

Lost Monarch



INTERLUDE

Ryan saw wrestling as more than just a sport; to her, it was a raw, primal performance. Every move felt like a word in a silent conversation, a fierce clash where intention and physicality met in a delicate balance. In the moments between holds, where bodies twisted at awkward angles, it wasn't just the physical impact that mattered, but the deeper, quieter toll—an almost invisible fracture of spirit and body. Beneath the sound of flesh meeting canvas, Ryan grasped the real violence: the slow, stealthy erosion that spread through her body, mind, and very essence.

Düsseldorf was supposed to bring clarity, but Pingotti, once a powerful presence, now stalked her like a ghost. Her movements were careful, biding her time for any sign of weakness from Ryan. It wasn't solely Ryan's battle—her new partner had claimed the spotlight for a

while. But when the pivotal moment came, Ryan instinctively took charge. A shift happened within her. The Tiger Flow—her fierce signature move, dubbed “Crowned With Teeth”—landed with a brutal finality. Slamming her opponent’s head into the mat, she felt the reverberation travel through her body. It was cathartic. Too cathartic, really. It almost sent her into a tailspin.

Pingotti lay defeated on the mat, silenced by the force Ryan had become. The SCW Television Championship was hers—an emblem of her supremacy. Yet, in the stillness that followed, a growing unease began to surface.

The arena faded into the background. The crowd’s roar muffled, as if she were submerged underwater. The venue’s walls softened and vanished, leaving her suspended in what felt like a timeless void. Amaria’s always-cautious voice crept into her mind, reminding her that victory isn’t permanent; it’s fleeting. As Ryan stood there, doubt began to claw at her. She’d fought hard to reach this point, but how long could she maintain her hold before it all slipped away?

Her next opponent was Clyde Sutter. To him, she was merely another hurdle to overcome. He failed to see how she had transformed—her growth driven not just by ambition, but by something deeper, more primal, that lingered just beneath the surface. But this fight wasn’t solely about him. It was part of a much bigger picture. William Haven and Waylon Creek loomed in her mind, their quiet presence a stark reminder of past mistakes. Yet it was Waylon’s face that haunted her, the memory of his weighty shadow still pressing down on her chest. This time, though, she longed for another bout, another chance to rewrite her history. This was her moment for redemption.

During her training, the lines of her battles began to blur. The ring, her therapy sessions, and Amaria’s cautious reminders merged into one. Her body—scarred, bruised, broken—held the legacy of every fight. Her mind, however, felt vulnerable and questioned how much more it could endure. How many times could she push herself before shattering under the pressure? The toll was piling up, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop.

Without her associates grounding presence, she worried about losing herself once more. But faced with her, Ryan confronted something darker—an unspoken fear that lingered just out of reach, a dread that could eclipse even her healing.

(She adjusted her championship belt, the cold metal pressing against her shoulder. It was both empowering and suffocating, a reminder of her triumph, yet also of the sacrifice it demanded. The ring loomed ahead, ambient with anticipation. Still, beneath the surface, an unsettling feeling gnawed at her. What lay ahead wouldn't just be another contest; it was far more significant and potentially more devastating than she was prepared to handle.)

Victory or defeat—none of it truly mattered. The ring would soon provide the answer.

Champion At Last

The flash came out of nowhere, a white petal lightly brushing against the sweat that was trickling down Ryan's temple. The championship belt felt icy against her skin, like a prop she hadn't fully embraced as her own yet. "One more, champ. Bring us fire," the cameraman urged, his voice buzzing in her ears, tinny and far away through the fog of exhaustion that surrounded her. She stood poised, the gold glistening under the harsh lights. It all felt staged—victory dressed up like a theater performance.

Then Franklin Mack appeared, towering over her with a grin that was a bit too wide and full of too many teeth. "Ryan, amazing. A real tour-de-force," he said, his voice smooth and rehearsed—words she'd heard countless times before. She nodded, briefly locking eyes with him, before shifting her gaze to a distant point behind him. His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "You know," he continued, lowering his voice, "the view from up high can be pretty lonely. The pressure, the

scrutiny...” He paused, catching her gaze. “Are you still seeing your therapist Dr. Cruz?”

Hearing that name struck her like a sharp note—one she recognized but couldn’t quite grasp. Dr. Cruz. Her mind was a jumble, swimming in the fog of fatigue and adrenaline. “Yeah,” she muttered, the words slipping out like lines from a script. “Still going.”

