

The Lustful Time Lord's Revenge

#Chapter 183 - A Personal Grudge - Read The Lustful Time Lord's Revenge Chapter 183 - A Personal Grudge

Chapter 183: Chapter 183 - A Personal Grudge

I had just finished off a pack of ten Rank B Rabid Roosters with [Mindrender], their black blood evaporating from my blade. In the sky, the leaderboard continued to change at a frantic pace. Numbers skyrocketed, names rose and fell. Everyone was truly giving it their all.

And to be fair, the average contestant in this tournament was a Rank B to A Awakener. They were no pushovers. They were the cream of the crop from elite academies. Top students like Leonhardt, Seraphina, Isaac—they were clearly pure Rank A's, with deep mastery of their abilities. They couldn't be underestimated.

And then there was Yukie Iceblood.

Rank S.

That made all the difference. Going from Rank A to S wasn't just moving up a level. It was like leaping from a cliff into the sky. Even Rank S monsters, which should be nightmares for most contestants, were probably like toys to her.

Just look at her score. More than a thousand points. Meanwhile, the second place, Leonhardt, was only at two hundred and twenty. A chasm so deep, so wide, it was as if they were competing in different leagues.

I yawned, sleepy, then decided not to think about it. Focus on what's in front of me.

A loud roar echoed from the direction of this ruined city's center. It was a sound full of authority, different from the usual caws of the rabid roosters. It seemed to be the ruler of this zone. This entire dead city area was clearly dominated by that species of rabid rooster monster.

I darted towards the sound, killing a few Rank A and B Rabid Roosters that happened to be in my way. I ignored other contestants I saw. At one intersection, four contestants in different uniforms—probably from different academies—were seen cooperating against a pack of Rank A roosters.

They protected each other, supported each other. Good tactics. But I didn't have time to join or observe longer.

I kept running, until I finally arrived at a wide square that might have once been a city park. But now, the place was a nest.

In the center of the square stood a monster that made me pause.

A Giant Rabid Rooster.

It was about six meters tall—the size of a two-story house. Its feathers were no longer red and black, but dark purple and iron-gray, with patterns like pulsing, open wounds glowing with an evil red light.

It didn't have two eyes, but four, arranged vertically, all glowing red with slit-like pupils. Its actual mouth—that tooth-filled maw—now had fangs protruding like swords. And from its back grew sharp bone spikes.

Above its head, a blood-red holographic label flashed: [MONSTER - RANK S - GIANT RABID ROOSTER]

And around it, at least sixty more Rank A Rabid Roosters were milling about like guard soldiers.

But what was more disturbing was what I saw next. The Giant Rooster was rumbling lowly, its rear end writhing, and then... it laid an egg.

An egg the size of a tombstone, with a dull red, semi-transparent shell. The egg hatched instantly on the ground. Out came a wet, sticky Rank A Rabid Rooster, which immediately stood up and joined the horde.

So this Rank S monster wasn't just strong. It could also multiply its forces. Intelligent, and with instant reproduction abilities. A dangerous combination.

So, how to attack them all?

If only I had a wide area-of-effect ability like Yukie's ice, or Ophelia's or Arianna's fire. I'm sure I could destroy them all if I had a way to hit them simultaneously.

But I didn't have that.

I peeked from behind the rubble of a collapsed building, observing the surroundings. This area was deserted of other contestants. Most likely, they preferred to avoid a fight that was clearly suicidal.

But I couldn't rule out the possibility that other contestants were hiding like me, waiting for someone to take on the monster and then, at the perfect moment, strike suddenly and steal the points after the battle. That would be very smart, and very annoying.

On top of that, facing that entire horde alone with my current stats... wasn't that simple.
My mind drifted to my utterly useless stat sheet in the middle of a fight.

NAME: Adam Socheron

CLASS: Depraved Time Lord

LEVEL: 60

EXP: 2700/5000

<Strength: 80>

<Agility: 60>

<Vitality: 65>

<Charisma: 9>

<Libido: 100>

Available Stat Points: -

SKILLS:

[Time Stop]

[Eye of Desire]

[Lustful Touch]

[Fertility Control]

[Mind Control]

[Five-Minute Rewind]

[Dreamweaver]

[Elixir of Bliss]

ITEMS:

[Faceless Mask]

[Aphrodisiac Elixir]

[Mindrender]

[Dragonroot Rope]

[Aegis Pendant]

[The Edge of Bliss]

[The Fleshcraver's Loop]

[Ring of Self-Control]

[Key of the Tower of Space]

My Strength, equivalent to Rank S. Agility and Vitality, both equivalent to Rank A+. My pathetic Charisma of 9, forget it. And Libido equivalent to rank SSS, completely useless here.

I felt incredibly stupid then, allocating so many stat points to Libido just for personal pleasure, satisfying my lecherous desires, instead of distributing them to Agility or Vitality which could be very useful in situations like this. But on the other hand... the pleasures I've had, the women I've dominated, that dark satisfaction... I don't entirely regret it.

But that doesn't solve the current problem.

I don't have teammates. Yukie, Maximus, Isabel, Ace—they're somewhere, and even if they were here, we're not a cohesive team. So I'm alone.

In that case, there's no other choice. I have to create a situation advantageous to me. I have to form a team my own way.

I gripped [Mindrender] tightly. Then, from behind the rubble, I measured the distance, regulated my breathing, and with all the strength in my arm, I threw my sword.

[Mindrender] shot out like a fired arrow, slicing through the air with a whistling sound. The target was right in the center of the Giant Rooster's chest, where its heart might be.

THWACK!

My sword sank deep, maybe only a third of the blade, but enough to pierce.

ROOOOOOOOARRRRRKKKK!!!!

A deafening roar of anger shook the entire area. The Giant Rooster threw its head back to the sky, all four of its eyes now focused with rage in the general direction the attack came from. Thick black blood flowed from its wound. Though not fatal, it hurt.

And more importantly, it got its attention.

It immediately knew the general direction of my location. Along with its entire horde of over sixty Rank A Roosters, it turned its massive body, and then... charged.

Thirty Rank A monsters plus one wounded, angry Rank S monster, all headed straight for my position.

I didn't wait. I immediately turned and RAN.

My legs pushed off the ground with all their might. I didn't run towards open roads, but along narrow paths between ruins, leaping over debris, crashing through broken windows, into half-collapsed buildings.

Behind me, the thunderous footsteps of sixty monsters and one giant shook the earth. The sound of destroyed rubble, angry screeches, and wild caws filled the air. They pursued me with unstoppable ferocity, demolishing everything in their path.

I ran faster, heart pounding from the adrenaline.

"Run, Adam, run," I whispered to myself as I jumped over a gap in the floor that immediately collapsed under the Giant Rooster's foot behind me.

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In the Audience Stands

The camera spotlight and the host's commentary were still focused on the screen showing Adam Socheron running for his life, chased by the horde of Giant Rabid Roosters. But amidst the sea of noisy spectators, there were two figures who were completely unfocused on the match.

The woman sat relaxed, one leg crossed over the other, revealing her smooth thigh exposed high by her tight black leather shorts. Her skin had a healthy olive tone, contrasting with her long, wild, untamed blonde hair.

She wore a dark red tank top that was extremely tight and provocative—braless, the fabric clinging so much that the shape of her large, voluptuous breasts was clearly visible, even her hardened nipples slightly shadowed beneath the thin material.

Beside her, the man sat stiffly. He was tall and thin, wearing a plain black suit that made him blend into the shadows. His face was sullen, with dark brown eyes that were always alert.

"Miiichaaaaeeell," the woman whined, her voice seductive and full of complaint. "Aren't we going to do anything? I'm so bored lately. Really, bored to death."

Michael didn't turn his head. "We have orders. To observe. That's it."

"But that pervy brat isn't coming anymore!" Yumi sighed dramatically, pushing her chest forward which made her tank top strain even more. "I've been waiting. And Zephyr? He's too busy with his own thing and barely saw me this week. I'm just so... lonely." The last word was said with a fake tremor in her voice.

Michael finally tilted his head, his eyes still fixed on the empty space in front of him. "Calm down. And don't cause trouble."

"Calm? CALM?!" Yumi suddenly sat upright, her pretty face contorted with dramatic irritation. "I am the calmest woman in this world, Michael! Look at me! Sitting here, wearing revealing clothes in the middle of these thousands of boring people, and I am NOT feeling embarrassed or anything! That is the pinnacle of calmness!"

She pointed roughly towards the arena. "Damn it! Why did I get paired with a boring man like you? A tombstone is more interesting than you!"

Now Michael turned, his dark eyes finally looking at her. There was a flash of annoyance in them. "Bitch, I don't want to be your partner either. But orders are orders. The Boss told us to wait. So we wait."

"Wait! Wait! Just wait!" Yumi shrieked, then lowered her voice to a fierce whisper as some nearby spectators glanced over. "Until when? Huh? Don't you read comics or novels, Michael? This is a BIG TOURNAMENT! All the important people are gathered here! The Guardian Council! Academy heads! Gifted students! This is the PERFECT time for villains like us to ATTACK! To announce the horror of the Abyss Syndicate to the world! We could... I don't know... at least plant a bomb under the stage!"

She leaned back, a self-satisfied smile on her face as if she'd just revealed a genius plan.

Michael let out a long sigh, the breath of someone who's endured this kind of nagging too many times.

"The Boss has a bigger plan. And it doesn't involve drawing the attention of the entire Global Hunter Authority with an open attack on a globally broadcast event."

"But—"

"No 'buts'. We observe. We gather data. That's it."

Yumi snorted, then her restless eyes darted around, finally landing on one of the giant screens. There, Adam's face was displayed, fully concentrated as he ran.

