THORNS 217

Chapter 217 - Final Curtain Call

Without a word, the distance between the two vanished.

BOOM!!!

In a motion so blistering the human eye could barely track the blurs, they collided at the center of the arena. Jin was a whirlwind of precision. A golden broadsword materialised in her right hand for a brutal downward slash, but as it came through, Emelie deflected the attack with a telekinetic blast against the flat of her blade.

"Dammit!"

The moment the broadsword shattered under the strain, Jin's left hand instantly formed a sleek golden trench knife and drove it toward Emelie's ribs with a crackle of lightning.

"Not today!" Emelie seamlessly glided backward.

As she retreated an inch off the ground, she manipulated the air beneath her boots. Then, with a rapid twitch of her fingers, she seized a jagged chunk of the stone floor behind Jin and hurled it straight toward the idol's back.

Sensing the shifting air pressure, Jin dropped into a low split, allowing the massive boulder to whistle harmlessly over her golden hair. She then propelled her palms upward, manifesting a pair of spiked golden lances that shot straight out of the ground toward Emelie's floating form.

The two incoming lances suddenly froze in mid-air, their golden lightning streaks spitting sparks against a wall of telekinetic stasis.

With a mocking flick of her wrist, Emelie reversed their trajection, sending the golden lances rocketing back down toward their creator at twice their original speed.

"Gotta move–!"

CRASH! CRASH!

The floor exploded into a cloud of dust and golden fragments, narrowly missing Jin as she nimbly rolled to the side. Once she was safe, she bounded back to her feet and wiped a fresh smear of sweat and dirt from her brow.

Her black and golden combat dress was beginning to show faint signs of searing along the hem, and her armored greaves were covered in fine scratches.

She looked across the clearing. Emelie stood with her hands loosely resting on her hips, looking impeccably composed. Unlike Jin, her sleek black bodysuit was untarnished, and her breathing hadn't even changed from its baseline, resting rhythm.

"Ha... hahaha. Man... you really are a freak of nature, aren't you, Emelie-chan? Honestly, monsters like you and Izumi-senpai... you guys are just built on a completely different evolutionary chart. It's almost unfair."

"If you're already sensing the wide gap between us, Goldilocks... you're welcome to throw your hands up and walk back to your team. I wouldn't shame you for it."

"Oh, please! Walk away?!" Jin grinned fiercely as her golden aura flared with a stubborn resurgence of pride. "A true idol never walks off the stage before the final curtain call!"

Suddenly, harmonic and beautifully synchronised sound began to echo from the northern and eastern stands of the coliseum.

It started with just a few hundred Myrian, but within seconds, it swelled into a deafening chorus of thirty plus thousand voices. The Myrian crowd they were singing. They were singing one of Jin Fu's most famous songs.

A song of hope, that whenever you find yourself trapped in trapped darkness, all you have to do is search deep within yourself to find that precious golden light:

"""YOU ARE MY SHINING STAR♫⋆."""

Jin Fu's eyes widened in a look of pure surprise. She slowly turned her head toward the enormous wall of crimson and gold banners waving in perfect harmony with the lyrics.

She could see the desperate hope in her fans' faces. They knew she was struggling; they could see she was facing an insurmountable wall – but they didn't care. They still believed in her. Their shining star.

"Ha.. Hahaha... Seriously, you guys are so..." The exhaustion in her limbs vanished and a warm feeling settled deep within her chest.

Feeling revitalised, she turned her attention back toward Emelie while loudly shouting at the people who were supporting her, "Thank you, everyone! I hear you loud and clear! Let's give them a proper finale, Emelie-chan!"

["LISTEN TO THAT RESONANCE!!!"] Commentator Ken felt his own skin covered in goosebumps. ["The entire Myrian populace is lifting their idol on their shoulders!"]

["I feel like I'm gonna cry..."] Christy sniffled. ["This is way too beautiful. An idol fueled by the love of her people is a dangerous force indeed."]

BZZZZZZT—BOOM!!!

With a charge that just about shattered the sound barrier, Jin launched herself high into the sky. Her golden aura expanded into an astronomical sphere of gold that illuminated the entire coliseum like a second sun.