“It’s crucial,” Franklin insisted, his earnestness almost unnerving. “Physical endurance is just part of it. If you don’t mind sharing, have you learned anything useful?”

Ryan scrambled for a response, her thoughts tangled. “We talked about... resilience,” she managed to say, stumbling over the word, feeling how hollow it sounded. “Techniques for... coping with work stress?” It felt like corporate lingo, and she cringed. “I’ll need to book another appointment soon,” she added, the deflection coming out naturally.

Franklin nodded, his practiced smile slipping back into place. “That’s great. Taking care of yourself is of utmost importance.”

That’s when she noticed Nina, quietly standing at Franklin’s side, like a shadow that somehow carried weight in this sea of superficial interactions. Nina was the one person who kept Ryan grounded amid the chaos, her solid presence offering a brief escape from the relentless performance they were all caught up in.

“Franklin,” Ryan interjected, her voice firm and her expression tight. “Excuse me.”

He blinked, his smile faltering just for a moment. “Go ahead,” he said quietly, stepping back.

Ryan turned right to Nina, and in that instant, the championship belt felt like a hollow symbol. She pulled Nina into a fierce hug—the only thing that felt genuine in that moment.

“Are you okay?” Nina’s voice was soft, her eyes searching Ryan’s for something more profound than she was ready to share.

“I’m okay,” Ryan lied, burying her face in Nina’s hair. “Just... so, so exhausted.”

She held Nina tightly, watching as Franklin walked away. His posture seemed proud as if he was assuming all the credit, and something twisted inside her—something she despised seeing in him week after week. In the rehearsed, empty spaces they inhabited, he, too, was just playing a part.

Burn Your Village (Part VIII)

Grenoble, France - 1692 (17th century)

Eloise’s consciousness struggled upward from the depths of oblivion to reveal to her a splintered universe soaked in fitful light and darkness. Shivering chill seeped to its core, its frost-fingered tendrils wrapping around her bones in unyielding hold. She blinked, every movement forced by desperate resolve that struggled to cut through the whorl of confusion shrouding her. Through the veil that shrouded her like impenetrable fog, she heard the whisper of her father—an ethereal whisper that was at once agonizingly close yet excruciatingly far away. *Are you all right, Eloise? Rise up, child. Rise.*

She repeated these words to herself unceasingly, their cutting edges chiseled from unyielding force that sliced through the veil of confusion like mist before morning sunlight. Strained to extreme effort, she hauled herself upright, the earth around her shifting like drunken legs on unsteady earth, limbs shivering like roots tangled in obstinate earth. Her vision strayed to that tower that towered like a golden-crowned sentinel in clearing, but she shrank from it in revulsion. Carved in mind was vision that seared with immediacy, brutal in its sharpness—one she would sacrifice everything to forget.

And yet she steelied herself for that vision, that instant threatening to engulf like an oncoming storm.

Her heart pulsed in her rib cage like splintered wood as she stumbled towards the house. Creak of the front door on hinges like jaws opening to devour all within rushed through the opening to greet her with bitter premonition that enveloped like a ghost shroud. As she stepped across the threshold, she was engulfed by the hush of the house that descended upon like crushing burden, rooms that radiated warmth before now shrouded in impenetrable secrecy.

Just inside the front entrance, she found her youngest sister lying on the floor, a wretched mass of tension and pallor. Her cheeks shone with a ghostly blue sheen, as if death itself had taken hold of her. Eloise gasped in breathlessness of fright. Frost enveloped her like a chilling shroud that kept her immovable. There was more to that frost than she realized—an angry cut disfigured the girl's arm, frozen by an unyielding chill. Dropping to her knees beside her, Eloise shivered as she swept hair from around her death-white face.

Now blinded by fright, she rushed through rooms in their house in desperate hopes of finding Amaria or at least some of her other sisters. They were gone, completely gone. Amaria—the sound of that word was like thunder in her mind. They have taken them from her, her own sisters, victims of darker passions than hers. And yet she must fight off despair that was threatening to engulf her.

Holding her sister in arms that shook at the cruel burden of cold encroaching on their body, she stumbled towards the hearth where embers of fire have reduced to ash for so much time now. With painstaking determination, she chanced to summon warmth from within to spark fire that at first faltered weak but gradually grew to a blazing fire that cast embers' glow like on encroaching nightfall. Wound in blankets, she struggled to drive off the chill that persisted on her sister's body.

