

Road to the Throne: 08.14.2026

Promotion: United Toughness Alliance
Date: August 14, 2026
Location: SNHU — Manchester, NH

Preview

The Road to the Throne qualifying matches continue as the UTA prepares the journey to crown the 2026 Ring King. All matches will be qualifying matches for the 2026 Ring King tournament.

Results

Introduction

Segment

The screen is black.

For a moment, there is nothing.

Then the familiar UTA logo slowly fades into view before the opening graphics explode across the screen.

Quick cuts flash by from one week ago in Philadelphia.

Kirsty McKinney driving through Valentina Blaze.

Bianca Page standing victorious alongside Ace Andrews.

Lindsey Lothario dropping Clovis Black with Final Bow.

Mike Best driving a knee into Valkyrie Knox with I Knead a Hero.

Maxwell Jett casually covering Kairo Bey following the Platinum Driver.

One final graphic slams onto the screen.

ROAD TO THE THRONE

AUGUST 14, 2026

MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

The broadcast cuts inside SNHU in Manchester, New Hampshire, where the crowd is already on its feet. Fans line the barricades surrounding the entranceway while signs celebrating their favorites are scattered throughout the building.

The camera sweeps across the audience before settling on the ring beneath the bright UTA lighting.

John Phillips: "Welcome, everybody, to Manchester, New Hampshire! Welcome to the United Toughness Alliance, and welcome to the second night of the Road to the Throne!"

Mark Bravo: "And if last week taught us anything, John, it's that nobody is getting handed a ticket to Los Angeles. Five people punched theirs in Philadelphia. Five more opportunities are waiting tonight."

John Phillips: "September twenty-sixth. Crypto.com Arena. Sixteen competitors. One tournament. And when the dust settles, somebody will leave Los Angeles as the 2026 Ring King—or Ring Queen—with a guaranteed opportunity at the UTA Championship."

Mark Bravo: "Unless Chris Ross wins the thing himself."

John Phillips: "Because Ross, like every current UTA singles champion, already has an automatic position in the tournament."

A graphic appears showing the six champions who have already secured their places.

UTA Champion — Chris Ross.

Fighting Champion — Samuel Scythe.

International Champion — Bobby Dean.

WrestleZone Champion — Mikey Unlikely.

Women's Champion — Emily Hightower.

United States Champion — Hakuryu.

Mark Bravo: "Six champions already in. And look at that list. There isn't an easy draw anywhere on it."

John Phillips: "Then last Friday night in Philadelphia, five more competitors earned their way into the field."

The graphic changes.

KIRSTY MCKINNEY — QUALIFIED

BIANCA PAGE — QUALIFIED

LINDSEY LOTHARIO — QUALIFIED

MIKE BEST — QUALIFIED

MAXWELL JETT — QUALIFIED

John Phillips: "Kirsty McKinney continued that increasingly aggressive streak of hers by defeating Valentina Blaze."

Mark Bravo: "Bianca Page got past Trey Mack. Lindsey Lothario survived the power of Clovis Black. And suddenly The Empire was looking at two losses in two attempts."

John Phillips: "Then Valkyrie Knoxx gave Mike Best everything he could handle."

Mark Bravo: "Twice she had an answer for I Knead a Hero. Twice. Eventually Mike Best found the opening anyway, and when that knee finally connected, that was it."

John Phillips: "Best advanced and immediately turned his attention toward the man currently carrying the UTA Championship, Chris Ross."

Mark Bravo: "That's the part nobody should misunderstand. Mike Best doesn't care about a crown. He cares about what winning this tournament can get him."

John Phillips: "And finally, in our main event, Maxwell Jett defeated Kairo Bey."

Mark Bravo: "And Maxwell treated the entire thing like an inconvenience. Once he took away Kairo's arm, took away that speed, it became Maxwell's kind of match. Platinum Driver. Casual cover. Thanks for coming."

John Phillips: "Although I would strongly advise everyone against reminding Maxwell that he is the former UTA Champion."

Mark Bravo: "Former."

John Phillips: "You're going to get us yelled at."

Mark Bravo: "Former UTA Champion, John."

The camera returns to the crowd as the noise builds again.

John Phillips: "That brings us to tonight. Five more qualifying matches, beginning with a woman who frankly may be fortunate to have a job."

The first match graphic appears.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

SELINA SANTORINO vs. SAVIOR HAWKINS

John Phillips: "At One Last Stop, Selina Santorino deliberately attacked Susanita Ybanez before Susanita was scheduled to compete against Marie Van Claudio. Susanita suffered a shoulder injury, Scott Stevens sent Selina home, and last week Stevens told her directly that he should fire her."

Mark Bravo: "And somehow Selina walked out of that office with a Ring King qualifier."

John Phillips: "Against Scott Stevens' better judgment."

Mark Bravo: "Maybe. But here's the problem: Selina doesn't think she got a second chance. She thinks Scott Stevens finally came to his senses and gave a future Ring Queen what she deserves."

John Phillips: "Savior Hawkins may have something to say about that."

The next graphic replaces it.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

SOL AZTECA vs. DARREN VALIANT

John Phillips: "Then Sol Azteca meets Darren Valiant, and this one is particularly interesting because for perhaps the first time in quite a while, Sol gets to focus entirely on the opponent standing across the ring from her."

Mark Bravo: "No Emily Hightower. No Hightower family circling the ring. No wondering where the next attack is coming from."

John Phillips: "Sol said recently that we've seen her enter the ring several times, but there's a difference between entering a ring and actually getting to wrestle."

Mark Bravo: "And I want to see it. We've seen the toughness. We've seen her survive chaos. Tonight we may actually get to see the technician underneath all of it."

John Phillips: "Darren Valiant would love nothing more than to make sure that demonstration ends before it ever gets started."

Another graphic.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

YOSHII vs. MAXX MAYHEM

John Phillips: "Former United States Champion Yoshii returns to competition tonight against Maxx Mayhem."

Mark Bravo: "And I don't know what losing that United States Championship at One Last Stop has done to Yoshii mentally."

John Phillips: "Hakuryu ended Yoshii's championship reign in Toronto, and now Yoshii has an opportunity to immediately redirect his focus toward Ring King."

Mark Bravo: "Meanwhile Maxx Mayhem has spent a lot of time recently tangled up with Mikey Unlikely and Eric Dane Jr., and don't forget that he challenged Mikey for the WrestleZone Championship at One Last Stop."

John Phillips: "Two men coming into this one with very different motivations, but only one advances."

The next graphic appears, drawing a noticeably different reaction from the audience.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

MADMAN SZALINSKI vs. TYGER II

John Phillips: "And then there is Madman Szalinski."

Mark Bravo: "GOD DAMN, SON."

John Phillips: "You couldn't help yourself."

Mark Bravo: "Would've been disrespectful not to."

John Phillips: "Madman is a former UTA Champion. He has spent years putting his body through things that frankly no human body was designed to endure."

Mark Bravo: "Bad knees. Bad neck. Bad back. Bad hips. And that's before you even start talking about everything else he's been through."

John Phillips: "Madman made it very clear last week that he understands opportunities like this are becoming fewer and farther between."

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes him dangerous tonight. Tyger II isn't wrestling a man thinking about next year. He's wrestling a man who thinks this might be his last shot."

John Phillips: "And Madman Szalinski has never exactly been known for self-preservation."

Mark Bravo: "That may be the understatement of the night."

The final match graphic fills the screen.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

AMY HARRISON vs. MARIE VAN CLAUDIO

The Manchester crowd reacts loudly at the sight of the two Empire members facing opposite one another.

John Phillips: "And then we get to this."

Mark Bravo: "Oh, this one's gonna be fun."

John Phillips: "The Empire entered last week's Road to the Throne believing it would send multiple members into Ring King."

Mark Bravo: "Instead Trey Mack lost. Clovis Black lost. Valkyrie Knox lost. Zero for three."

John Phillips: "And Marie Van Claudio believed there was one saving grace. Tonight's match guaranteed The Empire at least one qualifier."

Mark Bravo: "Because in Marie's mind, Amy Harrison was supposed to walk down here, lie on her back, and hand the leader of The Empire a free ticket."

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison had another idea."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah. She told Marie she could have the spot when she pinned her for three."

John Phillips: "The disagreement quickly became about far more than Ring King. Amy challenged Marie's claim to leadership. Marie reminded Amy that while Amy may once have been The Empire's public face, Marie claims she was always the one pulling the strings."

Mark Bravo: "Then Amy mentioned Hardcore Sandy."

John Phillips: "And Marie did not appreciate it."

Mark Bravo: "Trey Mack had to get between them before they tore each other apart last week. The Empire keeps telling everyone they're stronger than ever."

John Phillips: "Tonight we find out exactly how strong that bond really is."

The match graphic fades away.

The camera once again sweeps through the packed Manchester crowd before returning to the ring.

John Phillips: "Five matches. Five places in the 2026 Ring King tournament."

Mark Bravo: "No championships on the line. No consolation prizes. You win, you move on. You lose, somebody else goes to Los Angeles."

John Phillips: "The Road to the Throne continues tonight from Manchester, New Hampshire!"

The crowd roars as the camera pulls back to a wide shot of SNHU.

Now I Heal

Segment

The broadcast fades away from SNHU and into a pre-recorded video.

There is no UTA backdrop.

No arena lighting.

No crowd noise.

Instead, Susanita Ybanez sits alone in what appears to be a quiet living room, dressed casually in a black sleeveless shirt and athletic pants.

Her left shoulder and upper arm are heavily wrapped beneath a thick post-surgical bandage and support brace.

There is no hiding what happened.

Susanita looks tired.

Not defeated.

Tired.

She looks directly into the camera.

Susanita Ybanez: "I wanted to do this myself."

She pauses.

Susanita Ybanez: "UTA offered to send someone here. An interviewer. A camera crew."

Susanita Ybanez: "I said no."

Susanita glances briefly toward her bandaged shoulder.

Susanita Ybanez: "Because there really isn't anything for someone to ask me."

Susanita Ybanez: "Everybody knows what happened."

She slowly adjusts herself in the chair, clearly uncomfortable.

Susanita Ybanez: "At One Last Stop, Selina Santorino attacked me."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not in a match."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not because I hit her first."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not because we were fighting and something went too far."

Her expression hardens.

Susanita Ybanez: "She attacked me because she wanted to hurt me."

Susanita Ybanez: "And she did."

Susanita looks down at the surgical dressing again.

Susanita Ybanez: "The doctors fixed what they could."

Susanita Ybanez: "Now I heal."

Susanita Ybanez: "I do the therapy."

Susanita Ybanez: "I wait."

There is obvious frustration on that final word.

Susanita Ybanez: "And I hate waiting."

She gives a small, humorless smile.

Susanita Ybanez: "I have spent my whole life moving."

Susanita Ybanez: "Working."

Susanita Ybanez: "Training."

Susanita Ybanez: "Fighting."

Susanita Ybanez: "When there was no opportunity, I went looking for one."

Susanita Ybanez: "When someone told me I couldn't do something, I worked until I could."

Susanita Ybanez: "So sitting here..."

She looks around the room.

Susanita Ybanez: "...this is harder than people understand."

A beat.

Susanita Ybanez: "And tonight, Selina Santorino gets to wrestle."

Her jaw tightens.

Susanita Ybanez: "She gets a Ring King qualifying match."

Susanita Ybanez: "She gets an opportunity."

Susanita Ybanez: "And I am sitting here."

Susanita lets the silence sit for several seconds.

Susanita Ybanez: "That makes me angry."

Susanita Ybanez: "Very angry."

Her voice remains controlled.

Susanita Ybanez: "But anger does not mean stupidity."

Susanita Ybanez: "I have made that mistake before."

Susanita Ybanez: "I have rushed into fights because somebody hurt someone I cared about."

Susanita Ybanez: "I have let other people's actions decide mine."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not this time."

She leans forward slightly.

Susanita Ybanez: "Selina..."

Susanita Ybanez: "Scott Stevens told you that you were lucky to still have a job."

Susanita Ybanez: "Maybe you are."

Susanita Ybanez: "Maybe tonight you beat Savior Hawkins."

Susanita Ybanez: "Maybe you qualify for Ring King."

Susanita Ybanez: "Maybe you keep walking around telling everyone that none of this matters."

Susanita slowly shakes her head.

Susanita Ybanez: "But you and I know better."

Susanita Ybanez: "You hurt me."

Susanita Ybanez: "And when I come back..."

She points toward the camera with her good hand.

Susanita Ybanez: "...you will have to stand in front of me."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not behind me."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not when I am preparing for someone else."

Susanita Ybanez: "In front of me."

Susanita Ybanez: "Face to face."

Susanita Ybanez: "Bell to bell."

She settles back carefully.

Susanita Ybanez: "Then we finish it."

A moment passes.

Susanita's expression changes slightly.

Different anger.

Susanita Ybanez: "And Marie..."

Another pause.

Susanita Ybanez: "Do not think I forgot about you."

Susanita Ybanez: "Because I didn't."

Susanita Ybanez: "That is what makes all of this so frustrating."

Susanita Ybanez: "One Last Stop was supposed to be our night."

Susanita Ybanez: "After everything."

Susanita Ybanez: "After International Affair."

Susanita Ybanez: "After you turned on me."

Susanita Ybanez: "After The Empire."

Susanita Ybanez: "After every attack, every insult, every time you tried to make me believe that what we had meant nothing..."

Susanita's eyes narrow.

Susanita Ybanez: "I finally had you."

Susanita Ybanez: "One on one."

Susanita Ybanez: "And then somebody else decided to take that away from me."

She exhales slowly through her nose.

Susanita Ybanez: "So no, Marie."

Susanita Ybanez: "This injury did not end what exists between us."

Susanita Ybanez: "Selina did not save you from me."

Susanita Ybanez: "She delayed me."

Susanita looks straight into the lens.

Susanita Ybanez: "There is a difference."

She pauses again.

Susanita Ybanez: "I know you're wrestling tonight."

Susanita Ybanez: "I know Amy Harrison is standing across from you."

Susanita Ybanez: "I know The Empire has problems of its own right now."

Susanita Ybanez: "That is your business."

Susanita Ybanez: "Handle it."

Susanita Ybanez: "Because when I am cleared..."

She taps the edge of the brace around her shoulder.

Susanita Ybanez: "...this becomes my business again."

The room is silent.

Susanita Ybanez: "Selina Santorino owes me for this."

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie Van Claudio owes me an ending."

Susanita Ybanez: "And I intend to collect both."

There is no smile now.

Susanita Ybanez: "Not tonight."

Susanita Ybanez: "Not next week."

Susanita Ybanez: "I don't know exactly when."

Susanita Ybanez: "But I will come back."

Susanita Ybanez: "And when I do..."

Susanita raises her good hand and presses it against her heart.

Susanita Ybanez: "I will not come back weaker."

Susanita Ybanez: "I will not come back afraid."

Susanita Ybanez: "I will come back remembering every single second I had to sit here and watch while everybody else got to do what I love."

Her eyes remain locked on the camera.

Susanita Ybanez: "Selina."

Susanita Ybanez: "Marie."

Susanita Ybanez: "Heal while you can."

Susanita reaches toward the camera with her good arm.

The recording abruptly cuts to black.

Selina Santorino vs. Savior Hawkins

Match

The camera returns from the previous segment to the packed SNHU Arena as anticipation fills the building. The Ring King logo hangs proudly across the video wall while fans continue buzzing after everything that has already unfolded tonight.

"Healing Pool" by Safest Ledge begins to play.

The arena immediately darkens.

Floating white lights drift through the darkness while deep navy lighting washes over the entranceway.

Gold streaks flash across the massive screen as the atmosphere steadily builds.

John Phillips: "Our opening contest tonight is a Ring King qualifying match, and if you're looking for two young stars with incredibly bright futures, this is it."

Mark Bravo: "No question. Savior Hawkins has been impressive since arriving in UTA. He's two-for-two in singles competition, but tonight might be his toughest challenge yet."

The music explodes.

White and gold pyro erupts across the stage.

Savior Hawkins bursts through the curtain at full speed, his blue, white, and gold gear gleaming beneath the lights.

He sprints to the front of the stage, plants his feet, draws back an invisible bow...

Savior Hawkins: "SHOOOOOWWWWTIIIIIIIME!"

The crowd roars the final word right back at him.

John Phillips: "Listen to this crowd!"

Mark Bravo: "He has connected with these fans in a hurry. They believe in this kid."

Savior grins before immediately taking off around ringside, slapping every hand he can reach. He hops onto the barricade for a moment, leaning into the front row as fans stretch over one another trying to make contact.

Children jump excitedly.

Adults reach out just as eagerly.

Savior never stops moving.

John Phillips: "This is who Savior Hawkins is. The second that music hits, he feeds off the people."

Mark Bravo: "And then the bell rings..."

John Phillips: "...and the smile disappears."

Mark Bravo: "Exactly. He's one of the friendliest guys you'll meet until it's time to compete."

Completing his lap, Savior breaks into another sprint toward the ring.

He dives beneath the bottom rope, pops instantly back to his feet in one fluid motion, and climbs the nearest turnbuckle.

Once again he draws back the invisible bow.

The crowd follows his lead.

Crowd: "SHOWTIME! SHOWTIME! SHOWTIME!"

Savior nods appreciatively before hopping back down to the canvas.

The warmth of the entrance slowly fades from his face.

His expression tightens.

His jaw sets.

He begins bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, shifting into his familiar boxing stance while his eyes lock onto the entranceway.

John Phillips: "This is where the transformation happens."

Mark Bravo: "Absolutely. The crowd gets the entertainer. The opponent gets something entirely different."

John Phillips: "Savior knows what's waiting behind that curtain. Selina Santorino has been told by Scott Stevens that she's on her last chance after what she did to Susanita Ybanez."

Mark Bravo: "She's dangerous tonight. She doesn't just need this win to qualify for Ring King... she needs it to prove she belongs here after everything she's done."

Savior Hawkins continues bouncing lightly in his corner.

His eyes remain fixed on the entranceway.

Then the opening notes of Mariah Carey's "Obsessed" begin pulsing through the arena.

The crowd reacts immediately.

Boos roll through SNHU as the lighting shifts into a glossy wash of gold and magenta.

The Santorino Sentinel descends from above the entranceway, its ring light flickering in rapid paparazzi-style bursts.

John Phillips: "And here comes Selina Santorino."

Mark Bravo: "No Vanessa tonight. No one standing beside her. No one to hide behind."

Selina Santorino steps through the curtain.

Normally, she would pause immediately for the drone.

Normally, she would search for the perfect angle.

Normally, the entrance would be less about reaching the ring and more about making sure every second became content.

Tonight, she barely acknowledges the camera.

Her eyes are already locked on Savior Hawkins.

John Phillips: "That is a very different Selina Santorino."

Mark Bravo: "She still knows the camera is there. Let's not get carried away."

John Phillips: "But it isn't her priority tonight."

Selina begins walking down the ramp.

There is no runway strut.

No stopping to argue with fans.

No singing the lyrics into the face of someone at the barricade.

She walks with purpose.

Her jaw is tight.

Her shoulders are squared.

Her attention never leaves the ring.

Mark Bravo: "This one is personal."

John Phillips: "Selina Santorino has made it clear that she cannot stand Savior Hawkins."

Mark Bravo: "Everything about him irritates her. The crowd connection. The respect. The idea that he takes wrestling seriously instead of treating it like a livestream."

John Phillips: "And Savior has made no secret of his belief that Selina needs to be humbled."

Inside the ring, Savior stops bouncing.

He steps forward from his corner.

Selina notices.

A sharp smile briefly crosses her face.

Not the usual polished influencer smile.

Something meaner.

Something eager.

John Phillips: "This is Selina's first match since being sent home by Scott Stevens."

Mark Bravo: "After attacking Susanita and injuring her shoulder."

John Phillips: "Stevens told Selina he should have fired her."

Mark Bravo: "And then he gave her this opportunity anyway."

John Phillips: "One final warning. One Ring King qualifying match. No excuses."

Selina reaches the bottom of the ramp.

The Sentinel drifts closer, positioning itself beside her face.

Selina finally looks toward it.

She lifts one finger.

Selina Santorino: "Stay on me."

The drone adjusts.

Selina then points through the ropes toward Savior.

Selina Santorino: "And keep him in frame when I embarrass him."

Savior hears her.

He laughs once and shakes his head.

Savior Hawkins: "Just get in here."

Selina's expression hardens.

Mark Bravo: "There it is."

John Phillips: "Savior isn't interested in the production."

Mark Bravo: "Which is exactly why she hates him."

Selina vaults onto the apron.

She grips the top rope and stares across the ring.

Savior takes another step toward the center.

The referee immediately motions for him to remain back.

Savior raises both hands and retreats half a step.

Selina enters through the ropes.

Ring Announcer: "And his opponent... from Miami, Florida... weighing in at one hundred fifty pounds..."

Selina walks directly to the middle of the ring.

The Sentinel hovers above her.

For a moment, it appears she may begin her usual gymnastic display.

Instead, she simply spreads her arms and stares at Savior.

Ring Announcer: "The Queen of Clicks... the Dominican Diamond... SELINA... SANTORINO!"

The crowd boos.

Selina barely reacts.

Her focus remains entirely on Savior.

John Phillips: "The winner of this match joins the sixteen-person Ring King field."

Mark Bravo: "And for Selina, this is about considerably more than the tournament."

Savior steps forward again.

Selina meets him near the center of the ring.

The referee moves between them.

Neither backs away.

John Phillips: "Savior Hawkins is undefeated in UTA singles competition."

Mark Bravo: "Selina is talented enough to end that."

John Phillips: "But throughout her career, Selina has often depended on distractions, shortcuts, and outside help."

Mark Bravo: "Not tonight."

The camera catches Selina briefly glancing toward ringside.

No Vanessa.

No assistant waiting to interfere.

Only the drone hovering above the floor.

Selina looks back at Savior.

She does not appear concerned.

John Phillips: "Perhaps tonight we finally learn whether Selina Santorino can do this entirely on her own."

Savior gestures toward himself.

Savior Hawkins: "You ready?"

Selina steps closer.

Selina Santorino: "I was ready before you were relevant."

Savior gives her a tight smile.

Savior Hawkins: "Then prove it."

The referee separates them and directs each competitor toward a corner.

Savior turns and walks back without argument.

Selina remains in place for one additional second.

She stares after him.

Then finally turns toward her own corner.

Mark Bravo: "There is no respect between these two."

John Phillips: "There may be respect for the other's ability."

Mark Bravo: "They'd both rather swallow glass than admit it."

Selina reaches the turnbuckles.

She begins to climb onto the top rope for her customary lounging pose.

Halfway up, she stops.

She looks across the ring at Savior.

Then steps back down.

No pose.

No outfit check.

No speech to her followers.

She pulls lightly on the top rope and begins stretching her shoulders.

John Phillips: "That may be the most telling thing we've seen."

Mark Bravo: "Selina Santorino just passed on camera time."

John Phillips: "Because she wants Savior Hawkins."

The music fades.

The gold and magenta lighting returns to normal.

The Sentinel moves away from the ring and assumes its position near ringside.

Savior Hawkins steps out of his corner.

Selina Santorino does the same.

They stop several feet apart.

Savior rolls his shoulders.

Selina cracks her neck.

The referee checks both competitors and delivers the final instructions.

Neither appears to hear a word of them.

They are too busy staring at each other.

John Phillips: "The opening match of Road to the Throne."

Mark Bravo: "A place in Ring King on the line."

John Phillips: "Selina Santorino against Savior Hawkins."

The referee moves into position.

Selina leans forward.

Savior raises his hands.

The tension is immediate.

The referee signals for the bell.

DING! DING!

Neither competitor moves immediately.

Savior Hawkins remains light on his feet, hands raised.

Selina Santorino stands taller, chin raised, studying him from across the ring.

The crowd begins clapping steadily, encouraging the two competitors to engage.

John Phillips: "A spot in the Ring King tournament is on the line."

Mark Bravo: "But I don't think either one of them is thinking about the bracket right now."

Savior circles to his left.

Selina mirrors him.

They complete nearly one full rotation around the center of the ring without making contact.

Savior feints forward.

Selina does not flinch.

She gives him an exaggerated yawn.

Selina Santorino: "Try harder."

Savior nods once.

Then shoots forward.

They collide in a collar-and-elbow tie-up.

Both immediately plant their feet.

Savior attempts to drive Selina backward.

Selina braces and pushes right back.

For several seconds, neither competitor gains an inch.

John Phillips: "Selina has a significant height advantage over many of the competitors she faces, but Savior Hawkins is four inches taller than she is."

Mark Bravo: "And he isn't allowing her to dictate the opening exchange."

Still locked together, Selina turns her head just enough to speak directly into Savior's face.

Selina Santorino: "I'm diffing you so hard, you fucking tryhard."

Savior's expression tightens.

Savior Hawkins: "I'm going to humble you whether you want me to or not, you fucking brat."

Selina's eyes widen.

Then she smiles.

Mark Bravo: "Well, there goes the respectful opening."

Selina abruptly twists into a side headlock.

Savior immediately pushes against her hip and drives her toward the ropes.

Selina holds on tightly.

Savior tries again.

This time he forces her into the ropes and sends her across the ring.

Selina rebounds.

Savior drops to the canvas.

Selina steps over him and continues into the opposite ropes.

Savior rises and leapfrogs over her on the return.

Selina hits the ropes once more.

Savior turns for an arm drag.

Selina plants her feet and blocks it.

She attempts an arm drag of her own.

Savior flips through and lands on his feet.

The crowd reacts.

Selina rushes him.

Savior catches her with a deep arm drag.

Selina rolls through and immediately returns to her feet.

Savior charges.

Selina catches him with an arm drag.

Savior rolls through just as smoothly.

Both competitors spring upright.

They stop several feet apart.

The crowd applauds the exchange.

John Phillips: "There is the athleticism we expected from both of these competitors."

Mark Bravo: "And neither of them wants to admit the other just matched them."

Savior gives Selina a small nod.

Selina responds by holding her thumb and index finger less than an inch apart.

Selina Santorino: "Almost impressive."

Savior motions for her to come forward.

Selina obliges.

They lock up again.

Savior quickly captures the wrist and twists into an arm wringer.

Selina grimaces but immediately rolls forward across the canvas.

She kips back to her feet.

Then flips through beneath Savior's arm and reverses the pressure.

Savior rolls forward.

He plants one hand on the canvas, rotates through, and reverses the hold once again.

Selina attempts to pull free.

Savior tightens the wristlock.

She looks toward the hovering Sentinel.

Then instantly remembers the match in front of her and turns back.

John Phillips: "Selina nearly looked for the camera there."

Mark Bravo: "Nearly."

Selina reaches up, hooks Savior around the neck, and uses the leverage to cartwheel out of the wristlock.

Before Savior can reset, she sweeps his legs from beneath him.

Selina drops quickly into a cover.

ONE!

Savior kicks out.

Both competitors rise at the same time.

Savior answers with his own leg sweep.

He covers.

ONE!

Selina kicks out.

They rise again.

Selina swings with a clothesline.

Savior ducks.

He turns and attempts a waistlock.

Selina throws a sharp back elbow.

Savior avoids it.

Selina spins.

Savior throws a roundhouse kick.

Selina leans backward and narrowly avoids it.

Savior's boot passes inches from her face.

He completes the rotation.

Selina lifts her leg for a superkick.

Savior catches the boot.

Selina hops once on her standing leg.

Then launches into an enzuigiri.

Savior ducks.

Selina lands on her hands, pushes off, and flips back to her feet.

Savior turns.

Selina is already waiting for him.

Another standstill.

The crowd applauds louder this time.

John Phillips: "This is competitive wrestling at an extremely high level."

Mark Bravo: "They're testing each other. Every counter has another counter waiting behind it."

Savior wipes one hand across his jaw.

Selina adjusts her wrist tape.

They circle again.

This time Savior closes the distance first.

Selina ducks beneath the lockup and secures a rear waistlock.

Savior reaches down and begins prying at her grip.

Selina tightens her hands.

Savior switches behind her.

Selina reaches backward for a headlock.

Savior ducks under it and transitions into a hammerlock.

Selina reaches back, grabs his head, and snaps him forward with a mare.

Savior lands seated.

Selina runs past him into the ropes.

She rebounds with a low basement dropkick aimed at his chest.

Savior rolls backward beneath it.

Selina crashes onto the canvas but immediately pushes herself up.

Savior charges with a jumping clothesline.

