

## Evolution 63

Chapter 63: The Gauntlet of Titans.

"Enough chitchat. Form a line based on your rankings," Instructor Seraphis suddenly ordered.

"I guess I'll see you guys at the finish line," Jojo said with a playful salute before heading to the front alongside Melissa. Since Arthur and Rayan had similar rankings, they were next to leave.

Arthur had already tried to wait for his brother so they could take on the challenges together, but Levi declined. He told him he preferred to move at his own pace.

Hearing this, Arthur gave him a fist bump. "I'll be waiting at the finish line."

Levi chuckled and replied, "If you slack off, I might beat you there."

Arthur laughed but didn't brush off the remark. He knew exactly what Levi was capable of and never underestimated him...not for a second.

That said, Arthur had also changed. Especially after his training under Lord Idriss, he had become a completely different person compared to his former self in The Harrowing Forest.

Soon after, all the candidates lined up in four straight rows according to their rankings.

And Levi?

He stood at the very end...not behind any row. Alone. It was like he didn't belong in the competition.

Neither Instructor Seraphis nor the contracted nightcrawlers spared him a second glance. To them, he was a lost cause. Even the audience watching from cafés and homes had already dismissed him.

The only ones still holding onto a flicker of hope were Shia, Sergio, and Jamal. But even they knew this challenge wasn't tailored for someone with Levi's condition.

No matter how sharp his hearing was or how skilled Astra was in assisting him, competing in a high-speed obstacle trial without sight seemed like a suicide mission.

Logically, they weren't wrong...But Levi wasn't a normal human anymore.

"The trial will begin in five...four...three...two..." Instructor Seraphis roared, "ONE! BEGIN!"

Whoosh!

Demetris shot forward like a bullet, sprinting at full speed through the shifting zigzag lanes. The platforms were unstable, constantly moving, and designed to throw off anyone who couldn't anticipate their changes.

As if that wasn't enough, mechanized arms jutted out from the walls, throwing sudden punches meant to knock competitors into the water below.

Despite the hazards, Demetris blazed through the chaos with finesse and power, reaching the other end in no time.

Cheers erupted from the viewers, and more than a few contracted nightcrawlers stared at him with stars in their eyes.

"Twenty seconds to finish the first stage. Speed grade: S," Instructor Seraphis noted coolly.

Before Nurah could be called, Demetris was already deep in the second stage...a tight structure filled with narrow crawlways, swinging poles, and steep climbs. It was a pure test of flexibility and balance.

He even struggled in spots. But he maintained his flow well enough.

After fifty seconds had passed, Nurah finally got the go-ahead.

Though her sprint speed wasn't on Demetris's level, she breezed through the first stage without a single misstep, dodging every arm like she had rehearsed it in her sleep.

But it was in the second stage that she truly shone.

She twisted, coiled, and slipped through impossibly tight gaps like a feline without bones. Some gaps even acted as secret shortcuts...ones no one else had even dared try.

The crowd held its breath. It was like watching a creature born for this course.

She moved so fast, she caught up to Demetris at the base of the five-kilometer hill despite his fifty-second head start.

"Let's see how far that flexibility gets you now," Demetris muttered, strapping on a weighted vest and starting his ascent.

"Unfortunately for you, I've been training these legs since I was five." Nurah smiled, picked up a vest of her own, and immediately caught up.

Her skin-tight latex training suit made it clear...her legs weren't just strong. They were built for power and endurance.

"Bye-bye," she teased, blowing him a kiss before passing him with ease.

Demetris' expression darkened. He could have pushed harder...but he was smart enough to know there were harder stages ahead. If he wasted energy now, he might regret it later.

"Tch. Damn Blackthorn monsters..."

He watched her pull away and knew that unless something slowed her down, she had already won this round.

Meanwhile, Melissa, Jojo, and the other top candidates had begun their runs. Since their point differences were small, many started at the same time, causing chaos on the track.

But that was nothing compared to the central batch...dozens of candidates released in clusters.

Arthur and Rayan were among them.

"Stay behind me! I'll clear the way!" Arthur shouted as he barreled forward like a freight train. "GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

The ground rumbled with his every step. Candidates who turned to see the 6'5 behemoth charging toward them instantly panicked...some even dove into the water on their own.

Instructor Seraphis had banned weapons...but said nothing about physical contact.

"Haha! Good job, Arthur!" Rayan cheered from behind.

Arthur's brute presence opened a path for those who followed him, like a snowplow clearing a clogged road.

Unfortunately, even he couldn't avoid the arm punching from the side walls.

The narrow lanes became a jammed mess. Candidates started dragging each other into the water, scrambling for space and survival.