Her sister's pulse was weak, a faint thread of life. For now that was enough. Eloise stayed by the fire, guarding vigilantly beside her sister as she breathed gently on, wanting for her to stay just on death's icy

edge but not yet in its cold arms. Each breath taken was a shaky grasp on slipping hopes that somehow the impending blackness might yet stay at bay.

Second Chance at First Line

The distant drone of the television and the low hum of the heating system underlined the gentle vibrations of the hotel room. Not background noise, but a heartbeat, a disturbing reminder of Ryan's own life teetering on the edge of existence somewhere between here and there, a sound that vaguely echoed something that was, leaving a fitting hole in its wake.

She reclined on the edge of the bed, body collapsing in a manner that was at once recognizable yet strangely alien. The Television Championship belt was haphazard on the nightstand beside it, its flashiness glaring reminder of where she was at present. Champion. The title vibrated faint in her mind, a sour joke of the universe.

"Not exactly how things would normally go down," Casmir noted, speaking in that—her—voice with undertones of irony that was so unsettling in familiarity. He cast a look upward, and she received a flash of familiarity in her own gaze. "But definitely dramatic."

Ryan inched in closer, ghost of a woman's essence. "Saving our asses?" she snapped in reply, speaking in that ghostly whisper of hers. "Sometimes you have to color outside of lines if you want to play."

"Oh, I'm all for coloring on the wrong side of lines, sweetheart," he noted, playfulness in his eyes that danced like fire. "Especially where that involves flexing reality to obtain power from that's let's say—unconventional."

“Unconventional,” Ryan repeated, that word replete with that shiver of dread that crawled through every pore of her body. “What we’re calling body snatching and interdimensional power plays these days now?”

Casmir shrugged, that movement in harmony with that of hers. “Terms get so restrictive, darling. Why put ourselves in that box where we can fly?”

“Normalcy is more than insanity,” she spat in disgust, a shiver of indignation rippling through ghostly form. “And I’m hanging in limbo in my own life.”

He laughed richly, the sound rumbling through ghostly body. “Patience, dear. Every good story has surprises. What’s the appeal of a story that plays out with no twist?”

“Thrill?” Ryan sneered. “Ask that of the woman floating over her own body, wrestling with some kind of existential angst.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” he teased, grinning like a kid in a secret joke. “It’s like an adventure, like going on a journey to see where it all leads.”

Her spectral body churned in frustration as she growled, “More like a filthy detour to the Twilight Zone,”

His teeth gleamed in the dim light as a smile appeared on his lips. “And, my love, that’s where magic is. where things become muddled and we see things for what they really are.”

Ryan shuddered at the thought alone. “And that key? Room 13. Another red herring? Perhaps even more disturbing?”

“Maybe it’s your destiny, sweetheart,” he breathed low in sound, wrapping around like the chill of winter breeze. “Or simply Pandora’s Box.”

He stretched in relaxation, body moving in fluid ease. As he wove together pieces of a life weighted by excess and sorrow, he spoke of a wrestler by the name of Ryan Lesperance—of a grappler tangled by own demons, of fire that reduced all he loved to ash. A marriage to addiction, love reduced to embers. Second chance, ghostly presence entwined with a woman he'd never met on this plane not for her.

Ryan listened intently, her spectral form swirling with disbelief and a peculiar, unsettling sense of familiarity. It felt like a story that didn't quite add up, something torn from a fevered dream. But there was a truth in it she couldn't ignore.

"So we're connected," she whispered. "Two souls, two timelines, tangled up in this cosmic mess."

"Tangled," he echoed, his voice a soothing murmur. "A waltz of fate."

"More like a cosmic collision," Ryan shot back. "And to be honest, I'm not a fan of the choreography."

He chuckled. "Well then, sweetheart, maybe it's time we crafted a new routine."

"Crafted?" Ryan huffed. "You've already taken over my body—"

"Oh, chéri," he interrupted, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You wound me. I'm just putting the available assets to good use." He smiled. "Besides, it's not like you're using it right now, is it?"

Ryan glared at him, her ghostly form shimmering with anger. "And what do you want me to do? Haunt the bellhop?"

He shrugged, her shoulders moving beneath his influence. "I'm all ears for ideas. Though, I have to admit, haunting the continental breakfast does sound appealing."

Ryan rolled her eyes. "You know, for a spectral being, you're oddly obsessed with food."

“A guy’s gotta eat, Ryan,” he responded, a smug smile spreading across her face. “Even in the afterlife.”

He stood up, stretching her limbs with a familiar ease that was both impressive and infuriating. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a championship to defend and a key to check out.” He winked. “Don’t wait up.”

