

Once Human 721

Chapter 721 - Ardor

It wasn't what one would call an easy fight, even for a strong and young cultivator such as Ardor. Nonetheless, he was able to prevail and defeat the three opponents. However, fighting one's demon, especially in Ardor's case, wasn't going to be done this fast and with just one fight.

This fragmented piece of his past still haunts the youth, who, like Cristina, was quite arrogant when he entered the MoonStar Sect. Back then, Ardor had thought that apart from his master- now deceased- no one would surprise him, no matter how strong they were. So wrong he was, ignorant of the true prowess of the true experts, unable to accept that there are people who could beat his master. When he witnessed Arthur's myriad techniques, which were just as weird as they were heaven-defying, Ardor knew that he, despite traveling to many a place - dangerous and well-hidden- was still an inexperienced youngster.

There's also Lucy MoonStar, the wife of the notorious Parasite. A woman from the White Specter Clan, and a woman equipped with absurd physical strength and an arsenal of unique skills, such as the Golden Flames, for example.

Ho Qing's ultimate goal was to become an independent and strong cultivator, able to protect himself and his friends. He wanted to explore the mysteries of the world and reach the peak of cultivation.

Ardor's goal wasn't that different either. The youth sought after the title of 'Sword God', which, since ancient time- precisely the Era of Beginning- only one person truly deserved such a title. It was, of course, the Nameless Knight, a terrifying existence that makes anyone shiver with fear and in awe with admiration and fascination. He's, without a doubt, the strongest living being in the current Era

Ardor deeply wished to achieve such strength; To be able to flatten mountains and split seas with a casual swing of his sword. In fact, there hasn't been a book, story, or a fleeting rumor about The Nameless Knight that Ardor hasn't heard or read. His current teacher, Arthur MoonStar, was also a strong sword-user, a monster. A freak of nature. He may not be as strong as the Nameless Knight but Ardor was certain that there are many things he could learn from the Parasite.

When he but a toddler, his master warned him to never join any sect or clan, repeatedly telling him that the pursuit of strength requires constant fighting and non-stop traveling. Secluding yourself in a cave and cultivating can only do so much. It isn't an efficient way and, nowadays, it's only practiced by old decrepit, hermits, and those who are no longer interested in what's going on outside.

And so, Ardor broke the rule and joined the MoonStar sect. His demeanor, slowly but surely, was changing for the better. He got rid of his arrogance and persevered, seeing a hopeful future at the end of the road.

The youth, mumbling inaudible words under his breath, lifted his head and calmly watched three more opponents appear from the rising elevator.

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Riddled with wounds, his robe tattered and shredded around the waist and knees, Ardor sat on the ground. He has been continuously for eighty minutes, defeating more than twenty-one of those

machines. He didn't overexert himself and survived till now, which, fortunately, was the end. The surroundings blurred and, in the blink of an eye, he found himself sitting on the dirt, at the finish line. The two hours were almost up but not all participants had appeared.

"Hey! You good?"

Bora approached Ardor and offered his hand, which the latter tightly held and stood up.

"Did everyone make it?"

"Rosea and Shu Ru are still not here." Replied Bora, his voice showcasing his nervousness.

Ho Qing, standing a few meters away, nodded at Ardor but did not utter a word, as usual.

"I've got good news, though. Ho Qing was the first to complete the Trial. That ought to give our team bonus points, right?"

"Maybe." Responded Ardor, taking a deep breath as he raised his head, staring absent-mindedly at the cloudy grey sky.

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"Arthur, I've been wondering about something." Curiously said Isadore Malfront, maintaining his eyes on the screen.

"Shu Ru belongs to the Mirage Era Hall. Did she quit her sect.. or was there something I'm not aware of? Quite frankly, I was surprised to see her in your team."

Arthur didn't reply immediately, he also looked at the screen. Unlike the spectators, who couldn't see what the participants were facing, he- as the creator of the Trial- could see everything.

"I don't see anything that warrants you're incessant wondering, your Majesty."

"There's an unwritten rule about being at two sects at once. It's understandable if you're in a clan and joins a sect, but it clearly isn't the case with that girl."

The parasite softly chuckled and retorted, "I sense the worry in your voice, Your Majesty. Are you angry that I stole the Goddess of Green-Leaf?"

"Stole? Hah! I'm just intrigued." Isadore snuck a swift glance at the silent and cold-faced Lucy, who did not react to Arthur's words, which- he thought- were going to make her angry.

"You're the King of Green-Leaf and the Mirage Era Hall is in the capital and is under your wing and authority. They say each sect in the city is independent but I highly doubt that. Anyway, there's nothing worth mentioning about her transfer here. And before you ask, I had nothing to do with this. Shu Ru came here out of her own free will and I merely welcomed her."

"What about you, Madam Lucy?"

Isadore mustered some courage and asked Lucy, who's someone he felt reluctant to look at, much less converse with.

"Nothing in particular. The girl is hard-working and has a lot of promising potential."

"Yes yes, that's true!" The King agreed, plastering a faint smile.

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"Say, succubus, how strong is *she*?"

Edward Ortberg pointed at Lucy with his chin and whispered with a low voice. Fariya sneered at him and, unexpectedly, answered.

"Strong enough that, if you keep asking about her, she'll kill you with just a stare."

Edward shuddered and retracted his gaze from Lucy's back, whistling and scanning the other guests.

"I still don't understand how their power is evaluated. I mean, they're all like Gods."

"It's too complicated for your *tiny* mortal brain."

Unfortunately, Fariya soon regretted saying those words as Edward started rambling almost immediately.

"Actually, my brain is no different than yours. I think and feel like everyone here. But ever since I was introduced to this magical world and my perspective was broadened, I started feeling a bit sad and disappointed. You see, Succubus Fariya, I wasn't what you'd call a religious person, but I did suspect the existence of such Godly beings. Mind you, I never imagined they weren't any different than the Humans on Earth. They act-"

"Enough! I don't want to hear your pointless opinions."

"They're not pointless, you didn't let me finish declaring my point. I'm trying to explain to you that-"

"And I don't want to hear it. Share whatever you want to say with someone else."

She shifted her gaze to the mortal King of Green-Leaf and continued,

"I'm sure he'd be interested. After all, you two are mortals."

"Err, that's true. Maybe later... hopefully." He finished, cackling like a crazy person.

"I told you not to smoke here!"

Sonia, who just left her office and about to head to her room, snapped at the man leaning against the wall and puffing smoke.

It's not the first time this happened. In fact, this was the 7th time yet the man, Edward Ortberg, didn't want to listen. It's always the same place and the same time, smoking and looking at the brick wall in a daze.

Arthur had already told Sonia, the current Vice-master of the sect, about the mortal man and his circumstances. His past and the sins he committed, she knew everything, and that's why she was aggressive.

"Miss Sonia! Glad to see your lovely face! Heading to bed already?"

With the cigarette's butt between the corner of his lips, he approached the fuming woman. He didn't seem to be worried that she'll attack him, after all, she never did it in the past, no matter how angry she had been.

Indeed, Sonia, though not as strong as her peers, was still an Immortal. Nonetheless, she didn't use her magic on Edward, fearing that she injures his fragile body and that could, possibly, anger or annoy Arthur.

"Smoking is prohibited here! Especially in front of my office!"

She was huffing and puffing, her little hands clenched into fists, and her eyes cold and fixated on the smirking man.

"Where did you even get the cigarettes?"

"That's a good question, Miss Sonia! I've recently found out that people of this world are not fond of smoking, unsurprisingly. But I, being resourceful, managed to acquire a decent amount. All thanks to Arthur and the gold he gave me."

"Throw that cigarette and stop blowing at my face!"

"Okay okay! I'm sorry."

Edward reluctantly threw the cigarette at the wall then stepped on it to extinguish the little bit of flame.

Seeing this, Sonia's mood became slightly better, though she was giving the man a piercing glare. After snorting, she walked ahead and ignored him.

"Ah! Wait! Miss Sonia!"

He caught up to her, putting his hand in his pockets and laughing.

"It's a wonderful night and too early to sleep. How about we chat?"

"No. Stop following me or I'll turn you into an ice statue."

"You're joking, right? You must be! Hahaha"

The two disappeared into the dark hall, the woman increasing her walking pace whereas the man was glued onto her, talking non-stop.

Chapter 722 - Time Wraiths

Thirty-two participants undertook the fourth trial, but not all of them succeeded in defeating their inner demons. By the time the pigolo Gutcha, the host of the competition, announced the end of the two hours timelimit, three participants had still not appeared at the end of the misty forest.

One of the mermaids, one of the Elves, and one of the MoonStar team, were the three disqualified. The first two were brought back to their Guardian, however, the girl from Arthur and Lucy's team was in critical condition. Known as the Goddess of Green Life, or the Fairy, Shu Ru from the Mirage Era Hall. Once Gutcha got her out of that trial stage, he immediately took her to the parasite, who was as surprised as the pigolo.

Including the King of Green-leaf, all nearby guests were startled by Shu Ru, who looked on the brink of death. She didn't sustain any physical injuries, however, her skin was paler than snow, her breath heavy and incredibly. She was suffering from seizures every couple of seconds and her Life Essence was sucked dry, leaving naught but a sliver, which was exactly what was keeping her alive.

