

World Mall 326

Chapter 326 Clovis vs Aileen (5)

Aileen looked at Clovis with a lot of regret. This was over. Once she surpassed someone, that person would never catch up to her. And the same thing would be repeated again.

The referee also seemed to have concluded the same thing. She raised her hand, planning to end it as soon as Aileen placed her dagger on his neck. "End of the—"

However, before she could finish those words, she witnessed something unbelievable.

"Gah!" Aileen was launched into the air after coughing up blood. She was just as shocked as the referee and everyone else in this stadium.

'Ah. I never really wanted to rely on this, but in the end, this mysterious state saved me. Aileen was more talented than I originally thought...' Clovis stood up.

Aileen landed on the ground with a shocked expression. She looked at Clovis in disbelief, but she soon noticed something different from his gaze. It felt like he was able to see her completely. This was what she always felt whenever she didn't erase her presence.

'Did he...' Aileen didn't have time to think as Clovis had already rushed toward her.

Aileen jumped back to gather some thoughts. There was a pillar behind her, so she abruptly stopped.

Seeing Clovis swinging his blade from the left, she tilted her body in the opposite direction, planning to let the pillar reduce the power of his swing a bit before she stopped it with her blades.

Sadly for her, Clovis smashed the pillar with unprecedented strength and struck her.

'Too heavy? What is this?' Aileen was taken aback as Clovis launched her to the side. Her body bounced several times on the ground, but she managed to stabilize her position and stand back up.

But Clovis didn't give her a single second to think as he chased after her.

'What?' Aileen checked her body. 'I'm erasing my presence to the very limit. He is actually looking at me? Only someone with a Brain Affinity has that possibility. And what's with his swing? That power definitely far surpasses anything he has shown.'

Clovis reached Aileen, who failed to hide behind a pillar.

Clovis swung his blades multiple times while Aileen parried it until she found a chance to hide.

However, two strikes ended up hitting her thighs.

'What?' Aileen became even more shocked. 'His speed is also increasing. What is this? Why does he become a completely different person? Where does he gain all this strength?'

Aileen blocked Clovis' blow and used the power behind that swing to launch her away even though it made her bounce on the ground again.

When she stabilized her position and looked at the incoming Clovis, a certain thought appeared in her mind.

'He is still hiding something in his sleeves.'

It was supposed to be only Erwin's provocation. And she thought the footwork was the trump cards. However, she was wrong.

This might be Clovis' true trump card. If that was the case, it was understandable that Clovis tried to hide it.

'His power surpasses Jay, his senses are better than his operator, and his speed has gone beyond his limit.' Aileen, of course, missed the fact that Clovis' wounds had begun to close, like Ragna's regenerative ability.

And because of the same reason, Clovis planned to end this match as quickly as possible.

The moment he reached Aileen, he unleashed a speed far surpassing his own limit.

Aileen tried to block it, but a total of eight strikes actually landed on her body. The blood spurted from all that wound.

'What? While speed is not my true forte, I could still manage 22 strikes. Are you telling me that he has just unleashed thirty strikes when his limit is supposed to be 25?' Aileen widened her eyes, but there was nothing she could do. Her body refused to move. In fact, her feet already went limp after six out of those eight strikes hit her legs.

"So... that's really a wall..." Aileen muttered as she fell to her knees. She couldn't help but smile even though her body fell to the ground, symbolizing her defeat.

Clovis' expression remained solemn. He had won, but he was also frustrated by the fact that he had to rely on this mysterious power that wasn't reliable yet. Winning because of a gamble was not something he liked after all.

"You're strong, but the victory is mine." Clovis muttered.

People dropped their jaws to the ground. Clovis changed in the last part of the match. They didn't understand how Clovis was able to see her, but they still couldn't see Aileen, which meant Aileen didn't go easy on Clovis. In other words, Clovis had just gotten stronger.

Clovis glanced at the referees, who were still stunned enough to speak.

"A-Ah!" The referees gained their composure as one of them announced, "End of the match, it's Libation Fiesta's victory!"

The announcement made people snap back to reality. Cheers instantly erupted.

"The whole stadium is vibrating! Because... the conclusion between the strongest Tier 4 and the biggest dark horse has just been reached. It's Clovis' victory!" Shion confirmed it out loud.

"Uooohhh!"

