

## Evolution 62

Chapter 62: The Trial of Physicality.

Before long, all the candidates had received their grades and scores... except for one.

"I'm hoping I've saved the best for last," Instructor Seraphis said with a hardened look, "because with your shitty scores, I doubt any of you will make it past the physicality trial. Demetris Bane, step forth."

Demetris walked through the crowded area with his hands in his pockets and an indifferent expression.

Although he was Mantis's little brother, he didn't resemble him much aside from the color of his hair. It was short, dark green, and slightly messy... falling over his forehead and hiding his ears. His skin was fair, with a faint tan like he had been gently kissed by the sun.

He wore a simple black T-shirt beneath a hybrid jacket... green on the inside, black on the outside... that looked like a mix between a bomber and a hoodie. On the bottom, he sported slim black Sportif pants and sneakers.

Strapped to his back was a long-sheathed sword, the leather dyed in a serpentine green pattern that caught the attention of many nightcrawlers.

Weapon choice mattered. Nightcrawlers had their own battle styles, and they often preferred partners who matched them. For example, a nightcrawler who specialized in long-range combat would naturally seek a partner with a ranged weapon to maintain synergy.

This was also why Shia, Sergio, and Jamal had tried to talk Arthur out of choosing a shield... they knew it would shrink the pool of interested nightcrawlers.

That's why contract seekers were asked to bring their primary weapons... to advertise their compatibility.

The moment Demetris stepped onto the stage, it was like a revitalization spell had been cast on Instructor Seraphis and the observing nightcrawlers.

Demetris fixed his eyes on the artificial sun for ten seconds... twenty... thirty... forty...

Nurah's pupils thinned when she noticed her record had been broken... and Demetris still showed no signs of stopping.

Just when it looked like he might surpass the one-minute mark, Demetris calmly closed his eyes and descended from the stage before Instructor Seraphis could even call out his score.

"Now that's what I'm talking about." Instructor Seraphis' smile widened with satisfaction as he made the announcement.

"Demetris Bane, fifty-five seconds... light affinity grade 'SS'... points scored: 200!"

The moment those words rang out, the contract seekers instinctively parted, clearing a path for Demetris as they stared in a mix of awe and envy.

The sea of nightcrawlers had gone mad with excitement. Some even shouted contract offers right there and then.

"A swordsman with SS light affinity? I've seen enough. Sign me up now!"

Hearing the clamor, many candidates nearly died of envy at the idea of Demetris securing a contract from the very first trial.

"Do you wish to sign a contract now?" Instructor Seraphis asked.

"No, I'd like to continue until the end," Demetris replied calmly.

"Good." Instructor Seraphis looked up. "You heard him. Settle down."

The nightcrawlers quieted but kept their eyes fixed on the top candidates... Demetris, Nurah, Melissa, Jojo... anyone with an A grade or higher.

"This concludes the Trial of Light Affinity."

Instructor Seraphis clapped twice, and the Luminance Rite staircase crumbled back into the earth, returning the massive platform to its bare state.

Then, he projected the updated leaderboard, showing everyone's rankings from top to bottom. Demetris claimed first place, followed closely by Nurah. From the third position downward, the scores were close... but as one scrolled to the bottom of the barrel, a single name stood out like a bruised thumb.

— Levi Larson, 1 point —

He was twenty points behind the candidate just above him... a gap so large it made even the lowest scorers feel slightly redeemed.

After all, none of them had scored just one.

Levi wasn't deaf. He heard the whispers, the sarcasm, the mocking tones from his competitors. But he wore the same calm smile... their words bouncing harmlessly off his fortified mental walls.

The only thing on his mind was:

If I want to come first... I've got a long, long climb ahead.

"There will be no break. You have ten minutes to warm up for the next trial... the Trial of Physicality," Instructor Seraphis called out. "Welcome... to the Gauntlet of Titans."

