THORNS 181

Chapter 181 - Pre-Tournament Hype

Beneath the flawless, sun-drenched morning sky, the colossal arena vibrated with a deafening, thunderous roar.

Thousands of voices merged into a singular living wave of sound that bounced off the stone. The hype was a force that rattled beneath the foot of each and every person present.

Every section of the massive stands was a vibrant mix of national colors and loud tribalism.

In the northern stands, the citizens of Tricea waved pristine silver banners, shouting statistics about their magi-tech enhancements and the calculated efficiency of their contestants.

To the east, the Myrian's chanted with precise coordination, pumping glowsticks up high and waving flags of encouragement for their representatives.

Across the way, the merchant lords and sailors of Riverton cheered with boisterous laughter, throwing gold-trimmed confetti into the wind.

But the loudest of roars came from the southern seats – the heart of Eldoria.

"LET'S GO EMELIEEE!!!" a student shouted over the crowd. "Emelie hasn't lost a single fight her whole life! She's going to destroy the entire competition! Solo!"

"ARE YOU INSANE?!" a Myrian fan roared back from across the dividing line, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Izumi-sama will easily shatter your reality without breaking a sweat!"

Friendly but incredibly fierce arguments broke out in every single aisle.

Predictions were thrown back and forth like weapons, food vendors scrambled through the stairs throwing wrapped snacks to shouting buyers, and the sheer excitement of the continent's grandest event reached a fever pitch.

Down in the lower VIP seats of the Eldorian section, Kurt moved smoothly through the reserved aisle, looking for his designated spot.

Directly behind him was Sadie, who had taken her promise of eating stadium food to an absolute, ridiculous extreme. She was carrying a towering, precariously balanced mountain of snacks.

Trailing closely at Kurt's side was Hope. Her hands tightly clutched the edge of his blazer as her wide eyes darted around the overwhelming spectacle.

They slid into three spacious cushioned seats positioned perfectly at the very front, offering a completely unobstructed view of the magnificent arena floor.

"Oh, hell yeah!" Sadie sank into her seat with deep satisfaction. "Look at this! We get to have this kind of ridiculous VIP treatment! This row is normally reserved for people up top or those with a hefty pouch!"

Hope hopped onto her own seat and dangled her tiny legs. Her eyes shone with pure wonder as she looked at the overwhelming cheers of people from every nation. "Wow! Kurt, look! It's so big! It's so nice being this close to the stage! Ahahaha!"

"Haha, yep. We have to thank Diana for that."

Directly above the center of the stadium, floating high up in the crisp blue sky, was a massive, shimmering gold holographic countdown clock that pulsed in the air. The giant runes displayed that they had just under thirty minutes until the opening ceremony.

Thud!

Suddenly, without a single word of warning, the empty seat to Kurt's right was occupied.

A small figure clad in incredibly lavish white-and-gold religious robes – complete with an oversized holy hood – plopped down right next to him.

The figure slid her hood back with a cheerful motion, revealing a youthful, blindingly bright face framed by soft golden curls and vibrant, sparkling blue eyes.

Smiling brightly, she turned to face Kurt, "Hi there! Kurt Rossana, right?" she greeted happily, her voice carrying an incredibly pure ring to it. "It is so nice to finally meet you in person!"

"... Uhm. Hello there. And who might you be, little lady?"

Before the girl could answer, Sadie glanced over, and the box of fried potato chips she was holding slipped right out of her hands, spilling onto the floor.

Her jaw dropped and with a trembling finger, she pointed at the golden-haired girl.

"S-S-S-Saintess?! Saintess Christy Donna?!"

The moment Sadie's panicked exclamation cut through the immediate seating behind them, the surrounding Eldorian spectators froze.

Necks snapped around, eyes locked onto the front row, and within three seconds, a massive, deafening shockwave of pure pandemonium erupted through the southern stands.

"IT'S THE SAINTESS!!!"

"PRAISE BE THE SAINTESS!!!"

"I CAN FEEL THE DIVINE ENERGY IN THE AIR!!"

The crowd above them went absolutely wild, jumping out of their seats, waving their flags in a frantic frenzy, utterly ecstatic over the fact that the literal beacon of the Holy Church was sitting so close to them.

Christy giggled softly at the explosive reaction, turning to wave a dainty, jeweled hand up at the roaring stands.

"It’s only natural for me to sit here!" she shouted back to the crowd with a charming grin. "Eldoria is the beautiful host of this year’s tournament, after all! Your spirit is unmatched!"

