

LOA Nobody 161

Chapter 161 I'm Finally Back

Another week had passed since then, and as the healers had theorized the aftereffects of EMMSY were cured too. The damage to his soul and mind wasn't hard to handle as one of them possessed a blessing that had the reversal effect on them.

With constant aid of that blessing and help from other soothing potions and pills, he was finally cured. The black veins and dried skin behind his back had been gone now. Though if looked closely one could still see the minor stretches on his new skin, but with time they would be gone too.

He had completely woken up 3 days ago, and the scene where he realized he wasn't in that damned dungeon anymore was just tear jerking to watch for anyone.

The relief in his eyes at that moment was evident, when he hugged Artemis and cried his heart out.

To others it looked normal considering what he had been through, but to his family and everyone who knew him from before, the sight was anything but normal.

None of them had ever seen him breaking down like that, and every tear he shed only added the guilt and pain in their heart, as they assumed all the things he would've gone through.

His scars had all been gone, except a few which had etched deep and needed some more time for a better removal.

The injuries of his mana veins and damage had been healed too, as once he woke up, he could use his own blessings to hasten the process of healing.

Surprisingly one of the blessings he received was best suited for it. As it hastened the potions effective duration by half, in return for reducing its results. (Ex. at bottom)

So where his previous recovery time was considered way over a month, was reduced to mere days, once he got control over his mana again.

His rank had dropped by 3 whole levels after curing the EMMSY. It had now been stabilized at rank D. A big dive considering he was almost on the brink of reaching C+ two years ago.

But no one cared about that. Because with his talent and the immense resources his family had, no one could doubt he won't just catch up to that level and surpass it in a year or two.

The healers had gone back yesterday, and he was now mostly spending his time in his room, where half his family always surrounded him.

Everyone had been taking their time chatting with him, helping him with every little thing. The smile on their faces and his face never once withered whenever their gazes met.

People who knew him and learned of his return, had been eager to meet him too, but no one was allowed any entry in the mansion. Those who informed them of their arrival and desire to come meet him, were refused through the same means, and those who directly came to Damascus were simply left alone, as no one invited them.

The frenzy of rumors outside had died down a little, since even after 2 weeks Blake family didn't comment on anything. Since they didn't announce it, no one from any other guild or noble family made any announcement either.

Plus all the media and reporters had found a new topic to talk about, as the new academic year was about to begin, and the entrance exams for all the top academies were starting simultaneously.

Currently he was sitting in his room, going through what seemed like a tablet of sorts, looking at all the news reports and stuff that happened around the world while he was gone.

His body, though recovered, was still in need of proper rest, so he couldn't do much outside. Other than walking a little here and there, he wasn't allowed to leave his room. And actually he was glad for it.

This really was the treatment and something that he missed dearly in the past 2 years of hell.

"It says grandma will be coming back to Damascus." He asked as he read an article in some magazine.

Rio stood up from the sofa and went towards the window, opening it with a pull. The gust of cold wind struck his face as he closed his eyes to enjoy the peaceful moment.

"She is. Master said she'll be here by next week. She didn't want to miss Amelia's entrance ceremony." Myra replied as she prepared his bed.

"And when is that?"

Rio asked, looking at the full moon in the sky, it was beautiful, and yet somehow it still felt weird to see it wasn't red now, like the one in the dungeon.

"The exams are happening now, and then a week for them to decide the results, so the ceremony will probably take place after 10-15 days." Myra replied, as she stood beside him.

'So I still have some time,' Rio thought, as he remembered the plot of the novel that was about to begin.

The plot of the novel started when the entrance ceremony was happening and the results for the admissions were announced to the whole world.

"Did Amelia finish her exams?" Rio asked.

"Yes. She had her last exam the day we found you." Myra replied.

Rio nodded his head hearing that. Though he spent his time with all of them, no one asked him about his time in the dungeon or how he managed to survive there for 2 whole years. They wanted to give him enough time and space where he could share it with them when he was ready.

Talking or asking about that would probably bring back bad memories, is what they all thought. That's why they even chose their words carefully so as not to say something that might upset him.

"Which academy does she plan to join?" Rio asked.

In Arcadia, since all 5 top academies gathered together and built the world association, they all apparently have the similar requirements for entrance and similar rules to follow.

The world association conducts exams all over the world at the beginning of the new year. Those who pass the exams and meet the threshold of entrance, are then given a choice to enter the academy they wish for. Obviously the final decision to let them enter or not, depends on that academy.

But the examinee can still put his requests for the first choice or second and third and so on, during the forms they have to fill before exams.

Many choose the academy based on their own preference, most go for the ranking and levels, while some still choose the ones which is nearest to them or where they have some connections and sway.

"She's choosing sunshine academy." Myra said.

Her words surprised Rio, as sunshine was ranked 3rd among all the 5 academies. But that wasn't what was concerning, Amelia as every other important character was supposed to join the Zenith Academy. If she joined some other academy, how will she ever come in contact with the protagonist or other plotlines.

"Is everyone still blaming the academy for what happened?" Rio asked, as that incident back then was the only explanation for this change.

"Yes. It was their fault." Myra said, in a straight tone.

Had the world association taken the threats from Warzy seriously, had they provided better security for the exams, had they given more thoughts about holding that tournament in that damned dungeon - none of this would've happened.

And most of all to blame for everything, was Zenith academy, who couldn't do anything, despite having the most power and prestige among everyone. Had they tried to better protect their students instead of playing power games within themselves, not a single life would've been lost in that dungeon.

But they didn't.

And the results were in front of the whole world to see.

Rio didn't say anything, as he understood how she would've felt. He too felt anger at them, at everyone and everything.

but unlike his past self which relished in the events he altered, he had learned his lessons. He wasn't ignorant of the luck, fate or heavens anymore, he had learned that there were things he could and absolutely couldn't change. And he understood the consequences of trying to change them better than anyone else now.

Amelia shouldn't join any other academy. She couldn't.

He needed to fix it. Fix the mistakes he made 2 years ago, and for that he had to change everything back to the way it was.

'Can't believe I'm finally back. And this is the first thing I have to worry about.'

Chapter 162 Glimpse Of The Dungeon

The next morning instead of just sitting still in his room, waiting for Artemis or Amelia to come to him. Rio decided to take a walk.

All this sitting and sleeping had been fine and fun, but after doing it too much for the past 2 weeks, his body was now getting stiff.

'Never thought I'd be happy to leave my bed on my own wish huh.'

Rio thought as he started walking towards the garden. Esme started following him as soon as he took the first step out of his room.

Looking at her face, which had that bright smile on her face as she maintained her pace with his. He couldn't help but smile too.

She's been like that ever since she returned to her place as his shadow a few days ago.

Same was the case for Aina too, who's probably working hard on his breakfast or other things by now.

After his supposed death, Esme and Aina were told to follow Amelia. Aina's transfer was natural, as she's the next head of housing staff, and Amelia was the sole successor of the duchy after his death. But Esme being told to be Amelia's shadow, was a surprise for Rio.

He really couldn't grasp how Artemis even ordered such a thing, or how this silly vamp even agreed to it.

He still remembered when she asked his permission to be his shadow again a few days ago, her expressions at that time were priceless. Had he teased her a little bit, about why or told her no, there was no doubt in his mind that she would have started crying right there.

After all, she still blamed herself for not protecting him 2 years ago, even though everyone said not too.

Esme probably didn't have to convince Artemis and Amelia much, as they both could guess her decision and complied with her wish. And besides now that Erza was all grown up and finished her training, she could take her place to be Amelia's shadow rightfully.

It was decided years ago that Erza would be her shadow, as both girls had become quite close due to their similar age and tastes.

Though Rio had his doubts about Her personality and capabilities, since she was dead in the novel. but surprisingly after drinking that pura corpus potion and some other pills, which Rio just made her eat on a whim - her awakening went successfully.

Her talents and skills weren't as surprising or outrageous as Esme, but she was loyal to Amelia and wouldn't hesitate to die for her, Rio let it slide.

After all, the one, who was Amelia's shadow in the novel, was someone Rio already dealt with years ago.

There was no need for him to keep pests around, who keep forgetting their place and think they're the master, just cause there's no leash around their neck.

Her advices and suggestions weren't really suited for the version of Amelia, Rio was hoping for her to become. If he wanted Amy to survive her future troubles, he needed to prepare her beforehand. And that girl would've simply been a hurdle in that process.

'I also need to take care of that bastard, once and for all. If not for him, that incident from the dungeon never would've happened.'