Selina ducks.

Savior lands and turns.

Selina catches him with a sharp forearm.

Savior answers with one of his own.

Selina fires another.

Savior responds harder.

Selina stumbles half a step.

Her eyes flash with anger.

She steps back in and drives a forearm into Savior's jaw.

Savior rocks backward.

Selina grabs his wrist and sends him into the ropes.

Savior reverses.

Selina rebounds.

Savior attempts a back body drop.

Selina stops short and kicks him in the shoulder.

Savior rises quickly.

Selina explodes forward with a jumping clothesline.

Savior flips backward onto the canvas from the impact.

John Phillips: "Selina finally creates some separation!"

Selina springs back to her feet with a kip-up.

She begins to pose instinctively.

One hand starts moving toward her hair.

Then she sees Savior already beginning to rise.

Selina abandons the pose and charges again.

Mark Bravo: "She caught herself."

John Phillips: "That is important. Usually Selina would have given Savior all the time in the world to recover while she celebrated."

Selina drives a knee into Savior's midsection.

She hooks him around the waist.

Then throws him overhead with an exploder suplex.

Savior lands hard near the corner.

Selina crawls quickly into the cover.

ONE!

TWO!

Savior kicks out.

Selina sits upright.

She looks at the referee.

For one moment, it appears an argument may begin.

Instead, she nods once and gets back to her feet.

John Phillips: "No complaint."

Mark Bravo: "Who is this woman?"

Selina grabs Savior by the wrist and pulls him upward.

Savior suddenly traps her arm and drags her down into a grounded wristlock.

Selina rolls through before he can secure full pressure.

Savior stays attached and transitions into a hammerlock.

Selina reaches for the ropes.

They are too far away.

She pushes herself to one knee.

Then to her feet.

Savior maintains the hold.

Selina backs him toward the turnbuckles.

The referee begins a count.

ONE!

TWO!

Savior releases cleanly.

Selina turns around.

Savior raises both hands, showing the clean break.

Selina steps forward until they are nearly nose-to-nose.

Selina Santorino: "You're so proud of yourself."

Savior Hawkins: "You could try earning something sometime."

Selina slaps him across the face.

The crowd reacts sharply.

Savior's head turns from the impact.

He remains facing away for a moment.

Selina smiles.

Savior slowly turns back toward her.

The smile disappears from Selina's face.

Mark Bravo: "That may have been a mistake."

Savior fires a forearm into Selina's jaw.

Selina staggers backward.

Savior follows with another.

Then a third.

He grabs her wrist and whips her across the ring.

Selina rebounds.

Savior leaps and drives both boots into her chest with a dropkick.

Selina crashes onto her back.

Savior hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

Selina kicks out.

Savior rises immediately.

He pulls Selina up with him.

Selina suddenly drives her shoulder into his abdomen.

She lifts him and rushes forward.

Savior's back crashes into the turnbuckles.

Selina drives her shoulder into his midsection again.

And again.

The referee orders her to back away.

Selina does so at four.

Cleanly.

John Phillips: "Again, Selina breaks before the count."

Mark Bravo: "She isn't giving Scott Stevens any reason to come out here and pull the plug on this opportunity."

Selina moves back in.

Savior catches her with a boot to the face.

Selina stumbles backward.

Savior climbs quickly onto the middle turnbuckle.

He launches with a flying forearm.

Selina sidesteps.

Savior rolls through the landing.

He returns to his feet.

Selina catches him with a slingshot superkick as he turns.

The kick lands flush against Savior's jaw.

He collapses onto his back.

John Phillips: "What a kick!"

Selina looks toward the corner.

Then toward the hovering Sentinel.

Her expression changes.

The competitor briefly gives way to the creator.

Selina points urgently toward the drone.

Selina Santorino: "Camera! Camera! Watch this!"

She waves both hands, demanding the lens move closer.

Mark Bravo: "There she is."

Selina sprints toward the ropes.

She leaps onto the middle rope.

Then springs upward into a twisting moonsault.

At the peak of the rotation, Selina briefly arches her back and throws her hips into an exaggerated twerking motion for the camera.

The crowd erupts with a mixture of laughter, cheers, and disbelief.

John Phillips: "You cannot be serious!"

Selina completes the rotation.

She crashes perfectly across Savior's chest.

Selina hooks both legs.

ONE!

TWO!

Savior kicks out!

Selina is thrown off the cover.

She lands seated beside him.

Her mouth falls open.

Mark Bravo: "The twerk moonsault was not enough."

Selina looks toward the referee.

Then toward the drone.

Then back toward Savior.

She presses her lips together.

No tantrum.

No accusation.

She gets back to her feet.

John Phillips: "She performed for the camera, but she landed the move perfectly."

Mark Bravo: "And when Savior kicked out, she got right back to work."

Selina reaches down and grabs Savior by the head.

Savior suddenly pulls her into a small package.

ONE!

TWO!

Selina kicks out!

Both competitors scramble to their feet.

Savior charges.

Selina swings wildly.

Savior ducks and catches her from behind.

He lifts her for a German suplex.

Selina flips backward and lands on her feet.

Savior turns.

Selina launches another superkick.

Savior catches the leg.

He sweeps out Selina's standing leg.

Selina crashes onto her back.

Savior holds onto the captured leg.

He turns her over into a single-leg Boston crab.

Selina immediately reaches toward the ropes.

She is several feet away.

Savior sits deeper into the hold.

Selina cries out as pressure bends through her lower back.

John Phillips: "Savior has Selina trapped in the center of the ring!"

Selina reaches forward.

Her fingertips scrape across the canvas.

Savior pulls her farther back.

Selina raises one hand.

The crowd rises.

She looks toward the referee.

Then clenches her fist.

Selina digs her forearms into the canvas and begins dragging herself toward the ropes.

One painful movement at a time.

Savior continues applying pressure.

Selina stretches her arm forward.

Still short.

She pushes one final time.

Her fingers close around the bottom rope.

The referee orders the break.

Savior releases immediately.

John Phillips: "Selina reaches the ropes."

Mark Bravo: "And she did it on her own."

Savior rises and backs toward the center of the ring.

Selina remains near the ropes, holding her lower back.

The Sentinel drifts closer.

Selina looks toward its lens.

Her expression is not polished.

She is breathing hard.

Her hair is falling across her face.

For once, there is no attempt to correct the image.

Selina uses the ropes to pull herself back to her feet.

Savior Hawkins remains near the center of the ring.

He watches Selina Santorino pull herself upright with the ropes.

Selina turns toward him.

For a moment, neither moves.

The smile is gone from Selina's face.

The easy confidence is gone from Savior's.

Both now understand exactly what the other is capable of.

John Phillips: "This match has changed."

Mark Bravo: "The insults are still there, but the games are disappearing."

Savior approaches carefully.

Selina suddenly explodes away from the ropes with a forearm to the jaw.

Savior answers immediately.

Selina fires another.

Savior responds with one of his own.

They begin trading in the center of the ring.

Forearm from Selina.

Forearm from Savior.

Selina.

Savior.

Selina rocks backward but stays on her feet.

She steps back in and drives her forehead into Savior's.

Savior staggers.

Selina grabs his wrist and attempts an Irish whip.

Savior reverses.

Selina rebounds from the ropes.

Savior catches her with a rising knee to the abdomen.

Selina flips forward and lands hard on her back.

Savior hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

Selina kicks out.

John Phillips: "Another near fall for Savior Hawkins."

Savior rolls through the kickout and rises to one knee.

He glances briefly toward the referee.

Two.

He accepts it.

Savior reaches down and pulls Selina into a seated position.

He runs into the ropes.

Selina drops flat to avoid the kick.

Savior runs over her and continues into the opposite side.

Selina springs back to her feet.

Savior rebounds.

Selina catches him around the waist and throws him overhead with another exploder suplex.

Savior lands near the ropes.

Selina immediately charges.

Savior pulls down the top rope.

Selina reacts quickly, twisting her body and landing safely on the apron instead of tumbling outside.

Savior turns.

Selina catches him with a forearm through the ropes.

He stumbles backward.

Selina grabs the top rope and launches herself over it.

She rotates through a corkscrew crossbody.

Savior rolls backward with the impact.

Selina hooks both legs.

ONE!

TWO!

Savior kicks out!

Selina rises before Savior can recover.

She grabs him beneath the arms and begins pulling him upright.

Savior suddenly breaks her grip.

He lands a sharp body shot.

Then another.

Savior stands and drives a forearm into Selina's jaw.

Selina swings wildly in response.

Savior ducks beneath it.

He catches her around the waist and lifts.

Selina throws her weight backward and lands behind him.

She hooks Savior's head for the S.I.S.

John Phillips: "Selina has the underhook!"

Savior immediately spins free before she can drop him.

He catches Selina with a spinning back elbow.

Selina falls into the ropes.

Savior charges.

Selina lifts him over the top rope.

Savior lands on the apron.

Selina turns.

Savior drives his shoulder between the ropes and into her midsection.

Selina doubles over.

Savior slingshots himself into the ring with a sunset flip.

Selina rolls through instead of going down.

She rises and attempts a kick to Savior's face.

Savior moves.

Selina's leg swings over him.

Savior rolls Selina backward into a pinning combination.

ONE!

TWO!

Selina escapes!

Both competitors scramble upright.

Savior launches with a flying forearm.

It connects.

Selina falls and rolls toward the corner.

Savior charges again.

A second flying forearm lands.

Selina crashes back against the turnbuckles.

Savior backs toward the opposite corner.

The crowd begins rising with him.

John Phillips: "Savior is beginning to build the Divine Blitz!"

Savior sprints across the ring.

He launches with the third flying forearm.

It connects flush against Selina's face.

Selina stumbles out of the corner.

Savior runs into the ropes.

He rebounds and leaps for the finishing knee strike.

Selina drops beneath it.

Savior flies past her and lands on his feet.

Mark Bravo: "Selina avoided the knee!"

Savior turns around.

Selina is already waiting.

She hooks his arm.

Then reaches for the pumphandle position.

Selina Santorino: "BLOCK!"

Selina attempts to pull Savior into the pumphandle X-Factor.

Savior twists with the motion.

He rotates free before she can drive him into the canvas.

Savior lands behind her.

Selina spins around.

Savior throws a superkick.

Selina catches the boot.

She throws it aside.

Savior spins with the momentum and attempts a discus forearm.

Selina ducks.

She attempts another superkick.

Savior catches her ankle.

Selina springs off her standing leg and twists into a kick with the other foot.

Savior releases and leans backward to avoid it.

Selina lands.

Savior resets.

They stop.

Another standstill.

The crowd rises to its feet.

John Phillips: "Divine Blitz countered."

Mark Bravo: "The BLOCK countered."

John Phillips: "Neither competitor can put the other away."

Savior and Selina stare at one another from opposite sides of the ring.

Both are breathing heavily.

Both are exhausted.

Neither looks willing to give an inch.

Selina raises one hand and beckons Savior forward.

Selina Santorino: "Come on, tryhard."

Savior wipes sweat from his brow.

Savior Hawkins: "Still not humbled."

They charge simultaneously.

Savior swings first.

Selina ducks and continues into the ropes.

She rebounds with a jumping clothesline.

Savior ducks beneath it.

Selina lands and turns.

Savior catches her with a standing Spanish Fly.

Both competitors crash onto the canvas.

Savior crawls across Selina and hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

Selina throws her shoulder up!

Savior rolls onto his back beside her.

He stares up at the arena lights.

Selina lies motionless for several seconds.

John Phillips: "How much more can either competitor withstand?"

Mark Bravo: "This was supposed to be the first match of the night. They're wrestling like it's the final match of their lives."

Savior slowly sits up.

Selina begins crawling toward the ropes.

Savior sees her moving and follows.

He catches Selina by the ankle before she can reach the ropes.

Selina turns onto her back and kicks him away with her free leg.

Savior stumbles backward into the corner.

Selina pulls herself upright.

She charges.

Savior sidesteps.

Selina collides chest-first with the turnbuckles.

Savior hooks her from behind and pulls her backward into a neckbreaker.

Selina crashes onto the canvas.

Savior stands over her.

He looks toward the crowd.

Then begins dropping elbows.

One.

Savior rises.

Two.

He rises again.

Three.

Four.

Five.

The crowd begins counting with him.

Crowd: "SIX!"

Savior drives another elbow into Selina's chest.

Crowd: "SEVEN!"

Another elbow lands.

Crowd: "EIGHT!"

Selina's body jolts from the impact.

Crowd: "NINE!"

Savior rises one final time.

He pauses.

Then looks toward the Santorino Sentinel hovering at ringside.

Savior points directly at its lens.

Savior Hawkins: "Camera! Watch this!"

The crowd erupts.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, he's mocking her now!"

Savior runs both hands through his hair with an exaggerated flourish.

He blows a sarcastic kiss toward the drone.

Then throws himself into a dramatic leap.

The tenth elbow crashes into Selina's chest.

Savior hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

SELINA KICKS OUT!

The crowd explodes.

Savior sits upright in disbelief.

Selina rolls onto her side, coughing and holding her chest.

John Phillips: "Selina survives Savior's tribute—and his insult."

Mark Bravo: "He took her own camera routine and threw it right back in her face."

Savior looks toward Selina.

Selina raises her head.

She realizes exactly what he did.

Her eyes narrow.

Savior smiles.

Selina does not.

Both competitors slowly rise.

Savior Hawkins wipes sweat from his brow.

Selina Santorino keeps one hand over her chest where the elbows landed.

She takes one slow breath.

Then another.

She looks directly at Savior.

Selina Santorino: "You're dead."

Savior Hawkins: "Then come kill me."

Selina charges.

Savior meets her in the center of the ring.

Forearm.

Forearm.

Forearm.

Neither gives ground.

John Phillips: "They're done trying to outsmart each other."

Mark Bravo: "Now they're just trying to survive."

Selina lands a stiff elbow.

Savior answers with a European uppercut.

Selina staggers.

Savior grabs her wrist and sends her into the ropes.

Selina rebounds.

Savior goes for another dropkick.

Selina catches herself on the ropes instead of running into it.

Savior lands awkwardly.

Before he can recover...

Selina explodes forward with a slingshot superkick.

CRACK!

The kick catches Savior flush on the jaw.

He collapses to one knee.

John Phillips: "She got all of it!"

Selina doesn't cover.

Instead...

She grabs Savior by both wrists.

She yanks him back to his feet.

Mark Bravo: "She's learning."

John Phillips: "She knows she needs more."

Savior is barely standing.

Selina steps forward.

FOREARM!

Savior stumbles.

Another forearm.

The crowd reacts.

Selina smiles.

She runs off the ropes.

One final forearm catches Savior flush.

The building comes alive.

John Phillips: "Three forearms!"

Mark Bravo: "Not again..."

Savior barely remains upright.

Selina backs into the ropes.

She sprints forward.

The entire arena rises.

John Phillips: "DIVINE BLITZ!"

Selina leaps.

The knee comes flying toward Savior's jaw...

...

...

Savior ducks underneath it by inches.

Selina lands on her feet behind him.

She spins.

Savior spins.

Both freeze.

The crowd erupts into applause.

John Phillips: "She almost beat Savior Hawkins with HIS own signature!"

Mark Bravo: "That would've haunted him forever."

Savior's expression changes.

No anger.

Respect.

Just for a second.

Selina notices it.

She doesn't smile.

She simply nods once.

Then both charge again.

Savior lands a kick to the ribs.

Selina answers with a knee to the stomach.

Savior hooks both arms.

Bitter Consequences!

Selina flips out behind him before the lift is complete.

She shoves Savior toward the ropes.

He rebounds.

Selina ducks beneath a clothesline.

Both hit opposite ropes.

They collide in the middle with simultaneous crossbodies.

Both crash to the canvas.

The referee begins counting.

ONE!

TWO!

THREE!

Both begin moving.

FOUR!

Savior reaches the ropes first.

Selina follows.

FIVE!

Both use the ropes to stand.

John Phillips: "Listen to these people!"

A loud chant fills the arena.

Crowd: "UTA! UTA! UTA!"

Savior smiles through his exhaustion.

Selina hears it too.

Normally she'd sneer.

Normally she'd roll her eyes.

Tonight...

She doesn't.

She simply steps away from the ropes.

Savior does the same.

Mark Bravo: "This is the best I've ever seen Selina Santorino."

John Phillips: "Without Vanessa."

Mark Bravo: "Without cheating."

John Phillips: "Just wrestling."

Savior suddenly points toward the opposite corner.

He draws back the invisible bow.

The crowd instantly recognizes it.

Crowd: "SHOWTIME!"

John Phillips: "He's calling for it!"

Savior sprints.

Selina doesn't panic.

She doesn't look toward the drone.

She doesn't argue with the referee.

She simply waits.

Savior rebounds off the ropes.

He launches forward for the devastating kick.

At the very last instant...

Selina sidesteps.

Savior barely catches himself before striking the turnbuckles.

He turns around.

Selina is already behind him.

She slips both arms underneath his.

The underhook is secured.

John Phillips: "S.I.S.!"

Savior struggles.

Selina tightens her grip.

No camera.

No posing.

No theatrics.

Just wrestling.

She plants her feet.

And drives Savior face-first into the mat with the devastating underhook DDT.

The impact echoes throughout the arena.

Mark Bravo: "She hit it!"

Selina falls into the cover immediately.

Both legs hooked.

ONE!

TWO!

THREE!

DING! DING! DING!

John Phillips: "She did it!"

Mark Bravo: "She actually did it!"

Selina remains on top of Savior for several seconds, breathing heavily.

The realization slowly washes over her.

She won.

On her own.

No distraction.

No shortcut.

No Vanessa.

The referee helps her to her feet and raises her hand.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... and qualifying for the 2026 Ring King Tournament... SELINA... SANTORINOOOOO!"

John Phillips: "Regardless of what you think about Selina Santorino as a person... tonight she proved something."

Mark Bravo: "She proved she didn't need anyone else. If she wrestles like this going forward..."

John Phillips: "...the rest of the Ring King field better pay attention."

Selina looks toward the hovering Sentinel.

For a split second it looks like she's about to celebrate for the camera.

Instead...

She looks back at Savior Hawkins.

Savior is sitting up, disappointed but fully aware of what just happened.

The two lock eyes.

Selina gives the slightest nod.

Not friendship.

Not respect she'd ever admit publicly.

Just an acknowledgment that tonight... he brought out the wrestler hidden beneath the influencer.

Selina turns and leaves the ring, Ring King bound.

Last Chance

Segment

The broadcast cuts backstage where Melissa Cartwright stands in front of the familiar UTA interview backdrop, microphone in hand.

Standing beside her is a man who hasn't been seen around the UTA with any regularity in several months.

The suit looks like it has seen better days.

Then again, so has the man wearing it.

The unmistakable blue-and-red mask of Madman Szalinski covers his face as the former UTA Champion stands with his hands tucked casually into the pockets of his weathered jacket.

The reaction from inside the arena can be heard even backstage as his image appears on the screens.

Melissa Cartwright: "Madman, it's been a few months since we've really seen you here in the UTA, but tonight you're not here to visit. You're not here to manage somebody else. You're here to wrestle."

Madman looks down at himself for a second.

Madman Szalinski: "Allegedly."

Melissa smiles.

Madman Szalinski: "I got the boots. Got the mask. Got all my various joints taped together with whatever industrial adhesive the athletic trainers could find."

He lifts one leg slightly, testing the knee, then immediately thinks better of it.

Madman Szalinski: "Yep. That's still attached."

Melissa Cartwright: "Last week you talked about what this opportunity means to you. Tonight it's here. One match against Tyger II, and if you win, you're going to Ring King."

The joking expression in Madman's eyes changes.

Not completely.

There's always a little bit of Madman underneath everything.

But the smile fades.

Madman Szalinski: "Yeah."

He nods slowly.

Madman Szalinski: "And that's why I'm trying really hard not to make a joke right now."

Beat.

Madman Szalinski: "Which, for me, is medically dangerous."

Melissa laughs quietly, but Madman keeps going.

Madman Szalinski: "I've been doing this a long time, Melissa."

Madman Szalinski: "Long enough that I've watched whole generations come through those doors."

Madman Szalinski: "Some stayed."

Madman Szalinski: "Some left."

Madman Szalinski: "Some got famous."

Madman Szalinski: "Some disappeared."

Madman Szalinski: "And somehow..."

He gestures to himself.

Madman Szalinski: "...this dumb son of a bitch is still standing here."

A cheer rises from the arena.

Madman Szalinski: "Barely."

Another small grin.

Madman Szalinski: "But standing."

Melissa Cartwright: "You've been very honest about the condition your body's in."

Madman Szalinski: "Hard not to be. The thing sounds like a bowl of Rice Krispies when I get outta bed."

Madman Szalinski: "Snap, crackle, GOD DAMN, SON."

The crowd can be heard laughing and cheering.

Madman Szalinski: "My knees are shot. My neck don't turn like it used to. My back's pissed off at me. My hips are pissed off at my back. Pretty sure my left hand stopped taking orders sometime around 2015."

He holds the hand up and looks at it.

Madman Szalinski: "You still with us, buddy?"

He wiggles his fingers.

Madman Szalinski: "There we go."

Melissa tries not to laugh.

Madman Szalinski: "But here's the thing."

His tone settles again.

Madman Szalinski: "I know what tonight is."

Madman Szalinski: "And I know what tonight might be."

Melissa watches him closely.

Madman Szalinski: "When you're twenty-five, you think there's always gonna be another match."

Madman Szalinski: "Another show."

Madman Szalinski: "Another big opportunity."

Madman Szalinski: "You lose one, you shrug your shoulders and say you'll get the next one."

Madman shakes his head.

Madman Szalinski: "I ain't twenty-five."

Madman Szalinski: "I don't know if there's another one after this."

That hangs there for a moment.

Madman Szalinski: "Maybe there is."

Madman Szalinski: "Maybe I'm back here six months from now bothering Stevens until he puts me in another match."

Madman Szalinski: "Maybe I'm eighty years old and still wandering around backstage asking somebody where catering went."

Madman Szalinski: "Wouldn't shock me."

He shrugs.

Madman Szalinski: "But I can't count on that anymore."

Madman Szalinski: "Tonight is real."

Madman Szalinski: "Tonight is something they put in front of me."

Madman Szalinski: "Beat Tyger II, and Madman Szalinski goes to Ring King."

He looks toward the camera now.

Madman Szalinski: "Do you know how crazy that sounds to me?"

Madman Szalinski: "After everything?"

Madman Szalinski: "After the heart attack?"

Madman Szalinski: "After waking up from a coma?"

Madman Szalinski: "After all the times I left this place, came back, left again, pissed somebody off, got pissed off myself..."

He gives a little laugh.

Madman Szalinski: "There's been a lot."

Madman Szalinski: "And after all of it, somebody still looked at Madman Szalinski and said..."

He points toward himself.

Madman Szalinski: "'Give that guy a shot.'"

Madman takes a breath.

Madman Szalinski: "I'm grateful for that."

Madman Szalinski: "I really am."

The levity disappears almost entirely now.

Madman Szalinski: "Because this business doesn't owe me anything."

Madman Szalinski: "UTA doesn't owe me anything."

Madman Szalinski: "These people don't owe me anything."

Madman Szalinski: "I've already had moments most guys would give anything to have."

Madman Szalinski: "I've been UTA Champion."

Madman Szalinski: "I've stood on top of the mountain."

Madman Szalinski: "I've had people scream my name."

Madman Szalinski: "And I've had people wonder whether I was ever gonna stand up again."

Madman looks back toward Melissa.

Madman Szalinski: "So I'm not walking out there tonight thinking somebody owes me one more great moment."

Madman Szalinski: "I'm walking out there knowing they gave me the chance to earn one."

Melissa Cartwright: "And Tyger II?"

Madman immediately nods.

Madman Szalinski: "Deserves the same chance."

Madman Szalinski: "That's important."

Madman Szalinski: "Tyger II ain't an obstacle somebody put out there so everybody can clap for the old guy."

Madman Szalinski: "He's trying to go to Ring King too."

Madman Szalinski: "He's got dreams too."

Madman Szalinski: "And if he wants that spot, he's gonna fight me for it."

Madman leans slightly toward the microphone.

Madman Szalinski: "And son..."

Madman Szalinski: "I hope you're ready to fight."

His eyes sharpen behind the mask.

Madman Szalinski: "Because I don't know how many bullets are left in this old gun."

Madman Szalinski: "But I'm unloading every damn one tonight."

The crowd reacts loudly.

Madman Szalinski: "If this is my last real opportunity..."

Madman Szalinski: "...then I'm damn sure not wasting it."

Madman starts to step away, then stops.

He looks back at Melissa.

Madman Szalinski: "Besides..."

The grin returns.

Madman Szalinski: "You imagine me winning Ring King?"

Madman Szalinski: "They gotta put a crown on this mask."

He points enthusiastically at the top of his head.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON!"

Melissa laughs as Madman throws up both hands and walks away down the hallway, the fans inside SNHU roaring for the former UTA Champion.

For all the jokes, however, the camera lingers on Madman a little longer than normal as he disappears around the corner.

Because tonight, he knows exactly how much this opportunity may mean.

Sol Azteca vs. Darren Valient

Match

The shot returns to ringside as the Ring King logo fills the screen, transitioning into the graphic for the next qualifying match.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

SOL AZTECA vs. DARREN VALIANT

John Phillips: "We continue the Road to the Throne now with what could be one of the most evenly matched contests

of the entire evening."

Mark Bravo: "Different backgrounds, different styles, but there's a lot of athleticism on both sides of this one. Nobody gets to bully anybody here. Nobody gets an obvious shortcut."

John Phillips: "And unlike some of the other qualifiers we've seen over these two shows, there's no personal hatred involved here. Darren Valiant and Sol Azteca both have exactly the same objective: earn their place in Ring King."

The arena lights begin to shift.

Spotlights sweep quickly across the Manchester crowd, bouncing from section to section like the opening of a red-carpet premiere.

Then "Gold Teeth Grin" kicks through the speakers.

The glam-rock energy hits hard beneath modern drums, and Darren Valiant steps through the curtain.

Sleeveless jacket.

Jaw set.

Chin held high.

Valiant stops at the top of the entranceway and looks around SNHU like he's taking attendance.

Then he points both thumbs toward himself.

A grin spreads across his face.

Mark Bravo: "There is absolutely no shortage of confidence in Darren Valiant."

John Phillips: "And he'll tell you that's because he's earned the right to have it."

Mark Bravo: "That's the important distinction. Darren likes attention. Darren likes the spotlight. But when the bell rings, there's substance underneath all of this."

Valiant points from himself toward the ring.

His expression makes the message obvious.

That's where he belongs.

Darren starts down the ramp, slapping several extended hands along the barricade before briefly stopping halfway.

He rolls his shoulders.

One-two.

A rapid shadow-boxing combination.

Darren pivots sharply—

—and snaps his leg upward into a picture-perfect superkick pose.

He freezes there for just long enough for the cameras surrounding the aisle to catch it.

Then the grin returns.

John Phillips: "The Spotlight Specialist knows exactly where every camera in this building is."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, but here's the thing, John: you can roll your eyes at it right up until that superkick actually connects."

John Phillips: "The Spotlight Kick can change a match in an instant, and the Valiant Shift can come even faster."

Mark Bravo: "That's what makes Darren tricky. He doesn't necessarily need to control you for five straight minutes. He needs you to make one mistake."

Valiant continues toward ringside, the playfulness gradually giving way to concentration as he approaches the ring.

The ring announcer raises the microphone.

Ring Announcer: "The following contest is a RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH!"

The Manchester crowd responds loudly.

Ring Announcer: "Introducing first... from Cleveland, Ohio... weighing in at two hundred eighteen pounds..."

Darren reaches ringside and turns toward the hard camera.

Another knowing smirk.

Ring Announcer: "THE SPOTLIGHT SPECIALIST... DARREN... VALIANT!"

Darren slides underneath the bottom rope cleanly and immediately pops back to his feet.

No wasted movement.

He walks directly toward the center of the ring and throws both arms wide.

The crowd gives him another healthy response.

Valiant slowly turns through it, soaking up the noise like he knew perfectly well it was coming.

Mark Bravo: "He loves this."

John Phillips: "Absolutely."

Mark Bravo: "And honestly? I don't have a problem with that. You want the spotlight? Fine. Ring King is about as big a spotlight as you're going to find."

John Phillips: "Sixteen competitors will eventually enter that tournament in Los Angeles. Darren Valiant has an opportunity tonight to make certain his name is one of them."

