

Chapter 151: Disqualified

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Asher felt the familiar ripple of space stir once again as the blinding white light consumed him whole. In that brief moment of distortion, he could not help but feel as though his comprehension of spatial understanding was deepening, his awareness expanding with each successive teleportation.

But he knew this was only an illusion, a shallow sensation. No true progress was made simply by being transported from one place to another. Still, the subtle pull and bend of reality brushed against his senses, teasing him with a power just beyond his reach.

When the light faded, solid ground pressed beneath his boots. Asher opened his eyes, blessing this filthy world with his purple gaze.

Around him, the scene unfolded in an all-too-familiar manner. Students were once again vomiting violently, unable to endure the disorienting waves of teleportation. The sound of retching echoed across the room, mixed with groans and muffled curses.

Some of them, having already endured it once the previous day, managed to control themselves better this time. Their faces merely tightened with discomfort, lips curling as they forced the nausea down.

Others, however, fared no better than before. They clutched their stomachs, trembling, coughing up saliva as their bodies rejected the experience altogether.

Beside Asher, William stood perfectly calm and steady. His expression betrayed no sign of weakness, as though he had already adapted after experiencing teleportation only once.

Asher turned his head slightly toward him, studying him for a fraction of a second, before shifting his gaze away and keeping his thoughts carefully hidden. There was no need to speak.

Up ahead, his eyes landed on Jane. She stood erect with a posture of complete authority, her back pressed lightly against the wall. Her arms were crossed over her chest, beside her was a black door.

Asher's sharp eyes scanned the chamber in full. It resembled the very first room they had appeared in yesterday upon their arrival at the Star Academy, yet there were subtle differences that kept it from being identical.

'What is with these people and throwing us into rooms with four white walls and a single door?' Asher mused inwardly, though he had the wisdom not to voice his thoughts aloud.

The consequences of a misplaced word could be dire. If Jane decided to disqualify him for insolence, all of this would be over before it truly began.

His gaze lingered on a large orb mounted on the wall directly above the black door. Its smooth surface seemed dormant for now.

Around the room, rows of chairs were neatly arranged, almost as though the students were expected to sit and wait for extended periods.

At Jane's feet sat a wooden box. Its top was sealed, save for a small, perfectly round hole, just large enough for a single hand to pass through. Through his Omni Perception, Asher's senses pierced beyond the exterior. Inside, he saw stacks of folded papers, each prepared meticulously. The intention was clear: each student would soon be required to draw one.

Jane's voice cut sharply through the lingering haze of sickness in the room. "Yesterday, we cleaned after your mess. That will not happen again."

Her words silenced the faint groaning, and every head lifted toward her. The implications were clear, and many frowned deeply. If no one would clean the room, then the puddles of vomit would remain where they were, forcing everyone to coexist with the stench and filth. It was an unpleasant thought, yet Jane's tone left no room for negotiation.

Asher, however, remained unmoved. Nobody near him had vomited, and with a simple adjustment, he reduced the range of his Omni Perception, shutting out the disgusting images from entering his awareness. To him, it was nothing worth dwelling on.

Jane's expression remained perfectly indifferent. She neither acknowledged the discomfort etched into their faces nor offered any sympathy.

"You are not children," she continued "we will not coddle you. If you cannot stomach your own weakness, you are free to leave now."

Her boot shifted slightly as she tapped the box at her feet, pushing it forward. "Each of you will take one paper. The exam will begin soon. Be quick about it."

A girl from the front row moved forward hesitantly. Bending down, she lifted the box carefully and slid her slender hand into the hole. A moment later, she withdrew her hand, unfolding the paper she retrieved.

A bold number, 83, was written across it. She nodded, then passed the box to the student behind her. That girl drew number 12.

The process continued, slow but steady, as the box moved through the group of students. Each person reached in, pulled out a paper, and revealed their number to the room.

Nobody yet understood the purpose of these numbers, but all of them knew instinctively that their fates were tied to them.

Eventually, the box reached William. He smiled faintly as he withdrew his slip, turning it around to reveal the number 179. With an easy flick of his wrist, he handed the box to Asher.

Asher's hand slipped into the hole without hesitation. His fingers brushed against the folded papers, and he selected one at random. Drawing it out, he unfolded it with calm precision. The number 233 stared back at him.

Minutes later, every student had received their number. The box was returned to Jane, who had not shifted from her position at the wall. All eyes turned toward her, waiting for the explanation that would shed light on the random numbers.