Suddenly, the floating island began to tremble. The cracked earth shook violently as massive mechanical structures burst out from beneath... accompanied by the grinding sounds of ancient gears and pistons.

Steel pillars erupted like jagged fangs, forming hazardous sprint lanes. Rotating arms and gears were locked into place in a series of deadly obstacles.

At the end of each lane, a sealed door stood... the entrance to a towering structure filled with narrow ledges, collapsing floors, and impossibly tight gaps that tested flexibility and balance.

Beyond that, a massive hill rose at a sharp 45-degree incline, stretching more than three kilometers. At its peak stood resting chairs, while at its base lay two piles of weighted vests.

But it didn't end there.

Beyond the hill, the terrain twisted like rubber and dipped into a wide, gaping pit... soon filled with torrents of water gushing in from countless spouts hidden in the walls and cliffs. In mere seconds, the pit transformed into a vast artificial lake, its surface shimmering under the artificial sun.

At the far side of the lake, a finish line was painted clearly on the ground, glowing faintly. The silence that fell afterward was heavy... candidates stood motionless, their eyes wide in disbelief at the monstrous obstacle course before them.

It was clear now... Instructor Seraphis hadn't come to guide them. He had come to cull them.

"Welcome to the Gauntlet of the Titans," Instructor Seraphis announced, his proud smirk stretching. "It took me a month to visualize this beauty into reality... so I have high hopes of eliminating at least 40% of you."

"..."

"..."

Gulps and murmurs spread like wildfire across the platform. The trial was designed to be brutal... and no one doubted him when he said he'd built it to thin the herd.

And as expected, he didn't let ambiguity linger.

"I don't care what you do. Crawl, fly, cry... doesn't matter. If you don't cross the finish line in less than two hours, you're done. I don't care if you were first in the last trial or last in the next... zero means eliminated."

"Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir!" the crowd responded in a chorus of shaken voices.

"Good. Now, the rules," Instructor Seraphis said, and with a flick of his pen-like device, a large hologram appeared midair, listing the rules one by one.

The candidates' eyes scanned the text:

-The candidates' start timer will be based on the number of points collected. One second = one point.

-Candidates are not allowed to use any form of solar totems.

-Candidates may use their weapons, but not against others.

-The Gauntlet tests Speed, Flexibility, Strength, and Endurance.

-Each stage will be graded separately... final points are determined at the finish line.

-Bonus points will be awarded for completing hidden or extra challenges.

Since Levi couldn't see the holograms, and his echolocation didn't reflect light in a way that could help, he relied on Astra. Through her soft voice in his ear, she narrated the rules quietly and efficiently.

Once she finished, Levi's brows drew together.

'I'm dead last... which means I'll have to wait over two hundred seconds before I can even move...Ouch.'

The start timer system was brutal. With each point granting one second off the countdown, Demetris would start immediately. Nurah would follow after fifty seconds... and so on.

When the timer reached one, Levi would be the only one still waiting.

"What a harsh rule," Melissa muttered as she eyed Levi with concern. "By the time you're allowed to move... the top ten will already be halfway through."

"It's alright," Levi responded, giving a faint smile.

"At least you're taking it graciously," Rayan said, throwing a glance at a few candidates who were already grumbling and protesting the fairness of it all.

"Life favors the winners," Levi replied calmly. "If the rules seem unfair... it just means you're not winning hard enough yet."

Nearby candidates who overheard him didn't appreciate the comment, taking it as a veiled insult. But Levi didn't flinch under their glares.

Nurah, however, had a different reaction.

She walked past Levi with a lazy, seductive smile and whispered, "For someone sitting at the bottom with a single point... your confidence is impressive. Let's just hope you're not bluffing."

Before Levi could answer, she turned and sauntered toward the starting line, where Demetris was already stretching.

Arthur blinked. "What does she mean by that?"

Levi chuckled as he tracked her retreating aura with his senses. "It means she thinks I'm all bark... and no bite."

He smiled faintly.

Let her think that...

They'll all find out soon enough.