Darren removes his sleeveless jacket and passes it through the ropes before backing into his corner.

He bounces lightly from foot to foot.

The showmanship hasn't disappeared entirely, but the expression has changed.

He's ready to work.

John Phillips: "And he's going to have to earn it."

Mark Bravo: "Oh yeah. Because the woman coming through that curtain next has been waiting for exactly this kind of match."

Darren Valiant turns toward the entranceway, eyes fixed on the stage as his music begins to fade.

Darren Valiant remains in his corner, eyes locked on the entranceway as the arena lights begin to shift again.

Then the opening beat of "Gasolina (Instrumental)" by Daddy Yankee hits.

The reaction comes quickly.

Sol Azteca bursts onto the stage already moving with the rhythm, clapping her hands overhead and pointing out toward the Manchester crowd.

She spins once beneath the lights, her mask catching the glow, then immediately starts down the ramp with quick, fluid

footwork.

John Phillips: "And here comes Sol Azteca."

Mark Bravo: "You can feel the difference already, John. Darren wants the spotlight. Sol feeds off the energy and then turns it into motion."

Sol slaps hands along one side of the barricade, then cuts across the ramp to the other, never really standing still for more than a second.

She points toward the ring.

Darren Valiant points right back.

No hostility.

Just recognition.

John Phillips: "This is exactly the kind of match Sol said she wanted."

Mark Bravo: "A clear ring. A fair beginning. No Hightowers hanging around the outside. No wondering when somebody's going to interfere."

John Phillips: "So much of Sol Azteca's UTA run has revolved around Emily Hightower and the Hightower family that there is a very real question here tonight: have we actually seen everything Sol can do yet?"

Mark Bravo: "I don't think we have."

Sol reaches ringside and immediately drops low, sliding cleanly beneath the bottom rope.

She carries the momentum straight through.

Sol springs back to her feet and races toward the corner, climbing the turnbuckles in one fluid motion.

She throws both arms wide.

The crowd answers.

Ring Announcer: "And his opponent... from Puebla, Mexico... fighting by way of the Sendai Girls Dojo in Sendai, Japan..."

Sol points out into the crowd, then taps one hand against her chest.

Ring Announcer: "SOL... AZTECA!"

Sol drops back down to the mat.

And almost immediately, the energy changes.

The smile remains for another second.

Then it fades into focus.

Her shoulders settle.

Her stance tightens.

Her feet continue to shift beneath her as she begins lightly circling near her corner.

John Phillips: "There it is."

Mark Bravo: "Yep."

John Phillips: "The bell hasn't even rung yet and you can already see the transition."

Mark Bravo: "Before the match, she's all energy. Once it's time to work, everything tightens up."

John Phillips: "Sol Azteca began training in Mexico at a very young age before eventually traveling to Japan and training at the Sendai Girls Dojo. Those two influences are very different, but they've blended into something unique."

Mark Bravo: "The movement and creativity from lucha libre, but underneath it you've got that discipline. The striking. The patience. She isn't just fast for the sake of being fast."

Sol rolls one shoulder, then adjusts the tape around her wrist.

Across the ring, Darren Valiant gives her a small nod.

Sol returns it.

John Phillips: "Neither competitor needs to make this personal."

Mark Bravo: "They shouldn't. Honestly, John, this is the kind of match where you might learn more about both of them than you would in some blood feud."

Darren steps out from his corner slightly.

Sol does the same.

The crowd begins to rise in anticipation.

John Phillips: "Darren Valiant has the size advantage, but not enough of one that he can simply overpower Sol. Both are athletic. Both are quick. Both are comfortable countering on the move."

Mark Bravo: "Which means whoever controls the pace might control this entire match."

John Phillips: "And Sol has spent a lot of time lately talking about pace. Timing. Distance. Picking a limb and taking something away from an opponent."

Mark Bravo: "Tonight she finally gets the chance to show us what all of that looks like without somebody else's family turning the match upside down."

Sol continues lightly moving from foot to foot as her music fades away.

Darren Valiant steps toward the center of the ring.

Sol Azteca meets him there.

For a brief moment, they stand across from one another.

Two fan favorites.

Two athletes looking for the same thing.

One place in Ring King.

The music has faded.

Sol Azteca and Darren Valiant stand several feet apart in the center of the ring as the referee gives both competitors their final instructions.

Darren nods along before looking across at Sol.

Sol meets his eyes.

Valiant extends his hand.

There's no hesitation from Sol.

She reaches forward and shakes it.

The Manchester crowd applauds the show of sportsmanship.

John Phillips: "That's what we expected from these two."

Mark Bravo: "Respect before the bell. After the bell? Different story. There's only one spot in Ring King."

Darren releases the handshake and takes a few steps backward.

Sol does the same.

The referee signals.

The bell rings.

John Phillips: "And we're underway!"

Neither competitor immediately charges.

Instead, Sol begins circling to her right.

Darren mirrors her.

Both stay light on their feet, each watching the other's hips and shoulders, looking for the first commitment.

Darren feints forward.

Sol shifts backward immediately.

Valiant grins.

Sol gives him a little nod.

Mark Bravo: "Okay. They're measuring."

John Phillips: "Neither wants to give the other an early opening."

Mark Bravo: "And this is where this match gets interesting. Darren Valiant loves counters. He wants you committing first. Sol has been telling us for weeks that she wants to show everybody her timing and distance management."

They circle again before finally meeting in a collar-and-elbow tie-up.

There's an immediate struggle for position.

Darren plants his feet.

Sol lowers her center of gravity.

Neither gives much ground.

Darren finally uses his slight size advantage to begin pushing Sol backward—

—but Sol pivots at the last second, turning Valiant into the ropes instead.

The referee calls for the break.

Sol immediately raises both hands and backs away cleanly.

Darren looks at her for a moment.

Then nods.

John Phillips: "Clean break from Sol Azteca."

Mark Bravo: "And Darren learned something. He may have a little more size, but Sol's not going to stand there and let

him use it."

Valiant steps away from the ropes and they circle again.

Another lockup—

—this time Darren immediately slips around behind Sol and catches a waistlock.

Sol reaches down, trying to peel apart his grip.

Darren tightens it.

Sol changes approach.

She drops her weight, rolls forward, and slips underneath his grasp.

Darren turns—

Sol catches his wrist.

Arm wringer.

Darren rolls forward to relieve the pressure, springs back to his feet and reverses the wrist control.

Sol immediately cartwheels through.

She twists Darren's wrist again.

Darren rolls through.

Back up.

Reversal.

Sol rolls.

Darren tries to pull her into a side headlock—

—Sol shoves him toward the ropes.

Darren rebounds.

Sol drops flat.

Valiant clears her.

Off the opposite ropes.

Sol leapfrogs.

Darren keeps running.

Third rebound—

Sol goes for a hip toss!

Darren blocks it.

He tries one of his own.

Sol lands on her feet.

Darren spins around—

Sol shoots low for his legs!

Valiant hops over her attempt!

Sol rolls forward and springs back to her feet.

Both turn simultaneously.

They stop.

Standoff.

The Manchester crowd applauds loudly.

John Phillips: "How about that sequence?"

Mark Bravo: "That's two people finding out very quickly that everything they normally do has an answer tonight."

Darren slowly grins.

Sol can't help but smile herself.

Valiant gives her a small clap.

Sol responds with one of her own.

John Phillips: "Mutual appreciation."

Mark Bravo: "For now."

They approach again.

Darren offers his hand a second time.

Sol looks down at it.

Then up at Darren.

She laughs and slaps his hand instead.

Darren laughs too.

Then both immediately reset their stances.

Mark Bravo: "All right. We've established everybody likes everybody."

John Phillips: "You sound disappointed."

Mark Bravo: "Not at all. But somebody eventually has to hit somebody."

Darren moves first this time.

He reaches for another lockup—

—but Sol ducks underneath and catches the arm.

She quickly twists it behind Darren into a hammerlock.

Valiant searches for an escape.

Sol keeps tight against him, controlling the shoulder rather than simply holding the wrist.

John Phillips: "And look at where Sol has the pressure."

Mark Bravo: "Shoulder control. Exactly what she talked about. She's not trying to make this flashy right now. She's trying to take away Darren's ability to turn."

Darren tries to rotate toward her.

Sol follows.

He tries again.

She follows again.

Darren pauses.

Looks toward the crowd.

Then suddenly drops down and rolls through, dragging Sol forward with him.

Sol loses the hammerlock.

Darren pops up—

Picture-perfect dropkick!

Sol takes it square in the chest and goes down!

Mark Bravo: "There! Somebody hit somebody!"

John Phillips: "And Darren Valiant got all of that dropkick!"

Sol rolls backward from the impact and quickly gets one knee underneath her.

Darren doesn't rush her.

Instead, he stands several feet away and gestures for Sol to get back up.

Sol looks at him.

Darren taps his temple.

Sol nods.

Mark Bravo: "Darren's telling her he figured that one out."

John Phillips: "And I don't think Sol minds."

Sol rises.

She brushes a hand across her chest where the boots landed.

Then motions Darren forward.

Come on.

John Phillips: "The respect is still there."

Mark Bravo: "Absolutely. But now the feeling-out process is over."

Darren steps forward.

Sol does the same.

And this time, neither one is smiling.

Darren and Sol close the distance again.

This time there is no lockup.

Darren throws a quick forearm feint high—

—Sol shifts outside of it and answers with a sharp kick to the thigh.

Darren steps back immediately.

Not hurt badly.

But surprised.

Mark Bravo: "There we go. Sol's starting to change the equation."

John Phillips: "She doesn't have to knock Darren down with one strike. If she can take away a little bit of that explosiveness, that's enough."

Darren circles out.

Sol follows without chasing.

Another low kick.

Darren checks this one.

He immediately steps in with a quick elbow—

Sol slips underneath.

She catches the arm and redirects Darren forward into the ropes.

Darren rebounds.

Sol meets him with a springboard arm drag!

Valiant rolls through the landing and comes back up fast.

Sol is already moving.

Running dropkick!

Darren takes it square and tumbles backward toward the ropes.

John Phillips: "Beautiful combination from Sol Azteca."

Mark Bravo: "And that's what she means by flow. It's not move, stop, move. Everything is connected."

Darren uses the ropes to pull himself up.

Sol closes in—

—but Darren ducks beneath a spinning back elbow and catches her around the waist.

He snaps her backward with a quick neckbreaker!

Sol hits hard and rolls toward her side.

Darren immediately hooks the leg.

John Phillips: "First cover of the match!"

ONE!

TWO!

Sol kicks out.

Mark Bravo: "And that's Darren. He doesn't need a long setup to change momentum."

Darren rises quickly and pulls Sol up with him.

He fires a forearm.

Sol answers with one of her own.

Darren throws another.

Sol gives it back.

The crowd begins reacting to each strike.

John Phillips: "They're starting to trade now."

Mark Bravo: "And this is where respect stops meaning gentle."

Darren lands a sharper forearm that turns Sol's head.

Sol takes one step back.

Resets.

Then fires a fast kick into Darren's ribs.

Another to the thigh.

Darren reaches for her—

Sol pivots out and snaps a kick into the back of his leg.

Darren drops briefly to one knee.

Mark Bravo: "There it is again. Leg."

John Phillips: "And Darren's entire offense is built around timing, sudden acceleration, that ability to spring into something before you can react."

Mark Bravo: "Exactly. Take away the base and you take away some of the surprise."

Sol runs the ropes.

Darren pushes himself upright just in time—

—and catches her coming in with a sudden jumping DDT!

Sol spikes into the canvas!

Darren rolls her over immediately.

ONE!

TWO!

Sol gets a shoulder up!

John Phillips: "Two!"

Mark Bravo: "And Sol got caught moving forward. That's the danger."

Darren sits up and exhales hard.

He nods to himself.

Not frustration.

Adjustment.

Sol rolls toward the ropes, one hand finding the middle strand as she pulls herself upward.

Darren watches her carefully.

Then he begins bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet.

John Phillips: "Darren may be thinking Spotlight Kick."

Mark Bravo: "Too early to get cute. Just hit it if it's there."

Sol turns—

Darren fires the superkick!

Sol ducks!

Darren's leg sails over her shoulder.

Sol catches the plant leg immediately.

She sweeps it out from under him!

Darren crashes onto his back.

Sol wastes no time.

Basement dropkick directly into the knee!

Darren rolls away clutching the joint.

Mark Bravo: "That's twice now."

John Phillips: "And Darren knows it."

Sol doesn't celebrate.

She stays moving.

Darren gets one foot underneath himself.

Sol circles to the outside angle.

He tries to rise—

Sol catches him with a snapmare.

She runs forward.

Kick to the back!

Darren jolts from the impact.

Sol keeps going past him, rebounds off the ropes—

—and comes back with another kick, this one across the chest!

Darren goes flat.

Sol covers.

ONE!

TWO!

Darren kicks out!

John Phillips: "Another two count."

Mark Bravo: "And look at Darren's face. He's still in this, but Sol's forcing him to work at her rhythm now."

Sol rises first.

Darren pushes up behind her.

She turns and reaches for him—

Darren suddenly snaps off a picture-perfect dropkick!

Sol gets blasted backward into the turnbuckles.

Darren charges in.

Sol slips through the ropes to the apron at the last second.

Darren catches himself before hitting the corner.

He turns—

Sol springs to the top rope.

Solar Flare!

The springboard corkscrew crossbody catches Darren clean!

Both crash to the mat!

Sol hooks the far leg!

ONE!

TWO!

Darren escapes!

John Phillips: "That was close!"

Mark Bravo: "And that's the first time Darren couldn't completely absorb the momentum and bounce right back. Sol's making him stay down longer each time."

Sol sits up and looks toward Darren.

Valiant rolls onto his stomach and starts crawling toward the ropes.

Sol rises.

Darren uses the ropes to pull himself upright.

He turns around slowly.

Sol steps toward him.

Darren raises one hand.

Not surrender.

Just acknowledgement.

Sol pauses for half a beat.

Darren nods at her.

Sol nods back.

John Phillips: "Still respect."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah. But now they both know exactly how good the other one is."

Darren steps away from the ropes.

Sol meets him in the middle.

And the pace begins to rise again.

Darren and Sol meet again near center ring.

This time, Darren gets there first.

Forearm to the jaw.

Sol answers immediately.

Another from Darren.

Another from Sol.

The crowd starts counting along with the exchange as the shots come faster.

John Phillips: "This has turned into a fight in a hurry."

Mark Bravo: "And neither one wants to be the first to give ground."

Darren finally breaks the rhythm with a knee to the midsection.

He grabs Sol by the wrist and sends her hard into the ropes.

Sol rebounds.

Darren swings for a clothesline—

Sol ducks underneath.

She keeps running.

Darren turns—

Skyfire Kick!

The running spinning heel kick catches Darren across the side of the head!

Valiant spins with the impact and collapses to the mat.

Sol drops into the cover.

ONE!

TWO!

Darren gets the shoulder up!

John Phillips: "Valiant survives again!"

Mark Bravo: "But every time he survives, Sol is making him spend something."

Sol stays composed.

She doesn't argue the count.

She doesn't waste time staring at the referee.

Instead, she gets back to her feet and watches Darren carefully.

Valiant rolls toward the corner and uses the turnbuckles to pull himself upright.

Sol moves in.

Darren explodes out of the corner with a forearm!

Sol staggers backward.

Darren follows with another.

Then another.

He grabs Sol around the head—

Snap neckbreaker!

Sol hits hard.

Darren hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

Sol kicks out!

Mark Bravo: "That's the thing about Darren. You think you've got him slowing down and then suddenly you've eaten three strikes and you're staring at the lights."

John Phillips: "He thrives on these bursts."

Darren rises quickly.

He looks toward Sol.

Then toward the crowd.

The Manchester audience begins to rise as Darren backs into the corner.

He starts tuning up the Spotlight Kick.

John Phillips: "Valiant is measuring her."

Mark Bravo: "Sol had an answer earlier. Darren's betting she won't have one twice."

Sol pushes up to one knee.

Darren waits.

Sol rises.

Darren fires—

SPOTLIGHT KICK!

Sol catches the leg!

The crowd erupts!

Darren immediately hops on one foot, trying to regain balance.

Sol twists the ankle and forces him to turn—

—then drives another kick into the back of Darren's standing leg!

Valiant collapses to one knee.

Sol releases the leg and spins—

Spinning back elbow!

Darren gets rocked!

John Phillips: "She had it scouted again!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at Darren's leg. Sol has been building toward that all match."

Darren tries to stand.

The leg briefly buckles beneath him.

Sol sees it.

She immediately moves closer.

Darren knows exactly what she saw.

He pushes forward anyway.

Sol reaches for him—

Darren suddenly rolls her up!

ONE!

TWO!

Sol kicks free!

Both scramble back to their feet.

Darren swings—

Sol ducks.

Darren rebounds off the ropes.

Picture-perfect dropkick!

Sol gets launched backward!

Darren lands and immediately grabs at the leg Sol has been targeting.

Mark Bravo: "He paid for that one."

John Phillips: "He got the dropkick, but that plant leg is becoming a problem."

Sol rolls toward the corner.

Darren forces himself upright.

He limps forward.

Sol reaches the ropes and pulls herself up.

Darren charges—

Sol sidesteps!

Darren catches himself against the turnbuckles.

Sol fires a kick into the back of the thigh.

Darren turns around—

Sol catches him with a forearm.

Then another.

She grabs the wrist.

Darren reverses.

Sol gets sent toward the ropes.

She jumps onto the middle rope.

Darren realizes it too late.

Azteca Rush!

Sol handsprings through and whips around with the enziguri!

Darren gets caught flush and falls backward.

Sol covers!

ONE!

TWO!

TH—

Darren kicks out!

John Phillips: "Two and nine-tenths!"

Mark Bravo: "Now we're getting somewhere."

Sol sits back on her knees.

For the first time, there's a little frustration.

Not panic.

Just recognition that Darren is going to take more.

She takes a breath.

Resets.

Darren rolls onto his side.

Sol gets up and reaches for him.

Darren suddenly catches her around the head!

Jumping DDT!

Sol gets spiked again!

Darren can't capitalize immediately.

His bad leg slows him just enough.

John Phillips: "And that's the difference that targeting has made!"

Mark Bravo: "A healthy Darren is already covering her. Instead, he's trying to convince his leg to cooperate."

Darren finally crawls over and drapes an arm across Sol.

ONE!

TWO!

Sol kicks out!

Darren rolls onto his back and stares toward the ceiling.

The crowd applauds both competitors.

John Phillips: "Neither one is separating themselves."

Mark Bravo: "That's what we expected coming in. They're both having to earn every single advantage."

Darren slowly gets to his feet.

Sol follows several seconds later.

They turn toward one another.

Darren raises his fists.

Sol raises hers.

Darren throws a forearm.

Sol returns one.

Darren.

Sol.

Darren.

Sol.

The crowd gets louder with every strike.

Darren finally snaps off a rapid combination—forearm, elbow, body shot.

Sol absorbs it and stumbles backward.

Darren hits the ropes.

Sol catches him coming back with a basement dropkick to the damaged knee!

Darren flips forward and crashes to the mat!

Mark Bravo: "There it is again!"

Darren clutches the knee.

Sol moves immediately.

She grabs the leg.

Darren kicks at her with the other foot.

Sol avoids it.

Darren tries again.

Sol steps around.

She begins twisting into position for Luz Final—

John Phillips: "Submission attempt!"

Darren recognizes the danger and dives toward the ropes before Sol can fully secure it.

His hand grabs the bottom rope.

The referee calls for the break.

Sol releases instantly.

Darren pulls himself beneath the bottom rope onto the apron to create distance.

Mark Bravo: "Smart."

John Phillips: "Very smart. Darren knew exactly where that was heading."

Sol stands in the ring and watches him.

Darren sits on the apron for a moment, rubbing the knee.

Then he looks up at Sol.

She gives him a slight nod.

Darren nods back.

Still respect.

But the smiles are long gone.

John Phillips: "This isn't about proving who's better anymore."

Mark Bravo: "No. Now it's about who can find the last opening."

Darren slowly pulls himself upright on the apron.

Sol takes a few steps backward, giving him room to reenter rather than attacking through the ropes.

The crowd applauds the gesture.

Darren notices.

He steps back through the ropes.

Then immediately raises his hands.

Sol does the same.

And once again, they close the distance.

Darren Valiant and Sol Azteca meet again near center ring.

Both are breathing harder now.

Both are carrying the match on their bodies.

Darren's leg is clearly bothering him.

Sol is slower getting fully upright after the repeated DDTs and neckbreakers.

John Phillips: "We're reaching the stage now where every decision matters."

Mark Bravo: "And every mistake costs more because neither of them has much room left to recover."

Darren reaches in for Sol's wrist.

Sol rotates through and takes his instead.

Darren reverses.

Sol rolls underneath.

She comes up behind him—

Darren throws a back elbow!

Sol ducks.

Darren spins through anyway.

SPOTLIGHT KICK!

Sol jerks backward at the last possible instant!

Darren's boot misses her chin by inches.

But the missed kick forces Darren to plant hard on the leg Sol has been attacking.

His knee buckles.

He drops down immediately.

John Phillips: "The leg gave out!"

Mark Bravo: "That's not bad luck. That's twenty minutes of Sol Azteca making an investment."

Sol sees the opening.

She takes one step forward—

Then stops.

Darren is still trying to get the leg underneath himself.

Sol could attack immediately.

Instead, she gives him just enough space to stand.

Mark Bravo: "Don't get too generous."

John Phillips: "There's respect here, Mark."

Mark Bravo: "Respect doesn't get you into Ring King."

Darren uses the ropes to pull himself upright.

He looks across at Sol.

He knows she gave him the moment.

Darren nods once.

Then gestures for her to come on.

Sol obliges.

She closes quickly.

Darren meets her with a forearm.

Sol responds with one.

Darren fires another.

Sol answers with a kick to the body.

Darren doubles slightly.

Sol takes the wrist—

Darren spins out.

He catches Sol from behind!

John Phillips: "Valiant Shift!"

Darren jumps—

Sol grabs the top rope!

Darren loses the reverse DDT!

He lands awkwardly behind her.

Sol turns—

Darren catches her with a forearm!

Sol staggers.

Darren lunges again—

Sol catches the arm.

She redirects him into the ropes.

Darren rebounds—

Corona Strike!

The springboard knee connects flush!

Darren collapses backward!

John Phillips: "Right on the jaw!"

Sol falls into the cover!

ONE!

TWO!

TH—

DARREN GETS THE SHOULDER UP!

The crowd erupts.

Mark Bravo: "Okay! Darren Valiant just found another gear."

John Phillips: "Sol thought she had him!"

Sol stays on her knees beside Darren.

Her hands briefly go to the sides of her mask.

She looks toward the referee.

Two.

Definitely two.

Sol closes her eyes for one second.

Breathes.

Resets.

John Phillips: "That's what we've talked about with Sol all night. She allows herself the reaction, then she brings everything back under control."

Mark Bravo: "Because frustration is how you make mistakes."

Sol rises.

Darren is barely moving.

She reaches down and begins pulling him upward.

Darren suddenly grabs her around the waist.

Inside cradle!

ONE!

TWO!

Sol escapes!

Both scramble upright.

Darren swings wildly.

Sol ducks.

Darren turns—

Sol goes for Skyfire Kick!

Darren ducks!

Sol spins through.

Darren grabs her from behind!

VALIANT SHIFT!

THIS TIME HE HITS IT!

Sol is driven down hard!

Darren rolls through the impact and hooks both legs!

John Phillips: "This could be it!"

ONE!

TWO!

THRE—

SOL KICKS OUT!

Darren's eyes go wide.

The crowd explodes again.

John Phillips: "SOL AZTECA SURVIVES THE VALIANT SHIFT!"

Mark Bravo: "And look at Darren! He thought that was his ticket to Los Angeles!"

Darren sits beside Sol for a moment, staring toward the referee.

Two fingers.

Darren exhales and runs both hands over his face.

Then he looks down at Sol.

And laughs.

Not mockingly.

Almost in disbelief.

Sol is lying on her back staring upward, barely aware of where she is.

Mark Bravo: "That's the reaction of a guy who just threw his best shot and found out he needs another one."

Darren pushes himself upright.

His bad leg nearly gives out again.

He catches the top rope and steadies himself.

Then he looks toward Sol.

Valiant slowly backs into the corner.

John Phillips: "He's lining her up again."

Mark Bravo: "If the Valiant Shift didn't finish her, Darren's going back to the Spotlight Kick."

Sol crawls toward the ropes.

Darren waits.

The Manchester crowd rises.

Sol gets one knee underneath herself.

Darren pounds the mat once.

Sol gets to her feet.

She turns.

Darren explodes from the corner—

SPOTLIGHT KICK!

Sol moves!

Darren misses again!

His leg buckles on the landing!

Sol immediately catches the wrist.

Darren tries to pull away.

Sol holds on.

She steps through.

Darren throws an elbow with his free arm.

Sol ducks underneath.

She shifts behind him.

Darren turns back around—

Sol jumps to the middle rope.

Springboards back—

Another Corona Strike!

Darren staggers but somehow stays upright!

John Phillips: "He's still standing!"

Sol sees it.

She hits the ropes.

Darren instinctively swings a clothesline.

Sol ducks underneath.

She hits the opposite ropes.

Darren turns around—

Sol launches herself forward!

Darren catches her in midair!

For one moment, both competitors freeze in an awkward struggle for control.

Sol shifts her weight.

Darren tries to stabilize on the bad leg.

It buckles.

Both tumble down!

Sol rolls through!

She keeps Darren's arm trapped!

Mark Bravo: "WAIT!"

Sol turns her hips.

Darren realizes what is happening.

LUZ FINAL!

Sol has the submission locked in!

John Phillips: "LUZ FINAL! SOL CAUGHT HIM IN THE TRANSITION!"

Darren immediately reaches toward the ropes.

They're several feet away.

Sol tightens the hold.

Darren grits his teeth and begins dragging both of them across the canvas.

Mark Bravo: "This is exactly how Sol wants this hold! She didn't force it. Darren made one mistake and she flowed straight into it!"

Darren reaches again.

Still short.

His fingertips scrape across the canvas.

Sol pulls back harder.

Darren's face twists in pain.

The crowd rises even louder as his hand hovers above the canvas.

John Phillips: "Darren Valiant is in serious trouble!"

Darren raises his hand.

He looks at the ropes.

Then down at the mat.

Sol keeps the pressure on.

Darren Valiant's hand hangs over the canvas.

It drops—

—but stops just before hitting the mat.

Darren clenches his fist.

He shakes his head.

John Phillips: "Valiant refuses to give up!"

Mark Bravo: "He's got heart, John, but heart doesn't get you out of a hold when your body's already been taken apart."

Darren plants his free hand against the canvas.

He tries dragging himself forward again.

One inch.

Then another.

The ropes remain agonizingly close.

Sol Azteca adjusts her position.

She shifts her hips.

Pulls Darren back toward the center.

And cinches Luz Final even tighter.

John Phillips: "Sol just took away what little progress Darren had made!"

Mark Bravo: "That's technique. Darren's trying to escape with strength and determination. Sol's answering him with

positioning."

Darren reaches again.

His fingers stretch toward the bottom rope.

Too far.

His movements are becoming slower.

The crowd begins clapping rhythmically, trying to will him forward.

Darren hears them.

He tries again.

His arm pushes against the canvas—

—and gives out beneath him.

John Phillips: "Darren is fading!"

The referee drops beside him.

Sol can't see Darren's face from her position, but she can feel his resistance disappearing.

Her expression changes.

She doesn't release the hold.

But she looks directly toward the referee.

Mark Bravo: "Sol knows it too."

The referee asks Darren if he wants to submit.

There is no answer.

Darren's free arm lies against the canvas.

The referee grabs his wrist.

Raises the arm.

Lets go.

It falls.

John Phillips: "Darren may be out!"

The referee checks him again.

Darren doesn't respond.

That's enough.

The referee immediately calls for the bell!

DING! DING! DING!

Sol releases Luz Final the instant she realizes the match has been stopped.

John Phillips: "It's over! Darren Valiant never submitted, but he couldn't continue!"

Mark Bravo: "Sol Azteca put him out. That's as definitive as it gets."

Sol rolls away and sits on the canvas, breathing heavily.

She looks toward Darren immediately.

The referee kneels beside Valiant, checking on him.

Sol stays where she is.

