THORNS 191

Chapter 191 - One Down

With a violent screech of metal against metal, Ayako Nichole broke away from their initial blade-lock. The rebound sent Nichole skidding back ten feet with her boots digging into the stone, while Ayako gracefully drifted backward.

But the battlefield of a three-way tiebreaker left no room for a quiet reset.

Bzzt—CRACK!

Using the split-second opportunity of their separation, Ryan executed a high-speed lightning blitz. A trail of brilliant blue snapped through the air behind him as his black suit propelled him forward at a blinding velocity and appeared directly behind Ayako's blind spot.

"Sorry, Izumi, but I'm taking you out of the equation early!" Ryan's yelling voice resonated as he threw an enhanced punch straight down at the back of her head with enough force to shatter a fortress wall.

The metal fist connected – but there was no sound of breaking bone.

Instead of hitting solid flesh, Ryan's fist punched entirely through her figure. Ayako's body instantly dissolved into a swirling cloud of pink Sakura petals.

"Wha–!?"

BOOM!

Ryan's punch carried through the illusion and slammed directly into the solid arena floor.

A devastating explosion of pulverized stone and thick dust erupted upward, gouging to create a massive crater.

"Argh, dammit! Of course it won’t be that easy! Looks like the stories about the Izumi clan aren’t exaggerated at all."

Suddenly, a prickling sensation traveled down Ryan’s spine. Every internal radar and tactical sensor inside his advanced suit flared in crimson warning.

Snapping his head upward, he was met with Ayako’s silver katana swinging straight down toward his mechanical neck.

"SHIT–!"

Reacting entirely on purely on survival instinct, Ryan ignited his thruster and propelled himself backward a second before the blade could connect.

SHING—BOOM!

The moment the edge of her blade touched the floor, a perfectly clean and impossibly deep fissure tore through the earth itself were made of soft butter.

"What the hell?!" Ryan yelled as his heart hammered against his ribs. "Are you out of your mind?! Are you seriously trying to decapitate me out here?!"

"Decapitate? No. I merely wanted to test the true structural durability of that fascinating advanced suit of yours. I mean, it would be such a pity if it broke too quickly, don’t you think?"

"DON’T YOU DARE FORGET ABOUT ME!"

A shadow fell over the crater. From high above, Nichole came flying down like a descending comet. She held her mana coated broadblade over her head with both hands. She was aiming to drive her entire weight into a devastating downward cleave directly at Ayako’s skull.

"This is perfect actually." Ayako smiled while pointing her hand at Ryan.

Deep beneath the surface, the broken stone surrounding Ryan’s boots violently surged upward like a set of rocky jaws.

Before the Tricean captain could ignite his thrusters to escape, the stone snapped around his ankles and violently jerked his armored body straight across the crater toward Ayako, completely catching him off guard.

"Whoa–Oh fuck–!!"

As Ryan reeled into her immediate personal space, Ayako stepped forward with a terrifyingly graceful pivot and grabbed him directly by the reinforced neck-plate of armor. With a monstrous display of physical leverage, she hurled his multi-ton frame directly upward into the path of the incoming attack from Nichole.

The raw force of Ayako’s throw was too immense for Ryan to stabilize himself. His thrusters sputtered wildly in mid-air and his internal error codes blared as he found himself flying helplessly toward a falling mountain of iron.

"N-Nichole Firestar, wait! Abort! Abort I am no Izumi! I repeated! I am not Izumi!"

But Nichole was already in full descent with her momentum locked in. She couldn’t stop the strike. She could only commit.

"TAKE THIS!"

"OH FU–!"

SLICE—CRASH!

Nichole’s mana coated blade slashed heavily against Ryan’s chest plate, cutting straight through the reinforced Tricean alloy and leaving a gruesomely open slice across the front of his black armor.

The concussive force of the strike sent Ryan flying straight back down into the earth, skidding his body across the dirt.

["WHAT A PLAY!!! Izumi Ayako just used the Tricean Captain as a literal human shield!"] Commentator Ken screamed into his microphone, his hands on his head.

Lying motionless, a metallic wheezing sound echoed through his suit's external speakers and within seconds, a dark stream of fresh blood began to slowly leak from the jagged open cut in his shattered chest armor.

Up in the northern stands, the Tricean spectators let out a horrified gasp, whereas the remaining representatives on the Tricean bench stood up with their hands gripping the stone railings in unbridled anxiety.

