

## Evolution 241

Chapter 241: You Asked For it.

This time, even Arthur had his excitement reeled in, knowing just how challenging it was going to be for them... after all, they weren't fighting nobodies, but talented individuals from prestigious Lineages in their regions. The amount of resources invested in them was too much to calculate.

"Don't worry, you don't have to win against all of them." Feng Ling added, "Your win condition is ten wins, while their win condition is to defeat you all."

"Ten wins... It's still tough, but it's manageable than defeating all of them." Nurah nodded.

The others clamored in agreement... although they didn't expect the trial to be this brutal, they were in no place to complain. They understood that those three teams had done the work to earn their slot, competing nonstop against other powerful teams. Compared to them, they still had it easy, leaving them with no right to complain about the fairness of the situation.

"Their team captains are going to be the most difficult hurdles for you to pass... so, Levi, think carefully about how you will position your team's fighting order... It's fixed before the Gauntlet starts, and can't be altered." Feng Ling advised, "In Gauntlet format, energy and injuries will be your biggest downfall."

"I understand." Levi nodded.

He knew that fighting one after another posed great risks to one's energy reserves, since if they went all out to defeat the first challenger, they would be sitting ducks to the next one. A great team order would help them minimize those limitations, especially when they were only six while they had eighteen Daywalkers.

"The battles will be held in an hour from now... use it wisely."

Feng Ling uncrossed his arms and walked to the tent's door. Just as he was about to open it, Mao popped up on his shoulder and gave them a cruel look.

"If you lose and make us serve under that hippy, I will haunt you in your sleep for the rest of your lives."

With that ominous threat, they closed the door behind them.

'Well, you heard her... the stakes are high, Sir Feng Ling's freedom is on the line, and I, for one, don't want to make that cat an enemy of mine,' Levi said, switching to dimensional conversation to involve Jasmine without using signs.

'I still don't understand why Feng Ling did that.' Shia shook her head.

She knew that although Seraphis' life was at stake, Feng Ling wouldn't go as far as bet his own freedom on his survival... after all, it was known knowledge that his motto was: Daywalkers should take responsibility for their decisions.

'Maybe he didn't do it for Seraphis... maybe, he did it for us?' Jasmine said softly.

'Us? Why?'

'I don't know for sure...' Jasmine shrugged slightly, 'It's just a feeling.'

Everyone looked at each other in silence, wondering if she was right... Had Feng Ling truly taken such a risk just so they could gather priceless treasures worth half a million SA coins or more, all for the sake of their growth?

They knew that their progress would be halted the moment they hit the first Great Daywalkers Wall... Solarbound Evolution.

Since it needed exclusive, remarkable, or perfect evolutionary formulas to break through, the resources required might range from needing enough to buy the materials to going broke on investing in research for the right formula.

So, they would always require resources to accelerate the process.

'Maybe, or maybe he is doing it for a reason we don't know about.' Levi said calmly, 'Whatever it is, we didn't come here to get sent back packing... we are here to stay, and we will show everyone just how serious we are.'

'You god damn right we will.'

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Meanwhile, inside the Imperial Raiders' tent, Zhang Yanhuan, Tyrese, and Evangeline's teams had decided to gather up and discuss the upcoming challenge.

"We have been loyal rivals ever since we stepped inside the Conference... our teams have dominated the other teams and established our presence in the World Tree. Only then were we given the right to embark on this mission."

Zhang Yanhuan uttered calmly while sitting above the edge of a couch, while the rest of the Daywalkers were spread out across the living room. It looked like a gathering of villains who disliked each other but decided to unite for a single purpose.

"Yet, out of nowhere, we were told that some unheard of Daywalkers from a hillbilly region near a desert had decided to challenge us for our precious slots?" Yanhuan narrowed his eyes coldly, "You all know me... I keep my thoughts reserved, but not on this... they showed some promise in their first raid, and they started getting cocky, believing themselves to have what it takes to be amongst the top... It's a joke if you ask me."

Most nodded; their expressions were grim.

"Listen, I don't give a shit how they got here... Sir Dominic offered us twenty thousand Solar Aegis coins for each member of their team we defeat... saying no to free money is a sin."

Tyrese said while sitting with his arms spread across the couch, taking it all for himself, while the rest were sitting on the floor or leaning against the walls. Yet, no one dared to say anything.

"Money? This is a matter of principle..." Evangeline said sternly, "I hate nothing more than weasels, who think they can get along in life by abusing favors... Our companions have lost so much in the past weeks for this opportunity, and I owe it to them to erect justice on their behalf."

Her teammates were all wearing similar knightly armors like hers, but with different colors and styles, fitting their battle arts... when she finished, they tapped their feet on the ground once and uttered solemnly together.

"Life without justice is chaos dressed in silence... we are Justice sword, and we will implement order again."

Tyrese and his teammates rolled their eyes at their cringy attempts to be righteous pricks, who thought of themselves as always standing on the side of Justice.

Tyrese pulled up a container from his dimensional wallet... it was filled with rolled up blunts, joints, pinners, swishers, and any other type... each one had a different kind of weed or marijuana already inside.

He pulled two joints and offered one to Evangeline, speaking freely with a lazy smile.

"Eva, sometimes I wish your nightcrawler corrupted you if even by a little... then, your beauty might not be wasted on such a boring personality... take it, smoke a little, and stop being such a hardass."

Slice!

Before anyone could react, the joint was cut in half from Tyrese's hand, without leaving a single trace... it was like a ghost cut it in half. Yet, everyone glanced in Evangeline's right hand, which was resting on her sheathed sword... Her expression was as cold as always.

"I told you, don't call me Eva... I am not your friend." She uttered

"Fine... sheesh, you didn't have to cut it, you know." Tyrese picked up the sliced halves of the joint with a saddened expression, "What a waste... You know how hard it is to find premium weed after the great fall of civilization?"

"I don't, and I don't care... if you offer me that poison again, your hand will be severed instead... am I understood?"

"How b\*tchy... no wonder you can't find a boyfriend," Tyrese murmured under his breath while emptying the sliced-up joint on the table, wanting to roll up a new one.

Evangeline heard him and acted deaf, not wanting to interact with him anymore.

"So, what will be our split of challengers? You have seen their clips in their first raid... as much as I hate to admit it, they aren't a bunch of weaklings despite their region's rank being close to triple digits." Mira said.

She had long, wavy blonde hair that flowed past her waist. She was dressed in a crimson leather crop top with black studs and navy jean shorts held by a white belt with a phoenix buckle.

Her midnight-gray boots with silver spurs clicked against the ground with each slight movement, matching the scarlet-and-ivory holsters at her waist.

She wore a jet-black cowgirl hat that shaded her eyes, while a burgundy duster coat was tightened around her neck. When added to ash-gray gloves and a golden pendant, it finished her gunslinger look.

She looked like a girl from the American Old West, ready to take down anyone with a single bullet to the head.

She was the second strongest Daywalker in Tyrese's team and the wildest one, having no respect for hierarchy.

"How about you go first, Mira?"

Tyrese suggested casually while giving the joint one final lick to seal it. Just as Tyrese wanted to bring out a lighter, both Evangeline and Yanhuan gave him a cold stare.

"Sheesh... talk about being a buzzkill." Tyrese stashed the joint with an irked expression.

"Sir Dominic told us that anyone defeated under their hands will be put in the elimination bracket if they won the Gauntlet... so, we should send our strongest from the start." Li Mei expressed softly.

She was the cute bee-outfit wearer with large circular glasses and a backpack as her signature weapon... she also wore a cute Hello Kitty-like hat, but with a yellow and black bee design.

"Win the Gauntlet?" Mira smirked, "Li Mei, you are such a cutie... hell will descend before they succeed in defeating three of us. Everyone has powers capable of countering what they showed in their raid... spiritual, physical, elemental, it didn't matter."

"That's why our split needs to be solid, so we make sure to absolutely crush them and send them packing home." Guo Shi Shan said expressionlessly.

He was standing near the fireplace, with one leg resting on the wall and arms crossed... he was a muscular Chinese man with long flowing brown hair. He wore a sliced-up kung fu orange shirt from the shoulders and shorts matching the fit... He was barefoot with two ankle rocky bracelets.

"I am going for a smoke... Mira, don't let them cheat us out of the money." Tyrese said while standing up, incapable of remaining here for another second without a blunt in his lips.

"Good riddance," Evangeline said.

Tyrese only chuckled on the way out, not taking it to heart... after he left, the rest continued with their discussion about the split. Since almost everyone wanted to earn as much money as possible from defeating Levi's team, many volunteered to go first.

While this ruckus was ongoing... they had no clue that Levi was currently eavesdropping on their conversation from tens of meters away.

The tents were perfectly soundproof, but unfortunately for them... his Harmonic Spine had been upgraded a little after his latest evolutions.

This had increased his Harmonic Spine's range from about thirty meters to a hundred meters while simultaneously allowing him to recreate any change of frequency in his mind into a spoken language, a song, or any combination that was released in its presence.

Even if the walls were soundproof and allowed no sound to reach him!

It was like he was putting his ear in their room, and they could do nothing about it. He had been listening to them shittalking his team over and over again like they were some third-rate citizens.

Although most of them tried their best to hide it, he could sense it... the disdain channeled at their region and origin.

'I was planning to play nice since we are on the same side, regardless of our differences... but, crush us? Hell will descend before we defeat them? Hillbillies? Alright.' Levi showed his usual unprovocative smile, 'You asked for it.'

Chapter 242: Fearsome Jasmine.

Sometime later...

Almost everyone in the camp was seen gathered around a massive dusty arena, somewhat far from the camp... the arena was a massive circle of dried-up yellow land, but cleaned up better.

On the right side, the top three conference teams stood next to each other, but separated by their teams. Levi and his teammates were on the opposite side, waiting patiently for the start of the Gauntlet.

The rest of the camp staff were spread out across the arena, acting as a safety net in case anyone was harmed and needed to be rescued fast.

As for Dominic and Feng Ling? They were hovering in the sky above the arena... one was standing on his saber, and the other seemed to levitate using nothing; his hands were in his pockets.

"I always wanted to be a commentator like the Gamemasters." Dominic grinned as his rumbling voice thundered across the arena, "Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready to have your hearts explode out of excitement?! Are you ready to witness the strongest of our youngest generation of Daywalkers fight it out in a series of battles that kno..."

"Enough, no one wants to hear your ear-piercing voice under the scolding heat."

Feng Ling silenced him by trapping his voice in an air bubble around his head. Then, he looked both ways and said indifferently, "Listen up, no artifacts and no totems allowed... don't go for the kill, or you won't have a pleasant time after... First Daywalkers step up."

