THORNS 219

Chapter 219 - The Troll

"Then don’t mind if I do... Emelie!"

Ayako lifted her right boot and slammed it down onto the cracked stone of the arena floor.

From the floor beneath Emelie, two earthen hands emerged and clamped around her ankles with a crushing force, locking her legs in place.

Emelie cast a brief, annoyed glance down at the restraints. But the moment she looked back up, Ayako, who crossed the distance in less than heartbeat, was already in her proximity.

Her face was twisted into an ecstatic grin as she drew her katana in a wide, horizontal sweep. The edge of the steel whistled through the air and came within mere inches of slicing Emelie’s stomach open.

’Close, but no cigar!’ Emelie’s eyes flared with a deep light.

A telekinetic barrier materialised to halt the blade’s edge just before it could cut her.

But Ayako had anticipated this.

Instead of going fully through with the attack, she shifted her momentum and vanished from the front in an afterimage blur. She reappeared behind Emelie with her blade already mid-swing.

"Oh shit–!"

BAM!

The vicious strike connected with immense force. The impact sent Emelie flying upward like a rocket, her body tearing through the air.

As she watched her opponent soar, Ayako's grin flickered.

'I didn't feel the blade bite into flesh.She must have gotten one of those pesky invisible shields up at the very last second.'

BOOM!

Emelie crashed heavily against the barrier surrounding the stadium high up in the sky. Recovering herself, she remained suspended high above the arena as her eyes locked on the ground below.

Ayako bent her knees and launched herself off the ground, accelerating straight toward. She held her katana with both hands and pointed the tip forward in a deadly, focused stabbing position.

Emelie flipped gracefully to the side.

SHATTER!!!

The blade pierced straight through the barrier, shattering the magical construct like fragile glass.

Before Ayako could recover her footing in mid-air, Emelie swatted her right hand to the side.

SMACK!

A giant telekinetic hand struck Ayako away. Then, with a cold expression, Emelie swatted her hand downward.

BAM!

Another hand hammered her from above. She plummeted and slammed viciously back onto the arena.

CRASH!!!

The impact formed a wide, cracked crater with dust billowing outward. Yet, even as the debris settled, Ayako was already back on her feet. Her eyes shined with unbridled, competitive thrill as she looked back up at Emelie.

Just as she was preparing to leap back into the sky, something held her back.

She looked down and saw that two earthen hands had erupted from the floor, clamping firmly around her own ankles.

With a quick flex of her legs, she shattered the restraints into tiny pebbles. But by the time she looked up, Emelie was already coming down.

While flying down, every loose stone, pebble, and chunk of debris from the damaged arena rose into the sky, pulling together into a massive boulder above her head. Then, with a flick of her wrists, she hurled the massive rock straight down at the Myrian.

Ayako took the challenge head-on. She jumped straight toward the falling boulder and sliced the massive rock cleanly in half with almost no effort at all.

But Emelie’s hands remained extended.

Using her telekinesis, she seized the two falling halves of the boulder and slammed them back together with a deafening crash – trapping Ayako directly in the middle.

crack..crack, crack, crack...

As the recombined boulder hung in the air, a spider-web pattern of fractures spread across its surface before it exploded into a shower of dust and stone.

BOOM!!!

Through the cloud of debris, Ayako emerged and swung her blade in a series of rapid quick-draws. With each flash of her steel, she unleashed multiple crescent-moon elemental attacks.

Emelie flew forward, weaving her body through the air with elegant agility.

The first crescent of blazing fire sliced toward her chest. Emelie arched her back ninety degrees, diving beneath the heat as the flame singed the air above her.

The second crescent of freezing ice targeted her wingspan. She rolled to the left, causing the frost to brush against the side of her arm.

The third crescent made of sharp compressed wind aimed to bisect her. Emelie tilted her head, letting the whistling blade slice a single strand of her silver hair.

The fourth crescent of projectile earth came straight for her stomach. She spun gracefully around it, using its own draft to boost her downward momentum.

The final attack, a giant crackling stream of yellow lightning, shot straight toward her entire being with no way to dodge.

So instead of dodging, Emelie reached out and seized control of the lightning stream with her telekinesis. She spun her body in a full circle and redirected the bolt straight back at Ayako while adding her own major blast of fire to the attack.

