THORNS 185

Chapter 185 - The Show Must Go On

["– AND THAT'S THE MATCH FINISH FOR ROUND SIX!"] Commentator Ken's voice exploded through the stadium.

["What an overpowering display of dominance and pure grit! The winner of match six, representing Eldoria – Autumn Wingard!"]

"""""YEEEAAAAAHHHH!!!!"""""

The holographic screens caught the breathless figure of Autumn as she lowered back on the ground, her chest heaving as the ambient arena dust settled around her boots.

The moment she crossed the white boundary line back toward the Eldorian benches, a blurred figure rushed straight for her.

"Autumn!" Summer Wingard – who had lost her own match just two rounds prior – threw herself forward. Tears streamed down her face as she wrapped her arms tightly around Autumn's neck. "You did it! You actually did it!"

"Hahaha, I told you, didn't I? I told you I'd win this one to make up for your loss. Now stop crying, you're making an embarrassing scene in front of the whole world."

Up in the broadcasting booth, Princess Faye slammed her hands onto the console as her golden eyes flashed with unbridled excitement.

["A beautiful sisterly bond and an even more beautiful victory for our homeland! But the gears of the Grand Coliseum never stop turning, folks! Let's keep this momentum rolling. Bring up the next contestants!"]

The massive holographic display floating in the blue sky pulsed into motion, and with an audible chime, the random shuffle locked into place:

Match 7: Donovan (Riverton) vs. Yamada Ryuuji (Myria) vs. Gary (Eldoria) vs. Leon Finlay (Tricea).

["Participants, take your marks on the stone pit!"] Faye announced.

Down on the field, the representatives from Tricea, Myria, and Riverton stepped out from their respective groups, their eyes locked on the center stage.

Ryuuji was already cracking his knuckles with an arrogant sneer plastered across his face as his fiery mana began to spark around his ankles.

But as the seconds ticked by, the fourth contestant of the fatal four way still hadn't arrived.

At the front VIP section, Diana's crimson eyes narrowed and her posture grew incredibly rigid as a quiet anger began to bubble beneath the surface.

"Are you kidding me right now?" she murmured dangerously. "Did he seriously choose to not show up? Even after I explicitly gave him my word?"

"Diana? Something wrong?" Kurt asked, though he pretty much knew the deal.

"Rosie... The thing is, I have a highly problematic, borderline delinquent student named Austin. The way he's been conducting himself recently has been unacceptable, and I was fully prepared to hand him his expulsion papers.

"But Gary... Gary is Austin's closest friend, and a vital asset to our roster. He caught wind of the disciplinary action and explicitly threatened to walk away from the tournament if I expelled Austin. For the sake of the academy's standing, I refrained. I pocketed the papers. And yet... that boy still chooses to be a no-show..."

Down on the arena floor, the magical projection screens zoomed in on the Eldorian bench.

The atmosphere there was filled with worry. Amber was frantically speaking to her teammates when suddenly, Emelie stepped forward and whispered something directly into the president's ear.

Amber's eyes widened and her face hardened into an expression of grim acceptance.

["Uh-oh, folks. We're seeing some difficulties on the Eldorian sidelines."] Commentator Ken muttered, leaning into his microphone as the cameras tracked the exchange.

Amber looked up, her gaze locking directly with the hovering recording tag. With a solemn expression, she slowly shook her head side to side, signaling the broadcasting booth.

Gary was not coming.

["SHOCKING NEWS!"] Ken's voice boomed with genuine disbelief. [It's official! Eldoria's representative, Gary, has failed to appear on the battlefield! This is an unprecedented no-show on the grandest stage of them all!]

A tide of confused murmurs, disappointed groans, and angry shouting erupted through the southern stands. Eldorian fans threw their hands up in frustration, looking at the empty slot on the screen in absolute disbelief.

["Since Eldoria has officially failed to field their combatant for this round, they will suffer a forced forfeit. Eldoria receives exactly zero points for Match Seven."] Faye announced.

"Aaahahaha! Look at them!" Ryuuji threw his head back and burst into a loud, mocking laugh, pointing his finger directly at the Eldorian bench.

"The great Future Academy can't even keep track of their own pathetic fighters! What a bunch of miserable losers! Why don't you follow in the footsteps of your no-shower and just leave already!"

["The tournament must go on!"] Ken shouted, trying to salvage the energy of the arena. ["Factions, prepare for battle! Audience, count down the commencement with me! Let's go! FIVE!"]

The Myrian, Tricean and Riverton fans joined the countdown, but the southern Eldorian stands remained completely silent as a shroud of irritation hung over the home crowd.