"""YEEAAHHH!!!!"""

The crowd lost its collective mind, roaring with a fierce, proud patriotism that shook the banners.

Christy turned back to Kurt, her small shoulders shaking as she let out a distinctly smug and self-satisfied laugh, clearly enjoying her immense popularity.

"Well, look at you go." Kurt smiled. "I’m sitting next to a celebrity. Though I’ve gotta say, you’re still just a kid, no? You look no older than twelve."

Christy’s smug expression instantly vanished into a comical, deeply offended pout.

She crossed her arms over her lavish holy robes, puffing out her cheeks in frustration. "I am sixteen! ...in two months! Although I’m a bit short, I still am a fully matured Saintess, thank you very much!"

The massive magical projection screens scattered around the stadium – which had automatically zoomed in on her face the moment she sat down – displayed her dramatic pout to the entire coliseum. The entire stadium lost its mind at how overwhelmingly cute she was acting.

"Alright, sixteen, got it. Joking aside, I’m also glad I could finally meet you, Christy." Kurt bowed his head slightly toward her. "I wanted to formally thank you. For saving my life back when I was poisoned then."

"Oh, no, no! Please, there’s no need for that. I hardly did anything at all. When Diana brought you to me, for some reason the poison was already cured, and your vitality had already pulled you out of critical danger. All I did was give you a little bit of basic healing mana to close up the flesh of the wound. Any healer could’ve done that–"

"CHRISTY DONNA!"

"Eeeeek!"

An incredibly stern voice suddenly boomed through the air from the top of the aisle stairs. The young Saintess violently flinched, her golden curls bouncing as her eyes widened in pure panic.

"Oh no... Granny found me," she whispered in horror.

Without a shred of dignity, the Holy Saintess of Eden instantly slid off her plush seat and dove downward, hiding her entire body completely behind Kurt's knees, effectively using him as a human shield.

Marching down the stone steps with a rigid, unyielding posture was Archbishop Gloria. Her holy robes were impeccably neat, and her face was set in a glare of terrifying discipline.

She stopped right at the row, staring down at the empty seat, then glared at Kurt's knees.

"Christy, get up this instant! What on earth do you think you are doing?! You are the Holy Saintess! You are supposed to be seated at your designated royal balcony alongside his Holiness the Pope and the King!"

Christy peeked her head out from behind Kurt's leg, looking up at the archbishop with a stubborn, pleading pout.

"But Granny! The Pope and Maxy are sitting way too high up in that boring booth! It's completely isolated and away from all the fun action! I don't want to sit up there. I want to sit down here with my new friends and watch the matches from up close!"

"New friends?" Gloria's eyes narrowed.

Slowly, her discerning eyes shifted over, moving from the still wide-eyed Sadie, then the little maid, Hope, who smiled looking completely lost, and finally locking directly onto the single-eyed person sitting calmly in the center of the row.

Kurt, completely unbothered by the terrifying pressure of the archbishop, simply raised a hand and flashed her a casual, relaxed wave. "Hi there."

Gloria stared at him for a long, silent moment.

The cold, disciplinary mask on her face suddenly softened into an expression of quiet solemnity. To the absolute shock of everyone watching, the archbishop slowly closed her eyes and offered Kurt a deeply respectful bow.

"Thank you, Kurt Rossana," Gloria said, her voice carrying a rare, emotional vulnerability. "Thank you for saving the innocent women and children from the corruption of Bishop Tobias. The Church owes you a debt that cannot be easily repaid."

"Whoa! There’s absolutely no need to bow, ma’am. I was just doing what anyone else would have done in that situation."

Gloria straightened up with a faint, knowing glint in her eyes as she murmured softly, "I somehow highly doubt that."

Sensing a weakness in her guardian’s defenses, Christy quickly scrambled up from the floor. She lunged forward and grabbed Gloria’s hands, looking up at her with the ultimate, weaponized puppy-dog eyes.

"Please, Granny! Pretty please let me stay here! If you’re so worried about my safety, you can just sit right here with us! Look at the seats, they’re so comfy!"

"No. You’re coming with me."

"But look at the people, Granny!" Christy turned her head toward the thousands of Eldorian spectators who were watching them with the pinnacle of sadness. "Don’t force me to leave... You’ll break thousands of hearts..."

Gloria reluctantly turned her gaze up toward the massive stands. To her horror, almost every single one of the thousands of Eldorian students and citizens had all copied Christy’s expression – wide, exaggerated puppy-dog eyes that stared straight down at her in a hilarious, synchronised plea.