Hearing this, Guo Feng clasped his hands together in the direction of the arena and then jumped a couple of meters in the air before landing with a loud thud, his fist smashing the ground into pieces.

"Guo Shi Shan... Imperial Sun Agency." He introduced, his tone as harsh as stone.

When Levi saw him, he merely smiled in the direction of Jasmine while signing with his hands.

-Show them why we are here.-

-Oki.-

Jasmine gave him an okay sign with a soft smile, resembling an undead queen smiling before going on a feeding session. The moment she stepped inside the arena, she summoned her brush and waited silently for the start of the fight.

Meanwhile, the others were somewhat intrigued by her weapon choice as this was the second time they had seen anyone using a brush as a weapon... the first time was also her when she first arrived at the camp.

Since Jasmine didn't fight in the raid and the international missions she went along with her father were mostly related to rescue missions in regions in turmoil, none of them had any news about her way of fighting.

Still, Guo Shi didn't show an ounce of worry... his eyes drifted behind her to Levi and the others as he thought, 'If I were to defeat them all, I would have enough coins to invest in another researching attempt for a remarkable evolutionary formula.'

Once he stood in the arena, he had no plans on getting off.

"Fight."

When Feng Ling's voice resounded across the arena, Guo Shi's ankle's rocky brown bracelets started shimmering faintly. Then, he started walking in the direction of Jasmine, each step causing the dried-up ground to melt off into mud and encase his body.

The mud kept on rising from the ground, stacking up over and over again until his body was no longer to be seen... in its place, a giant five-meter muddy golem took the spotlight.

Then, the mud hardened with Guo Shi still inside... once the transformation was completed, Guo Shi's face emerged from the golem's chest and uttered, "This is the first and last warning I give to all of you... surrender or you won't walk out of the arena without a broken limb."

Jasmine looked at him for a moment in confusion, then she turned to glance in Levi's direction with her head slightly tilted... seemingly asking him what he said.

'He said he wants to break our legs.' Levi snitched immediately.

-Oki...-

This time, Jasmine's okay sign didn't look as sweet... in fact, the soft smile she always had near her friends disappeared at once.

'He wants to break my friend's limbs?' She thought coldly.

'Don't go overboard, Jas.' N'ibby said depressively, 'Overuse of our powers will bring nothing but unwanted attention...'

'Don't worry... I am just going to use what everyone already knows.' Jasmine replied while drawing a wide circle around her with white ink.

Then, uttered in her mind, 'Midnight Calligraphy Art: Erasure Shield.'

A milky white liquid dome manifested around Jasmine, hiding her completely from anyone's gaze... then, she erased the ground in front of her, making an empty scroll of it.

"You chose to ignore my warning... take responsibility for what happens next."

Seeing this sight, Guo Shi made his move and rushed in the direction of Jasmine's Erasure Shield... his giant size and weight made his steps send seismic shocks everywhere.

Yet, Levi and his friends didn't seem worried in the slightest... instead, when they saw him lift his leg and try to kick Jasmine's white barrier, they couldn't help but show sympathetic expressions.

Whoosh!

As the leg smashed against the barrier, its anticipated destruction was nowhere to be found... instead, the golem's leg was erased out of existence, leaving it swinging into the air with its remaining thigh up in the air.

The erasure was so smooth, so natural... it was like an artist used an eraser tool to get rid of a bad drawing.

Guo Shi was left dazed, feeling like his golem's leg was never there in the first place. Swiftly, he regained balance and pulled away from the shield... then, he rebuilt another leg and remained gazing at the white barrier in silence with the rest of the watchers.

Tyrese, Yanhuan, Evangeline, and the others left staring at this sight with a stunned expression...

"Am I tripping on the weed? Where did his leg go..."

Tyrese wondered while rubbing his bloodshot eyes... appearing as high as a kite. But when he saw everyone's expressions, he knew that was not the case.

Meanwhile, Guo Shi didn't give anyone the time to question what happened before he rushed back in, but this time, his golem's arm turned into a gigantic hammer.

"Stonemountain Arts: Colossal Hammer!"

As he shouted out loud, the Golem was already swinging the hammer from above on the white barrier, appearing like he was trying to flatten her on the ground... Yet, Feng Ling and Dominic didn't make a move, watching with a hint of interest buried in their eyes as the hammer went through the white dome yet again.

No loud noises, no spilled white ink, nothing... just a rocky hammer getting erased, leaving it armless.

"It can't be..."

Guo Shi murmured in disbelief, this time forced to accept the reality before him. His melee attacks weren't getting through the white dome... Still, he wasn't out of options yet.

'Underground it is.'

He detached from the golem's form and jumped, akin to a diver, straight to the ground, but instead of smacking his face, the ground turned muddy again, and he sank into it in no time.

"I don't know what kind of mystical powers she is wielding, but Guo Shi has yet to show his true prowess..." Yanhuan uttered with a faint, confident smile, "His nightcrawler used to be a Tier 5 of the Gravemole Nightcrawler species... underground is his home."

As he was saying this, Guo Shi was currently piercing through the underground in the direction of Jasmine, while his body was covered in a skin-tight rocky armor.

Once he got under her, he brought his palms together and murmured inwardly, 'Underground Drill!'

A giant rocky drill was released from his palms, pushing through the ground while spinning rapidly until it pierced... nothing.

The drill was devoured by the erasure barrier, which didn't encase just the surface of the ground, but also underneath it, creating an unbreakable sphere!

'What the hell is that shield made of...'

Guo Shi was left at his wits' end in under three attacks, realizing that his arsenal of techniques and abilities might all share a similar outcome.

He was an Earthbender... an exclusive Elemental Specialist with a signature weapon that amplified his Earth-based elemental attacks... His weapon was the ankle stone bracelets, which were still shimmering faintly.

He always took pride in his earthbending abilities, but as he watched his attacks getting erased with no explanation, he couldn't help but feel a tint of dread rise up within him.

In his mind, if this were a single defensive ability of Jasmine, how would her attacks be? As this question resounded in his mind, Jasmine was finally done painting on the scroll.

She signed it at the bottom and removed the Erasure Barrier at last... only Dominic, Feng Ling, Levi, and a few others with great observational skills saw what she had drawn on the ground.

'Shit... I might have gone overboard in charging her...'

Levi smiled wryly at the sight of three colossal inked warriors emerging from the underground in the painting.

Rumble! Rumble...

Mirroring the painting, the three gigantic inked warriors erupted from the ground with a loud rumble, shattering half of the arena into pieces, and hurling Guo Shi into the sky from wherever he was hiding.

As he flew in the air uncontrollably, his stunned eyes landed on the three warriors, each one standing ten meters tall, towering over the entire arena and anyone in it.

Tyrese and the rest of the watchers were also forced to fix their posture, their expressions turning solemn... it finally started to hit them, Levi's team had a secret weapon in their pocket.

As for Jasmine? One of the warriors lifted her with a finger and placed her on top of its shoulder gently.

'Strike.'

With a single order, the three warriors lifted their giant weapons into the sky... one was holding a spear, another a sword with a shield, and the last a double-handed axe.

Then, they split the air as they brought them down in the direction of Guo Shi, who had just landed on the ground.

"Crap, Mountain Chain!"

Guo Shi somersaulted away while manifesting a giant tough granite mountainous chain in his trail; each flip resulted in a miniature mountain to emerge, until he seemed to have a separating wall between him and the upcoming attacks.

This was his ultimate ability, one of his proudest defensive abilities in his possession.

Everyone believed that the inked constructed weapons would never destroy a mountainous chain crafted out of tough granite, one of the hardest stones in the universe.

And they were right.

Snap.

With a single snap of a finger from Jasmine, the weapons turned instantly into liquid ink again, drowning the mountainous chain and the shocked Guo Shi behind it, who got caught in its wake before he could do anything!

The black ink tsunami rushed in the direction of Yanhuan, Tyrese, and the others... The captains swiftly stood in front with their weapons summoned and grim expressions, ready to stop it.

Yet, before they could do anything, Guo Shi was hurled next to their feet while the tsunami of ink retracted backward until it got attached to the warriors as hardened weapons again.

Cough! Cough!

As Guo Shi was coughing his lungs out while covered in black ink, making him resemble a coal miner, everyone else was focused on Jasmine, who was sitting on the inked warrior's shoulder with her legs dangling below.

From there, she extended her arm in their direction and bent her fingers twice, making a familiar gesture; everyone knew what it meant.

-Next.-

Chapter 243: Three Down.

"That's what I am talking about, Jasmine!" Arthur cheered with his arms in the air.

The girls also cheered for her, but made sure to do it through dimensional messages. Hearing her friends' support made Jasmine smile again as she showed a thumbs up from above, letting them know that she got this.

"Now... that's some high-tier Aspects... I don't think I have ever seen anything like this before, even in the dimensional network."

Dominic whistled in astonishment, not expecting to have someone wield such mystical powers while flying under his radar... he turned to Feng Ling and saw a shallow smirk, making him realize at last why he had such great confidence in his team.

"Feng Ling... how come your region was hiding this girl? If you had made her apply to join the SAS Headquarters, we would have taken great care of her." Dominic complained.

"If you cared enough about low-ranked regions, you might have found out for yourself." Feng Ling said calmly.

Hearing this, Dominic was left silenced... he wanted to tell him that managing the SAS Headquarters that was responsible for hundreds of other Sanctuaries across the globe was no easy task... and that he couldn't be observant about everything happening in each holy region, but he knew, all of this was nothing but an excuse.

If he cared, he would have found out... Jasmine might have been keeping herself low profile; not even the citizens of her region knew of her existence, but she did many international missions arranged by Heliodor's Sanctuary and carried by her agency.

If his focus wasn't only on the Saviors, the Radians, and Daywalkers from the top-ranked regions, he would have found it right away with a single order.

"So, what's the deal with her Aspects?" Dominic asked, changing the subject.

"They are called Ink and Erasure Aspects... one erases matter, spirit, and even elemental attacks, consuming a percentage of her energy with each successful erasure... the more complicated the process, the more energy she spends." Feng Ling shared with his friend what he found out from Jasmine and her father, "Ink allows her to create what comes in her imagination in a scroll... again, the more complicated the imagination and the set of Laws it taps to, the more energy she spends."

"Wow... are you telling me that with such aspects, she can shift reality as she wishes as long as she has enough solar energy?" Dominic raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Theoretically, yes... but that's probably in the later stages of her development if she can reach her peak potential... for now, her powers are still grounded to reality since each utilization devours an insane amount of her energy reservoir." Feng Ling said, "These three warriors have most likely already consumed 70% of her reservoir."