"Hmm," Yumi hummed, her red lips curling into a smile that suddenly shifted from boredom to dangerous interest. "But... at least I can have a little fun, right? Look at that." She pointed at the screen. "That handsome steel-gray-haired boy. Adam Socheron. Son of the Star Witch. He's... interesting."

Michael immediately turned, now with a genuinely wary and warning look. "Yumi. Don't."

"What? Why not?" Yumi tilted her head, toying with a strand of her blonde hair. "He's Handsome. And... I have a little grudge against him."

"A grudge? What did he do to you?"

Yumi smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes which had suddenly turned cold. "Oh, not much. Just... somehow, a few months ago, he suddenly made me... wear all of that. Inside me. Humiliating me like that. In my whole life, no one has ever dared treat me that way."

Michael saw the strange expression on Yumi's face.

"And it felt," Yumi continued, slowly licking her lips, "so... ah... incredibly good. I've never felt anything like it."

"Yumi, I'm warning you—"

"I know, I know! We might provoke the wrath of the strongest Awakeners, blah blah blah." Yumi waved her hand as if shooing a fly.

"But think, Michael. That boy... is weird. His abilities... unusual. And most importantly... he's a pervert, a huge pervert. I can definitely subdue him, imagine what we could get from him if I succeed."

She stared at the image of Adam on the screen, her tongue slowly, sensually licking her upper lip. Since Adam first walked into her shop, Yumi had known that pervy brat was the child of the Sword Saint and Star Witch.

Michael looked at her with an expression mixed with disgust and concern. He knew just how dangerous and unpredictable Yumi was when she got an idea in her head. And an idea involving the son of a Star Witch... that was a recipe for disaster.

"Don't do something stupid, Yumi," he hissed, his voice heavy. "The Boss won't be happy."

"The Boss doesn't need to know everything," Yumi replied with a sweet, fake smile. "This is just... a small personal matter. I want to see how that boy gets out of the trouble he made for himself."

Chapter 184: Chapter 184 - The Great Chicken Chase

If it were just a flock of ordinary chickens chasing me, the scene might have been funny. But unfortunately, what's behind me is an ugly, multi-story-tall giant chicken, plus dozens of its 'chicks' the size of cars, all with mouths full of sharp teeth ready to grind me into pulp.

Good thing my speed is still enough to keep ahead of them, even if my breath is getting ragged.

I summoned [Mindrender] back to my hand after it automatically returned to my inventory. The moment I felt its familiar weight, I hurled it again with full force. This time I got lucky—the blade sank right into one of the Giant Rabid Rooster's eyes.

SCREEEECH!

The monster shrieked in pain, thrashing wildly, toppling building debris around it with swings of its bleeding head. But that just made it angrier, chasing me even faster.

I kept running, throwing [Mindrender] repeatedly each time it returned. My long-range attacks hurt and slowed the giant down, but they couldn't bring it down, let alone kill it. Even its wounds were starting to close on their own—regeneration. Of course, a Rank S monster wouldn't fall to something so trivial.

Two Rank A Rabid Roosters suddenly shot out from a narrow alley, trying to cut me off. I sidestepped, sliced one's neck, then immediately stabbed the other through the heart before continuing to run. But my energy was draining fast.

Then I saw a group of four—probably from different academies—fighting desperately against a pack of Rank A Rabid Roosters at an intersection. Our eyes met.

They immediately went pale.

I just gave them a brief nod as I sprinted past them.

"HEY! WHO—WHO ARE YOU?!" yelled one of them.

But his question was drowned out by the roar of the chicken horde that suddenly turned to follow me, swarming into the intersection.

"YOU BASTARD! BRINGING MONSTERS HERE!" shouted another, his voice cracking with fear.

They immediately scattered, running alongside me, their faces a mix of panic and hatred.

"YOU IDIOT! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!" snapped a blue-haired girl as she ran for her life next to me.

"Survival," I answered shortly, while throwing [Mindrender] again at the giant still chasing from behind. This time it only hit its thigh.

"Survival MY ASS! NOW WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!" yelled a burly guy beside her, already gasping for air.

We kept running, and every time we found other contestants fighting or hiding, they met the same fate. At first, they'd curse and get angry, but once they saw the wave of monsters behind us, they had only one choice: join the run.

Our group kept growing. Two archers trapped on a rooftop came down and ran. Three people hiding in a ruined store were forced to flee while swearing at my name. Another tight-knit group of five from a single academy initially tried to form a defensive formation, but their courage vanished the moment they saw the Giant Rooster, and they joined the fleeing ranks.

"WHO PISSED OFF THE ZONE BOSS IN THE FIRST PLACE?!" shouted a robed contestant, his face red from running and anger.

"IT'S HIM! THE GRAY-HAIRED GUY! SOCHERON! THE STAR WITCH'S SON!" someone else answered, pointing right at me.

"TRYING TO BE A HOTSHOT, HUH?! NOW WE ALL PAY THE PRICE!"

"I'M GONNA KILL YOU, BASTARD!"

Curses and swears kept flowing, but weirdly, no one dared to stop or attack me. Because ahead, beside, behind—everything was already filled with Rank A Rabid

Roosters coming from everywhere. Their individual strength wasn't enough to break through, let alone fight the boss. The only choice was to run together, hoping for an opportunity or a way out.

The monster wave drew closer. Their roars grew louder, the sound of their claws scraping the asphalt like the rumble of war drums.

"FASTER! THEY'RE GAINING!" someone screamed.

Then, a heart-wrenching shriek.

A female contestant who had lagged slightly tripped. She fell. In an instant, the leading pack of Rank A Rabid Roosters swarmed, surrounding her.

"HELP! HEL—" Her cry was cut off, swallowed by the sea of monsters.

But before they could tear her apart further, her body suddenly glowed and vanished without a trace. The simulator system had extracted her just in time.

But that incident sent panic into overdrive.

"WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE LIKE THAT!"

"I DON'T WANT TO BE ELIMINATED FROM THE TOURNAMENT LIKE THAT!"

"IS THERE A WAY OUT?!"

Meanwhile, outside, the atmosphere in the Colosseum was only heating up.

The Host, his face shining with excitement over the unexpected spectacle, yelled in an almost shrill voice.

"LOOK! LOOK, AUDIENCE! AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT! ADAM SOCHERON HAS NOT ONLY PROVOKED THE ZONE BOSS, BUT NOW... IS HE LEADING A MASS EXODUS?!"

The camera focused on the long, ragged line of contestants fleeing, with an ocean of monsters behind them, and the enraged Giant Rooster in their midst.

"THE OTHER CONTESTANTS CAUGHT IN THIS SITUATION DON'T SEEM HAPPY! ANGRY AND TERRIFIED FACES! BUT THIS IS A TOURNAMENT! AND IN A TOURNAMENT, THERE ARE NO RULES AGAINST A CONTESTANT... BRINGING TROUBLE TO OTHER CONTESTANTS!"

The audience roared with laughter, some cheering, others anxiously watching the contestants who were almost caught.

"WILL THIS END IN A MASS SLAUGHTER? OR WILL A HEROIC RUNNER EMERGE TO SAVE THEM ALL? TIME IS STILL TICKING! AND THE SHOW... SEEMS TO HAVE JUST LEVELED UP!"

The host, engrossed in commenting on the chaos of the mass escape I'd caused, suddenly fell silent. The main camera feed on the Colosseum's giant screen shifted sharply, leaving the fleeing, panicked crowd to focus on a completely different zone.

"OH-OH! WHAT'S THIS?! IT SEEMS WE HAVE AN INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT IN A DIFFERENT ZONE!" he shouted, his voice full of sensationalism. "EVERYONE'S ATTENTION TO... YUKIE ICEBLOOD!"

Yukie stood in the middle of the emptiness, as calm as when she'd entered. No sweat, no heavy breathing, even her uniform collar was still neat. She simply looked around the now-deserted plaza, as if confirming nothing was left.

Then, with measured steps, she began to walk. Leaving the plaza, heading towards a large highway leading to another part of the city. Her plan was simple: find more monsters. The job wasn't finished.

But she didn't reach that highway.

Just a few steps from the edge of the plaza, from behind ruined cars, from low rooftops, and from the mouths of narrow alleys, figures began to emerge.

Not monsters. But other contestants.

They numbered around twenty, coming from various directions, wearing uniforms from different academies. Some were from Arclight in their white-silver uniforms, and others from lesser-known academies. They moved cautiously but quickly, forming a loose ring that trapped Yukie at the plaza's exit.

They weren't one team. That was clear. But they seemed to have reached a silent agreement, a temporary alliance forged by a common threat.

A man from Arclight, sword already in hand, stepped forward. His face was tense, but there was resolve in his eyes.

"Yukie," he said, his voice struggling to sound steady. "What you just did... it defies reason. You're too strong for this competition."

A woman in a dark red uniform, her hands already sheathed in stone, looked at Yukie with a complex gaze—a mix of awe, envy, and fear.

"We've been watching your score. If you keep going like this, no one else will have a chance. This is a tournament, not a one-person show."

A burly contestant clenched his fists. "So we decided to work together. Stop you here. Don't think this is unsportsmanlike. In a real war, an enemy that's too strong gets ganged up on. That's survival logic."

Twenty pairs of eyes fixed on Yukie, waiting for a reaction—anger, scorn, or at least a change in expression.

What they got was... nothing.

Yukie stopped walking. She turned her head slowly, her white eyes sweeping over each person surrounding her. Her expression didn't change at all. No anger, no anxiety, not even an impression that she considered them a threat. Her face remained flat, cold, like the surface of a frozen lake in midwinter.

