THORNS 189

Chapter 189 - Amber Strongwill

["LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THIS IS IT! THE FINAL MATCH OF THE DAY!"] Commentator Ken's voice cracked into the upper registers.

["The board is locked, the arena is cleared, and four titans remain to close the curtains on this opening round! LET THE COUNTDOWN BEGIN!"]

"FIVE!!!""" The southern Eldorian crowd roared.

"""FOUR!!!""" The northern Tricean crowd roared.

"""THREE!!!""" The eastern Myrian crowd roared.

"""TWO!!!""" The western Rivertonian crowd roared.

"""ONE!!!""" Amber stood at her southern position with her hands tucked neatly behind her back and her posture completely relaxed as she offered a bright grin to the three fighters in the arena.

[" LET THE FINAL MATCH BEGIN!"]

The crowd braced themselves.

"..."

They waited.

"...."

And waited.

But nothing happened.

The stadium’s collective cheer suddenly fell into a confused murmur. In their respective positions, the Rivertonian Drew, the Tricean Loen Finlay, and the Myrian Rin stood still.

Their weapons were half-drawn and their feet were planted in starting stances, but not a single one of them had moved an inch forward.

["Uh... We seem to have a bit of a tactical standoff right out of the gate. Are they perhaps just feeling each other out? Trying to map out their strategies before crossing blades?"]

["They’re not standing off, Ken,"] Faye spoke softly into her own mic.

Commentator Ken turned his head toward the princess only to pause. Faye was staring down at the field with rigidness tensing her body. Nervous sweat dripped down her forehead, and though a forced smile was plastered across her lips, her golden eyes were wide with a deeply ingrained panic.

["Princess Faye? What do you mean?"]

["Look closer at their eyes,"] Faye murmured, her throat visibly moving as she swallowed hard. ["They aren’t choosing not to move. They cannot move."]

Down on the fractured stone pit, a suffocating gravity had descended over the arena like a falling mountain.

There was no spell activated. It was a raw manifestation of pure killing intent so dense it had locked the muscles of the three international students into place. Their hearts hammered against their ribs like caged birds, and as they looked across the arena, their trembling eyes locked onto the source.

Amber was still standing where she had started. Her hands were still tucked neatly behind her back, and that bright, bubbly smile was still fixed across her features.

Down at the Future Academy benches, Victor’s face slowly became pale. "Oh no... Oh, Goddess above, no. I know that look."

"What is it, Vic? What’s wrong with her?" Zack asked.

"Amber... President Amber is currently furious. She always smiles like that when she’s about to break something..."

On the lower VIP seats, Kurt suddenly felt a sharp jolt shooting through his system. His unique skill, Adaptation, screamed a red-alert warning of imminent danger, forcing his muscles to tense automatically even though the pressure wasn’t directed at him in the slightest.

Finally, Amber broke the stillness.

She tilted her head slightly to the side as her eyes locked onto the trembling contestants.

"You know..." Amber said so sweetly it felt like a sing-song melody echoed beautifully through the quiet coliseum.

"I’m a little... no, wait. I’m actually very pissed off right now. One of our own was a no-show and I just had to watch my cute little underclassmen get beaten up so badly that they couldn’t even walk off on their own."

She took a dainty step forward, her hands still tucked behind her back.

"So... I’m really, really sorry about this," she giggled as her smile widened into something entirely devoid of humanity. "But I’m going to have to take all of my frustrations out on the three of you."

With a light and innocent grace, Amber began to skip across the stone floor.

She hopped from one foot to the other, humming a quiet tune under her breath as she approached the Rivertonian, Drew.

Drew didn’t see a cute, bubbly academy girl skipping toward him. Through the lens of his survival instincts, he saw the manifestation of death casually strolling toward him.

Every fiber of his being screamed that if he didn’t move away from her right this second, he was going to die. With an agonising effort, he forced his locked muscles to respond and anxiously dragged his boot backward to take a single step away.

Amber stopped skipping. Her expression flattened into a serious, chilling blankness.

"Stay," she commanded.

Drew’s body couldn’t help itself; his muscles once again clamped on the spot.

Amber reached him within the next second, her hands returning behind her back as she tilted her head upward to look at his towering frame.

"Can I have your weapon, please?" she asked cutely.

Drew’s jaw clenched. He wanted to scream no, he wanted to swing at her, but suddenly, his right arm began to move entirely on its own accord. His fingers unclasped from his shield, wrapping around the hilt of his heavy iron mace, and with a confusing motion, his arm extended forward, handing the weapon directly over to Amber.