"There's only one thing that can do this..."

Isadore frowned and was about to stand up and get a closer look but stopped as Arthur and Lucy teleported away, with Shu Ru, of course.

"Jeez, she looked like a breathing corpse. Hey, what could've done that?" -Edward

Fariya, after a momentary silence, muttered with a low voice.

"Time Wraith."

"Ha? What's that?"

Isadore turned his head and looked at Edward, a grave look plastered on his face.

"Mysterious monsters born from Time Laws. They relentlessly chase anything or anyone that plays with time."

"You mean time-travel? That exists too?"

Edward was befuddled, glancing at the spot Shu Ru was at, unable to hide his curiosity.

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"What's wrong with her?"

Lucy was able to see the results provided by the Appraisal Skill, but as they were not satisfactory, she asked the frowning Arthur.

"It's a Time Wraith. I don't know how it got here, though."

He pressed his left hand on her chest and poured large quantities of Life Energy. Although Life Energy did make the girl's condition slightly better, it could not replace Life Essence.

Shu Ru was still half-conscious, breathing with difficulty, suffering from seizures, and groaning painfully.

"Master, Time Wraiths are coming." Warned Radolf, appearing behind Arthur, a sinister grey fog swirling around him.

Midolf appeared too, cursing inwardly as he lifted his head and glared at the roof. They were inside the tower, in one of the rooms that were allocated to the MoonStar Team.

The Quad-Spirit joined the two mythical beings, the three vanishing from the room and shooting toward the bright canopy.

The sky cracked and two silhouettes appeared from within a wormhole, their sizes bigger than the average human, rotten grey skin. The wraiths were faceless, croaking and screeching loudly, their lower body illusory and their slimy arms abnormally thin and long.

The two Time Wraiths stopped for a split second, their faceless head turning toward Midolf and Radolf, then the Quad-Spirit, which looked like a large misty black sphere.

"Smite the f.u.c.kers!" Roared Midolf, waving his hand in the air, causing the peaceful weather to change dramatically. Strong and unstoppable gales manifested themselves, actually affecting the Time Wraiths and pushing them dozens of kilometers away from the city.

Radolf and the spirit attacked in unison, the former transforming into his real appearance, a ferocious twin-headed bony lizard, which spat the signature black flames, covering the sky with them.

The Quad-Spirit relied on Dark Magic and Flames, invoking sinister darkness which trapped the Time Wraiths in jet black cube along with the black flames. An explosion erupted inside the cube, dark red flames raged left and right, so intense that the cube was tinged with a bit of red.

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"Something must've happened. She didn't fight her inner demon. She's not in critical condition anymore but..."

As he removed his hand, Arthur clicked his tongue and stated with an angered voice.

"You think someone had a hand in this?"

"Unlikely."

"You said you were acquainted with her grandfather. He might know something." Said Lucy, her eyes falling on the now-unconscious girl.

"It's been a long time since I've met him. I'll ask Isadore first."

The second Arthur returned, Cristina almost jumped at him, appearing worried about Shu Ru.

"How is she?! Please tell me she's okay!"

It's rare to see the cold and arrogant Cristina act as such, she was tear-eyed and speaking with an unstable tone.

Arthur sighed and reassured her that Shu Ru is no danger, speaking with a loud and clarion tone so that the curious people nearby could hear too.

"Boss, shall I continue?"

Gutcha appeared behind Cristina, bowing respectfully then asking.

"The fifth trial will be postponed till tomorrow. I need to inspect everything."

"Gotcha! I'll go announce that to everyone."

The pigolo, hideously smiling, gave another bow then vanished. Seconds later, his loud voice reverberated across the plateau, calming down the cheering crowd and instructing the participants to go rest.

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"Hmpf! So his trials are not as safe as they're claimed to be!"

The Patriarch of the Dark Blaze Sect, inside a large inn room, snorted as he glared at the sky-piercing tower at the center of the city. Excluding him, there was the remaining participant of the sect's team, as well as the grand elder. The Grand Elder was a short old man, bushy and long white beard, an oversized pointy hat like those fictional wizard wear, and a thick five-foot-long wooden staff, shabby and lacking any decoration or magical runes.

"Patriarch, it would be wise not to insult the Parasite in here. Even the walls have eyes and ears."

"So what? It's not like he can attack me just because of defamation! That parasitic monster! Ha!"

Unlike the angry Patriarch, the Grand Elder was calm and unperturbed. He was sitting on a short chair and drinking an iced lemonade. The youth, named Holand Dark Blaze, the very son of the Patriarch of the Dark Blaze Sect, Rasnod Ak Dark Blaze.

Once Rasnod was done cursing Arthur behind his back, he turned to his son, his mood changing so suddenly.

"Son, you did well in passing those trials by yourself. Your father is proud."

Holand, as expected of the son of a great sect, was pampered since childhood, provided with the best techniques and elixirs. However, he wasn't arrogant, just an indifferent person who seldom speaks. He wasn't as talented as Cristina or Bora but, being able to survive on his own for two trials proves that he's got some commendable skill.

"That thieving wench was disqualified but the idiot remains. You need to force him out, understand?"

Holand silently nodded his head and made sure his father had nothing more to say before excusing himself out of the room.

Unlike his father, Holand wasn't interested in forcing Bora and Cristina out of the competition or bringing them back to the sect. He had another reason, a personal one, which he had told no one about. Yes, he wanted to bring one of them with him but not by using force, and that's why he was participating... all to prove that he's worthy.

"Try this!"

Bora was touring the bustling city along with the rest of his team, though his attention was wholly focused on pleasing Cristina, his childhood friend, and his crush. They were touring the bustling city, visiting all kinds of shops, buying foreign yet incredibly mouth-watering food(especially sweets), and checking the displayed artifacts, which were exorbitant and unaffordable by the MoonStar Team, even Rosea and Shu Ru, who hailed from pretty wealthy backgrounds.

Unfortunately for dear Bora, Cristina didn't like him romantically. She considered him a close friend, a brother, and she would always reject his confessions, which tended to happen once a month, at least.

The six of them stopped before a doughnut stall, Rosea offered to buy them one each. Even Ho Qing was enjoying himself, finishing the sweet pink doughnut in less than a minute and even going out of his way to buy five more, stuffing the box into his already full Storage Ring.

"A-ah! What are you doing here?!"

Bora, cheerful just a second ago, narrowed his eyes and stood in front of Cristina, shielding her from a solitary youth standing two meters away. The youth, named Hold Dark Blaze, had long black hair, an average face, but a unique demeanor, unaffected by anything, even danger itself.

Holand didn't speak back, at least for the first couple of seconds. He stepped forward, his eyes focused on Cristina and Cristina alone. No heed was paid to the scowling Bora, who seemed about to lunge at him at any given second.

The competition was starting tomorrow and the majority of the participants were touring the city and enjoying all it had to offer. The city was big so there shouldn't be coincidences like this one, where two teams would meet each other, though Holand was alone and not accompanied by his team members.

The young man bypassed Bora and stretched his hand, offering an exquisite silver box to the confused Cristina.

"A gift." He said, seemingly not noticing the surprised looks of Ardor, Bora, and the rest.

After doing what he wanted to do, he backed away and spoke again.

"Good luck."

Soon after, he vanished into the large crowd....

Chapter 723 - The Head of Military Intelligence

Four individuals sat in a large circular room, three seated and the last was standing near the one and only door leading inside.

King Isadore Malfront pushed back his long golden hair, slumped on the chair, and let out a long sigh. He had large black bags under his eyes, his complexion looking worse than ever before.

"It's a disaster!" He said, helplessness and puzzlement lingering in his half-opened eyes.

The competition has been postponed longer than expected. It has been two days since the twenty-eight participants passed the fourth trial. Before continuing, Arthur did a thorough inspection of the remaining trials and dispatched the two Mythical Beings and Gutcha around the city. They were to ascertain that no Time Wraiths were lurking nearby, and so far, fortunately, there have been no sightings or attacks.

"The Mirage Era Hall is as empty and soulless as a graveyard. No signs of intruders, no signs of fighting. It's definitely the Time Wraiths' doing." Said the King as he grit his teeth, clearly infuriated but too physically tired to display his anger.

Dan, the Overgod and Isadore's personal guard, was fixing his oversized straw hat and chewing sum gun without a care in the world.

Lucy and Arthur, on the other hand, wore serious faces and deep frowns. Shu Ru managed to survive but she's still unconscious and expected to remain as such for a while. The abrupt and unanticipated appearance of the Time Wraiths was a shock to everyone, including the MoonStar couple. However, what was more surprising is the fall of the Mirage Era Hall Sect.

Not a soul was left in the sect, everyone seemed to have disappeared into thin air. The treasury was untouched and, in fact, no one from the other sects in the capital noticed the peculiar occurrence. Only when Dan went and checked the sect did this shocking news break out.

"Was it only the Mirage Era Hall?" Asked Arthur even though he already knew the answer.

"Yes. If it was an enemy... an organization, even, then we could've retaliated. But Time Wraiths? Ah damn!"