The combined, devastating fusion of elements rushed toward Ayako.

BOOOOOOM!!!!!!

The explosion lit up the arena and beyond, shaking the coliseum foundations. But as the smoke cleared, Emelie’s eyes narrowed. Ayako was not there.

Scattered in her place were hundreds of delicate, pink sakura petals that drifted lazily through the warm air.

’Argh, dammit. I hate this move.’

Emelie scanned the empty arena as she floated a few feet off the floor. There was no sign of her opponent. Only the pink petals remained...

Suddenly, the silent petals began to swirl.

With a soft rustle, the pink cloud gathered up speed and formed a funnel that shot straight up toward her. She raised her arms and formed a dense, spherical barrier around her body to protect herself.

But the defense proved useless.

The sakura petals seemed to ignore the barrier, morphing through the telekinetic shield. They grazed against her skin, leaving small, shallow cuts on her arms and tearing thin lines into her black bodysuit.

Irritation crossed her face as she failed to protect herself. *Grrr* "Enough of this."

She closed her eyes and focused her mana. Faint green sparks began to crackle across her shoulders and down her arms.

With a sharp exhale, she exploded outward, releasing a high-voltage electrical discharge that rippled through the air, destroying the magical construct of the petals

The pink storm dissolved into nothingness, but the heavy exertion of the attack left Emelie feeling tense and exhausted.

"Haaa... *Huff* *Puff*..."

"Arrrgh!"

Above her, a scream of pain echoed through the sky.

When she looked up, Emelie saw that Ayako was falling while clutching her head in agony. A remnant of faint disruption electrical sparks were still dancing across her body.

Seizing the opportunity, Emelie shot upward and grabbed Ayako by her boot. She rushed back down toward the ground with terrifying speed and with a single, aggressive swing, she slammed her straight into the stone floor.

BOOOM!!!!!!!!!!

Another deep crater shattered the white stone of the arena.

Emelie immediately pushed herself away, putting several yards of distance between them as she landed with her chest heaving.

From the center of the crater, the rubble exploded outward. Ayako rose from the dust and let out a loud, unhinged laugh as her eyes widened with a manic, ecstatic joy.

"Yes! Yes, Emelie! That is exactly what I wanted!"

"Here comes the crazy..."

Both women looked beaten. Emelie’s sleek suit was torn with thin lines of blood marking her skin, while Ayako’s uniform was covered in dust, soot, and deep bruises.

Ayako flared her sword out to the side.

SHEEN!

A dense layer of translucent blue mana coated the steel that hummed with a low, threatening frequency.

They both charged.

BOOM—CLANG!!!

What followed was a brutal exchange of mortal combat.

Ayako's blade became a blur of lethal steel. She pierced, slashed, and parried with terrifying speed. Emelie met her head-on, her hands moving in a blur as she reinforced her palms with her own layer mana coating.

CLANG! CLANG! BAM!

The sounds echoed through the coliseum. Ayako lunged forward, her blade scraping against Emelie's forearm. Emelie ducked under the follow-up strike, driving a heavy elbow straight into her ribs.

Ayako felt the pain but didn't back down. She swept her blade down, trying to take Emelie's footing, but was unsuccessful as Emelie leaped over the sweep and launched a quick, short-range blast of fire toward Ayako's chest.

SHING!

Ayako quickly recovered and sliced through the fire, cutting the flames in half. She spun, using the momentum to deliver a heavy pommel downward strike to Emelie's shoulder. Emelie stumbled back, but was also quick to recover, sending a telekinetic blast that caught Ayako in the stomach.

Both girls bounced backward to create distance between themselves once more. They were panting, and their faces were covered in sweat and light dust, but their eyes remained locked in a fierce stare.

"Let’s take off the limiters, Emelie!" Ayako yelled with childlike excitement. "Let’s take off the limiters and dance all the way to the end!"

She raised her katana and infused her mana-coated blade with her natural affinity.

The translucent mana around the steel began to vibrate and swirl, transforming into a beautiful, flowing aura of glowing pink sakura petals. The light from the blade cast a soft, pink hue across the cracked white stone of the arena.