Taking her up on the challenge, Emelie used her telekinesis and aggressively shot upward after her.

The two girls took their battle to the skies, leaping and clashing against the air thousands of feet above the arena floor. The spectators sat with their heads thrown back and their eyes glued to the magnificent, yet terrifying, aerial dance unfolding before them.

Jin created a pair of massive golden twin-blades, executing a spinning aerial slash that cut through a gust of wind Emelie tried to throw at her.

"Take this! And this! And this!" Jin's voice echoed down from the clouds as she rapidly manifested weapon after weapon – spears, daggers, halberds – throwing them in a continuous, lightning-fast stream as she fell through the air.

Emelie moved through the sky with weightless serenity.

With a subtle twist of her hips, she slipped past a massive golden broadsword. With a casual wave of her left hand, she casted a compact wall of compressed ice that got shattered into harmless frost as multiple golden daggers pierced through.

She was an untouchable phantom floating amidst a golden tempest.

"Ahahaha! You're amazing, Emelie-chan! But let's see how you handle my final curtain call!"

Reaching the apex of her altitude, Jin dynamically threw both of her arms toward the sky. Her golden lightning aura began to surge, then condense, pulling every single ounce of her remaining mana reserves into a single point directly above her head.

The sky darkened slightly as a colossal construct began to materialise. Within seconds, a gargantuan, golden broadsword – easily the size of a warship – hovered above the coliseum, its surface crackling with millions of volts of pure lightning.

"THIS IS IT EMELIE-CHAN! MY EVERYTHING! TAAAAKE THIIIISSS!!!!" Jin screamed at the top of her lungs and violently swept her arms downward.

The colossal golden sword pierced the cloud, its total mass and kinetic force creating a deafening, atmospheric rumble that caused the protective barriers around the coliseum stands to flare to their maximum intensity.

The entire Myrian and Eldorian crowd stood with bated breath as they waited for the world-shattering result.

Emelie looked up at the descending mountain of golden steel and lightning. For the first time during the match, her casual expression morphed into a subtle smile of respect. Slowly, she relaxed her arms.

Instead of maneuvering around it, Emelie closed her eyes and focused on a technique that would easily put an end to this.

Bzzt!

"Let’s do this."

As the tip of the blade zeroed in on her, Emelie thrust both of her palms upward and unleashed an unrestricted telekinetic force against the underside of the descending sword.

SKRRRRRRIIIICH!!!

The colossal golden broadsword suddenly froze in mid-air, barely a hundred feet above her head, the utter friction between her telekinetic grip and the thunderous force of Jin’s final attack created a deafening, metallic screech that rattled the teeth of every single person below.

Emelie set and clenched her jaw. Then, with a guttural shout, she strenuously twisted her wrists.

"DISRUPT!"

Bzzt–BBZZT–CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-SHATTER!!!

The gargantuan blade abruptly buckled, cracked, and completely shattered into a million shiny pieces of harmless golden glitter that rained down over the arena like a beautiful snowfall.

Jin, who was falling through the air with just about no mana left in the tank, let out a soft, defeated laugh as she watched her ultimate technique turn into harmless sparkles.

"Ah... yep. A total monster."

Before she could even touch the ground, Emelie shot through the falling glitter and appeared above Jin's falling form.

"Fo you really have to confirm the kill, Emelie-chan?"

"Unless you wanna give up?"

"... No."

"Then face the music."

With a casual, almost lazy downward push of her palm, Emelie unleashed a merciless blast of telekinetic force.

BOOM!

The attack caught Jin dead in the torso, sending her body sailing across the arena, completely clearing the white boundary before landing crashing and rolling near the Myrian Representatives.

["AND IT IS OVER!!!"] Commentator Ken exploded into the microphone.

"""YEEEEAAAAHHHHH!!!""" The Eldorian section of the coliseum also burst into a triumphant roar.

["EMELIE DISMANTLES THE GOLDEN IDOL OF MYRIA! JIN FU HAS BEEN ELIMINATED! ELDORIA MAINTAINS AN UNBROKEN STREAK!"]