Isadore kept silent for a brief period then he jerked his head forward and, slightly excited, asked,

"Aren't you two part of Black Rose? Maybe you could find some-"

Before he could finish, sadly, he was interrupted by a stern Arthur.

"No. There were complications between us and them. It's best we don't cross paths with any of the big heads there."

"Then what do you want me to do about this?" Retorted back the King.

"I don't know. We're not the rulers, you are."

"Yeah, but at least help me out! All eyes are looking at Green-leaf. With the competition and you two staying here."

"They can only look. None will dare to act... not even the Holy Dominion." Coldly said Lucy, snorting and standing up. She didn't even look at Isadore, her body soon vanishing.

"Will you be continuing the competition?" Gingerly asked the young blonde king.

"Of course. I have nothing else to do."

"What about Astria?"

"What about it?" Spat back Arthur, narrowing his eyes.

"Err- didn't you want to go there? You said your clone is there, right? I thought you're in a hurry."

"Indeed I am." Arthur spread his hands and took out a strange object which Isadore recognized as the Magical Warping Device. It is what, back then, Gutcha used to go from The Green-Leaf middle Realm to Astria.

"Its coordinates changed... meaning that it's no longer there. I need to locate it first."

"And how are you going to do that? Ah- never mind, I forgot that you're good at Spatial Magic too."

"Well, technically, I'm not the one searching for it."

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"Hello."

Lucy didn't apparate inside the dusty and small room, which was filled with countless books, so much that it was hard to move around.

She knocked thrice then opened the door, softly greeting the bespectacled woman sitting behind a desk, wholly engrossed in reading a thick book.

"Greetings, Madam Lucy."

Rey, the boy who, in the past, worked along with the Black Magicians, politely and respectfully greeted Lucy, bowing his head and stepping back.

He was no longer a boy, his raven-black hair grew much longer and, thanks to the seed of Dark Magic Arthur had granted him, he became much stronger. He still stuck next to Robin, never leaving her side and dutifully doing his job as a guard.

"Yy-yes, Hello Madam."

Robin was fl.u.s.tered, trying to stand up and bow but was stopped by a gesture from the silver-haired White Specter.

"Everything's alright?"

Lucy went and sat opposite the black-haired woman, who looked even more tired than poor Isadore.

"Still nothing, madam Lucy. Even with the device Arthur had given me, I couldn't find anything remotely useful. What I can tell, however, is that Astria is no longer in the System's universe."

Robin emptied the last bit of Tea Rey had prepared for her, closed the thick book, and leaned against the chair.

"You look tired. Do rest from time to time, please."

Lucy faintly smiled and looked around, seeing nothing but books stacked on each other. The room was small but Robin refused to change it, saying that she liked cramped places and already got used to her office.

Unlike Sonia or anyone who is considered as part of Arthur and Lucy's entourage, Robin was still a mortal. Her level was increased using Elixirs and other Alchemy concoction, however, she wasn't interested in power. She was a merchant and, without a doubt, her assistance was one of the factors that allowed the MoonStar to rise to its current prominence.

Her status, albeit being a mortal, was second only to Sonia, the Vice-master of the sect. Basically, Robin was the head of the military Intelligence and the Head of the Finance Department of the sect. The former hasn't developed yet as there is a lack of trustworthy individuals, but that doesn't mean it's completely useless. The latter, however, is blooming with every passing day, but it's not like the sect is in dire need of money, either gold or spirit stones, after all, Arthur inherited all of Zodiak's wealth and treasures, which could bring the strongest of sects to shame.

"Now that I got a closer look, she's really pretty!" Commented Edward as he leaned his head closer to the unconscious Shu Ru.

He grinned and glanced at the Succubus, adding, "She's prettier than you. But she's a bit flat for my test, you know?"

"Shut up and back away." Rebuked Fariya, hissing at the man.

In addition to the of them, Gutcha was also present. His large fingers were pressing several spots of Shu Ru's body, trying to reinforce her vitals.

A few hours ago, after the competition was postponed, she unwillingly introduced to the pigolo, who's a trusted confidant of Arthur. Moreover, she was ordered to obey his every command. Not only was Gutcha unbelievably hideous, but he was also weaker than her!

He was only a God-Monarch and although he could use Dark Magic, he's certainly incapable of defeating her. It was demeaning for a strong Demon such as herself to be slaved around by a random pigolo.

Edward, however, didn't seem to mind anything. He was curious about everything, rambling unceasingly and commenting about anything he laid his eyes on.

"You'll stay here and guard her. Except for the Boss and his wife, no one is to enter this place."

Fariya shrugged her shoulders and walked away, sitting on a soft pouf and begrudgingly folded her arms.

"Suck to be you!"

"You. Follow me."

Without waiting for a response, Gutcha left the room, leaving a trail of black fog behind him. Edward made sure not to get close to the fog, comically hopping around while throwing mocking grimaces in the succubus' direction.

"So, what do you have in store for me?"

Edward Ortberg seemed eager, cackling and jumping from the right side of the corridor to the left, still trying to get away from the ominous black fog.

"What are you hiding?"

Robin fixed her glasses and scrutinized the fidgeting teenager.

"N-nothing!"

Rey stepped back but he had no way to run as his back hit the wall. He kept both hands behind his back, clearly hiding something.

"You better show me. Don't make me get up." She warned him with a cold look, however, Rey was adamant, furiously shaking his hand and keeping his lips tightly shut.

In the end, Robin stood up and walked toward him, she stretched her hand toward his head and pulled his ear, causing him to groan painfully.

"You better not be up to mischief again!"

Rey had an unusual habit and that is to prank people, especially his guardian, Robin. She grew tired of his tricks and would punish him every time something odd or bad happens, even if it wasn't his doing. As he learned the hard way, Rey became a bit obedient but his pranks didn't entirely stop. Robin had misunderstood his current suspicious behavior, which led to this...

"What's this?"

She snatched a letter from his hand, a folded letter that had a unique fragrance. It smelled of Cupid Lilac.

"Hm?"

The bespectacled woman swiftly read the letter then looked at the youngster, whose face was dyed crimson-red. Too embarrassed to say anything, he stormed out of the room but didn't manage to run far as Robin, panting, caught up with him.

"You've got a girlfriend?" She inquired, a rare smile on her tired face.

Though still embarrassed, Rey meekly nodded his head but didn't deign to provide an explanation.

"Who is it? Is she part of the sect?"

Yet again, he nodded his head but maintained silence.

"..."

Robin meaningfully looked at him before handing the letter back. She gave him a hug and left rightly after, much to his confusion. He thought she'll berate him or try to ask more questions but she did not, surprisingly...

Chapter 724 - Trippy Pumpkins

"Ladies and gentleman!"

Gutcha, wearing the shabby host outfit, bowed toward the cheering crowd as he displayed his uniquely hideous smile.

"Excuse us for the untimely delay. The competition will finally resume and the Fifth Trial will begin shortly! Participants! On the stage, please!"

Gutcha gestured for the young participants to appear, and appear they did, all twenty-eight of them. They were given more than enough time to prepare themselves, mentally and physically. They recovered their exhausted Nether Energy, healed from whatever injuries they sustained when they had battled their demons, and were now back to their perfect and healthy state.

Except Arthur, the one who created the trials, Lucy and Gutcha, no one really knew how many Trials there were exactly, though it wasn't hard to tell that they were nearing the end. After all, the number of participants had decreased by a substantial amount and ere long, there will only be a few remaining.

"The ranking of the teams sorted by points!" Loudly declared Gutcha, pointing at the humongous screen hanging in the sky.

1 The Imoogi Clan: 280 points (5)

2 The Ancient Federation : 265 Points (1)

3 The PoMo Forest Team: 255 Points (6)

4 The Demon Team : 240 Points (2)

5 The MoonStar team : 225 Points (4)

6 The Mermaid Team : 210 Points (8)

7 The Holy Church Team : 200 Points (2)

8 The Dark Blaze Team : 154 Points (1)

The Imoogi Clan Team was in the lead, but John, the only member of the Ancient Federation Team was able to steal the second place by performing flawlessly in the Fourth Trial.

Unfortunately, Arthur's team was pushed back to 5th place after losing yet another member. Nonetheless, the points are not the only deciding factor as they can be used to gain advantages in certain Trials, or exchanged for a bunch of strong artifacts he looted from people he killed in the past.

Before long, the ugly host teleported the participants to the next stage; a fairly large room, dimly lit and filled with thick black boxes randomly scattered all around.

Gutcha clapped his hands to get their attention then proceeded to explain, as usual.

"The Fifth Trial is as simple as it can get." He raised his hand and pointed to a large pumpkin, which was half the size of a normal human. It had a distinctly creepy face and a wide grin as it soundlessly laid either on the black boxes or the ground.

"Those are Trippy Pumpkins and the goal is to catch them. As I said, simple and to the point. There are no traps or tricks, be assured and trust me."

The Pigolo paused, grinning at the confused and frowning participants. Even the breath-taking mermaids and beautiful elves, all of whom are females, looked uncomfortable, clearly disliking the feel of this strange room.