In the high commentary booth, Ken gripped his microphone tight with nerves. ["THIS IS IT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! SHE IS UNLEASHING IT!"]

["The very same technique she used to defeat Nichole Firestar!]" Christy added. ["This is Ayako’s absolute peak!"]

Emelie simply smiled as she stood loosely with her hands to the side and watched Ayako.

With a look of battle hunger, Ayako kicked off the ground and charged forward like a gunshot, her body breaking the sound barrier.

A loud sonic boom echoed through the coliseum as she closed the distance, aiming her petal-shrouded blade straight at Emelie’s neck.

Something was strange about Emelie as she stood there. She didn’t raise a barrier. She didn’t move her hands. She simply wore a confident, knowing smirk.

Ayako’s heart pounded with a wild thrill.

’This is it! She’s going to counter! Show me how you’ll defend this Emelie!’

The blade was mere inches from Emelie’s face when suddenly–

"I give up."

BOOOOOMMMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!

The sudden deceleration forced Ayako to halt her blade, and the tip of her steel stopped exactly one millimeter away from Emelie’s nose.

The explosive force of her stopped momentum erupted behind Emelie, creating a massive, towering explosion of pink sakura petals that formed the shape of a giant, blooming tree directly behind her, scattering soft leaves across the entire arena.

Ayako stood frozen with her chest heaving and her gray eyes wide with the look of crushing devastation. Her hands trembled on the hilt of her sword as she cracked a whisper at her opponent.

"W-What... What did you just say...?"

Emelie calmly reached up with two fingers and gently pushed the tip of the katana away from her face. "I said, I give up. I formally yield the match."

The silence that followed was deafening.

Then, the entire coliseum erupted into chaotic outrage.

"WHAT?!" Dominik screamed, pulling his hair in disbelief. "SHE GAVE UP?! WHY?! Why would she do that?!"

"NO WAY!" a Myrian in the crowd yelled. "THAT’S STRAIGHT BOGUS! FIGHT HER!"

"Is she insane?!" an Eldorian threw his hands in the air. "She had her on the ropes! Why did she stop?!"

Up in the booth, Commentator Ken was completely speechless as his mouth hung open while staring at the two girls.

["I... I don’t believe my eyes! Emelie Herst has just voluntarily surrendered the match! Ayako has won, but... but the crowd is in absolute shock!"]

Ayako’s face turned pale.

The thrill, the excitement, the beautiful, burning competitive fire that had filled her veins just a second ago had completely vanished, replaced by a hollow, frustrating void.

"W-Why...? Why? Why?! WHY?! Why would you do this to me?!"

Emelie turned her back and casually walked toward the Eldorian representative benches with a lazy wave of her hand.

"Just to troll, I guess. I wanted to soften you up for the rest of my team who hadn’t had a chance to fight you. I’ve done my part. Have fun with the rest of our lineup, Ayako-chan~"

Chapter 220 - Next

Ayako stood alone in the shattered ring. Her gaze burned with a quiet rage of restraint as she watched Emelie’s retreating figure. It took everything she had to fight down the overwhelming urge to chase after her and force her to finish what she had started.

Emelie, unaffected by the daggers being stared into her back, casually strolled back to the benches. When she reached her teammates, she stopped in front of a wide-eyed, mouth hanging open, Zack, and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Looks like you’re up, senior. Make us proud."

Zack couldn’t believe what he was hearing as he looked at Emelie in disbelief. He slowly turned his head to look at the arena, where Ayako was currently radiating a dark aura of plain frustration, and then looked back to his junior, who simply offered him a cheerful wink.

Zack nervously pulled up his red scarf, covering the lower half of his face. "Hey, uh... can I just forfeit? Like, right now?"

Amber slid up next to him and curved her eyes into a sweet, yet dangerous smile.

"Of course you can. But then you're going to have to deal with me after all of this is over. I wonder which is worse for you~? Pick your poison, Zack."

"You're too cruel, Prez."

Gasp "Cruel?! Me?! I'm the nicest girl you'll ever meet! Isn't that right, Vicky?"

Victor looked at him deadpan and pushed up his glasses. "That's right. Now pull up your socks, Zack, and go out there and represent Eldoria like you're supposed to."