Commentator Ken opened his mouth, his voice taking on a professional, solemn tone. ["It looks like the damage is too severe, folks. It seems that this the end of the road for Tri–"]

HISS

A loud, high-pressure burst of white steam suddenly erupted from the exhaust ports of the black armor.

With a staggering effort, Ryan's metal fingers dug into the cracked earth. He let out a harsh wet cough, but miraculously, he forced his trembling mechanical knees to lock, pushing his shattered frame back up onto his feet.

Inside his helmet, a bright green holographic warning text illuminated his vision:

CRITICAL DAMAGE DETECTED.

EMERGENCY SELF HEALING PROTOCOL: ACTIVATED.

CAUTION: MAGIC STONE CAPACITY REDUCED BY 50%.

The mana stone located at the heart of the armor began to glow green, and slowly, the open flesh wound beneath the armor started healing.

The northern Tricean stands erupted into a frantic wave of cheers for their representative captain who is still in the fight.

["DEAR PEOPLE AT THE TRICEAN STANDS, I TAKE BACK WHAT I SAID!! TALK ABOUT RESILIENCE!"]

Nichole, however, didn't give a single damn.

She rested her massive broadblade over her shoulder as a fierce grin returned to her face. "Hey! On the frontier, we have a very specific rule – it's always best to kick a dog while he's down! And that's exactly what I'm gonna do!"

With a ferocious battlecry, she lunged forward again, swinging her broadblade in a wide horizontal arc designed to take Ryan's legs out from under him.

"Oh, come on! Can you at least let a guy heal in peace?!"

What followed was a fast-paced and utterly chaotic dance of survival.

Nichole moved like an untamed forest fire. Her broadblade sang through the air as she combined her mana coating with explosive bursts of fire magic. Every swing of her blade left a trail of scorching, roaring flames that superheated the surrounding atmosphere.

Ryan, despite his depleting reserves, fought with a masterful tactical discipline. His suit whirred as he utilized multi-elemental integration – deploying compressed earth shields to absorb Nichole's heavy strikes, while simultaneously firing rapid wind needles to disrupt her footing and keep her from pinning him down.

CLANG! BOOM! CRACK!

"Hey! Fire-head! Listen to me for a second!" Ryan panted while parrying a savage downward strike. "We need to team up right now to take down Izumi! It is mathematically stupid for the two of us to keep tearing each other apart like this!

"If we knock each other out, Ayako can – and absolutely will – just stroll over and finish off whoever is left without breaking a sweat!"

"Hell no!" Nichole screamed back, her amber eyes blazing with stubborn pride. "Riverton doesn't do cheap alliances! I'm going to flatten you, and then I'm going to flatten her next!"

Suddenly, a soft, chilling chuckle resonated right between them.

Without either of them detecting her approach, Ayako materialized dead right beside their clashing. With two impossibly fast deflections, she struck the flat of Nichole's broadblade and the wrist of Ryan's gauntlet, completely shattering their momentum and forcing them both to step back.

"I highly suggest you take Ryan Sindelle's excellent advice, Nichole," Ayako murmured a breathlessly joyful tilt to her voice as she raised her blade to a mid-guard.

"Please, both of you – team up against me. It will be significantly more entertaining for myself that way. I would hate for this dance to end too quickly due to your stubbornness."

Nichole's jaw tightened as her face turned a deep, furious crimson at the sheer, mocking overconfidence of the Myrian. "You pretentious, aristocratic little witch! Who the hell do you think you're looking down on?! I'm going to tear that tongue right out your mouth!"

With a roar of pure rage, Nichole lunged straight at Ayako again, her broadblade completely engulfed in a twisting inferno.

At the exact same moment, inside Ryan's helmet, a soft chime chimed.

HEALING PROCESS: COMPLETED.

INTERNAL MANA RESERVES: 50% REMAINING.

WARNING: SYSTEM BURNOUT IMMINENT IF OUTPUT EXCEEDS TEN MINUTES.

"Ten minutes is more than enough," Ryan muttered. "Alright, Izumi. You wanted a challenge? Let’s see if you can actually back up that massive mouth of yours!"

With his thrusters booming at maximum output, Ryan joined the fray. He synchronized perfectly with Nichole’s aggressive movements, stepping in to assist her at every single turn.

The stadium erupted into a frenzy as the three captains engaged in a high-stakes, dramatic triple-threat maelstrom.

