THORNS 183

Chapter 183 - Tension And Structure

Amidst Eldoria’s ten representatives, a certain young prince was practically vibrating with raw adrenaline.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man!" Maxwell Jr., with a wide grin plastered on his face as he looked at the scale of the crowd, bounced lightly in place while shaking his arms to loosen up his muscles. "You guys feel that? I am getting so freaking pumped right now! The people are going absolutely insane today!"

Standing right beside him, with an impeccably regal posture, was Princess Kiana. "Junior, please calm down and act accordingly. You are the prince of Eldoria. Have some decorum; the entire watching is watching us right now."

But her scolding does absolutely nothing to deter the crowd. The moment the projection screens zoom in on Junior’s handsome and energetic face, a massive cluster of noble ladies and female students in the upper Eldorian stands erupted into high-pitched shrieks.

"""Prince Maxwell! We love you!""" Several girls scream in unison.

"Show them what Eldoria’s finest can do, young lad!"

"We’re counting on you, Prince!"

Completely ignoring his sister’s stern lecture, Junior raised a hand and gave a charming, smooth little wave back to his adoring fans.

"""Kyaaaah~! Prince Maxwell!"""

Kiana’s temple throbbed and with a swift motion, she drove her elbow directly into her brother’s ribs, making the prince wheeze and stumble a half-step back.

Right when she then turned to glare at the female students in the crowd, her violet eyes suddenly locked onto a very specific figure sitting right at the front row.

"Hey, Princess Bubblegum. Good luck out there," Kurt smirked and gave her a friendly wave.

"Y-You–!"

The moment their gazes met, a blazing blush instantly exploded across Kiana's cheeks, as her mind flashed back to the intensely embarrassing and physically compromising encounter they had shared.

A jolt of phantom adrenaline shot through her body. Almost instinctively, her hands raced down to grab her own butt, her fingers tensing against her skirt as if trying to shield herself from an imaginary spank.

"Why is the princess holding her butt like that, Kurt?" Hope asked when watching the strange interaction.

"Pfft–hahaha! That's priceless! Our poor princess is traumatised!" Sadie, who knew exactly what happened between the two, completely lost it.

"Uh... well, Hope, you see... the tournament is a very big deal. Maybe she's just... really, really nervous. People do weird things when they have stage fright." Kurt made up a believable excuse.

"Oh! That makes sense. My tummy hurts when I'm nervous too. Poor princess..."

"Y-Yeah, haha." 'She must never know...'

While the Eldorian side was dealing with its own chaotic dynamics, a completely different, far more suffocating aura was brewing across the arena floor.

Over at the eastern side of the field, the Myrian representatives stood in a flawless, elegant line. At the front of their pack, Ayako's face was a mask of serene beauty, but her eyes were anything but peaceful.

She stared directly across the expanse arena floor and locked her gaze unyieldingly onto Emelie’s profile. A deep, predatory smile slowly stretched across her lips as her eyes gleamed with the thrill of a hunter tracking its ultimate prey.

Emelie, possessing a sharp instinct for danger, immediately felt the murderous gaze boring into the side of her face. She slowly turned her head and met Ayako’s chilling stare.

Instead of freezing or showing a single shred of intimidation, Emelie’s expression shifted into a cocky and defiant smirk. Without a single care for the seventy thousand people watching, or the royal families sitting in the VIP boxes, she raised her right hand and flipped Ayako the bird.

Ayako’s predatory smile only deepened at the blatant disrespect shown to her.

"That arrogant, Eldorian bitch!" The now free from jail Ryuuji growled. "How dare she disrespect the Izumi clan like that?! I’ll step out there right now and tear her–"

"Calm down, Ryuuji," Ayako cut through his rage, not bothering to look back at him since her eyes were still locked on Emelie. "Save your energy. All of our grievances, and all of our blood will be thoroughly settled on the arena floor soon enough. Let her have her fun for now."

"Hmph! Whatever..."

Meanwhile, on the western side of the arena, the representatives of Riverton’s Crossroad Academy were watching the intense silent exchange between Eldoria and Myria with growing irritation.

A striking young woman with deeply tanned skin, a fiercely athletic build, and vibrant, fiery red hair tied into a topknot, glared at the two factions while tapping her foot violently against the stone floor.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now? Look at those pretentious bastards. Eldoria and Myria are completely ignoring us! They’re treating this entire international stage like it’s their own private playground!"

