

D. Extraction 881

Chapter 881 Denise's Conclusion

Denise just finished noting the unique energy patterns and the enhanced neural pathways of the Time Manipulator that set them apart from ordinary humans, when something unexpected happened.

She noticed subtle signs of movement!

Wasa's fingers twitched, and his breathing became more pronounced.

'Not good!'

Denise's eyes widened in alarm.

'He's waking up,' she thought as her mind raced to find a solution.

As expected of a Time Manipulator, Wasa's physique and control over his body were extraordinary.

Denise quickly activated a series of Magic Arrays around the study table. The intricate symbols glowed with a soft blue light, designed to induce sleep and suppress consciousness.

She watched anxiously as the arrays took effect, but Wasa's resistance was formidable. His eyelids fluttered, and he began to stir.

Realizing that the Magic Arrays alone wouldn't be enough, Denise reached for a vial of special fluid. This concoction was designed to enhance the effects of the sleep-inducing magic. However, it had some negative effects and she could only hope that Wasa's physique could handle it.

'Losing 4 or 5 Spirit Strands shouldn't be problem.' Denise thought.

She then carefully injected the fluid into Wasa's arm, watching as it spread through his veins.

Wasa's movements slowed, but he continued to fight against the enchantment. His eyes were already wide open, but it seemed like he was just being delirious.

Denise wasn't sure if Wasa was fully aware of what was going on in his brain or if he was just instinctively fighting whatever was limiting his body.

"I don't want to kill you... So just stay asleep..." Denise muttered as she knew that if he increased the Magic Array's effect and the fluid in this man's body, there would be a high chance that he'd die.

She didn't want a precious subject to perish since it would be a waste and lastly, Vale might scold her for killing this man!

Nonetheless, Denise knew that she would be helpless against this man once he woke up. Apex Guardian also doesn't have enough skills to bind a Time Manipulator. Well, this android could probably kill Wasa but not suppress him.

'One more...'

Denise's heart pounded as she prepared another injection, this time with a stronger dose. She administered the fluid carefully. Her hands were steady despite the urgency, which showed her skills.

Thud...

Finally, Wasa's resistance began to wane. His eyelids drooped, and his body relaxed. Denise let out a sigh of relief, but she knew she had to be cautious. The Time Manipulators' control over their bodies was remarkable, and any lapse in vigilance could be disastrous.

'This has to be noted...' Denise thought as she noted every change that had happened just now. Of course, she has an android that doesn't look like a human doing that for her. It was the special table or device itself that was filled with various pieces of equipment she needed for dissection or studying any human beings or otherworldly beings.

Anyway, with Wasa securely asleep, Denise decided to examine the other Time Manipulators to see the difference between a weaker and stronger Time Manipulator.

She was hoping that this experiment would be very useful.

However, before she could continue, Magnus suddenly appeared behind the door of her laboratory.

"You can come in, Sir Magnus." Denise said.

As Magnus came in, he immediately looked at the Time Manipulators who were about to get opened by Denise despite being alive.

"Err... I just felt some disturbance." Magnus said as he cautiously looked at the Apex Guardian who would rarely leave Denise's side.

"Everything's fine... I'm just studying them a bit. I'm sure that Sir Vale wanted me to do this... If I need some help, I'll call for you." Denise said.

Magnus finally smiled and nodded.

"As long as you're not going to kill them yet, I'm sure that Sir Vale wouldn't mind whatever you do to them. Good luck, Miss Denise."

With this said, Magnus finally left as he decided to continue his experiment. Just now, he obtained a vial containing the special potion that could turn an ordinary human being into a talented individual that could practice an Arcane Path...

Based on the reports, any human who was able to consume this potion could guarantee that they could at least practice one of the Arcane Paths and if they were average, they should be able to choose any four or five Arcane Paths to practice.

Of course, these forcefully enhanced people could only practice one Arcane Path but it was still an incredible creation that would surely advance this realm...

'But I have a bad feeling about this...' Magnus thought as he shut himself inside his laboratory to also conduct a study.

Meanwhile, Denise restarted her study after Magnus left and moved to Liora, who lay on a nearby table. As she fully undressed the lady, Denise confirmed that there were no Edo Stones hidden other items that could interfere her research.

Denise then activated the Magic Arrays around Liora, ensuring she remained unconscious. She should not make the same mistake.

After taking a deep breath, she began her examination, noting the same enhanced neural pathways and unique energy patterns. Liora's body, like Wasa's, seemed attuned to the flow of time. She continued studying her for three hours before feeling satisfied...

It seemed that she was getting better at this, as Liora didn't show any signs of waking up at all.

Next, Denise turned her attention to Cyper. She repeated the process, activating the Magic Arrays and administering the special fluid. This time, however, Cyper's resistance was strong, but Denise's preparations held firm.

'Weird...' Denise muttered as she felt that she was missing something. Nonetheless, this was part of the research and she could only continue.

Finally, Denise approached Elysia. After injecting her and activating the array, Denise observed Elysia's body succumbed to the enchantment.

Denise then resumed her studies. She compared the four's physiologies, noting the similarities and differences. Each possessed unique traits, but the common thread was their heightened sensitivity to temporal fluctuations.

Denise's mind buzzed with possibilities. She could harness this knowledge to create golems with time-manipulating abilities, or perhaps develop new spells and enchantments. The potential was limitless, but she had to proceed with caution.

As she worked, Denise couldn't help but marvel at the complexity of the Time Manipulators. Their abilities were both fascinating and formidable, and she was determined to unlock their secrets.

After about three days of studying without sleep, Denise finally left the laboratory with an exhausted face...

'It's a pity... I can only make five golems with the same trait with one Time Manipulator. I can't be too wasteful... There must be a way...'

Chapter 882: Heinz

Hours turned into days and into weeks as Denise continued her research. She meticulously documented her findings, and her excitement grew with each secret she uncovered.

Initially, she believed that if she used the bodies of the Time Manipulators as materials for her golems, it would be limited a lot because the Time Manipulator's Spirits were just too weak. They could not be torn apart more than five times.

However, she realized that these future golems might be very loyal to her, but they would just be too weak. They would probably be incapable of fighting against a Dragon who had the ability to control a small domain where Time Spells just don't work.

Because of that, she immediately changed her perspective on how she should approach this. Instead of limiting their potential by taking whatever was useful to them, she felt that strengthening these current Time Manipulators with her own method should be a lot better.