The buildup of magical energy inside the ever-growing crater grew higher and higher with every passing second.

It was a masterpiece of high-tier combat. Ryan operated as the ultimate support – the moment Ayako would glide backward to dodge one of Nichole’s savage cleaves, he would instantly manifest an advanced earth wall right behind her heels to lock her in place or fire a dense bolt of lightning to force her to block.

Simultaneously, Nichole provided the unstoppable pressure against the Myrian. Swinging and striking her blade through the air like a hurricane of fire and steel.

Yet, despite the overwhelming two-versus-one pressure, Ayako looked like she was experiencing paradise. Her battle manic tendencies were on full display.

She moved like a goddess of war, perfectly dodging and weaving through the overlapping streams of fire, lightning, and wind.

Her own mastery over the elements was nothing short of perfection. When Nichole unleashed a massive wall of fire, Ayako would effortlessly counter with an even larger torrent of water that instantly vaporized the flames into a blinding smokescreen.

When Ryan attempted to pin her down with a localized graviton gadget, she would use her own overwhelming wind magic to completely alter her trajectory in mid-air, defying the very laws of physics, and destroying said gadgets.

["THIS IS UNBELIEVABLE!"] Commentator Ken screamed. ["Izumi Ayako is fighting off two academy captains simultaneously, and she is thoroughly enjoying herself! Her combat prowess is completely out of this world!"]

CLANG! CLANG! BOOM!

"Ahahaha! Is this truly the absolute best the Riverton and Tricea can offer?!" Ayako laughed aloud, her usual serene mask completely gone.

Her silver katana deflected Ryan's plasma blade before she spun on her heel to deliver a concentrated blast of earth magic that forced Nichole to stop and block with a massive blade.

"More! Give me more! Force me to draw deeper from my core!"

Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Nichole yelled, her face covered in sweat and soot as she swung her blade with reckless fury. "I'm going to break that stupid little sword of yours into a thousand pieces!"

"Your spirit is magnificent, Nichole Firestar! Just what I like to see!"

Right when Ryan was about to assist, his black armor let out a high-pitched whine. The internal holographic display inside his helmet violently flashed in another warning-crimson pattern.

CRITICAL ERROR: MANA STONE DEPLETED.

EXOSKELETON SYSTEM FAILURE IN 5... 4...

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me right now," Ryan gasped as his mechanical limbs suddenly grew heavy with the suit's power source dying out.

Ayako's sharp eyes instantly caught the subtle stutter in his joints. She sheathed her weapon as her predatory smile deepened. "Looks like the machine has run out of fuel. Your time on this stage has officially concluded, Captain Sindelle."

With a movement so fast it left three afterimages in her wake, Ayako completely bypassed Nichole's line of defense and appeared directly in front of Ryan's failing mechanical frame.

Her katana remained sheathed for a microsecond before she unleashed a relentless sequence of close quarter quickdraw strikes.

BAM! BAM! CRACK! SHING!

She systematically dismantled the entire advanced mechanical suit. Ryan couldn't even raise his arms to defend himself as the heavy, consecutive impacts broke through the last of his remaining internal defenses.

For her final, finishing blow, Ayako clapped her hands together and channelled a concentrated sphere of pure kinetic mana directly into her palms. She drove both of her hands straight into Ryan's exposed chest plate.

BOOM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The explosive force of the blast was so immense that Ryan was launched across the arena like a bullet fired from a railgun. He soared clean across the damaged arena, his body traveling at a terminal velocity straight toward the announcer's booth.

CRASH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The protective barriers surrounding the announcers' booth violently shattered under the sheer weight of the impact. Ryan's body smashed straight through the front console, crashing right onto Commentator Ken and Faye's wooden desk, scattering parchment and splintered wood into the air.

The entire coliseum went deathly quiet, thousands of eyes looking up at the ruined broadcasting booth in absolute, stunned silence.

Faye slowly looked down at the desk. Broken pieces of black armor were scattered everywhere, and a thick trail of fresh blood was pooling on the paperwork. Ryan's helmet had been completely split down the center, revealing his unconscious face.

She shook her head at her co-announcer, signalling to him that he was unable to continue.

["L-LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! RYAN SINDELLE IS INCAPACITATED! The captain of Tricea's representatives has been brutally expelled from the arena floor! He is officially eliminated, marking the end for Tricea in the tournament!"]