"Amazing!"

"What was actually happening?"

"I don't know, but I still feel goosebumps!"

"Aileen surely had shown her full strength in this match... something that Rika couldn't bring out. Yet it wasn't enough."

"Yeah! It means Clovis is stronger than her!"

"This is too amazing!"

"Clovis!"

"Clovis!"

"Libation Fiesta!"

The people excitedly commented and began chanting their names. With Clovis defeating Aileen, Libation Fiesta would definitely be able to make another upset, just like in the previous two rounds.

They would definitely defeat the Bloody Rose and become the champions. People's excitement was at its peak.

The referees were busy checking their conditions.

Since a referee approached him, Clovis decided to ask for something. Although the referee looked confused, he still gave him a microphone.

Clovis raised his head, looking at the people filling the stadium. "I'm grateful for everyone's support, but our Libation Fiesta will concede in this match."

Thud—!

Chapter 327 Announcement

Thud—!

"W-What?!" Shion screamed. In fact, the entire stadium was screaming with a confused face.

"Are you kidding me?"

"What the hell? You're supposed to win!"

"Is this rigged?!"

"Libation Fiesta should have won! Why are they conceding the match?"

"What the hell are you doing, Clovis?"

"You idiot!"

Their reactions were mixed. Some were questioning Clovis' decision, while others were condemning him.

It was already quite hard for them to reach this stage, so the people hoped they would go all the way.

Even the referee started regretting his decision to hand over the microphone. Why would this happen, especially in the final?

This was simply ridiculous.

Shion hurriedly looked into the rule book while saying, "Wait a minute... There is no rule stating that the team can't surrender during the match. However, this is simply too ridiculous."

As she said, people saw this as a mockery, not only to them but to the entire competition.

Clovis simply said, "I understand your concern, but I have to make this hard decision as the captain of the team. It's not that I don't trust my teammates, but Kanaria and Melody aren't specialized in the individual battle.

"Rather than letting my team get hurt any further, it's better to become a coward. We originally wanted to continue and claim the victory... but the Eight Swords were simply better than we originally expected.

"As a result, Jay, who was supposed to be participating in this battle and claiming the last victory for us, couldn't participate."

Clovis shifted their attention to the Eight Swords. At the same time, this would diminish their achievement a little bit. If he continued fighting to the very end, he still couldn't defeat the Bloody Rose. However, his reputation would soar extremely high.

When that happened, more people would take notice of him. While he didn't mind showing his achievement, he only limited it to the province. If the entire nation gazed their eyes on his little group, it would be troublesome.

He might not even have the time to handle the beast wave that Vania warned him about since he would be forced to go to the capital or something for a better opportunity. He would also break the promise to go to Hana.

Hence, by smearing his own reputation, he diminished his achievement a bit. This way, people would wonder if they planned to recruit him.

At the same time, he also raised the prestige of the Eight Swords by stating that they were better than they expected.

Of course, this was also another plan from Clovis. While he lost this battle, the people would think, 'If Jay were here, would the Libation Fiesta defeat the Bloody Rose?'

'What if the Libation Fiesta had six members? Even without Jay, they might be able to become champions.'

Unlike other groups, people had seen numerous possibilities from the Libation Fiesta to win if their condition was different.

It created the illusion that Libation Fiesta should have won the match, though it didn't change the fact that they lost.

Last but not least, his teammates didn't have to get injured.

Of course, it would take a while before these people thought of it that way. For the time being, they were completely enraged and even started throwing stuff into the arena.

"Aaaahhh! Don't throw stuff into the arena." Shion tried to stop them, but it was useless.

Their rage couldn't be calmed so easily.

On the other hand, Clovis simply walked away with a solemn expression. They didn't realize one thing. There was one more reason why Clovis chose to end it this way.

And the one that would become his sword this time was not his group, but Vania.

"!!!" Vania frowned because a notification appeared when she was watching the battle with her phone. It was from her daughter, who passed on Clovis' message. She couldn't help but smile upon seeing this message.

Meanwhile, the medical team was carrying Aileen on a stretcher.

"Aileen. Are you alright?" Lana was the first one to come, worried about her condition. More importantly, she never thought that Aileen would lose, especially during the last part.

"Yeah." Aileen smiled wryly. "He was extremely strong... like a wall that I could never overcome..."