She was silent for several long seconds, just looking at them.

Then, in a voice that was flat, calm, and devoid of emotion, she uttered one word.

"Okay."

The twenty contestants, who were already on high alert, moved almost simultaneously. They weren't amateurs. They were the best representatives of their academies. So they attacked with surprising coordination for a makeshift alliance.

Attacks came from all directions. Energy arrows from Arclight shot forth, sharp stones flew, close-range fighters charged at high speed, and various elemental and illusion skills from other academies filled the air.

Yukie didn't move from where she stood.

She simply raised her hand again—but this time, not to freeze everything. From the ground around her, meter-thick walls of ice grew instantly, forming a perfect protective dome around her. The attacks slammed into the ice walls with explosions and showers of energy, but not a single one penetrated.

Then, the ice reacted.

From the surface of the walls, hundreds of ice spikes the size of arms shot out like guided missiles, each heading for a specific target—every contestant who had attacked. Their speed was extraordinary. Some contestants managed to dodge or parry, but many did not. Cries of pain rang out as the ice spikes pierced shoulders, legs, or shot past dangerously close as warnings.

But Yukie wasn't finished. With a subtle motion of her fingers, the air around the attackers suddenly turned intensely cold. Their breath turned into thick fog that instantly

froze, forming a thin sheet of ice on their faces and clothes, critically slowing their movements.

Then she moved.

For the first time since the fight began, Yukie stepped forward. But her movement wasn't like running. It was like gliding—ice formed a slick path under her feet, allowing her to shift with near-invisible high speed.

She appeared in front of an Arclight archer. Before the man could nock another arrow, a short ice spear had formed in Yukie's hand and stabbed his hand, disarming him. A light kick to the chest sent him flying backward, and before he hit the ground, ice had shackled his ankles to the floor.

She pivoted. Two attackers in brown uniforms came from both sides. Yukie didn't dodge. From her arms, two long ice blades formed. One horizontal slash, and both fell with non-lethal but incapacitating chest wounds.

The fight lasted less than a minute.

Twenty of the best contestants from various academies lay on the ground, some shackled by ice, others clutching bleeding wounds.

No one was dead—Yukie had deliberately avoided lethal strikes. But no one could get up and fight anymore. They were defeated. Easily. In fact, it seemed that Yukie was putting in no real effort.

She walked among the fallen, her steps calm. Almost all the contestants avoided her white gaze, ashamed and defeated.

Then she stopped in front of the Arclight man who had spoken first—the "spokesman." The man tried to get up with one hand, the other clutching the wound in his thigh where Yukie's ice spike had struck.

Yukie looked at him.

"If you truly wanted to defeat me, you should have attacked silently."

The Arclight man was silent for a moment, then gave a bitter chuckle. "Would that have worked? A silent attack... against you?"

Yukie shook her head, once.

"No."

Then, she raised her foot and kicked the man's chest with controlled force.

Thud.

His body was thrown several meters, and before he hit the ground, he glowed and vanished—extracted from the simulator by the safety system due to a critical condition.

Yukie looked around at the remaining contestants still lying on the ground. They all, one by one, began to glow and vanish too, forcibly ejected after their defeat.

Within seconds, the plaza that had been filled with twenty contestants was now empty again. Only Yukie stood in the middle, alone once more, surrounded by the remnants of a battle that disappeared as quickly as it began.

She let out a small sigh that was almost inaudible, then turned and resumed walking toward the highway that had been her original destination, as if she had just cleared a minor obstacle on her way.

Outside, the Colosseum fell silent for a moment, then erupted with a roar louder than ever before. Admiration and awe blended into one.

Chapter 185: Chapter 185 - Turn and Fight

The air around us was thick with dust, ragged gasps, and the sharp scent of fear. The thunderous rumble of over a hundred Rabid Roosters behind us was like the accelerating drums of death.

"Someone has to do something!" yelled a contestant in GOTE Academy's olive green uniform, his face slick with sweat and grime. "We can't keep running like this! They're faster than us over distance!"

My mind raced. I glanced back, estimating the numbers. Roughly a hundred. Maybe more. But I also surveyed the group now clustered around me—thirty-one contestants, faces etched with panic, anger, and exhaustion, but also... potential.

Thirty-one Awakeners, mostly Rank A, some Rank B. That was not an insignificant force. Until now, they'd been fighting alone and scattered. But if they could cooperate...

"I have a plan," I said, my voice cutting clearly through the stomping feet and monster roars.

"A PLAN?!" shrieked the blue-haired contestant, his face full of disbelief. "What kind of plan? To get us killed faster? This is all your fault, you bastard!"

"Yeah, what's your plan?" asked another, his voice dripping with skepticism. "It better get us out of this, since you started it!"

"If your plan doesn't get us out of this situation, you should just shut up!" added a red-haired woman from Lockfield Academy, her eyes blazing.

"Listen first," I cut in. "We can't keep running. Look at our condition."

I pointed around. Several contestants already looked pale, their breathing shallow, their knees trembling. "Our stamina is limited. Theirs isn't. They'll chase us until we drop one by one, and the system will extract us."

"So what are you proposing?" asked the GOTE contestant from earlier, his voice still tense but with a note of curiosity.

"We turn around," I stated simply. "We attack."

A brief silence. Then...

"ARE YOU INSANE?!" several voices yelled in unison.

"Over a hundred Rank A and B chickens, plus one Rank S! You want us to commit suicide?!"

But amidst the protests, a different voice emerged. A short woman with wavy black hair cut short and sharp eyes, wearing Drakefield's charcoal black uniform, stepped forward.

"That... is not a bad plan," she said, her tone flat yet firm.

All eyes turned to her. She shrugged. "He's right. Running isn't an option. We're getting tired. Every minute we run, we lose stamina, they get closer. Better to use our remaining strength to fight, on ground we choose, with preparation."

"But... how?" asked a young contestant, his voice trembling. "Even if we pool our strength, that Rank S monster... we can't defeat it."

All their eyes returned to me. That was the core question.

"The zone boss," I began, making sure every word sounded confident. "The Giant Rabid Rooster. I'll deal with it."

A heavier silence fell. Even the Drakefield woman raised an eyebrow.

"Just you? Alone?" asked the burly man, skeptical.

"Yes."

"And how will you do that? You've thrown your sword at its body multiple times. It didn't work!"

"I can sever its head," I answered, though I wasn't entirely sure myself. But I had to make them believe. "But I need you all to cover me. Hold back its horde. Give me the space and time to focus on the boss."

I looked at the Drakefield woman. "You. What's your name?"

"Raven," she answered shortly.

"Raven. Can you coordinate them? Split into groups, some holding the front, some attacking from the sides, some guarding the rear?"

Raven glanced at me, then looked at the other still-doubting contestants. She nodded. "I can. If they'll listen."

"You hear that?"

I looked around, meeting each pair of still-fearful, uncertain eyes. "This is a tournament. We're here to fight, not run. Every monster you kill is points for your academy. And if we work together, we can clear this entire zone."

In some eyes, fear began to shift into glimmers of resolve.

"But... if we lose..." whispered one contestant.

"If we lose, the system extracts us. Same as if we keep running, exhaust ourselves, and get taken down by these chickens," I explained.

The contestants exchanged glances. Rapid whispers. Raven looked at them, then nodded at me. "They agree."

"Good," I took a deep breath. "Raven, organize them. Form ranks. Defenders in front—those with shield abilities, enhancements, or long-range weapons. Those with wide-area attacks, ready to thin the horde. The rest, guard the flanks and rear, make sure nothing slips through."

Raven immediately moved, her authoritative voice cutting through the last doubts. "You and your group to the front! GOTE and you with defensive abilities, make a barrier! You to the left flank, attack with precision! The rest follow me on the right, hit fast and fall back!"

The previously disorganized group began to move, following her commands with a sudden alignment of survival instinct. They might not fully trust each other, but they trusted structure, a plan.

I looked towards the end of the street, where the shadow of the Giant Rooster was beginning to appear, surrounded by a sea of thirsty red eyes.

Under Raven's firm direction, the thirty contestants had formed a rough but effective defensive formation. At the front, contestants with defensive abilities—the burly man from Atlas Academy projecting a shimmering yellow energy shield, a group summoning stone walls from the cracked earth, a woman emitting a translucent blue barrier—stood in a line, a living wall.

"Hold! Don't let them break through!" Raven yelled from the right flank, where she led a fast-attack group. She already held a pair of short, dark-aura gleaming axes.

The first wave of Rabid Roosters—about twenty—slammed into the defense. The sounds of impact, scraping claws, and shouts filled the air. Energy shields vibrated, stone walls cracked, but they held. For now.

"Wide-area attackers, NOW!" Raven commanded.

From behind the defensive line, a group of contestants—likely from element-specializing academies—unleashed their attacks. Fireballs, pillars of ice, lightning spears, and shards of sharp stone rained down on the roosters trying to breach. Small explosions erupted, instantly killing some Rank B roosters and wounding the Rank As.

Meanwhile, I wasn't idle. I stood slightly behind but still on the front line, my gaze fixed on one target: the king.

The Giant Rabid Rooster paused, watching its minions being held back. Its four eyes blinked, as if processing this new situation. Then, its tooth-filled maw gaped open, releasing a roar that made the ground tremble.

ROOOOAAARRKKK!!!

It stomped forward, crushing some of its own Rank A roosters in the process, intending to charge directly into our defensive line. That would destroy everything.

"Not so fast," I growled.

[Mindrender] was already back in my hand after my last throw. I swung my arm back, then hurled it again with all the strength in my body.