Denise liked this approach a lot.

The Time Manipulators' bodies held the key to new realms of magic, and she was determined to explore them all.

Denise knew that Vale had entrusted her with this task for a reason, and she was determined not to disappoint him.

With patience and perseverance, she realized that the bodies of the Time Manipulators had incredible adaptability, and this was probably what set them apart as they could endure the 'passage of time.' The only problem was their Spirit.

They had a strong Soul that could control Time and perfect physique that could endure Time, but weak Spirits!

This was incredibly frustrating for Denise at first, but she felt that this was also her opportunity.

And so, in the quiet of her laboratory, Denise worked tirelessly, her mind focused on the task at hand. The future was uncertain, but one thing was clear-she was on the brink of a breakthrough, and she wouldn't stop until she had achieved her goal.

Soon, she confirmed that turning these Time Manipulators into half-androids would be the best way to make them stronger and completely loyal to them, even without using Mind Control Spells.

After all, it was already quite taxing to Vale, who doesn't really have a strong suit with Psychic Arts.

They should really find a way to make people follow them obediently and turning them into half-androids should be their best option...

However, this won't be very easy.

After some hesitations, Denise found her communication crystal and contacted Vale...

"Hi Vale... Thank you for answering me. I hope that I'm not disturbing you... It's been a while since you sent those Time Manipulators..." Denise said.

"Right... Magnus mentioned that you're doing something about them." Vale replied. He wasn't really that inclined to extract them, so he didn't mind if Denise had a use for them instead.

"Yes... I might be needing Sir Heinz's assistance. Can I ask him to visit my laboratory?" Denise suddenly asked.

The name Heinz made Vale feel a bit nostalgic. That person was terrifying when he just had just entered this world.

Vale couldn't help but smile after hearing this name.

He no longer bears a grudge against this old man.

According to Magnus's reports, Heinz actually tried to make contact with their group when their castle was in trouble... However, because of some concerns of the Dark Arts Faction, he was blocked by the prominent clans under the Faction.

They seemed to be wary that Heinz would defect to Vale's organization.

Heinz was one of the best Dark Alchemist after all. The only problem about him was that he was too unconventional and had decided to create a new Path for the Dark Arts instead of improving the current ones.

"Go ahead, Denise... You can ask for his help. You have all the authority to complete this project of yours. I'll inform Magnus about this so he can also help you manage these small things." Vale replied.

In the meantime, within the territory of the Dark Arts Faction, in a secret alchemy laboratory, the old Dark Alchemist Heinz stood before a row of containment cells.

Each cell held a Demon Saint, their bodies were also bound by powerful enchantments and runes.

The Dark Arts Faction had captured these formidable beings, and now it was Heinz's task to study them and extract their powers to control the Corrupted Divinity. To be exact, he was only one of 50 Dark Alchemists who were trying to accomplish this.

After all, Divinity was basically the peak of the Arcane Studies... Even if this was a Corrupted Divinity, it was still a power that was normally beyond their means.

They were incredibly lucky that many of these Demon Saints who were heavily injured by the Shadow Immortal many years ago had escaped through various means that would still land in their hands because of one of their Arcana...

Heinz's laboratory was inside an underground complex where there were also other laboratories for other Dark Alchemists...

Anyway, his room was filled with arcane instruments and bubbling cauldrons. Shelves lined the walls, crammed with ancient tomes, rare ingredients, and mysterious artifacts.

The intensity of Dark Magic in this place was also strong as he was waiting for the potions he made to be completely finished. However, the most interesting part about his small laboratory was the intricate patterns etched into the stone floor.

If Vale was here, he would surely recognize this as the same Magic Circle inside the Animus Haven Hall...

"All of you, stop working... We will start the extraction," Heinz suddenly said to several apprentices who were working in the laboratory.

They worked diligently, preparing reagents, maintaining the containment cells, and recording data.

Each apprentice was handpicked by Heinz for their skill and loyalty, and they knew better than to question his methods.

As soon as they heard about the extraction... They knew that it would cause some disturbance as the Demon Saint would try to fight back.

"Yes, Sir Heinz!" The apprentices answered.

Heinz then kept the communication crystal in his pocket and approached one of the cells, where a Demon Saint with crimson skin and glowing eyes glared at him.

Chapter 883: Heinz's Alchemy

Heinz had just finished talking with Denise and learned that this young girl had obtained a being that he would surely love...

Unfortunately, because of the involved confidentiality agreement, Denise couldn't tell what it was. However, Denise also hinted that it was an existence equal to Immortals and Demon Saints, but they were more interesting in terms of being research subjects.

Anyway, Denise needed his expertise in bio-mechanical alchemy, but not many people were aware that Heinz was actually an expert in this as well. Aside from that, Denise also needed his skills in Runic Gearsmith and his Dark Mystic Artificer's talent.

Although Heinz wasn't that great compared to many other Dark Alchemists in these two subjects, the fact that he also had a deep knowledge about the human or Arcanist's body would surely set him apart.

Finally, Denise offered some compensation to Heinz, like Dragon Blood and Immortal Blood. He would surely join and help with Denise's project. That would happen without a doubt.

However, Denise wasn't in a hurry to take him, and Heinz was also on a mission, so this could only be done later on.

Heinz composed himself as he kept the communication crystal in his pocket and approached one of the cells, where a Demon Saint with crimson skin and glowing eyes glared at him.

The alchemist's eyes gleamed with excitement as he felt that he would be very successful this time. He had a couple of years studying these Demon Saints, and now he was on the brink of a breakthrough.

"Begin the extraction process..." Heinz commanded as he initiated the process.

One of the apprentices stepped forward, activating a series of runes on the cell. The air was then suddenly filled with energy as the containment field intensified, holding the Demon Saint in place.

Heinz carefully inserted a needle into the demon's arm, drawing a vial of its blood. The blood shimmered with an unnatural light... It was proof of the demon's immense power.

This time, however, because of the Corrupted Divinity that was released, many of the apprentices felt pressured and suffocated. They weren't in a good condition... Every time they try to extract the Blood Essence of the Demon Saint, this would always happen.

Heinz moved to his workbench, where he began to analyze the blood. He added various reagents, watching as the mixture bubbled and changed color. His goal was to isolate the essence of the demon's power and understand how it could be harnessed and controlled.