"Please calm down, Captain." A young man possessing a calm, entirely stoic demeanor, gently held a hand on her shoulder.

His most striking feature was his hair, which was perfectly split down the middle – half pitch black, half snow white. "We will look like uncoordinated fools if you, our official leader, lose your composure over a few petty glances. Please, just wait for the tournament to begin."

The red-haired woman turned her glares toward him, but his grip remained completely unyielding.

"There, on the field, is where we will speak," he continued calmly. "We will systematically dismantle their prodigies one by one. We will prove to the entire world, and to those arrogant fools, that Riverton is a nation they should have never, ever ignored."

After staring at him for a second, the red head let out an aggressive huff and slapped his hand off her shoulder. "Fine. Like you, I'll be calm. For now..."

Over on the northern side, the atmosphere within Tricea's Kirstenbell Academy is far more brooding. Leading the group was a tall, slender young man who exudes an aura of eccentric brilliance.

He possessed a thick, curly afro, a sharp pair of wire-rimmed specs, and an impressive array of silver earrings lining the entirety of both his ears. Ignoring the tension going around, he was busy adjusting a small, glowing magi-tech gauntlet on his forearm. That was, until his eyes glanced backward at the triplets who were still visibly sweating.

"What's the matter with you three? You've been fidgeting ever since we stepped foot in the arena. Don't tell me you're actually getting stage fright?"

"N-No! Of course not!" The eldest of the three spoke up. "We're just... we're just anxious to get out there and show the world the power of Tricea's latest magically engineered combat modules! It's just adrenaline, nothing more!"

"Hm. I certainly hope so. Stay focused, all of you. If you stumble because of a lack of nerve, I will personally dismantle your armor piece by piece. Clear?"

"""C-Crystal clear!""" the three squeaked out in unison, standing perfectly at attention.

With all four factions finally settled into their respective corners of the massive, square arena floor, the atmosphere reached a state of breathless anticipation.

"Now that all of our esteemed participants have taken their rightful places on the grand stage, I will begin to explain the rules that this international tournament will strictly follow, as well as the overall structure of the brackets," Diana announced.

"The rules? It is quite simple, really. There are absolutely no rules, other than a strict prohibition of external interference from anyone."

A murmur of nervous excitement rippled through the stands.

"This is a true test of martial prowess and magical survival," Diana continued. "A round will only conclude once the opposition is entirely incapacitated, rendered physically unable to move, or if they verbally and clearly give up their right to fight."

She took a slow breath and focused her gaze over to the representatives.

"Now for the structure of the event. As you know, the tournament will be spread across three days. Firstly, Day 1, which is today, will be appropriately dubbed: The Eliminator Phase.

"How it works is:

"- 10 Group Matches: 10 separate fatal-four-way matches are going to be held.

"- Each match features exactly 1 fighter from each faction.

"Scoring:

"- Winning a match earns that representative's faction 2 points.

"- Placing second – being the last one eliminated before the winner – earns 1 point.

"- Third and last place gives you no points.

"At the end of Day 1, the points are tallied. The two factions with the lowest total scores are entirely eliminated from the tournament. Resulting in four factions becoming two.

"Next, Day 2 dubbed: The War Phase.

"The two surviving factions face off in a massive, continuous Tag-Team Elimination Gauntlet to determine who sends their best fighter to the finals.

"How it works is:

"- Both factions order their 10 remaining fighters from 1 to 10.

"- Fighter #1 from Faction A fights Fighter #1 from Faction B.

"- The winner of the match stays in the ring but carries over any fatigue/damage. The losing faction sends out their next fighter.

"- This continues until one faction has all 10 of their fighters eliminated.

"The last standing fighter in the ring wins the day for their faction. However, to make Day 3 a true 1v1, we need an opponent. That's where the MVP of the losing faction comes in, which is the individual from the losing side who secured the most knockouts during the gauntlet.

"By the end of day two, 20 fighters are narrowed down to 2 Finalists – representing the dominant faction and the ultimate underdog.

"Finally, Day 3. The Grand Finale.

"The ultimate showdown. No interference, no tag-teams, just pure skill. A traditional 1v1 bout where the undefeated champion of the winning faction takes on the battle-hardened MVP of the runner-up faction. Unlimited time, until knockout or submission. One definitive champion will bring the ultimate glory to their faction!"