Many of them had anticipated a written test, a direct battle, or perhaps even another grueling physical challenge. Instead, they were met with this cryptic system of numbered slips.

Jane's lips finally parted, her voice steady and clear. "Now, listen carefully. This is your first exam. I will not be telling you what it entails."

Her words fell heavily across the room. Confusion sparked immediately, though none dared interrupt her.

"You see the orb above the door?" Jane gestured casually toward it. "When it glows green with your number displayed upon it, you may leave this room. Outside, you will face whatever is waiting for you. Until then, you are not permitted to leave." She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in.

"If you attempt to leave before your number is displayed, you will be disqualified instantly. Furthermore, anything you see or hear outside, you are forbidden from revealing to those who remain here. The only time you may speak of it is when the exam concludes and all of you are released together."

Her gaze swept the room, sharp and unyielding. "The orb does not display numbers in any particular order. It is completely random. My advice to you is simple: take a seat, conserve your strength, and wait patiently."

When she finished, silence settled across the chamber.

"Any questions?" she asked.

For a moment, nobody moved. Then, William raised his hand. Jane turned toward him, her chin dipping ever so slightly in acknowledgment.

"What happened to the rest of the students, the ones who were standing on the staircase? I don't see them here," William asked.

Jane's answer came swiftly, without the slightest hesitation. "Disqualified."

A ripple of shock passed through the crowd.

"I told all of you to wait in the lobby," she said calmly, "but it seems some of you thought I was joking."

A girl to the side raised her voice timidly. "Then... where were they sent?"

This time, Jane's lips curved into a small, almost playful smile. "Back to the Canestane Barony."

The room fell utterly silent.

Almost as one, every student swallowed hard.

Chapter 152: Weakness

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As everyone swallowed hard at the sudden revelation, Asher alone remained unbothered. His expression was calm, as though the words had not carried the weight they did for the others.

He had already predicted that something similar would happen, largely because of the way Jane had so firmly stressed the importance of standing in the lobby precisely by seven o'clock.

That was the very reason he had chosen to arrive ten minutes earlier than required, just in case any unexpected changes occurred.

The Star Academy was renowned for its mysterious and unorthodox traditions, one of which was the peculiar custom of making parents, or whoever happened to be responsible for a child who had just entered the Academy for the first time, wait for three to four days after the new entrants were taken away into the Separate Dimension.

The reason was simple: once the students returned, their guardians could immediately reunite with them the moment they were teleported back to the territory from which they had originally been taken.

"Anyone else with a question?" Jane asked, her voice calm, her tone almost bored, her body still leaning casually against the wall.

Her arms were folded across her chest, her posture neither rigid nor loose but perfectly balanced, betraying the confidence of someone who belonged in control.

Seeing no one speak up, she straightened slightly, her presence radiating finality. Without moving the paper box that had been placed before her, it lifted gracefully from the ground as if pulled by invisible threads. Then, in an instant, she vanished, leaving behind nothing but a faint ripple in the air.

'Does she possess spatial affinity as well?' Asher wondered, his mind momentarily intrigued. But then he dismissed the thought with a small shake of his head. Whether she did or did not was irrelevant to him. It had nothing to do with his path, and he had no reason to waste thought on it.

Lowering himself into a seated position on the chair behind him, Asher exhaled slowly. William, quick to follow, immediately sat down beside him. One by one, the others began to move as well, each person claiming a seat for themselves.

No one raised their voice in protest. None of them dared scream that it was unfair to those who had not been in the lobby on time. None complained about being left behind.

After all, they all understood a fundamental truth: they were here under something akin to a scholarship. The Star Academy bore no true obligation to help them or to offer them anything at all. The Academy had extended its hand of opportunity, and that alone was more than they had any right to demand.

Small clusters of students gathered in hushed tones, whispering anxiously amongst themselves as they speculated about what awaited them.

What kind of exam lay beyond that black door?

Would it be safe?

Would it be brutal?

Would they come back alive, or half-dead?

As whispers grew, William found his own mind drifting toward speculation. Unable to contain himself, he finally turned toward the boy seated calmly beside him.

"So, what do you think?" he asked.

Asher's purple eyes shifted lazily toward him, his expression unchanging as he replied in a measured tone, "What I think doesn't matter."

Then, as if reconsidering, his lips curved into the faintest suggestion of a smile. "But tell me, what do you think?"

The words were deliberate. It was not simply a question, but a subtle test. He wanted to see whether William possessed any real measure of thought, whether the boy had a spark of intelligence that separated him from the usual shallow nobles Asher so despised.