"Figures... the more complex aspects are, the harsher their conditions." Dominic nodded before adding with a head shake, "Unfortunately, wielders of such mystical aspects are considered cursed more than blessed."

Feng Ling nodded in agreement, knowing exactly what he meant... He recognized that becoming a Mystic Specialist might sound like a dream for many due to how peculiar and unexplainable their powers were, but in reality, they were eternal prisons for their owners.

That's because the more complicated and mystical an Aspect, the less research was done on it... which meant, nightcrawlers or any other race utilizing those aspects were bound to remain at the lower ranks forever!

"Warden rank is most likely her limit... no wonder her father decided to let her out, he must be at his wits' end in finding an evolutionary formula to help her continue her evolution," Dominic added, "It took us years to find materials and a decent evolutionary formula for our evolutions to Solarbound, and we wield electricity and wind primarily, two of the most common Aspects across the universe... I can't imagine what this girl has to do to break through."

"Ink and Erasure..." Feng Ling murmured, "Hard... too hard."

Whenever he thought about it, his analytical mind went blank... where could one find high-grade materials for such aspects, when possibly no one knew about the aspects' existence in the first place?

He could understand her first three evolutions to Warden rank, as some materials with faint similarities to her powers could still be used in creating the formulas. However, there was a reason why concocting the Solarbound evolutionary formula was extremely challenging for every Daywalker, Nightcrawler, or other Seed Owners... The evolutionary formulas became almost exclusive to each person!

This meant, it became extremely rare to find evolutionary formulas that could work on multiple Seed Owners, even if they shared a similar main Aspect!

For example, Lord Idriss's primary Aspect was Blood-Fusion... this meant, he needed to create an evolutionary formula not based on just Blood Aspect in general anymore, but Blood-Fusion itself.

This precision and narrowness of one's path were the reason for the awakening of one's personal Dominion only after becoming a Solarbound.

That's also why Trueborn Lineages thrived... their Ancestor was capable of passing along all of the data in his evolutionary path into new Shadowlife Seeds, making anyone of their bloodline wield their powers with near perfect accuracy.

This flawlessness created an evolutionary path that could be tread using the same evolutionary formulas that the Ancestor had consumed to reach the same level of his power, as long as they followed his exact footsteps.

In a sense, they inherited a perfect evolutionary path to the moment the ancestor's evolution halted.

But in the case of Daywalkers and Nightcrawlers? Each was on their own, leaving them to share public evolutionary formulas or privately concocted ones until the day they grew their Seeds into Pre-Mature Trees.

That's when reality hit them... they had arrived at the last step of their evolutionary path, and if they wanted to continue forward, they had to build the staircase too.

This created a massive chasm between those of Pre-Mature Trees and those who achieved Mature Trees.

So, while many would envy Jasmine's powers like the children on the ground... the adults, who went through the struggle of achieving Solarbound, Blazewarden, and Ecliptic ranks, didn't envy her one bit... they knew the horror that awaited her was something they wouldn't wish on their worst enemies.

"Next fight, step up."

Feng Ling called after noticing the three conference teams were left in shambles in front of Jasmine's three gigantic inked warriors.

"Mira, you're next," Tyrese ordered with a solemn tone.

Mira had been talking boldly before in the tent to be put amongst the first fighters... but now? As she walked towards the three fearsome warriors, she couldn't help but gulp a mouthful.

She had seen how Jasmine's white shield managed to erase anything it touched... as a twin-pistol user, she was certain her bullets would meet the same fate. Unfortunately, once the split was decided, there was no redo.

'Mira, remember, just try to waste her energy... she must have already invested a lot in the warriors' creation.' Tyrese reminded telepathically.

'I get it, I get it.' Mira replied irritably.

To have her used like this wasn't to her liking in the slightest... her pride didn't allow it.

"I am going to defeat you."

She proclaimed coldly while pulling the twin pistols from their holsters, appearing quite badass... her stance screamed of confidence like she wasn't going against three merciless colossi.

Just as a flicker of hope was about to be restored in the hearts of her peers, it was extinguished in less than thirty seconds...

-Next-

Jasmine gestured for the next one to step up quickly after Mira was saved by Dominic in the blink of an eye... Her confidence was shattered the moment the warrior with the shield stood up in front of Jasmine and used it to defend every single explosive bullet she fired at her.

Meanwhile, the other two were sent to torment her; every single swing was capable of turning her into minced meat... she was as flexible as a cat, her movements were mesmerizing, jumping around the swings while even attempting to reach Jasmine through running on the arm of one of the warriors.

As she got close, Jasmine merely snapped her finger, and Mira found herself falling into a pool of liquid ink in the ground... When she tried to recover herself by firing an explosive bullet on the ground to bounce off, the warrior's foot swung in her direction, forcing Dominic to intervene and catch her before she got hit.

Mira could fight against many Daywalkers and absolutely thrash them, but this was way above her pay grade.

Unfortunately, for the three teams' union, the upcoming challengers didn't perform any better... Justice Sword's team had sent a Daywalker who used a sword that could split into two, with powers related to ice and water.

A fearsome combination... yet, he settled for attempting to waste Jasmine's energy tank, knowing that each time she ordered the ink to harden or liquify didn't come free.

Jasmine recognized what he was attempting to do and shut it down almost immediately by overwhelming him with nonstop assault from the three inked warriors until he was forced out of the arena's boundary.

If it had been only one inked warrior, destroying it would have been manageable. But with three attacking at once... and each able to liquefy at the slightest sign of danger... the battle became nearly impossible.

"Heliodor's Raiders... Three wins." Feng Ling announced, "Next challenger."

'Li Mei... It's up to you to defeat her or at least destroy one of her warriors. If you lose, I don't trust Tyrese's teammate to carry it for the next round until Tyrese's turn.' Yanhuan said solemnly, 'We messed up by underestimating them, and all we can do now is minimize our losses.'

'I will try my best...'

Li Mei lifted her glasses above her small nose and nodded at him with a somber expression... but her short stature and bee-like outfit made her just appear cute, like a chihuahua baring their fangs.

Then, she walked into the arena and gazed in Jasmine's direction, who was still standing on top of the warrior's shoulder. The battles might be fast-paced, but Jasmine's body was affixed to the inked warrior like she was superglued to it.

"Fight!"

"Wrathful Hive Arts: Dazzlebees Screen."

Chapter 244: Hive Aspect.

The moment she heard the announcement, Li Mei's expression shifted from adorable to cold, while a massive swarm of bee-like insects started pouring out of her backpack nonstop.

The insects had black-and-gold striped bodies with clear, smoky wings and a needle-like tail. Their compound eyes glowed with a yellowish hue as they showed thousands of the inked warriors.

Yet, they didn't make their move, focusing on the order at hand... creating a swarm big enough that it completely hid Li Mei's body.

What remained were thousands of insects so close to each other, they resembled a moving black and gold screen... Yet, this was only the beginning.

Half of the swarm stopped flying and stuck next to the flying ones... then, they opened their second set of wings, which resembled crystallized mirrors.

The moment the formation was complete, the swarm screen started reflecting light in ways that created a hypnotic effect... creating peculiar gold and black pictures on the screen and projecting them in front.

When Jasmine looked at them, she felt a sense of peace wash over her, like all of her pain, troubles, and hardships melted into a hot tub, where she could relax inside of it.

'Feels so nice...' she murmured inwardly, enjoying the tranquility.

She knew that it was a trap; she understood that if she didn't make a move soon, she might lose the fight... she knew all of this, and yet... the feeling was so good, it was like shooting a high dose of heroin, leaving her wanting to remain in this bliss for as long as possible.

While she was enjoying the blissful feeling, Li Mei separated from the back of the swarm without the hypnotic effect getting disturbed... then, she ordered the swarm screen to fly closer to Jasmine for a better effect.

Under the stunned eyes of Arthur and the others, the three inked warriors remained unmoving, allowing the swarm to keep getting closer.

'What's happening?' He asked.

'She is being hypnotized...'

Levi frowned, his auditory vision showing him the same shapes on the swarm's screen, but they did nothing to him... that's when he knew that it was a powerful eye-based hypnotic effect.

As for Arthur and the others? They were so far from the screen, the pictures didn't show clearly, which killed the hypnosis.

'Should we wake her up?'

'No, don't interfere... this is a battle, not a life or death situation.' Levi rejected, 'We should learn from those battles as much as possible, so we can always be ready when a similar situation presents itself.'

Levi understood that if Jasmine was defeated because of this, it was on her to be better... and the only way for her to be better was to fail and learn, or defeat the hypnosis on her own.

Nurah and the girls nodded in approval... as much as they wanted to win, they would never rob someone of the opportunity to learn.

Meanwhile, as the swarm screen kept getting closer, Li Mei was preparing another attack... her body floated in the air, lifted by another emerging swarm.

She pointed her small finger in Jasmine's direction and activated her most powerful ultimate ability, holding nothing back while Jasmine was still entrapped.

"Hive Queen's Wrath! Unleash!"

In an instant, the backpack burst open and released a storm of wings and chittering mandibles everywhere, resembling a tornado of rainbows! Tens of insect species, each one more unique than the other, swarmed out like their Queen was being slaughtered and they had to defend her.

Stinger Wasplets darted around the warriors' faces while the Resin Builders scuttled beneath their feet, spreading golden glue that solidified instantly, locking their ankles to the ground.

Boom! Boom! Boom!...

An army of Firefly-like insects exploded around their joints, seemingly desiring to break their limbs off!

Li Mei's eyes were transformed into compound eyes with thousands of hexagonal squares... each one displaying a single type of insect in her hive, controlling them one by one, akin to the Queen of all Insects.

Stinger Wasplets were the harassers, the fighters; their stings hurt like absolute hell.

Paralyzing Drones were capable of injecting paralyzing venom into joints or muscles, but since the warriors were inked constructs, she used them to cloud their vision.

Resin Builders could spray wax to create sticky barriers, which were used to trap the warriors' ankles and limbs, making sure their movement remained under her control in case Jasmine woke up from her hypnotic effect.

Then, we have the Bombers... small fireflies, but deadly. Boom! Boom!... their resounding explosions spoke for themselves.

Last but not least, Dazzlebees... the stars of keeping Jasmine's mind blissfully occupied.

There were a few more of other types under her command, but their powers weren't great against such constructs.

'As long as I don't target her and activate her danger instincts, she won't wake up from the hypnosis and use that peculiar white barrier... The goal is to strip her of her warriors first, then strike her.'

Li Mei thought as she watched the battlefield turn into a breathing hive... only the buzz of her swarms' wings engulfed everyone's ears and the slow destruction of Jasmine's warriors.

"Adorable... but terrifying."