""""YEAAAHHHH!!!""""

"I have laid the foundation. I will now give the reins back to our hosts, Commentator Ken and Princess Faye. Good luck to all participants and let the grand tournament begin!"

SHWOOSH!

With a sudden, brilliant flash of crimson trails, Diana teleported away from the center field, reappearing instantly before the Saintess with a sharp glare and cold smile.

"Excuse me, Saintess Christy. I believe you are sitting in my seat. Do you mind moving over one space?"

"O-Of course! I was just keeping this seat warm for you, ahahaha..." Christy quickly scrambled to sit next to Gloria, who had decided to stay with her after gaining permission from the pope.

"Thank you." Diana plopped down next to Kurt.

"Bosslady, you were so cool! Ten outta ten!" Sadie threw a thumbs up her way.

"Yes, Ms. Valentine! Very cool!" Hope threw two thumbs up.

"Hehehe. Thank you, Sadie, Hope."

Kurt nodded proudly at Diana and held her hand, causing her to blush and squeeze back tightly. They then turned their attention back to the arena.

["Thank you, Principal Valentine, for that incredibly clear and beautifully terrifying explanation of the rules!"] Commentator Ken's voice boomed once again, his excitement reaching an all-time high.

["Indeed!"] Faye chimed in, ["No rules means no holding back! This is where true warriors are forged! Now, everyone, cast your eyes up to the central projection screens! It is time to announce the very first match of the grand tournament!"]

The massive holographic screens floating high in the sky instantly shifted.

Four different boxes, each labelled by a nation appeared on the screen, spinning and shuffling all the representatives' images at an incredibly high speed.

["Alright, everyone! Let's get this party started!"] Commentator Ken screamed into his mic,

["Count down from three with us to stop the shuffle! Ready?!]

The entire coliseum and world joined in on a collective roar that shook the very clouds from the sky.

"""THREE!"""

"""TWO!"""

"""ONE!"""

The shuffle slowed down to a crawl, revealing the first four participants about to lock into place.

Chapter 184 - Opening Matches

["AND THE RESULTS ARE...!"] Commentator Ken's voice boomed over the speakers, his microphone practically crackling with energy as the shuffle came to a stop.

["Well, would you look at that, ladies and gentlemen! We are starting off with an absolute banger! Representing Myria: Shiki Kazuma! Representing Riverton: Bradley! Representing Tricea: Ava! And finally representing Eldoria: Emelie Herst!"]

"""YEEAAAHHH!!!"""

The Eldorian crowd, especially, went completely feral. The thunder of thousands of boots stamping against the stone steps created a pulsating vibration that rattled the glass of the VIP booths above.

"Kick their ass, Emelie!" Sadie cheered loudly from the front row. Hope was jumping so high her tiny maid headband flew right off her head, which Kurt caught easily and placed it back on her head.

The chosen contestants stayed in the arena while the others left for their designated seats near the front row of the stands. Four mages then stood at the corners of the outer arena area and activated an invisible barrier so that no civilian watching would be caught up in the crossfire.

This was it. The four participants stood at the far edge, nervously gauging and feeling out each other's strengths. One of them, however, was completely calm – almost bored.

["Look at that arrogance! Or should I say confidence!"] Princess Faye shouted into her mic. ["Unlike their others, Emelie isn't even drawing a weapon. She's just letting the atmospheric pressure of her opponents wash right over her. As expected of Future Academy's best!"]

Another crimson countdown materialised in the air above the arena floor, signalling the time for the match to start.

"""FIVE... FOUR... THREE... TWO... ONE!!!"

["LET THE SHOW BEGIN!!"]

Before anyone moved, an unspoken, silent agreement passed between the Tricean student Ava, the Myrian magician Kazuma, and Riverton’s heavy-hitter Bradley. They knew the terrifying reputation of Eldoria’s top prodigy.

Simultaneously, all three of them turned their aggression entirely toward Emelie, intending to eliminate the biggest threat on the board first.

["What’s this!? A three-way alliance right out of the gate!"] Commentator Ken yelled. ["They are teaming up on the Eldorian star!"]

["Teaming up to take out the big bad? Smart tactical decision."] Faye added. [" Let’s hope this doesn’t backfire on them."]