"!!!" Lana widened her eyes in shock. This was the first time she heard such praise come out of her mouth. "Is he that good?"

"His speed surpassed even me, his strength was stronger than Jay, his senses were comparable to his operator, and his schemes were worse than Tarkan's. He was that capable as a Tier 2 human. What do you think?"

"What?" Lana gasped. "Is he a human?"

"Lana..." Aileen looked solemn. "Now that the competition is done, the Bloody Rose will be disbanded, and I'll have to leave the group."

"Leave the group... Don't tell me. Are you going to do that?"

"Yeah. I want to get stronger..." Aileen sighed. "I'm sorry for being selfish."

"Jeez. I don't mind. Go pursue what you want. Don't hold back anymore, you hear me?"

"Is that so? Thank you." As if doing what Lana had just told her to do, a smile appeared on her cold face.

"Also, take this." Aileen took out a piece of paper and handed it to Lana.

"What is this?"

"Just open it later." Aileen closed her eyes. It was the piece of paper that contained the result of the match, according to Clovis. Aileen didn't have to look at it anymore after Clovis chose to concede the match.

Everything indeed went according to plan. And she accepted her loss.

Lana ended up stopping for a moment, looking at the medical staff bringing Aileen to the medical room.

Curious, Lana opened the piece of paper. "This is... the result of the battle?"

5-2 Lose (Draw).

Lana couldn't help but furrow her eyebrows. It stated 'lose,' so this must be Clovis' handwriting. In addition, the 'draw' actually piqued her interest more.

When she thought about it carefully, she finally understood its meaning. She could only smile wryly. "Is he a madman or something? To think that he would do all kinds of things that a normal person wouldn't do..."

Chapter 328 After the Competition

"Congratulations for being the first loser." Erwin was actually waiting for him outside the medical room, along with Ragna and the others.

Clovis chuckled. "Indeed."

"Well, I shouldn't be here for too long since we will be holding a party for the first loser tonight..." Erwin paused for a moment. His expression turned serious as Erwin actually lowered his head. "Thank you, Clovis."

"Mhmm?" Clovis looked surprised since he didn't expect someone as prideful as Erwin to lower his head. "Please raise your head. What is this all about? Is it because of the battle?"

"No." Erwin shook his head. He had confirmed one thing when he saw Aileen's expression after losing. "I'm grateful because you have become a wall that Aileen can strive to overcome."

"Oi, oi. Are you sacrificing me for her?"

"What are you talking about? It's for myself. Now that she can become stronger, it means that I can progress much faster chasing after her back. Next time, I will be the one to defeat her. After that, it will be you."

"Hahaha." Clovis chuckled.

"Anyway, I've said my pieces. It's time for me to leave. Just don't collapse before our party." Erwin smirked. "The reporters will definitely love to chat with you."

"..." Clovis smiled wryly as he watched Erwin leave. He then opened his mouth and said, "Kanaria—!"

Before he could say what he wanted, someone grabbed his shoulder from behind. Kanaria's face suddenly poked out over his shoulder. Even though she was smiling, her expression was extremely dark.

"I'm going to accompany you in the interview, but you have to handle the interview yourself."

"..." Clovis shuddered. He ended up scratching the back of his head, aware that he was the one making that decision. "Alright..."

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As expected, the reporters were asking him a lot of questions as if carrying the rage from the citizens.

Clovis managed to avoid being stabbed to death by the mass. While the general public was still angry, the people on the Skynet had begun to review the battle as well as Clovis' tactics and decisions.

During that time, the award ceremony was held. The Bloody Rose took first place, while the Libation Fiesta got second place. The result was actually similar to the previous competition, considering Ivan also got second place.

It was like a slap to the Drake Group and Ivan.

Still, the reward itself wasn't bad. As the champion, the Bloody Rose received three Tier 5 weapons, two Tier 4 beast souls, and 3 million Union Dollars.

On the other hand, the Libation Fiesta received two Tier 5 weapons, one Tier 4 beast soul, and 2 million Union Dollars.

Clovis' weapon was given to him by his grandfather, so he knew that it might be superior to a Tier 5 weapon. Hence, he gave this reward to Jay and Ragna. They would retrieve their weapons of their choice the next day.