Chapter 192 - End Of Day 1

"And then... there was one. Now, Nichole Firestar... it is just the two of us left to finish this dance."

Nichole stood twenty feet away, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Her topknot red hair was completely loose, and her arms were trembling slightly from the exhaustion of fighting against someone as strong as Ayako.

Yet, despite the clear disparity in their remaining reserves, her amber eyes were completely devoid of fear. She raised her left hand, wiped a trail of fresh blood and soot from her lip, and spat onto the dirt.

"Perfect. I always preferred one-on-one brawls anyway. Let's see what you've got, Izumi!"

With a mutual understanding, both captains burst forward simultaneously, unleashing a wild final duel that had the entire coliseum holding its collective breath.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

It was a clash of ideologies. Ayako fought with the flawless precision of Myria's fiercest warrior – every strike of her katana was a calculated work of art, weaving through the air with pristine grace.

Nichole, however, fought with the raw, untamed savage pride of Riverton's bravest. She didn't care about form or beauty; she threw her entire soul into every single swing. Her giant broadblade tore through the stone and earth, creating a constant, roaring inferno of exploding fire magic that superheated the arena until the air itself began to warp from the intense heat.

The battle built up to a dizzying crescendo. Ayako glided forward with her blade and executed a quick thrust aimed straight at Nichole's shoulder.

But right at that exact second, something completely unexpected happened.

Nichole – whose entire reputation was built on being a reckless, hot-headed, and purely instinctive brawler – suddenly did something entirely contrary to her character. Instead of trying to parry the strike with raw strength, she purposely tilted her body to the side, letting Ayako's razor-sharp katana slice clean through her leather vest, cutting into her ribs.

"URGH! G-GOTCHA!"

Using the split-second advantage of having Ayako's weapon trapped in her body, Nichole clapped her bare left hand directly onto the flat of Ayako's sword arm, locking her wrist in place. Simultaneously, she coated every single ounce of her remaining mana onto her broadblade.

The iron slab turned from a brilliant blue to a blindingly bright shade of crimson hot.

"TAKE THIS!"

BOOM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

At a point-blank, impossible-to-dodge range, a colossal explosion of compressed fire-infused-mana erupted from Nichole's blade.

The sheer force of the blast was so enormous it completely illuminated the entire coliseum in a blinding flash of red light. The shockwave violently shot Ayako backward, her figure soaring straight across the arena before crashing and burying into the distant pile of broken stone.

Nichole slid back ten feet before slamming her blade into the ground, using the hilt to keep her exhausted body from collapsing onto the dirt. She panted like a wolf, her chest heaving in and out, but a wide triumphant smile was plastered across her sweating face.

"""..."""

For a long, drawn-out ten seconds, nothing happened.

The arena remained in a state of stillness. A thick, black smoke hung heavily over the wreckage where Ayako had landed.

["H-Has she...?"] Commentator Ken stammered into his microphone, his hand shaking as he looked down from the ruined booth. ["Has Nichole actually done it?! Has the Captain of Riverton achieved the impossible and knocked out the Heiress of the Izumi clan?!"]

Nichole’s smile grew wider as she braced herself for the final verdict.

Ken slowly raised his hand, his voice preparing to deliver the historical announcement. ["L-Ladie and Gentlemen! The winner of the final–"]

RUMBLE... RUMBLE...

Suddenly, the entire coliseum began to vibrate. A low tremor echoed from deep beneath the earth, causing loose gravel and broken stone to bounce erratically across the floor.

["Wait a minute, people! Look at the ground!"] Faye screamed. ["It’s not over! Something is happening beneath the stage!"]

Nichole’s smile immediately vanished.

CRACK—SPLINTER!

Before she could even lift her foot, a massive sprout of wood violently erupted from the solid stone directly beneath her center of gravity. Within an instant, the ever-growing roots multiplied exponentially, twisting and coiling around her ankles, her torso, and her arms like a cluster of living, unbreakable pythons.

"Argh! Let go of me! LET ME GO!"

Nichole desperately tried to flare her fire magic to burn the wood away, but the wood was far too dense, absorbing her weak flames as if it were pure fertilizer. Not to mention she practically had zero mana left in the tank.

The tremors finally reached their utter peak.

In a spectacular, yet terrifying display of environmental sorcery, the wooden roots shot a hundred feet into the air, expanding outward into sweeping branches that instantly blanketed the entire center of the arena.