Ava’s magi-tech gauntlets hissed with steam, unleashing a barrage of tracking homing missiles that streaked through the air, painting trails of white smoke. At the same time, Kazuma summoned three massive pillars of twisting fire from the stone floor to trap her flinging paths. Bradley charged forward like a runaway freight train, his massive iron-reinforced shield raised high, intending to shatter her defenses.

"Same old, same old..." Emelie muttered dryly.

Just as the missiles, the flames, and the heavy shield were an inch from making contact, her green eyes and hair glowed. An invisible dome of telekinetic force erupted from her body.

BOOM!

The incoming homing exploded, the twisting flames collided and Bradley’s impenetrable charge all hit their target. Except, they didn’t.

["Incredible!"] Faye cheered, slamming her fist on the announcer’s table. ["A perfect, omnidirectional barrier from Emelie and she didn’t even flinch!"]

"My turn," Emelie said softly.

With a casual flick of her wrist, she gripped the air.

The huge, three-hundred-pound Bradley was suddenly hoisted off his feet by an unseen force, his legs flailing wildly in the air. Emelie then swung her arm to the left, and Rivertonian was hurled across the arena like a ragdoll, crashing directly into the Myrian sorcerer Kazuma. The two went down in a tangled, groaning heap of bruised limbs and shattered armor.

Feeling panicked, Ava rapidly adjusted her gauntlets, trying to lock onto Emelie for another round of missiles, but Emelie was already gone.

In a blur of speed accelerated by her own kinetic force, Emelie appeared directly in front of her. Before the Tricean could scream, Emelie placed a gentle palm against the magi-tech's chest piece.

A concentrated blast of kinetic energy shattered the mechanical core of her armor, destroying it in the process. The Tricean girl flew backward, sliding at least fifty feet across the stone before stopping and passing out cold.

["ONE DOWN!"] Ken screamed frantically. ["Ava is incapacitated!"]

Bradley scrambled to his feet and charged again at her in roaring in frustration, swinging his massive shield in a desperate, wide arc.

Emelie simply caught the edge of the reinforced iron with two fingers, stopping his momentum instantly. Terror shaped the Rivertonian's face.

"Bye-bye," Emelie murmured.

She twisted her wrist, ripping the shield effortlessly out of his grip, and used the flat of his own weapon to smack him squarely across the chest.

BAM!

The amplified force of her strike sent Bradley flying all out of the stone arena boundary, crashing hard into the protective barrier.

Kazuma, the last man standing, tried to cast a frenzied, high-tier binding spell, his hands glowing with golden runes. But Emelie merely raised her hand, clenching her fist. The air around Kazuma constricted violently, knocking the wind straight out of his lungs and shattering his focus. He fell to his knees, gasping for air, and weakly raised his hand.

"I... I yiel–!"

"Shut up."

THWACK!

Emelie swatted her to the hand to the right, and an invisible force struck the Myrian heavily across his entire body, sending him flying - and crashing – into the unconscious Bradley.

"""".....""""

"""""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!!"""""

["A-AND THAT IS IT!"] Commentator Ken’s voice was completely drowned out by the deafening explosion of cheers from the Eldorian stands.

["In less than two minutes, Emelie Herst completely decimated her competition! What a terrifying display of absolute dominance!"]

The southern stands were a sea of flying flags and wild cheers. Sadie was practically gloating, shouting insults at the neighboring sections while Kurt offered Emelie a quiet, respectful nod as she walked back to the benches.

"Haha! That’s my sister!" Evertte pumped his fist forward. "The other didn’t stand a chance!"

["No time to catch your breath, folks!"] Princess Faye announced as the holographic screens began to spin once more. ["Let’s see who is stepping into the meat grinder next!"]

The names shuffled rapidly before locking in with a heavy chime: Nichole Firestar (Riverton) vs. Hana (Myria) vs. Victor Moor (Eldoria) vs. Hans (Tricea).

Down at the Eldorian bench, Victor – the student council vice president – stood up, stretching his broad shoulders and adjusted his specs.

Amber patted him on the back, giggling warmly. "Good luck out there, big guy! Don’t let Riverton’s Captain intimidate you."

Junior threw him a thumbs-up and grinned. "Show ’em that Eldoria muscle, vice prez!"

"Ha. Thank you all for the encouragement."