Rio thought, as a face of some annoying bug came to his mind, who ruined all his plans for the plotlines and had him go through that hell in the dungeon.

Rio was lost in his thoughts when Esme patted his shoulder from behind, bringing him back to the real world.

"We're here, master."

Looking around, he noticed how he was already at the boundary of the garden.

"Stay here." Rio said, and walked forward.

He just kept sitting there, enjoying the scenery and beautiful scent of flowers. Lying down on the grass, looking up at the flowers and trees covering the blue sky.

The orange hue of the sunlight that started rising from the east was giving a warm touch to the environment.

It felt so peaceful that for a moment he even forgot what he was doing, as he closed his eyes to enjoy the ambience.

And that was a mistake.

Cuz when he opened his eyes he found himself in the dungeon where everything started getting haywire
- Draugr Depths dungeon.

The dungeon which had a simple meaning just as its name suggested - Death Valley or the revenant's realm.

The morning sun which was peacefully surrounded by orange hue till now, was now blood red, as it spread a heat that made one itch their skin in annoyance, as if every ray touching you were a needle hurting your skin.

The whole area around him was silent, empty streets and a ruined city were creating an atmosphere that he always only saw in movies back on earth.

The rotten corpses of every creature roaming, was creating a foul smell, that just made one cover their nose in annoyance. The roads were blocked with crashed vehicles and crumbled buildings, as not even a single sign of life was present anywhere.

Trees had dried up, their branches withered and leaves dried, the silent hissing of air was carrying the sound of the dead roaming all around them. The noise of their screeches and crashing and bones rattling was the only thing audible to them.

"Rio, let's go. We should hurry, at this pace we'll be the last one in this race."

His thoughts were broken when he heard the sound of a girl calling his name. She had black hair, tied in a single braid. She was wearing the silver armor the academy gave to everyone before they entered the dungeon.

"When will you start to take things seriously? You know we can't lose this, right?" She said, as swung her spear, creating a projectile attack that sliced an overgrown dog in 2 pieces.

Rio watched the pieces hit the ground, as instead of what he imagined, green blood started leaking out of the creature. Increasing the foul smell in the area by another degree.

"Why're you even worrying about them? Even if by luck, anyone beat us in this challenge, do you think they can defeat both of us in the finals? You should just relax instead." He said, as he pulled out a black mask from his storage ring and put it on.

"Seriously, I don't know if the real challenge is to survive the monster hordes or this bad smell."

The girl said, as she covered her nose. Even though the dog was more than 10 feet away, it was enough to nauseate people who weren't used to it.

"Ukhhhh it's killing me." She said, while being a little surprised that he didn't complain about it before her. But She got her answer when she turned to look at him and saw him wearing a mask that covered half of his face.

"Then you should've brought the things I told you to." He said with a smile, as he started walking ahead, leaving her behind.

The girl ran behind him, as she threw her arm over his shoulder, "Come on, I know you got something for me too. So why don't you just give it to me now."

"How about a no." He said amusingly, while running a little ahead, when she tried to pull his mask off.

"Come on. We'll only face more hordes of them moving forward, you really didn't get me anything." She asked, as she disappeared from her place and reappeared in front of him.

"Nope. Missy should've checked my messages and bought em herself." He said, as he waved his hand, creating a blade made out of darkness, that pierced another creature coming their way.

"You really didn't bring any. Come on, I'll pay you back." She said, as she pulled her handkerchief and used it to cover her face, only for it to fail to do anything. Though her perfume on it, made the smell go away for a second, as she took a deep breath, finally enjoying the flowery scent.

Rio didn't say anything as he smiled behind his mask, and waved his hand, an air projectile went forward slashing the 3 zombies who were crawling towards them from the side.

He then increased his pace, knowing the curses that were coming his way. And soon they came - "You_ you did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"What?" He said.

"Don't act innocent. I can still see your smile behind your mask. You just killed them to spread that foul smell everywhere." The girl said, as she pulled her handkerchief off.

The perfume from before did give a momentary support, but soon it became filled with that putrid smell of rot. Now it was even leaving that weird sour taste in her mouth, that was just annoying.

"I just killed them for points. You're the one who wanted me to take this seriously." Rio said, as he tried to control his laughter, looking at her furrowed brows and expressions.

"Come on. Are you really doing this? Just give me the mask, I know you got extras." She said, as she stopped moving, noticing at least a dozen zombies in the front.

"Fine, but you better buy me a lunch at Dorsia. here take it." Rio said, as he brought out a pink mask from his ring and passed it to her.

"Pink. Seriously. You know I hate this color, right." She said, in a little annoyed manner as she put it on.

"Yupp, that's why I bought it." He said with a smile.

"Now let's start the hunt shall we?" He added.

Seeing him unsheathing his swords, she took her stance with the spear too, as she added the bet -

"Losers does the presentation of the elections."

"Better start cooking up excuses to miss your classes, missy . Cause I ain't losing." Rio said, and disappeared from his place.

"Says the loser, who lost last time." She said, as she disappeared from her place too, leaving behind an after image and cracks on the ground.

"Bro _ther"

"Wake up, brother."

"WAKE UP"

Chapter 163 Shadows Don't Get Breaks

—Wake up—

The sound of someone's shouts woke up Rio, as his thoughts of the past stopped. He opened his eyes, as he looked at the sky.

Seeing the normal sky and sun, calmed his mind.

'Fucking dungeon'

He cursed that damn dungeon that refused to leave his mind.

"Brother, wake up already. Didn't mother warn you not to do this? Why're you even sleeping here?" Amelia's voice broke through the silence, her presence casting a shadow over him. He couldn't help but smile at her familiar face.

"Morning Ames." Rio said, as he smiled and sat up.

"Seriously, even after all these years, you're still the laziest guy I know." Amelia said, as she sat beside him, when he signaled her.

"Come on. I'm not that lazy. Right?"

"Yeah yeah." Amelia rolled her eyes playfully.

"So, where were you yesterday? Mother said, you went out." Rio asked, changing the topic.

"Yeah, Becca came with Bernhardt and others. They wanted to meet you, but since mother refused everyone's entry, we just met at the restaurant and talked." Amelia replied.

"How are they?" Rio asked, curious about what's happening with all these old acquaintances of his.

From the news articles he read -after that incident back then, even the Royal Family were partially blamed for the breach in security and loss of lives.

Though it all led to nothing, as what's done was done, and people forgot all about it after some time. King did some charity and killed some scapegoats in a dramatic way and that's all it took him to change everything back to normal.

But who knows what's been going on in the Royal Palace now, since it's been 2 years since then. He was actually curious about the situation in Haven, since the plot was about to begin.

"Everyone's fine. They gave some gifts and messages for you, wanna hear them." Amelia said, as she prepared to bring them out through her storage ring, but Rio refused her.

"Nah, not in the mood." He said.

He didn't want to read Bernhardt's message in front of anyone. After all, unlike others, Bernhardt wouldn't talk or write about formalities for him. If he is still the same as when he last met him, that is. So he decided to check them, when he's alone. "Just send them to my room, I'll read them later."

Amelia nodded her head. She looked at Esme standing a little far and said -"She's really acting like a shadow now, isn't she?"

"Yeah. She's been following me three steps back ever since I woke up. You didn't bully her, did you."

"If anything, I was an even better master than you." Amelia smirked, with a little proud expression. "She was a bad shadow though. Did you know she took holidays on her own wish? And I had to drive my own cars around." She continued with a smile, her words making Esme flinch, but she stayed silent. After all, it was true.

"She did what now?" Rio looked back at Amelia, his amused tone from earlier turned to surprise.

"What?" Amelia's smile stiffened when she heard him speak.

Ignoring his sister, Rio turned back at his shadow and asked "Esme, is that true?"

"Master, that _ "

"I don't need your excuses, Esme. Did you leave her alone or not?" He asked seriously, as his calm demeanor now gone, replaced by a stern expression.

"I did, master." Esme replied, her words barely above a whisper.

Her words only fueled his anger, as he clenched his fists. His nails, digging into the garden grass. But he ignored it, as he said angrily "Did you forget what a shadow's job is? Or are you taking things too lightly now?"

" _ " Esme had no words as she hung her head low. Amelia, seeing this scene, tried to intervene by saying "Brother, I was just joking."

"Not now, Amy." Rio said, stopping her from speaking further. He looked back at Esme and said "Answer me."

"I apologize, master." Esme said Apologetically, as she went on her knees.

"What did I always tell you? Did you forget that too." Rio said, glaring at Esme.