"Haaaa.... Fine... you little menace. I will go speak with his Holiness to see if it is acceptable for you to remain here."

"""YEEAAAHHHH!!!!"""

The moment Gloria turned around to walk up the stairs, the entire stadium erupted into a victorious roar.

Christy let out a triumphant cheer, jumping up onto her seat and throwing out a double peace sign toward the crowd with a blinding, ecstatic smile.

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High above the roaring stadium, nestled within the architectural apex of the coliseum, was the private VIP booth. The atmosphere was quieter, refined, and heavily guarded by elite knights and paladins.

Sitting in a grand, velvet-lined throne, the Pope let out a soft, hearty chuckle, his wrinkled hands resting on his golden staff as he watched Christy’s double-peace sign on the private viewing display.

"Haha... how wonderfully lively that child is. She carries the light of the heavens, yet she behaves like a stray bird."

Sitting directly to his left was the ruler of Eldoria, King Maxwell Dorothy.

The King wore a dark crimson military uniform adorned with dozens of medals, his sharp golden eyes fixed firmly on the lower decks. Beneath his wavy dark blue hair, his gaze drifted past the cheering Saintess, locking securely onto the figure sitting right beside her.

"It seems that wherever there is noise and chaos in this capital, Kurt Rossana is always found right at the epicenter," the King remarked, his deep, authoritative voice echoing in the private room.

"Ah... so that is the young man? Kurt Rossana. The one the reports speak of. I have yet to formally extend my gratitude to him for his immense contributions – capturing numerous zealots, resolving the dark incident involving Bishop Tobias, and ensuring the safety of our kingdom’s children."

"Hmph. Save your thanks for after the tournament. Right now, the focus of this world should be entirely on the next generation and this grand event."

"Haha. Fair enough, Maxwell. Tell me, who do you believe will take home this year’s grand championship trophy?"

"Is that even a question? Obviously, Eldoria will claim the prize. Our prodigies are unmatched."

"Perhaps. But if I were a betting man... my coin would be on the Myrian’s. I heard they brought a storm with them."

Suddenly, the ambient light in the coliseum shifted.

The massive golden holographic countdown clock floating in the center of the sky began to pulse violently, turning a vibrant crimson. The numbers hit the final ten seconds.

Instantly, the entire coliseum and whole world joined together into a single, earth-shaking, unified roar, counting down the final moments before glory.

"""TEN!"""

"""NINE!"""

"""EIGHT!"""

Chapter 182 - Convergence

"""SEVEN!"""

The roar didn't just vibrate within the stone walls of the coliseum; it rippled outward across the entirety of the capital.

The Adventurer's Guild, where hundreds of mercenaries, rugged vanguard fighters, and veterans slammed their mugs of ale onto the wooden tables. They threw their fists into the air, screaming the number on the massive projection hovering over the guild's central hall.

"""SIX!"""

Down at Eldoria's sprawling city square, thousands of citizens who couldn't secure a ticket to the main event stood shoulder-to-shoulder, packing the plaza to its fullest capacity. Craning their necks upward, their eyes reflecting the massive holographic screens casting a warm light over the fountains.

"""FIVE!""" The Triceans of the northern arena stands roared.

"""FOUR!""" The Myrians of the eastern stands roared.

"""THREE!""" The Eldorians of the southern stands roared.

""TWO!""

Sadie threw her hands up and roared. Beside her, Hope stood on her seat and pumped her tiny fists wildly in the air as she mimicked Sadie with a high-pitched, ecstatic squeal.

"""ONE!"""

Kurt and Christy roared, with the young Saintess nearly falling off her seat as she yelled the final digit with everything she had.

"""ZERO!""" The world completely ruptured.

The entire coliseum burst into a madhouse of cheers, screams, and triumphant brass horns.

Simultaneously, hundreds of cannons positioned along the outer rim of the stadium fired inward. A majestic shower of multicolored confetti rained down from the air, accompanied by a rapid-fire barrage of fireworks that lit up the crisp morning sky in mesmerising streaks of crimson, gold, and sapphire.

["GOOOOD MORNING, WORLD!"]

A magically amplified, incredibly charismatic voice resonated throughout every single corner of the stadium, effortlessly cutting through the deafening thunder of the crowd.

["Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, mages, and warriors, to the opening ceremony of the International Grand Tournament! I am your main host for this weekend-long festival of blood, sweat, and magic – Commentator Ken! And let me tell you, the energy today is totally off the charts! In fact, I wanna hear it again! Everybody make some noise!"]