As for the beast soul, Clovis really wanted to let Kanaria or Melody take it, but Jay actually utilized his beast soul a little bit differently after his fight against Rafael. Hence, he decided to let Jay take this beast soul. He would definitely use it better than the others. As for the rest, they could wait until they went to Hana.

Last but not least, there was a cash reward. Obviously, Clovis was the one who took it so that he could register it in the Another World Mall. After that, he would turn it into a group fund.

Of course, there was also a reward from Mayor Revan, but the discussion would be held the next day.

After a long day, the competition had finally ended. Erwin had set up a party at a famous restaurant. Of course, he rented a room so that they didn't have to get bothered.

Erwin brought all his teammates, as if he were trying to stop Clovis from recruiting him. Aileen, surprisingly, only brought her best friend, Lana, with her.

Unfortunately, Jay still remained in the hospital because of his injury. So, he didn't participate.

However, everyone's eyes seemed to be glued to Clovis. It wasn't because he was the MVP of the competition. Instead, it was due to him lying his head on the table as if his soul had gone from his body.

He let out some groans as if he had been sucked dry.

"Is he... dead?" Erwin chuckled.

Kanaria shrugged. "It was his fault for doing that. All the anger was directed at him. One single mistake would have destroyed him."

"Hahahaha!" Erwin laughed out loud. "Serve you right!"

Clovis raised his head, showing his tired expression. "So, when are you going to come to my group, Erwin?"

"!!!" Hana, Tarkan, and the others couldn't help but frown as if they didn't believe Clovis actually invited him.

Even Aileen secretly glanced at Erwin, wanting to know his answer.

"You truly don't hold back, don't you? You drop one bomb after another..." Erwin sighed. "My answer remains the same. Come to my city first before we talk about that."

"What are you being so secretive about? It's not like you're not interested in my group."

Erwin smiled. "After knowing your true identity, of course, I'd be curious. It would be weird if that didn't pique my interest."

"True identity?" Aileen and the others became curious. Now that they thought about it, Clovis didn't have a family name, which is quite rare in the current generation. In addition, Erwin mentioned that his family name was erased previously.

It seemed that Erwin had figured out Clovis' true identity. And it was big enough to pique Erwin's interest. They would be lying if they weren't curious about it.

"Come on. Let's eat first. We can talk later." Erwin shrugged. "Still, I'm quite curious about that trump card of yours, Clovis. You felt like a different person back then."

Aileen was also interested in that answer since she lost because of it.

Clovis stuck out his tongue and said, "Become a part of the Libation Fiesta first, then I'll tell you."

"You're truly persistent. If you want to recruit someone right now..." Erwin pointed at the person next to him. "Why don't you invite Aileen first?"

Chapter 329 Knowing Each Other

"Why don't you invite Aileen first?"

Their eyes soon darted to Clovis. That was right. If he had invited Erwin, he should have invited Aileen, since she was more talented than him.

Clovis simply shook his head while raising one finger. "Well, it's true that talent matters, but the person I recruit needs something in common."

"Something in common?" Lana frowned.

"Yeah. It's ambition." Clovis nodded. "Erwin is brimming with ambition. He looks like a person who has a lot of goals. But it looks like you've changed a little bit." Clovis turned to Aileen.

"I personally don't mind joining the group. It seems like I can continue forward, but... I can't follow you. As you said, I don't have an ambition... or more like I've forgotten about it." Aileen sighed. "Still, I just recovered that feeling again. This time, I'm planning to accept the invitation to the capital city to train under a teacher. This will be good for me to reaffirm my goals.

And if you still have the heart to invite me, then I'll definitely join your group."

"Hoh?" Clovis looked amused. "That sounds interesting. You think you can keep up with us?"

"Do you think I can't? I have decided to become stronger with all the methods available to me. At the same time, this also means that I will only serve the strong."

"I don't really mind taking you on again." Clovis smirked. "Though, someone might get angry at me when that happens."

"Why should I get angry?" Erwin narrowed his eyes.

Aileen, on the other hand, looked at Erwin while saying, "It sounds like joining the Libation Fiesta is only a matter of time for you. In that case, make sure you observe him all the time so that you can tell me his weakness later."

"..." Clovis just looked at these two and said, "You guys... I never mention a name, you know." Clovis glanced at Lana as if trying to imply that he was supposed to mention her.