Across the field, the Riverton section was roaring with a fierce, aggressive energy.

The tanned, red-haired captain of Crossroad Academy, Nichole Firestar, let out a predatory grin, cracking her knuckles so loudly it sounded like small firecrackers going off.

"Bring home the glory, Captain! Crush those arrogant bastards!"

"Revenge for Bradley!"

"How lucky of you to let out some steam so early, huh captain?" The black and white haired student said calmly.

"Hahaha! This is gonna be good!" Nichole exclaimed.

The four participants marched onto the field, taking their positions. Nichole’s fiery eyes skipped right past the Myrian and Tricean students, locking instantly onto Victor.

["COUNT WITH US FOLKS! FIVE!"]

""""FOUR... THREE... TWO... ONE!!!""""

["MATCH START!"]

Nichole didn’t waste a single millisecond.

An explosion of crimson aura erupted from her boots, shattering the stone floor beneath her as she shot forward with her massive broadblade, heading straight for Victor.

["WHOA!"] Ken shouted. ["The Riverton Captain is going straight for the throat! She wants Eldorian blood!"]

Victor braced himself, covering his entire body in solid tungsten to boost his offense and defenses.

"Hmph! Bring it!" he grunted, throwing a shattering punch directly at the incoming red-head.

Grinning wildly, Nichole met his fist head-on with an aggressive swing of her blade, infused with an explosive coat of mana.

"Captain! She’s using mana-coating!"

"No!" The black and white haired Rivertonian panicked. "She’s trying to infuse her natural element into it! Is she an idiot!? She hasn’t even perfected it yet! If they clash, she’s gonna–!"

CLANG!

KABOOM!

The force of the impact shattered Victor’s armor into dust and the impact sent them both blasting backwards to the outward arena.

Both were sent crashing high onto the protective barrier and falling hard to the ground below.

"Haha... Howzat, four-eyes?" Nichole got back up in the arena with a limp.

Slowly walking back into the arena himself, Victor adjusted his glasses before wiping his bloody nose. "... How very crude of you, Firestar."

Meeting back in the middle, Victor tried attacking with another tungsten fist, but Nichole was faster. She spun on her heel and delivered a devastating crescent kick directly into the side of his ribs.

"Ngahh–!" Victor gasped, the wind thoroughly knocked out of him as he stumbled back.

Meanwhile, the Tricean student, Hans, tried to capitalize on the chaos, sniping Nichole from afar with a high-voltage lightning rifle. But Nichole’s reflexes were extremely monstrous given the height of her adrenaline.

BZZT—BANG!

She ducked beneath the electrical beam, grabbed the groaning Myrian student, Hana, who was trying to sneak up on her, and literally hurled her body directly into Hans.

"I’m not done yet!" Nichole jumped high and infused her blade with her incomplete mana coating again.

"TAKE THIS!"

SHING!

KABOOM!

Both students were sent flying onto the protective barrier, falling unconscious and in critical condition, whereas Nichole stopped her imminent crash by slamming her blade into the stone.

Victor, showing his immense resilience, roared as he lunged forward, trying to tackle the weakened red-head down. But Nichole wasn't done yet.

She slipped beneath his guard, grabbed his exposed waist, and executed a flawless, bone-shattering German suplex, planting Victor headfirst into the hard stone floor.

The stadium gasped as the ground cracked. Victor lay there, dazed and completely incapacitated, his eyes rolling back.

"""""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!"""""

"""RIVERTON!!! RIVERTON!!!"""

Nichole stood up and wiped the sweat from her brow. She didn't wave to her cheering Riverton crowd. Instead, she turned her head and glared directly at the Eldorian and Myrian benches. She pointed a fierce, bloodied finger directly at Emelie and Ayako.

"Listen to me, you arrogant, high-and-mighty snobs!" Nichole's voice echoed powerfully through the stadium, completely unamplified but carrying an intense rage.

"Riverton is not your damn background scenery! We are here to win, and we are not to be underestimated! I'm coming for both of your crowns!"

"""""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!"""""

"""RIVERTON!!! RIVERTON!!!"""

The Riverton stands erupted into an absolute frenzy of wild, chaotic cheers, loving the rebellion of their captain. Emelie simply raised an eyebrow as a slightly amused smirk played on her lips, while Ayako's smile remained entirely placid.