"You can do it, Zack!" Summer cheered with encouragement.

"Yeah, show them what you've got!" Junior threw a small fist into the air, while Lilly gave him multiple supportive nods from the back.

"Haaaa... Alright, alright, I get it. Thanks for the support, guys." Zack adjusted his scarf and slowly began to make his way toward the arena.

As he walked away, Autumn marched over to Emelie. She stood right in front of the silver-haired girl with her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she glared down at her.

"What?" Emelie raised an eyebrow.

Autumn stared at her for a long, silent moment, before clicking her tongue in disgust.

"You really are a piece of shit," she snapped, before turning on her heel and marching back to sit next to her sister.

Emelie watched her leave when a small, dry chuckle escaped her lips. A soft green light gathered around her hands as she began to knit her own minor cuts back together. "... You don’t have to tell me twice." she murmured to herself.

Zack stopped several yards away from Ayako, who was looking down at the ground with her hair completely covering her face and her shoulders tense.

"Hey there, uhm... Izumi..san? Looks like we run into each other again, huh?"

No reaction.

"Don’t worry, I won’t run away this time."

His dark mana flared and he clapped his hands together.

Suddenly, every single shadow from every dark corner of the cracked arena, along with the shadow stretching from Zack’s own feet, began to shift and expand upward. The darkness climbed toward the sky and weaving together to form a massive dome that began to seal the entire arena in pitch-black darkness.

Before the dome could fully close, Zack offered a quiet smile. "Welcome to my territory."

["WHOA!"] Commentator Ken screamed as the darkness sealed them from view. ["IT LOOKS LIKE ZACK IS DEPLOYING WHAT SEEMS TO BE HIS SIGNATURE MOVE! With this, he has total control and mastery over the fight!"]

["That’s a very smart move,"] Christy noted. ["In the dark, a swordsman’s visual advantage is like, suuuper neutralized. But this is Ayako we’re talking about. Who knows what she’ll pull off!"]

"Looks like Zack is going all out right from the start." Lily watched with interest.

"Will it be enough, though?" Summer interlocked her finger anxiously.

"Zack is strong!" Junior insisted, his eyes bright with hope. "And Ayako– Errr... Izumi-san is already tired from her fight with Emelie! He's definitely going to win–"

The shadow dome began to shift.

Then, it slowly began to unravel, peeling away from the top down like a dissolving curtain. As the silhouettes inside were revealed, the seventy spectators gasped.

Ayako was standing perfectly upright. In her left hand, she held a beaten unconscious Zack up by his scarf with her katana.

With a bored sigh, she tossed his limp body toward the waiting healers, before turning her cold gray eyes back toward the Eldorian bench.

"Next."

"""YEEEAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!"""

The Myrian crowd erupted into a deafening roar of triumph.

["E-EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT JUST HAPPENED IN THERE!"] Ken yelled, looking completely flabbergasted. ["One thing is for certain! Izumi Ayako is far from done!"]

Feeling extra pissed off, Autumn stood up from the Eldorian bench, her green eyes flashing with anger. "I'll put an end to that gorilla with a sword."

"Autumn, please be careful," Summer looked up at her sister with worry.

Autumn gave a firm nod, gathered a current of wind beneath her boots and shot into the air, flying gracefully toward the center of the arena before landing with a soft hiss of air.

"Hmmm... You're small and cute."

"Shut up, gorilla!" Autumn's face flushed with anger as she pointed a stiff finger at Ayako.

"... And you're loud. Just like Ryuuji."

Without another word, Autumn unleashed a devastating gale. She swept her arms forward, and a giant, swirling torrent of razor-sharp wind, cut across the stone, tearing up the loose debris and launching it toward Ayako like a wall of flying blades.

Ayako simply tilted her body and clicked open her katana by an inch as she unleashed a vertical air slash that cleanly split Autumn's gale down the middle, letting the wind rush harmlessly past her sides.

"W-Why you–!" Autumn gritted her teeth.

She manifested several pressure wind spheres and launched them in a crisscross pattern to throw off Ayako's tracking. At the same time, she manipulated the air pressure around Ayako's lungs, trying to suffocate her.