The sword shot forth, embedding itself right between two of the Giant Rooster's eyes, at the base of its beak.

THWACK!

SKREEEEEEEEEE!!!!

Unbelievable pain. The Giant Rooster halted its advance, its head thrown back by the impact. Black blood gushed. And most importantly—its attention was now fully on me.

Its blazing red eyes, filled with pure hatred, locked onto me. It forgot the defensive line, forgot its minions fighting. For it now, there was only one target: me, the one who had wounded it repeatedly.

"Good," I whispered. "Come here, big chicken."

I turned and started to run, but this time not away. I ran along the side of the battle, drawing it away from the main group. I wanted it focused on me while the others handled the horde.

The plan worked. With a roar of fury, the Giant Rooster changed direction, following me. Its pillar-like legs crushed anything in its path—wrecked cars, building debris, even some Rank A roosters that didn't dodge in time.

"Cover him!" a man yelled in my direction, swinging his axe at a Rank A rooster's neck. "We'll handle the rest!"

I gave a sharp nod, keeping up my run. But I didn't run too fast. I maintained distance, ensuring the Giant Rooster kept following but couldn't get close enough to attack effectively. I made sudden turns, forcing it into awkward course changes, fueling its frustration.

Behind me, the battle between the thirty contestants and the eighty or so remaining Rabid Roosters intensified. Shouts of command, monster roars, and the sounds of ability explosions echoed. They were cooperating—defensive groups rotating as one tired, attackers focusing fire on wounded monsters, flanking groups like Raven's launching quick strikes and retreating.

Meanwhile, I led the Giant Rabid Rooster to a more open area—a shattered parking lot surrounded by ruined buildings.

I stopped in the middle of the lot and turned. The Giant Rooster halted about fifty meters away, its breath coming out in plumes of black smoke from its maw. All four eyes fixed on me with boiling hatred.

"Okay, big chicken," I said, summoning [Mindrender]. I gripped it tightly. Now, time to face it directly. No more running. I had to defeat it.

The Giant Rooster raised one massive leg, then stomped it down.

BOOM!

A shockwave spread, cracking the ground. Then, with surprising speed for its size, it charged.

The true one-on-one battle had just begun.

Chapter 186: Chapter 186 - Sonic Scream

Thanks to the continuous damage inflicted by [Mindrender]—and even though this simulated monster didn't possess true sanity, there was some kind of aggressive AI triggered by pain and threat—the Giant Rabid Rooster's attention was completely fixed on me. It no longer commanded or coordinated its flock. All that remained in its blazing red eyes was the desire to crush me.

It charged forward, its massive legs tearing through the asphalt of the parking lot.

I braced myself, knees slightly bent, [Mindrender] held in both hands for a powerful strike. My plan was simple: when it got close enough, I'd jump, dodge the direct attack, and deliver a decisive slash to its neck.

But this Rank S monster wasn't that straightforward.

When we were just meters apart, instead of continuing its charge or pecking, the Giant Rooster suddenly halted. Its four eyes blinked in sync. Then, its tooth-filled beak gaped wide, not to bite, but to...

SKREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!

The shriek that erupted wasn't just a loud sound. It was a visible, physical soundwave—a rippling, white shockwave of air that distorted everything, blasting forth from its maw like a sonic cannon blast.

My eyes widened. This... this was unexpected.

The wave shot out with incredible speed. Anything it touched—wrecked cars, concrete debris, lampposts, even a few unfortunate Rank A roosters still behind me—shattered into pieces. It was like being erased from existence by an invisible giant hand. Dust and debris flew, creating a fast-moving cloud of destruction heading straight for me.

Deep in my gut, danger alarms screamed at their loudest. I had no time to think. My reflexes took over. I instantly activated [Aegis Pendant] manually with a mental push, even though I knew I didn't need to as it would trigger automatically.

BRRRZZZZT!

A translucent bluish energy shield immediately formed around my entire body, wrapping me like a second protective skin. Just in time.

The soundwave hit.

DUNNNGGGGG!!!!!!

My [Aegis Pendant] shield vibrated violently, fine cracks like spiderwebs instantly appearing across its surface. The pressure was so immense I felt my bones creak, and my feet were forced to scrape backward several meters across the asphalt.

But the shield held. For a few critical seconds.

And in those seconds, my mind raced. It hadn't used this before. Why? Because a wide-area attack like this would destroy its own minions. That's why it only used it now, when its flock was fighting in the distance, and I was alone facing it. This monster was indeed intelligent.

The [Aegis Pendant] shield began cracking severely, almost shattering. But before it completely broke, I was already moving.

Using the momentum of the fading soundwave's pressure, I pushed off the ruined ground with all my might and leaped...

Towards it, through the remnants of the still-shaking sonic wave.

The world around me seemed to slow. I could see swirling dust particles, flying metal fragments, and the Giant Rooster's still-gaping maw.

My target was its neck.

I swung [Mindrender] with all the concentrated strength in my body into a single slash.

SWOOOOOSH!

My sword blade sank deep into the side of the monster's neck, just below the head, cutting through most of the muscle, bone, and data vessels simulating life. The satisfying crunch of bone echoed.

GRAAAAAAKKK!!!

A tremendous roar of pain erupted, but this time it sounded choked. Its massive head was nearly severed, held on only by torn flesh and skin. Black blood gushed like a fountain.

But before I could pull my sword free and finish the slash, something happened that made me curse inwardly.

From the nearly severed neck stump, flesh moved at an unnatural speed.

The torn muscle fibers reached for each other, fusing. The broken bone straightened. The blood stopped gushing. Within seconds, the wound that should have been fatal... healed rapidly. Not completely, but enough to stop its head from dangling dangerously.

Dammit!

I landed roughly on the ground a few meters away from it. The Giant Rooster now looked at me with different eyes—still full of hatred, but now also with... caution. And a deeper rage. Its neck still showed the deep slash mark, but it was no longer bleeding.

I stood up, breathing a little heavily.

'Fuck, my body's too tired and sleepy for this.'

Realizing its deadly sonic blast didn't manage to hurt me—and in fact gave me a chance to inflict a near-fatal wound—the Giant Rabid Rooster seemed to decide on a change in tactics. The momentary caution vanished, replaced by a more primitive, wilder, and more berserk fury.

With a roar full of frustration, it charged again. This time, there were no more measured special attacks. Just raw strength, speed, and the desire to destroy me with claws, bites, and kicks.

I didn't retreat. Instead, I advanced to meet it.

As its fridge-sized claws swept horizontally towards me, I jumped aside swiftly, my Agility letting me move like the wind. The claw smashed into a pile of debris behind me, pulverizing it to dust.

Before it could retract its claw, I was already close. Mindrender swung, slashing at the front leg that was like a pillar. My blade cut deep, hitting bone. Black blood spurted.

The rooster lifted the injured leg, losing its balance for a moment.

I gave it no time. I darted forward, under its huge body, dodging a wild kick from its hind leg. As I emerged on the other side, I was already swinging my sword towards its chest, aiming to pierce its heart.

Clang!

But this time, it was more wary. The feathers on its chest suddenly hardened, like a layer of steel. Mindrender only left a deep gash, but didn't penetrate.

Tch. It was adapting.

I immediately dodged, turned, and retreated a few steps. The Giant Rooster turned, its four eyes radiating pure insanity. It went berserk—spinning its body rapidly, its hard-feathered tail whipping around the area like an iron whip.

I jumped backward, feeling the wind from its tail pass by my face. But its rampage didn't stop. It kept spinning, creating a vortex of dust and debris, closing in on me.

I ran in a circle, keeping my distance, my eyes searching for an opening. Fatigue was setting in heavier. My muscles screamed, and the sleepiness I'd been holding back since the beginning began gnawing at my concentration.

But I had no choice.

When the rooster stopped spinning for a moment, maybe dizzy, I saw my chance.

The leg I'd injured earlier was still slightly unsteady.

I darted forward again, this time not attacking directly. I feinted an attack towards the uninjured leg, making it lift that leg to defend. But at the last moment, I changed direction, slid between its two legs, and with [Mindrender] drawn, I slashed at the inner thigh of its rear leg.

Slash!

A major muscle was severed.

The rooster staggered, almost falling. I seized the moment. I quickly scrambled up its spiny, bony back, avoiding the spikes, and reached its neck.

It felt me. It writhed, trying to shake its body to throw me off. But I was already gripping a spine at the base of its neck tightly with one hand, while the other raised [Mindrender] high.

"Die, you damn chicken!" I growled, then with every last ounce of strength I had, I slashed.

SWISH-CHONK!

This time, no regeneration was fast enough. The blade cleaved cleanly through the already badly wounded neck. The Giant Rabid Rooster's huge head detached from its body, flew several meters through the air, and then exploded into a spectacular burst of red and black data.

Its headless body swayed, then slowly began to glow and vanish as well, leaving only a large stain on the ground.

[POINT +100] flashed large in the air before me, then disappeared.

I landed with my knees bent, breathing heavily. My arms and legs trembled. But it was done. The zone boss was finally down.

Outside the Simulator.

The host, who had been tensely following the fight on the main screen, erupted in a cheer of elation.

"LOOK! LOOK! ADAM SOCHERON HAS DONE IT! He defeated the Rank S monster, the Giant Rabid Rooster! With incredible tenacity, speed, and precision! A truly impressive display from the Sword Saint's son!"

"AND REMEMBER, FOLKS," he continued with a sly grin, his voice dropping slightly as if sharing a secret. "This spectacular victory didn't come from a vacuum! Adam started it by dragging a whole horde of other contestants into his mess! A strategy that... could be called rather villainous, but proved effective at dividing the monster forces! Cunning or clever? You be the judge!"