When the dust and tremors finally settled, what was left standing dead center on the field was a giant, staggeringly beautiful, and fully bloomed Sakura tree. Its pink petals gently drifted through the afternoon air.

And trapped dead center within the heart of the trunk was Nichole. She thrashed and struggled with every ounce of her remaining strength, straining her muscles against the wood, but she could not budge out of her confinement. She was completely locked in place.

From the opposite side of the field, beneath the massive pile stone rubble, a single light step echoed through the quiet arena.

Crunch.

The broken rocks tumbled away, and Ayako slowly took a step out.

Her uniform was heavily scorched, and a thin line of blood was leaking down her pristine left cheek. Yet, despite the clear signs of physical damage, her posture was completely straight, and her expression had returned to its classic, serenely elegant composition.

She raised her hand and controlled a branch that carried her all the way up the giant Sakura tree – straight to the struggling Nichole.

"I must truly commend you, Nichole," Ayako said softly, her melodic voice carrying a genuine warmth as she stopped about thirty feet away from the trapped captain.

"That final strike of yours... it truly was spectacular. That was, without a doubt, the second most fun I have experienced since my arrival on this continent. However..."

She wrapped her slender fingers tightly around the hilt of her katana, gently guiding the blade back into its traditional scabbard until it rested at her waist. She then dropped her center of gravity into a low, classic drawing stance, her posture completely locked.

"However... Tomorrow's battle will require an immense amount of my actual stamina, I imagine. I cannot afford to waste any more time on a prolonged struggle today. Therefore, I am ending our dance right here."

Sensing the lethal finality behind her words, Nichole's eyes widened. She began to struggle even more violently against the wood as she bared her teeth.

"Don't you dare look down on me! I can still fight! Let me out of this damn tree and I'll show you! You think this is over?! Think again!"

"No. I'm afraid this really is over. Had your mana infusion technique been completed, it may have been a different story. Sadly, that is not the reality. As a reward for your valiant effort, I will show you what a completed mana infusion looks like."

"Y-YOU–!"

"Do not worry, Captain," Ayako said smoothly, her breathing controlled as the translucent blue mana coated around her scabbard "I am using the flat of my steel so you will not die. Though it is a shame that you will have to miss the rest of this magnificent tournament.

"You fought with incredible honor, Nichole Firestar. Let it be known across all of Myria... that you have earned my undisputed respect. Until our paths cross next time."

The blue hum enveloping her scabbard vanished, transforming into a swirling formation of sakura petals.

In a single, silent heartbeat – the entire world around Ayako seemed to stand completely still.

Her hand blurred.

SHING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

A blinding flash of vertical silver light sliced clean through the tree and arena.

Then, the delayed kinetic force caught up.

BOOM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The hundred-foot-tall Sakura tree was instantly split perfectly down the center which exploded into millions of flying splinters and drifting pink petals.

Nichole stood no chance. Feeling the slash of Ayako’s blade and the pressure that followed thereafter, her unconscious body flew backward at high speeds straight through the protective barriers before crashing heavily onto the Rivertonian stands below.

When the cloud of splinters and petals finally settled across the stone pit, Ayako, with a fluid motion of her wrist, guided her katana back into its scabbard.

The metal locked into place with a loud CLICK that echoed distinctly throughout the quiet coliseum.

The stadium remained frozen for one more breathless second before the eastern stands went absolutely completely wild.

"""""YEEEAAAHHH!!!"""""

["L-LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IT'S ALL OVER!"] Commentator Ken screamed into his microphone. ["The sudden-death tiebreaker has concluded! The winner of the match, carrying her entire nation to Day Two – Izumi Ayako of Myria!"]

The holographic scoreboard in the sky shifted and locked in the final two countries who had survived the opening round crucible:

DAY 1 FINAL QUALIFIERS:

ELDORIA VS MYRIA

Ayako gracefully hopped off her branch and began her slow walk off the cratered arena stage toward her bench. As she reached a certain edge, she stopped for a brief moment.

She tilted her head slightly toward the southern Eldorian bench, locking her grey eyes directly with Amber, who was currently sitting with her legs crossed and watching her with a wide grin.

In a rare, playful manner, Ayako raised a finger to her cheek and returned the mocking wink right back at her.

The message was clear. The warm-up phase was officially over.

And tomorrow, the real war would begin.