"!!!" Erwin and Aileen widened their eyes in shock, realizing that Clovis had just tricked them.

"I said that because I was the one who provoked her before your match." Erwin tried to avoid embarrassment.

"That's right." Aileen nodded in agreement.

Clovis and the others were just staring at them, their faces clearly telling them that they didn't believe those excuses. Tarkan and Lana were actually grinning.

Without them noticing it, they were quite similar. They were very competitive and had one best friend.

"Ahem." Aileen coughed with an embarrassed face. She said, "In any case, I owe you one, Clovis. Thank you for defeating me. I've finally regained what I've lost in the past. If you need my assistance, feel free to tell me about it."

Clovis nodded. "Still, I need some time before I can visit your city as promised."

"Certainly. It doesn't have to be because of me. As long as you come into our city, that's enough." Aileen nodded back.

"Erwin. Do you want to visit our city after this? It's only going to be two or three days," asked Clovis.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I have to go back right away." Erwin paused for a moment. "And once you return, you should be careful of that guy."

"That guy?" Clovis squinted his eyes.

"Yeah. The guy you defeated before the competition... I mean, the night when we first met."

"Ah!" Clovis finally knew who he meant. It was Ivan.

"Since you piqued my interest, I couldn't help but investigate those people as well. That guy has completely fallen. I can see nothing but hatred in his eyes. He might do something unthinkable out of desperation.

"The girl, who is always supporting him, is also quite dangerous. I don't really like her personality. She is like a snake. She waits for you to show an opening, approach you without a sound, entangle you, and finally kill you.

"Considering their backgrounds... if you are not careful, you might lose your life. Besides, it's not like you can use your own backing with that name. Don't die before you come to my city." Erwin harrumphed.

Clovis nodded. "I know. Well, I've expected it."

"!!!" Erwin thought for a moment before saying, "Did you forfeit because of that?"

"It was one of the reasons." Clovis confirmed it.

"I see." Erwin nodded while sipping his drink.

"Do you want me to eliminate him?" Aileen asked. "My family is in the assassination business as well, so it doesn't really matter if I assassinate them. This way, you don't have to worry about them."

"No. If you haven't come here, I might do that since it'll be impossible for them to find the connection. But it doesn't matter. This is the problem for our group. We'll deal with them personally." Clovis shook his head.

"In any case, you already have my contact. If you need my help, just tell me about it." Aileen nodded, respecting his choice.

"Still, there is something I'd like to ask you, Clovis." Erwin raised one finger. "After finding out about your true identity, there is something that doesn't add up. I've used my connection to check your evolution rate, do you really have a 40% evolution rate?"

The others who heard the question couldn't help but furrow their eyebrows. If that was really the case, they would definitely be speechless.

"Or else, I won't be able to become an explorer." Clovis shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal.

"!!!" They looked confused because of the weird wording.

"Huh?" Erwin knew that Clovis' family might use their connection to change it, but the way Clovis said it, it was as if he had a lower evolution rate.

"I don't really conceal it anymore after my grandfather changed the registered data." Clovis took out his phone and showed them the real number.

"15%?" They dropped their jaws to the ground. There were a lot of thoughts appearing in their heads. The most important question was, how in the world did the grandson of one of the strongest explorers in the world only have a 15% evolution rate?

Clovis simply chuckled. "It's not really a big deal. I just have to work hard for it. Instead of discussing such a heavy topic, let's just drink."

Chapter 330 Aftermath

The next day.

Ding!

Dong!

Creak!

After the bell rang, the door was opened because no one answered it.

"Aileen. Have you woken up yet?" Lana took a peek at the hotel room, finding no one inside. Hence, she entered while looking around to find Aileen. "Aileen..."

All the rooms were empty, leaving only the bedroom. She knocked on the door first, but because no one answered, she tried to open it.

Surprisingly, it wasn't locked.

"Huh?" Lana opened the door slightly, not really wanting to disturb Aileen if she was still sleeping. But the only thing she found was a messy bedroom with the bed almost flipped over. And that was exactly the problem.

Lana facepalmed and closed the door again, hoping that she hadn't seen that. She couldn't help but recall what happened yesterday.

After drinking a lot, they started to get drunk.

Aileen gulped down all of the beer and stood up. "I have drunk enough. It's time to go back."