"I remember, master." Esme said, her eyes still fixed on the ground. She remembered what he always used to say, even the last time when he met her, before that incident. He ordered her to keep Amelia safe. And yet when he was gone and she was given that job, she neglected it. The disappointment and anger she could hear in his voice was only making her more guilty now.

"Then you ignored them, because I was dead. Is that it?" Rio said.

"Master _ " Esme looked up at the mention of his death again. Her eyes were scared, but when she met his gaze, the one which used to be filled with care and gentleness, was changed with only anger now. "I _ I'm sorry master."

Ignoring her apology, Rio kept glaring at her as he shouted in a cold tone "If you can't do your job, you can leave. There are many others who _"

"Brother. Enough." Amelia said, as she shook his shoulder. "You can leave us alone Esme. Just wait outside."

She said, turning towards Esme, who was barely holding back her tears.

Esme stood up, bowed and left. Her head still hung low, as she was now too scared to now meet his gaze again. The disappointment in his eyes cut deep, and even though he didn't finish his sentence, she understood what he was going to say. And that hurt, a lot.

"What was that?" Once Esme left, Amelia turned towards Rio, whose eyes were still fixed on the entrance where Esme left. She could see he was angry, too angry over a little thing. She could guess why he might be worried for his safety, but she was still in Damascus. And no one would hurt her here.

"Nothing." Rio said as he tried to calm himself.

The second he heard she was out alone, all the plotlines of every scenario started playing in his head.

He had changed stuff, a lot of it, when it came to her safety, but that also meant that there were now chances where fate could pull some pranks and he wouldn't even know.

If she was alone and at that time, she met protagonist or worse those bastards from the cult _

He wasn't nearly on the level to solve those issues. If somehow that plotline went haywire, all he did, all he suffered and sacrificed for, would just turn out to be a waste.

"I need you to tell me if Erza ever does that. Shadows don't get leaves. Remember that." Rio said, as he turned to her.

His stern words and serious expression made Amelia bury her questions that she wanted to ask, as she just nodded her head and stayed silent.

They both just stayed still for a few minutes, lost in their thoughts.

"I'm sorry" Finally Rio broke the silence as he spoke.

"So wanna tell me what happened?" Amelia asked, seeing he was now back to his usual behavior.

"Maybe later."

"Hmm" Amelia nodded her head. She hesitated for a moment, but then she said "Can I ask you a question?"

"When did you need permission from me? Ask away."

"Are you angry at me?" She asked slowly, while gathering her courage.

"Of course not," He replied immediately.

"But you were angry at me. Back then. You know what I'm talking about right?" Amelia said, hesitantly.

Hearing her words made Rio silent for a second. He closed his eyes as he remembered what she was talking about. The scenes of that time played instantly in his eyes in that one blink that lasted a moment. But pushing his thoughts aside, when he remembered the plotlines that were coming, he replied

"I can never be angry at you Ames, so don't ever think that. I was just upset that day, nothing else. Promise."

"I'm sorry. That, because of me _ " She was saying as he held her shoulders and turned her face to his side and said - "What happened back then, was not your fault Amy. Don't ever think like that."

"But it was _ " Amelia said, as some tears formed in her eyes. The genuine care she saw in his eyes, only made her feel more guilty now.

"Hey, didn't you hear what I said? And besides, I'm back now. So stop blaming yourself for nothing. It's all in the past now, so just forget it." He said, as he held her hand.

Amelia cried some more, as she hugged him "I missed you brother. I missed you so much."

"I missed you too." He said, as he patted her back and joked- "Now stop crying. You're making me all emotional with those tears of yours. Father would kill me if he saw you crying."

"Stupid" Amelia said, with a weak smile. As she wiped her eyes.

"Ohh calling me stupid huh. Now can I ask you something?" Rio said.

"And when did you need permission from me?" Amelia said, his own words back.

"Why're you joining the sunshine academy?" Rio said, finally talking about the topic that really mattered now. The progress of plot.

Chapter 164 Let's Join Zenith Academy

"Why're you joining the Sunshine academy? I thought you always wanted to attend the Zenith." Rio asked as he looked at her.

Amelia's face mirrored his seriousness, a troubled look crossing her features as she averted her gaze. "Brother, can we not talk about it?"

Rio leaned forward, his tone gentle but insistent. "It's important, Amy. If you're choosing it just because you're angry at Zenith, then I'd really be disappointed in my sister."

"Brother _" Amelia's voice wavered, a hint of frustration in her eyes.

"What did I tell you, Amy?" Rio's voice held a note of seriousness, as he repeated his words -"Your emotions are your armor. If you wear them on your face, showing them off to the whole world, you'll only put yourself in danger."

Amelia sighed, her shoulders slumping as she looked down at her hands. She listened as Rio continued his words "What happened back then wasn't anyone's fault. It was an accident, and accidents happen. You're angry at them, that's fine, I am too, but risking your future or acting out on emotions won't get you anything. You think Zenith would care if you didn't join? You think they'd lose anything? The only one losing out would be you. So please think about it again."

"I won't take a step into that place, brother. I won't," Amelia's voice held a note of finality, a fierce determination in her eyes.

"Well then, I'll guess we'll be studying in different academies then." Rio said, as he shrugged his shoulders and laid down on the grass again.

Amelia's brows furrowed in confusion. "Wha _ what do you mean?"

A small smile played on Rio's lips as he looked up at the sky. "I'm planning on joining Zenith again, Ames. When the new year starts next month, I'll attend the academy again."

"Noo, you're not going back there. I won't allow it," Amelia's voice held a mixture of desperation and protest as tears threatened to well up in her eyes

Rio's eyes held a calm resolve, his gaze locking onto hers. "The choice isn't yours to make, Amy. I've already made up my mind. That's why I want you to join there too." His tone softened, as a soft smile played on his lips. "Unless you want to fight me in the next tournaments, of course."

"Brother," Amelia's voice wavered between a chuckle and a sigh, surprised he could still joke when they're talking about that matter. "I'll talk to mother. She won't allow it." Amelia said, as she stood up.

Amelia was convinced that her mother wouldn't allow her brother to return to Zenith Academy. She remembered vividly the anger that had radiated from her mother when she learned of their failure to protect him. Surely, she wouldn't trust the academy with Rio's safety again.

After all, if anyone hated the Zenith academy more than her after that incident, then it would be her mother. If not for the risk of starting an all out war with the world association, she would've wiped them out from the face of Arcadia 2 years ago.

Amelia thought and decided to talk with her mother instead. Her brother's decisions were often set in stone, and she knew she needed to convince her mother to convince him to change his mind.

"You know she won't stop me if I really want to join right. I'll talk about it to her myself next. I just wanted to let you know first. Give it a thought Ames, anger won't get you anywhere."

"If you don't want the past to repeat itself, you just have to grow stronger than you were in the past. As simple as that, and Zenith academy can help us with that." Rio said, as he left the garden, leaving Amelia behind in her thoughts.

Esme started following him as he started moving towards Artemis' room. She heard everything he said to Amelia and even she wanted to oppose it.

Even though Zenith academy was no. 1 and prestigious and all that. It was also a place where her master nearly lost his life. She wanted to tell him her opinions but looking at how he didn't even look at her once after coming out, she could tell he was still angry at her and wouldn't listen to anything she said.

'Lady Artemis would surely not allow it.' She thought, aware of Artemis' love for her children and her overprotective nature.

She took a few more steps back, once they both reached Artemis' room.

Instead of knocking on the door, Rio stood there for a few seconds, gathering his thoughts. Amelia would join the academy he joined, he was sure of it. But that was all only possible if he could convince Artemis or not.

If Artemis refused to let him go back there, he would have no other options through which he can maintain the events the way he wanted to. After what happened 2 years ago, he didn't want to let them unfold on their own or ignore them. He survived last time by luck, who knows if he'll be this lucky again or not.

'I need to be there to control everything. And the closer Amelia is to me, the safer she'd be. And the more focused I can be. I can't change her plotline if she doesn't join the academy.'

"You can come in." Artemis' voice broke his thoughts, as the door opened by itself.

The doors closed behind him once he walked in. Artemis, who was sitting near the table working on something, stood up and walked over to the sofa and sat there. The silent atmosphere seemed tense to Rio even before a word was spoken.

"Good morning, mother."

Artemis smiled and nodded, as she pointed towards her side, calling him.

Taking a deep breath, Rio hesitated for a moment, before going forward and sitting there. "I wanted to ask _"

"My answer is a no."

Before Rio could say what he wanted, Artemis cut him off with a straight answer in her firm tone.

Her words made his heart sank, as he pleaded "At Least hear what I have to say first."