Tyrese whistled with his arms resting behind his back, not wanting to tell anyone that she frightened him more than the other two captains... sometimes, it didn't matter the level of one's strength, but how horrifying their powers were.

'Li Mei wields Summoning Aspect and more precisely, Hive Aspect... Her contracted nightcrawler has faint bloodline relations to the ancient Hive Queen... The Queen of all Insects in the universe.' Yanhuan smirked faintly, 'I have invested heavily in her development, helping her obtain two perfect evolutionary formulas from my family.'

Yanhuan had personally gone out of his way to include her in his team when he was given the order by his father to win the Great Campaign Raid.

Many family members questioned his decision, warning him that the girl had confidence issues and wouldn't be a fit for his Royal team... When he had met her, she was still a fledgling in his father's agency; no one paid her any attention due to her weak stomach for battles. Not because she was scared, but her control of her Hive wasn't great, leaving any enemy she targeted mauled to death by her swarm. This made her fear her powers, which affected her control even worse.

But Yanhuan knew that his family wanted him to add his cousins for the sake of carrying them throughout the tournament... he had no plans to be a one-man show.

He was strong, and he believed himself to be the strongest Daywalker in today's generation... he wasn't being cocky, but he had what it took to back such a claim.

However, he still refused to carry deadweight, having higher inspirations than just winning the Great Campaign.

He needed monsters on his side, and Li Mei was the only one who managed to capture his attention... even Guo Shi and the rest of his teammates were just decent in his eyes, and he planned in the future to replace them.

Yanhuan stuck with his decision and supported her to great ends until she became a different persona every time she stepped to the challenge.

At the moment, everyone watched the effort of his labor come to fruition; their stunned eyes were affixed on the colossal inked warriors breaking into pieces and falling to the ground.

Thud! Thud!..

Only the inked warrior with the sword and shield remained standing due to Jasmine being on his shoulder, and Li Mei didn't want to awaken her.

But still, she took down two warriors that spread terror in the hearts of most Daywalkers behind her.

Only then did Li Mei target her attention to Jasmine, summoning her swarms around her. Now, even if Jasmine were to wake up, she was down two warriors and needed to waste immense energy to restore them.

Then, she made a gun-like gesture with her right hand and pulled the trigger.

Almost immediately, the swarm turned into a gigantic buzzing colorful bullet and rushed toward Jasmine.

"Aren't you going to make a move?"

Dominic asked his friend, understanding that if the swarm were to touch Jasmine, her corpse might not be found anymore.

"It's not over yet." Feng Ling replied calmly.

Hearing this, Dominic turned his focus back on Jasmine and saw that she was still smiling blissfully, even when the swarm was about to devour her.

Knowing that her survival instincts couldn't be that horrible drove him to reach a single conclusion.

'Was she always awake and allowed her warriors to collapse just to enjoy the hypnotic effect?' He thought speechlessly.

The moment this insane thought took root in his mind, Jasmine snapped her eyes open and signed with her hands in the direction of Li Mei.

Many were left confused... Li Mei among them... as few understood sign language, or even knew she was deaf. But when Levi caught the meaning of her signs, he could only smile wryly. 'Jasmine... you bully.'

-Thanks for the free therapy session...-

As this sentence resounded in his mind with Jasmine's desolate voice, he watched her break her last warrior into liquid form, so as the rest of the inked rubble on the ground... her body sank inside the tsunami of ink, disappearing from everyone's eyes.

The giant swarm bullet missed its target completely, half of it getting eaten by the black ink, while the remaining half flew into the air, avoiding the same fate.

Li Mei's bee-like eyes reflected a new terrifying scene of the arena getting turned into a raging lake of ink while she swiftly took off in the air, keeping her distance.

'There she is...'

Using her spiritual vision, she quickly located Jasmine standing at the bottom of the ink lake; the only thing moving was her arm... Li Mei didn't know what she was doing, and she had no plans on finding out.

She retracted the rest of her swarm and sent only the Bombers this time... but the moment they were about to pierce the ink and explode near their target, Jasmine lifted her head.

Li Mei's spiritual vision wasn't as great as Levi's to show exact facial details, but it was decent enough to show a sinister-like wavy smile.

Li Mei felt chills course down her spine, but it was already too late... a pitch-black portal manifested above her head, flooding her with pressured ink and her own Bomber insects!

Alas, the order was already given...

Boom! Boom! Boom!...

A series of explosions went off while she was trapped in the ink with her own swarm... This was happening while the pressured ink stream was pushing her downward straight in the direction of Jasmine, who was standing next to another ink portal painted on the ground!

She was holding her brush in the air, awaiting her arrival with the same soft smile that appeared creepy in Li Mei's spiritual vision.

Szzlzlz...

Before Li Mei could cross half the distance, an electrical spark appeared next to her, and Li Mei was gone.

Then, the same spark appeared next to Yanhuan and the others, whose astounded eyes were still affixed on the ink portal's emergence.

Dominic dropped off Li Mei next to them while his body was crackling with faint electricity... then, he turned to watch Jasmine with them... his body and clothes untainted by the ink somehow.

"She is something else, right?" He commented with his hands in his pockets. Then, he smiled when he looked at their dazed expressions, "So, what's going on here? Are you purposefully trying to make me look bad before that prick?"

Chapter 245: Bamboozled.

Splash!

The sound of the pressured ink pillar hitting the lake woke everyone from their daze and made them at last acknowledge the existence of Dominic.

He was so fast, he saved Li Mei, fixed his attire, dropped her off, talked, and only then did the ink pillar return to the lake's embrace!

Even Levi, who was proud of his auditory vision, failed to understand what happened.

'So fast... he is so fast, it looked like he teleported, not even my harmonic spine can keep up.' He sucked in a cold breath, 'Is this what it's like to be the strongest Daywalker in the world?'

'He is decent.'

Ash'Kral said lazily, but Levi paid him no attention, eavesdropping on the conversation Dominic was having with his 'sponsored' teams.

"You guys know that if you lose ten times, it's over, right?" Dominic said calmly, "I really want that prick as my right hand, so get your shit together... otherwise, the only site you will be exploring is your rooms back in the Conference."

With that warning uttered, Dominic left behind an electrical spark and returned to Feng Ling's side.

"Starting to get nervous?"

"Shut up, it's not over yet."

Feng Ling snickered and switched his focus back on Jasmine... Then, he asked her if she was going to continue or take a rest through a dimensional message.

She replied with one finger raised up... meaning she still had one more round in her.

"Tough luck for your side." Feng Ling announced, "Next fighter!"

While Levi's side was cheering and high-fiving at Jasmine's single-handedly defeating four Daywalkers, and still seemed to desire more, the Conference teams' side wasn't doing too good... their mental was at an all-time low.

"I am sorry... I thought I had it."

Li Mei apologized to Yanhuan while fiddling with her fingers... her entire body was covered in ink... If it wasn't for her swarm shielding her from the explosions, she might have lost a limb at minimum.

Although she was fine, Dominic had noticed that Jasmine's brush was tainted with white ink as she waited for her descent... he didn't want to find out what would have happened to Li Mei if she were touched by it.

"Don't, you did more than I asked for... great efforts."

Yanhuan praised her with a head pat and turned to face the captains and the others, his expression turning cold all of a sudden.

"You heard Sir Dominic... our performance doesn't represent the elite status of the Conference in the slightest... I know she is powerful with Aspects I still can't grasp at all, but until when are we going to have our asses kicked by her? Don't you think it's embarrassing for a single Daywalker from a low-ranked region to defeat four of us and still look to aim for more?"

He paused and scanned everyone's gloomy expressions.

"Wake up, people... I have seen you at your best and lowest, and besides Li Mei, who has given it all, your performance is a mockery to our regions, agencies, and status as the best of our generation."

Hearing enough, Tyrese lifted his head and walked to Yanhuan, his size towering over him... then, he leaned closer and uttered indifferently, "Little Majesty... if you want to lecture your teammates, go ahead, wash them as you would like... but don't f\*cking involve me or my people ever again... got it?"

Yanhuan was unfazed by his threat, not sweating a drop... he tilted his head slightly and said coldly, "Your teammate Blake is next, tell him to get his shit together and get rid of her... Li Mei has already destroyed all of her warriors, and she can't restore them in form without exhausting her entire reservoir."

Before Tyrese could respond, Yanhuan walked back next to his teammates and said with his back facing him.

"If I knew it would end like this, I would have gone first and gotten rid of them on my own... how bothersome."

Evangeline and Tyrese remained silent... as cocky as Yanhuan was, they were the only ones who had experienced his full power and lived to tell the tale.

They knew he was right... even if Jasmine was at full power, he would have wiped the floor with her, or so they believed.

"If you don't send anyone in the next three seconds, I will consider it a forfeit."

"Blake, do what you have to do."

Hearing Feng Ling's irritated voice from above, Tyrese tapped the shoulder of a slender white boy with messy, short platinum blond hair.

He wore a sleeveless navy vest over a silver mesh shirt, paired with black cargo pants tucked into steel-toed boots... He had a tattoo of a two-headed peacock whose tail extended outside the tattoo's border, emitting an electrifying shock, on his left temple... It was hidden a bit by his hair.

"Dontchu worry, bosh, I got thish."

Blake spoke with a lisp, his voice somewhat immature, like he hadn't gone through puberty yet... Then, he walked in the direction of the inked lake, eyeing Jasmine, who was standing above the lake peacefully.

"Ink ish shtill water... in water, I am sha king!"

He uttered coolly while summoning his signature weapon... a long peacock feather that resembled a whip. The twist? It was emitting black electricity nonstop.

"Sha king... he will be sha crushed just like the rest of ush." Mira sneered, mocking his lisp.

No one showed much of a reaction, knowing that although Mira and Blake were under Tyrese's team, they were like fire and water... always bickering.

They only wished that she was wrong, but alas... the fight ended faster than any other fight.

Jasmine, knowing that she had only enough energy for this round, did something no one could have predicted... the moment he stepped into the arena, the ink lake retracted into Jasmine's ethereal palm, resembling a gigantic black hole.

She balanced it atop the brush's tip... and before Blake could even register what she was doing, Jasmine flicked the brush to the side and calmly walked back toward her teammates.

As for the giant ink sphere? It splashed into the ground, creating a mesmerizing giant calligraphy in the shape of a full name... Blake Thompson

The moment Dominic and Feng Ling saw his name written in ink and started to shimmer, their hearts skipped a beat... even when they had never seen this ability before, Dominic swiftly picked up Blake while Feng Ling released a powerful tornado to get rid of the letters!

"Why did shou do that?! I haven't done anyshing yet!"

Blake complained the moment Dominic put him down next to his teammates, having no clue that he was an inch away from getting killed.