No celebration yet.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... and QUALIFYING for the 2026 RING KING tournament... SOL... AZTECA!"

The Manchester crowd erupts.

Sol finally allows herself a smile.

The referee comes over and raises her arm.

John Phillips: "Sol Azteca is going to Los Angeles!"

Mark Bravo: "And remember what she wanted from this match. She wanted a clear ring. A fair beginning. No Hightower family. No chaos. No excuses."

John Phillips: "She wanted the opportunity to show everyone what Sol Azteca looks like when she's allowed to simply wrestle."

Mark Bravo: "Well, we saw it. She changed pace when she needed to. She attacked Darren's leg. She took away the base for the Spotlight Kick. She kept adjusting until she found the opening for Luz Final."

John Phillips: "They see the sun..."

Mark Bravo: "...they forget what it burns."

Sol's celebration remains restrained as Darren begins to stir.

Valiant rolls onto his side.

The crowd applauds as he slowly becomes aware of his surroundings.

Sol notices.

She walks over and crouches beside him.

Darren looks up at her.

For a moment, he appears confused.

Then he looks toward the referee.

Then back to Sol.

Understanding sets in.

Darren closes his eyes and exhales.

Disappointed.

But not angry.

Sol extends her hand.

Darren looks at it.

Then takes it.

Sol helps him back to his feet.

Darren's damaged leg nearly buckles, and Sol immediately catches him by the arm until he regains his balance.

John Phillips: "Exactly the way this match began."

Mark Bravo: "Respect."

Darren steadies himself.

He looks at Sol.

Then gives her a nod.

Sol returns it.

Darren raises Sol's arm himself.

The crowd responds with another loud ovation.

John Phillips: "Darren Valiant gave Sol Azteca everything tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And that's why this win matters. Darren wasn't sacrificed to prove a point. Sol had to figure him out."

Darren releases her arm and says something quietly to Sol.

She nods.

The two shake hands once more.

Darren then steps through the ropes, leaving the ring to Sol.

Sol turns toward the Manchester crowd.

This time, she lets herself enjoy it.

She climbs onto the middle turnbuckle and raises both arms high.

John Phillips: "Add another name to the field."

Mark Bravo: "Sol Azteca is officially Ring King bound."

The Ring King logo appears beside Sol's name on the screen.

SOL AZTECA — QUALIFIED

Sol remains on the turnbuckles, looking out over the cheering crowd as the broadcast prepares to move on.

A Crack in the Foundation

Segment

The broadcast cuts backstage.

The Empire locker room.

The atmosphere is noticeably different from one week ago.

Quieter.

More controlled.

Almost too controlled.

Trey Mack sits forward on a bench, elbows resting on his knees.

Clovis Black stands against one wall with his arms folded.

Valkyrie Knoxx is nearby, quietly tightening the tape around one wrist.

And on opposite sides of the room...

Amy Harrison.

Marie Van Claudio.

Neither woman is looking at the other.

Marie stands in front of a mirror adjusting her gear.

Amy sits on another bench, scrolling through her phone.

Silence.

Trey finally looks from one woman to the other.

Trey Mack: "So we really gonna do this all night?"

Amy continues scrolling.

Amy Harrison: "Do what?"

Trey Mack: "This."

He gestures between Amy and Marie.

Trey Mack: "Whatever the hell this is."

Marie continues adjusting the strap on her gear.

Marie Van Claudio: "There is nothing to discuss."

Amy immediately laughs beneath her breath.

Marie stops.

She looks at Amy through the mirror.

Marie Van Claudio: "Something amusing?"

Amy finally lowers her phone.

Amy Harrison: "You."

Trey closes his eyes.

Trey Mack: "Jesus Christ."

Amy stands.

Marie slowly turns away from the mirror to face her.

Amy Harrison: "You keep saying there's nothing to discuss like that somehow makes what you said last week less ridiculous."

Marie Van Claudio: "What exactly was ridiculous?"

Amy Harrison: "That you genuinely thought I was going to walk into that ring tonight..."

Amy points toward the floor.

Amy Harrison: "...lie down..."

Another gesture.

Amy Harrison: "...and let you put your foot on my chest."

Marie Van Claudio: "I never said anything about my foot."

Amy Harrison: "Oh, sorry."

Amy puts a hand against her chest.

Amy Harrison: "How unreasonable of me."

Valkyrie briefly looks up.

Clovis remains motionless.

Marie Van Claudio: "This is bigger than you."

Amy Harrison: "There it is."

Marie Van Claudio: "It is bigger than me too."

Amy Harrison: "No, Marie. You don't get to add that part afterward."

Amy takes a few steps closer.

Amy Harrison: "You didn't come into that locker room last week and say, 'Amy, what's best for The Empire?'"

Amy Harrison: "You told everybody what was going to happen."

Marie lifts her chin.

Marie Van Claudio: "Because somebody has to make decisions."

Amy Harrison: "And naturally that somebody is you."

Marie Van Claudio: "I am the leader of The Empire."

There it is again.

Amy smiles.

Not pleasantly.

Amy Harrison: "Keep saying it."

Marie Van Claudio: "Excuse me?"

Amy Harrison: "Maybe eventually you won't need to remind everybody."

Marie steps toward her.

Trey immediately rises from the bench.

Trey Mack: "No."

Both women look toward him.

Trey Mack: "I'm not doing this shit again."

Trey moves between them, though neither has actually thrown a punch.

Trey Mack: "Last week was enough."

Trey Mack: "We already went oh-for-three in qualifiers."

Trey Mack: "Tonight, one of you is guaranteed to put The Empire in Ring King."

He points toward Marie.

Trey Mack: "You win, Empire gets in."

Then Amy.

Trey Mack: "You win, Empire gets in."

Trey spreads his arms.

Trey Mack: "Either way, we fucking win."

Amy looks past Trey toward Marie.

Amy Harrison: "That's what I've been saying."

Marie Van Claudio: "No. What you've been saying is that you have something to prove."

Amy Harrison: "Maybe I do."

Marie smiles faintly.

Marie Van Claudio: "Then prove it."

A beat.

Amy Harrison: "Gladly."

Trey looks between them.

Behind him, Valkyrie finishes taping her wrist.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Then settle it in the ring."

Everyone turns toward her.

Valkyrie stands.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "No cheap shots back here."

Valkyrie Knoxx: "No tearing the locker room apart."

Valkyrie Knoxx: "You want the tournament spot?"

She looks between Amy and Marie.

Valkyrie Knoxx: "Take it from each other."

Clovis finally speaks from against the wall.

Clovis Black: "And when it's over..."

All eyes move toward him.

Clovis Black: "...it's over."

Silence settles over the locker room again.

Marie looks toward Clovis.

Then Valkyrie.

Then Trey.

Finally, Amy.

Marie Van Claudio: "Fine."

Amy crosses her arms.

Amy Harrison: "Fine."

Trey exhales.

Trey Mack: "Good."

He looks toward Marie.

Trey Mack: "Because Empire ain't falling apart over one tournament match."

Marie immediately answers.

Marie Van Claudio: "Of course it isn't."

Amy looks at her.

Amy Harrison: "We'll see."

The room goes quiet again.

Trey slowly turns toward Amy.

Amy has already picked her phone back up.

Marie returns to the mirror.

But now neither woman is pretending the other isn't there.

Marie watches Amy through the reflection.

Amy catches the look through the same mirror.

Neither looks away.

Valkyrie glances toward Trey.

Trey rubs both hands over his face.

Clovis simply resumes leaning against the wall.

Whatever happens later tonight...

The Empire will have a representative in Ring King.

The question appears to be what will remain of The Empire once that representative is decided.

The broadcast fades away from the locker room.

Bow

Segment

The broadcast cuts away from the arena.

The camera fades into a dimly lit locker room somewhere backstage inside SNHU Arena.

The room is almost completely still.

Hakuryu sits silently in a chair.

Mounted on the wall behind him is the UTA United States Championship.

The championship he took from Yoshii at One Last Stop.

Hakuryu methodically wraps his wrists, pulling the tape tight with slow, deliberate movements.

There is no emotion on his face.

No excitement.

No nervousness.

Nothing.

Standing beside him, dressed entirely in black, is Sinja.

A monitor behind the two displays the developing 2026 Ring King tournament field. The names already guaranteed entry are visible alongside the qualifiers who have earned their positions, while several spaces remain unresolved as tonight's matches continue.

Hakuryu finishes wrapping one wrist.

Then slowly raises his eyes toward the camera.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja smirks.

Sinja: "The Ring King Tournament..."

Sinja: "They call it a tournament to crown a king."

His smile widens.

Sinja: "Master Hakuryu says that's adorable."

Sinja: "Kings are not created by brackets."

Sinja: "Kings are forged through conquest."

Sinja: "And there is only one man in this entire tournament who has already shown exactly what happens when something stands in his path."

Sinja gestures toward Hakuryu.

Sinja: "You're looking at him."

Hakuryu slowly rises from the chair.

His eyes move toward the tournament display.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "Every time Hakuryu looks at this field..."

Sinja: "He doesn't feel excitement."

Sinja: "He feels disappointment."

Sinja turns toward the monitor.

Sinja: "THIS..."

Sinja: "...is supposed to be the best UTA has to offer?"

Sinja: "These are the people who believe they're worthy of sharing a ring with the White Dragon?"

Sinja scoffs.

Sinja: "Pathetic."

Hakuryu lifts one hand and points toward the display.

One particular name holds his attention.

Yoshii.

A man who has not yet secured his place in the tournament, but will have the opportunity to do exactly that later tonight.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "Let's begin with Yoshii."

Sinja: "Unlike the rest of this circus..."

Sinja: "Master Hakuryu actually respects him."

Sinja: "Yoshii is disciplined."

Sinja: "Yoshii is dangerous."

Sinja: "Yoshii fights with honor."

Sinja pauses.

Sinja: "But respect does not equal equality."

Sinja: "Yoshii already learned that at One Last Stop."

Hakuryu glances toward the United States Championship hanging behind him.

Sinja: "He stood across the ring from Hakuryu with this championship around his waist."

Sinja: "And when the night ended..."

Sinja looks toward the title as well.

Sinja: "...it belonged to the White Dragon."

Sinja: "Yoshii is still standing beneath Hakuryu."

Sinja: "A mountain does not fear the hill beneath it."

Sinja: "Yoshii may qualify tonight."

Sinja: "He may even survive long enough to meet Hakuryu again."

Sinja: "And if he does..."

Sinja smiles.

Sinja: "...Master Hakuryu will remind him exactly why that championship changed hands."

Hakuryu lets out a quiet chuckle.

His attention moves to another name.

Maxwell Jett.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja laughs openly.

Sinja: "Then there's Maxwell Jett."

Sinja: "The professional victim."

Sinja: "Every interview..."

Sinja: "Every complaint..."

Sinja: "Every excuse..."

Sinja: "If he loses, someone cheated him."

Sinja: "If he wins, somehow he still thinks the world owes him something."

Sinja: "He cries."

Sinja: "He whines."

Sinja: "He begs for sympathy."

Hakuryu slowly shakes his head.

Sinja: "Master Hakuryu says Maxwell Jett doesn't need an opponent."

Sinja: "He needs a therapist and a tissue."

Sinja gives another short laugh.

Sinja: "The Ring King Tournament isn't daycare for emotionally unstable children."

Sinja: "It's a battlefield."

Sinja's expression turns cold.

Sinja: "And children get slaughtered on battlefields."

Hakuryu's finger moves again.

Mike Best.

Hakuryu: ???

Sinja: "Mike Best."

Sinja: "A man desperately trying to convince everyone it's still twenty years ago."

Sinja: "Every step he takes is another desperate attempt to squeeze one more reaction out of people who remember his glory days."

Sinja: "He doesn't fight on merit anymore."

Sinja: "He fights on nostalgia."

Sinja: "On favors."

Sinja: "On reputation."

Hakuryu stares directly into the camera.

Sinja: "Hakuryu doesn't care what your name USED to mean."

Sinja: "When the bell rings, history books don't throw punches."

Sinja: "Living in the past only guarantees one thing..."

Sinja takes a small step toward the camera.

Sinja: "...you'll be buried in it."

Hakuryu's attention shifts one final time.

The UTA Champion.

Chris Ross.

A long silence follows.

Hakuryu simply stares at the name.

Then...

Hakuryu: ???????.....??

Hakuryu smirks.

That's it.

Nothing else.

Sinja tries to contain himself.

He fails.

A laugh escapes.

Sinja: "Chris Ross..."

Sinja shrugs.

Sinja: "Enough said."

The silence afterward somehow makes the dismissal even more insulting.

Hakuryu turns away from the monitor.

He reaches behind him.

The United States Championship comes down from the wall.

Hakuryu places it across his shoulder.

Hakuryu: ???...???????????

Sinja steps forward one final time.

Sinja: "The Ring King Tournament is not a competition."

Sinja: "It's an execution."

Sinja: "One by one..."

Sinja: "...every name that enters that bracket will disappear."

Sinja: "Not because they're unlucky."

Sinja: "Not because the officials failed them."

Sinja: "Not because fate was cruel."

Sinja: "Because they had the misfortune of entering a tournament with Hakuryu."

Sinja points toward the championship resting over Hakuryu's shoulder.

Sinja: "The United States Champion."

Sinja: "The White Dragon."

Sinja: "Pure Evil."

Hakuryu remains completely motionless behind him.

Sinja: "You don't crown a Ring King when the Emperor is already sitting on his throne."

Hakuryu slowly closes his eyes.

Several seconds pass.

Then his eyes reopen.

Hakuryu: ???????

Sinja grins.

Sinja: "Bow."

The camera remains locked on Hakuryu.

The United States Championship rests over his shoulder.

The unfinished Ring King field glows behind him.

Hakuryu's emotionless stare never leaves the lens.

The image slowly fades to black.

Yoshii vs. Maxx Mayhem

Match

The arena lights begin to pulse as the opening of "Wolf Totem" by The HU featuring Jacoby Shaddix blasts across SNHU.

The Manchester crowd immediately comes alive.

Yoshii steps through the curtain.

And for perhaps the first time in quite a while, something is noticeably missing.

There is no United States Championship resting across his shoulder.

Yoshii pauses at the top of the entranceway.

His usual massive smile is there, but it's a little more subdued tonight.

He looks around at the cheering fans.

Then pats his bare shoulder once.

Yoshii exhales.

And the smile grows.

He raises both arms.

Yoshii: "YOSHII!"

The crowd roars it right back at him.

John Phillips: "Listen to this reception for Yoshii! The former United States Champion is back in action tonight, but there is no question that things have changed since we last saw him compete."

Mark Bravo: "That championship was becoming part of the picture whenever you saw Yoshii, John. Tonight the shoulder is empty because at One Last Stop, Hakuryu took the United States Championship away from him."

Yoshii begins down the aisle, reaching toward the fans on either side.

He slaps hands.

He stops to bump fists with a young fan wearing a UTA shirt.

The kid shouts something up at him.

Yoshii laughs, points at the child and nods enthusiastically.

Several steps behind him comes Jed Dye.

Jed isn't laughing.

He isn't smiling.

His suit is perfectly pressed, his posture rigid, and the expression on his face looks like someone has personally committed an administrative offense against him.

Mark Bravo: "Yoshii seems to be handling the loss pretty well."

John Phillips: "Jed Dye does not."

Mark Bravo: "Jed Dye looks like he's spent the last three weeks demanding a recount."

Jed notices one fan near the barricade pointing toward Yoshii's empty shoulder.

Jed immediately stops.

He points two fingers toward his own eyes.

Then toward the fan.

I'm watching you.

Yoshii realizes Jed has fallen behind and turns around.

He waves enthusiastically for his manager to catch up.

Jed instantly straightens his jacket and marches forward as though absolutely nothing happened.

John Phillips: "For Yoshii, tonight has to be about moving forward. Hakuryu defeated him for the United States Championship at One Last Stop. That chapter hurt, but Yoshii has an enormous opportunity to begin another one tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And it's one hell of an opportunity. Win tonight, qualify for Ring King. Then you're four wins away from winning the entire tournament and earning a guaranteed UTA Championship opportunity."

Yoshii reaches ringside.

He stops before climbing the steps.

For a moment, his expression becomes serious.

Competition takes over.

He looks toward the Ring King logo displayed across the massive screen above the entrance.

Yoshii points at it.

Then points toward himself.

Yoshii: "Yoshii... Ring King!"

The crowd cheers.

Jed Dye steps beside him and vigorously nods, pointing at Yoshii as though this statement has been independently verified by several reputable sources.

John Phillips: "And let's not forget something when we talk about Yoshii trying to climb back to the top. This isn't simply a former United States Champion. Yoshii has been UTA World Champion before."

Mark Bravo: "He's six-foot-four, nearly six hundred pounds, he's got championship experience, and somehow he's still one of the happiest human beings I've ever seen. You know what I do when I'm unhappy? I eat. Maybe that's the secret."

Yoshii climbs the steel steps and steps through the ropes.

Jed Dye follows.

Yoshii immediately walks toward the corner and begins climbing.

He reaches the second turnbuckle.

For just a fraction of a second, his hand instinctively moves toward the shoulder where the United States Championship used to sit.

He catches himself.

His expression changes.

The smile disappears.

Yoshii looks down.

Then he looks out over the crowd.

He raises both arms instead.

Yoshii: "YOSHIIIIIIII!"

Manchester answers him with another huge ovation.

John Phillips: "That tells you something right there."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah. He felt for the championship."

John Phillips: "For weeks that belt was there every time Yoshii climbed those turnbuckles. Tonight it isn't."

Yoshii steps back down into the ring.

Jed approaches him.

He places both hands on Yoshii's shoulders and begins speaking rapidly.

Yoshii listens.

Jed points toward the Ring King logo.

Then toward Yoshii.

Then makes a sweeping motion with his hand as if dismissing everything that happened at One Last Stop as irrelevant paperwork.

Yoshii nods.

Mark Bravo: "I don't speak Jed, but I think that translates roughly to, 'Hakuryu is yesterday's problem.'"

John Phillips: "Maybe. But I don't know that Hakuryu is a problem you simply forget."

The mention of the new United States Champion draws a mixed reaction from the audience.

John Phillips: "There was already history there before One Last Stop. Hakuryu spent weeks watching Yoshii, watching that championship, making it very clear what he wanted. Eventually, he got his opportunity."

Mark Bravo: "And now Hakuryu has the belt."

John Phillips: "But Yoshii has an opportunity tonight that Hakuryu cannot take away from him. Hakuryu is already automatically entered into Ring King as United States Champion. Yoshii can join him in that tournament by defeating Maxx Mayhem."

Jed moves toward the ropes and begins loudly giving unsolicited instructions to ringside personnel.

One crew member apparently isn't moving quickly enough for him.

Jed points toward the man's chair.

Then points six inches to the left.

The confused crew member moves the chair.

Jed considers the adjustment.

He nods approvingly.

Mark Bravo: "Thank God. The chair was crooked. We almost had to cancel the match."

Meanwhile, Yoshii walks toward the center of the ring.

He rolls his shoulders.

The smile fades again.

His massive hands close into fists.

There is still warmth when he looks toward the crowd.

But when Yoshii turns toward the entrance...

He's ready to fight.

John Phillips: "The United States Championship is gone. Yoshii can't change that tonight."

Mark Bravo: "But he can make damn sure losing it wasn't the end of his story."

Jed Dye exits to ringside and takes his position near Yoshii's corner.

Inside the ring, Yoshii plants his feet and stares toward the curtain.

"Wolf Totem" begins to fade.

The Manchester crowd remains firmly behind the former United States Champion as Yoshii waits for the Mayhem Machine.

Yoshii stands in the center of the ring, eyes fixed on the entrance.

Jed Dye waits at ringside, still looking like someone personally offended him by allowing this match to exist.

Then—

SIRENS.

Static tears across the video screen.

The opening of "Holiday" by Green Day hits the speakers.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, great."

John Phillips: "You say that every time."

Mark Bravo: "Because every time Maxx Mayhem comes through that curtain, my chances of having to explain something completely ridiculous increase exponentially."

Maxx Mayhem bursts through the curtain.

He's carrying a trash can lid.

Of course he is.

Maxx holds the lid above his head and spins in a circle before smashing it against his own forehead.

CLANG!

He stops.

Looks at the lid.

Looks at the crowd.

Hits himself again.

CLANG!

The Manchester crowd cheers.

John Phillips: "The Mayhem Machine has arrived!"

Mark Bravo: "And he's already losing a fight with a garbage can."

Maxx tosses the lid into the air.

It lands behind him.

He never looks back.

Instead, Maxx points toward the ring.

More specifically...

He points at Yoshii.

Maxx's eyes slowly travel upward.

And upward.

And upward.

He cranes his neck back dramatically.

Then takes several exaggerated steps backward as though he needs additional distance just to fit all of Yoshii into his field of vision.

Yoshii can't help himself.

He laughs.

Mark Bravo: "Yeah, Maxx. That's approximately five hundred and eighty-three pounds of your immediate future."

Maxx starts down the aisle.

He high-fives a fan.

He goes for another.

Pulls his hand away at the last second.

Then immediately doubles back and gives the disappointed fan an apologetic hug.

John Phillips: "There really is no predicting this man."

Mark Bravo: "You don't predict Maxx Mayhem. You survive Maxx Mayhem."

Maxx reaches another section of the barricade and suddenly stops.

He turns toward the hard camera.

Points toward Yoshii.

Then holds his hands ridiculously far apart.

Maxx Mayhem: "THAT'S A LOTTA YOSHII!"

The crowd laughs.

Inside the ring, Yoshii nods enthusiastically.

Yoshii: "YOSHII!"

Maxx points at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "SEE?! HE AGREES!"

Mark Bravo: "Compelling argument."

Maxx resumes his trip toward ringside.

John Phillips: "There is plenty of humor surrounding Maxx Mayhem, but nobody should mistake that for Maxx not being dangerous. We saw that again at One Last Stop when he challenged Mikey Unlikely for the WrestleZone Championship."

Mark Bravo: "That's the problem. Maxx is funny right up until the moment he isn't. Underneath all the wisecracks is a guy who genuinely enjoys chaos."

Maxx reaches ringside.

Jed Dye immediately steps several feet away.

Maxx notices.

He stops.

Slowly turns his head toward Jed.

Grins.

Jed points toward the ring.

Jed Dye: "Your designated competition area is inside the ropes. Proceed."

Maxx looks at the ring.

Then back at Jed.

Then at the ring.

Then back at Jed.

Maxx Mayhem: "You always talk like a microwave instruction manual?"

The crowd laughs.

Jed's face tightens.

Jed Dye: "Enter. The. Ring."

Maxx raises both hands.

Maxx Mayhem: "Whoa! Okay, Dad."

Maxx slides underneath the bottom rope.

Jed immediately begins complaining to the referee about something that isn't remotely actionable.

Mark Bravo: "I give those two seven minutes before one of them develops a stress-related medical condition."

Maxx pops back to his feet.

Now he finally stands directly across from Yoshii.

The size difference is staggering.

Five-foot-ten, two-hundred thirty-five-pound Maxx Mayhem looks Yoshii up and down.

Yoshii smiles.

Maxx looks toward the crowd.

Then back toward Yoshii.

He reaches into the front of his gear.

The referee immediately approaches, suspicious.

Maxx pulls out...

...nothing.

He holds his empty hand up to the referee.

Then begins laughing hysterically.

John Phillips: "Come on."

Mark Bravo: "That's valuable officiating time we'll never get back."

The referee shakes their head and checks Maxx anyway.

Maxx dramatically raises both arms and spreads his legs, making the search as unnecessarily theatrical as possible.

Yoshii watches from across the ring, visibly amused.

John Phillips: "Very different personalities, but both of these men are fan favorites. And for all the fun we're seeing right now, the stakes couldn't be more serious."

Mark Bravo: "One tournament position. That's it. Hakuryu doesn't have to worry about tonight because beating Yoshii for the United States Championship gave him automatic entry. Yoshii and Maxx don't have that luxury."

The referee finishes checking Maxx.

Maxx walks toward Yoshii.

He stops directly in front of the massive former United States Champion.

Again, Maxx slowly looks upward.

Yoshii looks down at him.

Maxx extends his hand.

Yoshii looks at it.

Then happily reaches forward and takes it.

Maxx's entire body jerks forward from the force of Yoshii's handshake.

His eyes widen.

Yoshii releases him.

Maxx stares down at his hand.

He flexes his fingers.

Then looks toward Yoshii.

Maxx Mayhem: "Okay. New plan."

Yoshii tilts his head curiously.

Maxx Mayhem: "Don't let you touch me."

Yoshii laughs.

Yoshii: "YOSHII!"

Maxx turns toward the hard camera.

Maxx Mayhem: "I have made a terrible mistake."

Mark Bravo: "First intelligent thing he's said all night."

"Holiday" begins fading from the speakers.

Maxx backs toward his corner, shaking out the hand Yoshii just squeezed.

Across from him, Yoshii rolls his enormous shoulders and settles into position.

At ringside, Jed Dye points toward Maxx and begins giving Yoshii instructions.

The smile remains on Yoshii's face.

Maxx is still grinning too.

But as the referee moves between them...

Both men become noticeably more focused.

John Phillips: "Yoshii wants to prove losing the United States Championship was a setback, not the beginning of a decline. Maxx Mayhem wants another major opportunity after coming up short against Mikey Unlikely at One Last Stop."

Mark Bravo: "And one of them is about to join the Ring King field."

Yoshii and Maxx Mayhem stare across the ring at one another.

The humor has gotten them here.

Now comes the fight.

The referee gives both competitors their final instructions.

Yoshii nods seriously.

Maxx Mayhem nods too.

Then nods again.

And again.

The referee stops talking.

Maxx continues nodding.

The referee stares at him.

Maxx finally stops.

Maxx Mayhem: "Got it."

The referee signals for the bell.

DING! DING!

John Phillips: "Here we go! Yoshii versus Maxx Mayhem, and the winner advances to the 2026 Ring King tournament!"

Maxx immediately charges forward.

Yoshii doesn't move.

Maxx stops.

He looks up at Yoshii.

Then down at Yoshii's stomach.

Then back up.

Maxx slowly raises both hands for a traditional collar-and-elbow tie-up.

Yoshii raises his.

Maxx thinks about it.

He lowers his hands.

Maxx Mayhem: "Nah."

The crowd laughs.

Mark Bravo: "First sound tactical decision of the match."

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem gives up nearly three hundred fifty pounds to Yoshii. Trying to overpower him would be ridiculous."

Mark Bravo: "Which is exactly why I'm still expecting Maxx to try it eventually."

Maxx begins circling.

Yoshii turns with him.

Maxx suddenly darts forward and throws a quick kick into Yoshii's thigh.

He immediately retreats.

Yoshii looks down at his leg.

Then at Maxx.

Maxx shrugs.

Another quick approach.

Another kick.

Back out.

Yoshii nods.

Maxx comes in a third time—

Yoshii reaches for him!

Maxx barely slips underneath those enormous arms and races toward the opposite ropes.

He rebounds.

Shoulder tackle!

Maxx bounces off Yoshii and lands flat on his back.

Yoshii remains standing.

Maxx stares up at the lights.

Mark Bravo: "There it is."

John Phillips: "You knew he'd try it."

Mark Bravo: "Of course he did. Somewhere inside Maxx Mayhem's brain there was a voice saying, 'Don't run directly into the five-hundred-eighty-three-pound former sumo wrestler.' Maxx ignored that voice."

Maxx sits up.

He looks at Yoshii.

Yoshii smiles.

Maxx points at him.

Maxx Mayhem: "You cheated."

Yoshii looks genuinely confused.

Yoshii: "Yoshii?"

Maxx Mayhem: "Exactly."

At ringside, Jed Dye throws both hands up in disgust.

Jed Dye: "His mass is not an infraction!"

Mark Bravo: "Thank you, Jed."

Maxx gets back to his feet.

This time, there's a little more thought behind his approach.

He circles quickly.

Kick to the thigh.

Yoshii reaches.

Maxx slips away.

Another kick.

Yoshii turns.

Maxx darts behind him and throws a forearm into Yoshii's back.

Another.

Yoshii turns—

Maxx is already gone.

John Phillips: "This is what Maxx has to do. Keep moving. Don't let Yoshii get both hands on him."

Mark Bravo: "Hit and run. Be annoying. Frankly, Maxx has been training for that strategy his entire life."

Maxx hits the ropes.

He comes back with a running forearm.