"There are a total of six Trippy Pumpkins. When all of them are caught, the Trial will end and the two empty-handed teams will be disqualified. That's about it."

Gutcha excitedly clapped his hands again and vanished into thin air. With his departure, however, the dimly lit room was illuminated by flying torches, which were actually miniature flaming Trippy Pumpkins, cackling unpleasantly.

The first to make a move were the Mermaids and the Imoogi, each of them shooting toward a Trippy Pumpkin.

The fastest of the Imoogis, a youngster with raven-black named Eirz, reached the target in just three seconds, however, just as he was about touch it, the Trippy Pumpkin's empty eyes glowed with a blinding orange light then it shot at Eirz, hitting his chin and blowing him to the back. His teammates, startled, retreated from the pumpkin's way and closely followed it.

The Mermaid had it worse as the Trippy Pumpkin they were after managed to hit two mermaids, both in the head, unfortunately. They were immediately knocked unconscious and before they even fell to the ground, Gutcha appeared and took them out of the stage.

One more team was just as unfortunate as the Imoogi and the Mermaids. The girl and boy from the Holy Church Team targeted a Trippy Pumpkin sitting on one of the large black boxes but were hit with an equally strong hit as the previous ones.

The boy, who had long golden hair, was hit in the shoulder and flew to the side like a cannonball, his body crashing into the stone wall. On the other hand, the girl barely managed to avoid the madly flying pumpkin, she twisted her body mid-air and unleashed a burst of blinding white light.

The Holy Magic was able to accurately hit the Trippy Pumpkin but it wasn't enough to slow it down, much less stop it. In fact, it only made it faster and more furious as it circled around and shot at the girl, who shrieked and urgently backed away.

The remaining five teams stood in place, witnessing this unexpected spectacle. Seeing the Trippy Pumpkins act like that, they thought twice and thrice before making a move. Plus, Gutcha never said anything about attacking each other or stealing the pumpkins from other teams, which can only mean that a fierce battle will inevitably happen inside this small room.

"Do we wait or?"

Bora looked at his teammates, grabbed an arrow and prepared himself in case there was an attack from both sides. The other teams were just as nervous as the MoonStar team, with the exception of one person.

John wasn't looking at the pumpkin but at Ho Qing, his eyes fixedly staring at the red-haired competitor. He still has not given up on recruiting Ho Qing but didn't try to do it openly after getting rebuked by Gutcha.

He talked to his guardian about this and the two shared the same opinion. Unfortunately, they can't take him by force, especially since none other than Arthur was his master.

John's guardian was a strong cultivator, someone at the middle-stages of the Exalted God Realm, but even he was fearful of the parasite and his wife. He repeatedly warned John not to act rashly or provoke anyone, just stick to his role as a participant and try to win.

The temperature inside the room was warm, there were candles illuminating the medium-sized room, making it feel cozier.

A n.a.k.e.d Lucy was laying on Arthur's c.h.e.s.t, both of them sweating a bit, most definitely due to the s.e.x.u.a.l activities- which will be omitted- they were performing for a decent amount of time.

There was a bedspread covering half of their bodies as they snuggled close to each other and talked. She laid her head on his c.h.e.s.t while he c.a.r.e.s.sed her long silver hair.

Recently, the two were busy with the competition and training Shu Ru and the rest so there haven't been many chances to spend time with each other. It wasn't just about m.a.k.i.n.g. .l.o.v.e, there are many things they do together. Sometimes they can talk all day without getting bored.

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Fortunately, today, they were able to be together. Excluding the time they spend m.a.k.i.n.g. .l.o.v.e, all the rest was dedicated to talking to each other, without moving.

Lucy enjoyed this position, hugging her arms around his c.h.e.s.t and listening to him talk about Shen Shen and Saly, who are a bit similar.

"She's as stubborn as you, you know." He said, chuckling as he remembered the small blue-haired girl, who would act all haughty and proud, curious about every little thing she set her bright eyes upon.

"I can't wait to meet her."

Lucy smiled and raised her body, leaning her face closer to his.

"You never told me how many children you want."

"Err... I don't know. As many as we could have?"

"Oh?"

She pursed her lips and touched his cheek.

"You should go easy on your wife."

Arthur gave a wry smile, jerking his head upwards.

"I should be the one saying that."

"Are you accusing me of being nymphomaniac? Hmpf!"

Chapter 725 - Head of Combat Division

The gloomy room was small and cramped with unorderedly-placed black boxes. The illumination was no longer a problem as the participants were using their techniques, showering the air and ground with colorful lights.

In the first minute, two Mermaids were knocked down and disqualified. The Trippy Pumpkin was rapidly rolling on the ground or circling in the air, their speed was too fast to follow. They let out unpleasant cackling, their eyes-sockets releasing a sinister glow.

The MoonStar team targeted a motionless pumpkin at the far back of the room, sitting on a medium-sized black box. Bora shot an arrow at it but before it was able to hit, the Trippy Pumpkin sprung into motion, flying straight at him.

Pink ice surged from the ground, trying to freeze the flying pumpkin but it slowed down before shattering into pieces. Ho Qing was about to use his Phoenix Fire but was suddenly attacked from the side.

John, from the Ancient Federation, appeared next to Ho Qing and punched. Before his fist could land, however, Ardor appeared, thrusting his sword at the black-haired youth. The sword released a milky-white twirling Sword Essence as it clashed with John's fist. The two participants were pushed to the back.

"What are you doing?" Solemnly said Ardor, his eyes fixated on John.

"I want to fight Ho Qing. Do not b.u.t.t in." Calmly and truthfully answered John, displaying a friendly smile.

"We're in the midst of a trial! Back off!"

Bora too, wasn't pleased with John's ambush. The tanned Bora was jumping from one spot to the other, trying to avoid the crazily flying Trippy Pumpkin, which was relentlessly pursuing him.

...

"That motherf.u.c.k-"

"Language, Cristina." Interrupted Lucy, giving the infuriated girl a chilling glare.

Though still furious, the girl snorted and swallowed back the curse words she was about to say. She was cheering for her friends, of course, and certainly didn't like how John attacked out of the blue.

Arthur shifted his gaze to a tall and slim man wearing a jet black robe. He was standing alone, his hands behind his back and seemingly enjoying the show. This man was John's guardian, Paul of Irfondor, the Head of Combat division in the Ancient Federation. Paul had long greasy brown hair and, at first glance, didn't look like a kind person.

When he was looked at by the Parasite, he turned his head and gave a friendly wave without forgetting to display a soft smile that didn't suit him at all.

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'It seems that hoping to cooperate with the federation is no longer feasible.'

Lucy spoke to Arthur using the Telepathy skill. She glanced at Paul for a split second before directing her attention back to the large screen.

'We'll see about that. They're interested in Ho Qing.'

'We're giving them no one.'-Lucy

She angrily snorted, making Isadore twitch and look at her with confusion. He thought he unconsciously said something inappropriate thus annoying Arthur's wife. For the next ten minutes, he kept throwing cursory looks at her but, fortunately, she didn't say anything.

Back in the Fifth Trial stage, things became more heated. All the teams started acting and fights broke out. You couldn't even see who's attacking who, or what's really happening. The place was blinded by bright spells and techniques, whether it's Ho Qing's scorching flames, the Elves' Nature Magic which filled the place with thick roots and large leaves, or the Golden-white Light unleashed by the duo from the Holy Church Team.

John seemed to have forgotten about the trial, he was in full pursuit of Ho Qing, repeatedly shouting at him, demanding they fight. Unfortunately, the place and time he had chosen were- quite literally- the worst. The room was too small and the explosions continuously happening did not break the walls, nor the roof and the ground. The black boxes were unbreakable and the Trippy Pumpkins were ferociously attacking everyone.

In just ten minutes, three more Participants were disqualified. When Gutcha appeared, one of the flying Pumpkin shot at him but was easily stopped his b.a.r.e hands, which was enveloped by sinister darkness. The Pigolo tutted and nonchalantly threw it against to the side, causing it to release a deafening shriek.

Rosea somersaulted, leaving a trail of rising pink ice behind her, which was able to block dozens of thick vines coming at her. Just as she landed on the ground, one of the Imoogi youngsters appeared behind her and spun around, kicking her in the side of the abdomen. Rosea let out a groan as she smashed in the wall, her robe becoming colored with blood-red. The attacking Imoogi wasn't that better either as he was struck by an arrow in the c.h.e.s.t then engulfed in phoenix flames. He howled loudly and before he could be injured any further, Gutcha appeared again and brought him outside.

The Imoogis weren't happy with this but they didn't continue attacking the MoonStar team. Eirz, the Imoogi youngster- miraculously- was able to catch a Trippy Pumpkin that passed right before him. He hugged, thus getting dragged around along with it, his body crashing into the ground. After a few seconds, the pumpkin calmed down and laid still in his arms.

The host resurfaced again, snapping his fingers, which made what remained of the Imoogi Team to vanish.

Seven Teams remained, but only five Trippy Pumpkins were still flying and rolling around. Rosea and Bora were injured, though they weren't the only ones.