With the death of the Giant Rabid Rooster—their leader and progenitor—the remaining horde of Rabid Roosters still fighting the thirty other contestants underwent a drastic change.

They didn't run. They didn't become fearful.

They became even wilder.

Without control from their leader, their pack instincts collapsed, replaced by blind rage and confusion. Their crows turned into a chaotic, panicked, insane cacophony.

"Dammit, they've gone crazy!" shouted a man from the front line, as two Rank B roosters lunged at him simultaneously, ignoring any counterattacks.

The previously organized defensive line began to falter. A mass rampage from dozens of panicking Rank A and B monsters proved harder to hold back.

I sighed. There was still a bit of energy left in my exhausted body.

I jumped, rejoining the fray. [Mindrender] in my hand was still faithful, though it felt heavier than before.

I didn't immediately attack the densest crowds. Instead, I focused on the highest-point targets—the Rank A roosters that were breaking through the line or wounding exhausted contestants.

One Rank A rooster managed to break through from the left flank. Its gaping maw bit down on the arm of a female contestant who was bent over, out of breath. The woman screamed, her body instantly glowing before she vanished, eliminated from the simulation.

Just as she disappeared, I was already there. My saber landed on the rooster's neck from the side, ending the monster instantly.

[POINT +30]

And the slaughter continued.

Chapter 187: Chapter 187 - Silent Agreement

I kept slaughtering. Every Rabid Rooster that approached, every monster still rampaging, became a target for [Mindrender]. My movements might not have been as fast or lethal as at the start, but they were still enough to finish off these disorganized creatures.

My eyes weren't just focused on the monsters, but also my surroundings. I watched the other contestants struggling, some nearly falling, others managing kills. But in my heart, a colder thought ran: If possible, let them get eliminated by these chickens first before I kill the monsters. Fewer contestants meant less competition for points later. And with my body this tired, every little advantage mattered.

The battle continued brutally but one-sidedly. Without their leader, the chicken horde lost direction. They were still dangerous, but uncoordinated. One by one, they fell. Sometimes by me, sometimes by the remaining contestants.

About fifteen minutes later, the last crowing and roaring echoed, then... silence.

The area that had been full of chaos and fury was now quiet, broken only by heavy breathing and the sounds of people trying to calm themselves. I looked around.

Of the thirty-one contestants who fought alongside me, only nineteen remained standing. The other twelve had been eliminated—severely wounded by monsters and extracted by the system.

'They really aren't to be underestimated,' I thought, looking at these survivors. They endured the monster wave and internal competition. They were indeed selected students.

I didn't join them. Instead, I walked a short distance away, found a pile of rubble high enough to sit on, and took a seat.

The distance between me and the other group was about ten meters—far enough for privacy, close enough to see any threats. I needed to rest. Really rest. My body demanded sleep, but the best I could get right now was to sit and catch my breath.

In the distance, the nineteen contestants seemed to form smaller groups. Though from different academies, they clustered based on who had fought side-by-side earlier—one

group of four, a group of three, several pairs, and a few loners like myself. They were talking amongst themselves, maybe sharing experiences, or... planning something.

I observed them through half-closed eyes, trying to look more tired than I actually was.

And right on cue, a moment later, three men detached from their groups and started walking towards me. They were from an academy whose uniform I didn't quite recognize—dark brown with a tower-like emblem. All three were young men, about my age, with friendly expressions.

"Hey," said the one in front, a guy with curly brown hair and a wide smile. "Mind if we sit here?"

I just nodded.

They sat around me, not too close, but close enough to be uncomfortable.

"Why not join the others?" asked the second guy, a larger man with a voice trying to sound familiar.

"I prefer being alone," I answered flatly, my eyes looking straight ahead, not at them.

"Ah, understandable," chimed in the third, a skinny guy with glasses. "That fight was really impressive. You... you actually killed a Rank S monster solo. And you're still a student, amazing."

I just nodded again. Inwardly, I sneered. A few minutes ago, you were probably among those cursing me for bringing the monster horde. Why the sudden friendliness now?

"I... I'm actually a huge fan of your father," the curly-haired guy continued, his smile widening. "The Sword Saint. A legend. I idolize him. So seeing you fight earlier... it was like seeing his shadow."

I didn't respond to their flattery or confessions. I just sat there, regulating my breath, while my hand rested casually near the hilt of [Mindrender] which I'd leaned beside me.

They exchanged a brief glance, then the burly man spoke again.

"But... this tournament is about teamwork, right? Our academy... we're not from a big one like Nine Stars. So we have to cooperate."

And in an instant, all three moved.

"And sometimes... to win the tournament and make our academy proud, we have to do difficult things," the bespectacled guy added, his voice now losing all pretense, becoming flat and dangerous.

The burly man lunged forward, his fist aimed at my face at full speed. The guy with glasses next to me produced a short dagger from his sleeve, stabbing towards my ribs.

And the curly-haired guy behind me—who had apparently repositioned without me noticing—brought out a rope with a weighted sickle at the end, trying to snare my neck.

But I was already wary.

I threw my body to the side, dodging the fist that nearly hit my face. As I spun, my hand clamped down on the wrist of the glasses guy holding the dagger, twisting it hard until the bone cracked. The dagger fell.

"ARRGH!" the man screamed.

But I didn't stop. In the same motion, I pulled the now-stumbling bespectacled man in front of me, using him as a human shield against the weighted rope from behind. The rope landed on his own teammate's back, entangling him.

"What—?!" the curly-haired guy yelled, confused.

I released my grip on the now-entangled glasses guy and jumped back a few steps, creating distance. My saber was already in my hand.

The three men were now in a chaotic position—one clutching his broken wrist, one entangled by his teammate's rope, and the rope-holder looking bewildered.

"You think I didn't know your intentions?" I said, my voice cold.

The burly man whose punch had missed now snarled, drawing his real weapon—a short war hammer. "Doesn't matter. Three against one, you're still tired. We'll still eliminate you."

They repositioned, more cautious this time. But their expressions had changed—from false friendliness to hard determination, and a little anxiety that their initial plan had failed.

I raised my saber, a thin, humorless smile touching my lips. "Go ahead. Try again."

At the same moment, I glanced around quickly while keeping the three enemies in front of me under observation. The atmosphere in the area had changed drastically. The post-monster battle silence had been broken by the sounds of clashes and ability explosions.

Across the field, a quiet guy from GOTE Academy who had fought calmly earlier was now being ganged up on by a group of four from a different academy.

He tried to hold his ground, using formidable earth manipulation abilities, but the numbers were against him and exhaustion was taking its toll. In seconds, a combined attack—an energy arrow from range and a shock attack from up close—sent him sprawling. His body glowed and then vanished. Eliminated.

On another side, Raven from Drakefield was also in trouble. She was surrounded by three people—two men and a woman—attacking her in coordination. Raven fought fiercely, her axes spinning fast to block attacks, but I could see she was being pushed back.

Of the nineteen contestants remaining, Raven and I were the only representatives from top-tier academies still in this immediate area—me from Nine Stars, her from Drakefield.

The other sixteen people, though from different academies, had somehow formed a silent agreement. An agreement to eliminate the biggest threats first: the contestants from top academies who were individually too strong.

I wasn't surprised at all. In fact, it made sense. In a competition where only sixteen academies could advance, cooperating to eliminate the overly strong individuals was a good strategy to give their own smaller academies a chance.

Their reasoning was sound. But it wasn't clever enough. And indeed, I had anticipated this possibility from the start.

The problem was: I was very tired. The fight against the Giant Rabid Rooster and clearing its horde had drained a lot of my energy. Plus, these sixteen people—each had their own unique skills and abilities they might not have fully revealed yet.

They were the selected Rank A and B Awakeners from their academies. As for me... aside from high physical stats, I had no real combat abilities. My cheat skills like [Time Stop] or [Mind Control] were too precious to use here, in front of thousands of spectators and the monitoring system.

Two more people detached from the crowd and started walking towards me. They joined the three already surrounding me. Five against one. And at the same time, the three original attackers—now angry and frustrated their initial plan failed—decided to attack again.

The burly man charged first, his fist swinging with crushing intent. I didn't dodge. Instead, I stepped forward, into the arc of his swing. Before his fist gained full momentum, I kicked the side of his knee.

CRACK!

His knee bent the wrong way. He screamed, losing balance. I gave him no time. My right elbow slammed into his chin, sending him falling backward. He didn't get up—but

his body began to glow, a sign the system was saving him due to critical injury. Eliminated.

One.

The curly-haired guy with a short sword attacked from the side, a quick stab to the ribs. I pivoted, letting the sword miss by centimeters, then my saber swung horizontally.

He tried to parry, but the force of my slash was too great. His short sword was knocked away, and my saber cut across his stomach. He staggered, clutching what he thought was a severe wound, but before that could happen, his body glowed and vanished.

The bespectacled guy with the broken wrist, seeing two of his comrades eliminated in seconds, panicked. He turned and tried to run. But exhaustion and pain slowed him. I threw my saber—the sword shot like an arrow, piercing his back. He collapsed, then also vanished.

All three were eliminated in under twenty seconds.

I took a deep breath, summoning my saber back to my hand. My body screamed for rest, but not now.

The two new arrivals stopped several meters from me. Their faces were pale, having witnessed firsthand how quickly and efficiently I eliminated three opponents at once, despite being exhausted.

"Monster," the woman whispered, her voice trembling. "You really are a monster."

I ignored her comment, not waiting for them to attack. I took the initiative.

Chapter 188: Chapter 188 - Arc of Betrayal

I shot forward to face the last two attackers. The woman with the electric energy whip and the man with the tonfa—or side-handle baton.