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

["BEGIN!"]

The moment the signal was given, Donovan and one third of the Kirstenbell triplets, Leon Finlay, immediately lunged at each other. Their traditional and magically engineered weapon clashing in a flurry of sparks while completely ignoring Ryuuji's presence.

"HEY! WHO THE HELL SAID YOU COULD IGNORE ME?! IF THAT'S HOW IT'S GONNA BE, THEN DIE!"

Ryuuji slammed both of his palms directly into the stone floor. Suddenly, the entire floor violently buckled

Rumble–GUSHH!

Giant fissures tore through the solid stone and boiling, white-hot columns of liquid lava shot upward from the earth like a row of volcanic geysers.

The heat of Ryuuji magic forced the protective magical barriers to hiss and ripple. The Leon and Donovan were forced to break their clash, executing frantic, high-speed backward leaps to dodge the blistering torrents of molten rock.

"Are you kidding me?! Don't you dare dodge my magic!" Ryuuji roared, his hot-headed nature transforming into pure, destructive battlefield prowess.

What followed was a devastating, chaotic back-and-forth brawl.

While Ryuuji was an unbearable, loudmouthed arrogant brat outside the arena, his combat capabilities were undeniable. He moved like a living wildfire, weaving through the Leon's traps and blasting through Donovan's heavy rock-infused defenses with raw, high-output explosive sorcery.

He neutralized Leo with a direct lava blast that melted his weapons to slag, and cornered Donovan with a suffocating wall of ash before knocking him unconscious with a flamed fist to the jaw.

["AND IT'S OVER!"] Ken shouted as the dust cleared. ["Yamada Ryuuji takes the win with an absolute volcanic showcase!"]

The eastern Myrian stands erupted into a deafening cheer and Ryuuji stood dead center, completely soaking in the adoration. He puffed his chest out and walked back to his bench with a smug swagger.

"See that, Izumi-san? That's how a Yamada handles business. A flawless victory."

"Mmhm. A magnificent display, Ryuuji. You handled yourself perfectly." Ayako offered him a soft smile, her voice carrying a gentle yet patronizing warmth.

Oblivious to the fact, Ryuuji's chest puffed out even further, his face lighting up as he completely melted under her rare praise. He was feeling really good about himself.

["Keep those eyes glued to the sky, folks!"] Princess Faye's voice carried a sudden, intense jolt of personal energy. ["The shuffle for Match Eight is rolling right now!"]

The holographic shuffle spun at blinding speeds before grinding to a halt with a chime. The names locked in:

Match 8: Joseph (Riverton) vs. Nishiki (Myria) vs. Kiana Dorothy (Eldoria) vs. Ryan Sindelle (Tricea).

Down on the Eldorian bench, Junior immediately slapped his sister's shoulder with a face full of genuine pride. "Alright, Kiana! It's your turn! Go out there and show them what royal blood looks like! Don't hold back!"

Up in the broadcasting booth, Princess Faye completely lost her professional composure. She grabbed her microphone with both hands, leaning so far over the glass railing she was practically falling out.

["ALRIGHT, KIANA! THAT'S MY LITTLE SISTER RIGHT THERE! CRUSH THEM, KIKI! SHOW THE WHOLE WORLD THE GLORY OF THE DOROTHY LINEAGE! BIG SISTER IS WATCHING YOU!"]

Kiana closed her eyes as a deeply embarrassed sigh escaped her lips at her sister's amplified voice echoing across the colosseum. She tried her best to maintain a stoic, deadpan royal face, ignoring the teasing snickers of her teammates, but as she took her first step onto the stone pit, Kurt's voice cut clean through the noise.

"Hey, Princess Bubblegum! Don't let your sister down now! Give 'em hell!"

The sudden, casual cheer from the one man who had thoroughly broken something in her not too long ago, shattered her concentration.

A furious crimson blush instantly flared across Kiana's cheeks. She stumbled slightly on her stride, her violet eyes snapping toward Kurt's row with a mixture of intense embarrassment and sheer panic before she quickly looked away, forcing her posture back into a rigid, icy discipline.

"Ah... it seems it is finally time to see what the future rulers of Eldoria are capable of." The pope chuckled. "The young princess possesses a terrifying amount of latent mana, no?"

King Maxwell didn't say a single word. He sat completely motionless on his throne as his sharp, calculating golden eyes fixed firmly on his youngest daughter down on the field. His expression was an unreadable mask of absolute sovereign expectation.