The Dark Arts Faction wanted to obtain the power to control the Corrupted Divinity! The Dark Arts Faction may say to the public that they wanted to learn more about Divinity, but it truly meant that they wanted to control it.

As he worked, Heinz's mind raced with possibilities. The Corrupted Divinity seemed to be a force of chaos and destruction, but with the right approach, it could be tamed and used to further the Dark Arts Faction's goals.

The Demon Saints held the key since their powers were like a bridge between the mortal realm's Arcanists and the divine itself.

Heinz's experiments were meticulous and methodical.

Over the past couple of years, he had already tested the blood's reaction to different elements, noting how it responded to fire, ice, lightning, and others. He had already observed its behavior under various magical influences, recording every detail in his journal.

Heinz continued his work tirelessly, but this time, he believed that he would obtain the secret of the Corrupted Divinity.

While other Dark Alchemists were still trying to communicate with other Existence from other realms about the method to harness the Corrupted Divinity, Heinz moved from one Demon Saint to the next, extracting samples as he tried to ensure that the blood would reach the same after using Malevolent Spells...

However, each demon presented unique challenges, their powers manifesting in different ways. Some had control over destruction, while others wielded dark magic or possessed incredible physical strength.

One particularly challenging subject was a Demon Saint with the ability to manipulate shadows...

'Is it similar to the Shadow Immortal?' Heinz mused.

However, he noticed that the manipulated shadow didn't have the power of Corrupted Divinity itself, so he immediately learned that it wasn't similar to the Shadow Immortal, which had traces of Divinity everywhere.

Anyway, Heinz moved on as he felt that his method of finding a way to control the Corrupted Divinity was getting close.

Throughout his experiments, Heinz relied on his apprentices to assist him. They prepared the reagents, maintained the containment cells, and recorded the results. Heinz trusted them implicitly, knowing that their loyalty was unquestionable.

As the days passed, Heinz began to see patterns in his data. The essence of the Demon Saints held a unique resonance, a frequency that could be attuned to the Corrupted Divinity. He theorized that by combining the essences in the right proportions, he could create a catalyst that would allow him to control the chaotic energy.

'Indeed... I'm going in the right direction...'

Heinz's excitement grew as he approached the final stages of his research. He carefully mixed the essences, adding the final ingredients to the concoction.

The mixture suddenly glowed with a dark, pulsating light, which was a sign that he was on the right track.

With the catalyst complete, Heinz turned his attention to the Corrupted Divinity he had collected from the Blood Essence.

This Corrupted Divinity would normally dissipate after a few hours and would just be wasted. What he wanted to do was to stop it from dissipating, and from that, they would be able to start using the Corrupted Divinity itself!

These undying Demon Saints in prison would become their source of Corrupted Divinity for

that!

This solution may not be the one that the Faction was looking for, but this was another option they could use to harness Corrupted Divinity!

Soon, he activated a series of runes on the floor, creating a summoning circle. The air became cold as he began the incantation in an ancient language, calling forth a mysterious force...

'This is it... I will create a new Artifact that can wield Corrupted Divinity! With this power, the Dark Arts Faction will rise to new heights.'

Chapter 884 The Will of the Realm

Heinz stood in his laboratory, holding the newly created divinity crystal.

The dark, pulsating light within the crystal was proof of his success. He had done it—he had harnessed the power of the Corrupted Divinity. This crystal would allow him and any other Dark Arts Practitioner at the First-Class level to control this chaotic energy. It could still be modified to make it a lot better, but others could do this task.

Heinz felt relieved after confirming that this compulsory task that was thrown at him was finally completed.

He then allowed himself a rare moment of celebration. His apprentices also gathered around and for sure, their faces were filled with awe and admiration.

"Today marks a new era for the Dark Arts," Heinz declared, his voice resonating with pride. "With this divinity crystal, we can wield the power of the Corrupted Divinity. Our strength will be unmatched."

The apprentices cheered and their excitement were also noticed by the other Alchemists and immediately gathered around.

Although this crystal wasn't really the goal of their mission here, it was still a great breakthrough. Of course, Heinz knew that this was only the beginning and he decided not to submit the crystal to the Dark Arts Faction just yet. Instead, he would create more of these crystals, ensuring that their power was fully understood and perfected.

For the next month, Heinz worked tirelessly, refining his process and producing additional divinity crystals. Each one was a masterpiece, and he almost didn't want to part with them...

Nonetheless, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction as he watched his collection grow.

'This should be enough to leave this place...' Heinz thought as he wasn't really here because he wanted to... He was taken here together with other Dark Alchemists to use these Demon Saints for a larger project. Although he also liked the research that he made, it was still completely different to conduct your own research with your own volition.

Finally, after a month of relentless work, Heinz decided it was time to leave as he submitted all his findings to the Faction.

After another week of rest, he finally informed Denise that he was ready.

With a sense of anticipation, he made his way to Vale's Castle through the arrangement that Denise has made.

Upon his arrival, Heinz couldn't help but feel a chill seeing Vale's Castle. He still couldn't believe that the young disciple he had taken was now a renowned Immortal, surpassing in just less than a decade.

Anyway, he was soon escorted to Denise's laboratory by a strange golem...

'So this is the android I've heard about...' Heinz muttered to himself.

Although he didn't have a great talent for Golem crafting, he was still quite knowledgeable when it came to the creation of the core.

He was curious if Denise wanted his skills on this.

Soon, the familiar scent of alchemical components and the hum of magical energy filled his senses as he neared to Denise's lab...

"Welcome, Sir Heinz. It's been a while. I apologize for not greeting you outside." Denise said as he gestured for Heinz to enter.

"It's fine... Now, why are you trying to make this project of yours too mysterious? Heh, do you know that I even experimented on Demon Saints? Nothing will surprise me anymore." Heinz proudly said.

However, as soon he entered the lab, his eyes widened in shock. There, on the study tables, lay the bodies of four Time Manipulators!

"Denise," Heinz exclaimed, his voice filled with astonishment. "How did you come by such precious specimens?"

Denise glanced at the bodies, and a smile showed her lips. "Vale brought them to me. He captured them himself. I've been studying their physiology and abilities... To be exact, I want them to change their physiques with your knowledge of Runic Gearsmith and Dark Mystic Artificer."

Heinz approached the tables, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. "This is incredible. But... With that knowledge, are you planning to turn them into mechanical puppets?"