"""YEEAAAHHHH!!!!"""

["Alright! Now, for an event this important, I obviously couldn't handle the broadcasting booth alone. Today, I have the honor and privilege of sharing this booth with a very special, highly distinguished co-commentator.

She has just returned from her high-level diplomatic tour across the western seas – please give a roaring welcome home to the First Princess of Eldoria, Faye Dorothy!"]

The projection screens immediately shifted, displaying a close-up view of the woman sitting beside him.

Faye Dorothy was a vision of striking, regal beauty and martial prowess. She possessed long, dark blue hair tied back into a wavy, high ponytail that cascaded down her back, and her golden eyes flashed with a lively, unyielding vigor. She was dressed in a pristine white, blue, and silver military uniform that accentuated her sharp posture.

["Hello, Eldoria! I, Faye Dorothy, have returned home!"]

The Eldorian crowd went absolutely feral. Students screamed her name, soldiers saluted the screens, and the sheer joy of having their beloved warrior princess back home sent the southern stands into a temporary state of ecstatic chaos.

["Ahahaha! Let’s show these international guests how we fight!"]

Up in the private royal VIP booth, the Pope let out an amused chuckle, looking over at the sovereign sitting beside him.

"Hoho... a lively girl, indeed. Tell me, Maxwell, did you know your eldest daughter was going to take up the commentator’s quill today?"

"No. The brat hasn’t even reported to the throne room to declare her return yet. I suppose I should have guessed she would pull a stunt like this the moment she crossed the border."

Down in the booth, Commentator Ken wiped a mock tear from his eye. ["Thank you, Your Highness, for that incredibly lively and patriotic introduction! Now, folks, tighten your seatbelts and ready your vocal cords one more time.

To officially open the stage and welcome our contestants, please cast your eyes to the dead center of the arena floor as I introduce the beautiful, the lethal, the Crimson Flash and Principal of Future Academy herself – Principal Diana Valentine!"]

CLANG!

A blinding streak of dark light descended from the heavens like a falling star, striking the exact center of the stone arena stage.

The impact left a shockwave of wind that rippled across the ground, and as the dust cleared instantly, a long, elegantly crafted crimson odachi sword stood lodged deep into the solid stone floor.

A split second later, a brilliant burst of displacement mana flared directly beside the hilt. In a flash of crimson sparks, the air around the sword cracked and opened up.

Seemingly out of thin air, Diana walked out, whipping her long platinum hair around her shoulders as her crimson eyes scanned the stands with a cool, effortless authority that radiated power.

Then, she smiled.

"""YEEAAAHHHH!!!"""

The crowd completely lost its mind.

The overwhelming presence of the legendary Crimson Flash sent a wave of mania through the tiers. In the mid-level stands, several over-emotional students literally fainted into their friends' arms from pure excitement. The old and crippled miraculously rose to their feet and leaned over the railings. Nearly the entire colosseum screamed declarations of eternal love at the top of their lungs as they watched her smiling face.

"Bossman, look! Look at her!" Sadie gripped Kurt's shoulder and shook him violently back and forth. "That was the coolest entrance in the history of entrances! Oh my goddess, she is so amazing!"

Kurt could only let out a heartfelt laugh at the utter absurdity of the reaction. Down on the arena, as if sensing his gaze through the thousands of spectators, Diana subtly turned her head. Her crimson eyes locked directly onto Kurt's position in the front row, and a small, incredibly soft, and private smile graced her lips for a fleeting second.

"She looked at me! The principal just smiled directly at me!" a third-year student screamed, grabbing his chest.

"Are you blind?! She was clearly looking at me! My hair is crimson, she loves it!" another roared back.

Meanwhile, seated high above the chaotic crowd in a luxurious private booth reserved for the high aristocracy, the members of the continent's most powerful houses sat together.

On one side sat the Valentine House – Reuben, Julianne, and their stoic personal butler.

Sitting right beside them were the heads of the Herst House – Everette, his elegant mother, his stern father, and their personal head maid.

Everette's mother and father let out soft, dignified laughs, thoroughly amused by the display. Everette himself sat with a wide, starstruck smile plastered across his face as he watched Diana on the screen.

"Ah... beautiful as always. That is my future wife right there. Just look at that grace."

Julianne's fingers tightened around the fabric of her dress, her jaw tensing slightly at Everette's comment, though she kept her composure. Beside her, Reuben remained entirely motionless. His cold, unreadable eyes fixed on his daughter down on the arena floor, offering no reaction to her grand entrance.