Twenty minutes in, John grew tired of pointlessly chasing after Ho Qing. He shot at one of the Pumpkins, taking out a glistening silver chain from his Storage Ring. The boy made it looks effortless as he swung the chains, easily wrapping them around the Pumpkin. He tugged the chain and pulled, quickly grasping the rocketing Pumpkin in his hand. Soon enough, he too, was teleported outside of the room, officially becoming the second "winner" of the Fifth Trial.

"That one is ours!" Yelled Cosima, one of the two girls of the Demon Team.

She was madly chasing after a Trippy Pumpkin, a dark purple aura was swirling around her body, dramatically boosting her speed.

She was forced to stop as a rain of arrows descended upon her. Cosima retreated to the back and glowered at Bora, who was panting heavily.

After he made sure the demon girl was out of the way, he took out a golden net from his ring and, with some effort, threw it in the air. He managed to predict where the Trippy Pumpkin will fly off to and successfully entrap it.

Even while it was trapped by the golden net, the pumpkin thrashed around. Were it not for Rosea and Ardor, who assisted Bora, it would have escaped. The pumpkin was first frozen in a large pink cube of ice then it was enveloped by Ardor's milky-white sword essence.

Ho Qing, however, was a distance away, busy dealing with the other Demon girl. She was Cosima's senior and considerably stronger than her, nonetheless, she was incapable of defeating the stoic red-haired youth. His Phoenix Flames were endless, covering a third of the room and pushing her farther and farther from her target.

Eventually, Bora and Rosea were able to catch the Pumpkin. Bora was ecstatic whereas Rosea was too tired to celebrate. She was impatiently waiting for Gutcha to appear and take them away, which he certainly did, a few seconds later.

"Congratulations, Arthur!"

Isadore happily clapped his hand and laughed. Even though they were lacking two members, the MoonStar team was able to complete the trial, becoming the third team to catch the Trippy Pumpkin. However, their departure made the other teams more restless and aggressive. They no longer hold themselves back, they started using their trump cards and going all-out, hoping to catch that damned creepy-looking pumpkin.

"Excuse me for a moment, your Majesty."

Arthur stood up and left, first teleporting to where his team was to praise then appearing close to Paul of Irfondor.

The Head of the Combat Division, Paul, wasn't surprised to see the parasite. He was busy talking to John, patting his shoulder and congratulating him.

"Mister Arthur MoonStar, it's a p.l.e.a.s.u.r.e to formally make your acquaintance. I am Paul of Irfondor, Head of the Combat Division of the Ancient Federation."

"Arthur MoonStar." Bluntly said Arthur, neither offering his hand nor using polite speech.

"About what happened with John. On his behalf, I apologize. He's still too young... you see."

"Sir, I apologize."

Both Paul and John apologetically bowed, though the latter didn't look the least bit sorry. He still had the same expression, seemingly not afraid of anyone or bothered by his provocative actions, both after the Fourth Trial or in the Fifth Trial.

Chapter 726 - Cheating

"Mr Arthur, what seems to be the problem?"

Paul, still eerily smiling, nicely asked as he feigned confusion. John, on the other hand, was frowning as his black pupils were so intensely focused on the parasite.

"I would like to John for a second. I don't suppose you mind, yes?"

"Of course not, Mr Arthur." As he said that, he turned to John and sternly warned him

"Be respectful and don't cause any trouble."

When he finished, he softly pushed the youth toward Arthur, who did a simple gesture, causing both he and John to vanish.

When they were gone, Paul remained standing there, seemingly dazed. His eyes jumped to where Arthur was, wondering what's going to happen. When he finally snapped out of it, he looked at the VIP box only, his gaze falling on the silver-haired woman.

His body instinctively trembled, feeling a wave of chilling frost momentarily cover him. Lucy was glaring at him, not even trying to mask her hostility.

'Maybe this was a bad idea, after all.' Thought Paul, politely lowering his head to Lucy and smiling. When he felt his bow lasted long enough, he turned around and left.

..

"Mr Arthur, I apologize again for my rash actions. I didn't mean to ambush your team, I just wanted to spar with Ho Qing."

Now that he was alone with Arthur and no one, including Paul, could hear them, John became excited rather than nervous. He was face to face with the notorious parasite, someone who shocked the whole world on more than one occasion. Whether it's his attack on the White Specter Clan or his demonstration of power in the Red Tower.

Arthur was slowly pacing around, his eyes resting on the black-haired youth. There was a mysterious smile on his face as he continuously nodded his head, seemingly understanding something.

"Don't worry about that. I didn't bring you here to talk about that."

"Emm... then what?"

John couldn't help but smile, his hands tingling and his heart beating fast. He wasn't powerful enough to fight the parasite but he an unstoppable urge to try and attack. There were no ulterior motives, just a pure d.e.s.i.r.e to battle the strongest.

"You know, John, I really don't understand people like you and them. Do they think I have no eyes or what? I mean, I'm a parasite and my eyes, you see... are very special."

The more he listened to Arthur, the more confused John became. The tingling he was experiencing seemed to have completely disappeared, replaced by an unimaginable dread. Before he could utter a sound, his surroundings changed. He heard unceasing and loud hissing from all around, the sky was crimson-red and his body was shaking.

He jumped into the air and, without any hesitation, swung his chains at dozens of snakes that jumped at him. He was able to pulverize them but couldn't defend his back, which was bitten by a snake twice his size.

The snake, green in color and very slimy, dug its fangs deep into his back and flung him in the air. The youth let out a painful groan, bore through the pain, and summoned his Godspirit...

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"Ah!"

When he came back, John was injured and bleeding profusely. He felt a hand tightly hold his shoulder then, miraculously, his body was restored to normal. The blood, injuries, and ripped clothes were unscathed again.

"Are you satisfied now?"

This time, John didn't dare look into the parasite's eyes. His head was lowered and he was still shaking. He could've sworn he had died in that strange world, yet here he was, healthier than ever.

"Mr Arthur... I didn't"

"Didn't mean what?" Coldly retorted Arthur. He retracted his hand and continued pacing around.

"I knew from the beginning that you were breaking the rules but I still turned a blind eye, do you know why? It's because you weren't that much stronger than the other Participants. I wanted to see how they will fare.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I lied earlier. Part of why you're here is because you attacked my team. A 6-star God Monarch who faked his age and repressed his cultivation. Isn't it humiliating? Tricking the host and even cheating?"

Only when he heard the last words did John instinctively raise his head, his mouth half-open.

"What? think I won't find out? Lucy and I saw everything. And I don't doubt a few others saw you too."

"Mr Arthur, please forgive me!"

John attempted to kneel but couldn't. An invisible force kept him standing against his will, wrapping around his whole body and rendering him unable to do naught but move his eyes.

"Funnily enough, John, I've dealt with a puppeteer not long ago. Though even if I had not, the situation would've been exactly the same, I reckon."

Now, only Arthur was talking, his smile getting wider as he paced around.

"The Ancient Federation, a strong and hidden power situated at the end of the world. I was a bit surprised to see them send a young participant. I had high expectations... alas, they turned out to be not that different from the Sects and Clan in the Divine Planet-"

The parasite stopped and faced the frightened youth.

"Actually, here's what I don't understand. Why cheat? It's not like you don't have capable and talented youngsters? Were the competition awards that lucrative? Probably not. Then why?"

"..."

"I asked you a question, John. Don't think of leaving this place alive if you don't talk."

After what seemed to be an eternity, John mustered some courage and responded.

"M..m-my teacher's idea. He told me it..it-it'll help me to join the competition."

"Did he tell you to cheat too? And hide your real age?"

"N-no. He didn't know about the rules. I was excited too but the participants were too weak so I wanted to...."

"What did you want?"

"I wanted to fight you, Mr Arthur."

Hearing this, Arthur burst out in laughter. He laughed for a long time as if he heard the funniest joke.

"Did you even do research before having that thought? You can't even beat Gutcha."

As much as he wanted to object to that statement, John just bit his lips and maintained silence.

"You may be slightly older than the rest of the participants but you're not wiser, unfortunately."

He approached John and stopped right in front of him, gazed down at his pale face. Arthur was at least a head taller and, especially right now, he looked absolutely dreadful to the previously excited John.

"You'll continue the competition, but if I see you cheating again then I assure you that you'll meet a fate worse than death. If you know even a little bit of me then you must know that I always keep my words, right?"

Fearing that Arthur might change his mind, John frantically nodded his head. He felt his body ease done, no longer bound by the parasite's Telekinesis.

"Sorry, Mr Arthur."

"Whatever."

The talk between the two didn't last long, only fifteen minutes. Arthur teleported back to the VIP box whereas John returned to the plateau, where the rest of the winning teams were currently at.

"How did it go?"

Lucy looked at Arthur and calmly asked, to which he winked at her and whispered.

"How did you think it went?"

She turned his gaze to John, who stood amongst the participants, his fists balled and his face as pale as earlier.

"You scared the boy shitless."

"He had it coming." He replied, chuckling to himself while remembering John's fear-filled eyes.

"Ladies and Gentleman! The six Trippy Pumpkins have finally been captured. The Sixth Trial will begin an hour!"

Surprisingly, both the Elves and Mermaids were out of the competition. They were the teams that had the highest numbers of participants yet they came out empty-handed, quite literally.