"Shut it, brat, your life wasn't yours anymore..." Dominic uttered solemnly as he gazed at Jasmine's back.

'Jasmine, if your ability were to be activated, what would it do?' Feng Ling asked dimensionally as he gazed at the splattered ink everywhere.

Jasmine merely shrugged her shoulders with a smile.

"..."

"..."

Both Feng Ling and Mao were left speechless, realizing that maybe Jasmine had bluffed them all. She knew that her energy was low and couldn't go for a prolonged battle.

Instead of fighting, she wrote Blake's name on the field without saying anything else... but because her powers were too mystical and seemed to have capabilities of shifting reality, she left everything to their imagination.

Neither Dominic nor Feng Ling dared to wait and see what would happen after the name was activated.

"What happened?" Dominic asked after returning.

"I believe we have been bamboozled." Feng Ling smiled faintly.

"Shit... I knew she couldn't kill anyone with just a name, but her powers are too mystical to dare test them." Dominic rubbed his eyes in annoyance.

Dominic had seen a lot of powers, but to kill someone purely with his name? He had never seen it before, and even if it existed, he believed it should be an endgame ability... Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"You're telling them?"

"Not a chance."

"Suit yourself." Feng Ling glanced below and announced, "Five-minute break until the arena is cleaned."

Hearing this, Levi and the others grouped up with Jasmine, giving her high fives for her absolute masterwork of a performance.

Although she hadn't defeated a captain, she took down five Daywalkers, with Li Mei being the closest to a captain's strength... she did it in a row!

'I just wanna know... what would have happened if the written name remained?' Levi asked privately, his curiosity eating him away.

Chapter 246: Unbreakable Defenses.

Just like Feng Ling and Dominic, he also believed that it shouldn't be possible for Blake to drop dead on the spot... but still, he had a feeling that her attack wasn't 100% a bluff since he knew her bloodline wasn't normal... an Inkrith was also an Ancient Bloodline, which meant her powers should never be judged by common logic.

'Nothing... at least, not with my current energy level.'

Jasmine answered with a finger near her mouth, seemingly telling him to stay hush about it... Levi chuckled and nodded in understanding. But, he swiftly asked the experts in his mind, wanting to know if she was telling the truth.

'None of us has any interactions with the Inkrith or their powers... we already told you, they existed before our time.' Ash'Kral responded, 'Still, I do believe her powers can kill someone purely with their name... to link to reality meant linking to the universe and everything in and in between. But, unless she is a Radiant Daywalker or higher, it shouldn't be possible.'

'Makes sense.' Levi nodded.

After keeping a close tab on Jasmine for a while now, Levi had been getting more and more intrigued by her ancient bloodline and their powers... since he was told that Shadowlife seeds struggled immensely in awakening dormant Ancient Bloodlines, this drove him to believe that either Jasmine or her nightcrawler had their bloodline already awakened.

In other words, one of them had a high purity percentage, which was all the more shocking when considering that the Ancient Inkrith Bloodline was far older than the Radiant or Oblivar bloodlines.

'She is truly a riddle... and one day, I will be the one to solve it.'

Levi murmured inwardly, his gaze lingering on Jasmine for a while... his sickness of solving mysteries and reclaiming knowledge was always there to guide him... to trouble or something better? Who could tell?

For now, their team needed only five more wins to earn their slot in the exploration.

"Jojo, you're next," Levi said after noticing that the arena was already cleaned up by the staff.

The girls wished her good luck like normal people, while Arthur couldn't help but say, "Break a leg."

"I will come back and break yours." Jojo gave him a death glare as she walked away.

"Heh... come back first," Arthur said, noticing that her opponent was none other than Tyrese.

From his stride alone, it was clear he had no intention of fooling around. Jasmine had already done a number on their minds, and as captain of the USA team... the second-strongest region in the world... he carried a duty to uphold. Or so everyone believed.

"Girl... as much as I like your style, and wouldn't mind grabbing a drink after, I am not going to show mercy," Tyrese said, his smile widening a bit at Jojo's cute appearance.

Although she was bald, he didn't seem to mind it in the slightest... in fact, he liked her even more because of it.

"Oooh, someone is checking your girl." Nurah giggled, seeing Arthur's expression turn somber all of a sudden.

Before he could respond to her teasing, Jojo bowed her head in Tyrese's direction and said, "One annoying gorilla is enough for me, Namaste."

Then, she summoned her twelve prayer beads and had them hover around her, awaiting the start of the battle.

"Gorilla? You mean ponytail?" Tyrese laughed, "Fine by me... I will break his legs next and show you that he is nothing before me. Let's see, then, if you will still respect him as your man."

"He wishes to be my man, and so as you." Jojo narrowed her eyes coldly, not pleased with being seen as a reward for men.

"Who wants to be a man with a foul-mouthed egg!"

Arthur's voice echoed from the distance, making Jojo's eyelids twitch... but her heart couldn't help but flutter for a little.

Jojo hated nothing more than men, who saw women as objects for their sexual desires... as much as she bickered with Arthur, he always stayed true to himself and said how he really felt about her.

No ulterior motives, nothing... just an honest hostility between them... She would rather hang out with men like him than Tyrese, any time of day.

But for now, she was cursed, and the bastard was too far from her to retaliate, leaving her with a burning desire to unleash her rage at Tyrese.

"Fight!"

No further ado, Jojo stood on top of a prayer bead and took off into the sky, putting a great distance from Tyrese... she had seen videos of his battles, and knew just how powerful he was up close.

He was a true Enhancement Specialist Daywalker.

"How unfair, I can't fly."

Tyrese pouted while watching Jojo kick the illuminating prayer beads in his direction... although the beads were flying rapidly, there was enough distance for him to react in time and dodge.

Yet, he didn't bother doing so.

He pulled the black gourd from the side of his waist... then, he shook it once and pulled the cork out. Tyrese brought the gourd close to his lips and drank its whole contents in one chug... Then, he burped while wiping his lips.

Ting! Ting! Ting!...

The prayer beads landed on him during the entire process... yet he didn't move, yelp, or even twitch! They bounced off him like they had hit a steel wall!

'As expected, his physical and spiritual defenses are in a different league.' Jojo frowned as she recalled her spirit-infused beads.

'Jojo is going to suffer against him... in fact, many will.' Levi held his chin thoughtfully, recalling the days of their preparations for these battles.

He watched Tyrese rip a Tier 4 nightcrawler in half with his bare hands while roaring into the sky... showering with its blood like a tribal barbarian.

Yet, his strongest perk was his enhanced spiritual subconsciousness and physical body... although he couldn't use spiritual attacks, it didn't mean that he couldn't enhance his soul's defenses.

Many Enhancement Specialist Daywalkers took this route to ensure that their defenses were top-notch... but only a few were capable of balancing out the enhancements while still keeping their strength as their main focus.

Tyrese was one of the few Daywalkers talented enough to pull it off... the secret? His insane genetics, which were complemented by his contracted nightcrawler and peculiar Aspect.

"Cutie... we can do this all day long, and you will be the one exhausted in the end." Tyrese yawned while sitting on the floor with one hand resting on his knee and the other holding the black gourd, taking a few sips once in a while.

Ting! Ting!

He allowed Jojo's prayer beads to smack his head and body around like a training dummy.

Yet, he felt nothing... his defenses unbreakable.

'I have to go all out, and still pray that his spiritual defenses will break apart.' Jojo frowned while summoning back her prayer beads.

Jojo understood that her basic attacks and such would do nothing but waste her energy slowly without resulting in any positive outcome.

Tyrese's subconscious barrier was believed to be as tough as a Solarbound entry-level Daywalker after drinking from the Gourd... This was too much for Jojo, who was still treading on the Pathfinder rank.

But if she went all out from the start, she might put some serious damage, weakening him for her next teammate.

Making her decision, Jojo lifted her feet off the prayer bead and used her will to keep herself in the air... She sat cross-legged, spine straight, shoulders relaxed.

Her hands rested lightly on her knees, palms facing upward, with her thumb and index finger touching to form a circle... the classic gesture of calm focus and inner balance.

"Karmic Pendulum Arts: Oblivion Prayer..." she whispered, her voice barely audible, yet somehow everyone heard her.

Tyrese, being the closest and the target of her ultimate ability, heard her voice akin to a church bell ringing in his mind... His instincts tingled in danger, making him knit his eyebrows solemnly.

'Looks like she has more in her than what she showed in their raid.'

His solemn eyes stayed fixed on the spinning prayer beads as she whispered a Sutra under her breath... the louder her voice grew, the faster the beads whirled, and the brighter their glow became.

Golden script, invisible to the naked eye before, had now taken form from the prayer beads' illumination.

With a graceful sweep of her hand, the words detached from the air and began orbiting her like a halo of judgment... Each character was written in Ilthorien runic letters, the spinning prayer beads manifested them, akin to how anime was created in the old days.

'I should shield up just in case.'

Tyrese brought the gourd close to his lips and murmured under his breath, "Bacchanalian Arts: Toast to the Soul."

The gourd shook a little bit, and it was filled to the brim with a new type of vintage. Tyrese removed the cork and drank it whole in one chug.

"Give it your best..."

Tyrese laughed as he smacked the gourd on the ground in front of him, seemingly getting slightly tipsy.

"Sutra of the Silent End... finish him," She intoned.

Chapter 247: Fermented Elixirs.

The golden runic letters tore from the halo and shot toward Tyrese like a barrage of radiant arrows!

As the first letters struck, they didn't touch his flesh. Instead, they slipped through and shot straight toward his subconscious barrier. Once there, the glowing runes shrank in size, circling and dancing around it like restless sparks.

Each time a word was completed, they exploded into a powerful spiritual attack based on the content of each word!

If it were a runic word of 'Burn', the subconscious barrier was engulfed in a spiritual white flame!

If it were 'Shatter', the word clung to the barrier and started shaking it, akin to an earthquake, attempting to shatter it.

The words were already decided by Jojo when she was uttering a Sutra with the most possible damage while still maintaining a Sutra's holy calming nature.

Yet, despite their relentless assault, the barrier held strong!

Tyrese's eyes flickered briefly, feeling waves of agonizing pain assaulting his soul, but he didn't move, didn't flinch... He closed his eyes and entered an in-tune state with his body and soul, allowing him to mitigate the pain while his barrier absorbed and nullified every rune, each strike bouncing off into harmless sparks that evaporated midair.

'What kind of animal is he? How come his subconscious barrier does not even crack? He doesn't even seem in pain.'

Jojo's expression turned for the worse at the sight as she continued channeling her ultimate ability. She had a feeling that her ultimate ability wouldn't win her the battle, but at least put him in bad shape.