The electric whip lashed out with surprising speed, leaving a blue trail in the air. I dodged, feeling the air near me vibrate with electric energy. The man with the tonfa immediately closed the distance, his rapid combos fast and precise, targeting joints and vital points.

They were strong Rank A Awakeners. Their combination of long and close-range attacks was effective, and at full strength, they might have been a serious challenge.

But I didn't have time for a drawn-out game.

When the electric whip lashed again, this time I didn't fully dodge. I raised [Mindrender], letting the whip coil around the blade. Electricity jolted through my hand, making my muscles twitch, but I held on. Then, with all my strength, I pulled.

The woman was caught off guard, stumbling forward off-balance. The man with the tonfa tried to attack to distract me, but I'd anticipated it. With my left foot, I kicked a chunk of concrete debris on the ground towards him, forcing him to pause for a split second.

And in that pause, I was already upon the woman. My free hand punched her stomach hard.

The air rushed from her lungs. Before she could react, my saber swung, slashing across the side of her neck. Not fatal in the real world, but enough for the system to deem it a critical injury.

Her body glowed, then vanished.

The man with the tonfa, seeing his partner eliminated, panicked. He retreated a few steps, trying to create distance, but I didn't give him the chance.

I threw [Mindrender] straight at his chest. He tried to block with his tonfa, but the force of my throw was too great. His tonfa was knocked aside, and my sword embedded itself in his shoulder. He fell, and before he could rise, I was on top of him, one blow to the head knocking him out. His body also vanished.

Five people eliminated. My breath was now truly ragged. My muscles trembled, my vision slightly blurred. But I couldn't stop.

I glanced around. Of the sixteen contestants left, seven more were now walking towards me with serious expressions—they had learned from their comrades' mistakes and were now coming in a larger group.

And on the other side, Raven was still holding on, but her situation was getting worse. She was now surrounded by five people, and I could see a wound on her arm slowing her movements. She wouldn't last more than another minute.

My mind raced. I was alone, exhausted, surrounded. Raven was alone, wounded, also surrounded. But if we worked together...

It was the only chance. After all, only the two of us were from top academies in this area. Our mutual enemy was everyone else. Simple logic: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And to survive, I had to cooperate with her.

I made a decision.

Instead of waiting for the five people approaching me, I shot forward. Diagonally, cutting across the field at the maximum speed I could still muster. Pushing my tired body as fast as possible, making me look like a fast-moving shadow among the ruins.

The seven people moving towards me were startled, yelled, and tried to give chase, but I had a head start.

Raven and her four attackers didn't even notice my presence until I was very close. One of Raven's attackers—a man with a large mace—was raising his weapon high, ready to smash Raven who was trying to parry attacks from two others.

No time to think. I leaped, [Mindrender] swinging from behind.

Swish!

The man with the mace never got to finish his swing. My sword severed the arm holding the mace, causing his weapon to fall. Before he could scream, my side kick slammed into his waist, knocking him down. His body began to glow.

Raven, startled by this sudden intervention, glanced at me. Her sharp black eyes narrowed, but I saw a flash of recognition—she understood.

We didn't need to speak. We immediately stood back-to-back. I faced the five attackers closing in from one direction, plus the three remaining attackers from Raven's side. Raven, though wounded, stood firm behind me, watching the opposite direction.

"Thanks," she whispered.

"Don't thank me yet," I replied, eyes still fixed on the enemies. "We're still surrounded."

And we were. The twelve remaining contestants had now organized themselves. They formed a loose half-circle around us, maintaining a safe distance, but clearly intending to overwhelm us with numbers.

Their faces were full of determination. They'd seen what I could do. They knew Raven was tough. But they also knew we were tired, wounded, and outnumbered.

One of them, a woman with neatly tied blonde hair, stepped forward slightly. "You two... you're amazing. But this is over. Just surrender. Leave the simulator with honor."

Raven snorted. "Screw you."

Raven and I then fought fiercely against the twelve of them.

The twelve contestants no longer held back. They knew this was their last chance. If they failed to defeat us here, they'd be eliminated one by one. So they brought out everything.

From behind their line, a man with an energy bow fired a blazing lightning arrow. It shot with near-invisible speed, splitting the air with a hiss. Beside him, a woman raised her hands, and the ground beneath my feet suddenly turned into sucking quicksand, grasping my ankles.

"Aegis!" I shouted in my mind, and the bluish shield appeared again, just as the lightning arrow struck.

BRZZZT-CRACK!

The shield shattered completely this time, breaking into pieces, but it held off the attack. The quicksand still held, but with my Strength, I ripped my feet free roughly.

While I was busy with the long-range attacks, three others—two men with swords and a woman with a spear—charged from the front. They attacked simultaneously, covering all angles of escape.

But I wasn't alone.

From behind me came a low roar almost like a beast's. Raven had transformed. Her eyes, once sharp and black, now emitted a faint red glow. Her axes, once swung with precision, now spun wildly, creating a deadly vortex around her. She seemed to have entered some kind of 'berserk' mode—increasing power and speed at the cost of defense and control.

She lunged into the group attacking me from the side, her axe smashing through one man's sword and immediately continuing into his shoulder. The man went down, eliminated before he could scream.

I seized the opening. With my saber in hand, I leaped forward. I let the spearwoman's thrust miss by my side, then slashed at the wrist holding her spear. She screamed, retreating. The two swordsmen tried to flank me, but I pivoted, my sword swinging in a wide arc, forcing them back.

The battle became chaotic, brutal, and intense. Raven was like a whirlwind of death, smashing anything that got close, sometimes even nearly hitting me. But somehow, we developed a rhythm—she disrupted their formation, created openings, and I moved in, delivering precise, lethal strikes.

One by one, they fell.

I slashed across the chest of a man trying to sneak up from behind, sending him away in a glow. A shame there were no points for eliminating other contestants.

Raven smashed a woman's shield and sent her flying with a kick that made her body vanish mid-air.

I dodged a jet of fire from an elemental specialist, then hurled [Mindrender] into his chest.

Raven deflected a volley of energy arrows with her spinning axe, then leaped and brought her axe down on the archer's head.

Five... six... seven... the number of people I eliminated kept climbing.

I kept fighting. Every swing, every kick, every sword throw reduced the number of enemies. Blood and sweat soaked the ground. Cries of pain, roars of anger, and the clashing sounds of weapons filled the air.

And finally... suddenly... silence.

I stood, breathing heavily, [Mindrender] in my hand dripping 'blood' that slowly evaporated. Around me, the bodies of the eliminated contestants had vanished, leaving only stains and marks of battle.

Raven stood about three meters away, also breathing hard. Both her axes were still clenched tightly in her hands, but her body swayed slightly. She looked worse than me—the wound on her arm was worse, there was a gash on her cheek, and her uniform was torn in several places.

We looked at each other. On Raven's face was a thin, strange, almost crazy smile. The faint red glow in her eyes was fading, returning to black.

"We... did it," she said, her voice hoarse.

I nodded, trying to calm my breathing.

We both smiled. A smile of victory, relief, and maybe a little disbelief. Out of twelve opponents, we had survived. We had defeated them all.

But then, something changed in Raven's eyes.

Her thin smile suddenly widened, grew sharper. Her eyes, which had just returned to normal, suddenly flashed, and that faint red glow returned—brighter and more intense.

And in an instant, Raven moved towards me. With the speed still left from her berserk mode, she swung her right axe in a swift, arcing strike aimed at my back.

"Finally," she hissed, her voice dripping with satisfaction. "Now it's just you."

Time seemed to slow. I saw the axe closing in, the glint of the blade, the expression on Raven's face which was now a mocking smirk.

She had never intended to cooperate until the end. She had only been waiting until all the other enemies were gone. And now... now it was my turn.

Chapter 189: Chapter 189 - Twisted Nurturing

Raven's expression shifted in an instant—from mocking to pure shock. Her eyes widened, as if she couldn't believe I was just like her, planning to attack after the battle ended, and that we'd both struck at the same moment.

But I was faster. Only a fraction of a second, but it was enough.

Before her axe swing could touch my neck, my [Mindrender] had already shot from high to low. I didn't try to block—I immediately counterattacked, taking the risk that her axe would hit.

The two weapons crossed the narrow space between us.

Swish-thud!

The sound of air from the axe that almost landed, then the sound of parting flesh.

My saber slashed diagonally from Raven's left shoulder down to her right hip. Not overly deep, but enough for the simulator system to deem it a serious injury.

Raven's body stiffened. The shocked expression on her face turned to... astonishment, then anger, and finally... acknowledgment. She looked at her wound, which was beginning to glow, then stared at me.

She didn't vanish immediately. The system gave a few seconds.

"Bastard..." she hissed, but her voice wasn't angry. Instead, there was a tone of being impressed. "You... were thinking the same thing from the start, huh?"

I nodded.

Raven gave a hoarse chuckle. Then, her body glowed, and in an instant, she vanished from the simulator. Eliminated.

Outside the Simulator

The host, who had almost run out of words following this chain of drama, finally found his voice again.

"INCREDIBLE! ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE! ADAM SOCHERON HAS DONE IT AGAIN! NOT ONLY FACING A MONSTER HORDE AND OTHER CONTESTANTS, HE ALSO MANAGED TO DEFEAT RAVEN FROM DRAKEFIELD IN A BRIEF, INTRICATE BATTLE! HE NEVER TRUSTED ANYONE! THIS IS A VALUABLE LESSON IN BATTLEFIELD AWARENESS!"

The camera showed a close-up of my face, now truly alone in the middle of the ruined, battle-scarred area.