Denise smiled as she confirmed that Heinz had an idea about her plans... "I've been making progress, but it's slow. Their bodies are remarkably resilient, and their physique is unlike anything I've encountered. I'm planning to turn them into half-robots. After all, aside from Time Manipulation, their talents in other Arcane Paths are just at the beginner level. They also age really fast because of their ability to control time..."

"They age fast?" Heinz found this really unusual, but it certainly made sense to pay a price to control time.

"I have something that might help..." Heinz said as he found this project interesting.

In the meantime, in the heart of the Dark Arts Faction's grand hall, the Half-Immortals of the five main families gathered.

These families—Moontomb, Featherstar, Angelart, Ravinie, and Vermont—were the founders of the Dark Arts Path.

Today, they stood before a monumental achievement made by Heinz: the Divine Crystal, a creation that allowed even those who weren't Immortal to harness Divinity, even if it was Corrupted Divinity.

The fact that even an Arcanist of the First Class could wield Divinity could surely change the war that they've been planning for a long time!

At the center of the hall, on a platform of black marble, a dozen Divine Crystals pulsed with a dark, mesmerizing light. Nôv(el)B\\jnn

The Half-Immortals, each a formidable practitioner of the dark arts, gazed at the crystal with a mix of awe and elation.

These items may not be very useful for them, but they were something that they sought out if they wanted to start a war against another Arcane Faction.

After all, Half-Immortals aren't allowed to meddle in the war of Arcanists. That would be the same for Immortals if the other Factions have them.

The Will of the Realm would be the one to suppress these Immortals if they dared to kill mortals just for pleasure. A handful of mortals may not be enough to get severe punishment from the Will of the Realm, but if the Half-Immortals or Immortals had gone too far, they might be completely suppressed, killed, or even exiled by the Will of the Realm.

Chapter 885 Constance's Worry

Of course, if these non-Immortals or ordinary humans offended the Immortals, then that would be a different case if the Immortals retaliated. Not even the Will of the Realm could do about that.

"It is finally within our grasp," said Lord Moontomb with his deep voice. "The power of Divinity, even if corrupted, will elevate our faction's abilities."

Lady Featherstar nodded, her eyes also gleamed with excitement. "It's a pity we can't have a lot of them... Those Demon Saints produce Corrupted Divinity too slow..."

Despite her disappointment, her voice still sounded happy as she could imagine how those Priests, Exorcists, and Holy Knights would tremble at the sight of Dark Arcanists using the power created by Corrupted Divinity.

There was also the fact that the Church of the Lord of the Secrets started providing numerous potions that could turn an ordinary person into an Arcanist. Thanks to this mysterious potion, the issue of having a low number of Dark Arcanists was finally removed. After all, the potion helped them resolve the high death rate during the Dark Possession...

Consuming the Dark Possession Potion after the Arcanist Potion was actually so effective!

Thanks to that, the number of Dark Arcanists on their side had immediately increased.

Lord Angelart, known for his strategic mind, stepped forward. "We must use this power quickly. The Corrupted Divinity is potent and there's no way they could stop with this artifact... I suggest that we start sending a plague to their territories."

Lady Ravinie nodded at this as she was so eager to see the Holy Arts Faction suffer. They had been bullied by the alliance that the Holy Arts Faction created. Now that they have a chance to turn things around, they shouldn't miss it.

"This is a turning point for our faction. We must use our advantage before the Avatar of the Fortune Goddess recovers."

Lord Vermont, the eldest and most revered among them, raised his hand. "Then, let's start with the plague as Lord Angelart suggested."

The Half-Immortals nodded in agreement as they knew that the time had come. The Divine Crystal was a game-changer, a tool that could reshape the balance of power in their favor.

Lord Moontomb's eyes darkened with a vengeful glint. "They have thwarted us for too long. Let's start with the plague to make their healers busy..."

Lady Featherstar's smile was cold. "Indeed. Then, let's send our Necromancer to summon a horde of undead creatures at the edges of their territories. The Holy Arts Faction will be too preoccupied with the chaos to stop our advance..."

Lord Angelart nodded. "We must ensure that our actions remain secret. The element of surprise will be our greatest weapon. We will use the undead to weaken their defenses and send our Dark Magicians to the Holy City once their forces have spread out."

The Half-Immortals spent hours planning their strategy in order to bring down the Holy Arts Faction. They could not be too complacent just because they obtained the Corrupted Divinity Crystal.

They have to create numerous plans and backup strategies as they might not have another chance once they fail this attempt to route the Church of the Fortune Goddess and the Holy Arts Faction.

In the meantime, as the Dark Arts Faction was plotting to wage war against the Holy Arts Faction, Vale, approached the grand entrance of the Arcane Bureau's main branch.

Of course, he didn't exude an immortal presence. His appearance was carefully disguised to blend in with the other Arcanists.

He wore a simple robe and his aura was subdued to avoid drawing attention. As he entered the headquarters, he was greeted by Merlin, one of his trusted subordinates and the previous Overseer of this realm.

Merlin, now a special Director of the Bureau, found Vale immediately despite his guise because of their special connection, the Slave Mark.

With a respectful nod, he led Vale through the bustling corridors to his private office.

The room was filled with shelves of various documents, some magical artifacts, and intricate maps detailing various areas they around the continent.

Once inside, Merlin closed the door and turned to Vale.

"Lord Vale, may I ask the reason for your visit?" he inquired, his tone respectful yet curious. From the connection he felt, he knew that the one in front of him wasn't the Avatar but the real one.

Vale took a moment to observe the office, noting the meticulous organization and the faint hum Arcane Energy around.

"I just visited Constance... Ahh, you probably know her as Pearl," he began. "She mentioned that there could still be a problem in this realm even after we defeated the Abyss Invasion, the Time Manipulators, and even the Death God. She wasn't sure about this as well and only mentioned that it was an intuition she obtained after becoming a Spirit Immortal. As an Overseer, do you have any idea about this?"

Merlin frowned, deep in thought.

He considered the possibilities. His mind raced through the various threats and anomalies that could still pose a danger.

"The problems I could think of," he began slowly, "include the weakening of the Realm's Will, the potential return of the Demon Lord, or perhaps the presence of other successors of the Paragons had already arrived in the continent."

Vale's interest was piqued. "Other successors?"

Merlin nodded. "Yes, there are two other known successors of the Paragons. The Chaos Alchemist, who wields the Primordial Chaos Arts, and the Blood Soulcaster, who wields the Void Arts. These individuals possess powers that could rival our own. I believe that you are the third successor, Lord Vale, the Divine Extractor."