Yet, she was wasting insane amounts of spiritual energy each second, and the Sutra words still hadn't broken through his defenses.

Alas... Tyrese went through a full thirty seconds of nonstop barrage on his soul, and the only thing Jojo had for show was a tiny, tiny crack on his subconscious barrier.

Jojo's second ultimate ability wasn't weak in the slightest as she had used it before on many enemies... even Tier 4 nightcrawlers... None of them stood more than two seconds before her Sutra's soul barrage, their subconscious barrier failing to protect their souls.

She was left gasping in midair, sweat covering her forehead... She had exhausted most of her spiritual energy, which put her out of the battle.

Meanwhile, Tyrese opened one eye and smirked faintly, brushing a speck of golden light off his shoulder.

"Cutie, I admire the attempt to win over my soul and heart..." He said lazily, "But that barrier isn't going anywhere... next please."

"Jojo... I believe you forfeit?" Feng Ling asked.

"Yes... I am done."

Jojo gave him a slight head nod and flew back to the ground, walking towards her friends with a slightly sullen expression.

As she was walking away, she heard Tyrese's voice from a distance, "Shall we put a rain check on our date?"

Jojo's brow twitched, but she said nothing... once she was defeated, anything she said would sound like a sore loser's cry. As for entertaining his request? That was never an option.

However, Arthur saw her silence differently... with how she was sulking, he could tell that she was visibly upset.

Before Feng Ling could request the next fighter to step up, Arthur summoned his shield in his right hand and walked up in the direction of Jojo.

He crossed paths with her, but he said nothing... Jojo was surprised, expecting him to mock her like always. But when she lifted her gaze and saw the stony expression he had on, her lips pressed together while her eyes followed him closely.

"Don't get beat up." She said, their backs facing each other.

"It's statistically impossible for my performance to be worse than yours."

"I doubt you can even spell statistically."

Jojo roared back with a faint smile... she could tell from his voice that he was taking his next fight more seriously than anything else. For himself? For her? She didn't know.

All she knew was that Arthur would not lose.

After Jojo returned to the embrace of her friends, she apologized for such a disappointing performance... but no one took it to heart. They could tell that Tyrese was a different breed than the other Daywalkers Jasmine fought against.

"Don't worry about it... You made him use his gourd, and that's more than enough." Levi said, smiling serenely.

"Twice isn't a lot." Jojo sighed, "He should still be at his peak."

"No... I can see his spiritual aura and his blood vessels... the side effects of his aspect are starting to show."

Levi mentioned while using his Harmonic Spine to look through Tyrese's flesh... he saw his blood vessels expanded a bit while his spiritual aura was slightly wilder than usual.

These were the first signs of being drunk... though Tyrese's drunkenness wasn't like what everyone experienced.

It was a side effect of consuming a great quantity of the Vintages inside his Gourd... He was a wielder of a peculiar Aspect called Vintage Aspect, which was part of the Poison Aspect family tree.

His nightcrawler was called Zymo'fly, and Levi had seen him hovering around him on the bridge of darkness, just like the rest of the other nightcrawlers.

He was a small, wiry nightcrawler that resembled a mixture of mosquito and fruit flies... he had a flexible proboscis and wine-red translucent wings.

If both of them were placed next to each other, no one would guess that he was Tyrese's contracted Nightcrawler, as it was a known fact that Nightcrawlers usually reflected their partners' style of fighting.

Yet, despite their appearances mismatching as day and night, these two created a monster... the nightcrawler's powers were related to Fermentation Manipulation... he could ferment any liquid within

him into drinkable elixirs that could either provide a buff or a debuff, depending on Tyrese's unlocked innate abilities or self-learned techniques.

However, such powerful amplifications didn't come without a cost... the fermented elixirs had high concentrations of alcohol. How high? A single sip from the gourd could send a citizen into the ER with alcohol poisoning!

Yet, Tyrese chugged it twice, and it just made him feel a little tipsy... this was due to his amazing genetics, which weren't related to physical strength, but just having an abnormally high alcohol tolerance!

When evolved and boosted by his Shadowlife seed, it became much more potent, allowing him to benefit the most from his Vintage Aspect.

"Let's hope for the best... I know Arthur is strong, but Tyrese's strength gives me the creeps."

Shia knitted her eyebrows as she gazed at Arthur and Tyrese, who were standing ten meters away from each other.

"Ponytail... Care for a drink?"

Tyrese offered his gourd with a sleazy smile.

"Are we doing this?" Arthur ignored him and asked, his eyes affixed on Feng Ling.

"Fight!"

The moment he was given permission, Arthur rushed in the direction of Tyrese while having his shield in front of his chest, attempting to ram him!

"This will be fun."

Seeing this, Tyrese put away the gourd and cracked his knuckles and neck... then, he rushed in Arthur's direction while having both of his arms extended in front, wanting to take the ram straight out!

Baam!

Just like two wild bulls smashing their heads against each other, both Arthur and Tyrese held strong during first contact. However, Arthur knew the truth... Tyrese was physically stronger than him!

'If it wasn't for the shield absorbing the excessive kinetic force, I would have gotten thrown away.'

Arthur frowned, not pleased with such findings.

Both of them were around two meters in height... however, Tyrese's muscles looked more developed, like he was drinking steroids for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and in celebrations.

It made sense... his powers allowed him to continue enhancing his strength to its theoretical limit as long as he put the work in... it was the same as taking a much more potent version of steroids.

Meanwhile, Arthur's powers gave him the right to manipulate the absorbed kinetic force depending on the chosen gemheart... if he chose the black Brag's Gemheart, his strength could be amplified immensely, but temporarily.

While his powers gave him more utilities, they also made him not a pure Enhancement Specialist like Tyrese... at least, not with the sort of abilities he had shown.

"You're tough, ponytail... but sadly, you can never beat me physically." Tyrese grinned, his diamond tooth flashing.

Then, he swung at Arthur's face with a wide punch, forcing him to take cover behind the shield.

Ting!

Brag's gemheart flashed white, absorbing most of the kinetic force, which kept Arthur on his feet. Yet, this was just the beginning of Tyrese's ferocious barrage.

Ting! Ting! Ting!...

Tyrese descended on Arthur like a raging typhoon, fists raining down in a ruthless barrage... strike after strike, each one accompanied by Tyrese's exuberant laugh.

Arthur held his ground, shield locked in place, leaving the watchers to appreciate the sound of impacts thundering through the air.

Seeing that his punches were not breaking Arthur's defenses, Tyrese pressed harder, mixing in brutal kicks and driving knees.

He might look like a powerlifter, but his fighting style was fluid and experienced, having a street-fight flair... a fighting style expected from someone born and raised in the slums, knowing nothing else but to throw a punch and eat it.

The moment Tyrese figured out that Arthur's fighting skills were just decent, he flashed a cunning grin and slid low across the dirt, his leg sweeping into Arthur's footing and throwing him off balance.

'Shit!'

Thud!

Before he knew it, Arthur found himself lying on the ground with Tyrese jumping a couple of meters in the sky with his knees tucked in.

"Ponytail! Admit it! I am the strongest!"

With a growling roar, he brought his knee crashing down from the sky as sharp as a guillotine, aimed squarely at Arthur's chest!

Arthur's reflexes snapped into action, his expression turning colder.

'Heavens Breaker Arts: Rebound Engine.'

All the absorbed kinetic energy from Tyrese's barrage was swiftly fed into Arthur's body, making him shimmer with vermillion light... feeling the insane force coursing through him, Arthur bounced off the ground akin to a rabbit.

Then, he tightened his fist and held it next to his waist, gazing at the falling Tyrese's knee with a narrowed, cold stare.

"The strongest is... ME!"

Chapter 248: Beaten Black and Blue.

No hesitation, Arthur threw everything in one punch, connecting it with Tyrese's knee, uncaring if his fist was weaker than a knee!

BOOOOOOM!!

A powerful shockwave was released at contact, kicking up a cloud of dust that rushed across the arena, akin to a two-ton dynamite explosion!

Levi, Yanhuan, Mira, Blake, Jojo, and the rest of the watchers were left with breath held at such a supreme display of raw physical prowess.

'Idiot... there ish no way the Bosh will losh th...'

Before Blake could finish his thought, the cloud of dust went away, exposing Arthur still standing in his place with a completely shattered arm that was dangling on the side... his feet were dug a couple of centimeters into the ground, but he was still standing.

As for Tyrese? He was sent flying a couple of meters away, rolling three times... he lay on the ground, his limbs spread out, but one of them was deformed, a bloody bone visible to all.

"Impossible..."

Mira covered her mouth in disbelief, a reaction shared by her teammates and even the rest of the Daywalkers next to them. Although they knew that Tyrese wasn't going all out, they still expected him to come out as a winner from this single confrontation.

"Tyrese, stop screwing around and win this... we can't afford to lose more matches," Yanhuan said coldly, his voice resounding across the silent arena.

"Hah..hahaha...haha!"

Hearing his voice, the fallen Tyrese broke into wild laughter while slowly getting into a sitting position. He glanced at his ruined right knee and didn't seem bothered in the slightest.

Instead, he switched his focus to Arthur and showed his white blingy teeth.

"Not bad, ponytail, not bad... the moment I saw your highlights in your raid, I knew you would be an interesting challenger to my physique." He said while reaching out to the gourd and uncorking it with a soft pop... "I have to say, you're the first person to put me in this state through pure physicality."

"You're not so bad yourself," Arthur replied casually while changing the main gemstone to the pink one... Aurikara's Gemheart.

"Oh, how I wish you could keep up and give me a good workout." Tyrese grinned with the gourd next to his mouth, "Bacchanalian Arts: Toast to Recovery."

The gourd was filled with green fermented liquid, and Tyrese didn't hesitate to gulp it in one go... then, he burped loudly while smacking his chest twice.

"That's the good stuff."

Just like taking a magical elixir, Tyrese's bloody bone retracted rapidly into its position under everyone's eyes... then, the wide cut was healed, leaving behind nothing but dried-up blood.

Tyrese cracked his knee and jumped back up on his feet, bouncing up and down like it was never broken in the first place.

"Whatchu gonna do about your arm?" Tyrese asked, eyeing Arthur's shattered arm with a hint of annoyance... it was like he wanted him in peak form to beat his ass down right.

"I have my ways." Arthur uttered inwardly, 'Heavens Breaker Arts: Aurikara's Blessing.'

Under everyone's astonished eyes, the central pink gemheart started releasing a faint halo of pinkish light around Arthur's shattered arm, transforming the absorbed kinetic energy of their last confrontation to heal his shattered arm.