"AND NOW... HE IS THE ONLY ONE LEFT STANDING IN THIS ZONE! ALL MONSTERS AND OTHER CONTESTANTS HAVE BEEN WIPED OUT! THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE VICTORY!"

I lifted my head, looking at the sky. The large rankings were still displayed there, the numbers constantly changing.

TOP 10 PARTICIPANTS:

1. YUKIE ICEBLOOD (NINE STARS) - 5,220 Points
2. LEONHARDT HALSTROM (ARCLIGHT) - 3,150 Points
3. ADAM SOCHERON (NINE STARS) - 3,080 Points
4. MAXIMUS TREYBERN (NINE STARS) - 1,950 Points
5. ISABEL MERCEDES (NINE STARS) - 1,800 Points
6. ISAAC MOONFALL (DRAKEFIELD) - 1,750 Points
7. SERAPHINA GRIMGEAR (GOTE) - 1,700 Points
8. ATTICUS ASHBORNE (LOCKFIELD) - 1,550 Points
9. IVY SILGRACE (ECHELON) - 1,500 Points
10. SIENNA FROSTELLE (DRAKEFIELD) - 1,250 Points

ACADEMY RANKING:

1. NINE STARS ACADEMY - 13,050 Points
2. ARCLIGHT ACADEMY - 4,500 Points

3. DRAKEFIELD ACADEMY - 4,200 Points

4. GOTE ACADEMY - 4,000 Points

5. LOCKFIELD ACADEMY - 3,800 Points

Over half an hour had passed. The five representatives from each of the thirty-six academies—one hundred eighty contestants—had been fighting fiercely. Their scores had increased drastically. Nine Stars was still leading by a significant margin, especially thanks to Yukie who kept adding points at an insane rate.

I let out a long sigh, deciding to leave this area and head somewhere else.

But fate had other plans.

As I walked down the ruined city street, from behind the corner of a collapsed building, emerged a figure I knew very well.

Maximus.

He stood in the middle of the road, about twenty meters from me. His uniform was a bit dirty, with a few scratches, but he looked like he still had plenty of energy left. His dark brown eyes stared at me coldly, and within them was an unconcealed fire of competition and hatred.

We faced each other in sudden silence.

The air around us felt dense, filled with a tension that was almost visible. The atmosphere was anything but friendly.

And right at that moment, in my peripheral vision, a system notification appeared.

[Revenge Quest Generated]

A transparent window appeared before my eyes, visible only to me.

[REVENGE QUEST]

TARGET: Maximus Treybern

OBJECTIVE: Face him and defeat him in a humiliating manner.

REWARD: 3000 EXP and 1 Random Item.

[Accept: y / n]

I read the quest quickly. My system was responding to my hatred and my desire for revenge against Maximus.

While I was still processing it, Maximus spoke, his voice flat but full of challenge.

"Adam, let's settle what happened in the locker room," he said, his fists already clenched. A dangerous aura of power began radiating from his body.

I looked at him, then a cold, cynical smile spread across my lips. I casually selected 'y' in the quest window before my eyes.

"Alright, Maximus," I said, my voice now lower, more dangerous. "I'll give you a lesson you'll never forget."

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A few hours earlier, in a quiet room within the Socheron estate before the tournament's commotion began, Charlotte Haverty held the hands of her closest friend tightly. The air in the room was heavy, filled with a tension different from the tournament preparations outside.

"Del," whispered Charlotte, her voice trembling with a mix of desperation and resolve. "Please... come to your senses. How long will you let yourself stay like this? This... this isn't you."

Delilah Socheron, the Star Witch, sat gracefully on a plush sofa. Her golden hair shimmered under the lamplight, her face calm yet with a strange light in her golden eyes. She looked at Charlotte with genuine, mild confusion.

"What do you mean, Charlie?" she asked, her voice gentle as always.

Charlotte took a deep breath, forcing herself to continue. "Are you going to let your life stay like this? Let him keep controlling you? Adam... that stepson of yours... is a monster."

Delilah's graceful expression changed. Her cheeks flushed slightly, and at the corner of her beautiful lips, a small, strange smile appeared.

"That's true," she answered, her voice becoming lower, more tremulous. "He is a monster, especially in bed."

Charlotte felt as if she'd been slapped. She bit her lip, trying to ignore the indecent images that suddenly flashed in her own mind.

"D-Del, please be serious."

"I am serious, Charlie," Delilah leaned back, her eyes gleaming.

Charlotte, desperate, tried another approach. "Think of your daughters! Angeline... your sweet little angel. Did you see what that monster did to her? He corrupted her! She used to be such a sweet girl, but now..."

"Angeline is still the sweetest girl," Delilah cut in firmly, but the smile on her face didn't fade. "And she's happier than ever."

"And Gwen!" Charlotte pressed on, her voice rising. "Are you really okay with seeing her treated as less than an animal? She's the child you were so proud of, right? Can you bear to see her fall that far?"

"Gwen deserved that," Delilah answered, her voice flat this time, more like the dignified Star Witch. "It was necessary to make her better. I've seen what she's been doing to Adam all this time. And Adam was only guiding her. After that... we've grown closer as a family."

"Family?!" Charlotte felt like she was talking to a wall. She squeezed Delilah's hands tighter. She couldn't hold back anymore. Tears began to well in her eyes. "Please, Delilah! You are the Star Witch! We can't keep going on like this! We're just... nothing more than sex slaves for that monster! Fight his control! I know the real you inside must be suffering terribly, please come out!"

Delilah looked at her with a gaze that was suddenly full of pity, as if looking at a child who didn't understand.

"You're so strange, Charlie. I'm suffering? Haven't you seen how much I enjoy it?" She paused for a moment, then continued with a voice full of pent-up passion.

"He is the only man who has ever wanted me that much. He loves me... and I love him. You know my two marriages were only contract marriages. Adam made me realize that no matter how strong I am, I'm still a woman who wants to be loved and cherished like any other woman."

"But it's wrong!" Charlotte snapped, her voice hardening for the first time. "Everything he's doing is wrong! IT'S ALL WRONG, DELILAH! YOU KNOW THAT, DON'T YOU?"

Delilah was silent for a moment. Then, in a calm yet deadly voice, she replied, "I understand what you mean, Charlie. Loving my stepson to the point of intimacy with him is wrong. Letting my stepson sleep with both my daughters is wrong. The four of us being together is wrong."

She stopped, then that terrifyingly sweet smile spread across her lips.

"But does it matter? What matters is we are all happy and growing closer as a family. It may not be a normal family, but we are a family that loves each other the most. Besides... nothing else matters. The opinions of others, morals, rules... none of it matters."

Charlotte stared at her, and in her heart, a small, desperate voice whispered, 'My best friend has fallen too deep. Is it really impossible to wake her up?'

Delilah seemed to read her mind.

"You seem dissatisfied?" she asked, tilting her head. "But weren't you the one curious about what it felt like to be a real woman?"

Charlotte immediately flared up. "Dissatisfied?! He treats me lower than a prostitute! How could I possibly be satisfied being treated like that by that monster?!"

"Oh, Charlotte..." Delilah sighed a fake sigh, then her eyes sparkled mischievously. "But you were the one begging to be taken by my son that time. And you seemed to be enjoying it very much."

Charlotte's face flushed crimson, a mix of deep shame and burning anger, because deep down, it was true. "That—That's because Adam did something to my body! That's why I ended up like that! And Adam did something to your body too, Delilah! And to your daughters! That's why you all became like this!"

Delilah wasn't provoked. Instead, she smiled wider, more self-satisfied. "I know he did something to me and my daughters. But it doesn't matter as long as we are happy."

Her hand casually stroked her own voluptuous breasts beneath her dress. "Can't you see these? Adam enlarged them until no bra fits properly, and made it so I could lactate. It's truly amazing. I can do something I couldn't do before as his mother."

Charlotte blushed even deeper, unable to stop herself from glancing at Delilah's chest, which indeed looked larger and fuller than before. She felt a shameful moisture beginning to seep between her own thighs. No. Not now.

"D-Del, stop with that lewd talk!" she protested, her voice weak.

But Delilah didn't stop. She instead rose from the sofa, and with a graceful step that made Charlotte freeze, she approached.

"Oh, poor Charlie..." she whispered, her voice like a caress. "You've never been honest with yourself. You enjoyed it very much, didn't you? Being treated like that."

Before Charlotte could react, Delilah was too close. Her smooth but quick hand slipped inside Charlotte's business skirt, past her panties, and directly touched her damp sex.

Charlotte choked, unable to move, unable to scream. She could only stare with wide eyes.

Delilah withdrew her hand, then raised it between them. On the tip of her delicate finger, unmistakable clear fluid glistened under the light.

"Look," Delilah whispered, her voice full of triumph. "How naughty you are, Charlie. Just talking about my son gets you into this state."

Charlotte felt the world spin. The deepest, most shameful humiliation crushed her. She wanted to disappear. Wanted the ground to swallow her.

But Delilah wasn't finished. She brought her face closer, and in a voice only Charlotte could hear, she whispered something that pierced straight to the core of Charlotte's hidden fears and desires.

"Be honest, Charlie. The reason you're talking to me like this... is so I'll tell Adam. So that my son will punish you harshly, right? Because that's what you really want. To be punished. To be treated more roughly. Because that's what arouses you."

Each word was like a blow. Charlotte trembled. She couldn't deny it. In her darkest heart, she knew it was true. And that knowledge destroyed her even more.

Delilah drew back, wiping her finger elegantly with a handkerchief, as if she had just done the most ordinary thing. "I'll tell him, Charlie. Don't worry. I'm a broad-minded woman. Tonight, after the tournament, I'll make sure Adam gives you... the special lesson you so desperately want."