Yoshii rocks slightly.

Maxx hits the ropes again.

Second forearm.

Yoshii gives another half-step.

Maxx sees it.

His eyes widen.

He points toward Yoshii.

Maxx Mayhem: "I MOVED HIM!"

The crowd cheers.

Maxx hits the ropes for a third attempt.

He comes charging back—

Yoshii lowers his shoulder.

WHAM!

Maxx gets launched off his feet from the collision and crashes onto his back!

John Phillips: "And Yoshii moved Maxx a whole lot farther!"

Maxx rolls onto his stomach.

Yoshii steps toward him.

Maxx scrambles backward.

Yoshii continues forward.

Maxx reaches the corner.

Nowhere else to go.

Yoshii closes in.

Maxx looks left.

Right.

Up.

Then ducks through the ropes.

Maxx Mayhem: "TIME OUT!"

The referee immediately tells him there are no time outs.

Maxx Mayhem: "There should be!"

Yoshii laughs.

Even the referee has to hide a smile.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem trying everything he can think of to slow Yoshii down."

Mark Bravo: "Including attempting to rewrite the rules of professional wrestling."

Maxx slowly steps back through the ropes.

Yoshii gives him room.

They reset.

Maxx shakes out his arms.

Then suddenly rushes in again.

This time he goes low.

Dropkick to Yoshii's knee!

The big man buckles slightly.

Maxx springs back up.

Another dropkick to the same knee!

Yoshii drops to one knee.

John Phillips: "There we go! Maxx finally brings Yoshii down!"

Maxx sees the opportunity and immediately hits the ropes.

Running knee to the side of Yoshii's head!

Yoshii rocks sideways but remains on one knee.

Maxx runs again.

Another knee!

Yoshii catches him!

The crowd erupts.

Maxx's eyes become enormous as Yoshii stands up with him trapped in both arms.

Maxx Mayhem: "Mistakes were made!"

Yoshii launches him across the ring with a massive belly-to-belly suplex!

Maxx flies through the air and crashes hard onto the canvas!

Mark Bravo: "GOOD LORD!"

John Phillips: "Yoshii just threw Maxx Mayhem halfway across the ring!"

Maxx rolls toward the ropes, clutching his back.

Yoshii rises fully.

The smile is gone now.

The former United States Champion stalks forward.

Maxx gets to his feet near the ropes.

Yoshii grabs him.

Huge open-hand chop across the chest!

SMACK!

Maxx's entire body recoils.

He looks down at his chest.

Then back at Yoshii.

Maxx Mayhem: "RUDE!"

Yoshii grabs him again.

Another thunderous chop!

Maxx stumbles along the ropes.

Mark Bravo: "Maxx is going to need somebody to iron his chest back out."

Yoshii sends Maxx across the ring.

Maxx rebounds—

Yoshii scoops him up!

Maxx kicks his legs wildly.

Yoshii turns—

—and plants him with a huge powerslam!

The ring shakes beneath the impact.

Yoshii hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

Maxx kicks out!

John Phillips: "Two count, and Maxx Mayhem is beginning to find out what so many challengers learned during Yoshii's United States Championship reign."

Mark Bravo: "You can have a strategy for Yoshii. Everybody does. Then he gets his hands on you and suddenly the strategy becomes 'please stop throwing me.'"

Yoshii sits up.

For just a moment, the camera catches Jed Dye outside the ring.

Jed is nodding emphatically.

He points toward Yoshii, then loudly taps the side of his own head.

Jed Dye: "CONTROL! SYSTEMATIC CONTROL!"

Yoshii looks toward him.

He nods.

Yoshii: "Yoshii!"

Mark Bravo: "I'm not convinced Yoshii understood a word of that."

John Phillips: "I'm not convinced anyone understands Jed Dye."

Yoshii pulls Maxx back to his feet.

He sends him hard toward the corner.

Maxx hits the turnbuckles.

Yoshii charges.

Maxx sees nearly six hundred pounds coming directly at him.

His eyes widen.

He dives out of the way!

Yoshii catches himself against the turnbuckles before the collision.

Maxx rolls back to his feet.

He charges—

Running forearm into Yoshii's back!

Another!

Another!

Yoshii turns around.

Maxx unloads with rapid right hands.

Yoshii shoves him away.

Maxx rolls backward with the force, comes right back up, and runs straight at him again!

Yoshii swings.

Maxx ducks.

He hits the ropes.

Flying crossbody!

Yoshii catches him.

Again.

Maxx looks toward the crowd while suspended in Yoshii's arms.

Maxx Mayhem: "WHY DO I KEEP DOING THIS?!"

Yoshii grins.

He lifts Maxx higher—

Maxx suddenly rakes his forearm across Yoshii's face!

Not an eye rake.

Just enough desperation to break the grip.

Maxx drops behind Yoshii.

He immediately chop-blocks the back of Yoshii's knee!

Yoshii drops down!

John Phillips: "And Maxx goes right back to the leg!"

Maxx doesn't stop this time.

He hits the ropes.

Running low dropkick to the side of Yoshii's head!

The big man falls onto one hand.

Maxx runs again.

Another dropkick!

Yoshii finally goes down onto his back!

The crowd comes alive as Maxx scrambles into the cover.

ONE!

Yoshii launches Maxx off of him before two!

Maxx lands several feet away.

Mark Bravo: "That's demoralizing."

John Phillips: "Maxx finally gets Yoshii flat, and Yoshii throws him off at one!"

Maxx sits up.

He stares across at Yoshii.

Then looks toward the referee.

He holds up one finger.

Maxx Mayhem: "That felt like more."

The referee shakes their head.

Maxx sighs.

Then gets back to work.

John Phillips: "And underneath all the jokes, that's something important about Maxx Mayhem. He's not intimidated."

Mark Bravo: "Maybe he should be a little intimidated."

John Phillips: "Maybe. But he's still attacking. He's still trying things. He's still looking for a way to solve Yoshii."

Maxx approaches as Yoshii starts pushing himself back upright.

Kick to the damaged knee.

Another.

Yoshii reaches for him.

Maxx backs away.

Yoshii rises.

Maxx comes forward again.

Yoshii suddenly catches him with a massive palm strike to the chest!

Maxx flies backward and collapses!

The crowd erupts.

Mark Bravo: "There is your reminder that this man was United States Champion for a reason."

Yoshii stands over Maxx.

For a moment, his expression changes.

The cheerful Yoshii disappears completely.

There's frustration there.

Determination.

Something to prove.

John Phillips: "And you have to wonder how much of what we're seeing from Yoshii tonight is connected to One Last Stop."

Mark Bravo: "Of course it is. Hakuryu took his championship. Yoshii can smile, shake hands, wave to the kids all he wants, but losing hurts."

John Phillips: "Especially when you've carried that championship with as much pride as Yoshii did."

At ringside, Jed Dye pounds the apron.

Jed Dye: "FORWARD! WE DO NOT REGRESS!"

Yoshii glances toward him.

Then toward the Ring King logo displayed around the arena.

He nods slowly.

Maxx begins to rise.

Yoshii turns back toward him.

And advances.

Yoshii reaches down and pulls Maxx Mayhem back to his feet.

Maxx fires a quick right hand into Yoshii's stomach.

Another.

A third.

Yoshii absorbs them and grabs Maxx around the waist.

Maxx's eyes widen.

Maxx Mayhem: "We talked about this!"

Yoshii lifts him effortlessly.

Maxx kicks his legs, trying to shift his weight—

—but Yoshii launches him overhead!

Maxx crashes onto the canvas and rolls almost all the way into the opposite corner.

John Phillips: "Another enormous throw from Yoshii!"

Mark Bravo: "Maxx's strategy has actually been pretty good. The problem is every mistake costs him about twelve feet of altitude."

Maxx pulls himself upright in the corner.

Yoshii sees him.

The big man lowers his head.

He charges.

Maxx moves!

Yoshii slams chest-first into the turnbuckles!

Maxx immediately runs to the opposite corner.

He turns.

Charges back.

Running splash into Yoshii!

Maxx lands and immediately backs away again.

Second running splash!

Yoshii rocks against the turnbuckles.

Maxx backs up for a third.

Mark Bravo: "If two worked..."

Maxx charges.

Yoshii steps forward.

Maxx realizes his mistake approximately one second too late.

Yoshii catches him around the throat and chest—

—and THROWS him into the corner!

Maxx hits the turnbuckles hard.

Yoshii backs away.

Then charges.

AVALANCHE!

Nearly six hundred pounds crushes Maxx against the turnbuckles!

Maxx stumbles forward with his eyes glazed.

He takes two steps.

Looks at Yoshii.

Maxx Mayhem: "I regret... several things."

Maxx falls face-first.

Mark Bravo: "Put that on his autobiography."

Yoshii rolls Maxx onto his back and covers.

ONE!

TWO!

Maxx gets a shoulder up!

John Phillips: "Mayhem stays alive!"

Yoshii sits back on his knees.

He takes a breath.

No frustration with the count.

He simply reaches for Maxx again.

At ringside, Jed Dye is far less patient.

Jed Dye: "HE HAS DEMONSTRATED SUFFICIENT RESILIENCE! TERMINATE THE CONTEST!"

Mark Bravo: "Jed's ordering a wrestling finish like he's firing somebody."

Yoshii pulls Maxx upright.

He scoops him onto his shoulder.

Maxx immediately begins hammering elbows against the side of Yoshii's head.

One.

Two.

Three.

Yoshii's grip loosens.

Maxx slides down behind him.

He immediately kicks Yoshii in the back of the knee.

Yoshii drops to one knee.

Maxx hits the ropes.

Running knee to the face!

Yoshii rocks backward.

But stays on his knee.

Maxx looks toward the ropes.

Then toward Yoshii.

Then back toward the ropes.

Maxx Mayhem: "Okay. Again."

Maxx runs.

Another knee!

Yoshii falls backward!

The crowd comes alive.

John Phillips: "Yoshii is down!"

Mark Bravo: "And Maxx needs to capitalize now. You don't get many opportunities with Yoshii flat on his back."

Maxx looks down at Yoshii.

Then toward the corner.

A terrible idea visibly enters his head.

Mark Bravo: "No."

Maxx points toward the top turnbuckle.

Mark Bravo: "No, no, no."

The crowd cheers.

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem is going upstairs!"

Mark Bravo: "That's because Maxx Mayhem has confused audience approval with medical advice."

Maxx climbs.

First rope.

Second.

Top.

He stands above Yoshii.

Maxx looks down.

He spreads his arms.

Maxx Mayhem: "MAYHEMMMMM!"

He leaps!

Flying elbow drop—

YOSHII ROLLS AWAY!

Maxx crashes elbow-first into the canvas!

He bounces from the impact and immediately grabs his arm.

Mark Bravo: "And gravity remains undefeated."

Yoshii begins pushing himself upright.

Maxx does the same, favoring the arm.

Both reach their feet.

Maxx turns—

Yoshii runs through him with a massive clothesline!

Maxx flips inside out!

John Phillips: "GOOD LORD!"

Yoshii doesn't cover.

He stands over Maxx, breathing heavily.

The crowd begins rallying behind him.

Yoshii raises one enormous arm.

Yoshii: "YOSHII!"

The audience responds.

Crowd: "YOSHII!"

Again.

Yoshii: "YOSHII!"

Crowd: "YOSHII!"

John Phillips: "Yoshii can feel it!"

Jed Dye pounds the apron, pointing frantically toward Maxx.

Jed Dye: "NOW! CAPITALIZE!"

Yoshii bends down and pulls Maxx from the canvas.

Maxx can barely stand.

Yoshii positions him.

Maxx suddenly drops down and rolls Yoshii forward!

ONE!

TWO!

YOSHII POWERS OUT!

Maxx is launched forward by the kickout.

He rolls through and somehow lands on his feet.

Maxx turns.

Yoshii is already coming.

Maxx sidesteps.

Yoshii hits the ropes.

Maxx runs beside him.

Yoshii rebounds.

Maxx jumps onto the middle rope—

Springboard crossbody!

YOSHII CATCHES HIM!

Maxx freezes in Yoshii's arms.

He slowly looks toward the hard camera.

Maxx Mayhem: "Son of a—"

Yoshii launches him overhead again!

Maxx crashes down!

John Phillips: "Every time Maxx thinks he's found a way around Yoshii's size, he ends up right back in those arms!"

Mark Bravo: "And this is starting to become a very bad night for Maxx's spine."

Yoshii gets back to his feet.

Maxx is slower now.

Much slower.

He crawls toward the ropes and begins pulling himself upright.

Yoshii waits.

Maxx turns around.

Yoshii charges.

Maxx ducks!

Yoshii stops himself against the ropes.

Maxx kicks the back of Yoshii's knee.

Yoshii drops down.

Maxx runs.

He comes off the ropes—

Yoshii surges back to his feet and catches Maxx with both hands!

Maxx is lifted high into the air!

GORILLA PRESS!

The crowd rises.

Maxx is held high above Yoshii's head.

His legs kick helplessly.

Maxx Mayhem: "THIS VIEW SUCKS!"

Yoshii walks toward the center of the ring with Maxx still overhead.

John Phillips: "Look at the power of Yoshii!"

Yoshii launches Maxx forward!

Maxx crashes chest-first into the canvas!

He rolls onto his back.

Yoshii looks toward the corner.

The crowd realizes what he is considering.

So does Jed Dye.

Jed points toward the turnbuckles.

Jed Dye: "END THIS!"

Yoshii starts toward the corner.

John Phillips: "Yoshii may be looking to finish it."

Mark Bravo: "If nearly six hundred pounds comes down on Maxx from those ropes, we're done."

Yoshii reaches the corner.

He grabs the ropes.

Then—

The crowd reaction changes.

Not louder.

Different.

A wave of noise begins spreading from the entrance side of the arena.

Jed Dye hears it first.

His head snaps toward the aisle.

John Phillips: "Wait a minute..."

Yoshii stops.

He looks over his shoulder.

Jed Dye has gone completely still.

The camera turns toward the entrance.

There stands Sinja.

Motionless.

Watching.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, come on."

Sinja takes one deliberate step forward.

Then another.

And behind him...

The United States Championship comes into view.

Resting in the possession of Hakuryu.

Yoshii's entire demeanor changes.

The smile is gone.

Completely.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu."

Mark Bravo: "And look at Yoshii."

Hakuryu steps into full view beside Sinja.

The United States Championship is prominently displayed.

He doesn't say anything.

He doesn't need to.

Hakuryu simply looks toward Yoshii.

Then slowly raises the championship.

John Phillips: "The man who ended Yoshii's United States Championship reign is here."

Mark Bravo: "And he's carrying the reminder."

At ringside, Jed Dye marches away from the apron toward the bottom of the aisle.

Jed Dye: "NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT! YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS HERE!"

Sinja continues toward ringside.

Hakuryu follows several steps behind him.

Inside the ring, Yoshii has completely forgotten about the corner.

He stares at Hakuryu.

Hakuryu stares back.

And between them...

Maxx Mayhem is beginning to stir.

Hakuryu remains at the foot of the aisle.

The United States Championship rests over his shoulder.

Sinja stands several steps ahead of him, staring toward the ring.

Jed Dye plants himself between them and ringside.

Jed Dye: "This is an active Ring King qualifying contest! Your presence is neither requested nor necessary!"

Sinja doesn't answer.

Hakuryu doesn't answer.

Jed points back toward the entrance.

Jed Dye: "Leave."

Nothing.

Mark Bravo: "Jed's going to bureaucrat them to death."

John Phillips: "Hakuryu hasn't actually done anything yet, but there is absolutely no reason for the United States Champion to be out here."

Mark Bravo: "Sure there is. He knows exactly what that championship means to Yoshii."

Inside the ring, Yoshii hasn't taken his eyes off Hakuryu.

Hakuryu slowly removes the United States Championship from his shoulder.

He looks down at the title.

Then back at Yoshii.

Hakuryu raises it overhead.

Yoshii grips the top rope.

John Phillips: "Don't do this, Yoshii. Maxx Mayhem is still in the match."

Maxx is indeed moving again.

He rolls onto his stomach.

Pushes himself to his knees.

He sees Yoshii facing away from him.

Then he looks beyond Yoshii.

He spots Hakuryu.

Maxx's expression says everything.

Oh.

That's why.

Mark Bravo: "Maxx knows what's happening."

John Phillips: "And whether Maxx likes the circumstances or not, he has a tournament position on the line."

Maxx gets one foot underneath himself.

Yoshii finally turns back toward the match—

Maxx charges!

Running forearm!

Yoshii absorbs it and staggers into the ropes.

Maxx hits him with another!

And another!

Yoshii finally shoves Maxx backward with both hands.

Maxx rolls through the shove and pops back up.

Yoshii charges—

Maxx sidesteps!

Yoshii hits the ropes chest-first.

Maxx immediately chop-blocks the knee!

Yoshii drops down.

John Phillips: "Maxx goes right back to that leg!"

Mark Bravo: "He'd be an idiot not to. Hakuryu just handed him an opening."

Maxx hits the ropes.

Running knee!

Yoshii gets caught in the side of the head!

Maxx covers!

ONE!

TWO!

Yoshii powers out!

Maxx gets thrown off and rolls onto his back.

He sits up quickly.

Looks at the referee.

Then at Yoshii.

Maxx Mayhem: "Worth a shot."

Maxx gets back to his feet.

Outside, Jed Dye is still demanding that Hakuryu and Sinja leave.

Sinja finally moves.

He steps forward.

Jed immediately steps forward too.

Jed Dye: "Do not."

Sinja stops.

He slowly turns his head toward Jed.

Jed doesn't back down.

Mark Bravo: "I will give Jed this: unpleasant as he may be, he's standing his ground."

John Phillips: "Because he knows exactly what this is doing to Yoshii."

Hakuryu remains behind Sinja.

Still holding the United States Championship.

Still watching Yoshii.

Yoshii gets back to his feet.

Maxx runs at him again.

Yoshii catches him!

Maxx gets scooped off his feet—

—and DRIVEN down with another enormous powerslam!

The ring shakes!

John Phillips: "Yoshii caught him!"

Mark Bravo: "And that's the problem for Maxx! Distracted or not, you're still wrestling Yoshii!"

Yoshii hooks the leg!

ONE!

TWO!

TH—

MAXX KICKS OUT!

Yoshii sits up.

He looks toward the referee.

Two.

Yoshii nods.

Then his eyes drift toward ringside again.

Hakuryu is still there.

Yoshii's jaw tightens.

John Phillips: "Yoshii has to forget about Hakuryu."

Mark Bravo: "Easier said than done. That's the man who took his championship, and he's standing ten yards away waving it in his face."

Jed turns toward Yoshii.

Jed Dye: "YOSHII!"

Yoshii looks toward his manager.

Jed points emphatically at Maxx.

Jed Dye: "THE MATCH!"

Yoshii looks down.

Maxx is still flat on his back.

Yoshii nods.

He's right.

Yoshii turns away from Hakuryu.

He grabs Maxx and pulls him upright.

Maxx is barely able to stand.

Yoshii wraps both arms around him.

Maxx realizes what's coming.

Maxx Mayhem: "Oh, balls."

Yoshii lifts him!

Maxx is elevated high against Yoshii's massive frame.

Yoshii turns toward the center of the ring—

—and outside, Sinja suddenly grabs Jed Dye by the jacket!

John Phillips: "HEY!"

Jed immediately grabs Sinja's wrist.

Jed Dye: "REMOVE YOUR HAND!"

Sinja doesn't.

Jed shoves him.

Sinja shoves Jed back!

Jed stumbles into the barricade!

The crowd boos loudly.

John Phillips: "Sinja just put his hands on Jed Dye!"

Yoshii hears the commotion.

He turns his head.

He sees Jed against the barricade.

Yoshii immediately drops Maxx back onto his feet.

Mark Bravo: "No, no, no! Yoshii, stay on Maxx!"

Yoshii moves toward the ropes.

Sinja takes another step toward Jed.

Yoshii reaches over the top rope and points directly at him.

Yoshii: "NO!"

Sinja stops.

Slowly, he turns toward Yoshii.

Hakuryu remains perfectly calm behind him.

Then Hakuryu raises the United States Championship again.

Right in Yoshii's line of sight.

Yoshii stares at it.

Hakuryu lowers the belt onto his own shoulder.
And gives it one deliberate pat.
John Phillips: "He's rubbing it in."
Mark Bravo: "This isn't an accident anymore. Hakuryu knows exactly what he's doing."
Yoshii grabs the top rope.
He starts stepping through.
The referee rushes over and orders him to stay inside.
Yoshii points toward Sinja.
Then toward Jed.
The referee turns to look outside.
Sinja immediately raises both hands.
Jed Dye is already back on his feet, furious.
Jed Dye: "DO NOT ENGAGE! FINISH THE MATCH!"
Yoshii looks toward Jed.
Jed points behind him.
Jed Dye: "YOSHII!"
Yoshii turns—
MAXX MAYHEM IS ALREADY COMING!
Maxx jumps onto Yoshii's back!
He hooks an arm around Yoshii's head!
Yoshii reaches backward, trying to grab him.
Maxx shifts his weight—
Yoshii loses his balance!
Maxx drags him backward into a modified sunset roll!
The referee drops!
ONE!
TWO!
YOSHII POWERS OUT!
Maxx goes flying forward!
John Phillips: "Almost! Hakuryu almost cost Yoshii the match right there!"
Maxx rolls through and gets back to his feet.
Yoshii rises behind him.
Maxx turns—

Yoshii catches him with both hands!

He lifts Maxx straight off the canvas!

The crowd explodes!

Mark Bravo: "That's it! Forget Hakuryu! Finish Maxx!"

Yoshii turns toward center ring.

Maxx struggles helplessly in his grasp.

Yoshii sets his feet.

Then—

CLANG!

A deafening metallic crash rings out from ringside.

Yoshii freezes.

The United States Championship is lying on the floor.

Hakuryu has deliberately dropped it.

Right beside Jed Dye.

Jed looks down at the belt.

Then at Hakuryu.

Hakuryu says nothing.

He simply motions toward the championship.

As if inviting Jed to pick it up.

John Phillips: "What is Hakuryu doing?"

Mark Bravo: "Baiting them."

Jed stares at the United States Championship.

The belt Yoshii carried.

The belt Hakuryu took from him.

Jed bends down.

John Phillips: "Jed, don't."

Jed picks up the United States Championship.

The crowd reacts.

Hakuryu's expression barely changes.

Sinja steps toward Jed.

Jed clutches the championship against his chest.

Jed Dye: "This does not belong to you."

Inside the ring, Yoshii sees his manager holding his former championship.

His grip on Maxx loosens.

Just slightly.

That's all Maxx needs.

Maxx slips down behind him!

Yoshii turns—

Maxx kicks the knee!

Yoshii buckles!

Maxx hits the ropes!

He comes flying back with a brutal running knee to Yoshii's jaw!

Yoshii falls backward!

The ring shakes!

John Phillips: "YOSHII IS DOWN!"

Maxx collapses beside him.

For a moment, neither man moves.

Then Maxx slowly raises his head.

He sees Yoshii flat on his back.

He sees the corner.

Maxx's eyes widen.

He points toward it.

Maxx Mayhem: "Bad idea."

He pauses.

Maxx Mayhem: "Doing it."

Maxx crawls toward the turnbuckles.

Mark Bravo: "Of course he is."

Outside, Jed Dye still has possession of the United States Championship.

Sinja advances toward him.

Hakuryu watches.

Inside the ring, Maxx begins climbing.

Yoshii remains down.

John Phillips: "Yoshii was in control of this match before Hakuryu and Sinja arrived. Now Maxx Mayhem has an opening that should never have existed!"

Maxx reaches the top.

He steadies himself.

He looks down at Yoshii.

Then toward the crowd.

Maxx takes a breath.

And prepares to jump.

Maxx Mayhem balances himself on the top turnbuckle.

He looks down at the enormous target lying beneath him.

Then he looks toward the crowd.

Maxx Mayhem: "THIS IS STILL A BAD IDEA!"

Maxx leaps!

FLYING ELBOW DROP!

THIS TIME IT CONNECTS!

Maxx drives the elbow down across Yoshii's chest!

The impact sends Maxx bouncing away clutching his own arm, but Yoshii remains flat on the canvas!

John Phillips: "HE GOT IT! Maxx Mayhem connects from the top!"

Mark Bravo: "Cover him! Laugh about how stupid it was later!"

Maxx rolls back toward Yoshii.

He throws himself across the massive chest and hooks one of Yoshii's legs as best he can.

ONE!

TWO!

THR—

YOSHII GETS THE SHOULDER UP!

The crowd erupts!

John Phillips: "NO! YOSHII SURVIVES!"

Maxx rolls off and lies beside Yoshii.

He stares toward the ceiling.

Then slowly turns his head toward the referee.

Maxx Mayhem: "You sure he's human?"

The referee motions for Maxx to continue.

Maxx Mayhem: "That's not an answer."

Mark Bravo: "Maxx Mayhem is learning why Yoshii held championship gold. You can create the opening. You can land the shot. Then you've still got to keep nearly six hundred pounds down for three."

Outside the ring, the situation has become increasingly volatile.

Jed Dye still holds the United States Championship.

Sinja stands directly in front of him.

Hakuryu remains several feet behind his servant.

Calm.

Watching.

Jed finally thrusts the championship toward Sinja.

Jed Dye: "Take it."

Sinja looks down at the belt.

He doesn't move.

Jed Dye: "I said take it."

Hakuryu gives the slightest motion of his hand.

Only then does Sinja reach forward.

Jed sees it.

His eyes narrow.

The realization is obvious.

Sinja doesn't act until Hakuryu tells him to.

Jed releases the championship into Sinja's hands.

Jed Dye: "Get away from my client."

Sinja turns.

He carries the championship back toward Hakuryu.

Hakuryu takes it.

Places it over his shoulder.

And continues watching the ring.

John Phillips: "This entire thing has been orchestrated by Hakuryu."

Mark Bravo: "He hasn't touched Yoshii. He hasn't entered the ring. He doesn't have to. He's living inside Yoshii's head right now."

Inside the ring, Maxx slowly pulls himself upright.

Yoshii begins to stir.

Maxx sees him.

He backs toward the ropes.

Yoshii gets to one knee.

Maxx charges!

RUNNING KNEE—

YOSHII CATCHES HIM!

Maxx is snatched out of the air!

Yoshii rises with Maxx trapped against his body!

The crowd explodes!

John Phillips: "Yoshii caught him again!"

Maxx hammers down with elbows.

Yoshii doesn't let go.

Another elbow.

Still nothing.

Yoshii ROARS.

Then launches Maxx overhead with a devastating belly-to-belly suplex!

Maxx crashes down!

Yoshii pushes himself back to his feet.

Maxx somehow begins rising too.

Yoshii waits.

Maxx turns around—

MASSIVE PALM STRIKE!

Maxx crumples!

Mark Bravo: "There it is! Yoshii has got him!"

Yoshii looks toward the corner.

Then toward Maxx.

This time, he doesn't look toward Hakuryu.

He starts toward the turnbuckles.

John Phillips: "Yoshii has regained his focus!"

Jed Dye sees it too.

He turns away from Hakuryu and Sinja.

He pounds the apron.

Jed Dye: "YES! NOW!"

Yoshii reaches the corner.

He begins climbing.

The crowd rises.

Maxx remains motionless near the center of the ring.

Mark Bravo: "If Yoshii gets all of this, there isn't a human being alive who's kicking out."

Yoshii reaches the second rope.

He steadies himself.

He looks down at Maxx.

At ringside, Hakuryu suddenly begins walking away.

Sinja follows.

Jed notices.

So does Yoshii.

But Yoshii immediately turns his attention back toward Maxx.

John Phillips: "Let them go, Yoshii. Finish the match."

Yoshii raises both arms.

Yoshii: "YOSHIIIIII!"

Manchester roars.

Yoshii prepares to launch himself—

—when Jed Dye suddenly goes down!

John Phillips: "WAIT!"

The camera whips toward ringside.

Sinja has just swept Jed's legs out from underneath him!

Jed crashes face-first against the apron before falling to the floor!

The crowd erupts in boos!

John Phillips: "SINJA ATTACKED JED DYE!"

Mark Bravo: "And he waited until Yoshii finally stopped watching them!"

Yoshii freezes on the ropes.

He looks down.

Jed is sprawled on the floor.

Sinja stands over him.

Hakuryu stops walking.

Slowly turns around.

And watches.

Yoshii's expression changes instantly.