On the northern side of the field, the Tricean captain – the tall young man with the thick, curly afro, wire-rimmed specs, and an array of silver earrings, Ryan Sindelle – slowly walked onto the stone pit.

He lazily scratched his afro, letting out a relaxed sigh. "Man... talk about an inconvenience. I'm going to look like such an evil bastard when I beat a beautiful princess in front of her own home crowd. The public relations department is going to hate me, that's for sure."

"You speak with confidence for someone who has yet to witness my magic, Sindelle. I suggest you focus on the reality in front of you."

"Yeah, yeah..."

["EVERYONE! WITH ME! FIVE!!"]

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

["LET THE EIGHTH MATCH BEGIN!!"]

Chapter 186 - Dominant Showing

"I apologise to the audience," Kiana said softly, her voice carrying a chilling echo. "But I have no desire to waste unnecessary time in this match. I am going all out from the very get-go."

Ryan's eyes sharpened behind his specs. Sensing a massive, unnatural spike in atmospheric pressure, he quickly leapt away from her range.

However, the other representatives – Nishiki and Joseph – were eager to make a name for themselves by taking down the princess. They lunged directly toward her from both flanks, weapons drawn, intending to interrupt her before she could set off whatever she was about to.

But they were already too late.

Kiana gently closed her eyes, took a deep, freezing breath and whispered two words to herself:

"Absolute Zero."

Instantly, her deep blue hair underwent an unnatural transformation, lightening into a glowing icy sapphire. High above her head, the ambient moisture in the air condensed rapidly, beginning to form the ethereal, jagged outline of a majestic ice crown – though it remained fractured and incomplete.

WHOOSH!

A cataclysmic wave of below-freezing mana exploded from her body in an omnidirectional shockwave.

In seconds, a blinding blizzard of icy death engulfed the entire arena floor.

A black cloud of icy fog violently slammed into the reinforced magical barrier nearest to her, and even though the barrier held, preventing the fog from breaking through into the crowd, the supernatural temperature drop did manage to bleed through.

Thousands of spectators shivered as misty breaths began to form from their mouths. Hope buried her face into Kurt's blazer, whimpering from the sudden chill, while Sadie hugged herself and chattered her teeth loudly.

Once the fog froze over the whole arena and finally cleared a few seconds later, the floor was revealed. And it was a landscape of pure, unmitigated horror.

The entire stone pit had been transformed into a frozen wasteland of solid, jagged glaciers. Nishiki and Joseph didn't even have the chance to scream; they stood completely frozen solid inside two thick blocks of unbreakable ice with their expressions locked in a state of terror.

["IN-INCREDIBLE!"] Commentator Ken chattered into the mic. ["In a single attack, Princess Kiana has beaten the competition–!"]

["Wait!"] Faye cut in. ["Look at the center stage! The match isn't over!"]

CRACK!

Right at the edge of the northern glacier, a series of bright red, glowing thermal lines cut through the thick ice.

SHATTER!

With an explosive blast, a sleek, terrifyingly advanced piece of machinery broke free from the frozen prison.

A pitch-black magically engineered armored suit landed heavily on the icy floor. The armor plates shifted in place, and behind the glowing crimson visor of the helmet, the smooth voice of Ryan Sindelle echoed out.

"Man... that was a close one. I really wanted to save this prototype suit for the big dogs later in the tournament. But it looks like I'd better use it right now, or I'm going to get turned into a popsicle."

["LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! JUST AS PRINCESS FAYE SAID! THE FIGHT IS NOT OVER! Tricea's captain has unveiled a new, next-generation magi-tech exoskeleton suit! What on earth is this mechanical monstrosity?!"]

"This is the apex of Tricean innovation," Ryan proclaimed as the thrusters beneath his feet roared, shooting him forward like a literal railgun.

"Not so fast!"

Kiana unleashed a relentless barrage of towering ice spears, freezing vortexes, and literal glaciers. But the black mechanical suit was a masterpiece of battlefield engineering.

Hiss!

The suit's gauntlets projected high-density plasma blades that sliced through Kiana's unbreakable ice spears as if they were warm butter.

Utilising the suit's advanced multi-element integration – his thrusters burned with fire mana to neutralise her frost, while his armor plates crackled with lightning to accelerate his speed beyond the human eye's ability to track.

Kiana movements, albeit graceful, became increasingly desperate. All while she pushed her mana reserves to its absolute limits, the jagged ice crown hovering above her head was getting fuller and fuller, taking a proper, completed shape.

"No... no, no, no! Stop it, Kiana!" Junior began to panic. "That crown... If that crown is completed, she'll lose all control and her mana veins will completely rupture from the inside out!"