"The first time you stood outside my room without saying anything was when you told me you've seen your fate. And the one after that, was when you asked my permission to join that academy 3 years earlier. And this is the third time.

Whatever you want to ask me, my answer is a no, Rio. And I won't change my mind." Artemis declared with a straight tone. Her face showed no expression of any leniency.

"I want to finish my studies, mother." Rio said.

A moment of silence hung in the air, as Artemis kept looking at him.

"Then you can join your sister at Sunshine. Mother already talked with the principal and made all the arrangements. You two can start from next month." Artemis said, as she passed him two letters of admissions that she received for both Rio and Amelia.

She knew someday he'd have to finish his studies, so she made some preparations for him beforehand. Since Amelia wanted to join the sunshine academy, she made arrangements for her. And when the news of Rio's return spread. The principal of sunshine academy sent another letter of admission for him too. With it, he can join their academy whenever he wants.

Her words weren't a surprise to Rio, as the vice principal of sunshine academy was their grandmother. With the recommendation from Patricia Blake, and the reputation that he made in his time at the Zenith academy -were enough to give him entry in any academy he wished for.

But that's not what Rio wanted, even though joining the sunshine academy might give a momentary sense of safety with his grandmother's influence and protection, but that would end up ruining the plot completely.

The help Amelia needed to survive her plotlines, she could only get it, if she joined Zenith academy. He could try all he wants, but if someday, the events of her future started, then he alone won't be enough to save her. She'd need someone else too, and that someone can only be found in Zenith academy.

That's why, both of them had to be there at the Zenith academy. Amelia, so she can get the help she needs, and he, to keep the protagonist and other plots in check.

"I appreciate your concern, mother," Rio began carefully, "but I want to continue my studies at Zenith Academy only. Not anywhere else."

Chapter 165 Do You Want To Repeat Your Year Again

"I want to continue my studies at zenith academy mother, not anywhere else."

Artemis' brows furrowed, her gaze intent on her son. "Explain yourself, Rio."

"You know I can't tell you that." Rio said, hoping the excuse of fate's blessing would give him a pass, like it did in the past.

But sadly, Artemis wasn't intent on letting him join the same place where he almost lost his life. "Then I can't allow you to join that academy. If you went there, Amelia would follow you too. I can't put both of your lives in danger. Not again."

Her words were resolute, but Rio replied with the same tone "Danger is everywhere, mother. We live in a world where literally anything and everything is possible. I had my body ripped in a million particles and I'm still alive. I won't risk my life ever again, mother."

Artemis' eyes bore into her son's, her concern and frustration palpable. "And your solution to that is to go to the same place that caused that incident? You know if you go back there now, how many people would be hating you? That's an organization that lost its value once you died, and now that you're back, do you think they'd be happy with you?"

Rio's voice remained unwavering, determined to make his case. "I can handle them, mother."

Artemis leaned forward, her voice laced with concern. "Handle them? What about the others? Do you know how many people are pissed that you're back and none of the others are? You take one step outside this mansion, and they'll jump at you like hyenas to blame everything on you."

"I can handle it, mother," Rio reiterated, his eyes locking onto Artemis'. "Just like how you handled everything for these 2 years. Let me help you. Please."

Artemis exhaled slowly, her gaze softening as she regarded her determined son. "You being away from me isn't helping me, my son. I just have to worry about you guys all day."

His voice softened, Rio leaned forward, his earnestness evident. "I don't like it either, mother. But you've seen it too, right? The people who've been rallying against our family from the shadows. How many rumors and new oppositions have you solved in these past 2 years? Even though the media downplayed it, the signs are still apparent, mother. And you know it too."

Artemis leaned back, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered his words. "They're just ants, and I'll crush them all if I have to. But no matter what you say, I won't risk my children's safety based on some God's words and prophecy."

Rio's gaze held a mix of urgency and plea as he continued, "It's not that simple, mother. Me and Amelia joining the academy is necessary, more than you can imagine. I wouldn't ask it if there was any other way. So please, trust me, just this once."

"You're always asking me for trust, when you don't even trust me and your father to protect you guys," Artemis countered, her voice tinged with a hint of hurt.

"It's not like that, mother," Rio responded earnestly. "And I'm not doubting yours or father's ability to protect us. I just want to keep this family safe, like you do. I promise I'll be careful."

A tense silence settled in the room as Artemis contemplated her son's words. Her gaze softened, her voice quieter as she finally spoke, "The last time you promised something, I had to cry in front of your poster for 2 years, Rio. Why would I risk it again? I finally got you back after so long; I will never risk losing you again. So you can forget about that academy and whatever your plans might be."

"Please, mother," Rio's voice held a note of desperation, his emotions laid bare before her. "If I don't join the academy, then everything I did, everything you did, for all these years would be a waste. We would simply lose everything. Threats far more dangerous than what we can handle are coming, mother. And Zenith Academy is the only place that can ensure that we survive it."

Artemis sighed, weariness etched on her features as she looked at him. "Why, why only that place? You already know everything they can teach. And any other knowledge that they have is something you can take wherever you want. Just go with your grandmother, or you can just stay here, and I'll teach you everything I know."

Rio's gaze held a mixture of frustration and understanding. "Things aren't that simple, mother. I would've told you everything if I could, but I can't. So please don't force me, mother. I'm begging you, please."

"Rio..."

"Please, mother. Just this once."

Artemis hesitated, her heart torn between a mother's worry and the responsibility she had for her family. She looked at her son, his eyes holding a mixture of hope and determination that mirrored her own. After a prolonged silence, she relented, her voice softening. "Fine, you can go there. But on one condition."

Rio's eyes brightened with a mixture of relief as he said. "Anything."

"You'll leave that academy along with your sister, if ever I tell you to do so. I don't want any more risks involving you two." Artemis stated her terms.

Rio hesitated for a moment, but this was already the best outcome he could hope for. As for leaving the academy, he'll just have to think of something else, when that day comes. "I_I promise, mother."

Artemis nodded her head and said. "I'll ask Myra to make the preparations. You can join them from the next session."

"Ahh that" Rio nervously looked at her, trying to say something.

Looking at him, Artemis sighed as she asked "What is it now?"

"Actually, I was hoping to join the academy this time only."

Surprised by his request, Artemis shook her head as she informed him "Absolutely not. Your body's still not fully healed. And if you didn't notice you dropped 3 ranks in your absence. Unless you at least reach them again, you'll just have to stay here."

"Fine. I'll just have to push my talents to my limits. I'm sure I can do it, if I try hard enough." Rio said, making her further confused.

"Seriously"

"You know my blessings, mother. The last thing you should worry about is me getting power ups." Rio smiled and said.

Though anyone else hearing those words, about him crossing 3 ranks in a little over a month, would've doubted him or just outright called it an impossible feat. Artemis didn't.

After all, she knew all about her son's blessings and talents better than anyone. That's why, even when the whole world gave up on him and declared him dead, she still believed he was alive and he was.

So now she was worried that he might just pull out some secret cards or something that's even more bizarre, then all the bizarre things he did. So she hurriedly said

"Don't, don't do it. Just don't force yourself. You can join alright. No need to push yourself."

Her words made Rio happy, as he internally breathed a sigh of relief. Even with all his knowledge, he didn't know any method to rake up ranks like that.

"Fine. Also I'll need you to come with me for that entrance ceremony. I might need your help to convince that foggy to let me join his academy, along with Amelia."

"You want to repeat your year." Artemis Confusedly asked

"Well, technically I never finished my exams, so it's not exactly a repeat right." Rio stated the fact. After all, he was trapped in the dungeon during the final tournaments, so it was true that he never passed the exam.

"Well, I don't have any problem with it. Since both of you will be together. Now go, before I change my mind." Artemis said. Happy that at least both these kids would be in the same class.

"Thanks mother. You're the best." Rio said, happily and ran away before she really changed her mind.

He was opening the door, when he stopped and turned to look at the corner. His eyes fixed there for a moment. Earlier he was too focused on convincing Artemis that he didn't notice, but now he could sense someone's presence there. But seeing as she didn't react and let it be, Rio just thought it was Myra or Camilla. And left the room.

Artemis smiled seeing his reaction, as it just proved to her again, how sharp his senses were.

"You can come out now." She said, once Rio closed the door and left.

But after waiting for a few seconds she still didn't get any response, so she further continued "Using his gifts to spy on him. I didn't think I taught my daughter like that."

Hearing her words, finally some movement could be seen from the corner. As Amelia's figure became visible now.

"I just wanted to know how he'd convince you. And to stop you, if you agree to it." Amelia said, as she came out and sat on a chair.