Vale absorbed this information... He already had a rough idea about this. "If these successors are indeed active, they could pose a significant threat. We need to be prepared."

Merlin agreed. "Indeed. The weakening of the Realm's Will is also a concern. It could lead to instability and make our realm vulnerable to external threats." Merlin said.

Well, he already guessed that Vale was the Divine Extractor after he got targeted by the Death God and the Demon Lord together with the Time Manipulators. It just couldn't be hidden from someone as knowledgeable as him.

Vale nodded at this, appreciating Merlin's insights. "Thank you, Merlin. Do you have information about these two?"

Merlin bowed slightly. "It is my honor to serve, Lord Vale. I already tried to investigate them, and the Arcane Bureau had guessed that the Lord of the Secrets might be hiding them..."

Chapter 886 Celebration

Vale wasn't too surprised after hearing this. Instead, he just felt that it would actually make a lot of sense that he had no idea about them until now.

The Lord of the Secrets was just too mysterious. Not even the other Eminence of the Sea or the Fortune Goddess dared to antagonize this Church, which was filled with unknown.

Furthermore, Vale knew that the Church of the Fortune Goddess had Holy Knights as their guardians. The Church of the Divine Sorcerer had various levels of Sorcerers. The Church of the Eminence of the Sea had Storm Knights, while the Church of the Three Paragons had Sacred Knights.

As for the Church of the Lord of the Secrets? He had no idea about it, or he simply couldn't recall the reports he had read from the Arcane Bureau.

Anyway, he just decided to ask Merlin about it.

"They're called Masked Archons, Lord Vale... No one knows about their backgrounds, but we know a bit about their abilities. They have incredible powers when it comes to Sealing Techniques... They weren't weak against any particular Arcane Arts and were known to be capable of sealing even the Demon Saints." Merlin explained.

"That's impressive... They sealed Demon Saints?" Vale muttered.

"Yes, Lord Vale. There were about 70 Demon Saints who had entered our Realm... Although our Faction eliminated about half of them, the other half was dealt with by the combined forces of the twelve Arcane Arts Factions, the Churches, and the various large organizations or those half-immortals behind the Royal Families or Imperial Families of some nations."

Vale nodded after hearing this explanation. He was indeed unaware of the other battles that had occurred aside from those places he deemed to be incapable of defending themselves. That was why he sent his Avatars, Lisa, and the others to places that would likely fall from the Abyss Invasion.

'Well, it's no wonder that the potion that could make anyone an Arcanist is so popular. After that invasion, they must've realized how vulnerable they are and wanted to change their destiny themselves.' Vale mused as he asked a few more things about these Masked Archons.

According to Merlin, these Masked Archons truly deserved to be the followers of the Lord of the Secrets. All their missions, which also involved the Arcane Bureau's special agents, were actually done exceptionally well... Whether it was assassination, human trafficking, or even stealing of various artifacts, they were done without any possible evidence leading to them.

The only reason why the Bureau knew that it was them was simply because there was no evidence left behind. Only these Masked Archons were somehow capable of doing that since they were able to receive the blessing of their Lord.

'The Blessing of the Lord of the Secrets, huh...' Vale gently nodded his head as he felt that it was interesting. Of course, he wasn't threatened by these Masked Archons, and he was simply curious about the plan of this mysterious Church if they were really hiding the Chaos Alchemist and the Blood Soulcaster.

Several weeks had quickly passed. Vale decided not to offend the Church of the Lord of the Secrets since he felt that they weren't really doing anything that would directly harm him.

After being an Immortal, he also felt the Will of the Realm's restriction. Although he was very powerful, he couldn't just harm the mortals, or he'd suffer.

It was something that he was able to feel as soon as he became an Immortal. He could only harm mortals if they offended him... Because of that, he felt less inclined to cause trouble by searching those two successors of the Paragons...

Nonetheless, Giorgi soon informed him that the expedition team was about to return from the Celestial Prison Realm!

Finally!

They had really taken a lot of time exploring that Realm, and Vale felt excited about the result of their investigation.

After all, if there was nothing in that Realm, they wouldn't take this long to return! They must've hauled some treasures and took their time to ensure that they didn't miss anything!

Whom~

Soon, a group of people from the Arcane Circle appeared, and Giorgi had been guarding them for some time.

Chad, the Half-Dragon. Odessa, the former Royal Mage. Jin, the Time Manipulator. Aurion, the True Immortal, and the Shadow Immortal's Avatar emerged with a wave of powerful aura spreading throughout the surroundings.

"Ugh..."

"This..."

Their group suddenly felt an overwhelming wave of weakness... It appears that they've been away from the Human Realm for too long, and their body needs to adjust first.

Furthermore, the journey through the portal itself had drained their strength significantly.

"I feel sick..." Chad muttered.

Unbeknownst to them, while two long years had passed within the Celestial Prison Realm, only two months had elapsed in the Human Realm.

Their mission had taken far longer than anticipated due to the vague nature of the Celestial's Perfect Vessel.

The search had been taxing, and there were moments when they doubted they would ever find it. Yet, after years of persistent pursuit, they finally succeeded.

With the Vessel in their possession, they were prepared to save Vale.

Soon, after they recovered their strength, they visited the Vale's castle as they wanted to see his condition.

However, upon their return, they were met with an unexpected sight. Vale's main body stood before them, already restored to perfect health.

"Vale!" Chad's eyes sparkled with relief and joy at the sight of their friend.

"Immortal Vale..." Odessa whispered, her voice filled with awe and reverence. She knew how powerful Aurion was, but this True Immortal was merely a subordinate to the Shadow Immortal. There was no way she wouldn't be impressed with this young man who had advanced from a normal Arcanist to an Immortal in just about a decade...

"Lord, it's good to see you again," Jin, the Time Immortal, said with a respectful bow. He was still a slave, after all.

On the other hand, Aurion simply nodded. His expression was serene, while the Avatar of the Shadow Immortal maintained a knowing smile.

Vale greeted them warmly. "It seems you've all been away for quite some time. We should celebrate your return," he declared, leading them towards the castle for a well-deserved celebration.

Chapter 887 Complete

During this time, the Avatar transferred all the information about their long journey to Vale... This happened almost in an instant but this process wasn't done through a certain spell. It was just a natural ability of the Avatars made from a part of his soul and divinity.