Charlotte could no longer speak. She just sat there, her body trembling, caught between burning shame and the dark hope beginning to coil deep within her womb.

Chapter 190: Chapter 190 - Hidden Agendas

Outside the Simulator.

The host, who had just finished commenting on Adam's overwhelming victory in his zone, suddenly shifted his attention to another screen that had just split the feed.

Camera spotlights and the simulator's sensitive microphones captured two figures standing opposite each other on a ruined city street.

"OH! LOOK! TWO REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE SAME ACADEMY HAVE FINALLY MET!" he shouted with full enthusiasm.

"ADAM SOCHERON AND MAXIMUS TREYBERN! TWO YOUNG MONSTERS FROM NINE STARS! IMAGINE IF THEY JOIN FORCES! WITH THEIR COMBINED STRENGTH, THEY WOULD BE ALMOST UNSTOPPABLE IN THIS SIMULATOR! THEY COULD DOMINATE ANY ZONE AND RACK UP POINS INCREDIBLY FAST!"

The audience cheered.

But then, the host fell silent. Because on the screen, Adam and Maximus did not greet each other, did not exchange nods, showed no signs of unity.

Instead, they advanced on each other, and from the giant screen above the arena, they could hear their conversation. The distance between them shrank. Twenty meters... fifteen meters... ten meters...

Their postures were tense, their gazes locked with unmistakable, real hostility. The atmosphere around them, even through the screen, felt incredibly charged, crackling with electricity ready to explode.

"W-Wait... what's happening here?" the host spoke again, but this time with a confused and wary tone. "They... they don't look like they're about to cooperate. They look like... like they're about to attack each other!"

And indeed. When the distance was just five meters, Adam raised [Mindrender] in a ready stance. Maximus clenched both fists, a visible aura of physical strength beginning to emanate from his body, scattering the dust around him.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" the host almost screamed, his voice full of disbelief. "ARE THEY REALLY GOING TO FIGHT?! FELLOW TEAMMATES?! IN THE MIDDLE OF A TOURNAMENT WHERE COOPERATION IS KEY?!"

The camera showed a close-up of Adam's cold, disdainful face, then Maximus's face, filled with anger and determination.

"THE ATMOSPHERE BETWEEN THEM... IS INCREDIBLY TENSE! SO MUCH HISTORY AND CONFLICT IS VISIBLE BETWEEN THEM!"

The host shook his head, still in disbelief. "BUT... WHY?! WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON BETWEEN THEM? AND WHERE IS THEIR ACADEMY HEAD? OPHELIA THE BLAZEWALKER? WHY ISN'T SHE INTERVENING OR AT LEAST GIVING ORDERS TO HER STUDENTS NOT TO FIGHT AMONG THEMSELVES?!"

The camera panned frantically across the academy heads' stands, searching for Ophelia's face. But her seat among the other academy heads was empty. Ophelia Blazinger was nowhere to be seen.

Of course, she wasn't. Because the Head of Nine Stars Academy was currently lying exhausted in a luxury hotel room, fast asleep—or more accurately, passed out from exhaustion—after a "special treatment" session lasting the entire night from one of her students, none other than Adam himself. Her body was now recovering from a very... intense therapy session.

Meanwhile, in the Nine Stars contestants' stand, Instructor Violet Albestorm sat with a stiff, upright back. Her usually cool, beautiful face was now contorted with real anger. Her purple eyes stared sharply at the screen showing Adam and Maximus on the verge of fighting. Her hands were clenched in her lap.

"Instructor Violet," Ace whispered, "should we do something?"

Violet shook her head, her jaw locked.

"There's nothing we can do from here." But her voice trembled with frustration. She had warned them in the locker room. She had told them to settle their affairs later. But they clearly weren't listening.

On the screen, Adam and Maximus were very close. Only three meters separated them. The fight between Nine Stars' two stars was about to begin—in front of hundreds of thousands of spectators, and it would be a disgraceful spectacle for the academy's reputation.

The host, after a moment of confusion, finally returned with even more excitement.

"WELL... AS THE HOST, I CAN'T INTERFERE. BUT THIS... THIS IS GOING TO BE VERY INTERESTING. WHEN WILL WE EVER SEE A SHOW LIKE THIS AGAIN? TWO OF THE BEST STUDENTS FROM THE TOP ACADEMY, NOT FIGHTING MONSTERS OR OTHER ACADEMIES... BUT EACH OTHER. WHAT WILL HAPPEN? WHO WILL WIN? AND WHAT WILL IT MEAN FOR THE NINE STARS TEAM?"

He paused, making the atmosphere ominous.

"WE'LL FIND OUT SOON."

Zephyr sat in a posture that looked relaxed, but in reality, every muscle in his body was alert. His black leather-gloved hand pressed against his temple, fingers massaging slowly as if trying to relieve unseen tension.

His eyes were tightly covered by a layer of white cloth. But sight wasn't an issue for Zephyr. His consciousness spread outward like an invisible spiderweb, reaching every corner of this giant Colosseum.

He didn't push to his maximum limit—unlike the night when his consciousness expanded to two hundred kilometers to face that monster. This time, it was enough to blanket the entire arena, detecting every strange energy vibration, every hidden malicious intent among the spectators.

And because of that, he easily found Yumi.

'It's been a long time since I've seen her,' Zephyr thought to himself, a vague sense of nostalgia touching his heart. 'After this tournament is over, maybe I could—'

But he immediately shook his head, dismissing the thought. 'No. Not now. Today is too busy. This tournament... is actually the perfect time for me to strike and carry out my plan. I must stay focused.'

He let out a slow breath, then shifted his full attention back to the main screen, where a much hotter scene was heating up inside the Dungeon Simulator.

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Inside the simulator, the air between us felt like a steel wire stretched to its breaking point.

I narrowed my eyes, looking at Maximus who stood opposite me in a fighting stance. He did the same—his dark brown eyes stared at me with equal intensity, full of unhidden determination and hatred.

No more words. No more warnings.

We charged at the same time.

My steps shot forward, [Mindrender] in my hand swinging from overhead down with the intent to cleave him from shoulder to hip. But Maximus didn't dodge. Instead, he stepped in, his clenched right hand sweeping sideways, parrying my sword slash with the side of his forearm.

CLANG!

The loud sound of metal clashing echoed like two blades meeting. The vibration traveled through [Mindrender]'s hilt up my arm. I was surprised—but not completely.

Maximus gave a thin smile, a smile full of superiority. "My arms and legs are trained like steel, Socheron. Don't expect to cut through them easily."

As he spoke, his low kick was already shooting towards my knee. I jumped back, avoiding the bone-crushing kick, while simultaneously swinging my sword horizontally towards his stomach. Again, Maximus parried with his left arm and used the momentum to drive his body forward, his right fist swinging for my face.

I parried with [Mindrender]'s hilt, then pushed him back with a counter-kick to his chest. He absorbed my kick with a strong horse stance, only shifting half a step.

We retreated simultaneously, back to a safe distance, watching each other with breaths starting to grow slightly heavy.

'Impressive,' I thought, reassessing. His speed, strength, and endurance had drastically improved compared to the locker room earlier. Maybe he was still holding back then.

Those iron-like hands were clearly not just a metaphor—whether it was a hardening skill, extreme physical training, or maybe a relic. Whatever it was, it allowed him to fight directly against sharp weapons without injury.

In the back of my mind, the quest I had just received reappeared. Defeat him shamefully. What did that mean? Did I have to defeat him and then strip him naked in front of thousands of spectators? Or force him to surrender in a humiliating way?

Then, Sonya's image appeared in my head. Maximus's sister. Right now, she must be watching on TV at their home. I wondered—what was her expression as she watched the younger brother she was so proud of face me? Would she support me? Or would she hope for Maximus to defeat me?

'Defeat shamefully...' I pondered again. Maybe it had to do with his pride. Maximus was the type of person who took immense pride in his physical strength, his prowess as an Awakener, his position as the top representative. So, to shame him, I had to tear that down. I had to defeat him in a way that shattered that pride.

I took a deep breath, then I raised [Mindrender]. The black saber glowed for a moment, then vanished from my hand.

Maximus furrowed his brow, wary. "What's your meaning?"

I extended both my hands, palms open, showing I was now unarmed.

"I thought this would be more fair," I said, belittling him. "I'll defeat you with just my bare hands. That seems to be your pride, right? Your physical strength?"

Maximus's expression changed instantly. His face, which had been full of wariness, now flushed with boiling anger. His eyes narrowed, veins pulsing at his temples. You could almost hear his teeth grinding.

"You... you're looking down on me?" he hissed, his voice low and dangerous.

"Not looking down," I countered, still with the same tone. "Just thinking that if I use a weapon, it'll be over too quickly. And I want to enjoy this."

It was a direct insult. And it worked perfectly.

"Heh!" Maximus couldn't believe the loser he used to beat up had become this daring.

He didn't answer with words anymore. He answered with action.

With a roar of anger, he charged. This time, his speed was even higher. His right fist shot out like a cannonball, targeting my face. I didn't dodge completely. Instead, I pivoted my body, letting his fist pass by my cheek by mere centimeters, then my hand caught his wrist.

The strength behind that punch nearly broke my grip. But I held on tight. Then, using his own momentum, I pulled him towards me while placing my foot behind his leg.

Maximus stumbled, losing his balance. But he didn't fall. With quick reflexes, he twisted his body, breaking my grip with a spinning motion, then his back kick swung towards my ribs.

THUD!

I blocked the kick with my arm, but its force pushed me back a step. It felt like being hit by a large rock. But the smile on my lips didn't fade.