Arthur didn't care. He powered forward until he cleared the stage.

-Now that's what I'm talking about!-

-A Juggernaut like him? Fits my style to perfection.-

Some nightcrawlers began to take notice. Enhancement-type nightcrawlers, in particular, were visibly interested.

But others were still skeptical.

They had seen plenty of meatheads before. The true test was always the second stage.

However, Arthur proved them wrong.

He may not have matched Nurah's elegance, but he bulldozed his way through with astonishing agility...leaping, swinging, and vaulting with surprising grace for someone his size.

Imagine a gorilla in motion...powerful, fluid, and relentless.

"Isn't he the Morningstars' sponsored candidate?"

"I thought so...Wait a minute. Let me double-check the list...Hmm. No. Arthur Larson isn't registered as a sponsored candidate."

"What?! That can't be! He's been hanging out with their people since the start."

"The list doesn't lie...Melissa and someone named Levi Larson are the ones sponsored by Morningstars."

"Levi Larson? That's the guy with the trash light affinity, right?"

"Yeah. The one-point wonder."

"..."

"Are you saying Madam Naima sponsored the wrong Larson?"

"Madam Naima making a mistake? Keep dreaming."

"Then what's going on here?"

"I doubt even the Morningstars know."

Across every agency watching the trial, similar conversations sparked between leaders and their seconds-in-command.

No one had double-checked the Larson brothers...They simply assumed Arthur was the prodigy on the sponsorship list.

But now that the spotlight was on Arthur...the truth had come out.

The candidate with the lowest score...the infamous 'F' grade...the blind boy...

Was the one sponsored by the Morningstars!

Not a single agency kept the news to themselves...They swiftly spread it across social media until Levi Larson's name and face were plastered everywhere.

-A scandal! Morningstars Lineage has sponsored a boy with the worst-known light affinity in the world! Was it a mistake, or was it intentional?... Daywalkers' Daily Media tweeted.

-Rumors say Lord Idriss has been personally training a sponsored candidate...Could it be Levi Larson?

-How could he train a contract seeker with such horrendous talent? No nightcrawler would sign him!

-What a waste of a recommendation letter...If I had the chance, I'd have performed ten times better.

Weconnecto...the most popular social media platform on the planet...was bombarded with posts from media companies, celebrities, Daywalkers, and even everyday citizens voicing their complaints.

Fortunately, the news remained confined to the Heliodor region's social media sphere...Had it reached beyond, the entire region might have become a laughingstock.

As Levi once said, light was worshiped and darkness shunned in this society...In other words, light affinity had become the new beauty privilege.

Those attuned to light were treated like angels...saviors, "good people," talented, kind...All sorts of praise clung to them like a natural aura.

Meanwhile, those with poor light affinity or mental instability were viewed as muggles, misfits, the bottom feeders of society.

Whether now or a century ago...human nature hadn't changed.

So, a boy no one truly knew found himself buried under a nationwide storm of mockery and insults.

Unaware of any of it, Levi stood with a serene, gentle smile, using sound to paint his dark world...watching his little brother perform with pride.

He's truly improved...I'm glad.

While he silently cheered for his brother, no one was cheering for him...except three friends watching from afar.

As they read through comments on their holographic screens, their expressions soured.

"He would've scored better if he were blind...Those f\*cking assholes...what do they even know?!" Sergio growled, fingers furiously typing replies laced with every insult he could think of.

"Don't waste your time on those keyboard warriors..." Shia said coldly. "Levi will shut everyone up during the Trials of Spirituality and Intelligence."

She believed in him wholeheartedly, convinced those two trials would be where Levi truly shone.

What she didn't know...was that Levi had no intention of lying low in the Trial of Physicality either.

"Astra, alert me when it's my turn..." Levi murmured, slowly walking toward the starting line. Ten seconds remained on the countdown.

He was the final candidate left at the line out of over a hundred...and as the scandal unfolded, Instructor Seraphis found himself puzzled.

He had known Lord Idriss personally...they had gone on joint expeditions in years past. He knew the man's standards. Knew he would never allow the Morningstars' name to be tarnished this way.

Which meant...Levi might be hiding something.

And so, Instructor Seraphis shifted his focus from the frontrunners to the underdog, placing Levi's face on national broadcast just as the barrage of public ridicule reached its peak.

Levi set down his backup gear and rested his metallic staff on his shoulder, silencing the world around him.

He tuned out the crowd, the commentary, even his own heartbeat...leaving only the sounds of the gauntlet.

The hiss of shifting tiles...The hum of tensioned gears...The mechanical whine of punching arms...The echo of impact.

He listened.

Mapped.

Understood.

Three...Two...One...

"Go!"