"Hehehe~ Thank you."

The very next millisecond, her smile vanished.

BAM! BAM! THWACK! WHACK! CRACK! CRACK!

With a terrifying display of physical strength, Amber unleashed a vicious, lightning-fast sequence of strikes. She used Drew’s own weapon to hammer him down over and over.

The speed of the thrashing left a trail of afterimages in the air. Within three seconds, Drew’s armor was completely caved in. His eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed face-first onto the stone, unconscious and in critical condition.

"Aw... what? The fun’s over already? You’re so fragile, Drew of Riverton. Are you really a representative?"

She turned her head toward the western Riverton benches, where Nichole Firestar and the rest of the Crossroads representatives were staring at the scene in a horrified silence.

"Hey, Crossroad!" Amber called out cheerfully, waving her hand. "You can have your friend back! Make sure you catch him!"

BOOM!

With a brutal, enhanced kick, she launched Drew’s unconscious body straight across the arena. His massive frame soared cleanly over the boundary and crashed hard onto the protective barrier directly in front of the Riverton bench.

Then, she hurled his iron mace right after him, the weapon embedding itself deep into the stone beside him.

One down.

Next, Amber turned her deathly smile toward the Tricean, Loen Finlay.

But Loen was having none of it. Fearing for his life, he raised his trembling left hand and opened his mouth to scream the words of surrender. "I–I forf–!"

Slap!

"Shhh..."

Before the final word could leave his throat, Amber vanished from her spot and appeared directly in front of his face. With a lightning-fast reflex, her small hand snapped forward and clamped tightly over his mouth, muffling out his voice.

"Loan Finlay~? How am I supposed to set a proper example for your precious captain, Ryan Sindelle, if you go ahead and surrender so early? That wouldn't be very fair to me, would it?"

Tears of genuine fear began to roll down his pale cheeks as he let out a series of desperate and muffled screams against her palms.

From the opposite flank, the Myrian, Rin, managed to let out a primal warcry, using the adrenaline of her fear to break through the paralysis locking her joints.

Her arms snapped forward, her black sleeves billowing as a blinding torrent of high-voltage purple lightning erupted from her palms. "TAKE THIS!"

The stream of electrical death shot straight toward Amber's back, intending to take out both Amber and Loen in a single strike.

Without even turning her head around to look, Amber simply extended her free left hand backward.

A layer of blue crystal-clear mana instantly coated her entire forearm and palm like a gauntlet.

CRZZZZZZZZT!

The torrent of purple lightning slammed directly into her palm. The crowd braced for an explosion, but the electrical beam completely disintegrated against her mana coating.

["IN-INCREDIBLE!"] Commentator Ken lost his mind, standing up from his seat and pointing wildly at the scene. ["Just like Nichole Fierstar, Amber Strongwill is using Mana Coating!"]

Amber casually formed a finger-gun with her left hand, pointing it directly at the panting, terrified Rin.

"Hey. Please wait your turn. I'll be with you in just a minute, okay?"

Thwip! Thwip! Thwip! Thwip!

With a flick of her wrist, four heavy cuffs made of solid rock shot at her. Before Rin could attempt to dodge, earthen cuffs snapped shut tightly around her neck and both of her ankles, instantly anchoring her body flush against the ground.

Another block of solid earth shot over her mouth, sealing her vocal cords completely. Panicking, Rin tried to use her free hands to tear the stone away, but Amber fired two more precise earthen cuffs and clamped her wrists over her shoulder, locking her into a state of helpless confinement.

"Now..." she turned her attention back to the crying Loen, her hand still covering his mouth. "Where were we? Oh, yes. Making a proper example out of you."

Loen shook his head frantically, his muffled screams of terror vibrating against her palm as he begged for his life.

But Amber wasn't listening.

Her grip on his face tightened to a bone-crushing degree. She planted her boots firmly into the stone and began to spin them both around.

One turn. Two turns. Three turns.

She spun around multiple times at a dizzying speed, building up an immense, terrifying amount of radiating momentum until she became a literal blur of amber and white.

"Up you go!"

WHOOOSH!

With a sudden release of her grip, she hurled Loen straight upward into the sky.

The Tricean student shot through the air like a launched missile, soaring hundreds of feet upward until his body reached the very peak of the coliseum's open-air stadium roof.

