THORNS 187

Chapter 187 - Unexpected Occurrence

Match 9: Lance Finaly (Tricea) vs. Yumi Yumi (Myria) vs. Jason Campbell (Riverton) vs. Maxwell Dorothy Jr. (Eldoria).

The moment Junior's profile lit up the screen, a collective, visceral roar erupted from the southern stands.

Eldorians, inside the colosseum and out, were all fueled with vengeful vigor over the brutal beatdown their young Princess had suffered just moments prior.

"AVENGE THE PRINCESS!"

"CRUSH THEM, MY PRINCE! SHOW THE TRICEANS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU MESS ROYAL BLOOD!"

Down on the northern sidelines, Lance Finaly – the eldest of the Tricean triplets – let out a miserable groan as he looked over at Ryan, who was calmly stepping out of his suit.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now, Ryan? I feel like I am at a psychological disadvantage out there. You just sent his little sister to the hospital, and now I bet the Crown Prince is going to step onto the arena looking to tear my spine out! I mean, just listen to this crowd! I'm fucking dead!"

"Meh. Sucks to be you, man." Ryan shrugged as he ran a hand through his curly afro.

"You dick!"

Meanwhile, over at the western Riverton benches, the atmosphere was completely different. It was vibrant, chaotic, and fiercely enthusiastic.

Nichole lunged forward and slammed her hand violently against the shoulder of her right-hand man.

"Alright, Jason! This is it! Go out there and show these pretentious bastards and tech-snobs what Riverton’s finest can really do! Don’t you dare lose!"

The rest of the Crossroad Academy representatives cheered boisterously, slamming their weapons together in a display of solidarity.

Jason Campbell – the man with his hair perfectly split down the middle, half pitch black and half snow white – remained completely calm amidst the rowdiness.

"Thank you all for the support," Jason nodded once.

He then reached down and gripped the hilt of his beautifully crafted, double-sided sword that gleamed with an ominous, split enchantment.

"I will ensure Riverton’s name is thoroughly engraved into the stone of this pit."

With practiced ease, Jason walked onto the arena floor alongside Lance and Myria’s Yumi. Three of the four combatants had taken their places, but the southern side remained vacant.

BOOM!

An explosion of golden aura erupted from the depths of the southern tunnel. Out of the darkness, Junior shot into the sky like a golden rocket, leaping high through the air before slamming heavily onto his designated spot.

The impact sent a shockwave of wind that swept across the arena floor, his violet eyes flashing with a terrifying fury.

["THAT’S MY LITTLE BROTHER! GO GET ’EM, MJ! DESTROY EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM! SHOW THE WORLD THE UNBREAKABLE WILL OF ELDORIA!"]

["Uh, Princess Faye, please remember to maintain neutral commentary,"] Commentator Ken whispered into the mic before switching back to his professional self. ["The countdown is on, folks! Let's get ready to rumbleeee! IN FIVE!"]

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

["FIGHT!"]

BOOM!

Junior didn't wait for his opponents to make a move. Driven by determination and a fierce protective rage for his sister, he lunged forward to his nearest opponent.

He slammed his palms together and with a crystallization crackle, the moisture in the air condensed, forming two beautifully jagged dual-wielding scimitars composed of glacial ice, similar to that of his sister.

The first to meet him was Jason Campbell.

The Rivertonian raised his weapon and executed a flawless, lightning-fast defensive parry.

CLANG!

CLINK!

CLANK!

"You're fast, Prince. But your anger makes your stance predictable. You really oughta calm down."

"Predictable is all I need to crush you!" Junior barked, swinging his newly formed ice saber in a vicious upward arc that forced Jason to rapidly leap backward.

Seeing an opening, Lance quickly backed away toward the edge of the arena, his fingers flying across the string of his magi-tech bow. Without using active elemental magic yet, he utilized the bow's internal mechanical tension and fired a rapid-fire volley of steel-tipped armor-piercing arrows directly at Junior's blind spot.

Thwip! Thwip! Thwip!

Junior, without looking, relied solely on his instincts. He morphed his left ice saber into a shield of dense frost fragments and deflected the incoming arrows with ease.

In the same motion, he lunged forward and thrusted his remaining right saber directly toward the Myrian, Yumi, who was trying to circle around him.