He strode on with an assurance that brooked not even a whisper of opposition, body moving in fluid curves capable of inspiring awe or wrath in all who saw her. Ryan trailed him with blank expression, like a ghost tethered to a future she was not to escape from. secretly seared through her non-existent pocket like a threat reeking of peril.

Night stretched before her like interminable eternity, a vast universe of ghostly existence. As the initial glow of dawn started to color the sky, Ryan realized that she was not so much fighting for dominance of body or even for possession of mind. She was fighting for possession of buried secrets woven through folds of reality inextricably connected to fear and seduction. And she was determined to have the right to tell own story even if she must tell it like an apparition.

AFTERWORD:

Alright, let’s dispense with the pleasantries, shall we? Clyde Sutter enters this match with the misplaced bravado of a man convinced of his own narrative. He carries himself with the weight of a perceived slight, a chip on his shoulder so prominent it’s practically a geological feature. He fancies himself capable of simply shedding the Düsseldorf debacle like the molting lizard he is, emerging from Adam Brock’s considerable shadow as if by sheer force of will. He genuinely believes that a sufficient dose of ruthlessness – as if that were some magical elixir – can somehow sanitize his past failures, airbrush them out of existence like a bad memory.

But, Clyde, darling, let's be realistic. History, particularly in this arena, isn't so easily rewritten. And, more importantly, I'm not a character in your redemption arc—you can't *rewrite* me.

While you were horizontal, intimately acquainted with the arena's lighting fixtures, I was, you know, engaged in the messy business of making history. My acquisition of the SCW Television Championship wasn't a polite transaction; it was a *coup*. I wrested that title from Polly Pingotti's grasp, leaving her clutching at air like a socialite who just had her Birkin bag snatched. Talk about a power dynamic shift. She, like so many others, labored under the delusion of invincibility. A common affliction among those who mistake privilege for genuine prowess.

And now, you seriously entertain the notion that you can replicate my achievement? That you can just waltz into my domain, casually dismantle me like a practice dummy, and suddenly find yourself elevated to my position? Clyde, please. I am not the one being hunted. I have never been the prey. You do not enter my territory and, even for a fleeting moment, imagine that you hold any semblance of control. That's not confidence; that's delusion.

You style yourself The Assassin. How...dramatic. Mr. "I Wait for the Perfect Moment." Honey, assassins operate in the shadows. I command the light. You've spent your career waiting for your opportune moment? I am that moment. And, frankly, it's not looking good for you.

Here's a crucial distinction, Clyde. We don't occupy the same competitive ecosystem. You don't comprehend the relentless pressure, the constant scrutiny, the sheer weight of expectation that I carry. You don't wake up every day knowing that a legion of competitors is plotting your downfall. You fight to rebuild a shattered image. I fight to maintain my position against a relentless tide of challengers. It's a fundamental difference.

You genuinely believe you own this fight? Because you paid your dues? Because you think you've earned some kind of cosmic reward?

I've encountered countless athletes like you – men who mistake entitlement for genuine accomplishment. They fail to grasp the fundamental truth: true dominance is forged in the crucible of unwavering dedication, strategic brilliance, and an unshakeable will to prevail.

You envision yourself as some kind of heroic figure, slaying the dragon, claiming the spoils of victory? By all means, indulge your fantasies. Brandish your metaphorical sword. But, Clyde, give it a few days, and you'll be eating out of my hand, just like every other would-be hero who dared to challenge me. I don't merely defeat my opponents; I redefine them. I dissect their strategies, expose their weaknesses, and leave them questioning their very place in the competitive hierarchy.

This isn't simply about personal ambition, by the way. It transcends the sense of one's individualism. It's about every woman who's been told to be quiet, to be compliant, to minimize her aspirations. It's about everyone who's been underestimated, dismissed, relegated to the sidelines. I fight for them. I fight because I was born for this. Because I built myself for this.

So, bring your best game, Clyde. Your meticulously crafted strategies, your "assassin" persona, all the fury and desperation you can muster. It will not be enough.

I'm not here to simply burn your village, Clyde.

I am the fire.

And when the bell rings and the dust settles, I won't just be standing. I'll be holding this championship. Still the Star of Tomorrow. And you? You'll be left grappling with the same existential question that haunts every opponent I've faced:

"What was I thinking?"

To give you the answer to such a poignant question, you weren't, you never were. And, honestly,

Clyde, I'm far too busy being a champion to offer you any post-match counseling.