Following right after him, Amber exploded off the ground. She caught up to his ascending frame in the blink of an eye, reaching out to grab both of his ankles tightly with her bare hands.

With a fierce, joyful grin, Amber twisted her body in mid-air and began to spin them both downward like a drilling rocket as she accelerated back toward the earth at a terminal velocity.

BOOOOOM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The cataclysmic impact shook the entire coliseum to its very foundations. A gigantic cloud of debris, smoke, and shattered stone erupted into the sky, and a shockwave of wind blasted across the lower stands, hitting the protective barrier.

When the dust finally cleared a few seconds later, an enormous , twenty-foot-deep crater was revealed in the center of the arena stage

Loen Finlay lay dead center at the bottom of the pit, his consciousness gone.

Two down.

Amber casually leaped out of the smoking crater, dusting off her uniform with a light, cheerful giggle. She skipped her way back over to the western side of the arena, stopping right in front of the restrained figure of Rin.

Squatting down, she rested her chin on her hands as she looked innocently into Rin’s wide, terrified eyes.

"Hi~ I’m back. Hmm... I should probably find a much more creative way to finish you off."

Suddenly, her face lit up as a brilliant idea struck her mind. "Oh! I know!"

Amber stood up and slightly bent her knees as she used strengthening magic on her legs. With a violent pop, she launched herself high into the sky once more, disappearing into the sunlight before descending straight down toward the anchored Myrian student like a falling meteor.

Rin looked up, her pupils dilating as she saw the literal approaching image of death descending from the clouds.

The earthen block over her mouth prevented her from screaming, but tears of terror streamed down her cheeks as she struggled, thrashed, and cried out in vain against the unbreakable cuffs locking her to the floor.

It was completely useless.

"STRIKE DOWN!!!"

BOOOM!!!!!!!

Amber landed feet-first directly onto Rin’s torso, creating another crater that sent cracks tearing through the surrounding stone.

"Ahahaha! Oh my gosh, that was so much fun!" Amber burst into an ecstatic laugh, her eyes gleaming with unhinged adrenaline.

"Let’s do it again! Let’s see how deep we can make this hole go!"

Without a single second of hesitation, Amber leaped high into the air once more, coming straight down with another heavy, enhanced stomp.

BOOOM!!!!!!!

The crater deepened by another three feet and another shockwave travelled through the colosseum. Rin's head lolled to the side, her consciousness completely snuffed out from the immense concussive force.

But Amber didn't stop.

Her manic, joyful laughter only grew louder, echoing beautifully through the stone pillars as she prepared to leap into the air for a third consecutive strike.

["R-RIN IS INCAPACITATED!"] Commentator Ken stammered into his microphone. ["The winner of–!]

"Ahahaha! One more time! Just one more time! Don't die, okay!?"

["Amber Strongwill! Please stop! The competitor is already unconscious! The match is officially over!"]

However, Amber was completely lost in her own private world. Deaf to the warnings of the broadcasting booth, she soared into the air one final time.

But right as her boots came within three inches of making contact with Rin's chest–

VREEEEEEEM

A stifling wave of telekinetic force manifested out of thin air, locking Amber's momentum dead in its tracks.

Amber’s laughter abruptly ceased. Feeling the familiar mana signature locking her body into place, she let out a soft, defeated sigh and turned her head toward the southern sideline.

Sitting calmly in her seat was Emelie. Her green eyes and streaked hair were subtly glowing with a telekinetic aura.

Amber’s manic smile dissolved, transforming right back into her classic, bubbly grin.

The telekinetic hold released her, and she dropped lightly onto the stone floor, making sure not to hit the unconscious Rin.

["THE VERDICT IS FINAL!"] Commentator Ken bellowed, letting out a massive, trembling sigh of relief as he wiped his brow. ["The winner of the tenth and final match of the day – Eldoria’s Amber Strongwill!"]

The southern stands ruptured into a deafening madhouse of wild, triumphant cheers. The home crowd threw their fists into the air, their national pride thoroughly restored by the crushing dominance of their star.

Amber stood dead center in the cratered arena, basking in the wild applause. Slowly, she turned her head toward the eastern Myrian bench. Her eyes locked directly with Ayako, who was sitting with her arms crossed.

With a playful motion, Amber gave the Myrian a cheeky wink.

Ayako’s serene smile remained fixed on her face, but a powerful shiver traveled straight down her spine and her sharp eyes gleamed with a newfound thrill.