In less time than Tyrese's healing process, Arthur's arm was fixed of any cracks, fissures, vein implosion, or meshed flesh... his fist had a nasty bluish color to it before, but now? It looked brand new with a pinkish hue like newborn skin.

"Whoa... that's quite cool." Tyrese raised an eyebrow in surprise, "What kind of powers do you even wield? How come you can do everything?"

This question resonated in everyone's minds, knowing that it was quite weird for one Daywalker to be able to enhance his strength, release fiery beams, heal himself, and still act as a tank... they didn't know if all of this was based on a single peculiar Aspect or multiple Aspects.

Meanwhile, Dominic and Feng Ling knew exactly what Arthur was wielding.

"Nine Royal Gemhearts..." Dominic murmured, "To awaken a gemheart on each rank means that his nightcrawler's coreline somehow shares a link with all three... still, to guarantee awakening them needs perfect evolutions... or, be very, very lucky with remarkable evolutions."

Seeing that Feng Ling remained silent, Dominic narrowed his eyes in his direction.

"Be honest, did your region land on a jackpot of perfect evolutionary formulas or what? I have scanned them all, and I believe most of them have gone through at least one perfect evolution." He asked.

"Who knows..." Feng Ling shrugged dismissively, neither confirming nor denying.

He knew his friend had already arrived at the truth, as it was nearly impossible to hide it from an Ecliptic Daywalker... still, he had no plans of confirming it.

Realizing that he wouldn't be getting anything from poking him, Dominic clicked his tongue in irritation and focused on the ongoing battle below them.

Of course, Arthur refused to answer Tyrese... Levi had taught him to keep his mouth shut about his powers, as there was no reason to air out that he could create crystals based on the extinct gemhearts.

"Fine, keep your answers to yourself."

Tyrese brought the gourd near his mouth again, and this time, he made a toast to Strength, leaving everyone to marvel at his bulging, veiny muscles almost doubling in size!

Yet, he wasn't done; he made another toast, but this one was for Swiftness.

The effects weren't noticeable, but those with piercing vision could see his pupils thinning to the limit, like a beast was awakened.

Then, to top it all off, he lifted the gourd to the air while leaning right and left off balance... he burped tipsily, his eyelids dropped.

"Idiot! Stop drinking already! You won't be able to fight properly after you defeat him." Evangeline cursed at last, incapable of handling the bastard way of dealing with such a grave matter.

"Shut... up, Eva! You... burp, you're not my mother." Tyrese laughed while drinking from the gourd one last time, "How can I make three toasts... burp, and leave Mr. Endurance alone?"

The moment he wiped his lips, he desummoned the gourd, not needing it anymore... he leaned slightly forward with a hunched back, appearing like he would fall at any moment.

But only a select few knew... this was the entrance to his second form of Battle Arts.

"Forbidden Drunken Arts: Nine-Cup... burp, Stagger."

As the last word left his lips, Arthur found Tyrese's drunken, foolish face right in front of him. Before he could react, a missile of a punch smashed him on his right cheek, breaking his jaw and teeth instantly while hurling him tens of meters backward!

Thud! Thud! Thud!...

He rolled on the ground nonstop uncontrollably like he had been hit by a train. Yet, this was only the beginning of the worst beatdown of his life as Tyrese instantly appeared next to his rolling body and held him from the head, before dragging his face across the floor until both of them neared the edge of the arena... where Levi's team stood.

He lifted Arthur from his ponytail and showed them his dirtied and bloodied face while keeping his clutch so tight, Arthur couldn't help but groan in pain, feeling like his skull was about to shatter.

Seeing this sight, Levi tightened his fist until his fingernails dug into his palm... he knew that he could easily bring much worse fate upon Tyrese with a single decision. But he kept his emotions in control, watching his little brother getting manhandled.

He knew that if he were to help Arthur out, he would never forgive him... this was his fight, and he knew what he was doing.

'Arthur... you're capable of more than this.' Levi thought inwardly as he gazed at Tyrese winking at Jojo while making a call me sign with his hand.

Jojo wasn't having it any better... her expression turned murderous, finding it harder to contain her rage... especially when she saw Arthur's bloodied face.

But, before she could open her mouth, Tyrese threw Arthur back inside the arena like he was made out of foam... his strength was absolutely barbaric, leaving everyone to believe that it had already crossed the Solarbound rank!

Whoosh!

In no time, he chased after him and held him by the leg, then he smashed him to the ground on all sides before kicking him in the stomach, forcing him to cough out blood while flying away.

"Are you planning to keep watching until he dies or what?" Dominic frowned, noticing that Arthur's heart rate had slowed down immensely... he might be alive and conscious, but barely.

Anymore beatings and he might die on the spot.

"Not yet..." Feng Ling replied coolly.

Tyrese continued with his rabid beating.

"Now?"

"Not yet."

"You've got to be kidding me... he can't win." Dominic's expression turned cold, "I am not having a dead body of a talented Daywalker on a bet."

Just as he was about to make his move, Feng Ling caught him by the hand and said, "Aren't you a man of faith? Then, have some little faith."

As he said this, everyone watched Tyrese hurl Arthur into the sky like he was a lifeless doll in the direction of Feng Ling and Dominic. Then, he bent his legs until his veins were about to pop.

In a single motion, he jumped into the sky and caught Arthur by the leg right in front of the supervisors... he burped and said, "Do you want me to... kill him?"

"His... burp, funeral."

With a careless shrug midair, he swung Arthur around twice and hurled him down like a warhead crashing to earth.

BOOOOM!

Arthur's body cracked the arena floor, bouncing once before settling in... he coughed out a large amount of blood again, but he was still conscious... barely, somehow.

To go through this entire beatdown and remain conscious went beyond human perception.

"Ponytail! Look alive, I am coming down... burp!"

'Arthur... I think it's time you use it.' Khu'zan said calmly.

'I think so too...argh... everything is shattered...' Arthur replied, his vision cloudy, his body aching all over, and he could barely lift a single finger... yet, his mind was clearer than ever.

Arthur could have defended himself from the beatdown by hiding inside his fortress until Tyrese's Toast effects ended, but besides looking like a coward doing it, he had a different reason for allowing himself to get beaten up this terribly.

Why?

Only a select few knew about it...

#### Chapter 249: SHOW THEM!

As Arthur's cloudy eyes gazed at Tyrese's falling knee, the same attack from the start, his mind drifted elsewhere... drifted to the day of his evolution to Pathfinder rank, and the day his contracted nightcrawler spoke to him about this very moment.

\*\*\*

Sometime ago... Inside the Larsons' apartment.

While Levi went out to hunt down dark energy clouds for cultivation, Arthur remained in his room, sitting on the floor... he had just successfully evolved to the Pathfinder rank using the perfect evolution that was handed to him by the Morningstars.

He checked his mutations and was somewhat disappointed when he didn't unlock anything that looked flashy, like Levi's spine or something else.

'Don't be short-sighted... You are lucky to have two mutations that reinforced your internal body... it will be extremely difficult to kill you even if you look like shit on the outside.'

Khu'zan scolded, feeling as though he'd been forced into the role of a full-time father to a brat who cared only about saving the world, backing up his brother, and looking cool while doing it.

'Tsk, who can beat me anyway to such a state?' Arthur smirked while flexing his biceps, 'You see these bad boys? No one is going to break them.'

'You still haven't seen the enormity of the heavens... There are people out there who can bend you like a piece of paper, and you can do nothing about it.' Khu'zan interrupted after noticing Arthur's mouth opening up, 'Before you say anything, I am talking about your peers... kids, who are near your age.'

'Are you sure?' Arthur narrowed his eyes, 'Bend me? Aren't you exaggerating? I know I am not the strongest, but I can still hold my weight, you know.'

'Ah, I am done with you... Just check your unlocked ultimate ability already.' Khu'zan sighed in defeat.

Arthur did as he was told with a chuckle... After closing his eyes briefly, he checked the details of his latest unlocked ultimate ability.

//Orryn's Ascendance:

Trigger: When the user's body sustains extreme damage, nearing collapse, Aurikara's Gemheart instinctively awakens, and the crystallized vines and fractured bone-like shards bloom from within, absorbing all the damage and reforging a permanent body anew.//

"Woah... what kind of masochistic ability is this?" Arthur's pupils widened in stupefaction.

"It suits you well... I know one day your overconfidence will get you beaten black and blue, might as well have a contingency." Khu'zan smiled, "Also, it helped you awaken Aurikara's Gemheart of the Great Healer Golem."

"The Great Healer?" Arthur wondered.

"Yes, Ancestor Aurikara had great powers related to healing, recovery, even treating one's soul... She was called the Great Healer because many sick people went to her to be blessed, and she had never turned anyone away... even if they were from different races. Unfortunately, she passed away, and her royal family also wasn't spared." Khu'zan said with a sorrowful smile.

"That sucks to hear." Arthur's expression went solemn, "The First Nineborn and their royal families... what kind of enemies did they have? Why have most of them all gone extinct? It doesn't add up."

Khu'zan remained silent as he sat in the bridge of darkness by himself... his appearance also changed after the evolution, his body remained the same, but it now had pink crystals coming out of his back... His split horn had an addition of a pink crystal, but he didn't seem to care about his new appearance.

"They joined the losers' side and paid the price..." Khu'zan said.

Hearing this, Arthur opened his mouth, wanting more details, but Khu'zan shut down his attempts.

"What did you notice from your new ultimate?" He asked.

"Hmm?" Arthur held his chin thoughtfully for a few moments... then, he answered while scratching his head, "The mutation is based on Orryn's Heart, yet Aurikara's Gemheart is the one to awaken it? I don't get it, do the Gemhearts have some inherent synchronization?"

"Bingo." Khu'zan smiled, "All Nineborn Golems are believed to originate from a single source... hence, as varied as their powers are, they still share the same origin. This means each Gemheart can activate the mutations based on other Gemhearts."

"Now we are talking." Arthur grinned, not feeling bad anymore about his non-flashy mutation.

"Let's go test it out... it says reforging a body anew permanently, this means you can abuse this ability to keep increasing your physical strength to its limit, as long as you are willing to eat the pain," Khu'zan said.

"How bad can it be?" Arthur smirked.

...

An hour later...

Arthur could be seen lying on the ground inside a forest with a look of utter despair... the entire area around him was covered in pools of blood, yet his body looked brand new.

However, the eyes chico... the eyes never lie.

Arthur's eyes were as white as snow, widened to the limit as if he had just been tortured for the last hour.

"No more... no more..." He kept repeating, akin to a broken machine.

'Yea... this isn't going to work.' Khu'zan shook his head, 'He can't inflict massive harm on himself and not lose his marbles... also, the permanent enhancement is nothing worth noting unless his body was completely shattered... he can never reach such a state on his own.'