["Wow! What an unforgettable fight,"] Christy cheered while clapping her hands happily. ["This one will definitely go down in the history books!"]

The Eldorian fans were high-fiving and screaming Emelie's name, while Dominik and Mia were simultaneously cheering for her victory and throwing supportive flowers toward the healing priests who were currently carrying an unconscious Jin Fu toward the medical bay.

But down on the arena floor, there was no rest for the wicked.

The very second the priests cleared away, a shadow suddenly launched itself straight from the Myrian representative bench.

The figure crossed the ring with an aggressive pace, leaping high into the air and pulling back an enhanced fist of dark-brown earth magic.

"THINK FAST, YOU SILVER-HAIRED DEMON!!!"

Emelie didn't even turn her entire torso around. She simply tilted her head to the side, allowing the fist to whistle harmlessly past her ear.

Before the attacker's feet could even firmly touch the white stone, she casually reached out her left hand, grabbed him tightly by the collar of his uniform, and violently slammed him flat onto his back against the ground.

CRASH!!!

"EURGH!" The young man let out a choked gasp as the air left his lungs.

He glared up at her wildly, his teeth grinding as he spat a bit of sand from his lips. "You... you damn Eldorian monster! Do you remember me, huh?!"

"Nope. Not even a little bit."

["HOLD ON A SECOND, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"] Commentator Ken’s voice boomed back over the speakers.

["It looks like we have a revenge match! Entering the ring as Myria’s third representative is none other than Shiki Kazuma, who charged into the arena looking for payback for what Emelie did to him during the opening rumble of Day One!"]

"There! Does that ring any bells?! You ruined my whole debut yesterday!"

"Oh! You’re–"

"Yes! Exactly! You finally remember me now, don’t you?!"

A mocking smile cut across Emelie’s face like a razor blade. "Nope. Don’t know. Don’t care."

Chapter 218 - The Long Wait Ended

"I have you pinned to the ground. This match was over before it even had the chance to properly begin. Now, give up so we can move on, okay?"

"Ha..Hahaha! Never!" Shiki Kazuma let out a snide laugh as he glared up at her. "You seem to be forgetting that I am a chosen representative of Myria! Something as pathetic as this will never make me–! GAK—ARGH!"

The words died in his throat when an invisible, suffocating pressure seized his throat, squeezing with the unrelenting force of an iron vice.

Kazuma’s bulged pupils began to dilate with terror as he looked directly into Emelie’s face.

"Yield," she commanded softly, her green eyes glowing slightly as she applied more pressure around his throat.

Kazuma clawed desperately at his neck, but his hands swatted wildly through the empty air in a despairing attempt to rip away whatever was crushing his windpipe.

’She’s... she’s holding me down by my collar with her actual hand,yet I’m still being choked! What the hell is this magic?! Is this what Ryuuji and Jin had to deal with!?’

His face rapidly shifted from a flushed red to a dark purple. Strangle gasps bubbled past his lips as his chest heaved severely, begging him to take in air properly.

With his free, trembling hands, he deliriously tried to channel his mana, attempting to manifest a jagged stone spike from the ground to pierce her. But Emelie’s was quicker.

SLAM!

"ARGH–GAK!"

A powerful telekinetic force slammed both of his arms flat, cracking the stone beneath him. Kazuma strained with every fiber of his being, but his limbs were utterly pinned, completely unable to lift even an inch off the ground.

"Still not giving up?"

"N-Ne... v-ver... A-Ack!"

"Hmmm..."

She casually released her grip on his collar, stepping back but keeping her foot firmly planted onto his chest. She slowly raised her right hand, formed a casual finger gun, and pointed it straight down at him.

The green streaks in her silver hair began to glow with a pulsing light, her hair swaying and floating as she began to draw a concentrated amount of mana toward the tip of her finger.

A jagged pebble materialised, hovering about a centimeter away from her fingernail. Then, the pebble ignited, wrapping the stone in a mini-flame before a static charge of lightning crackled across its surface as well.

As Kazuma lay there choking, she calmly aligned her finger with his right shoulder.