The stage was set, the first round was over, and she had officially found another incredibly dangerous, yet worthy opponent to dismantle.

Chapter 190 - The Results

["AND THAT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, OFFICIALLY BRINGS A THUNDEROUS END TO THE FIRST PHASE OF OUR GRAND TOURNAMENT!"] Commentator Ken’s voice boomed, matching the wild, echoing cheers of the Eldorian fans.

["Day one has given us blood, sweat, tears, and magic that shook the skies above! But now, it is time for the moment of truth. It is time to look at the leaderboard and announce the final points each team has accumulated today!"

The holographic projection screens high above the stone pit flickered and shifted from Amber's smiling face to a giant, metallic-textured scoreboard.

["But first, a crucial reminder, as explained by the beautiful Diana Valentine, of the stakes for everyone inside this grand coliseum and those watching across the continent!

["Only two teams will survive today's crucible to advance to the elimination gauntlet tomorrow. As a refresher on our scoring system: a clean victory in a fatal four-way nets your faction 2 points. Being the last person eliminated by the winner – placing second – nets you 1 point. Placing third or fourth gets you 0 points. The margins are razor-thin, folks!

["The crowd is buzzing and the tensions are rising, so I am passing the mic to our lovely royal host to break down the final standings. Princess Faye, give us the damage!"]

Faye stood up and gripped her microphone with both hands, ["You heard people! Let's see who stands tall and who falls into the abyss! Everyone, look to the sky!"]

The scoreboard pulsed as a golden light illuminated the first continent's name.

["Representing our proud host nation, with a spectacular showing of 3 clean victories and placing second four times... TEAM ELDORIA sits at the top of the world with a grand total of 10 points!"]

""""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!""""

""LET'S GO ELDORIA!!""

The southern stands went absolutely ballistic. Thousands of home fans across the stands erupted into a synchronised roar, stomping their feet, waving banners, and popping of confetti into the air.

Down on the Future Academy bench, Amber was happily high fiving a laughing Lily Mathers and the Windgard twins, while even the usually stoic Victor let out a deep sigh of relief.

["But don't celebrate just yet, because the battle for the second slot might still be a bloodbath!"] Faye's voice rose over the din, the scoreboard shifting to the next nation.

["Next up are the eastern powerhouses! With a total of 2 clean wins and placing second thrice... TEAM MYRIA finishes the day with a grand total of 7 points!"

The Myrian in the eastern stands let out a proud cheer, clapping in unison. Yamada Ryuuji crossed his arms with a smug grin. Even though they came 3 points behind Eldoria, he was confident that their seven points would easily carry them to the next day.

["Hold your breath, Myria, because the tech-wizards are breathing right down your necks!"] Faye shouted as the third slot illuminated in neon blue.

["Representing the mechanical heights of innovation! Just like Myria, with a total 2 clean wins and managing to secure second place 3 times through pure defensive grit... TEAM TRICEA also sits at a grand total of 7 points! It is a dead tie for second place!"]

A collective gasp rippled through the coliseum and the murmurs of the crowd grew worrisome.

["And finally,"] Faye's voice carried a breathless drop in tempo as all eyes locked onto the final, unrevealed section of the board.

["The wild card of the western frontier. Crossroads Academy of Riverton. Now, everyone, understand the stakes: since Myria and Tricea are currently drawing at 7 points, if Riverton has achieved 8 points or higher, both Myria and Tricea are instantly eliminated!

["However, if they have less, they are out, and our drawing teams will duke it out. So, let us see! Riverton, with a total of 3 spectacular wins and placing second exactly once... they have accumulated... 7 POINTS AS WELL!"

The giant holographic screen flashed in bright, warning-crimson letters across the entire sky:

ELDORIA – 10 PTS (QUALIFIED)

MYRIA – 7 PTS (TIE)

TRICEA – 7 PTS (TIE)

RIVERTON – 7 PTS (TIE)

The stadium completely froze for a single, breathless second before the southern Eldorian stands erupted in celebration. The others though? The other couldn't believe the predicament they found themselves in.

["LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THIS IS JUST MADNESS!" Commentator Ken screamed, pulling at his hair in sheer excitement.

["A triple tie-way! Three nations – Myria, Riverton, and Tricea – are locked in a deadly, three-way draw at seven points apiece! By the strict rules of the Grant Tournament, we cannot end Day One like this!

["Each of the tying factions must immediately choose one representative to step into the stone pit for a sudden-death, winner-takes-all clash! The victor carries their entire continent to Day Two!"]