"Oh. Alright." Lana nodded as she needed to take care of this best friend of her. Aileen grabbed the back of someone's collar, but the problem was that it was Erwin's. "Aileen?"

"What?" Erwin turned around. "What are you doing?"

"Since I've lost... it doesn't really matter if I lose one more time." Aileen dragged Erwin away.

"Oi, oi! What the hell are you doing, insane woman? Are you drunk, Aileen?" Erwin shouted.

"If I don't get drunk, it's impossible to lose to you." Aileen snorted.

"Clovis. Help me!" Erwin panicked. He hurriedly tried to find some help, but his teammates were already drunk.

"What? You haven't become a part of my group, so I don't have any obligation to help. Besides, it's not like you're against it." Clovis shrugged.

"It's because of that reason that you have to help me." Erwin gritted his teeth. "Do you think I will be able to stop myself?"

Clovis sighed before pointing his thumb to the side. "Do you think I'm in a position where I can help you?"

Erwin's face turned pale. Kanaria was already placing her hand on Clovis' shoulder to say a lot of things. Her smile was actually scarier than she expected.

That answer had just sealed his fate as Erwin was dragged away.

Recalling that memory put a wry smile on her face. "How much money do we need to leave behind as a tip for all this mess..."

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Meanwhile, Clovis and Kanaria had another meeting with the mayor.

"Congratulations, Clovis, Kanaria, and the Libation Fiesta for getting 2nd place. You guys have truly surprised me." Mayor Revan was smiling from ear to ear. He couldn't even sleep yesterday because of the result.

It far surpassed the target he had in mind. More importantly, their average age was much lower than that of the rest of the teams.

In addition, Clovis also mentioned Mayor Revan's support during the interview. This way, Mayor Revan would be more popular and hold more power.

"Thank you." Clovis nodded calmly.

No one mentioned Clovis' controversial decision.

"Still, there is something I'd like to convey. While I have promised to reward you with money depending on your result, it's actually impossible to give you all that money."

"Huh?" Clovis squinted his eyes, looking displeased.

Mayor Revan hurriedly waved down as if telling him he had the wrong idea. "I'm talking about the fact that it's impossible for me to give all that liquid cash because the amount is too big. That's why I wonder if you don't mind getting only five million in cash and one Tier 4 beast soul."

Clovis frowned before glancing at Kanaria.

Kanaria looked down, contemplating. 'It's true that liquidation is always the problem. Besides, a Tier 4 beast soul is about five to ten million in our city due to their rarity. In other words, the mayor is planning to give us more than ten million for the third part. If we add the other two parts, he has given us more than twenty million. It's already too much.'

Kanaria chose to nod her head, fully aware of how hard it was to get all that cash. Unlike the Essence Bank, which had business in every city, it was hard to get too much cash from the city's fund.

Since Kanaria chose to accept it, Clovis nodded his head. "I understand. Thank you for believing in us."

"Don't worry. It's my job as mayor to believe and support my citizens." The mayor smiled. However, Clovis noticed the worry behind that smile.

Considering he met Erwin and Aileen yesterday, the mayor must be worried that they would join other cities.

Clovis said, "Don't worry. While I do plan to visit other cities, I don't have any plans for a long stay in the next few months."

"Ah." The mayor scratched the back of his head, forgetting that these people were experts who could easily see through his emotions. "I'm thankful for your consideration. Are you going to return with us?"

"We still have to wait for Jay." Clovis shook his head.

"How about going back only with me? I will send the other participants in the bus first."

Clovis thought it wouldn't be good to reject him too much. "If you can wait for another two days, then sure."

Ragna also needed to make preparations to leave this city. All the bad rumors regarding him had disappeared as he became one of the reasons why the Libation Fiesta could go this far.

"I understand. In that case, I shall not disturb you any further. Please take your time to recover." Mayor Revan chose to leave before he made another request and ended up annoying Clovis.

After they saw him off, Kanaria couldn't help but stretch her body while saying, "It's going to be exhausting when we go back. I'm more concerned about Ivan and the Drake Group than their popularity at this point."

"Yeah. Don't worry about that. I have expected it as well, and it's the perfect time to strike back. I've left it to a very reliable person..."

"A very reliable person that can hit the Drake Group?" Kanaria was confused. "Who?"

"Who else? The stalk—Ahem, I mean, your beloved mother."