The speed of Junior blitzing across the arena was completely overwhelming to all who came across him. Within a matter of thirty seconds, his relentless, aggressive assault had pushed all three of his opponents into a defensive bottleneck, thoroughly dominating the flow of battle.

["Incredible!"] Commentator Ken shouted. ["The young prince is fighting like a man possessed! The three contestants are seriously struggling to keep up with his raw physical output!"]

Tsk "That's enough warming up from me."

Finding space to breathe, Jason took a deep breath. Suddenly, his double-sided sword erupted into a contrasting display of elemental sorcery.

The top blade of his weapon glowed with a blinding, searing white light mana, while the bottom blade was instantly cloaked in a swirling, abyssal vortex of pitch-black dark mana.

"Let's see how your ice handles the duality of Light and Darkness, Prince."

He swung his double blade, unleashing a synchronised wave of light and dark crescent slashes that ripped through the air. The light magic burned with intense, searing heat, while the dark magic possessed a gravity-compressing force that warped the air it sliced.

Simultaneously, Lance's mechanical bow began to hum with its own elemental power. The magi-tech conduits along the limbs of the weapon lit up in four distinct colors. "Activating advanced combat mode: Four-Element Symphony!"

Lance drew back the string, and a massive, synthesised arrow composed of fire, swirling wind, dense earth, and crushing water materialised on the rest. He let the string go, and the elemental arrow split into four devastating spells that converged on Junior from high above.

Junior found himself completely trapped dead center.

He frantically summoned a massive, multi-layered dome of solid ice to shield himself, but the combined, overwhelming force of Jason's light-and-dark duality and Lance's four-element barrage was simply too much to handle.

BOOM!

Junior was sent skidding violently across the stone floor as the ice dome instantly pulverized into a cloud of snow and vapor.

Kneeling on the shattered stone, his breathing came in heavy as his left arm hung slightly limp from the impact. He looked up at his three closing opponents, then toward the medical tunnel. The image of his unconscious battered sister still burned brightly in his mind.

"No... I am not losing here. I trained too hard just to lose again. I will... I WILL beat you!"

Junior slowly stood up and gritted his teeth with his arms dropped to his sides.

Suddenly a terrifying and utterly suffocating pressure descended upon the entire coliseum. His blue hair shifting into a glowing golden-white and his once violet eyes transforming into gold

Up in the front row of the VIP section, Saintess Christy abruptly stood up from her seat as her eyes wide with an expression of pure astonishment.

"D-Divine... Divine mana?! I can feel it! This is Divine Mana! How can an Eldorian royal possess such a sacred power?! Is this– Has Goddess Bula blessed him?!"

"WHAT?!" Sadie shrieked and dropped her snacks. "The prince has Divine mana?!"

Up in the private royal box, the Pope's wrinkled hands tightened so hard around his golden staff that the metal began to creak as his wise eyes widened with absolute disbelief.

Beside him, King Maxwell remained entirely motionless on his throne. Though the subtle, intense tightening of his jaw betrayed the deep shock running through his veins.

["WHAT A PARADIGM SHIFT!"] Commentator Ken screamed with a cracking voice. [" Is what the Saintess is saying true!? Have we just all witnessed the Goddess blessing someone in real time?!"]

Before anyone could even process the revelation, Junior shot forward. His speed was no longer human; he moved like a literal flash of divine lightning and appeared directly in front of Yumi Yumi in the blink of an eye.

With a casual, light flick of his forearm, he struck Yumi's defenses. The moment the holy light touched the Myrian defensive spell, it completely dissolved it into particles of nothingness and sent her flying across the arena before crashing onto the protective barrier.

"""YEAAAHHHH!!!"""

["He's completely dominating!"] Princess Faye cheered, her voice crackling with a mixture of shock and pride. ["The divine light of Eldoria has awakened!"]

Lance Finaly frantically pulled his bow, firing a desperate, maximum-output fire-and-wind combination arrow. Without caring, Junior walked straight toward the incoming projectile and the moment the raging inferno made contact with the golden aura surrounding his body, the fire instantly snuffed out.

Junior reached out, grabbed the top of Lance's compound bow, and with a casual twist of his wrist, snapped the reinforced weapon in half like a dry twig before delivering a soft palm strike to Lance's chest that sent him skidding fifty feet across the floor.