["Teams, choose your ultimate fighters!"] Faye roared.

Over at the eastern bench, the deliberation lasted for exactly zero seconds.

Ayako gently uncrossed her arms, adjusted her captain's cap and without saying a single word to her teammates, she took a single step forward toward the arena. Naturally, it was a given. She was the undisputed pillar of Myria's representatives, and she would personally secure their survival.

Over at the northern Tricean bench, the atmosphere was utterly miserable.

Almost all of their capable representatives were either heavily bandaged, badly bruised, or entirely incapacitated from their previous bouts.

Their captain, Ryan Sindelle, let out an exhausted sigh. He adjusted his wire-rimmed spectacles and glanced down at his glowing, tech-gauntlet.

"Man... I guess I'll have to pull up my socks and just go out there myself," he said with a pessimistic frown on his face.

"... I can already see the exact, painful result of this match. I'm going to be the bad guy again, but in a different way..." He muttered to himself before stepping out onto the arena floor.

Meanwhile, the western Riverton benches were in a state of chaos. The Crossroads representatives were huddled in a tight circle, arguing loudly.

"We have to send Jason! Did you see his last match? He's calm, he's calculated, he can and will beat that Izumi chick!"

"No way, what about Captain Nichole?!"

"Why is this even a damn question?!" Nichole yelled, violently stomping her foot against the stone floor. "Of course I'm the one going out there! I'm the captain of this team!"

The other representatives winced, rubbing the backs of their necks nervously. "Captain... please, look at it logically. You're... you're way too reckless. Going off your last match... what if you get so hot-headed you accidentally eliminate yourself? The stakes are too high, no?!"

Nichole's face turned bright red from anger, her fists clenching as she prepared to shout at them.

"That’s enough everyone. Step down," Jason’s steady voice cut through the argument.

He stepped into the center of the huddle and locked eyes directly with Nichole’s furious gaze. The others tried to protest, but Jason raised a hand, silencing them instantly.

"She is our captain. Whatever the captain says, goes. It’s as simple as that. Besides, let’s stop pretending for a second – Nichole is, without a doubt, the strongest combatant out of all of us. I wouldn’t last a second against Izumi Ayako. I trust Nichole. And I trust that she knows exactly what she’s doing out there."

Nichole’s anger instantly evaporated, and a wide, deeply touched, and incredibly cheerful grin split her face.

She stepped forward and slammed a heavy hand onto Jason’s shoulder. "Ha! See?! He gets it! That’s why you’re my right-hand man, Jase!"

The other Riverton representatives looked at the ground as a wave of collective guilt washed over them. They looked back up at their captain, their expressions shifting into fierce determination.

"""We’re sorry we doubted you, Captain!!!"""

"Go out there and win!"

"For Riverton!"

"Hahaha! You’re damn right I will!" Nichole cheered.

Feeling immensely pumped up, she reached back and grabbed the hilt of her giant broadblade. She ripped the massive slab of iron from her back, resting it casually over her shoulder as she marched with confident strides out into the bright sunlight of the stone pit.

Three anchors. Three captains. One single slot for survival.

["THE STAGE IS SET FOR THE REAL FINAL MATCH OF THE DAY!"] Commentator Ken’s voice reached a fever pitch, the crowd completely electric. ["Factions, get ready!"]

""'FIVE!!"" Both announcers cheered in unison.

""""FOUR!!"" the entire seventy-thousand-seat stadium roared.

""""THREE!""" Nichole dropped into a low, aggressive stance, with her giant broadblade beginning to hum with a translucent blue layer of pure mana.

""""TWO!""" Ryan’s black mechanical suit whirred to life, his plasma blades crackling with high-output electrical energy.

""""ONE!""" Ayako stood perfectly patient as her eyes locked on her opponents.

[""'FIGHT!""]

BOOOM!!

Nichole transformed into a literal rocket of crimson and blue force. The stone beneath her boots shattered into dust as she shot across the arena floor, completely ignoring the Tricean captain. Her fiery amber eyes were locked solely on the top dog in the pit.

"TAKE THIS, YOU SMUG SONOVABITCH! HAAAAAH!" Nichole swung her massive broadblade downward in a visceral vertical cleave designed to split a mountain.

Ayako’s eyes narrowed slightly. For the first time in the entire tournament, her hands glided smoothly to the hilt of her katana. A flash of blinding silver light illuminated the dirt before–

CLANG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!