'Incredible...' Vale muttered to himself after learning what had happened in their journey and after realizing how much time they spent inside the Celestial Prison Realm.

Of course, he was also surprised about the Perfect Vessel that they'd found, including the new residents of this realm that they had recruited.

Unfortunately, the passageway that the Golden Key could create was too small for these new residents for dimensional travel... They still have to create a proper gateway that would help them lessen the burden of transporting people.

At the very least, they could already send a few of them here as long as he agreed to do so... These beings include not just beastfolks but also real Angels.

Aside from this, Vale also learned about the treasures they obtained. There were a lot of them, but what really caught his interest was the Towers themselves were part of the treasure!

Apparently, the 16 Towers of the Celestial Prison Realm had been transformed into toy-like structures about five inches in height! No one lives in these Towers right now. They were also no longer used as prisons, but they were now comparable to the Soul Towers, where Arcanists could train and such.

Furthermore, If he wanted to spend a lot of resources on these Towers, he could make them similar to Arcanist Tower instead of just using them to store resources, train people, or use them as a living space.

Lastly, there was actually a piece of news about Mennena's main body...

To be exact, her main body was actually in the Void Arts Prison Tower... As soon as they entered the Void Arts Tower, Mennena was somehow able to escape by using the small cracks that were made when they got transported inside. However, it just felt like a strange aura passed through them.

Mennena had then vanished completely... If not for the Avatar's senses, everyone else would've dismissed the phenomenon that they encountered.

Nonetheless, Vale still asked everyone about their journey as if he was still unaware of this. This time, he was able to know their perspective as well.

'Mennena...' Vale frowned as he heard this name once again. He already knew what had happened in the castle when Mennena and that Dragon called Aersus had appeared to cause trouble. From the looks of it, Aersus was still here hiding somewhere while Mennena was probably recovering right now.

Whether Mennena was an enemy or not, he wasn't exactly sure... He could only hope that she would not add to the problem.

After organizing his thoughts, he finally had a chance to talk with the others about their adventure inside the Celestial Prison Realm.

Chad shared this information with him and was pretty excited about it.

"We just need some Divine Crystals. With those Crystals, those folks in the Celestial Prison Realm will be able to enter... Ahem... There's actually an Asura Race among them." Chad explained and the last part was said in a low voice.

To be exact, there was only one member of the Asura Race who was still alive in the Prison Realm. The Asura was incredible and, perhaps, equal to an Immortal if he was able to recover to his peak strength.

"Asura, huh..." Vale muttered softly as he didn't think too much of it at first when he learned about it.

However, after considering it for a moment, its existence would surely help them understand more about the other races and methods of becoming an Immortal without being an Arcanist.

Furthermore, he recalled about the corpses they found.

"Right... Your Avatar is keeping those three corpses of Asura in his Spatial Ring. I'm not sure if you can use them though..." Chad added.

Vale nodded. According to his memories, the corpses weren't actually dried-up corpses. It was still somehow preserved, including the garments and various belongings on their bodies.

'I hope I can extract them... But if not...'

"They can probably help Denise in case I can't." Vale said as he trusts Denise's incredible ability. Furthermore, she was also learning with Heinz about the project she was doing with the Time Manipulators.

It would be very long until this young woman became a boss-like figure of numerous powerful golem creations that had the power equal to Immortals.

After all, the Apex Guardian alone was already something that was above the Half-Immortal level... It was something that could trouble the two Dragons as well.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the expedition group, a mysterious figure had slipped through the portal with them, vanishing into the shadows as soon as they arrived in the Human Realm.

This enigmatic presence went undetected, even by Vale, the Shadow Immortal.

Had Constance, the Spirit Immortal, been present, she might have sensed the faint traces of this intruder. However, she was absent from the castle, leaving the figure free to escape without encountering any barriers.

Whoosh~

Three hundred kilometers away, in a secluded dungeon within an Earl's Castle in the Milton Kingdom, the figure found a mirror. The dungeon was a cold, damp place, with walls covered in moss and the air thick with the scent of mold.

Chains and shackles hung from the walls. It was the remnants of the dungeon's grim past. The only light came from flickering torches, casting shadows in a gloomy dungeon.

As the figure approached the mirror, it began to glow with an otherworldly light.

The figure's form became clearer, revealing a young woman with outstanding features.

With a wave of her hand, her naked body was suddenly covered by a black energy before turning into a charming red dress.

"At last, I am complete!" Mennena exclaimed, gazing at her reflection with tears of relief. Her eyes, a deep shade of violet, sparkled with joy...

Chapter 888: The Asura

Mennena knew that her plans could finally continue after breaking free from that prison. She just needed some time to quickly recover to her full strength.

Indeed, despite her elation, she knew she had to remain hidden. Her body was not yet fully recovered, and revealing her presence too soon would alert the Immortals of this realm. She needed time to regain control over her powers.

"Tap... Tap... Tap..."

The dungeon's silence was broken only by the distant drip of water and the occasional scurrying of rats.

'Hu~'

Mennena took a deep breath as she had to calm her excited heart. She knew that the Paragons, those who had wronged her, would pay dearly for their actions. However, she had already waited a long time, and she could not make a mess right now.

"Paragons... You fools... I will have my revenge soon," Mennena vowed. Her voice echoed through the dungeon as she vanished into the shadows once more.

Her master plan was just beginning, and she would stop at nothing to reclaim her power and exact her vengeance.

Two months had quickly passed, and during this time, Jin and the others were able to complete all the things they needed in order to open a path to allow the previous prisoners of the Celestial Prison Realm to enter the Human Realm.

This matter was huge since they would certainly be suppressed by the Will of the Realm once they entered.

Furthermore, they could only let the others realize that they were planning to let hundreds of non-humans live peacefully in this realm. After all, this would be a huge change not just in their society but in the whole continent.

Although there were other races living here on the continent through various summoning attempts by numerous Arcanists throughout the century, their numbers were small and would rarely affect a society. A few Vampires, Sprites, Ghouls, or mutated animals were simply sources of materials and weren't a real threat to the world of Arcanists.

However, Vale's group would be bringing hundreds of beastfolks, members of the shadow race, and other mystical races, including Angels and an Asura!

No matter what, they would have to prepare for numerous things before accepting them in their territory. This was the reason why it took them two months to prepare.