Ayako sprinted forward and effortlessly weaved through the oncoming wind spheres. When the sudden drop in air pressure threatened to restrict her breathing, she simply gathered her own wind mana, forcing a fresh pocket of air into her path as she closed the distance.

Autumn quickly levitated, taking to the sky to keep her distance.

She thrust both hands downward and created a rotating vacuum that attempted to pull Ayako off her feet.

However, Ayako slammed the tip of her sheathed katana into the stone which anchored herself against the howling wind as she looked calmly up at the floating girl.

Grrrr "Don’t get cocky!" Refusing to back down, Autumn crossed her wrists, drawing upon more mana.

The howling winds around her compressed and spun so fast they began to whistle a high-pitched tune. With a fierce shout, she launched a barrage of invisible vacuum-sealed air lances straight down at the floor.

WHOOSH—BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The impacts shattered the stone wherever Ayako stepped.

The Heiress was forced into a high-speed sprint, dodging the invisible lances by mere inches. She moved in an erratic zigzag across the arena with her katana drawn just enough to deflect the stray shockwaves that threatened to knock her off balance.

"You can’t keep dodging forever, gorilla!" Autumn screamed, dropping her altitude slightly as she slammed both palms together.

As the air currents shifted, a massive twister-hurricane materialised directly beneath Ayako, engulfing her form in a column of debris and suffocating pressure. The tempest began to lift the stone shards and grinded them together like a blender.

Inside the swirling chaos, Ayako remained perfectly composed. She sank into her stance and let her left hand gripping the scabbard while her right rested on the hilt.

SHING!

With a draw so fast it left an afterimage, Ayako swung her blade in a full, horizontal circle. A razor-sharp ring of compressed water exploded outward from her position, slicing through the eye of the twister.

The pressure differential popped the hurricane like a balloon, scattering the trapped stone fragments across the ring.

Autumn gasped as the shockwave of the collapsing wind pushed her back in the air. Before she could regain her bearings, Ayako was already leaping off the ground, using the falling debris as stepping stones to close the gap.

"S-Shit!" She pulled wind close to her body to form a propulsion system, which she then shot backward through the air. Simultaneously she threw out twin arcs of wind blades that sliced through the air below at the approaching Myrian.

Ayako parried the first blade with the flat of her katana and ducked under the second, her momentum barely slowing down.

She flipped in mid-air and landed lightly back on the arena floor before staring up at her floating green-haired opponent.

"You're good. But you're not 'Emelie good'."

Snap.

"SHUT UP!"

Autumn's green eyes glowed with wild, unrestricted mana as she flew higher into the sky.

She threw her arms wide and gathered every single atmospheric current in the stadium. The clouds above began to swirl as she prepared a devastating, city-level hurricane, intending to flatten the entire arena.

Ayako sighed, her fingers wrapping around her hilt. She didn't look up as she drew her blade.

With a swift, horizontal slash, Ayako unleashed a wave of blazing hot fire that shot straight into the sky. The heat of the attack expanded the air, disrupting and dismantling Autumn's gathering hurricane before it could even form.

"W-What?! What did you do?!"

Before she could recover and try again, Ayako's form scattered into a cloud of pink sakura petals that rose rapidly toward her.

"Stay back! Get away from me!" Autumn unleashed a defensive blast of wind to blow the petals away.

But the pink leaves defied the gale, continuing their relentless path toward her.

Autumn quickly gathered her wind around herself to form a dense, spinning shield of air. To her horror, the moment the petals touched the shield, they began to slice through the wind currents, unraveling her defense.

That was when she noticed a shadow falling from above.

"No–!" She looked up.

Ayako was hovering in the air above her, her katana raised. With a single brutal downward strike using the flat of her blade, she struck Autumn point-blank directly across the shoulder.

crack—BOOOOOM!!!!!!!!!

The force of the blow sent her crashing straight down into the arena, creating a fresh crater.

"AUTUMN!" Summer screamed from the bench.

Ayako landed gracefully beside the crater. She bent down, picked up the unconscious girl’s body, and tossed her toward the medical priests.

She wiped a light sweat from her brow, sheathed her blade, and turned her gaze back toward the Eldorian bench.

"Next."