"And yet you never showed up." Artemis replied.

"Cause I got my answer already. What is his blessing that you talked about, mother?" Amelia asked, curious since she could tell that was the most important thing her brother kept hinting at.

But instead of answering her, Artemis shook her head while saying "That's not my secret to tell, Amelia. Why don't you go and ask him yourself?"

"Maybe I would." Amelia said and stood up to leave.

Watching both her children acting all grown up and making their own decisions, Artemis leaned back on her sofa as she thought -'When did they both grew up so big?'

From when she used to look after them, to when they're looking after her and each other, they did indeed come a long way.

Chapter 166 The Books Of Rio

Currently Rio was lying down on his bed with his eyes wide open. Looking up at the shimmering stars and the shallow moon. His room was a mess, as the tables and chairs were pushed aside in the middle, while his bed was dragged near the window.

It was already way past midnight, and soon in an hour or two, the morning sun would rise again. But he couldn't sleep a wink the whole night.

Diaries and notebooks were thrown around on his bed, as he spent the last few hours of time, going over stuff from the novel and the stuff he changed. His mind kept making notes and wrote down everything he could think of.

At the beginning of his arrival in Arcadia, he remembered the plot too well, due to the memory flashes that resurfaced before his death. And then the merging scenes replay cleared all the other parts too. So he didn't write anything about the novel.

Then he awakened the system, who read his mind and copied all the plotlines, since the system made the notes itself for free. So his lazy brain didn't think about the need to write it all down again.

But then one day that useless AI died and all the work load came to his head.

He remembered how after that first birthday event, he was hold up in his room for over a week, trying to remember and write down the whole novel, from every arc to every event and even fillers. It took a while, but he wrote it all, down to the very last twist and turn he could recall. He named it "The book of a failed future"

Once that was done, he had to write 2 other more books, one which he titled "The book of changes" - a book, where he wrote down all the changes he brought and made in the original story. The second book was titled "The book of possibilities" - a book, where he wrote down all the potential ramifications of his alterations, and every possible outcome the changes he made might bring. The events that might change and be rushed or rooted out -every possibility that he could come up with was written there.

Today, he spent his whole night reading through everything, all 3 of his books, and as a result, his exhausted eyes were hurting now. It had been a while since he read through so much so fast, if not for the experience of skimming through stuff from Sky Ultima, he might need a whole week to read it all. But those 3 years of constant reading proved somewhat useful today. Plus some pills that increased his focus, and maybe one or two potions that kept him energetic enough to bear through everything, also helped a little.

Even after he finished reading and was tired as hell, he couldn't get himself to sleep. After all, tomorrow morning was the day when it'll all begin. The day he had been waiting and preparing for, for the past 8 years.

Ever since he wrote the the book of failed future himself, he had come across dozens or maybe even more major plot holes in the novel story, that he didn't even notice back on earth. Maybe it was because it was his first novel, and he didn't focus hard on it, but those plot holes, those mysteries that were never explained were the most important to him now. As they might hold the key of his survival. They might be what can help him to avoid the ending, to avoid HIM, or maybe even the key to kill HIM without following the written path.

And that's why he was extra hellbent on joining the Zenith academy. As one such plot hole mystery was present there. If he could solve that puzzle, it might give him a clue or a lead, on how to stop the worst case scenario of the novel.

'I will never repeat what happened 2 years ago.' He thought, as the thoughts of his last failure came to his mind. If not for that one slip up, he wouldn't have to go through all that hell. He could've stayed leisurely and lived his life like everyone else, but due to his ignorance, he ended up falling into their traps. The haunting memories of the previous 2 years served as a constant reminder of the stakes at hand. Screaming at him, that he shouldn't fail again.

Remembering the faces of everyone he hasn't seen in 2 years, brought a cold, almost sinister smile to his face.

The ones who are still alive and living in the academy, the ones he played around and experimented with to learn about fate and its tricks, he'd come across them soon enough, and this time he wouldn't just be an observer but one of their targets too.

Artemis was right, many of the students, staff and others, weren't happy with the news of his survival. After all, he was the only one who returned alive, while all the others were killed in that dungeon incident.

"Some of them might try to put the blame of others' death on me, or try to fan those rumors of a new evil God, but since I have enough proof to prove my innocence, they'll all die down.' he mused, his smile morphing into a calculated grin.

'In the eyes of general public, Blake family's image has been good enough. Even though his death's reaction and his father's killings had ignited some false reports, but one charity policy or another new invention of cheap entertainment, would change it all back to normal. After all, he and Artemis have been doing that for years now.'

Rio thought remembering how his mother had transformed the Blake family's image into the most noble, noble family ever. The 8 years of her hard work, was the reason why whole of Damascus was sad for his death too.

"The rumors of me being a chosen one, who returned from the dead...," he pondered, this was an unexpected twist that had made him a central figure in the narrative. But it could also play out in my favor someday.

'The image of my genius talent and other nice stuff I did all these years, had already made me an angel-like figure in Damascus. I just have to maintain this image till it suits me, and use it to increase my influence outside Damascus now.'

He considered the likely reaction of the novel's beginning antagonists. The villains of academy arcs. They wouldn't move against him overtly, not when he was in the spotlight. And troubling him, would only highlight them too. But they would likely send their underlings and minions. He was confident in his ability to fend off such attacks and handle them cleanly. And if the situation ever escalated beyond his control, he had a reliable pawn ready to intercept them. He'll just have to redirect them to that lucky cockroach and enjoy the drama from the sidelines.

"My system should awaken tomorrow too, since the plot starts from then -wonder how long it'll take this time for it to count my points. I've literally ruined everything I possibly could with my power -so would I be a millionaire or a billionaire in points when it comes online."

'That system sounds like a cheapskate, so it better not shortchange me or cut my points. If it did I'll just buy a physical body for the system and then beat it up.'

System, who was peacefully sleeping in a silent tiny corner of his mind, had a shiver as it heard Rio's words.

Chapter 167 Stage For Entrance

Astralair Venera, a valley, a realm that defied the laws of gravity and normal existence. A place, which housed nothing on the ground but was made whole in sky.

It was a continental area made up by numerous floating islands. Each island was part of some other plane, a fragment of some other world, that appeared in Arcadia after emergence.

These islands instead of falling down with the pull of gravity, kept floating among the clouds.

In this mysterious place, was an island known throughout Arcadia as the most prestigious and beautiful one, it was called Laurelia Sanctum. The name itself held profound meaning, signifying the sanctuary of legendary knowledge and lore that this island held.

Laurelia Sanctum island was filled with stone statues and monuments, each said to be holding the secrets of sansara(world). Thus this island was also often referred as Cairn island. Meaning a place where statues carved from stone dotted its landscape and knowledge was engraved and etched on them.

The island's mystique was further enhanced by its ethereal beauty. Clouds embraced its peaks, giving the illusion that it rested on a celestial throne. As sunlight kissed the ground, a golden aura seemed to emanate from the island, captivating all who gazed upon it.

But despite its vast mysteries and beautiful scenery, it was mainly known for something else. This was where Arcadia's current best academy was made. One of the 5 pillars of world association, their pride, Zenith academy.

While the island remained shrouded in the barriers of magic and concealed by the veils of clouds for most of the year, today was a rare exception. Today it was open for the world to see as a special occasion. This was because today marked the entrance ceremony of Zenith Academy's new batch of students.

But even today, not just anybody could walk in. Considering the safety of the ceremony and crowd control, only those who were invited could take a step inside this island.

Numerous famous reporters from various guilds, magazines and other sectors were called and given permission to record and broadcast this grand event throughout the world.

Families of the incoming students, who had either been selected through examinations or received invitations based on their talent and recommendations, were also welcomed to partake in this grand event.

The security of the place was guaranteed as the staff of Zenith Academy was present there. The responsibility to maintain the crowd and smooth orchestration of the event was also given to the student council and discipline committee of the academy.

Many drones were flying in the air, to record the whole area, sitting arrangements were made in an open space for everyone.

In the center of the celebratory ground stood a big circular stage, elevated to offer a clear view to all. Figures of authority and faculty members from Zenith Academy gathered upon the stage, their presence exuding an air of authority that naturally drew the attention of the crowd

Glass screens suspended in mid-air provided an up-close view of the stage for everyone present. Even those sitting far behind or those watching the footage of drones from their home.

Any incident like the one 2 years ago doesn't happen again, so extra measures of safety were taken. Even the principal of Zenith was present on the stage, waiting to commence the ceremony.