Sreas, the Asura, had been in the Human Realm for four days now. The Asura race, known for their four arms and the third eye on their foreheads, were masters of the Dark Arts and nearly immune to all forms of magic.

Sreas had been transported here along with many other beings from various races, and everyone of them had received blood extraction to be studied by the Alchemists of this world. None of them rejected this since they mentioned how it would also help to cure them if they obtained a disease after entering this world.

In any case, it wasn't too important to them... After being imprisoned in the same place for many years, having their blood extracted was not a big deal since they could finally live outside that Tower and experience the heat of the sun and fresh air and even talk to others.

The atmosphere of this world, rich with Arcane Energy, was something Sreas had quickly grown accustomed to.

He found the energy invigorating, a stark contrast to the oppressive environment of the Celestial Prison Realm.

However, he was confined to a 150-kilometer radius around the Shadow Immortal's castle, a limitation he found somewhat frustrating. However, it was quite understandable after being told that there are other Immortals in this world, and these Immortals may not like their presence or they might just straight up put them in a dissection table.

That was definitely a situation none of them wanted to be in. After all, they just regained their freedom...

"At least the Shadow Immortal promised that the confinement wouldn't last for a long time." Sreas muttered to himself.

After giving this much hope, Sreas decided to accept his fate and made the most of his time, exploring the lush forests and various places like lakes and caves within his allowed range. He had even encountered various Evil Creatures and it was quite an interesting experience.

"I'm liking this place... It's a pity I'm the only Asura left." Sreas muttered with a helpless smile on his face.

The Arcane Energy in the air seemed to resonate with his very being, accelerating his recovery. He had already regained more than half of his strength, a fact that did not go unnoticed by those around him.

One afternoon, as Sreas was meditating near a tranquil stream, Chad, the Half-Dragon, approached him with a broad grin.

Chad had been part of the team that had freed Sreas from the Celestial Prison Realm, and the two had developed a mutual respect for each other's abilities.

"Sreas, how about a practice match?" Chad suggested, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

Sreas opened his third eye, assessing Chad's energy levels. "I have recovered more than half of my strength already... Are you sure?" he asked, his voice a deep rumble.

"Hahaha... That's better! Let's go to that hill and have a match!" Chad replied with excitement...

Without waiting for a response, he burst into a sprint, his powerful legs propelling him towards a nearby hill.

Sreas stood up, stretching his four arms and feeling the dark energy coursing through his veins.

A practice match with Chad would be an excellent way to test his regained strength. With a swift motion, he followed Chad; his movements were swift, and he didn't lose out compared to Chad's speed.

As they reached the hill, the two warriors faced each other, and the temperature in the surroundings immediately drop.

The hilltop was a perfect battleground, offering a wide, open space surrounded by dense forest.

Soon, Chad's dragon scales glinted in the sunlight, while Sreas's dark aura seemed to absorb the light around him.

"Let's see what you've got, Half-Dragon," Sreas said, a rare smile playing on his lips.

"Bring it on, Asura," Chad replied, his eyes narrowing in focus.

Chapter 889: Chad vs Sreas

Today, Vale had decided to focus on strengthening his set of Spells.

Using his system, he wanted to fuse many Spell Models to create a stronger spell. He wouldn't mind even if he was left with a handful of Spell in doing so, as long as they were incredibly strong...

Of course, he could not be too hasty on this since he could not undo any fusion he made.

Once they were fused, the Spells he used would vanish to create a new Spell that could just be slightly better or incredibly better.

As he was thinking carefully of the Spells he would like to combine, he felt Chad and Sreas aura moving to a hill not too far from where he was resting...

He then hid his presence as he didn't want to disturb their meeting.

Soon, he saw the two looking at each other with a smile on their faces. They seemed to be planning to fight.

'Chad really likes to fight, huh...' Vale smiled as he liked this sort of competition. It would certainly broaden both of their horizons as he believed that even the Asura had never fought against a Half-Dragon like Chad.

"Don't hold back..." Chad said as he was afraid that the Asura would go easy on him.

"I'll assess your strength first... If you can endure more, then I'll stop holding back." Sreas replied.

Chad found this reasoning appropriate and nodded.

Soon, they were ready to engage in their practice match.

Chad then started his transformation. He flexed his powerful muscles as his dragon scales slowly formed and shined in the sunlight.

His eyes also turned into a fierce shade of amber and focused onto Sreas. "Let's see what you've got, Asura!" He roared with a deep voice.

Sreas had two of his arms crossed while the other two seemed to be ready for battle.

He remained on his spot and waited for Chad... It seemed as if he wasn't taking this battle seriously. However, Vale could tell that his third eye was emitting some sort of magic as it glowed with a dark, ominous light.

Indeed, although Sreas was confident that he could win against the Half-Dragon, it was only calculated based on the energy inside Chad's body.

"Bring it on, Half-Dragon." Sreas said as a smile curved on his lips.

With a roar, Chad launched himself at Sreas... In an instant, he appeared on Sreas' left!

Ha!

Chad swung a massive fist, aiming for Sreas's rib...

But the Asura was ready.

The two lower arms that were previously crossed suddenly moved and blocked the punch! Bang!

Of course, Sreas didn't waste his time as the other two struck back with lightning speed, aiming for Chad's head!

Bang! Bang!

Chad grunted as the blows landed, but he didn't falter. He fully trusted his tough Draconic Body!

"Hmph!" Sreas was indeed surprised at how tough Chad was and decided to increase his strength.

However, Chad had already unleashed his Draconic Might, his body surged with raw power. For a couple of seconds, the Asura felt overwhelmed and pressured... He was stunned by the might and unable to move quickly...

'So you can still be affected by Dragon's Might... I guess only Vale can completely block this, huh...'
Chad thought as he countered.

His scales hardened, and his muscles bulged and kicked Sreas!

Boom!

Sreas was thrown from that kick but because Sreas was heavy, he was only thrown by about five meters!

If someone else was hit by that, they would be flying for over 100 meters if they weren't crushed by that kick!

"Hahaha! That was your only opportunity to defeat me and you just hit me with that kick... I won't give you another chance!"

Sreas quickly regained his footing, and his third eye glowed brighter as he tapped into his dark energy.

This Dark Energy was familiar since Chad was also a Dark Practitioner before. He even possessed a Ghost King Body that he inherited from his family... Because of that, he wasn't heavily affected by the Dark Energy assault.