For Asher, stupidity was intolerable, something he loathed down to his very bones. Not because he expected others to match his level of intellect, he knew everyone could not, but

because he believed that at the very least, people should possess the bare minimum of common sense.

William smiled faintly at Asher's reply, unfazed by the reversal. He spoke with a calm voice, deliberate and thoughtful. "Well, we don't have any information for now. We will have to wait for the first three to five people to leave this room before we can begin to understand what is happening."

Asher did not respond, but his gaze remained fixed on William, eyes sharp and unblinking, as if urging him silently to continue.

"Even though the rules forbid them from speaking about what they encounter beyond that door," William went on, "information can still be extracted. It may not come in the form of words, but it will exist nonetheless. Through observation of their bodies, their minds, their spirits, their very states upon returning, we can gather much."

Asher's lips moved almost imperceptibly. He understood perfectly what William meant, for he himself had already considered the same line of thought.

Jane had never forbidden them from using their abilities to gather information. It was true, they could not ask, but the silence of a tongue was not the same as the silence of the body or the mind.

If the students who went ahead returned without so much as a scratch, without trauma etched upon their faces, then perhaps the exam did not involve combat at all.

But the reverse was equally possible. The trial might involve combat, and the staff, many of whom certainly possessed healing abilities, might simply restore the students before sending them back into the room.

In that case, the condition of their spirit and mind would reveal far more than their physical appearance ever could.

"Why three to five people?" Asher finally asked, breaking his silence. "Why not simply two?"

William leaned forward slightly, his eyes gleaming with thought. "Because the instructor told us that numbers would be chosen randomly, without order or pattern. What if the method of the exam isn't the same, random, and different for each participant? In that case, observing just two would not be enough. But with three to five, we can account for multiple variations."

He paused only briefly before continuing, his tone calm yet assured. "Although almost none of us possesses a proper weapon, which could suggest the exam might not involve combat, there is no guarantee. Who is to say the staff will not hand us weapons the moment we step through that door?"

Asher said nothing. Instead, a rare smile touched his lips. He had expected nothing, zero expectations, as always, but William's reasoning had impressed him nonetheless. He had not thought the boy capable of such depth.

"I don't think I've ever seen a Wargrave smile before, Tenth Sun," William said softly, clearly amused.

"Have you ever met a Wargrave before me?" Asher countered.

"...No."

"Then do not make assumptions based on nothing," Asher replied evenly, his tone calm but flat.

William fell silent, absorbing the rebuke without protest. For a few seconds, quiet passed between them before he asked again, "Then tell me, what do you think?"

Asher smirked faintly. "So you're forcing me to answer now that you've given yours?"

Seeing that William offered no reply, Asher finally spoke. "I think it's a non-combat exam... at least for now."

"Why?" William asked, tilting his head curiously.

"Because of clichés," Asher said simply.

"Clichés?" William frowned, not quite grasping the word.

Asher leaned back slightly, his tone calm and instructive. "Think of the exam as two halves: combat and non-combat. The Star Academy has no use for those who can only swing fists without thought, nor for those who can think but cannot act. Both will be tested. But logic dictates that the non-combat portion will come first. Why? Because once combat has occurred, many will be injured, fatigued, or mentally scarred. Their condition will inevitably taint the results of a non-combat test. Therefore, it is only natural that the Academy would start with the non-combat trials, while everyone is still at their peak."

William fell silent, his brows furrowed as he absorbed the explanation. It was simple, almost obvious in retrospect, yet he had not considered it.

"Of course," Asher added, his tone as calm as ever, "I could be wrong. But that is why we observe those who go before us... unless fate decides to mock us by placing us first."

William gave a small nod. It was true; even if they were mistaken, they would still be prepared to face whatever awaited them.

After a moment, Asher suddenly asked, "Do you know the weakness of many intelligent people, William?"

William's eyes narrowed. "What weakness?"

"They overanalyze," Asher replied smoothly. "When confronted with a simple question, where one plus one is clearly two, they begin to dig deeper, searching for hidden meanings where none exist."

William froze, his mind retracing his earlier words, his earlier reasoning. Though Asher had not explicitly pointed it out, he knew the boy was referring to him.

'The randomization... I turned a simple instruction into something greater than it was,' William thought bitterly.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"Anytime," Asher replied with his usual calm detachment.

It was at that moment that both their heads turned simultaneously toward the black door. Above it, the once dim orb now glowed bright green, numbers flickering across its surface before settling firmly into place.

The number displayed was 101.

The exam had begun.