1 The Imoogi Clan: 330 points (3)

2 The Ancient Federation : 320 Points (1)

3 The Demon Team : 300 Points (2)

4 The MoonStar team : 275 Points (4)

5 The Holy Church Team : 260 Points (2)

6 The Dark Blaze Team : 199 Points (1)

Thirteen participants remain, though the ranking didn't change by a lot. The Dark Blaze Team, or rather, Holand, pulled it off yet again, shocking everyone. His perseverance and resilience were commendable, he managed to best both the Mermaids and Elves and caught the Trippy Pumpkin all by himself. Consequently, however, he was gruesomely injured by one of the Demon Girls, his whole left arm shredded and his shoulder bleeding profusely.

"I never imagined he'll make it to the Sixth Trial!"

Even Isadore was shocked, tapping his seat with his index as he eyed the young man.

"What do you think, Arthur? Could he be cheating?"

"No. It's sheer will."

"Will? It's not like it could help you catch a Pumpkin or fight a monster."

"It could do many wondrous things, Your Majesty."

As Arthur said that, he glanced at the quiet Cristina. The girl was sitting next to Lucy and looking at her celebrating friends. She was sad that she couldn't join them but nonetheless felt happy that they are winning.

Chapter 727 - The Dark Maze (1)

"Do you want to continue?"

Arthur asked the beaming Bora, whose condition was by far the worst of the bunch. He consumed the pills he was given and getting treated by Life Energy, he was still mentally exhausted, even after the passing of an hour. Still, the tanned youth was acting all energetic and his excitement from passing the Fifth Trial had not gone down yet.

"Yes, teacher!"

He gave an enthusiastic response and looked at the remaining members of the team; Rosea, Ho Qing, and Ardor. They had come a long way and their bond deepened considerably over the course of the five trials. It's too late to give up or blame himself over the complications that they had gone through, all he could do right now is persevere and hope they make it.

"Good."

Arthur patted his shoulders and after giving a couple of words of encouragement, he returned to the VIP BOX. The Sixth Trial was nigh and all the participants returned to the square-shaped platform at the center of the plateau, all of them looking much better and ready to continue.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I hope you're enjoying this glorious competition and are ready for the upcoming Trial, which I don't doubt will impress you and entertain you as much as its predecessors."

The Pigolo host bowed toward the loudly cheering crowd then took out Arthur's device, soon teleporting the thirteen participants to the next stage, which was also a separate and small world created by the parasite.

"S-sir... I really don't think it's a good idea."

A beautiful female elder belonging to the Dark Blaze Sect stepped closer to the Patriarch, Rasnod, and, while stuttering, muttered her honest thoughts. They've been in the city for a while now and the hopes of causing any kind of disturbance were unlikely. The Black Dragon Formation looming over their heads was more than enough to obliterate them into nothingness if it's activated, and it as hell would if Rasnod tries something.

Even while thinking optimistically, they really had no chance of getting out of here alive were they to launch a pre-emptive attack, it would lead to nothing but death.

The woman, Jenny Dark Blaze, Holand's aunt, and Rasnod's little sister, was skeptical and nervous. Her older brother, the Patriarch of the team, was getting more and more restless and it won't be surprising to see him flare up and start his suicidal and rash plan. Even she, his sister, didn't know why he's so obsessed with Cristina and Bora, hellbent on capturing them both and bringing them back to the sect.

Sure, they broke the rules and deserted, taking with them high-graded Artefacts, nonetheless, it's not worth the trouble of getting them back, especially if it means making an enemy out of the MoonStar Sect and Isadore Malfront, both of which have numerous experts, including Overgods, under them.

"Stop nagging! I haven't done a thing!"

Rasnod was red-faced and breathing loudly, he hissed at Jenny and shoved her hand away. When she tried to convince him again, the Grand Elder sighed and pulled her back, silently shaking his head.

This old man, who was always dressed strangely and was more than eccentric, was a powerful cultivator and has been the Grand Elder of the sect for three generations. He's over ten thousand years in age and is currently stuck at the middle stages of the Exalted God Realm. He's undoubtedly powerful but he's also wise, wise enough to know that there will be nothing good coming out of the foolish plan concocted by Rasnod. However, much to Jenny's surprise and confusion, the Grand Elder, Edward Jonathan Dark Blaze, tagged along and never objected to anything the Patriarch said.

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"Elder, look... it's her."

The woman accompanying Cardinal Patrick shifted her gaze to the third VIP box, her eyes resting on a golden-haired woman.

The Cardinal, a balding but muscular old man wearing a white robe with three red lines on it, slightly tilted his head and stared at Delia. Not only did she betray the Holy Dominion but she also convinced her sister to come with her, which enraged many of the Priests and the devout believers. While Delia may not have been an important member, her sister played a big role and her absence is unmistakably noticed.

"Leave them alone." He solemnly said, soon returning his gaze to the large screen. The Holy Church Team, though not ranking in the first place, was still faring well. They were affected by the absurd quantity of Dark Magic looming in the environment, thus consequently weakened. Nevertheless, they performed admirably and none of them was disqualified, fortunately. Furthermore, neither Arthur nor Lucy were showing any hostility toward the Dominion's envoy, which is also a good thing, considering the two parties' bloody past.

"Elder, about the Kang Clan." The woman hesitated for a couple of breaths as she snuck glances at the parasite.

"Elder Nord seemed to have departed. Maybe we can use this to ou-"

"Stop talking, Melissa."

"But-"

"Don't think! Just watch." He gave her a chilling glare, causing her to tightly close her lips and lower her head.

"We are here to watch. Anything that happens has nothing to do with us. Don't forget that our mission is to ensure the safety of Leo and Veia."

"Yes, Elder."

"Come on! I don't want to go back there! Ughh!"

Edward Ortberg, like a child, was throwing a tantrum. He kept stomping his foot on the boat's deck and pacing around, restless and annoyed.

"Shut your gob! We should be the one complaining!"

Midolf was as frustrated as the serial killer. He spat on the ground and piercingly gazed at Edward.

"Don't be like that! We used to be cellmates! You'll protect me, right? Right?"

Midolf snorted but did not reply, his twin, however, nodded at the mortal and reassured him.

"Master tasked us to take you there and try to uncover the truth. It'll take us a while to arrive so better save your energy and rest."

"But I hate that desert! Last time I was there, I was almost killed by those giant hands!"

Edward turned to look behind him, his grumbling instantly replaced by a wide smile.

"Miss! I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that you're also tagging along!"

Sonia appearing from inside, wearing a long azure robe. She was stone-faced, calmly cleaning her glasses and looking at the ever-changing plains. They took Arthur's fastest Spirit Boat and were heading back to the Ramel Kingdom. Sonia, surprisingly, volunteered to go, saying that she's not that busy and since Arthur and Lucy were there, she can be at ease.

The mission wasn't that hard, they were to go to the desert and inspect that ungodly pit in which Shen Shen and Zaarae jumped into. It was highly unlikely that the little girl would come back, however, the Parasite Empress is another thing. Arthur could use Zaarae's help in the fight against the angels.

"Focus... focus on me!"

Gutcha yelled with a hoarse and deafening voice, making all the participants turn their attention to him.

"As you can see, this is a very simple maze. The goal is simple, find this."

He opened his palm and revealed a hovering fist-sized orange blob of light.

"This is considered a point. There are twelve of them."

"That's it?"

Cosima frowned and suspiciously looked at the grinning host.

"More or less. The Sixth Trial is a bonus one, meant to further decrease the number of participants. Good luck!"

He cheerfully waved his hand and vanished right after, leaving the confused youngsters standing there. The maze was made of thick twisting black vines, forming walls that were no less than thirty feet high.

Even without being told, all of them knew that flying is not possible. Still, one of the Imoogi attempted to fly or at least jump above the wall of vines only to immediately plummet from above and viciously crash onto the ground.

There was an eerie silence for a whole minute, in which they warily looked at each other, waiting for someone to take the first step and enter the maze. There were more than ten entrances, but it was hard to see where they led as darkness covered the air and the corners.

A burst of blinding white light rose above the duo from the Holy Church Team. The boy and girl didn't waste any time, dashing inside the maze and disappearing into the looming blackness. Not even a few seconds later, the sound of fighting could be heard from inside of the maze, further alerting those who stood still.

Chapter 728 - The Dark Maze (2)

"They're behind." Said Rosea, turning her head to the rear and shooting five icicles.

They had two pursuers... the two Demon girls, Cosima and Marjory. Apparently, they were still angry over what happened in the Fifth Trial and wanted to exact revenge.

Cosima was agile and flexible, jumping in the air and easily dodging the pink-colored icy projectiles. As she soundlessly landed on the ground, she swiftly threw two daggers at the closest MoonStar member, which was Ardor.

The sword-wielding youth abruptly stopped running, rapidly rotated his body and thrust his sword upwards. A stream of milky-white sword essence shot in the air then, like a tsunami, cascaded onto Cosima.

Unfortunately, though Ardor's retaliation did stop the thrown daggers, it wasn't able to inflict any damage upon Cosima. Her senior, Marjory, interfered in the nick of time and unleashed a burst of Neon light, which was faster than Ardore's Sword Essence.