BOOM!

"Just give up, Princess!" Ryan's voice boomed through his crimson visor as he effortlessly deflected another wave of ice, delivering a devastating punch straight through Kiana's defensive wall.

CRACK–SHATTER!

The ice wall shattered, and Kiana was sent skidding backward across the ice, a trail of fresh blood leaking from the corner of her lips.

"You're not looking so good, Princess! Your vitals are dropping into the red zone! Just give up!"

"N-Never..."

"Then whatever happens next is all on you."

.....

THWACK!

"G-Gah!"

The beatdown that followed was nothing short of brutal. The advanced suit was simply too fast, too versatile, and completely immune to her environmental freezing.

Ryan systematically dismantled her defenses, delivering heavy strikes that broke through her ice armor and sending her crashing into the frozen ground time and time again.

Yet, every single time, Kiana forced herself back up, whipping her lightened sapphire hair around her bruised face. She refused to utter the words of surrender.

Up in the stands, the Eldorian crowd fell into a painful silence. Many couldn't even bear to watch their beloved youngest princess being beaten this gruesomely on their own home turf.

High above in the broadcasting booth, Princess Faye was quiet as well. Her eyes bled with a mixture of intense restraint and agonising sisterly heartbreak.

The ice crown above Kiana's head was now ninety percent complete, pulsing with a volatile light that threatened to destroy her entire being. She began to shiver and her eyes slowly rolled back as her consciousness flickered.

Ryan shot forward one final time. "It's over, Princess!"

"GET THE HELL AWAY FROM MY SISTER!"

BOOM!

The protective barrier shattered from the inside-out.

Junior, completely losing his mind from rage, broke through the arena. In a flash, he appeared at Kiana's side and drove his shoulder directly into the side of Ryan's advanced suit.

"What the–!"

BANG!

The force of Junior’s bash sent the armor flying backward, skidding fifty feet across the shattered glaciers before Ryan could stabilize his thrusters.

Without wasting a single microsecond to look at his opponent, Junior dropped to his knees and scooped up his sister’s shivering body into his arms.

The young prince’s face was a mask of frantic worry as he sprinted at top speed toward the stadium’s emergency medical tunnel.

"""....."""

All present in the crowd was at a loss for words.

Commentator Ken cleared his throat, his voice carrying a deeply somber, thoroughly professional tone as he delivered the only possible verdict.

["Since external interference from a teammate occurred before the match could naturally conclude... according to tournament rules... the victory of Match Eight is officially awarded to the Tricea’s Ryan Sindelle."]

The afro-haired captain slowly deactivated his plasma blades, his mechanical suit hissing as he turned and silently walked off the shattered, frozen stage.

The heavy silence stretched over the stadium.

In the southern stands, thousands of Eldorians sat in stunned, grief-stricken stillness. Their pride had been dealt a crushing blow – not just because their beloved princess had been brutally defeated, but because the match had ended in a forced disqualification.

Down in the VIP section, Sadie finally let her hands drop from her face. Her usual fiery, loudmouthed demeanor was completely gone, replaced by an expression of anxiety.

She looked toward the dark medical tunnel where Junior had vanished, her voice barely a whisper. "She... she’s going to be okay, right Bossman?"

"..."

Kurt didn’t answer immediately.

He stayed seated, gaze fixed on the empty ice-shattered pit while holding a terrified Hope close to him. He reached down and gently patted Hope’s trembling shoulders to soothe her.

"... Yeah. She’ll be alright. Her crown hadn’t fully materialised yet. Besides, as you just witnessed, she’s one tough cookie to crack. She’ll live. But that Tricean... That suit is going to be a massive pain in the ass for anyone who steps up to it."

Up in the private royal VIP box, King Maxwell finally closed his golden eyes, letting out a controlled breath.

He didn’t utter a word of disappointment, nor did he curse the Tricean delegation. He simply leaned back into his throne as his expression returned to that of an unyielding sovereign. Though his tightly clenched fist against the armrest betrayed the silent fury of a father.

Beside him, the Pope lowered his head, silently reciting a soft, whispered prayer for the young princess’s swift recovery, his holy staff glowing with a faint, comforting light.

High above the arena, Commentator Ken wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, desperately trying to salvage his showman persona as the projection began to flicker back to life.

["A... a tragic turn of events for team Eldoria, folks! But the rules of this International Grand Tournament are absolute and unyielding! We must press onward! Clear the ice, reset the stage, and prepare yourselves... because the shuffle for Match Nine is rolling right now!"]