'He needs someone to beat him so bad and still keep him alive... only then will his potential bloom.' He thought.

\*\*\*

Back to the present...

As everyone's eyes were affixed on the falling Tyrese, who resembled a meteor descending... only a few had their eyes on Arthur.

"Arthur... do it, do it and show them all..." Levi uttered under his breath as he gazed at his brother's shattered internal body, "Show them that the Larsons crack, but we don't break."

"SHOW THEM!"

Booom!

As Levi's shout resounded across the arena, it was soon drowned out by a thunderous explosion of Tyrese's fall, kicking up a much bigger cloud of dust that hid their bodies from everyone's eyes.

But, before the explosion occurred, Levi's sensitive ears picked up on a faint whisper uttered with great difficulty, but buried passion only he could feel... only he, who shared his bloodline, could feel it.

-Orryn's Ascendance... Free me from my weakness... free me.-

"..."

"..."

"..."

As Levi was grinning from ear to ear, the girls held Jojo tightly, noticing that her eyes were already bloodshot, seeing nothing but red before her. Luckily, she was too weak to fight them off.

Meanwhile, as Tyrese staggered away from the pit, swaying back and forth, he muttered with a disappointed, sorrowful expression.

"Ahh... burp, my bad, ponytail, I went overboard again... I thought you were different, burp... I thought you could handle me at my best... how unfo... burp..tunate."

But, before he could walk far, his ear twitched after hearing a faint heartbeat.

Ka-thumb...

"Hmm?"

Confused, he turned around, his head tilted to the side, resembling a drunken person searching for something to lean on.

Ka-thumb! Ka-thumb!...

The faint heartbeats thundered with sudden intensity, like an ancient engine roaring back to life after a long, forgotten slumber... Then came a sharp crack, like crystal splitting under immense pressure.

The cloud dust began to stir, glowing faintly red, creating a vermillion silhouette of a figure rising from the depths.

The conference teams' celebration was halted immediately, their pupils widening in shock at the sight of Arthur's body after the dust cleared out of the pit.

His clothes were torn as vermillion crystals sprouted from his arms, ribs, shoulders, and even his legs, making him resemble a man cursed to turn into a vermillion crystal sculpture, but defying the odds and resisting the curse in the middle of the transformation.

His loose hair spilled free of its tie, flowing down until his waist... it was black with a soft vermillion hue before, but now? It was burning red with the tips crystallizing into sharp shards.

Tyrese froze, heart skipping a beat, awakened slightly from his drunken stupor... he could feel it, this wasn't the same Arthur from before.

This was something else... something reborn.

Chapter 250: Undying Will of MAN. (Suggested Song: Pharrell Williams - Freedom)

Arthur lifted his head slowly, and both of his eyes were protected behind a vermillion crystal layer, making him see the world through a red lens... He cracked his neck while opening his mouth, flashing his crystallized teeth.

Then, he uttered calmly while gazing at Tyrese's dazed expression, "Thank you, Tyrese... for freeing me. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Huh?"

Before Tyrese could register what he meant, Arthur took a step forward, and then... There was no then.

Argh...

Tyrese found Arthur digging his fist in his stomach, sending an electrifying shockwave across his body... he went limp for a second, and Arthur caught him with the other arm, leaving Tyrese's head to rest on his shoulder.

"Try to keep up..." Arthur whispered next to Tyrese's ear as he was stopping himself from vomiting all the drinks he had taken.

Tiing!!

With a crystallized indestructible elbow, Arthur smashed it right on Tyrese's temple, so powerful, he heard his skull crack.

Thud! Thud! Thud!...

Tyrese's body was launched tens of meters, rolling uncontrollably while feeling a buzzing, disoriented sensation coursing through his mind... Yet, Arthur was only starting to return the favor.

Under everyone's stunned expressions, Arthur charged after Tyrese's rolling body, resembling a crystallized Behemoth unleashed from its cage.

He caught Tyrese by his dreads and dragged him across the floor while sprinting in the direction of the conference's teams. Once he arrived, he skidded over the ground, half of his soles turned crystallized, giving him better sliding dynamics.

Then, he came to a stop, kicking up a cloud of dust in front of them.

Arthur lifted Tyrese by his head and tightened his grasp, forcing him to go limp from the pain of having his skull crushed... Yet, Tyrese's teammates did not move an inch, knowing that it could cause their disqualification.

"Heliodor... Heliodor's Raiders, engrave this name in your memory... You will be seeing us a lot." He uttered indifferently.

Baaam!!

Before any of them could react, Arthur did a round kick and smashed his heel on Tyrese's stomach, hurling him back inside the arena.

Then, he arrived next to him in no time with the same indifferent expression... but he didn't hit him anymore. He just gazed at his bloody state and short breaths.

He crouched beside him and said, "I know this isn't your limit... You helped me break my limits, now it's your turn... show me what you got."

Hearing this, Tyrese forgot all the pain coursing through his body... he knew if he hadn't enhanced his endurance and strength, he would be a goner by now.

"Ha..ha..ha cough... cough... Ponytail... you're crazy."

Tyrese laughed with great difficulty, blood spilling nonstop from his lips. He could tell that Arthur meant it, and Tyrese wasn't one to back off from a Macho fight.

"I have never done this while drunk... but, as you said, it's time to get out of my comfort zone."

He summoned his gourd and lifted it in the direction of Arthur, then he uttered with a maddened grin, "Forbidden Toast... Madness Uncorked."

"Noooooooo!! Don't do it, Bosh!"

"Tyrese! You can die from it!"

Hearing what he said, Mira, Blake, and the rest of their teammates' faces went as pale as a sheet of paper.

They knew that was his Pathfinder rank's ultimate ability... the last one, and the strongest of them all. However, it was so potent, he was barely capable of staying awake while consuming the toast without being drunk.

To do it now? When he was clearly already nearing his tolerance limit? There was a high chance it might go terribly wrong.

But, Tyrese ignored them and clicked his gourd with Arthur's fist... then he drank the entire gourd and started coughing his lungs out, feeling like he had just drank liquid fire.

"Po..ponytail... forgive me, for whatever about to happen next... burp." Tyrese glanced at Arthur with eyes slowly losing focus, "I may not be the one in front of the wheel anymore..."

As his voice faded, Arthur put some distance between them and prepared with a deep breath, his eyes narrowed in preparation... if he wanted to win, he could have taken advantage of the earlier beatdown, but Arthur wanted more.

His goal was to get as strong as possible to keep up with his brother... the only way to do so was to challenge himself, over and over, and over, not getting lax once.

He always proclaimed himself to be the strongest, but Arthur knew... he wasn't being cocky, but manifesting his future, following the teachings of his wise mother.

"Every word you speak carves a path ahead... when you declare your future aloud, the universe has no choice but to listen... so, make it listen." Ruqya Larson.

As his mother's words resounded in his mind, Arthur watched Tyrese slowly stand up, his muscles squirming nonstop like a million snakes were within him.

His head, arms, and entire stance hunched as hot, steamy smoke rose from him... then he snapped his head upward, revealing a wide, maddening grin with unfocused eyes.

"Shall we?" He said, his voice resembled a devil's growl.

"We shall."

Then, without warning, they lunged, kicking off dust behind them as they fought in melee... no weapons, no shields, just hands and legs being thrown, each contact sent shivers down everyone's spines, resounding akin to gunshots!

Boom! Boom! Boom!...

Tyrese threw a brutal series of punches, and Arthur met him head-on, his crystal-armored fists absorbing the hits, sending reverberations that shook the ground and sent nearby stones tumbling away!

Blood and shards of crystal flew with each collision, yet... both had a maddening grin plastered over their faces.

Seeing an opening, Arthur countered with a spinning kick, his crystallized leg striking Tyrese's side like a sledgehammer!

Tyrese grunted, pain coursing through him, but he didn't allow it to dictate his battle... Instead, he leapt high, spinning in midair, and slammed a downward elbow into Arthur's shoulder, the impact causing the crystal to shine brighter.

"More! More! MOORE!!"

Arthur laughed... a loud, manic sound that blended with Tyrese's own growling roar of excitement.

They circled each other like predators, faces smeared with blood, eyes shining with pure, unhinged exhilaration... Each strike became wilder than the last. Tyrese's knees crashed into Arthur's ribs; Arthur's fists tore into Tyrese's torso.

A never-ending dance of what it meant to have the undying will of MAN!

Every punch, kick, and elbow created a shockwave that shattered the ground, while the wind itself seemed to howl at such a level of violence.

"How... just how is still capable of keeping up with Tyrese in that fearsome state?" Mira murmured in disbelief, feeling like she was spectating a dream.

On the other side...

"To keep up with Arthur's attacks, which were infused with absorbed kinetic energy... Tyrese is a real beast... as expected of the second strongest region in the world."

Levi uttered, watching as Tyrese kept eating Arthur's bursts of destruction with his flesh and remained standing. He knew that in this transformation state, Arthur didn't need the shield to channel the kinetic energy and transform it. His entire body became the conductor with that much crystal merged in him!

Thus, he could do more than just increase the power of his punches.

With a sudden, terrifying speed, Arthur vanished from Tyrese's sight, reappearing behind him... his hands extended, and gripped Tyrese's head.

With a roar of pure bloodlust, Arthur slammed him into the ground with enough force to make the ground tremble!

Tyrese groaned but laughed, blood dribbling from his mouth and nose... He grabbed Arthur's forearm mid-swing and twisted, flipping him over. Then, he became on top and started raining down on him with punches.

Arthur blocked his face with his forearms, joining his maddening laughter... everyone watching could tell, those two Juggernauts were no longer fighting... at least not rationally. They were predators, lost in the carnage, each strike a declaration of dominance!

But in the end... their transformations were fueled by solar energy, and it wasn't infinite... after another thirty seconds of nonstop blows, the two beasts had finally exhausted every bit of their energy.

Yet still, they were standing up close with their bodies covered in blood and wounds, punching each other lightly and slowly.

"I win... I struck last." Arthur said absentmindedly, his crystallized form went dormant a few moments ago.

"Not.. burp, a chance..." Tyrese punched him back on the chest, his punch barely touching him.

In the end, both of them fell side by side, their eyelids too heavy to open... yet still, they were murmuring under their breaths.

"I'm the strongest..."

"No.. It's me..."

They kept murmuring faintly until they lost consciousness, going silent at last, and leaving behind a horrified audience and an arena resembling a WW2 battlefield.

"Feng Ling... I am starting to see your vision. Maybe, the next generation is the key to our salvation..." Dominic murmured as he gazed at the two monstrous children... one sixteen, and the other barely seventeen, yet delivering a devastation of two entry level Solarbound Daywalkers.