The Demon's neon light spread across the air and the ground, not dealing any physical damage but it was able to significantly slow down the MoonStar team. It seemed to be some type of a curse, rendering the targets helpless and defenseless.

"I've got you now!"

Cosima cackled as she whipped her leg at Ardor, blowing him against the creepy thick vines. Not only was his c.h.e.s.t hurt, his back was also pierced by the ever-moving vines, which didn't stop at that. The vine-infested walls were trying to pull the youth inside, trying to devour his body whole.

Fortunately, Bora was able to shoot a blinding and scorching hot arrow, incinerating many of the vines and giving Ardor enough time to free himself.

"Go on, I'll deal with them."

Now covered in orange flames- from head to toe- Ho Qing gestured for his three friends to continue while he confronted the incoming Cosima.

"You're not getting awa-"

The demon girl couldn't finish... not expecting Ho Qing to move so fast, she was punched right in the face, her body blown in the air then crashing into the ground, temporarily limp.

This wasn't the end, however, as waves of turbulent Phoenix flames spread from Ho Qing's hands, clashing with Marjory's strange curse. Blast waves emitted from the point of impact, pushing the two demon girls and Ho Qing back.

"Cosima! Back! Let's go back!"

Marjory helped her friend up and just when they were about to leave, they heard an ear-piercing bird screech then felt a suffocating heat coming from above.

The two demon girls summoned their magic, one bursting with neon light while the other taking out a strange brown drum and banging on it with her clenched fists.

The magnificent flaming phoenix wasn't stopped, its flames incinerated the neon light and the sound waves sent by the drum. In the end, Cosima and Marjory went all out by holding hands and chanting a short incantation.

A pillar of dark violent light rose into the darkened canopy, dispersing the phoenix and its trail of flames. Although they were able to defend against Ho Qing's ultimate attack, they were exhausted. Ho Qing wasn't any better either too, he was bloodied and limping, nonetheless, he still moved toward the incapacitated girls, ready to finish them off.

"What's he doing?"

Isadore was getting nervous, his eyes, as well as everyone else's, were glued onto the screen. They were staring at John, who was slowly marching toward the injured Ho Qing and tired demon girls. The youth was expressionless and didn't look like he was going to fight.

The King of Green-Leaf turned his head but was surprised to see that Arthur had vanished. Lucy her legs crossed and arms folded, a truly dangerous and murderous aura emanating from her eyes, which were, likewise, glued onto the screen.

...

Seeing the heavily wounded Ho Qing, John was in deep contemplation, at least for some time. He paid no attention to Cosima and Marjory, only the red-haired youth interested him.

His d.e.s.i.r.e to fight him had already died down... no, he wanted to revenge on Arthur. He was indeed frightened by what he saw and what was done to him, but, as a prideful person, John could not and did not want to forget what had happened. A chance presented itself for him so he just needs to do this flawlessly.

His invisible puppet will do the job, it will kill Ho Qing without anyone noticing. Of course, there's bound to be people with keen eyes, nonetheless, as long as the majority of the crowd doesn't see anything, he can later on claim innocence. Furthermore, Paul won't stand by and let him get persecuted by the Parasite and his wife. Even the Ancient Federation will back him up and it's definitely an organization that the MoonStar cannot contend against.

It seemed John had forgotten Arthur's warning or what the latter was capable of. The dread that dominated him in that snake-infested world had completely vanished, now replaced by the d.e.s.i.r.e to prove he's over everyone. Not even Arthur MoonStar could look down at him, that's how confident and arrogant John was. Maybe his confrontation with the Parasite turned him into a lunatic... no one really knows.

But, everyone saw John stop a distance away from Ho Qing and slowly raise his head, his jet-black pupils resting on the bleeding and panting crimson-haired Qing.

His puppet, which not only could turn invisible, but is also enchanted by several ancient runes, all of which considerably boosts its movement speed. John thought it'll end in a second, however, his invisible and small puppet shrieked unpleasantly then was flattened into the ground. Before he could react and

summon it back, it exploded into countless small pieces, which, in their turn, were dispersed by a bone-chilling breeze.

"So it had come to this, John."

Arthur looked at Ho Qing first then drifted his eyes to the dumbstruck John. Cosima and Marjory were supporting themselves as they sat on the ground, surprised to see the parasite appear here.

"Boss! What happened?"

Gutcha appeared second later, looking as astonished as anyone else. He kept looking between Arthur and John but couldn't figure out the situation.

"It's nothing. It's already been taken care of."

As he said that, Arthur unceremoniously waved his hand, causing a mass of darkness to engulf the anxious John. The victim tried to resist but it was pointless, only his desperate cries could be heard, lasting no more than three seconds.

The Dark Magic left nothing of the boy, consuming his vitality, body, bones, blood, and even Nether Energy. This frightening sight shocked the crowd and even Paul, John's guardian, who didn't think Arthur would dare to publicly kill one of the participants. Unfortunately, he had massively underestimated the parasite, which led to this unwanted outcome.

Chapter 729 - The Mysterious Pit

As soon as John from the Ancient Federation was killed in front of everyone, his guardian appeared in the VIP box. He was glaring at Lucy, barely able to contain his aura.

"I demand an answer!" He shouted, alarming the stupefied crowd, which already stopped cheering and was now focusing on him.

Dan, the Overgod guarding Isadore Malfront, as well as Amidel and Gutcha all appeared around Paul, giving him threatening glares.

Arthur stayed behind to make an announcement, which echoed throughout the plateau merely seconds later.

"John from the Ancient Federation Team has been caught cheating and breaking the competition rules. Not only did he fake his age, he also used a puppet to win the Third Trial."

Still standing in-between the Demon girls and Ho Qing, Arthur's voice paused for a second, his bone-chilling gaze falling on Cosima and Marjory for a couple of breaths.

"I will tolerate any attempt to assassinate any of the participants. This is a friendly competition and killing blows are strictly prohibited, especially if the opponent is already incapacitated. Let it be known that anyone who dares to disturb the flow of this competition will be dealt with appropriately. I believe John was a clear demonstration of how much I value the rules."

"This is preposterous! Do you even know what you did?!"

Paul seemed even angrier after listening to Arthur's brief speech.

"I advise you to calm down."

Lucy stood up from her seat and stared back at the man, a frosty aura emanating from her hands and enveloping the VIP box.

"Calm down? You just murdered one of the participants without a proper investigation! As the federation's delegate, I won't stand for this!"

"And what are you going to do about it?"

Arthur appeared next to Lucy, his eyes dangerously narrowed as he glared at Paul.

"John broke the rules and cheated. He was about to kill one of the participants. His punishment was as severe as his crimes."

"You're not the one who decides that."

Paul was gritting his teeth and controlling his aura, trying not to attack. He knew that it was a losing battle... there's no way he'll make it out of here alive if he acts rashly and attacks first. Even if it was just Lucy, she's more than capable of killing him and Paul was more than aware of that. Nevertheless, he couldn't bear such a massive loss of face, especially as the only delegate dispatched by the federation. John was an important member of the Ancient Federation young generation and coming back without him will cause repercussions that he could not handle.

At the very least, he'll be punished and sacked immediately after. The worst case is the guillotine, quite literally. Honestly, he didn't expect John to act like that and try to inflict fatal harm on one of the participants. That's not what they agreed upon. In fact, ever since his secretive meeting with Arthur, John had been behaving strangely.

"You won't be able to get out of this, Arthur MoonStar."

"We'll see about that."

Arthur waved his hand dismissively at Paul then turned around and sat down.

"Why are you shivering, your Majesty?"

Once Paul of Irfondor left, Arthur chuckled and asked the young king.

"A-ah... it's nothing."

Isadore didn't want to say that it's due to Lucy's aura, which was bone-chilling. She released it to frighten Paul but it affected him more, even with Dan's protection.

"Here, a token of my appreciation for your help."

Arthur did a simple gesture which caused a wave of warmth to wash over Isadore.

"Don't mention it. We're friends, are we not?"

"More like allies." Corrected Arthur while shrugging his shoulders.

"Isn't it the same?" Added Isadore while beaming at the Parasite.

"Let's take another route."

Marjory helped Cosima up, the two slowly backing away while warily looking at the motionless Ho Qing.

The red-haired youth remained like that for an indeterminate amount of time, trying to recover some Nether Energy and reflect on his unsaid mistakes. Although he managed to fend off the Demon Team, he ended up getting separated from his Team, which complicated the situation.

Gutcha clearly said that there were twelve points to find so only one person will be disqualified. However, now that John is dead, it's possible for everyone to pass the Sixth Trial, which was actually a bonus trial meant to decrease the number of the participants.

...

"This is it, right?"

Bora tentatively approached a glowing blob of light, circled around it before asking Rosea and Ardor.

"It must be." Rosea kept looking to her rear, afraid that they would get ambushed.

"Who should take it?"

"I can continue." Said the girl with determination.

"I can too."-Ardor

The two looked at the tanned youth, who scratched his head then shook it.

"I can still fight too."

"You stay here and wait for a bit then. If someone appears then take it."