Some speculated it was also because of the vast number of talented people who joined the academy this time. From the Royal princess of Schilla, to the heirs and heiresses of some Dukes. From the children of the top 5 guild leaders, to even heir apparent of the Elven empire. From scions of noble vampire families to students of high ranking dwarven officials, everyone had come to join Zenith academy this year.

"Golden generation" that's what people have been calling it. Ever since the news and some footage of the entrance examinations were released to the world. The talent shown by each one of the selected students in their respective fields was something that could put them in highlights of history, and now they were all coming together, to study and grow together at the same academy.

As anticipation built, a hushed excitement enveloped the crowd. Conversations buzzed with anticipation, mixing with the gentle breeze that carried whispers of rumors and the potential of future.

"The principal himself is here. This is going to be awesome."

"When was the last time he made a public appearance?"

"I heard this batch of students includes some of the most talented kids from whole world."

"Did you not see the list of new students present? No wonder everyone's calling them the golden generation, every one of them is a monster."

Conversations like these echoed through the air, mingling with the energy of the crowd.

"Man, I waited a whole year to come here again."

"Yeah, I had to use all my connections to convince my supervisor to let me enter. This is all so worth it."

"Humph what's so special about it. It happens every year."

"Who do you think took the first rank in entrance examination? The list had so much competition."

"I don't know man, they all seem so good. Someone even said, that the record of Rio as the fastest to finish the Spectrum Maze in history was broken this time too."

"Wh_what, who did that?"

"I don't know, but whoever that person is, they're likely to take the first place too."

"Damn."

Amid the celebration and anticipation, soon the murmurs started flowing regarding the return of a figure long thought dead.

"Talking about Rio, is he really back? I've seen images and heard stories, but is it possible?"

"Nah, they're just rumors I bet. Otherwise his family or the guilds would've made an announcement. It's been over a month but no one has seen him. It was probably done by some reporters to start some controversy to get famous."

"I think so too, after all, how can one survive in a dungeon for 2 years."

"Even with his talent and luck, he can't just survive a dungeon crash right? That's impossible."

Such discussions were inevitable, given the circumstances surrounding Rio's supposed return. Some were skeptical, attributing it to the sensationalism of the media. While some were still doubtful since after that day, the influx of many influential people and healers had increased in Damascus.

But on the papers, the news about his return was basically buried now. Since no one got any confirmation even after a month, every media company moved on, and was now busy covering the articles on entrance examinations and ceremony.

Many guilds had also sent their scouts to get some underdogs or less known talented students in their guilds. After all, once someone joined the academy, they wouldn't be able to leave for the whole year. And they can't sign with any guild until they graduate from the academy.

The 4 years of academy life, would solely be taken over by studies and trainings on these islands. So many guilds were trying to rope in kids before they join the academy, and their value increases. This way it's cheaper and has less competition, instead of waiting for 4 years to get that same guy to sign with the guild.

This also works only cause once someone graduated from any of the top 5 academies, they would only join one of the top guilds, that's why mid or low ranking guilds try to get as many talents contracted to them as soon as possible.

Obviously since everyone knows about all this, they all want to join the top 5, not many can be fooled , but still those who have no connections or those who're in need of money or other resources -do sign these deals to join a guild.

In another section of guests were the students who passed the exams and their families. Every student could bring 2 people with him to watch the ceremony. So despite the limitations the crowd of hundreds had formed in the ground.

No conflicts or safety issues arises, so proper distance and space was maintained between all the sitting arrangements. The families, clans or races which aren't on friendly terms or have bad relationships were especially given separate spaces away from each other, so as not to create any fights on day one of the new year.

The stage was set, and the entry of the protagonist was about to happen. The perfect boost of backing, confidence, power and prestige awaited the hero. But obviously how can the destined devil, let it all happen so smoothly.

Years ago, on a similar stage he had changed the fate of the first heroine, and today, he was finally coming face to face with the hero.

He was back from the certain death to ruin it all.

Chapter 168 Dance Of Devil

To ensure that no God's or Strays could create any drama, the whole island was surrounded by the barrier erected by artifacts which dampens the vision of Gods and shuts the flow of faith energy.

Since every God gets their powers from the faith, they all have similar origin of energy. That's why the artifacts or formations which stops or resists the flow of faith energy, makes it harder for gods to take notice and act.

This is why, the city of non-believers and atheists called Nontheos, was the worst place for any God. As that place was simply filled with people who had no faith and chosen the path of Apostasy -

abandonment of religion. That's why gods couldn't interfere in any way and it became the blind region from the God's eyes.

Obviously chosen Gods tied to their avatar, could still act freely within the confines of the academy and any other formations too.

To stop the trickster gods who're always simply looking for a laugh, the other gods were given a tribute to interfere and stop them. In simple terms, the academy hired Gods to stop gods from interfering.

This was the story known to everyone, but what the normal public of Arcadia didn't know was that there were no formations or artifacts which stopped the gods, it was all due to the stone pillars surrounding the entire island. The normally weird looking stone monuments created a null zone which separated the realm of gods and created a disturbance in their abilities.

No one could stop a God from doing what they wanted, but that God must be willing to pay the equal price. As the Cairns covered the entire island, if some God intervened, they'd have to spend dozens of times more energy than what is needed anywhere else. In simple terms, gods kept silent, simply cause it was costly for them to say something.

Watching the mortals, talking to them, giving them blessings or making them an avatar - it all costs them their energy, their own powers, so it's simple why they wouldn't waste that on trying to get past the barrier forcefully, when they can just wait for the person they chose to come out. After all, 4 years might seem longer in the eyes of normal mortals, but in the eyes of gods, it's a time that'll fly in a blink of an eye.

In the novel, after phase 2 of Emergence when the world was suddenly thrown into the chaos once more, these islands became the sanctuary for everyone.

At that time these islands became the place that were safe from the raging flames of carnage that covered all of Arcadia.

Even Rio's future self, infamously known as the Devil, had made use of these so called barriers in his fight against the Gods.

There was a scene in the novel, where Devil trapped a 108 avatars from all over the world on these islands, and forced their chosen gods to watch as he slaughtered them.

The gods who couldn't control their anger or those who were too attached with their avatar and came to their rescue -only ended up playing in his hands and getting trapped in the barriers themselves too.

The barriers made them considerably weak, as the more they used their abilities the more they struggled to fight against him, thus that became another continuation of the battle between Gods vs Devil.

Though Rio had no plans to go that crazy and blood thirsty yet, these stone monuments were indeed the reason why he wanted to join Zenith Academy the most. He wanted to learn everything about these barriers and their workings and origins. He wanted to see, if they can be used in the way he hoped to utilize them to stop his ending once and for all.

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(Fk I'm getting sidetracked again, aren't I? Let's focus back on the entrance ceremony.)

Currently in a separate hall many children ranging from the age of 15-18 were sitting around.

These were the group of students who were chosen to enter the academy this year after they passed the entrance examinations. More than 150 kids were sitting in the hall, as this was only one of the many such halls.

The tense atmosphere in the hall was a stark contrast with the excitement present outside. Currently everyone inside was checking their bracelets, looking at the message of the ranking list and their points distribution from the tests.

Some were happy with the results they got showing off everywhere, while others complained and compared with others.

Many students chose to stay silent and just observe their surroundings, while some had already started to form their groups. Some socials were trying to be friendly with everyone, while some shy ones just stayed away in a corner..

The list had announced the ranking of everyone except the top 25 rankers, who would only be announced once the ceremony starts and they get rewarded and praised for their outstanding achievements in front of everyone.

Those who didn't take part in entrance examinations and were invited to join by the academy itself, were present in a separate hall. While in one other hall, were the top rankers, the top 25 students of this year. They were all waiting for the announcements to start so they could go out and join everyone too.

In that hall, Leonard Heartwell, the protagonist was standing by the window, talking to his family on the phone.

<Ohh phones were invented in between the time skip, so don't say where did these things popped up>

His father and aunt were present outside in the visitor's section. He looked at their excited faces and how proud they were for him, as they constantly chatted about the crowd and everything happening outside.

"Where's sister? Did you meet her?" Leon's father asked.

"No, she's in the student council. So she's probably busy with all the arrangements and other responsibilities. I'll meet her once the function starts." Leon said, and engaged his parents in another conversation.

Once he cut the call, he opened the contact details of his sister and dialed it, but the answer was the same as before.

'Guess I'll just have to see her outside' Leon thought, and turned around to glance at the people around him.

They were the top rankers of this session, people who were as strong and talented as him. Many of those present were children of noble families or young masters of their clans and races. Those who didn't belong to them, were related to the various associations and guilds of the world.