Jason lunged from the blindspot, aiming a lethal strike at Junior's neck. Junior, however, simply raised two fingers and caught the razor-sharp edge of the blade perfectly.

The divine light bled from his fingers, instantly cracking and began to purify the darkness of Jason's sword.

Despite the terrifying showcase of power, Kurt noticed something a little off as he watched Junior's movements.

Beside him, Christy let out a soft, worried sigh. "He's winning... but no one has been eliminated yet because they're all fighting desperately for survival... And, as I'm sure you've noticed, look at his posture."

Kurt looked even closer. Underneath the beautiful white-and-gold light, Junior's shoulders were beginning to subtly sag. Drops of barely visible sweat were beginning to show, and his breathing, though masked by the roaring divine energy, was becoming incredibly shallow.

"He's not used to it," Christy pointed out. "Divine mana isn't something a human body can naturally harbor without years of specialised, holy training. It's taking a monstrous toll on his stamina and his mana veins with every single second it remains active."

'I see. So he's kinda like his sister in that regard.'

Back in the arena, Junior delivered a heavy, light-infused kick that sent Jason sliding back. But as Junior took his next step to pursue, his knee subtly buckled, a sharp wince of pain crossing his features as the golden aura around his skin flickered for a brief microsecond.

Jason, while wiping a trail of blood from his lip, noticed the stumble and subtly smiled.

Christy squeezed the stone railing, her voice tight with tension. "He figured it out. If Junior is stalled out for just a few more minutes until his divinity naturally wears off... the prince is completely done for."

Chapter 188 - Match 9 Climax

"Stall him!" Jason commanded the other two representatives. "Don’t let him touch you! Just keep moving!"

"Rahhh! Take this!" Junior lunged toward Lance and swung his fist downward.

But just when his foot entered the radius of Lance’s tactically placed gravity-anchors, an artificial force field multiplied the gravity by tenfold, unexpectedly slamming Junior’s boot into the stone, cracking the ground beneath him.

It only delayed him for a second, but that moment was exactly what his opponents needed.

From his left, Yumi channeled a high-tier earth-and-water combination attack, conjuring a massive swirling pit of quicksand meant to stop his movements and sap his momentum.

["What a brilliant defensive pivot by the international students!"] Commentator Ken excitedly shouted.

["It seems their plan is to stall him, and it’s now become a race against their own survival."] Princess Faye analyzed, her gaze tracking her little brother’s subtly flickering aura.

"Such cheap tactics won’t work on me!" Junior easily escaped Yumi’s quicksand by effortlessly jumping out.

He emerged from the earth like a vengeful god and immediately locked onto Jason Campbell, who stood waiting with his double-sided sword held in a readied guard.

"Jason! You're the one pulling the strings! So I'll take you down first!" Junior shouted, driving forward with a thrust of concentrated holy energy.

Jason waited until the very last microsecond, and then, with a hypnotic spin of his blade, he utilized the dark half of his sword to slash a crescent moon attack that absorbed the kinetic force of Junior's momentum, while his light magic flared to deflect the prince to the side.

VREEEEM—BOOM!

The golden light gouged a fifty-foot trench into the arena floor, missing Jason by just an inch.

Junior leapt out and prepared to swing again, but suddenly, the brilliant white-and-golden light connecting him to the divine sputtered, flickering on and off.

"H-Huh...? What's going– G-Gah!"

In an instant, the glowing golden light in his eyes died out, returning them to their natural violet, and his hair snapped back to its light blue color. A wave of extreme exhaustion hit him like a physical freight train. His knees buckled and a pained grunt escaped his throat as he fell to one knee, panting heavily with his hands trembling against the stone.

"No... not yet... It hasn't even been five minutes yet... damn it, just a little more...!"

["LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! THE PRINCE HAS RUN OUT OF STEAM!"] Commentator Ken roared to the stadium. ["The divine power has evaporated! Prince Maxwell Junior has transformed back to normal!"]

"Now, Jason!" Nichole screamed from the Riverton sidelines. "Take him down!"

"Loud and clear, Captain."