BANG!

A clean, circular hole was blasted straight through his right shoulder joint.

"GYAAAH-HURRRK—AAAAGH!!!"

Kazuma let out an ugly, blood-curdling scream of pure agony. However, the sound almost immediately cut short into a choking gurgle as the telekinetic vice on his throat tightened even further.

"Yield."

"A-ACK! ARGH! GAG!"

"Haaaa..." Emelie pointed her finger gun at his other shoulder.

BANG!

"Uuuuurgh—AAAHHH-HUK!!!"

Another clean hole punched through his left shoulder this time. At this point, Kazuma’s screams degenerated into a series of pathetic, incoherent whimpers.

"Yield."

Kazuma’s mind was broken by the agonising combination of suffocation and physical mutilation.

"Fine. If that’s truly how you want to play this, so be it."

She slowly pointed her finger gun at the exact center of his forehead, right between his wide, teary, and terrified eyes. The suffocating hold on his throat suddenly snapped, releasing its grip.

The sudden return of air threw Kazuma into a panicked state of primal fear. Staring up at the glowing tip of her finger, his face contorted in sheer terror.

"W-WAIT! PLEASE! NO! I GIVE–!"

BANG!

The screaming stopped. A heavy silence fell over the spectators in the coliseum.

Up on the holographic projection screen, the image zoomed in on Kazuma. His eyes were rolled back to his head and a dark stain spread across the crotch of his trousers where he had pissed himself in fear.

But there was no hole in his forehead.

Instead, a trail of fresh blood was spreading across the ground beside his temple. Emelie hadn’t shot his head; at the last second, she had adjusted her aim and vaporised his left ear. The psychological terror of the near-miss, combined with his injuries, had caused him to black out.

["L-L-LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"] Commentator Ken’s voice carried an unsettled tremor that the crowd hadn’t heard since Amber’s match as he stared down at the bloody scene. ["The winner of the third bout... is Emelie Herst! Eldoria secures another decisive victory!"]

["I mean, was there ever any real doubt?"] Christy murmured casually as she watched the display of dominance.

With a lazy, effortless kick of her heel, Emelie swept Kazuma’s unconscious body into the air, using a telekinetic push to chuck him toward the waiting medical priests near the boundary.

Then, her glowing green eyes locked straight onto the Myrian bench.

"Next."

Every single eye on the bench – and indeed, the entire coliseum – turned to look at one specific, solitary figure sitting near the center of the bench.

Emelie’s lips curled into a genuinely excited smirk. "Well, well, well. So you’re fourth in their line-up this time around. It’s about time you finally showed up... Izumi Ayako."

"""""""YEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!"""""""

An absolute fever-pitch of pure chaos erupted across the entire coliseum. They screamed with a terrifying wave of vigorous patriotism.

"IZUMI-SAMA!!! DESTROY HER!!!"

"IF YOU BEAT HER, THE GAUNTLET IS PRETTY OVER, EMELIE!!!"

Ayako let out a soft chuckle. Under her breath, she whispered, "Finally."

She slowly stood up to her full height and reached down to adjust the leather scabbard of her sheathed katana at her waist, before reaching up to straighten her black sailor’s captain hat.

The remaining Myrian representatives all looked up at her with reverent respect. Chihara Mei offered her a warm, knowing smile. "Good luck out there, Ayako. Not that you'll need it."

"Thank you, Principal Chihara. I will not disappoint."

She swept her mini cape properly around her shoulder and walked toward the arena. As she stepped up onto the floor, she paused, looking around at the cracked, melted, and heavily damaged terrain left behind by the previous three bouts.

"Ms. Herst... would you mind floating up into the air for just a single moment, please?"

Emelie shrugged her shoulders carelessly and smoothly hovered a few feet off the ground.

Ayako's gray eyes subtly flared with a faint glow.

RUMBLE...

Without her moving a muscle, every single piece of shattered stone, loose debris, and melted boulder across the entire arena floor rose into the air. In a breathtaking display of elemental reconstitution, the stones snapped perfectly back into their original configurations, the melted boulders fitted back into the earth, and the battlefield completely repaired itself in a matter of seconds.