Back to her, Diana slowly raised her right hand. The simple, elegant gesture carried a subtle ripple of authority that silenced the entire coliseum cheers within seconds.

"Thank you all for such a lively, heartwarming welcome," her amplified voice resonated beautifully through the arena. "But I must ask you to save your loudest, most ferocious cheers for the true stars of this event."

She took a slow step forward, her crimson cloak billowing slightly in the breeze.

"Once every four years, a miracle occurs on these grounds. The finest, most exceptionally talented students from every corner of the world gather in one singular spot. They have trained through blood, sweat, and tears, pushing past their limits to stand before you today.

They are here to duke it out, to test their mettle, and to see who among them will take home the grand victory – and earn the bragging rights to call themselves the best rising star this world has to offer.

Now, let us not waste another precious second. Representatives... take the stage!"

The crowd erupted into a fresh wave of cheers as the tournament anthems began to blare from the stadium arrays.

"First up," Diana announced, pointing toward the western stadium tunnel. "Please give a lively welcome to Riverton's finest – Crossroad Academy!"

An upbeat march filled with brass instruments and rhythmic drums echoed through the air.

Out of the dark tunnel emerged a group of ten exceptionally sharp-looking students, dressed in sleek, dark brown uniforms, adjourned with some light armouring. Leading the pack with a confident, wide grin was their principal, Jack Axel.

The Riverton students marched out with high spirits as their home crowd showered them with praise and encouragement, before taking their positions at the designated western side of the arena.

"Next," Diana's voice boomed, turning toward the northern tunnel. "Representing the heights of magical innovation – Tricea's Kirstenbell Academy!"

The Tricean crowd went absolutely wild, as a metallic anthem echoed throughout the stadium. Out walked their ten representatives, their uniforms lined with glowing, intricate magi-tech conduits. Leading them with a meticulously precise posture was their principal, Alaster Morgan.

As the students walked past the center stage, three familiar triplets – who had caused the hospitalisation of a Future Academy student, Dale Cooper – happened to glance toward Diana.

Diana leveled a sharp, suffocatingly cold glare directly at them. The triplets instantly flinched, their faces going pale as they vividly remembered the terror of what they had done and the power she possessed. The Tricean group quickly moved past, taking their stance at the northern side of the field.

"Now, a crowd favourite! From the east, masters of the ancient elements – Myria's Skyward Academy!"

A beautiful, traditional melody filled with flutes and string instruments resonated through the coliseum. The crowd lost its absolute mind as the ten Myrian representatives walked out, draped in dark military uniforms with a cape attached, and a dark sailor captain's hat. Leading them was their renowned principal, Chihara Mei.

The moment the cameras zoomed in on the group, the eastern stands erupted into a deafening roar of cheers for Izumi Ayako, who walked with a calm, stoic, and effortless grace. Beside her, her fellow representative Ryuuji, was practically glowing, waving both of his hands frantically toward the screaming crowd, absolutely loving the immense attention. They marched smoothly over to the eastern side of the arena.

"And finally," Diana smiled, her voice carrying an extra layer of pride that resonated deeply with the home crowd. "Representing our homeland – Eldoria's Future Academy!"

The entire coliseum threatened to collapse under the sheer volume of the explosion of sound that followed.

Out of the southern tunnel walked the final ten representatives, wearing a combat ready version of their well-known white uniforms.

At the very front of the group, walking with a perfectly cool and unbothered, was Emelie. Her silver-and-mint hair caught the sunlight beautifully. Directly behind her, Amber let out a quiet giggle, leaning slightly toward her friend. "Wow, Emelie, listen to them. They absolutely love you out here. You're like a goddess to these people."

Emelie didn't break her stride. Her expression remained professional and composed, though a faint, soft hum escaped her lips as she took her position at the southern side of the field, directly in front of the Eldorian section.

Down in the front row, Sadie leaned over the stone railing, cupping her hands around her mouth. "Good luck, Emelie!"

Beside her, Hope bounced wildly. "Emelie! You look so pretty! Go get ’em!"

Kurt simply leaned against the railing, catching Emelie’s eye from a few yards away, throwing her a highly amused smirk.

Rolling her eyes with a dramatic, fond sigh, a genuine, beautiful smile finally broke through Emelie’s stoic mask as she looked at her chaotic friends.

With all four factions standing tall on the outer rims of the massive stone arena, the stage was officially set. The finest young mages and warriors of the generation stood ready, and the true battle for victory was about to begin.