Not hesitating for a single moment, Jason transformed into a streak of black-and-white lightning. He closed the distance instantly and spun his double-sided sword in a lethal arc.

"N-NO!" Junior, driven by desperation, forced himself back onto his feet. He clapped his hands together and tried to summon an icy defensive wall, but his core was completely spent. The ice wall was hollow and brittle.

SHATTER!

Jason easily shattered the ice into millions of sparkling shards with a single, devastating slash. The impact cut directly into Junior’s chest, sending the prince flying backward across the arena.

Before Junior could even recover his footing, Jason materialized in his blindspot, delivering another slash across his back, followed by a sweep of his legs.

Junior hit the ground hard, his breath exploding from his lungs as landed face first. The second he turned around; he was met with a blade to his throat that he could do absolutely nothing against.

["ELIMINATION!"] Commentator Ken screamed, sending a massive shockwave of pure shock through the entire stadium. ["I cannot believe my eyes! The Crown Prince of Eldoria, Maxwell Dorothy Junior, is the first in this fatal four way to be eliminated from Match Nine!"]

The southern stands went deathly silent.

The home crowd was completely paralyzed by the sight of their prince lying down, unable to stand.

On the field, Lance let out an ecstatic laugh, leaning on his broken bow as he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Oh, thank the Goddess above! That monster is down! We actually survived!"

Yumi let out a soft sigh of relief, dropping her guard for a brief second to catch her breath.

But Jason didn’t share the sentimentality.

"You two haven’t forgotten where we are, have you?" Jason asked in a tone devoid of any pity. "This is still a fatal four-way. And you are my enemies."

Before Yumi could even process his words, Jason burst forward. The Myrian sorcerer, already completely drained from fighting Junior, could barely raise her hands before Jason’s blade swept through her defense, striking and sending her flying out the arena and crashing onto the protective barrier.

["K.O! YUMI YUMI IS OUT!"] Faye announced, trying to keep her commentary professional despite the lump in her throat. ["Jason Campbell is moving like a reaper out there!"]

"Wait, wait, wait, Campbell, let’s–"

Lance desperately tried to pull a back-up small crossbow from his thigh holster, firing a frantic stream of iron bolted arrows, but Jason was entirely out of his league.

He effortlessly dodged the incoming projectiles with minor tilts of his head, closed the distance in a blur, and delivered a swift, crushing strike with the flat of his blade to Lance’s chin, followed by a powerful gut check and an upwards kick to his chin again that propelled the Tricean right out of the arena.

"""""YEEAAAHHHHH!!!"""""

["AND THAT IS THE MATCH!"] Commentator Ken shouted as the Riverton stands erupted into a madhouse of cheers and flying confetti.

["The winner of Match Nine – Jason Campbell of Riverton!"]

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

The moment Jason crossed over back to his fellow representatives, Nichole completely lost her mind. While laughing hysterically, she leaped over the bench and jumped right onto his back, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I knew you could do it, you split-haired bastard! You fucking crushed them!"

The rest of the Riverton representatives swarmed and hoisted him onto their shoulders, cheering and slamming their fists against his armor in a roaring celebration of their massive victory over the host nation’s prince.

Meanwhile, on the southern side of the arena, a deeply somber scene was unfolding.

Junior laid on a white medical stretcher with a body that was completely limp. A team of church healers in white robes hurried alongside the stretcher, administering basic soothing magic to stabilize his mana veins as they wheeled him toward the dark stadium tunnel.

Once out of sight, he raised a trembling, heavily bruised forearm, covering his eyes completely as tears of shame and frustration leaked down his cheeks.

"Damn it... *Sob* Even though... even though I trained so hard... so that I’ll never lose again... So that I could protect Kiana... I still lost. I couldn’t do anything... I’m so... useless!"

Up in the broadcasting booth, Commentator Ken let out a deeply sympathetic sigh, ["An incredibly heartbreaking loss for the local fans here today. Both the prince and the princess of Eldoria had lost their respective matches. Princess Faye... as their eldest sister, what are your thoughts on this outcome?"]

Faye sat rigidly in her seat with her golden eyes fixed on the empty tunnel. She leaned into her microphone, her voice carrying a powerful resonant tone.