Though half of them had also gotten the invitations to join the academy, and didn't even need to take part in these exams, many still did that just to test their limits and see their rankings. Some also wanted to show off their powers in front of other students and simply did it as a competition of sports between them.

After all, many of them were future pillars and would be leaders of various places, so the competition between them and need to establish their dominance or superiority was even more obvious between them.

"Who do you think is taking the first place?" One of the kids asked his friend.

"It's probably one of those three?" He said while pointing towards certain students.

"Nah, I bet it's that guy or maybe the one from that guild."

"Isn't his father the leader of that _"

Conversations and speculations between everyone were happening, when an announcement of the top students was made and the doors of the halls opened and they started moving out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome, the best of the golden generation. The cream of the crop and the finest of the finals. I, present you, the rankers of the Zenith Academy's this new year."

The students passed through a dimly lit hallway moving outward where the loud cheers of the crowd could be heard calling for them. Screaming and welcoming them in loud tones as claps and noise echoed everywhere.

When every student came out, they were to stand upon the stone platform, which floated in the air. Various light crystals and fireworks lit up the sky, as they all made their entrance between the whole stage.

The stone platform floated, giving everyone a close look at the next best of this year's students. The platform roamed around, making a full circle of the open ground, before stopping in one place.

The platform of rankers was now situated just below the main stage, where the principal and other staff of the academy made their announcements.

"The results of your exams have been sent to your id bracelets. So check them and take your respective stand based on your rankings."

A man with glasses came forward and said. Though he didn't use any loudspeakers or microphone, his voice still reached every student, who eagerly checked their results.

While they were busy looking through that, the platform lit up in different colors as it created panels with numbers written on it. The ground of certain places raised upwards, and there the banners of rank one to three floated above.

All this signified their ranking and positions in the class, rank 1-3 were given a higher platform to showcase them to the whole world.

The reason behind announcing results in front of the whole world and this display of different treatment, was to show 2 things to every new student – one, to build up the hype and show the surprise to everyone together. Second, to increase the competition between the students and show them that no matter who they were outside, or who they own and belong to, the only thing that matters in these walls is your ranking.

After getting accustomed to the surprise ranking reveal, the students all started taking steps towards their positions. Even those who were dissatisfied with their results, had to put on a smiling front to not look petty in front of the whole world.

Leon looked at the message on his bracelet, as he skimmed through everything.

[Leon Heartwell - rank 1]

Chapter 169 Stealing The Limelight

As Leon confidently ascended the elevated platform designated for the first ranker, the crowd went into a frenzy. Even the rankers standing on the same platform had a shocked expression, exchanging bewildered glances between themselves after seeing a surprisingly new face at the high stage.

The glass screens suspended in the air, broadcasting the event to those seated afar and even those watching remotely, displayed Leon's image prominently. His presence at the pinnacle of the stage sent shockwaves throughout Laurelia Sanctum.

Whispers and murmurs swept across the space, creating an atmosphere of disbelief and astonishment.

"Who's that guy?"

"Is he the first rank?"

"What about others, is this ranking really real?"

"Is this some sort of error or a prank?"

"I remember him – the Baron's son who failed his awakening. How could he suddenly emerge as the first rank?"

"He was even crippled, wasn't he? How can he awaken again and claim the top spot?"

The confusion and astonishment spread through the crowd, a sea of faces reflecting shock and disbelief. Not a single person was present there, who wasn't surprised by this reveal. Leon's guardians, his father and aunt, stood among them, their astonishment mirroring that of the others, perhaps even more so.

Unlike the rest of the world, they knew Leon had his successful awakening 2 years ago. They've seen him train and push himself to limits in these past 2 years, but even they hadn't anticipated him rising to claim the first place in the rankings of the world's best academy.

As the murmurs spread like wildfire, Alora, Leon's aunt, turned to her brother, Darren Heartwell, her voice trembling with a mix of amazement and pride. "Is this really happening, Darren?"

Her brother, Darren, stood frozen for a moment, his eyes fixed on the stage where his son stood proudly. "That's truly my son up there, isn't it?"

"I knew his hard work would pay off. He's been training tirelessly ever since then. Celeste would've been so proud." Alora said, her voice tinged with a touch of melancholy.

Celeste Lightborne, Leon's mother and her sister in law, was still unconscious even after all these years had passed.

With the help of the Blake family, her condition had improved drastically over the years. As the corrosion of the curse placed on her reduced and stopped spreading any further. But even they couldn't help in curing her completely.

Hearing his wife's name, the memories of the beautiful past came to Darren's mind, but he stopped himself from thinking about sad things, because today was probably the biggest day for his son.

Meanwhile, not everyone in the audience shared the same sentiment of joy. The leaders of other guilds, parents of other high-ranking students, and members of influential families were struggling to process the unexpected turn of events. Their expressions were a mix of disbelief, curiosity, and in some cases, even suspicion. Everyone was looking at the stage waiting for an explanation.

As the tension in the air grew palpable, the stage where Leon stood became the epicenter of attention. The faculty members, sensing the need to address the crowd's confusion, exchanged quick glances before one of them stepped forward.

"Now I know many of you might find these rankings as surprising or shocking, but let me reassure you, these are all unbiased and given after a thorough check of everyone's abilities and their performance in the exams."

A hush fell over the crowd, all eyes turned to the staff present on stage, listening to his explanation.

"This year was perhaps the most challenging one for us to decide the rankings, especially the first 5 students, it was a very close call and even us at the academy had to watch the clips many times to decide upon the first rank." The announcer said making everyone curious. Then with a graceful wave of his hand, a sense of wonder filled the atmosphere as a large scroll unfurled itself against the sky, accompanied by bursts of colorful fireworks. The scroll revealed a list of names, each written in a different glowing hue.

"These are the results of the ranking," the announcer's voice echoed, capturing the attention of all present.

As the crowd's gaze fixed upon the scroll, the following names illuminated the sky:

1. Leonard Heartwell

2. Moksh Blackwood

3. Katherine Winston

4. Valtor Shade

5. Qingyue Grayborn

6. Vanessa Belmont

7. Edward Sinclair

8.Zirix Drakkar

9.Amaya Stormswill

10.Firsjen Scarlett

11.Lincoln Korbil

12.Sunaina Vaidya

13.Elroy Morris

14.Ziona Boulderhelm

15.Morfius Thornfang

"These are the top 15 of this year. For those who are feeling dissatisfied with the results don't worry, cause to quell your curiosity, we have prepared this. The highlights of everyone's journey in the entrance exams. This will show you what all these students did and went through."

With a mesmerizing transformation, the waterfall behind the stage ceased its cascade, morphing into a mirror-like still surface. It flickered to life, displaying the recordings of various students going through different phases of the entrance exams.

As the staff said, every student was amazing in their trials. They were all flawless and almost neck to neck with each other. The rankers were showing their all in the battles they fought, the speed, reflexes and the presence of mind showed by them was far surpassing the other students. The rankings aside, it was evident that every student had displayed exceptional qualities.

The difficulty of exams and their trials change every year, so there was no need to hide these videos, when these worked very well for the promotions.

After the last recording concluded, a sense of satisfaction lingered in the air. But soon even that silence stopped as people started cheering once more. The murmurs of appreciation gradually subsided as the announcer took center stage once more, his voice carrying a playful edge.

"So you guys still want more huh." he remarked, drawing laughter from the audience.

"But we have nothing for you about any other toppers anymore _ " He stopped speaking, creating the environment of curiosity and then continued - "But for the record breaker, the underdog whom no one saw coming, the one who truly emerged as a surprise package. The one at the top, the number one Leonard Heartwell."

At the announcer's words, several lights turned on Leon who still stood with the same confident expression, looking around at everyone.

"Now this guy right there had broken the record of passing the Spectrum maze in the least amount of time. Not only in this year, no, but all those before him too."

"He had broken the previous record set by Rio Blake 2 years ago." The announcer of the event said.

"You guys feeling curious yet. Do you wanna see his results now?" the announcer inquired, his tone dripping with anticipation.

A resounding chorus of "YES" echoed throughout the crowd, a clear testament to their eagerness.

"Or perhaps you're more interested in watching his journey unfold?" The question was met with an enthusiastic chorus of "YES" and applause.

The crowd erupted in roars and cheers as the announcer announced all the news. Everyone wanted to see the recordings of this new talent that popped up suddenly. The guild members who were working as scouts started calling their superiors informing them everything and discussing what to offer to this new prodigy if they could fool him.