Concern becomes anger.

Anger becomes rage.

Yoshii: "JED!"

Yoshii climbs down from the turnbuckles.

John Phillips: "No! Yoshii, you cannot let them do this!"

Yoshii steps through the ropes onto the apron.

The referee immediately orders him back into the ring.

Yoshii points toward Sinja.

Sinja takes one step away from Jed.

Yoshii drops to the floor.

Mark Bravo: "And now the referee has to start counting!"

ONE!

Yoshii kneels beside Jed.

Jed pushes himself onto one elbow.

He immediately points toward the ring.

Jed Dye: "GET BACK IN THERE!"

TWO!

Yoshii looks toward Sinja.

Sinja has backed toward Hakuryu.

Hakuryu stands several yards away.

The United States Championship still on his shoulder.

THREE!

Yoshii rises.

He starts toward Sinja.

Jed Dye: "YOSHII!"

FOUR!

Yoshii stops.

Jed grabs the bottom rope and pulls himself upright.

Jed Dye: "THE MATCH!"

FIVE!

Yoshii looks back toward the ring.

Maxx Mayhem is beginning to move.

SIX!

Yoshii turns toward Hakuryu one last time.

Hakuryu pats the United States Championship.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

SEVEN!

Yoshii charges back toward the ring.

He grabs the bottom rope.

EIGHT!

Yoshii pulls himself onto the apron.

He starts through the ropes—

Maxx Mayhem comes flying across the ring!

RUNNING KNEE!

Yoshii gets blasted in the side of the head while halfway through the ropes!

His enormous body slumps forward into the ring!

John Phillips: "MAXX CAUGHT HIM!"

Maxx grabs Yoshii by the head and desperately pulls him farther inside.

Yoshii tries to rise.

Maxx hits the ropes.

ANOTHER RUNNING KNEE!

Yoshii drops to both knees!

Maxx looks toward the ropes.

Then toward Yoshii.

He knows he needs more.

Maxx runs again.

THIRD RUNNING KNEE!

Yoshii finally collapses onto his back!

Mark Bravo: "That's three! Cover him!"

Maxx dives across Yoshii.

He hooks the leg with everything he has.

ONE!

TWO!

THREE!

DING! DING! DING!

The crowd reacts with a mixture of shock, disappointment and cheers for Maxx Mayhem.

Maxx immediately rolls off Yoshii and onto his back.

He doesn't even celebrate at first.

He just lies there.

Breathing.

Staring upward.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... and QUALIFYING for the 2026 RING KING tournament... MAXX... MAYHEM!"

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem is going to Ring King, but there is no question how this happened!"

Mark Bravo: "Maxx took the opening. I can't blame him for that. He didn't invite Hakuryu down here. He didn't tell Sinja to attack Jed Dye. Maxx had a tournament spot sitting in front of him and he took it."

The referee raises Maxx's arm.

Maxx sits up.

He looks toward Yoshii.

Then toward ringside.

He sees Jed Dye.

He sees Sinja.

And finally, he sees Hakuryu.

Maxx slowly points toward the United States Champion.

Then toward Yoshii.

Then back toward Hakuryu.

Maxx nods to himself.

Maxx Mayhem: "Well... that's gonna be a problem."

Maxx rolls underneath the bottom rope.

He raises both hands as he backs away from the situation.

Maxx Mayhem: "Not my circus!"

He thinks about it.

Maxx Mayhem: "Actually, usually my circus. Not this time!"

Maxx begins making his way up the aisle, his arm raised as the Ring King graphic appears beside his name.

MAXX MAYHEM — QUALIFIED

John Phillips: "Maxx Mayhem advances. Yoshii does not."

Inside the ring, Yoshii begins to sit up.

His eyes immediately search ringside.

Jed Dye is back on his feet.

He's furious.

Absolutely furious.

Yoshii sees that Jed is okay.

Then his eyes move beyond him.

Hakuryu.

The United States Champion has not left.

He stands in the aisle with Sinja beside him.

Yoshii gets to one knee.

Hakuryu slowly raises the United States Championship.

Yoshii stares at him.

The crowd begins booing louder.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu already took the United States Championship from Yoshii at One Last Stop."

Mark Bravo: "Tonight he took something else."

John Phillips: "Yoshii's chance to become Ring King."

Yoshii rises fully.

He steps toward the ropes.

Jed Dye climbs onto the apron.

Yoshii starts through the ropes.

Jed grabs his arm.

Jed Dye: "No."

Yoshii turns toward him.

Jed shakes his head.

Jed Dye: "Not like this."

Yoshii looks back toward Hakuryu.

His fists clench.

The cheerful giant who entered the arena earlier is nowhere to be seen.

Hakuryu lowers the championship back onto his shoulder.

He turns.

Sinja follows immediately.

The two begin walking toward the entrance.

John Phillips: "Hakuryu has made this personal."

Mark Bravo: "It was already personal. Yoshii lost a championship. That's business. Coming out here and deliberately making sure Yoshii loses another opportunity? That's a message."

Hakuryu reaches the entranceway.

He stops.

Without turning around, Hakuryu raises the United States Championship over his head one final time.

Yoshii stares from inside the ring.

Jed Dye stands beside him.

And Yoshii's expression says more than his limited vocabulary ever could.

Hakuryu took his championship.

Now Hakuryu has taken his place in Ring King.

Yoshii slowly points toward the entrance.

Yoshii: "Hakuryu."

A beat.

Yoshii points toward himself.

Yoshii: "Yoshii."

Then he closes his fist.

Yoshii: "Fight."

The Manchester crowd erupts.

John Phillips: "I think that's perfectly clear."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah. Hakuryu wanted Yoshii's attention."

The camera tightens on Yoshii's furious expression.

Mark Bravo: "He's got it."

Only Here to Win

Segment

The broadcast cuts backstage.

Melissa Cartwright stands in the interview area, microphone in hand.

Beside her...

Mikey Unlikely.

The UTA WrestleZone Championship rests over his shoulder.

Perfectly tailored suit.

Designer sunglasses.

The relaxed smile of a man who believes every camera was invented specifically to capture him.

Melissa Cartwright: "Ladies and gentlemen, joining me at this time is the UTA WrestleZone Champion... Mikey Unlikely."

Mikey slowly lowers his sunglasses.

He looks directly into the camera.

Then toward Melissa.

Mikey Unlikely: "You say that beautifully."

Melissa Cartwright: "Thank you."

Mikey Unlikely: "The appropriate amount of reverence."

Melissa Cartwright: "I was introducing you."

Mikey Unlikely: "And you crushed it."

Melissa pauses.

Mikey smiles.

Melissa Cartwright: "Last week marked the beginning of the Road to the Throne. As WrestleZone Champion, you are one of six competitors guaranteed entry into the Ring King tournament."

Mikey looks down at the championship.

He runs one hand across its faceplate.

Mikey Unlikely: "Guaranteed."

He nods approvingly.

Mikey Unlikely: "That is a good word."

Melissa Cartwright: "Five additional competitors qualified last week."

Mikey Unlikely: "I saw."

Melissa Cartwright: "Kirsty McKinney."

Mikey nods.

Melissa Cartwright: "Bianca Page."

Another nod.

Melissa Cartwright: "Lindsey Lothario."

Mikey's expression becomes slightly more thoughtful.

Melissa Cartwright: "Mike Best."

The crowd inside the arena reacts at the name.

Mikey winces.

He slowly looks toward the camera.

Melissa Cartwright: "And former UTA Champion Maxwell Jett."

Mikey immediately raises one finger.

Mikey Unlikely: "Emphasis on former."

A reaction rolls through the arena.

Melissa Cartwright: "Maxwell believes he will defeat everyone standing between him and reclaiming the UTA Championship."

Mikey Unlikely: "Of course he does."

Melissa Cartwright: "Does that concern you?"

Mikey stares at her.

Then looks over his shoulder.

He checks the space behind him.

Looks beneath the WrestleZone Championship.

Finally, he turns back toward Melissa.

Mikey Unlikely: "No."

Melissa Cartwright: "No?"

Mikey Unlikely: "Sorry. I thought concern might have snuck up behind me while you were talking."

Melissa does not react.

Mikey Unlikely: "It did not."

He pushes his sunglasses back into place.

Mikey Unlikely: "Melissa, Maxwell Jett can threaten fifteen people. Mike Best can promise destruction. The Platinum Society can fill half the bracket if they want. Every person in that tournament can stand in front of a camera and tell the world why this is their destiny."

He gives a dismissive shrug.

Mikey Unlikely: "Everybody believes they are the main character."

Mikey turns directly toward the camera.

Mikey Unlikely: "Unfortunately for them..."

A grin.

Mikey Unlikely: "...Mikey Unlikely is back."

The crowd reacts.

Melissa Cartwright: "There are people who viewed your return at International Affair as a celebration of UTA's history."

Mikey Unlikely: "It was."

Melissa Cartwright: "Some called it a nostalgia appearance."

The smile remains.

But something behind it changes.

Mikey Unlikely: "There it is."

Melissa Cartwright: "There what is?"

Mikey removes his sunglasses.

Slowly.

He folds them and slips them into his jacket.

Mikey Unlikely: "Nostalgia."

Mikey adjusts the WrestleZone Championship on his shoulder.

Mikey Unlikely: "People love that word. It makes everything comfortable. Mikey Unlikely walks through the curtain after all these years, everybody gets to remember the old music, the old matches, the Hollywood Bruvs..."

He motions toward himself.

Mikey Unlikely: "...the hair."

Melissa glances toward his hair.

Mikey Unlikely: "Still incredible."

Melissa Cartwright: "Of course."

Mikey Unlikely: "Thank you."

The brief smile disappears again.

Mikey Unlikely: "But nostalgia is looking backward."

Mikey taps the WrestleZone Championship.

Mikey Unlikely: "Does this look backward to you?"

Melissa looks toward the title.

Mikey Unlikely: "I did not return so everybody could tell stories about what Mikey Unlikely used to be."

Mikey Unlikely: "I did not come back for an ovation. I did not come back to wave from the stage, sell a few commemorative shirts, and disappear before anyone realized the old guy still had to wrestle."

He steps closer to the camera.

Mikey Unlikely: "I entered the All or Nothing Rumble. I survived. I left with championship gold."

Mikey lifts the WrestleZone Championship from his shoulder.

He holds it in front of him.

Mikey Unlikely: "This is not a lifetime achievement award."

Mikey Unlikely: "This is not a souvenir, Melissa."

He looks down at the championship.

Mikey Unlikely: "This is proof."

Mikey places the championship back over his shoulder.

Mikey Unlikely: "Proof that I am not here to remember."

A beat.

Mikey Unlikely: "I am here to win."

The crowd inside the arena cheers.

Melissa Cartwright: "You already hold the WrestleZone Championship. What does winning Ring King mean to you?"

Mikey looks toward her.

Mikey Unlikely: "Everything."

No joke.

No smile.

The answer comes immediately.

Melissa notices.

Melissa Cartwright: "Everything?"

Mikey Unlikely: "Do you know what happens when somebody like me leaves for a long time?"

Melissa waits.

Mikey Unlikely: "People start editing the story."

Mikey Unlikely: "They remember the entrances. They remember the movies. They remember the money, the lights, the ego."

He gestures toward himself.

Mikey Unlikely: "All very important components."

The crowd laughs.

Mikey allows the reaction to pass.

Mikey Unlikely: "But they forget the winning."

His expression hardens.

Mikey Unlikely: "They forget that before the cameras followed Mikey Unlikely everywhere..."

Mikey taps his chest.

Mikey Unlikely: "...Mikey Unlikely gave them a reason to."

Mikey Unlikely: "They forget the championships. They forget the main events. They forget that every time somebody decided I was more celebrity than wrestler..."

He leans slightly toward Melissa's microphone.

Mikey Unlikely: "...I beat them."

A louder reaction rolls through the arena.

Mikey Unlikely: "Ring King is not a reunion tour."

Mikey Unlikely: "It is not another stop on the comeback."

Mikey Unlikely: "It is sixteen competitors walking into a tournament believing this is their opportunity..."

He smiles again.

Sharper now.

Mikey Unlikely: "...and Mikey Unlikely showing them the difference between an opportunity and an outcome."

Melissa Cartwright: "One of those competitors is your friend, Bobby Dean."

Mikey's eyes shift toward Melissa.

Melissa Cartwright: "Have you considered the possibility that you could face him?"

Mikey is quiet for a moment.

He looks down at the WrestleZone Championship.

Then back toward the camera.

Mikey Unlikely: "Bobby Dean is the International Champion."

Mikey Unlikely: "He earned his place."

Melissa Cartwright: "That doesn't answer the question."

Mikey nods.

Mikey Unlikely: "No."

He pauses.

Mikey Unlikely: "It doesn't."

Mikey adjusts his cuff.

Mikey Unlikely: "Bobby is my friend. I believe in him. And if the bracket puts Bobby Dean across the ring from Mikey Unlikely..."

He looks directly into the lens.

Mikey Unlikely: "...then I will believe in him while I beat him."

The crowd reacts.

Mikey Unlikely: "Because friendship does not require dishonesty."

Mikey Unlikely: "Bobby knows why I'm here. He knows what I want. And when that bell rings, Bobby Dean will not ask me to be anything less than exactly who I am."

Melissa Cartwright: "And who is that?"

Mikey's grin returns.

Full confidence.

Full Hollywood.

Mikey Unlikely: "The WrestleZone Champion."

He raises the championship.

Mikey Unlikely: "The World's Greatest Entertainer."

Another beat.

Mikey Unlikely: "And the next Ring King."

The crowd cheers.

Mikey lowers the championship onto his shoulder.

Melissa Cartwright: "Any final message for the other members of the tournament?"

Mikey Unlikely: "I don't care who believes this is their moment."

Mikey Unlikely: "I don't care who needs this tournament to save their career, reclaim their championship, validate their legacy, or finally prove they belong."

Mikey raises the WrestleZone Championship one final time.

Mikey Unlikely: "I am not here to help write your story."

Mikey Unlikely: "I'm here to finish mine."

Mikey Unlikely: "I'm here to win."

Mikey Unlikely: "Every match."

Mikey Unlikely: "Every round."

Mikey Unlikely: "The whole damn thing."

He places his sunglasses back over his eyes.

The larger-than-life smile returns.

Mikey Unlikely: "Baby..."

He looks straight into the camera.

Mikey Unlikely: "...you can call it the Road to the Throne."

Mikey pats the WrestleZone Championship.

Mikey Unlikely: "I call it the Mikey Unlikely Victory Tour."

Mikey turns and walks out of frame.

Melissa watches him leave.

She turns back toward the camera.

Melissa Cartwright: "Mikey Unlikely is guaranteed entry into Ring King."

A pause.

Melissa Cartwright: "And apparently, he considers everything after that guaranteed too."

The camera shifts away from Melissa and catches Mikey disappearing down the hallway.

The WrestleZone Championship rests over his shoulder.

He never looks back.

Fallout

Segment

The camera moves back over to Melissa Cartwright.

She barely has time to raise the microphone before Jed Dye storms into frame.

His suit jacket is open.

His tie is crooked.

And for once, the normally composed manager looks completely rattled.

Melissa Cartwright: "Jed—"

Jed Dye: "No."

Melissa stops.

Jed points back toward the direction of the arena.

Jed Dye: "No, we are not going to stand here and pretend what just happened was acceptable."

His voice is sharp.

Angry.

Controlled only by force.

Jed Dye: "That was not competition."

Jed Dye: "That was sabotage."

Melissa waits for an opening.

Melissa Cartwright: "You're referring to Hakuryu and Sinja."

Jed stares at her.

Jed Dye: "Who else would I be referring to?"

He begins pacing.

Jed Dye: "Yoshii had Maxx Mayhem beaten."

Jed Dye: "Not maybe."

Jed Dye: "Not potentially."

Jed Dye: "Beaten."

Jed slaps one hand into the other for emphasis.

Jed Dye: "He had control."

Jed Dye: "He had momentum."

Jed Dye: "He had a place in the Ring King tournament within reach."

His expression twists.

Jed Dye: "And then those two decided they were more important than the match."

Melissa Cartwright: "Hakuryu never actually entered the ring."

Jed stops pacing.

Slowly turns toward her.

Jed Dye: "That is your defense?"

Melissa Cartwright: "I'm not defending him. I'm saying—"

Jed Dye: "He didn't need to enter the ring."

Jed points toward the floor.

Jed Dye: "That was the entire point."

Jed Dye: "Hakuryu came out there with Yoshii's championship over his shoulder."

Jed Dye: "He paraded it in front of him."

Jed Dye: "He sent Sinja after me."

Jed Dye: "And every single second of it was designed to pull Yoshii's attention away from the one thing that mattered."

Jed leans closer to the microphone.

Jed Dye: "The match."

A beat.

Jed Dye: "It worked."

That admission seems to anger him even more.

Jed Dye: "And do you know what makes me sick about it?"

Melissa waits.

Jed Dye: "Hakuryu already took the United States Championship."

Jed Dye: "He won."

Jed Dye: "He got what he wanted."

Jed Dye: "But apparently that wasn't enough."

Jed shakes his head.

Jed Dye: "Now he needs Yoshii out of Ring King too."

Melissa Cartwright: "Do you believe Hakuryu sees Yoshii as a threat?"

Jed lets out a short, humorless laugh.

Jed Dye: "Of course he does."

Jed Dye: "Why else would he be there?"

Jed straightens his jacket, though it does nothing to make him look calmer.

Jed Dye: "Hakuryu can stand in front of cameras and talk about mountains and emperors and conquest and whatever other self-important nonsense Sinja translates for him."

Jed Dye: "But actions are data."

Jed taps two fingers against his temple.

Jed Dye: "And tonight's data says Hakuryu did not want Yoshii anywhere near that tournament."

Melissa glances briefly off-camera.

Melissa Cartwright: "How is Yoshii handling the loss?"

Jed's anger shifts slightly.

Still there.

But now there is concern underneath it.

Jed Dye: "Poorly."

He exhales.

Jed Dye: "And he shouldn't be handling it well."

Jed Dye: "He lost the United States Championship to Hakuryu."

Jed Dye: "Tonight he lost his opportunity to enter Ring King because Hakuryu inserted himself into his business again."

Jed looks directly into the camera.

Jed Dye: "There is a pattern developing."

Jed Dye: "And I do not like patterns I cannot control."

Melissa raises the microphone again.

Melissa Cartwright: "What happens next?"

Jed goes quiet.

Very quiet.

He adjusts one cuff.

Then the other.

The composure starts returning.

Jed Dye: "Next?"

He looks toward Melissa.

Jed Dye: "Next, Hakuryu learns something."

Melissa Cartwright: "What's that?"

Jed turns toward the camera.

Jed Dye: "That Yoshii is pleasant."

Jed Dye: "I am not."

A beat.

Jed Dye: "Yoshii smiles."

Jed Dye: "Yoshii respects people."

Jed Dye: "Yoshii wants to compete."

Jed's eyes narrow.

Jed Dye: "I handle problems."

From somewhere off-camera, a familiar voice cuts in.

Yoshii: "Jed."

Jed stops.

The camera widens.

Yoshii stands several feet away.

He is still in his gear.

Sweaty.

Bruised.

And visibly furious.

But unlike Jed...

Yoshii is calm.

Too calm.

Yoshii: "No problem."

Jed looks at him.

Jed Dye: "Yoshii, what happened out there—"

Yoshii shakes his head.

Yoshii: "Hakuryu."

He points toward himself.

Yoshii: "Yoshii."

Then he closes one massive fist.

Yoshii: "Fight."

Jed stares at him.

The anger slowly becomes a smile.

Not a nice one.

Jed Dye: "Yes."

Jed turns back toward Melissa.

Jed Dye: "There is your answer."

Yoshii turns and begins walking down the hallway.

Jed follows him.

After several steps, Jed stops.

He looks back toward the camera one final time.

Jed Dye: "Hakuryu wanted Yoshii's attention."

Jed adjusts his tie.

Jed Dye: "Congratulations."

A thin smile.

Jed Dye: "He has mine too."

Jed turns and follows Yoshii down the hallway.

Melissa watches them disappear around the corner.

The broadcast fades away.

Madman Szalinski vs. Tyger II

Match

The Ring King logo fills the screen once more.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

MADMAN SZALINSKI vs. TYGER II

The graphic fades back to the arena.

For a few seconds, nothing happens.

The Manchester crowd waits.

Then the opening notes of Madman Szalinski's entrance music begin to play.

The reaction is immediate.

The crowd rises as one.

And then he steps through the curtain.

Madman Szalinski.

The old blue-and-red mask.

The weathered suit.

The same unmistakable presence that has been walking in and out of UTA history for more than a decade.

Madman stops at the top of the entranceway.

For once, he doesn't immediately make a joke.

He simply looks around.

Thousands of people are standing for him.

Madman slowly places both hands on his hips.

He nods.

John Phillips: "Listen to this reception."

Mark Bravo: "He's been gone for a few months, John, but nobody forgot him."

John Phillips: "How could they? Madman Szalinski has lived an entire lifetime in the United Toughness Alliance."

Madman takes several steps down the aisle.

Then stops.

He looks toward one side of the crowd.

Raises his arms.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON!"

Manchester explodes.

There he is.

Madman's shoulders shake with laughter beneath the mask.

Mark Bravo: "Okay. Now it feels right."

John Phillips: "Madman told Melissa Cartwright earlier tonight that he doesn't know how many opportunities like this are left."

Madman resumes his walk toward the ring.

He reaches toward the fans along the barricade.

High-fives.

Fist bumps.

One fan reaches out with both hands, and Madman stops long enough to grab them both and shake vigorously.

He takes another few steps.

Then doubles back.

He looks at the same fan.

Madman Szalinski: "Good grip."

The fan laughs.

Madman nods seriously as though an important evaluation has just been completed.

Mark Bravo: "He's still Madman."

John Phillips: "Absolutely. But underneath that humor tonight is something very real."

The pace of Madman's walk slows slightly as he nears ringside.

John Phillips: "This is a former UTA Champion."

Mark Bravo: "A man who reached the top of this company and nearly lost everything almost immediately afterward."

John Phillips: "Shortly after becoming UTA Champion in 2014, Madman suffered a heart attack and spent

approximately two weeks in a coma."

Madman reaches the bottom of the aisle.

His eyes move toward the ring.

The expression behind the mask changes.

John Phillips: "And somehow, all these years later, he is standing here again."

Mark Bravo: "Standing is doing a lot of work in that sentence."

Madman puts one hand on the apron.

He pauses.

Then slowly lifts one leg onto the edge.

He stops halfway.

Looks down at his knee.

Madman Szalinski: "Come on, you bastard."

The crowd laughs.

Madman gets the leg up.

Then the other.

He rolls underneath the bottom rope rather than stepping through.

He lands on his back.

Stares at the ceiling.

Raises one finger.

Madman Szalinski: "Nailed it."

Mark Bravo: "Ten outta ten."

Madman rolls onto his side and pushes himself upward.

It's slower than it once was.

There is no hiding that.

His knees don't cooperate immediately.

His back straightens in stages.

But he gets there.

And once Madman Szalinski is upright...

...he throws both arms into the air.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON!"

The crowd gives him another enormous reaction.

John Phillips: "That's what tonight means."

Madman slowly turns in the center of the ring.

John Phillips: "He knows his knees aren't what they were."

Mark Bravo: "His neck isn't what it was. His back isn't what it was. His hips aren't what they were."

John Phillips: "Madman himself admitted earlier that he doesn't know whether another opportunity comes after this."

Mark Bravo: "That's the part that makes this dangerous for Tyger II. Madman isn't thinking about preserving himself for next month."

Madman reaches one corner.

He puts one boot onto the bottom rope.

Then decides against climbing any higher.

He points at the turnbuckle.

Madman Szalinski: "Not yet."

Another laugh from the crowd.

Madman turns away from it.

John Phillips: "Earlier tonight he said something that stuck with me. UTA doesn't owe him another great moment."

Mark Bravo: "But they gave him a chance to earn one."

Madman moves toward the center of the ring.

He looks upward at the Ring King graphic displayed above the entrance.

The humor fades.

For several seconds, Madman just stares.

John Phillips: "Win tonight, and Madman Szalinski continues the journey toward Los Angeles."

Mark Bravo: "And then suddenly the crazy old bastard who wasn't even sure he had another meaningful match left is standing in a sixteen-person tournament with the biggest names in UTA."

Madman slowly nods to himself.

He taps his chest once.

Then points toward the Ring King logo.

Madman Szalinski: "One more."

The crowd applauds.

John Phillips: "That's all he's asking for."

Mark Bravo: "And standing between him and that one more is one hell of a wrestler."

Madman turns toward the entranceway.

He knows exactly who is coming.

John Phillips: "Tyger II is younger. Faster. Healthier. He is the son of UTA Hall of Famer Tatsumi 'Tyger' Tanaka, and he's built his entire career around honor, discipline and carrying that legacy forward."

Mark Bravo: "And importantly, Tyger isn't coming out here looking to embarrass some broken-down old man. He respects Madman."

John Phillips: "And Madman respects him."

Mark Bravo: "But respect doesn't change what they're fighting for."

Madman backs toward his corner.

He rolls his neck.

Immediately winces.

He stops.

Madman Szalinski: "Bad idea."

Madman shakes out his arms instead.

His eyes remain on the curtain.

The lovable eccentric is still there.

But underneath it is the man who once climbed to the very top of the United Toughness Alliance.

And tonight, perhaps for the last time...

Madman Szalinski has a road back toward something that matters.

Madman Szalinski settles into his corner, eyes still locked on the entranceway.

The lights begin to dim.

A low taiko drum rolls through SNHU.

Then another.

The opening of "Claw of the Yokai" begins to build beneath it.

The crowd rises again.

Tyger II steps through the curtain.

His mask gleams beneath the lights.

His posture is straight.

Measured.

Calm.

He stops at the top of the entranceway and looks toward the ring.

Toward Madman.

Then Tyger II bows.

John Phillips: "And there is the respect we talked about."

Mark Bravo: "Tyger knows exactly who is standing in that ring."

Madman watches from the corner.

He slowly raises one hand.

Returns the gesture with a small bow of his own.

Then points at Tyger.

Madman Szalinski: "Good kid."

The crowd laughs softly.

John Phillips: "Tyger II has never hidden the importance of legacy in his career. His father, Tatsumi 'Tyger' Tanaka, is a UTA Hall of Famer, and Tyger II has made it clear that carrying that name is something he treats as responsibility, not entitlement."

Mark Bravo: "And tonight he's standing across from another piece of UTA history."

Tyger begins walking toward the ring.

No playing to the crowd.

No unnecessary movement.

Just a focused, purposeful stride.

Fans along the barricade reach toward him.

Tyger acknowledges several with quick touches of the hand, but his eyes repeatedly return to Madman.

John Phillips: "There is a huge difference in where these two men are in their careers."

Mark Bravo: "Tyger is looking forward. Madman is wondering how many more times he even gets to look."

Tyger reaches ringside.

Before entering, he stops.

Places one hand against the apron.

Then lowers into a ceremonial crouch.

His head bows.

A quiet acknowledgement of the ring itself.

Madman watches.

His joking expression disappears.

He understands.

John Phillips: "Tyger II treats the ring as sacred ground."

Mark Bravo: "And Madman has probably done things on sacred ground that require an apology."

Madman slowly turns his head toward the commentary side of the arena.

He points toward Mark Bravo.

Madman Szalinski: "TRUE!"

Mark Bravo: "See?"

Tyger slides underneath the bottom rope.

He rises immediately.

The Ring Announcer steps forward.

Ring Announcer: "And his opponent... from Osaka, Japan... weighing in at two hundred two pounds... TYGER... TWO!"

Tyger moves toward the center of the ring.

Madman steps out from his corner.

The two men meet.

Tyger looks Madman directly in the eyes.

Then bows again.

Deeper this time.

Madman stares at him for a second.

He looks toward the crowd.

Then back at Tyger.

Madman extends his hand.

Tyger accepts it immediately.

Firm handshake.

Neither man lets go right away.

John Phillips: "No games here."

Mark Bravo: "No reason for any. These two like each other. They respect each other. And in about thirty seconds, they're going to try to beat the hell out of each other."

Madman finally releases the handshake.

Madman Szalinski: "Kid."

Tyger tilts his head.

Madman Szalinski: "Don't take it easy on me."

Tyger's eyes sharpen behind the mask.

He nods once.

Tyger II: "I would never disrespect you like that."