Bora agreed with Rosea's proposition and stood guard very close to the floating blob of light.

Ten days after their departure, Midolf, Radolf, Edward and Sonia have finally reached the Ramel Kingdom. They directly headed toward the mysterious pit.

"Where the f.u.c.k is it?"

Midolf stomped the ground as he looked around, spotting nothing but mountains of sand.

"It should have been here. Maybe it disappeared."

Edward grabbed his orange scissors made of plastic and started cutting the air, trying to discover something. Only Sonia remained calm and aboard the Spirit Boat, surveying the vicinity with interest and fascination.

"We should report back."

Radolf scouted the area and came back an hour later, ordering them all back on the boat. Since the pit is gone, they had nothing else to do here, much to Midolf and Edward's elation. Both of them did not like the climate and the never-ending masses of golden sand. Sonia, on the other hand, showcased a lot of

interest in the history of the Ramel Kingdom and secretly wanted to visit the capital. Unfortunately, it wasn't the right time for that so she ended up keeping her mouth shut and her thoughts to herself.

"What are you writing?"

Timos was pacing around and seemingly deep in thought, however, he suddenly stopped and glanced at the youth that has been accompanying him for a period of time now.

Vyncent raised his head and put down his pent.

"All my experiences so far."

"Don't they say that the unforgettable experiences stick around even if you don't write them?" The Creation God cackled like a lunatic and kept pacing around, but Vyncent merely snorted and continued writing.

A bit later, Timos stopped again and asked.

"What are your theories about this place?"

He gestured with the desolate land surrounding them, the grey and gloomy canopy, and the blood-red ground, made from crumbled ruins and lot... absurdly lots of blood.

"I think the pit was a crack or a hole in the fabric of reality... that's why it keeps transporting us to different times and places. Is my theory correct?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be asking you. But what you said does hold some truth... I wonder if in the future or the past."

"For a Creation God, I thought you'd be able to handle yourself." Scoffed the bearded youth, continuing his unceasing scribbling.

Timos spread his hands and shrugged nonchalantly.

"This is out of my hands. There are things that not even Creation God can control."

"So we'll be stuck here forever."

"Hopefully not."

Timos folded his hands and focused his gaze on a half-black half-white Crow circling in the air before flying closer to them.

"No need to panic." He chuckled as Vyncent abruptly stood up and was about to attack.

"It's time you showed up, Bilgart."

Chapter 730 - The Seventh Trial

The Sixth Trial- a bonus one- lasted for approximately two and a half hours, which was more than Arthur had expected. Since there was no time limit, the remaining twelve participants were able to pass,

fortunately for them. The number of blobs of light was equivalent to the number of participants so there really was no reason for the teams to fight and wear themselves out.

Arthur's declaration was heard by every one of them so they knew that, with John gone, their chances of completing the Sixth Trial is no less than a hundred percent.

Apart from the fights that broke out at the beginning, nothing of importance happened later. The only reason it took over two hours for the Trial to finish was because the Dark Maze was incredibly huge, rendering it the navigation particularly hard, especially since the blobs of light- the participant's target- was relatively small and hard to see amidst the wriggling thick black vines surging from the ground and aimlessly moving around. Sometimes a blocked path would open and another would close, making it hard to backtrack or try to memorize the safe routes.

"Will the next Trial be the last?"

Isadore was brimming with visible curiosity as he turned his head and looked at the parasite. He was faintly smiling and tapping his chair, a bad habit of his that indicated he's excited and restless.

"I've prepared a total of nine Trials but the last two are not for the participants."

"For whom is it, then?"

This time, Arthur maintained silence and Lucy was the one who answered. She glanced at Rasnod, the Patriarch of the Dark Blaze Sect, then at Cardinal Patrick.

"For the brave ones wanting to challenge the MoonStar Sect, of course." She displayed a mesmerizing smile, her luscious pink lips arching upwards, giving Isadore chilling goosebumps.

"I can decline, right?" Hesitantly asked Isadore as he looked at Dan. The straw-hat wearing Overgod was as nonchalant as ever, his mind seemingly wondering about something irrelevant.

"It's a friendly competition, no need to panic, Your Majesty. Only the guardians of the teams can participate and since you're a mortal, you're exempt."

"And will you be participating?"

"Lucy will. I'm a spectator... very much like you."

...

"Ladies and gentlemen! We've reached the final trial! The most exciting of them all! Five teams remain and only one will emerge victorious! Individual contribution and the ranking you see on the board up above will be the determining factor! Please, enjoy!"

Gutcha did a clumsy bow then stepped off the stage, leaving the twelve youngsters bathe in the spotlight and hear the loud cheering of the crowd.

Unlike earlier, the participating teams were given only half an hour to recuperate before the beginning of the Seventh and last Trial.

"We made it!" Bora, as always, laughing and beaming with joy of triumph as he hugged the reluctant Ho Qing and Ardor, though when he approached Rosea, she gave him a piercing glare that stopped him

dead in his tracks. He scratched his head and awkwardly laughed then, with more force than he intended, patted the princess' back, causing her to scowl at him.

"Good job."

Arthur, along with Lucy and Cristina, appeared right behind the youth, startling him. Ho Qing and Ardor bowed at the same time, Rosea did the same albeit a second later. Bora was the last, smiling widely and performing an exaggerated bow.

"Although not all of you reached the end, you still did it. So far, your performance- though not flawless- is nevertheless commendable. You've made us proud."

Arthur softly smiled at the four of them, he lifted his hand and released a white light that enveloped them all. Ho Qing's injuries were instantly healed and a minuscule amount of his Nether Energy was restored.

"I know you guys could do it!"

Cristina walked to her friends and happily congratulated them, seeming genuinely relieved that the MoonStar team, despite losing two of its members, was able to achieve success and reach the final.

Although Rosea and Cristina would constantly bicker, the former didn't shy away from voicing her thoughts and inquiring about the latter's arm injury, which had long since been fully healed, fortunately. In addition, Cristina's mood became much better after speaking her heart to Lucy.

"I trust that you'll not betray our expectations and win the competition." Added Arthur as he thoroughly scrutinized each of them.

"Teacher, I'd like to withdraw from the competition."

Out of nowhere, Ho Qing spoke those words, surprising not only his teammates but also Arthur and Lucy.

"What's the reason?" With one eyebrow raised, Lucy meaningfully looked at the red-haired youth, who was stoof straight and didn't avoid her eyes.

"I believe I've achieved what I wanted from this tournament. I need some time alone to think about my mistakes and to cultivate. Please excuse my presumptuous request and I beg you to accept it."

After saying that, he turned toward Bora, Rosea, and Ardor, and added,

"Even without me, I know that you'll win. Please do not be angry with me, however, I'm doing what I think is best for me."

"Don't you think it's a bit selfish?!" Rosea was not at all happy with Ho Qing, she walked to him and angrily glared at his face as if she's going to slap him at any given second.

Rosea was about to continue lashing at him but was stopped by Arthur, who raised his hand and gestured for her to step back.

"If that is what you want then so be it. You'll be disqualified."

"Thank you, teacher." Ho Qing respectfully bowed two times, one for Arthur and one for Lucy.

The youth didn't stay there for any longer, he politely excused himself and returned to the tower.

"Teacher, how could you let him go? We need him!"

Rosea was firmly objecting to Ho Qing's withdrawal. Having one less member significantly decreases their chance of winning.

"I'm not obligating anyone to participate. This competition aims for the participants' improvements above all. Ho Qing achieved what he wanted and if he says it's enough then I won't object to his decision. After all, he knows himself best."

"But-"

"Stop complaining. We'll just have to do it without him."

Ardor interrupted her with a serious and sharp tone, leaving her no room to argue back. The princess bit her lips and balled her fists but didn't dare to cause a ruckus after Arthur declared his intentions. She looked at Lucy, seeking for another positive answer but the female White Specter was completely expressionless and eerily silent.

"What you've been waiting for has finally arrived! The Seventh Trial will begin shortly." Gutcha declared with his croaky deafening voice, not forgetting to showcase his hideously ugly grin, fangs bared and eyes half-opened.

"The final Trial is individual fights between the remaining teams. Each victory counts for 50 points so..." The Pigolo directed his gaze to the team with the lowest points, the Dark Blaze Team.

Holand was quietly standing a distance away, seemingly not interested in hearing the rules or anything about the last Trial.

"Even a team with one participant can rise to the top. Furthermore, in the case of being defeated in an individual battle, the loser will also earn points depending on his performance. The fights between the participants will be assigned randomly and three defeats will lead to disqualification!"

"Isn't it too basic?"

"It certainly is." Arthur, now back to the VIP box, let out a long sigh as he replied to the young King.

"But it's what the crowd wants and, ultimately, one-on-one fights are what really matters. Those who qualify are the true winners."

"Indeed. I wish my team wasn't disqualified..." Isadore shook his head in disappointment, which made Arthur chuckle and jokingly say,

"So they can use the overpowered artefacts you provided them? Your Majesty, your vast wealth is not a secret, you know."

"So what? It's not like it's against the rules. Look! Even the duo from the Holy Dominion have high-graded accessories and gear."