["HOLY SHI–! OH MY BEAUTIFUL GODDESS ABOVE!"] Commentator Ken screamed. ["Izumi Ayako has literally rebuilt the whole arena with a single thought!"]

"There. Thank you for waiting. Now, we can finally begin."

Down in the VIP seats, Kurt's body suddenly went rigid.

A prickling sensation shot down his spine. Like with Amber, his Unique Skill screamed an alarming bell of danger inside his head even though their animosity wasn't directed at him. But this time, the sensation was ten times worse.

Gulp 'These two... they're on a completely different level. This is going to be one helluva a bloodbath.'

"...."

"....."

BOOM!!!

The battle erupted in an explosion.

Ayako's silhouette vanished from the spot. There was no lightning step, no visual trace – just a sudden vacuum of air where she had been standing.

Standing still, Emelie instantly manifested a multi-layered, compressed telekinetic dome around her body.

CLANG!!!!

Ayako appeared directly in front of her with her katana half-drawn from its sheath. The single inch of exposed steel pressed against Emelie's barrier, creating a loud, high-pitched ringing sound that vibrated through the concrete foundations of the coliseum.

"Fast as always," Emelie smirked.

Her hands then flew forward as she unleashed a barrage of sharp wind blades at Ayako's face.

Ayako nimbly spun away while clicking her katana back into its sheath. With a sweeping motion of her leg, she unleashed a massive arc of freezing ice along the ground, creating a towering wall of frost that completely shattered Emelie's wind blades.

Before the ice could even settle, Emelie shattered the frozen wall with a telekinetic blast and transformed the shards into a thousand lethal, flying needles, launching them straight at the Izumi Heiress.

Ayako’s gray eyes sparked. She took a deep, grounding breath and wrapped her fingers tightly around the hilt of her blade.

In a fraction of a second, she drew her blade.

SHING–BWOOSH!!!

A howling hurricane erupted from the steel, completely vaporizing the incoming ice needles before transforming into a giant, vertical vortex that tore across the arena, aiming straight to swallow Emelie.

Emelie thrusted both of her hands forward and seized the air currents of the vortex itself. Using her telekinesis, she violently tore the hurricane apart, splitting it down the middle before summoning a crackling sphere of fire in her palms.

"Let’s see you slice through this!"

BOOM!!!

She threw a gargantuan fireball toward her.

Ayako’s smile widened. Her calm and disciplined demeanor finally melted away to reveal the explosive, thrill-seeking warrior she keeps buried inside. Her heart hammered against her ribs as an intoxicating rush of adrenaline surging through her veins.

"Oh, I absolutely will!"

Her eyes shined with wild excitement as she stepped directly into the path of the roaring flames.

With a draw so swift it left a silver crescent in the air, her blade cleared the sheath, and a pressurised wave of dark blue water erupted from the edge of her steel. The torrent crashed directly into the fireball, generating a spectacular detonation of boiling steam that completely swallowed the center of the arena.

Before the mist could even begin to drift, Emelie parted the white cloud with her own wind.

With her hand outstretched, she shot through the gap like a bullet. She hardened the air around her fist until it possessed the density of a solid steel wrecking ball.

Ayako twisted her upper body and let the blunt force of Emelie’s fist whistle past her shoulder. The pressure of the near-miss attack was so intense that it tore a clean rip in the sleeve of her coat.

Smiling through the rush of wind, she pivoted on and brought the back of her katana up in a brutal strike aimed directly at Emelie’s ribs.

However, a thin, hard plate of telekinetic force manifested right where her strike was about to hit.

BANG!

The impact sounded like a hammer hitting an anvil. The rebound pushed both girls back, carving parallel tracks in the newly fixed arena before they came to a halt ten yards apart.

"Your reaction speed is absolutely beautiful, Ms. Herst!" Ayako shouted over the roar of the crowd.

She eagerly threw her hat toward the Myrian bench, letting her dark hair spill free in the wind. "I haven’t had to think this fast in years!"

"Don’t start praising me yet. We’re still just stretching our legs. Also, call me Emelie."