Madman smiles.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON."

The crowd erupts again.

John Phillips: "That's everything you need to know about this match."

The referee moves between them.

Both men return to their corners.

Tyger rolls his shoulders.

Madman tries to do the same.

His left shoulder rolls smoothly.

His right one does not.

Madman stops halfway.

Madman Szalinski: "We're not doing that."

Tyger catches the comment.

The corner of his mouth turns upward beneath the mask.

Mark Bravo: "I swear his entire body is negotiating its participation right now."

John Phillips: "And yet he's here."

The referee signals.

DING! DING!

John Phillips: "Madman Szalinski and Tyger II are underway!"

Tyger steps forward carefully.

Madman does the same.

They circle.

Madman stays lower than expected, his stance awkward but functional.

Tyger watches the knees.

The hips.

The shoulders.

He isn't charging recklessly.

John Phillips: "And look at Tyger's approach already. He's not treating Madman like an old man."

Mark Bravo: "Good. Because Madman specifically told him not to."

They lock up.

Tyger immediately uses his speed to slip around behind Madman into a waistlock.

Madman's hands go to the grip.

Tyger lowers his base.

Madman tries to turn.

His back resists.

Tyger feels it.

He could wrench harder.

He doesn't.

Instead, he switches to the arm and guides Madman into a wristlock.

Mark Bravo: "There. That's respect without mercy. He's not trying to snap the old man's spine in the first thirty seconds, but he's still wrestling him."

Madman looks down at his trapped wrist.

Then at Tyger.

He spins underneath.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

Halfway through, Madman gets stuck.

He stops.

Tyger waits.

Madman looks toward the crowd.

Madman Szalinski: "Hold on."

The crowd laughs.

Madman works his shoulder through the rest of the rotation.

Then suddenly snaps Tyger's arm into a reversal.

The speed surprises everyone.

Especially Tyger.

John Phillips: "And there's still something in there!"

Madman twists the wrist.

Tyger forward-rolls.

Kips up.

Reverses.

Madman attempts the same thing.

He rolls forward.

Gets onto one knee.

Stops.

Looks at the other knee.

Madman Szalinski: "You're gonna have to help me with this part."

Tyger actually laughs.

He releases the wristlock and offers Madman a hand.

Madman takes it.

Tyger pulls him upright—

—and Madman immediately catches him with a side headlock!

The crowd pops.

Mark Bravo: "DIRTY OLD MAN!"

John Phillips: "Perfectly legal!"

Tyger laughs again even while trapped in the headlock.

He pushes Madman toward the ropes.

Madman releases.

Tyger sends him across.

Madman rebounds.

Tyger drops flat.

Madman jumps over him—

Well.

Madman steps over him.

Carefully.

Mark Bravo: "AIR SZALINSKI!"

Madman hits the opposite ropes.

Tyger leapfrogs.

Madman runs underneath.

He comes off the ropes again.

Tyger turns—

Madman stops directly in front of him.

Tyger braces.

Madman pokes him gently in the chest.

Madman Szalinski: "Fast."

Tyger nods.

Madman Szalinski: "Annoying."

Tyger gives him another slight bow.

Madman grins.

Then throws a forearm.

Tyger blocks it.

He answers with a sharp kick to Madman's thigh.

Madman immediately grabs the leg.

His eyes widen.

Madman Szalinski: "OH, THAT'S A LEG!"

Tyger pauses.

Madman points at him.

Madman Szalinski: "Do it again."

Tyger hesitates.

Madman Szalinski: "I said don't take it easy!"

Tyger's posture changes.

The smile disappears.

He fires another kick into the same thigh.

Madman's leg buckles.

Tyger follows with a quick forearm.

Another.

Madman gives ground.

Tyger whips him toward the ropes.

Madman rebounds—

Tyger catches him with a rolling back elbow!

Madman goes down hard!

John Phillips: "And now Tyger II is giving Madman exactly what he asked for!"

Tyger immediately drops into the cover.

ONE!

TWO!

Madman kicks out!

Tyger rises.

Madman rolls onto his side.

The humor has disappeared from his face.

He looks at Tyger.

Tyger waits.

Madman slowly gets one knee beneath himself.

Then the other.

He stands.

Madman nods.

Madman Szalinski: "That's better."

Tyger raises his hands.

Madman raises his.

John Phillips: "The fun is over."

Mark Bravo: "Yeah. Now Madman gets to find out whether the body can still keep up with the heart."

The two men step toward each other again.

Madman Szalinski and Tyger II close the distance again.

This time Tyger is quicker.

Sharp kick to the thigh.

Madman absorbs it.

Tyger fires another.

Madman's leg buckles slightly.

Tyger follows with a forearm.

Madman answers with one of his own.

Tyger.

Madman.

Tyger.

Madman.

John Phillips: "They're exchanging now, and this is exactly where Tyger II should have the advantage."

Mark Bravo: "Youth. Speed. Conditioning. Madman knows all of that. He also knows he's not going to win by pretending he's twenty years younger."

Tyger snaps another kick into Madman's leg.

Madman stumbles toward the ropes.

Tyger closes in—

Madman suddenly catches him with a short elbow!

Tyger rocks backward.

Madman grabs the arm.

He pulls Tyger into a quick neckbreaker!

Both men hit the canvas.

Madman rolls onto his side and grabs at his lower back.

Mark Bravo: "See, that's the problem. Madman can still hit the move. The move also hits Madman."

John Phillips: "Every impact costs him something."

Tyger is first to his knees.

Madman is still working his way upright.

Tyger pauses.

Not out of pity.

Just recognition.

Madman sees him waiting.

Madman Szalinski: "Don't you start."

Tyger nods.

He immediately charges.

Madman barely avoids a running kick!

Tyger rebounds off the ropes.

Madman catches him with a back body drop!

Tyger lands hard but rolls through onto one knee.

Madman turns—

Ghost Fang Kick!

The snap superkick catches Madman on the jaw!

Madman drops flat!

John Phillips: "Ghost Fang Kick! Tyger caught him clean!"

Tyger drops into the cover.

ONE!

TWO!

Madman gets a shoulder up!

Mark Bravo: "That wasn't nostalgia kicking out. Madman's still got some fight left."

Tyger sits back on his heels.

He looks down at Madman.

Then slowly nods.

Madman opens one eye.

Madman Szalinski: "You kick like your old man."

Tyger pauses.

That lands differently.

He gives Madman a small bow from one knee.

John Phillips: "That may be one of the highest compliments Tyger II can receive."

Madman rolls onto his stomach.

He tries to push up.

His arms shake.

Tyger moves behind him and pulls Madman upright.

He catches a waistlock.

Madman immediately grabs the hands.

Tyger tries to lift.

Madman blocks.

Tyger tries again.

Madman's legs hold.

He throws a back elbow.

Tyger ducks.

Madman spins—

Tyger catches him with a palm strike!

Madman staggers.

Tyger hits the ropes.

Feral Descent!

The springboard flipping neckbreaker drives Madman into the canvas!

The crowd reacts loudly.

John Phillips: "Tyger II is taking over!"

Tyger hooks the leg.

ONE!

TWO!

TH—

Madman kicks out!

Tyger sits up quickly.

This time there is surprise in his eyes.

Mark Bravo: "Okay. Now Tyger knows what this means to him."

Madman rolls toward the ropes.

His movements are slower now.

Much slower.

He reaches the bottom rope and uses it to pull himself upward.

One knee.

Then both feet.

Madman stands.

Barely.

Tyger watches him.

Madman turns around.

Tyger raises both hands.

Madman waves him forward.

Madman Szalinski: "Come on, kid."

Tyger rushes.

Madman ducks a forearm.

Tyger turns—

Madman catches him with a sudden DDT!

Tyger spikes into the mat!

Madman rolls over and drapes an arm across him.

ONE!

TWO!

Tyger kicks out!

John Phillips: "Madman found an opening!"

Mark Bravo: "That's experience. He isn't faster than Tyger. He doesn't need to be every second. He needs to be faster once."

Madman sits up.

He slaps his own leg.

Then immediately regrets it.

Madman Szalinski: "Ow."

The crowd laughs.

Madman points toward them.

Madman Szalinski: "You laugh now."

Tyger starts getting up behind him.

Madman hears the movement.

He turns.

Tyger fires a kick.

Madman catches the leg!

Tyger hops on one foot.

Madman twists—

Tyger rolls through!

He springs back up—

Madman catches him with a clothesline!

Tyger flips onto his back!

Madman falls to one knee from his own momentum.

John Phillips: "Madman is finding ways to slow Tyger down."

Mark Bravo: "And that's the only way he survives this. He cannot let Tyger turn this into a track meet."

Madman reaches down and pulls Tyger upright.

Tyger fires a body shot.

Madman answers with a forearm.

Tyger lands another.

Madman gives it back.

The exchanges grow heavier.

The crowd reacts to each one.

Tyger lands three fast strikes in succession.

Madman staggers backward into the corner.

Tyger charges.

Running knee!

Madman moves!

Tyger catches the turnbuckles awkwardly.

Madman grabs him from behind.

German suplex!

Tyger lands hard!

Madman rolls through slowly and covers.

ONE!

TWO!

Tyger escapes!

Madman lies beside him after the kickout.

Both men stare toward the ceiling.

John Phillips: "Look at Madman."

Madman is breathing hard.

Very hard.

He rolls onto his side.

One hand presses against his chest.

The referee immediately checks on him.

Tyger notices.

He sits up.

Concern replaces competition for just a moment.

John Phillips: "Given Madman's medical history, you understand why the referee is checking immediately."

Mark Bravo: "And you understand why everybody in this building just got quiet."

Madman waves the referee away.

The referee asks again.

Madman shakes his head.

Madman Szalinski: "I'm breathing."

He takes another breath.

Madman Szalinski: "It just sucks."

The tension in the building releases slightly.

Tyger gets to one knee.

Madman looks toward him.

Tyger doesn't move.

Madman points at him.

Madman Szalinski: "What'd I tell you?"

Tyger's expression tightens.

Madman Szalinski: "Fight."

Tyger nods.

Madman pushes himself upright.

Slowly.

Painfully.

Tyger rises too.

John Phillips: "This is what Madman meant earlier. He doesn't want sympathy."

Mark Bravo: "He wants the opportunity. There's a difference."

Madman finally gets to his feet.

He raises his hands.

Tyger raises his.

Madman smiles beneath the mask.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON."

Tyger II charges.

Madman braces himself.

Tyger fires a forearm!

Madman takes it.

Another!

Madman staggers backward.

Tyger fires a third—

Madman answers!

A heavy forearm catches Tyger across the jaw.

Tyger rocks backward.

Madman follows with another.

Tyger answers.

Madman answers back.

The pace isn't pretty anymore.

It isn't supposed to be.

Two men stand in the center of the ring and trade.

John Phillips: "Madman is hanging in there!"

Mark Bravo: "And every minute this goes, you have to wonder how much more he's got. Tyger can recover. Madman is spending from an account that might already be empty."

Tyger suddenly changes levels.

Kick to the thigh!

Madman's bad leg buckles.

Tyger catches him with a forearm.

Then another kick to the leg!

Madman drops to one knee.

Tyger backs toward the ropes.

He looks at Madman.

There's no hesitation now.

Madman told him to fight.

So Tyger fights.

Tyger explodes forward—

RUNNING KNEE!

Madman collapses backward!

John Phillips: "That could do it!"

Tyger hooks both legs!

ONE!

TWO!

THR—

MADMAN KICKS OUT!

The crowd erupts!

Tyger sits upright.

He looks toward the referee.

Two.

Tyger nods.

Mark Bravo: "That wasn't instinct. Look at him. Madman knew where he was."

Madman lies flat on his back.

His chest rises and falls rapidly.

His eyes are open.

Fixed on the lights above him.

Tyger rises.

He looks down at Madman.

Then toward the corner.

John Phillips: "Tyger II knows he has to keep going."

Tyger moves toward the turnbuckles.

He climbs quickly.

Madman still hasn't moved.

Tyger reaches the top.

He steadies himself.

Then launches!

Madman rolls away!

Tyger sees it in midair and manages to adjust!

He rolls through the landing!

Tyger comes back to his feet.

Madman is pulling himself up with the ropes.

Tyger charges again!

Madman ducks!

Tyger hits the ropes.

He rebounds—

Madman catches him!

SPINEBUSTER!

Tyger is driven into the canvas!

Madman immediately rolls onto his back beside him.

He grabs his own lower spine.

Mark Bravo: "There it is again! He got all of Tyger and half of himself!"

John Phillips: "Madman can't even capitalize!"

The crowd begins clapping.

Slowly at first.

Then louder.

Madman turns his head.

Tyger is lying beside him.

Madman reaches over.

His fingertips barely touch Tyger's chest.

Not enough.

Madman grimaces.

He rolls.

Inches closer.

Finally drapes an arm over Tyger.

ONE!

TWO!

THR—

TYGER GETS THE SHOULDER UP!

Madman doesn't react immediately.

He simply rolls onto his back again.

John Phillips: "If Madman had been able to cover immediately..."

Mark Bravo: "But he couldn't. That's the match, John. We can talk about what Madman used to be all night long. Tonight he has to win with what he is."

Madman turns onto his stomach.

He plants both palms against the canvas.

Pushes.

His arms tremble.

He gets to one knee.

Tyger is already beginning to rise.

Madman sees him.

Madman Szalinski: "Son of a bitch."

Tyger hears him.

Even exhausted, he smiles.

Madman points at him.

Madman Szalinski: "Compliment."

Tyger nods.

Both men reach their feet.

Barely.

Tyger strikes first.

Forearm.

Madman fires back.

Tyger answers.

Madman answers.

Tyger kicks the damaged leg.

Madman nearly goes down.

Tyger grabs him before he can fall.

Not to help him.

To pull him directly into a snap suplex!

Madman hits hard.

Tyger rolls through.

He pulls Madman up again.

Another suplex!

Madman's body folds against the canvas.

John Phillips: "Tyger is forcing Madman's body to absorb impact after impact."

Mark Bravo: "That's smart wrestling. Respect the man, attack the weaknesses."

Tyger stands.

He takes a deep breath.

Madman rolls toward the corner.

Tyger follows.

Madman uses the turnbuckles to pull himself upright.

Tyger charges.

Madman gets an elbow up!

Tyger stumbles backward.

Madman comes out of the corner.

Tyger catches him with a kick to the stomach!

Madman doubles over.

Tyger hits the ropes.

Madman suddenly straightens.

He catches Tyger coming back—

POWERSLAM!

Madman hooks the leg!

ONE!

TWO!

TYGER KICKS OUT!

Madman rolls away.

He sits against the bottom turnbuckle.

His head falls backward against the pad.

His eyes close.

John Phillips: "Madman is running out of gas."

Mark Bravo: "He ran out ten minutes ago. Whatever we're watching now is stubbornness."

Madman's eyes open.

He looks toward the crowd.

People are standing.

Clapping.

Calling his name.

MAD-MAN!

MAD-MAN!

MAD-MAN!

Madman listens.

He looks across the ring.

Tyger II is pulling himself upright.

Madman grabs the ropes.

He pulls.

His knees shake.

He gets up anyway.

John Phillips: "Earlier tonight, Madman told Melissa Cartwright that maybe this is the last opportunity."

Madman takes one step out of the corner.

John Phillips: "Maybe there isn't another qualifier."

Another step.

John Phillips: "Maybe there isn't another tournament."

Tyger turns around.

John Phillips: "Maybe there isn't another run."

Madman raises his hands.

Mark Bravo: "Then he'd better make this one count."

Tyger charges.

Madman swings.

Tyger ducks.

Tyger rebounds from the ropes.

Madman turns—
GHOST FANG KICK!
Madman's head snaps backward!
He staggers.
But he doesn't fall.
Tyger's eyes widen.
Madman sways.
He looks at Tyger.
Madman Szalinski: "God..."
Madman takes an unsteady step forward.
Madman Szalinski: "...damn..."
Tyger fires another Ghost Fang Kick!
Madman catches the leg!
The crowd erupts!
Madman Szalinski: "...SON!"
Madman yanks Tyger forward!
SHORT-ARM CLOTHESLINE!
Tyger turns inside out!
Both men collapse!
John Phillips: "MADMAN IS STILL HERE!"
The crowd is on its feet.
Madman crawls toward Tyger.
He gets one hand underneath himself.
Then another.
He looks down at Tyger.
Tyger looks back up at him.
For just a second, neither moves.
Then Tyger begins pushing himself upright again.
Madman sees it.
He starts laughing.
A tired, almost disbelieving laugh.
Madman Szalinski: "Good kid."
Madman forces himself back to his feet.

Tyger rises with him.

They meet once again in the center of the ring.

Tyger is exhausted.

Madman looks held together by little more than spite and scar tissue.

They stare at one another.

Madman nods.

Tyger nods back.

John Phillips: "Whatever is left..."

Both men raise their hands.

John Phillips: "...we're about to see it."

Madman Szalinski and Tyger II stand across from one another in the center of the ring.

Both men are exhausted.

Both are hurt.

Neither backs away.

Tyger strikes first.

Forearm.

Madman answers.

Tyger again.

Madman again.

The crowd begins reacting to every shot.

John Phillips: "Neither man has much left, but neither man is willing to give the other this opportunity."

Mark Bravo: "This is exactly what Madman was talking about. Maybe this is his last real shot. Maybe it isn't. But he's wrestling like he refuses to find out the easy way."

Tyger lands a sharp kick to the ribs.

Madman folds slightly.

Tyger follows with another.

Madman reaches out and grabs him around the shoulders.

Headbutt!

Tyger staggers backward.

Madman staggers too.

Mark Bravo: "I don't think Madman's skull appreciated that strategy."

Tyger regains his footing first.

He fires another forearm.

Madman absorbs it.

Tyger hits the ropes.
Madman tries to intercept him—
Ghost Fang Kick!
The superkick connects again!
Madman crashes backward into the ropes.
The ropes keep him upright.
Tyger sees it.
He doesn't hesitate.
He runs.
Madman ducks underneath another strike!
Tyger turns—
Madman catches him with a sudden inside cradle!
ONE!
TWO!
TYGER ESCAPES!
Both scramble up.
Tyger is faster.
Kick to the stomach.
He pulls Madman in.
Yokai Driver!
Tyger plants Madman with the sitout fireman's carry spinebuster!
The crowd gasps.
Tyger hooks the leg!
ONE!
TWO!
THRE—
MADMAN GETS THE SHOULDER UP!
John Phillips: "MADMAN SURVIVES!"
Tyger falls backward onto the canvas.
He stares toward the ceiling.
Almost laughing from disbelief.
Mark Bravo: "Tyger has hit him with everything short of Tiger Eclipse."
Tyger slowly sits up.

He looks toward Madman.
Madman barely moves.
Tyger nods to himself.
He knows what comes next.
John Phillips: "Tyger may be thinking about ending this."
Tyger gets to his feet.
He takes several steps backward.
His hand slowly rises.
Fingers curl.
The Tiger Claw.
The crowd reacts.
Mark Bravo: "He's calling for Tiger Eclipse."
Madman starts to rise.
One knee.
Then the other.
Tyger waits.
Madman reaches his feet.
Tyger moves in.
He catches Madman around the waist!
He starts to lift—
Madman blocks!
Tyger tries again.
Madman's legs shake beneath him.
But they hold.
Madman throws a back elbow!
Tyger absorbs it.
Another!
Tyger's grip loosens.
Madman spins free!
Tyger immediately throws Ghost Fang Kick!
Madman ducks!
Tyger's momentum carries him around.
Madman grabs him from behind!

Tyger reaches for the ropes—

Too late!

Madman pulls him backward into a tight rolling cradle!

ONE!

TWO!

THR—

TYGER KICKS OUT AGAIN!

Both men roll apart.

Madman is first to one knee.

Tyger rises almost immediately.

He charges.

Madman catches him with a kick to the stomach!

Tyger doubles over.

Madman grabs the head.

DDT!

Tyger spikes into the canvas!

Madman rolls him over!

ONE!

TWO!

TYGER KICKS OUT!

Madman sits up.

He looks toward the referee.

Two.

He nods.

No complaint.

Just exhaustion.

John Phillips: "Madman knows he needs something more."

Mark Bravo: "The question is whether the body can give it to him."

Madman slowly gets back to his feet.

Tyger is already stirring.

Madman watches him rise.

There is almost pride in his eyes.

Madman Szalinski: "Come on, kid."

Tyger gets to his feet.

Madman raises his hands.

Tyger does the same.

Tyger fires a forearm.

Madman answers.

Tyger fires another.

Madman gives one back.

Tyger unloads with a rapid combination.

Forearm.

Body kick.

Elbow.

Madman staggers into the ropes.

Tyger charges.

Madman drops low!

Tyger goes over the top rope—

—but catches himself on the apron!

Madman turns around.

Tyger springs onto the top rope!

Feral Descent—

MADMAN MOVES!

Tyger crashes hard onto the canvas!

The crowd erupts!

John Phillips: "Tyger missed!"

Madman sees the opening.

He lunges forward.

Tyger starts to rise.

Madman hooks him from behind.

He pulls him down into a grounded hold, wrenching back across the neck and shoulder!

Tyger immediately reaches toward the ropes.

Mark Bravo: "Madman has him trapped!"

Tyger claws forward.

Madman pulls back.

Tyger drags himself another inch.

Madman's arms shake.

His back is screaming.

His legs are barely underneath him.

He holds on anyway.

John Phillips: "This may be Madman's last chance, and he is squeezing everything he has left into it!"

Tyger reaches again.

Still short.

Madman adjusts.

He pulls Tyger farther back from the ropes.

Tyger shakes his head.

Refuses.

Madman grits his teeth.

Madman Szalinski: "COME ON!"

Tyger tries to rise.

Madman transitions with him.

Tyger gets one knee underneath himself.

Then suddenly rolls through!

Madman loses the hold!

Both men come up awkwardly.

Tyger strikes first—

Ghost Fang Kick!

Madman catches the boot again!

Tyger balances on one leg.

Madman stares at him.

Madman Szalinski: "Gotcha."

Madman sweeps the standing leg!

Tyger crashes onto his back!

Madman immediately dives onto him.

He stacks Tyger's legs high!

ONE!

TWO!

THREE!

DING! DING! DING!

The building explodes.

Madman immediately rolls off Tyger and collapses flat on his back.

He doesn't celebrate.

He can't.

He simply lies there, breathing.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... and QUALIFYING for the 2026 RING KING tournament... MADMAN... SZALINSKI!"

John Phillips: "HE DID IT!"

Mark Bravo: "The old bastard did it!"

Madman's eyes close beneath the mask.

He starts laughing.

Quietly at first.

Then louder.

The referee reaches down to check on him.

Madman raises one finger.

Madman Szalinski: "Still alive."

The crowd laughs and cheers.

John Phillips: "Madman Szalinski is going to Ring King!"

Mark Bravo: "And he didn't beat Tyger with speed. He didn't overpower him. He didn't suddenly become the Madman Szalinski of 2014. He survived long enough to find one opening."

Madman slowly sits up.

Tyger II is sitting several feet away.

Disappointed.

But composed.

Tyger looks toward Madman.

Madman looks back.

For a moment, neither says anything.

Then Tyger rises.

He walks toward Madman.

Madman tries to stand.

His legs don't cooperate immediately.

Tyger reaches down.

Madman looks at the offered hand.

Then takes it.

Tyger pulls Madman upright.
The two stand face-to-face.
Tyger bows deeply.
Madman's expression softens.
He puts one hand on Tyger's shoulder.
Madman Szalinski: "Hell of a fight."
Tyger nods.
Tyger II: "You earned it."
Madman looks toward the crowd.
Then back at Tyger.
Madman Szalinski: "You got a lot of years ahead of you."
Madman taps himself on the chest.
Madman Szalinski: "I got Tuesday."
Tyger laughs despite himself.
The crowd does too.
Tyger takes Madman's wrist.
He raises Madman's arm.
The crowd gets even louder.
John Phillips: "What a moment."
The Ring King graphic appears.
MADMAN SZALINSKI — QUALIFIED
Tyger releases Madman's wrist and bows once more before stepping back.
Madman looks toward the graphic.
He stares at his own name.
Then puts both hands on top of his head.
Almost stunned.
Mark Bravo: "I think it just hit him."
Madman slowly turns toward the crowd.
He takes a breath.
Raises both arms.
Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON!"
Manchester erupts.
John Phillips: "Maybe this was the last opportunity."

Mark Bravo: "Not anymore."

Madman continues soaking in the ovation as Tyger II applauds from the ropes.

Against a younger man.

Against a healthier man.

Against a body that has been telling him for years to stop.

Madman Szalinski found one more win.

And one more road to travel.

Coming Up Next

Segment

Coming Up Next — Amy Harrison vs. Marie Van Claudio

The broadcast returns to a split-screen shot backstage.

On the left side of the screen...

Amy Harrison walks through the backstage corridor toward the entrance area.

There is no Empire surrounding her.

No conversation.

No smile.

Just Amy, focused straight ahead as she makes the long walk toward the curtain.

On the right side...

Marie Van Claudio approaches from another part of the building.

She walks alone as well.

Her expression is cold and determined.

The two women never see one another.

They don't have to.

After everything said between them over the last two weeks, both know exactly what waits on the other side of that curtain.

John Phillips: "There they are. Amy Harrison and Marie Van Claudio. Two members of The Empire, headed toward the same ring from two very different directions."

Mark Bravo: "And after what we saw in that locker room earlier tonight, John, I'm not sure anybody knows what The Empire is going to look like when this is over."

Amy reaches the final hallway leading toward gorilla position.

On the opposite side of the screen, Marie does the same.

John Phillips: "Marie believed Amy should step aside. Amy's answer was simple: if Marie wants the Ring King tournament spot, she can pin her for the three."

Mark Bravo: "We're about to find out whether this is competition between stablemates... or the beginning of the end."

A graphic rises across the bottom of the split screen.

COMING UP NEXT

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

AMY HARRISON vs. MARIE VAN CLAUDIO

Amy disappears behind the curtain on the left.

Marie disappears behind the curtain on the right.

The screen holds on the Ring King qualifying graphic.

Still Here

Segment

The broadcast cuts backstage following Madman Szalinski's victory over Tyger II.

Melissa Cartwright stands in the interview area, microphone in hand.

Beside her is the newest competitor to qualify for the 2026 Ring King tournament.

Madman Szalinski.

The veteran is still dressed in his ring gear and his familiar blue-and-red mask.

His chest rises and falls heavily.

One hand rests against his lower back.

The other braces against the wall beside him.

Every part of his body looks like it knows exactly how long he has been doing this.

But beneath the mask...

Madman is smiling.

Melissa Cartwright: "Madman, earlier tonight you told me that you didn't know how many opportunities like this you had left."

Madman nods, still trying to catch his breath.

Melissa Cartwright: "You just defeated Tyger II. You're going to Ring King."

Madman looks down at the floor.

For a moment, the normally eccentric veteran doesn't have an immediate response.

Madman Szalinski: "Yeah."

He exhales.

Madman Szalinski: "Yeah, I am."

Madman slowly straightens himself.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD DAMN, SON!"

A cheer can be heard from inside the arena.

Madman laughs.

Madman Szalinski: "Still got one!"

He immediately grabs his lower back again.

Madman Szalinski: "Apparently I've also still got a spine, which is frankly surprising."

Melissa smiles.

Melissa Cartwright: "Tyger II certainly made you earn it."

Madman's expression changes immediately.

He nods.

Madman Szalinski: "That kid is good."

Madman Szalinski: "No. Scratch that."

Madman looks directly into the camera.

Madman Szalinski: "That kid is damn good."

Madman Szalinski: "Tyger II didn't go out there to give the old man his moment. He wasn't there to shake my hand, take a picture, and tell everybody what an honor it was."

Madman Szalinski: "He tried to beat my ass."

Madman grins.

Madman Szalinski: "That's respect."

Melissa nods.

Madman Szalinski: "And someday, when I'm sitting at home eating pudding through a straw because my neck finally decides it's had enough of my bullshit..."

Melissa tries not to laugh.

Madman Szalinski: "...I hope somebody reminds that kid that Madman Szalinski said he's got one hell of a future."

Melissa Cartwright: "But tonight belongs to you."

Madman's smile slowly fades.

Melissa Cartwright: "Earlier, you called this potentially your last meaningful opportunity in a UTA ring."

Madman looks down again.

This time the silence lasts longer.