["On a true battlefield, Ken... your title, your lineage, and your royal blood do not matter. The dirt does not care who your father is, as we have clearly seen here today. The world is an incredibly big place, filled with hidden monsters and relentless warriors...

["As their older sister, I sincerely hope my siblings take today’s pain not as a defeat, but as a harsh lesson and a powerful motivator moving forward. Use the lessons this tournament brought to them to better themselves and grow even stronger than before."]

["Well spoken, Your Highness,"] Ken agreed solemnly, nodding his head.

He then checked his glowing ledger and his face instantly shifted back into his classic showman's smile as he looked out over the stadium.

["And with that, ladies and gentlemen, we have reached the final event of Day 1! No randomization shuffle is needed for this one, folks! Will the final representatives of the day please enter the stage!"]

The massive holographic projection screens shifted, displaying the profiles of the last four combatants who had yet to taste the dirt of the arena.

Match 10: Amber Strongwill (Eldoria) vs. Rin (Myria) vs. Loen Finlay (Tricea) vs. Drew (Riverton).

Down at the Eldorian bench, Amber stood up and stretched her arms above her head with a bright grin. Her bubbly personality seemed completely unaffected by the heavy tension hanging over the home crowd.

"Well, it's finally my turn! Jeez, I can't believe they saved me for the last match. My legs were starting to go numb from sitting so long!"

Victor, sitting with a thick ice pack taped to his bruised ribs, offered her a tired but genuine smile. "Good luck out there, President Amber."

Zack pulled his black scarf down slightly, nodding. "Yeah, don't overextend. Good luck."

Lily Mathers and Summer Wingard waved gently, ""We'll be cheering for you, Amber!""

"Mess them up good, Prez!" Autumn pumped her fist upwards.

"Thanks, guys!" Amber beamed, adjusting the collar of her white uniform.

Then she slowly turned her head toward the front of the bench where Emelie stood. Amber pouted playfully and nudged her shoulder. "Hey, Emelie~ aren't you going to wish me good luck too?"

"No need." Emelie stated with a small, knowing smirk tugging at the corner of her lips. "You're going to win anyway."

"Hehe, I'll take what I can get from you!"

With a bouncy, energetic stride, Amber marched out and stepped onto the wide stone pit.

Looking over the crowd, her grin widened as she spotted a few lively people who found their voice amidst the somber of the last match.

"Go get 'em, Amber! We're rooting for you!" Sadie cheered while jumping up and down.

Beside her, Hope was cupping her tiny hands around her mouth as she squealed, "Go, Amber, go!"

Amber waved back at the girls enthusiastically. Her eyes then shifted slightly to the left, locking directly with Kurt.

Kurt simply offered her a cool nod of approval, wishing her good luck.

Amber's smile turned distinctly mischievous. She raised a gloved hand to her eye and gave him a deliberately playful wink.

"... Huh? Did she wink at me?" A random person in the crowd asked.

"... Pretty sure it was for me."

"... Who the hell are you!? It was obviously for me!"

"... NO, ME!"

"... ME!"

"... ME!"

Crack

"Ow–!"

Suddenly, without warning, Kurt felt a bone-crushing grip clamping down onto his left hand.

He turned his head slowly to his left. Sitting right beside him, Diana was staring blankly at him – as if to look into his very soul.

"Rosie? What, pray tell, was that about?"

".... What was what about, Chief?"

"She winked at you," Diana stated, her voice entirely flat and her grip on his hand tightening even more. "Specifically. At you."

"Oh that? Psshh, come on, Diana. She wasn't winking at me. She was winking at the sad people in the crowd. Probably to cheer them up. Which it did. Her winking specifically at me wouldn't make a lick of sense. But never mind that—look, the final match is about to start, let's watch."

Diana kept her eyes on him for a silent three seconds, thoroughly eyeing his relaxed profile. Slowly, the terrifying pressure evaporated from her demeanour, and a satisfied smile graced her lips as she released her tightened grip on his hand. "Very well. Let us watch."

From the seat next to her, Kurt glanced over only to see Christy trembling as she desperately tried to suppress an amused snicker at his expense. Her blue eyes gleamed with a mischievous mockery, at which he simply rolled his eye over and ignored.

High up above, the massive crimson numbers materialised in the sky one final time as the countdown for the final clash of the day began to pulse.