The screen first showed the numbers of his results in bold letters

[Leonard Heartwell

[Challenge - Spectrum Maze

[Clearance time - 27 min 56 seconds]

A breathless hush settled over the crowd. The seconds ticked by in near silence as everyone processed the information. The realization dawned – the record had been broken. It was real. Somehow this guy whom no one knew existed, or seen as a challenge, appeared out of nowhere and even broke the record of zenith academy's history.

Previous record for clearing the spectrum maze was set by Rio, and even he took 28 minutes and 10 seconds.

The difference between them might be less in numbers, but it was enough when it comes to records and now that belonged to Leonard.

"I never thought his records would be broken in just 2 years."

"Yeah, all the previous records lasted for decades before someone could beat them. "These guys are all monsters."

"When did he even awaken? I remember he was a cripple just 3 years ago, when his sister joined the academy."

"Yeah, there were even memes about this guy back then. It means he just went from a cripple to a record breaking genius in just 3 years at maximum."

"This is too much right. Look at those noble kids' faces. I bet they must be cursing their luck to compete in public exams, and now standing beneath a Baron's son."

"True. Hey, do you think he's more talented than Rio?"

"What kind of question is that? Can't you see the results, this guy will definitely be even more talented than him."

"Yeah, Rio had Blake family behind him, while this guy is just a Baron's son. Yet he still became this outstanding in this little time. If he had the similar resources like Rio he would simply leave everyone behind."

The discussions like this were going on, as cheers echoed through the hallways and open stage. Every drone focused on Leonard and his recordings playing in the mirror screens.

Outside the celebration ground, hearing the loud roars Rio had a smile on his face as he heard the announcements.

'He's sitting on the shoulders of a God, and yet the world sees him as down to earth. What a funny way his halo works.'

"The academy set the stage and he became the limelight, then let me steal the show and change the highlight."

Chapter 170 Returning From The Dead In The Limelight

Rio along with Amelia and Artemis came out of the teleportation gate. The entry to the islands was only accessible through space magic, as the normal ways of traveling couldn't work. Flying was prohibited around the floating islands and walking or vehicles were impossible to come.

Airships, which are often used for air travel or flying treasures which are used for flying in the sky, aren't allowed to enter the vicinity of Laurelia Sanctum. There's a barrier surrounding the island and the only way to pass through that is either with the tokens issued by the world association or with the permission from the principal of Zenith academy. Forced entry or unauthorized stay in the airspace would be dealt devastation and no questions or explanations would be asked.

Since the ceremony had already started, all the guests were already present inside, so other than the guards and security staff stationed at the gate, no one else was present.

Artemis' showed the invitation and after the staff were done checking the authenticity and reading the mana signature of everyone, they let everyone enter.

"The ceremony has started, if you follow along the path marked by the signs, you can reach there. Or you can wait, as the senior year students would show you the way."

One of the guards came forward to inform them. His eyes were fixed on Rio's figure, as he kept staring at him in doubt and shock. Artemis ignored him and started walking ahead, without waiting for anyone to lead them. Even without these flashy signs or boards finding the place where everyone is gathered won't be hard, as even at the outskirts of islands, the loud cheers could be heard. And they just need to follow the sound.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Artemis asked, for the last time. Once Rio stepped forward and into the crowd, the reactions of everyone would simply be out of control. And that too in this academy, at this time -the whole world was watching and there'd be no turning back.

"I can handle it, mother. You can go ahead." Rio said with a smile, reassuring her. She wanted to wait a month or two more, until he was fully healed, before he showed himself to the whole world. But there was no need for him to think twice now. The plot had begun, and he couldn't afford to sit silent somewhere else anymore, when heavens had already played their first play already.

Artemis looked at Amelia, and then left them. She went towards the section where other nobles and special guests were present. Patricia Blake, their grandmother was also present there. And to convince the principal for Rio's request, Artemis might even need her help. That's why she went alone to talk to her.

Rio and Amelia started walking towards the entrance, as the closer they got, the louder the roars and cheers were getting.

Amelia was walking with a frown on her face, even after thinking over his reasons for a month, she was still not happy with his decision to join this academy again. But after hearing his discussion with their mother, she knew whatever she said or asked would have no effect on him, as he had already made up his mind to join here.

For the past month, many times she wanted to ask him about his blessing, or why he was so hellbent on joining this academy, but she knew he wouldn't tell her anything. And if she forced him for answers it would only annoy him or make him angry. Her curiosity 2 years ago almost cost him his life, and she had to live with that guilt for all this time. Now that he was back, she didn't want to repeat her mistakes again.

Attempting to shift her thoughts, Amelia looked at her brother, her voice carrying a hint of casualness. "So, how does it feel to be back here?"

"Nothing much has changed actually, it all feels familiar, maybe nostalgic." Rio said, as he walked without even looking at the signs. He could go there even with his eyes closed, after all, he did spend a whole year roaming every corner of this academy.

"Your classmates, the ones from your year, they would be in their final year at the academy now," Amelia said.

Rio's lips curved into a nonchalant smile. "Yeah, I guess. It's probably going to be a surprise for them seeing me back in first-year classes again. Same goes for the teachers too."

Amelia nodded, a hint of amusement in her eyes. "You'll be the weird one in the whole academy, who's repeating a year."

Rio shrugged his shoulders and said. "Doesn't matter much to me. I'm not here for their reactions anyway."

Looking at the gate and students standing at the sides, Amelia turned to her brother as she said "This is it, the final step."

"If anything this is the first one."

Rio said, with a smile while pushing the door open and walking inside. He felt his heart race with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. He had played his part from the shadows for too long, and now, as the plot started, there was no more room for hesitation. He just has to join it, and face what comes his way head on.

Just as soon as he walked in, when he had only taken a few steps, people started pointing their fingers at him, as they looked at him with shock and surprise. Whispers rippled through the crowd like wildfire, each comment a mixture of disbelief and awe:

"Is that...?"

"Could it be?"

"But he's supposed to be..."

"I heard he returned, but this..."

"That's him right. That's definitely him."

"So those rumors, they weren't false."

Conversations like this started spreading as more people started taking notice of him.

Rio looked at the big screens hovering on all corners playing the images of Leon clearing the different challenges prepared for this year's exams. As Rio's eyes scanned the screens, a smile tugged at his lips.

'The academy set the stage and he became the limelight, then let me steal the show and change the highlight.'

His words had just finished, when something happened, something changed in the celebration area. The hovering drones, which had been capturing the event from above, abruptly altered their course, redirecting their flight toward the entrance of the public grounds.

The screens that had been displaying the ongoing ceremony and Leon's performance switched their focus too, now showcasing the unfolding scene captured by the drones.

The footage displayed a girl with raven-black hair walking alongside a young man who bore short, snowy-white hair. The focus of the cameras even ignored the pretty girl as they zoomed in on the boy whose eyes, dark and silent, looked straight, undeterred by the storm his entry had set off.

Every step he took, the more reporters followed behind him and the more the crowd went into a frenzy. The reporters started pointing their cameras, which looked like crystals cut into various shapes. Their various questions got drowned quickly as people started shouting and cheering and screaming around him.

The crowd was unable to come close to him, as they were all stopped by an invisible barrier around him, some people dressed in black appeared out of nowhere, forming a circle around him, making sure no one could even come close to that barrier or try to get past it.

Rio looked at Amelia, who wore an annoyed expression. She looked at the excessive crowd and covered her ears with mana. It was a makeshift solution to shield herself from the deafening cheers that had transformed into roars and chatter that hurt her ears now.

Ignoring everything, Rio kept walking towards the central stage, as the students of the student council and disciplinary committee also came forward to control the crowd.

Glancing to the side, Rio's gaze collided with the eyes of some familiar faces among the students. Their expressions mirrored the surprise rippling through the crowd.

Without saying anything to them, or even acknowledging their presence Rio turned his attention back towards the stage, where he could see the expressions of the staff and the principal too. Looking at their faces, he really wanted to smirk and smile at them, to show them that he was back.

To shout that even though they failed, he survived and crawled out of that hell on his own, but he couldn't do that. It wasn't the right time yet. He didn't forget anything and he wouldn't forgive them for nothing, but their punishments would have to wait a little.

As today was a day dedicated to the protagonist.

'It's been a while since I've been back. A stage as grand as this seems pretty fitting for my debut, don't you think?' Rio thought to himself, and next second, the soothing voice of his system sounded in his ears again.

[Of course host. This seems perfect.]

'Welcome back' x [Welcome back]

They both said together, announcing each other's arrival back to the world. One, came back from the dead, and the other, ended its slumber and woke up.