Nonetheless, Sreas extended his four arms, each one condensing a ball filled with dark magic. Chad didn't feel threatened as he even felt excited at what was about to come.

"Bring it on!" He roared...

The Asura then unleashed a barrage of dark energy blasts, each one aimed at Chad's body, but he wasn't targeting his vital parts at the time.

Chad wanted to dodge at first, but seeing that it was slow, he decided to try to use his Draconic Repel to change the direction of the attacks aimed at him!

His Dragon Scales allowed him to do this trick! Furthermore, since he decided to take the attack instead of dodging, the Asura failed to calculate his moves and Chad was able to get closer a lot faster than Sreas expected!

However, as Chad got closer, some of the attacks truly hit him, searing his scales and drawing a growl of pain from his lips.

But he was able to accomplish what he wanted to do.

He was able to get into the Asura's range! Then, Chad used his Draconic Claws... It seemed quite underwhelming, but Chad's claws suddenly extended and tried to rip the Asura apart! "They are doing well..." Vale muttered to himself as he watched the two fighting each other. He believed that if the Abyss Realm invaded this time, these two would be more than enough to deal with a few Demon Saints themselves. He didn't doubt this at all, considering the aura they were both emitting right now.

Anyway, the two clashed for a little while, each one testing the limits of the other's strength and skill. Vale could tell that they were both trying to use all of their skills as if trying to practice them.

They seemed to be enjoying this battle, and they probably hadn't realized that they were already fighting for almost three hours!

Vale shook his head at this since it wouldn't do them any good if this continued.

Chapter 890 Possible Destruction

Vale had also seen enough to gauge the true strength of this Asura. Sreas was definitely a strong individual, and it was a pity that he was the only one remaining in his race.

'Right... Denise obtained some of his blood. I hope she can do something about it.' Vale wryly smiled at this thought since it wasn't a simple task at all.

Perhaps, the Chaos Alchemist was the only one who had a chance of cloning such a race.

In any case, as he was about to stop the two from fighting, he realized that they were both gathering some strength as if to clash for the last time.

Vale considered for a moment before he decided to just allow them for this last clash.

If they still decided to continue after that, he would be stopping them at all costs.

At this point, the two had distanced themselves from each other.

Sreas's four arms started gathering Dark Energy in the surroundings... Then, his third eye glowed with a purple light, as if it was trying to burn Chad. However, this purple light actually created a wave of chaotic force in the area to disrupt the Arcane Energies in the surroundings. It was quite similar to a domain where only Dark Energy would prosper...

Chad, on the other hand, knew that this would probably be their last clash and he was not one to back down.

He summoned all his draconic might... Then, he accessed a drop of Orden's True Blood in his body. Currently, Chad had three drops of Vale's Immortal Blood and 10 drops each with Orden and Ryzoir.

After using Orden Blood, Chad's body had another change. It must be remembered that Orden was considered an Ancient Rune Dragon, while Ryzoir was an Ancient Flame Dragon.

Using Orden's Blood allowed Chad to obtain a Runic Dragon Body... This act surprised even Vale since he didn't expect that Chad's ability to adapt had already reached this frightening level.

Soon, Chad's body radiated with a fierce, purple aura.

With a roar, he unleashed a torrent of purple fire! It wasn't hot like it seemed, but it could destroy anything it touched!

Boom!

The flames roared towards Sreas with unstoppable force!

Sreas could feel the danger coming right at him, but he wasn't scared. As a matter of fact, he felt really excited! This was something he had always wanted to feel! This excitement was indescribable.

"Bring it on, Dragonkin!"

Sreas control in his domain suddenly burst and formed a shield of dark energy that absorbed the flames. Confirming that his domain could last longer, his four arms released the energy it had been gathering to form a small black flame!

"This is called the Asura's Flame... Avoid it if you can't handle it..." Sreas reminded as he controlled the flame to hit Chad...

The force that came with it was so powerful. Even if Chad hadn't been hit yet, he could tell that the black flame had a bone-crushing force.

Chad already staggered back, seeing that his scales started to crack...

Of course, these cracks were being regenerated by his Runic Dragon Body, but he couldn't just receive the attack coming at him since the Runic Dragon Body might fail to heal his body in time.

Chad swiftly dodged, but even after managing to do so, he still felt the overwhelming dark flame pass through him!

Chad got out of balance during his escape and crashed to the ground!

"I lost..." Chad said with a smile of satisfaction. He wasn't disappointed at all.

He just lay there on the ground, panting and battered.

"You're really strong, Sreas..." He said with his voice filled with respect.

Chad waited for his reply to acknowledge him as well but he noticed that something was off. Soon, he realized that Sreas seemed to be in a pinch...

'Wait...'

Soon, Chad realized what was going on.

The incredibly powerful Dark Flame that he dodged was heading towards to the other side of the hill!

Sreas couldn't stop it! It seemed that he could release this trump card as a means to defeat any opponent stronger than him, but he had no way of withdrawing it!

Chad had a decent understanding of how strong that small dark flame was. It wouldn't be an exaggeration that it could destroy a huge city with just that dark flame.

After all, that power was something that he had only felt once and it was when Vale used his strongest Celestial Art, the Meteor Summon!

Indeed, that black flame that was the same size as his fist could equal the power of a giant meteor that Vale could summon!

If that attack had been released around here, they might have injured some of the workers around this area because of the shockwave. It might even kill some ordinary people working on the farm several kilometers away!

"Stop it!" Chad shouted.

"I'm trying!" Sreas replied. Perhaps, if he had fully recovered himself. This wouldn't be a big issue. However, he felt too excited and overestimated himself. He was only thinking of defeating the Dragonkin and not how to handle the aftermath!

It was already too late when he realized his mistake.

"Not good!"

Chad and Sreas said at the same time.

Panic surged through Sreas as he watched the flame's trajectory, knowing he was powerless to stop it.

"Ahh!"

Suddenly, a figure clad in a familiar Arcanist Robe appeared in front of the black flame.

It was Vale, the Shadow Immortal. His presence alone made the two individuals feel relieved... They might get scolded because of how reckless they were, but it was still better than letting that flame cause destruction.

With a swift movement, Vale extended his hand and caught the flame, his fingers closing around it with effortless action.

The black flame, which had seemed so unstoppable, was extinguished almost instantly in Vale's grasp. The dark energy dissipated into the air, leaving nothing but a faint wisp of smoke.

Vale sighed as he looked at the two with an amused smile on his face.