Madman Szalinski: "I meant it."

No joke this time.

Madman Szalinski: "I'm not gonna stand here and pretend I'm twenty-five years old."

Madman Szalinski: "Hell, there are mornings when I wake up and I'm not convinced I'm eighty-five."

A small smile.

Madman Szalinski: "My knees are shot."

Madman Szalinski: "My neck barely turns."

Madman Szalinski: "My back hurts."

Madman Szalinski: "My hips hurt."

Madman Szalinski: "Pretty sure something over here started hurting during the match."

He points vaguely toward his ribs.

Madman Szalinski: "Don't even know what that is."

Melissa Cartwright: "That sounds concerning."

Madman Szalinski: "Everything about me is concerning, Melissa."

Madman laughs again.

Then he grows serious.

Madman Szalinski: "But I won."

He lets those words sit.

Madman Szalinski: "That's what matters."

Madman Szalinski: "Because when you're young, you think there's always another one."

Madman Szalinski: "Another match."

Madman Szalinski: "Another tournament."

Madman Szalinski: "Another chance."

Madman shakes his head.

Madman Szalinski: "Eventually you figure out that isn't true."

Melissa lowers the microphone slightly as Madman looks toward the arena.

Madman Szalinski: "So when somebody gives you one more..."

He looks back toward Melissa.

Madman Szalinski: "...you don't waste it."

Melissa Cartwright: "And now that opportunity has become much bigger. You're officially part of a sixteen-person tournament that includes current champions, former champions, and some of the best competitors in UTA."

Madman nods.

Melissa Cartwright: "Do you believe you can actually win Ring King?"

Madman stares at her.

His head tilts slightly.

Madman Szalinski: "Melissa..."

He gestures toward himself.

Madman Szalinski: "Look at me."

Melissa does.

Madman Szalinski: "I shouldn't have won tonight."

A beat.

Madman Szalinski: "Hell, depending on which doctor you ask, I probably shouldn't be standing here."

His voice grows quieter.

Madman Szalinski: "But I am."

Madman pushes himself away from the wall.

He stands completely under his own power now.

Madman Szalinski: "I'm still here."

Madman Szalinski: "I've been knocked down."

Madman Szalinski: "I've been broken."

Madman Szalinski: "I've had this business take pieces of me I'm never getting back."

Madman Szalinski: "And somehow..."

He spreads his arms.

Madman Szalinski: "...the crazy son of a bitch in the mask is still here."

A cheer rises from the arena again.

Madman Szalinski: "So can I win Ring King?"

The old familiar energy starts returning.

Madman Szalinski: "I don't know!"

Madman Szalinski: "But somebody's gonna have to get my old ass out of that tournament to stop me!"

Madman points directly into the camera.

Madman Szalinski: "And until somebody does..."

His grin grows beneath the mask.

Madman Szalinski: "GOD."

Madman Szalinski: "DAMN."

Madman Szalinski: "SON!"

The crowd inside SNHU Arena erupts.

Madman immediately winces and grabs his ribs again.

Madman Szalinski: "Ow."

Melissa laughs.

Madman Szalinski: "Worth it."

Madman gives Melissa a grateful pat on the shoulder before limping out of the interview area.

Melissa watches him leave with a smile.

The broadcast fades back toward the arena.

Amy Harrison vs. Marie Van Claudio

Match

The broadcast returns to a wide shot of SNHU.

The Ring King logo fills the video wall before transitioning into the graphic for tonight's final qualifying match.

RING KING QUALIFYING MATCH

AMY HARRISON vs. MARIE VAN CLAUDIO

The Manchester crowd immediately reacts.

John Phillips: "And now we have arrived at our main event."

Mark Bravo: "The match The Empire probably wishes didn't have to happen."

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison. Marie Van Claudio. One place remaining tonight in the 2026 Ring King tournament."

Mark Bravo: "And one very uncomfortable question hanging over The Empire."

The match graphic disappears.

For several seconds, the arena falls dark.

Then a deep bass pulse begins pounding through the speakers.

Not Amy Harrison's music.

Not Marie Van Claudio's.

An Empire-specific theme begins to play.

The video wall comes alive with the unmistakable insignia of THE EMPIRE.

John Phillips: "Well, this is different."

Mark Bravo: "They're making a statement."

Smoke begins rolling across the entranceway.

The first person through the curtain is Valkyrie Knoxx.

The Iron Valkyrie steps through with her usual stoic expression, shoulders squared, eyes fixed on the ring.

No theatrics.

No smile.

Just presence.

Several steps behind her comes Clovis Black.

Hood up.

Arms hanging at his sides.

The bruising powerhouse walks through the smoke like he has somewhere unpleasant to be and intends to make it everybody else's problem.

Then Trey Mack emerges.

Trey pauses at the top of the entranceway.

He looks toward Valkyrie.

Then Clovis.

Then toward the ring.

There is considerably less swagger than usual.

John Phillips: "Valkyrie Knoxx. Clovis Black. Trey Mack."

Mark Bravo: "Three members of The Empire coming out together before Amy or Marie."

John Phillips: "And I think the message is obvious."

Mark Bravo: "We're together."

The three begin walking toward ringside.

Valkyrie leads.

Clovis follows.

Trey brings up the rear.

John Phillips: "Last week wasn't exactly a successful night for The Empire."

Mark Bravo: "That's putting it kindly."

John Phillips: "Trey Mack lost his Ring King qualifier to Bianca Page. Clovis Black was defeated by Lindsey Lothario. Valkyrie Knox pushed Mike Best extremely hard, but she ultimately fell to I Knead a Hero."

Mark Bravo: "Zero for three."

Valkyrie reaches ringside first.

She moves around one side of the ring and takes a position near the corner.

Clovis moves toward the opposite side.

Trey remains near the center of the floor, looking into the ring.

John Phillips: "And after those losses, things became significantly more complicated backstage."

Mark Bravo: "Because Marie Van Claudio decided there was nothing to worry about."

John Phillips: "Marie believed tonight guaranteed The Empire a Ring King entrant because Amy Harrison would simply lie down and allow Marie to advance."

Mark Bravo: "One small problem."

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison never agreed to that."

Trey Mack folds his arms at ringside.

His expression becomes noticeably serious as commentary recounts what happened.

Mark Bravo: "And Amy didn't just say no. She challenged Marie on something much bigger."

John Phillips: "Leadership."

Mark Bravo: "That's the dangerous word."

John Phillips: "Marie said she is the leader of The Empire. Amy reminded Marie that when The Empire previously became one of the most dominant factions in UTA history, Amy Harrison was the woman standing at the front of it."

Mark Bravo: "And Marie's response was basically, 'You might've been the face, but I was pulling the strings.'"

Valkyrie looks across ringside toward Trey.

Trey notices.

Neither says anything.

John Phillips: "Then Amy mocked Marie's emotional farewell to Hardcore Sandy at One Last Stop."

Mark Bravo: "And that was about the point where the temperature in the room went from uncomfortable to somebody-might-get-punched."

John Phillips: "Trey Mack had to physically step between Amy and Marie."

The camera focuses on Trey.

Trey looks up toward the entranceway.

John Phillips: "He was the one who yelled enough."

Mark Bravo: "And honestly, I didn't have Trey Mack playing marriage counselor for The Empire on my 2026 bingo card."

John Phillips: "Trey reminded both women that now was not the time for The Empire to tear itself apart."

Mark Bravo: "He said they were as strong as ever."

John Phillips: "Marie corrected him."

Mark Bravo: "'Stronger.'"

The camera slowly pans across the three Empire members surrounding the ring.

Valkyrie.

Clovis.

Trey.

Three people making a very deliberate show of solidarity.

John Phillips: "And perhaps that's what we're seeing here."

Mark Bravo: "Presentation."

John Phillips: "Explain."

Mark Bravo: "Look at them. Everybody comes out together. Empire music. Empire graphics. Three members surrounding the ring before either woman arrives. This is them telling the entire world that nothing is wrong."

John Phillips: "Do you believe them?"

Mark Bravo: "Not for a second."

At ringside, Clovis Black turns toward a group of fans loudly booing The Empire.

He simply stares at them.

The fans continue shouting.

Clovis doesn't react.

Eventually he turns back toward the ring.

John Phillips: "Whatever the relationship between Amy Harrison and Marie Van Claudio looks like after tonight, these three are going to have front-row seats."

Mark Bravo: "And that's another layer to this, John. What happens if somebody crosses a line?"

John Phillips: "Which somebody?"

Mark Bravo: "Exactly."

Trey Mack walks toward Clovis.

He says something quietly.

Clovis nods once.

Trey crosses behind the ring toward Valkyrie.

Another brief conversation.

Valkyrie gives the slightest nod.

John Phillips: "It looks like Trey is making sure everybody understands why they're out here."

Mark Bravo: "Keep the peace."

John Phillips: "Or protect The Empire."

Mark Bravo: "Might be the same thing tonight."

Trey returns to the center position at ringside.

The Empire theme continues playing.

The video wall cycles through imagery of the faction.

The three members remain positioned around the ring almost like guards awaiting the arrival of royalty.

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison eventually told Marie Van Claudio last week that Marie could have the Ring King spot."

Mark Bravo: "And Marie said good."

John Phillips: "Then Amy finished the sentence."

Mark Bravo: "'When you pin me for the three.'"

The crowd reacts at the reminder.

John Phillips: "So let's make this absolutely clear before either competitor comes through that curtain."

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison is not lying down."

Mark Bravo: "Marie Van Claudio knows it now."

John Phillips: "This will be a legitimate Ring King qualifying match."

Mark Bravo: "Between two women who have known each other for a very, very long time."

John Phillips: "Friends. Rivals. Enemies. Allies. Their history in this company stretches back more than a decade."

Mark Bravo: "And now somehow they've ended up underneath the same Empire banner."

John Phillips: "The question is whether that banner survives tonight."

The Empire theme begins to fade.

Valkyrie Knox stands with her arms crossed.

Clovis Black remains stone-faced.

Trey Mack looks toward the curtain.

All three wait.

Because now...

The two women at the center of all of this are still to come.

The Empire theme fades completely.

Valkyrie Knox, Clovis Black and Trey Mack remain positioned around ringside.

Then the eerie opening chords of "Sanctify Me" by In This Moment begin to play.

The lights shift between pink and blue.

The crowd reaction turns immediately hostile.

John Phillips: "And here comes Amy Harrison."

Smoke curls across the entranceway.

Amy Harrison steps through it.

She stops at the top of the ramp.

One hand rests on her hip.

Her head tilts slightly as she surveys the ring.

Not the crowd.

The ring.

And the three members of The Empire waiting around it.

Mark Bravo: "Look at her."

John Phillips: "What are you seeing?"

Mark Bravo: "Not somebody walking into a match she's supposed to lose."

Amy slowly flicks her hair back over one shoulder.

Then she begins walking down the ramp.

Confident.

Unhurried.

Every step deliberate.

John Phillips: "Last week Marie Van Claudio believed this match was essentially a formality."

Mark Bravo: "Because in Marie's mind, Amy would do what was best for The Empire."

John Phillips: "And Amy Harrison decided that what was best for The Empire did not include lying on her back."

Amy reaches the middle of the aisle.

She slows.

Looks toward Trey Mack.

Trey meets her eyes.

Amy gives him the slightest smirk.

Trey does not return it.

Mark Bravo: "Trey Mack knows better than anybody how close this came to getting ugly last week."

John Phillips: "He had to physically get between Amy and Marie."

Mark Bravo: "And tonight he gets to stand there and watch them actually fight."

Amy continues forward.

As she nears ringside, Valkyrie Knox shifts her attention toward her.

Amy stops beside Valkyrie.

The two women look at one another.

Amy says something quietly.

Valkyrie's expression does not change.

She gives one small nod.

Amy smiles.

John Phillips: "You have to wonder what the other members of The Empire actually think about this."

Mark Bravo: "They'd be smart not to pick sides."

Amy turns toward Clovis Black on the opposite side.

Clovis remains motionless.

She gives him a small wave.

Clovis does nothing.

Mark Bravo: "And there is Clovis Black demonstrating the emotional range of a brick wall."

Amy reaches the steel steps.

She pauses before climbing.

Then turns toward the crowd.

A chorus of boos rains down.

Amy closes her eyes.

Smiles.

And slowly opens both arms as though soaking in applause instead.

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison has never exactly been bothered by being unpopular."

Mark Bravo: "She likes it."

Amy climbs the steps.

She reaches the apron and turns toward the hard camera.

Her fingers move slowly along the top rope.

She looks toward the referee.

Amy Harrison: "Open it."

The referee holds the ropes apart.

Amy enters slowly.

Ring Announcer: "Introducing first... from Belfast, Northern Ireland... weighing in at one hundred twenty pounds..."

Amy walks toward the middle of the ring.

She turns slowly, letting the reaction follow her.

Ring Announcer: "THE EMPRESS... AMY... HARRISON!"

Amy moves toward the ropes facing the hard camera.

She leans against them.

Licks her lips.

Bites lightly at one finger.

Then takes a step backward.

Her hair flips over her shoulder.

Amy Harrison: "Long live the Empress."

The crowd boos loudly.

John Phillips: "Interesting choice of words."

Mark Bravo: "Very."

Amy's eyes move toward the entranceway.

The smirk remains.

John Phillips: "Marie Van Claudio has made it very clear that she sees herself as the leader of The Empire."

Mark Bravo: "Amy Harrison just walked out here and reminded everybody that she's still calling herself the Empress."

Amy turns toward Trey at ringside.

She points toward herself.

Then points toward the center of the ring.

Trey exhales slowly.

John Phillips: "No mixed signals there."

Amy backs into her corner.

She stretches one arm along the top rope.

Then the other.

Her eyes never leave the stage.

Mark Bravo: "Let's not forget something else here. Amy Harrison isn't some foot soldier Marie recruited last month."

John Phillips: "Not even close."

Mark Bravo: "Amy built one of the strongest runs The Empire has ever had. She was Women's Champion. She was the public face of that faction."

John Phillips: "And that is exactly what she reminded Marie of last week."

Amy's expression shifts.

The seduction and theatrics fade.

What remains is competitive focus.

John Phillips: "Amy told Marie she could have this Ring King spot."

Mark Bravo: "When she pins Amy for three."

Amy looks toward the entranceway.

She raises three fingers.

Then slowly folds them down one by one.

Three.

Two.

One.

Amy points toward the canvas.

Come earn it.

John Phillips: "The message hasn't changed."

Mark Bravo: "Marie wants to call herself the leader? Fine."

Amy Harrison settles into the corner.

Mark Bravo: "Tonight the leader has to beat the Empress."

"Sanctify Me" begins to fade.

At ringside, The Empire remains assembled.

Valkyrie Knoxx watches.

Clovis Black watches.

Trey Mack watches.

Inside the ring, Amy Harrison stares toward the curtain.

Waiting for Marie Van Claudio.

Amy Harrison waits in her corner.

Valkyrie Knoxx, Trey Mack, and Clovis Black remain stationed around ringside.

Then the arena lights drop.

The opening of Marie Van Claudio's entrance music hits.

The reaction is immediate.

Boos pour through SNHU as Marie Van Claudio steps through the curtain.

Marie stops at the top of the entranceway.

Her chin is raised.

Her posture is immaculate.

Her expression carries the same cold certainty that has defined her since taking control of The Empire.

She doesn't look toward the fans.

She looks directly at Amy Harrison.

John Phillips: "And here comes Marie Van Claudio."

Mark Bravo: "You want to know whether Amy's little message got through? Look at Marie's face."

Inside the ring, Amy Harrison leans casually against the turnbuckles.

She smiles.

Marie does not.

John Phillips: "One week ago, Marie believed she would be walking into this match tonight and essentially collecting her place in Ring King."

Mark Bravo: "Because she's the leader. That's how Marie sees it. Amy lies down, Marie gets the three, The Empire gets somebody into the tournament, everybody goes home happy."

John Phillips: "Everybody except Amy Harrison."

Mark Bravo: "Which turned out to be a pretty important detail."

Marie begins walking down the aisle.

There is no rush.

She moves with the confidence of someone who still believes the entire situation should be beneath her.

But her eyes remain fixed on Amy.

Amy raises her hand.

Three fingers.

Marie sees them.

Amy folds one down.

Then another.

Then the last.

One.

Two.

Three.

Marie stops walking.

Her jaw tightens.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, Amy is enjoying this."

John Phillips: "She's reminding Marie of exactly what she said last week."

Marie resumes walking.

Her attention finally shifts from Amy as she approaches ringside.

Valkyrie Knox is the first Empire member she passes.

Marie gives Valkyrie a small nod.

Valkyrie returns it.

Marie continues toward Clovis Black.

Another nod.

Clovis responds in kind.

Then Marie reaches Trey Mack.

She stops.

Trey looks at her.

Marie looks at him.

Neither speaks for a moment.

John Phillips: "Remember, Trey Mack was the man standing between these two women last week."

Mark Bravo: "Literally."

Marie says something quietly to Trey.

The microphones don't pick it up.

Trey answers with a small nod.

Marie starts to move past him.

Trey reaches out and lightly catches her arm.

Marie stops.

She slowly looks down at his hand.

Trey immediately releases her.

But he doesn't back away.

Trey Mack: "Keep it in the ring."

Marie stares at him.

Trey remains serious.

Trey Mack: "Both of you."

Marie glances toward Amy.

Amy has been watching the entire exchange.

Marie turns back toward Trey.

Marie Van Claudio: "I know what I'm doing."

Marie walks away.

Mark Bravo: "Trey Mack is trying desperately to keep a lid on this thing."

John Phillips: "And that may become increasingly difficult once the bell rings."

Marie reaches the ring apron.

She stops again.

Her eyes travel upward toward Amy.

Amy pushes herself out of the corner.

Now both women are staring directly at one another.

Marie climbs onto the apron.

Amy walks toward the ropes.

The referee immediately steps between them.

Amy raises both hands innocently.

Amy Harrison: "What?"

Marie steps through the ropes.

She doesn't take her eyes off Amy.

Ring Announcer: "And her opponent..."

Marie moves toward the center of the ring.

She turns toward the crowd.

The boos intensify.

Marie slowly spreads her arms.

She welcomes every bit of it.

Ring Announcer: "MARIE... VAN... CLAUDIO!"

Marie lowers her arms.

She turns.

Amy Harrison is standing directly across from her.

The two Empire members stare at one another.

John Phillips: "Whatever Marie expected this match to be seven days ago, that expectation is gone now."

Mark Bravo: "It better be. Amy isn't joking anymore."

Marie takes one step toward Amy.

Amy takes one toward Marie.

The referee moves between them again.

Neither woman acknowledges him.

Marie Van Claudio: "You could have made this easy."

Amy smiles.

Amy Harrison: "For you."

Marie tilts her head.

Marie Van Claudio: "For us."

Amy glances around ringside.

Valkyrie.

Clovis.

Trey.

Then she looks back at Marie.

Amy Harrison: "Then earn it."

The crowd reacts.

John Phillips: "There it is again."

Marie takes another step forward.

The referee puts a hand between them and orders both women back to their corners.

Marie reluctantly backs away.

Amy does the same.

Mark Bravo: "There's something else we haven't talked enough about, John. These two know each other."

John Phillips: "Very well."

Mark Bravo: "This isn't two Empire members who happened to get paired together by a draw. Amy Harrison and Marie Van Claudio have years of history with one another. They know how the other thinks."

Marie reaches her corner.

She removes the final pieces of her entrance gear.

Her eyes remain on Amy.

John Phillips: "And lately, Marie has made no secret of her belief that The Empire answers to her."

Mark Bravo: "That's where tonight gets dangerous."

At ringside, Trey Mack moves closer to the apron.

Valkyrie Knox remains on one side.

Clovis Black remains on the other.

The Empire surrounds the ring.

But inside it, The Empire is divided directly down the middle.

John Phillips: "For all the talk about being stronger than ever, somebody from The Empire is going to Ring King tonight."

Mark Bravo: "And somebody isn't."

Marie steps out of her corner.

Amy does the same.

They meet near the center.

The referee gives both women final instructions.

Amy barely listens.

Marie barely listens.

They're staring at each other.

Marie extends her hand.

Amy looks down at it.

The crowd murmurs.

John Phillips: "Interesting."

Amy looks back up at Marie.

Marie waits.

Amy slowly reaches forward.

She takes Marie's hand.

They shake.

For half a second, it appears almost genuine.

Then neither lets go.

Marie's grip tightens.

Amy's smile grows.

Amy tightens hers right back.

The two women stare into each other's eyes with their hands locked between them.

Mark Bravo: "Yeah. That's not a handshake."

The referee orders them to separate.

They finally release.

Amy backs toward her corner.

Marie backs toward hers.

At ringside, Trey Mack exhales through his nose.

He already looks tired.

John Phillips: "Amy Harrison told Marie Van Claudio exactly what she had to do."

Marie lowers into her stance.

Amy does the same.

John Phillips: "If Marie wants Amy's place in Ring King..."

The referee looks toward both competitors.

Mark Bravo: "...pin her for three."

The tension hangs over the ring as the referee prepares to call for the bell.

The referee looks toward Amy Harrison.

Then toward Marie Van Claudio.

Amy stands in one corner.

Marie stands in the other.

Neither woman smiles.

At ringside, Trey Mack has his arms folded.

Valkyrie Knoxx watches from one side.

Clovis Black stands on the other.

The entire Empire surrounds the ring.

And for a few seconds...

...it feels like everybody is waiting to see whether this is the moment it all falls apart.

John Phillips: "Here we go."

Mark Bravo: "This could get ugly very quickly."

The referee signals.

DING! DING!

Amy Harrison steps forward.

Marie Van Claudio does the same.

Slowly.

Neither rushes.

The Manchester crowd begins buzzing.

Amy circles left.

Marie circles with her.

Eyes locked.

John Phillips: "Look at the body language."

Mark Bravo: "No jokes now."

Amy stops.

Marie stops.

They stare at one another.

The crowd grows louder.

Marie raises one hand.

Amy raises hers.

They move closer.

Collar-and-elbow tie-up.

For approximately one second.

Then Amy Harrison suddenly drops to one knee.

She grabs Marie's wrist.

Marie twists almost lazily into a standing wristlock.

Amy immediately slaps the mat.

TAP.

TAP.

TAP.

The referee freezes.

So does the crowd.

DING! DING! DING!

John Phillips: "...What?"

Marie releases the wristlock.

Amy drops onto her back.

She begins laughing.

Marie looks down at her.

And starts laughing too.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, you have GOT to be kidding me."

The boos begin.

Not ordinary boos.

The kind that come from thousands of people realizing at the exact same moment that they've been conned.

Amy rolls onto her side, laughing harder.

Marie bends forward with her hands on her knees, practically delighted.

John Phillips: "It was a setup."

Mark Bravo: "The whole damn thing."

At ringside, Trey Mack throws his head back and starts laughing.

Valkyrie Knox finally cracks a grin.

Even Clovis Black allows the faintest smirk.

John Phillips: "Last week. The argument. Trey getting between them. Amy refusing to lie down. All of it."

Mark Bravo: "They played everybody."

Amy pushes herself back to her feet.

Marie extends a hand.

Amy takes it.

Marie pulls her upright.

The two women immediately embrace.

The crowd rains boos down upon them.

Amy pulls away first.

She looks directly toward the hard camera.

Then gives an exaggerated pout.

Marie covers her mouth with one hand in mock shock.

Then both women start laughing again.

John Phillips: "They wanted everyone to believe The Empire was cracking."

Mark Bravo: "And we bought it."

John Phillips: "Everybody bought it."

The Ring Announcer raises the microphone over the chaos.

Ring Announcer: "Here is your winner... by submission... and QUALIFYING for the 2026 RING KING tournament... MARIE... VAN... CLAUDIO!"

The boos intensify.

Marie raises both arms triumphantly.

Amy raises one of them herself.

Mark Bravo: "Technically, Amy kept her word."

John Phillips: "Don't."

Mark Bravo: "She said Marie could have the spot when she beat her."

John Phillips: "That was not a match."

Mark Bravo: "Oh, absolutely not."

Trey Mack climbs onto the apron.

Then steps through the ropes.

Valkyrie Knox follows.

Clovis Black enters last.

The entire Empire gathers in the center of the ring.

Marie.

Amy.

Trey.

Valkyrie.

Clovis.

Shoulder to shoulder.

United.

The boos continue pouring down.

John Phillips: "And suddenly that word from last week makes a lot more sense."

Mark Bravo: "Stronger."

Marie motions for a microphone.

One is handed through the ropes.

Marie takes it.

She waits.

The boos continue.

Marie smiles.

Marie Van Claudio: "Oh, please."

The reaction gets louder.

Marie Van Claudio: "You people really are that stupid."

Amy laughs beside her.

Trey shakes his head, smiling.

Marie Van Claudio: "For an entire week..."

Marie Van Claudio: "...you talked about it."

Marie Van Claudio: "You analyzed it."

Marie Van Claudio: "You wondered whether Amy and I were fighting."

Marie looks toward Amy.

Amy pretends to look angry.

Marie pretends to look concerned.

Then they both laugh again.

Marie Van Claudio: "Was The Empire falling apart?"

Marie Van Claudio: "Was Amy jealous?"

Marie Van Claudio: "Was Marie losing control?"

Marie shakes her head.

Marie Van Claudio: "Idiots."

The crowd boos.

Marie Van Claudio: "Do you honestly think Amy Harrison and I survived everything we've survived because we're incapable of having a conversation?"

Amy holds out her hand for the microphone.

Marie gives it to her.

Amy Harrison: "Come on."

Amy looks around the arena.

Amy Harrison: "You really thought I was angry because Marie told me to lie down?"

Amy laughs.

Amy Harrison: "I suggested it."

The crowd gets even louder.

Mark Bravo: "Oh, that's disgusting."

Amy points toward Marie.

Amy Harrison: "Ring King needs The Empire."

Amy Harrison: "And Marie gives us the best chance to take the whole damn thing."

Marie gives Amy an approving nod.

Amy Harrison: "So we gave all of you a little show."

Amy turns toward Trey.

Amy Harrison: "Trey deserves an award, by the way."

Trey spreads his arms.

Amy Harrison: "'ENOUGH!'"

Amy dramatically imitates Trey's intervention from the previous week.

Trey starts laughing.

Marie laughs beside him.

Amy Harrison: "Beautiful performance."

Trey bows sarcastically.

John Phillips: "Even that was staged."

Mark Bravo: "Every bit of it."

Amy hands the microphone back to Marie.

Marie Van Claudio: "You see, that is the difference between The Empire and everybody else."

Marie Van Claudio: "Everybody else reacts."

Marie Van Claudio: "We plan."

Marie Van Claudio: "Everybody else fights among themselves because their egos can't survive sharing the spotlight."

Marie Van Claudio: "We understand exactly what this is."

Marie points toward the Ring King graphic on the screen.

Marie Van Claudio: "Opportunity."

Marie Van Claudio: "And now..."

She points toward herself.

Marie Van Claudio: "...The Empire has its place in Ring King."

The crowd continues booing.

Marie Van Claudio: "While the rest of you spent seven days gossiping about whether we were falling apart..."

Marie Van Claudio: "...we were already celebrating."

Amy raises Marie's arm again.

Valkyrie steps closer.

Clovis joins them.

Trey moves to Marie's other side.

Marie Van Claudio: "Trey Mack said it last week."

Marie looks around at the group.

Marie Van Claudio: "The Empire is as strong as ever."

She pauses.

A smile spreads across her face.

Marie Van Claudio: "And I corrected him."

Amy smiles beside her.

Valkyrie raises her chin.

Clovis folds his arms.

Trey nods.

Marie Van Claudio: "Stronger."

The Empire theme hits.

The five members raise their arms together.

Boos thunder through SNHU.

John Phillips: "We thought tonight might be the end of The Empire."

Mark Bravo: "Instead, they just made everybody in this building look like a fool."

The Ring King graphic appears across the screen.

MARIE VAN CLAUDIO — QUALIFIED

Marie looks toward it.

Then back toward the camera.

She raises one finger.

One place in Ring King.

Secured.

Amy Harrison stands beside her laughing as The Empire celebrates together in the center of the ring.

Not fractured.

Not divided.

Not weaker.

Stronger.

Fade out.

Conclusion

All Six Singles Champions Are Guaranteed a Spot in the Tournament.

[VIEW THE TOURNAMENT BRACKET HERE: Ring King 2026 — United Toughness Alliance](#)

Show Credits