["Talk about a statement match!"] Commentator Ken yelled, sweating from the hype of the matches. ["The rivalry is boiling over! Let's see the next line-up!"]

The shuffle spun again, the runes flashing before locking down with a freezing, ominous chime: IzumiAyako (Myria) vs. Toby (Riverton) vs. Tristan (Tricea) vs. Zack (Eldoria).

The moment Ayako's face appeared on the giant screens, the eastern stands went into a state of near-religious ecstasy. The Myrian's chanted her family name in a synchronised, haunting rhythm that filled the entire coliseum with a heavy, chilling presence.

Down at the Eldorian bench, Zack – a laid-back student known for his dark magic – let out a long, miserable sigh. He pulled up his thick black scarf, covering half his face as he slouched his shoulders.

"Ugh... What a painful drag. Why did I have to get matched with the literal boss monster in the early stages?"

"Don't be a defeatist, Zack! You can do it!" Lily Mathers – the mother of the group – offered a gentle smile.

"Dammit! I'm so jealous you get to fight her!" Junior added. "Just do your best, Zack. We'll be cheering for you."

"Haaaa... Thanks for the vote of confidence, guys. I'll try not to die."

As the four contestants stepped onto the stage, a sudden, freezing chill swept through the entire coliseum.

The ambient temperature dropped so fast that the spectators in the front rows could literally see their own breath in the air. Hope shivered, cuddling closer to Kurt's side, and Kurt wrapped a fragment of his blazer around her shoulders, narrowing his gaze he watched Ayako step onto the arena floor with a graceful, almost ethereal stride.

["WITH ME FOLKS! FIVE!"]

""""FOUR... THREE... TWO... ONE!!!""""

["MATCH THREE, BEGIN!"]

The Riverton student Toby and the Tricean Tritsan immediately recognised the danger.

They both bolted backward, intending to keep their distance and form a ranged barrage. Tristan unleashed a stream of explosives from his gauntlets, while Toby threw a dozen explosive daggers infused with wind magic.

Ayako didn't draw her katana. She didn't even take her hands out of her long sleeves. She merely took a single, dainty step forward.

Snap.

A wave of frost erupted from her boot. The incoming explosives were instantly frozen mid-air, turning into a beautiful, harmless sculpture of solid ice before shattering into a million sparkling diamonds.

The explosive wind daggers were caught in a sudden blizzard, their kinetic energy completely neutralized as they dropped to the floor, encased in thick ice cubes.

["Unbelievable!"] Princess Faye shouted. ["And just like that, Izumi Ayako has made her presence known!"]

Ayako offered her opponents a soft condescending smile. She began to wander lazily across the arena, completely toying with them. Every time Tristan tried to run, a sudden spike of earth would erupt right beneath his boot, tripping him over. Every time Toby tried to throw a weapon, his fingers would instantly burn at the metal, making him yell in frustration.

She was treating two of the continent's finest prodigies like absolute toddlers in a playground.

Within a minute of psychological torture, both the Tricean and Riverton representatives were completely frozen up to their necks in beautiful, shimmering pillars of unbreakable ice, unable to move a single muscle.

[["And just like that, it's a 1v1!"] Commentator Ken yelled as the crowd leaned forward in their seats. ["It's down to Izumi Ayako and Eldoria's Zack!"]

Zack stood at the edge of the arena. He looked at the two frozen statues across the field, then looked at Ayako, who turned her sharp, predatory gaze directly onto him with eyes that gleamed in anticipation.

Zack stared at her for exactly three seconds. Then, with a slow motion, he raised his arms in a clear, unambiguous gesture of surrender.

"Yeah, absolutely not," Zack said, his voice muffled by his black scarf as he turned around and began walking off the stage. "I know when I'm beat. I value my limbs too much for this. I yield."

"""""....."""""

The entire coliseum was stunned into a brief silence before bursting into a mixture of laughter and roaring cheers.

["A complete, strategic surrender!"] Commentator Ken laughed. ["Zack chooses survival! And the victory goes to the undisputed Queen of Myria – Izumi Ayako!"]

"""YEEEAAAHHHHH!!!"""

The eastern stands went absolutely wild, their chants echoing through the sky as Ayako let out a soft giggle. Her eyes drifted toward Emelie as she smoothly walked off the field, the stage set for an even grander clash.