

Void 1431

Chapter 1431 7th Sword [4]

Giovani didn't really have the extra space to pay attention to him after that original glance, but Damien was still smilingly watching the proceedings from the side.

'I didn't think it'd turn out like this when I brought Nikolas. I was really preparing for a direct confrontation with the order, but it's good that it turned out this way instead.'

It really wasn't, but he was telling himself that to feel better.

Honestly, Damien didn't care much about the traitor. He hadn't been with the palace for very long, so he didn't feel any sort of connection with the people there aside from those who were family yet:

He was building that connection with the Swords that remained, but the rest of them were just strangers to him.

Why would he care about a stranger?

Giovani was just a target for elimination in his eyes, and since he brought a weapon to do the eliminating part for him, he didn't have to pay it any more mind.

However, Giovani presented a variable far larger than himself.

'The Divine Order was supposed to be a small problem, but it's looking like it'll be anything but. At this rate, I don't even know how we're going to confront the three-pronged assault we're currently facing.'

The Divine Order's power was more manageable, but with the information they had, they became a demon on the same level as the Straea Clan.

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Damien was able to act covertly against the Divine Order because of their proximity and his disguises, but his facade wouldn't be able to last once the Straea Clan caught wind of what was happening.

They never showed any direct kinship with the order, but as they were both working towards the same goal, it wouldn't be strange for them to start sharing the same bed.

'That's absolutely unacceptable.'

The current road map for Void Palace couldn't allow such an event to take place.

'The problem once again boils down to how late I got here.'

The situation was already in full swing. Damien was the one intruding when it was practically already at its foregone conclusion.

The alliance he feared was likely already a thing.

Which meant...

'...not only do I have to pull the Veritas Clan in a lot earlier than expected, but I'll have to bring out a wild card as well.'

Damien sighed.

He missed the frontline. Being able to just fight and solve all his problems that way was far more entertaining than spending most of his time planning for the future.

'But on the bright side, once this is all over with, I'll be able to run wild without anything to stop me.'

He looked towards the future with hope, and as plans rapidly formulated and came together in his mind, Nikolas also managed to do his job properly.

It took a while to convince the unruly Giovanni that he wasn't going to cut it in the Heavenly World, no pun intended.

By the time he stopped swinging at Nikolas, his sword had already dulled. Let alone cutting a God, with the way Nikolas left it, it wouldn't even make a good kitchen knife.

"Fine."

Giovanni spoke through gritted teeth.

"Meet me in the Heavenly God Plane."

Nikolas smiled in response.

"As you wish."

The two held their swords pointed at the ground and stood just a few feet apart, facing each other.

Their mana swarmed forward, creating two unique territories that surrounded them and influenced all the energy in a several dozen million-kilometer area.

Their minds and souls were transported into another plane. As for their bodies...

"Ah, it's my time to shine."

Damien stood up and casually walked up to where they stood.

Neither of them could recognize his presence anymore. Their battle was likely continuing in full swing in the Heavenly God Plane, at a level Damien couldn't even fathom yet.

But that wasn't any of his business.

They were only here to eliminate a traitor, not to show off.

He found out he could do it in the Forbidden Secret Realm, but back then, he wasn't fully equipped to deal with the aftermath.

This time, however, he had reliable backup.

Damien combined the forces in his control, creating the pubescent version of Existence Law that he'd been learning to master.

Just as he did last time, he approached the enemy God's body and prepared all his mana without restrictions.

He didn't aim at the head this time. As he'd found, it didn't actually do much damage.

Instead, he used his freedom of movement to thoroughly scan Giovani's body and find out how he moved his mana.

That was Damien's target.

With nothing left to do but strike, Damien did exactly that.

He let loose all his mana, locked on to the systems it needed to attack.

There was no explosion, but there was a heavy sound that rocked the surrounding structure.

"KAHAK...!"

Giovani was instantly disconnected from the Heavenly God Plane.

His soul and senses returned to the body, only to start coughing up heaps of blood soon after.

"WHO?!"

He tried to send out a wave of mana in every direction just to push back whoever attacked him, but he found that his mana was a lot more sluggish than he remembered it being.

It didn't affect him in the long run, but in that moment, he found himself unable to move mana properly.

He was temporarily crippled.

And the opponent he left in the Heavenly God Plane wasn't just going to sit around and wait for him.

Nikolas exited as soon as he realized Giovani's oddity. Just like the other man, the first thing he saw when he arrived back in the Heavenly World was blood being coughed up.

He didn't quite get it, but he wasn't just going to waste an opportunity.

He gripped his sword and moved it to his waist, still sheathed.

Only a single movement was made from there.

One, extremely clean, almost impossibly fast, sword strike.

Nikolas was on the other side of the coliseum before anyone knew it.

As for Giovanni...

Everything went still for a second.

Sixteen sword slashes appeared in the air as one, all overlapping with different parts of Giovanni's body.

It was a brutal scene.

They seemed to enact themselves in a sort of rhythm.

For instance, there were four slashes on each of Giovanni's arms. Before the ones closer to the shoulder actually cut their target, the ones on his forearm and wrist would cut first.

Before Giovanni's legs were severed, his toes, ankles, and knees were slashed first.

They were sword slashes perfectly executed so Giovanni would feel the pain wrought by each and every one individually without fail.

"AAAAARGH!"

A sound of pain.

Thud!

A limbless body dropping to the ground.

If Giovanni stopped struggling and focused, he'd have found that his mana was already moving as it did previously.

He had the option to flee or somehow fight back if he wanted to.

However, it was too late for him even if he did realize it.

Nikolas wasn't one to revel in things like this more than he needed to.

His sword went back into its sheath on his waist.

Another perfect slash was made.

And Giovanni's body became a small hill of meat chunks.

Damien stepped in at that point and devoured his soul as if it was just another Monday morning.

That was the end of the traitor known as Giovanni Perera.

Chapter 1432 Cooperation [1]

Damien wasn't going to leave any problems unsolved.

Right now, the traitor was dead, but the Divine Order's scheming wasn't so shallow that it could end with just this.

Whether they had Giovanni or not, they had the ability to use the 7th Sword as an excuse now.

Giovanni had been specifically loud about his actions for that exact purpose.

Damien didn't really care about the actual act of destroying the evidence.

From the moment he decided to stand against the Divine Order, they were fated for destruction. He didn't actually need the homunculi as some sort of justification to make that a reality.

The only part that mattered was Giovanni's presence.

That was where his plan hatched from.

First things first, he took Giovanni's severed head and sent it into the Sanctuary along with a message.

Damian, Damien's second Avatar, took the head and the message to the main palace through the Sanctuary connection with Rose and the rest.

That happened within a second, and within the next few minutes, everything else was already set up.

The place had just been cleaned up, but the heads of the 16 traitorous Elders were already replaced with someone new.

When the common populace woke up in the morning, they'd eventually see it.

Giovanni's head displayed on a stake, accompanied by a stele declared his sins.

With that, Void Palace not only had a response prepared for the declaration that the Divine Order would soon put out, but they also had an alibi for what came next.

The days were allowed to pass quietly for a bit after that.

As expected, the Divine Order tried to blame Void Palace for the cathedral's destruction and hid information about what was actually taking place there.

However, Void Palace's 7th Sword was also announced dead around the same time, his head serving as clear evidence that nobody could deny.

Controversy naturally brewed from the two extremely differing testimonies, with many unsure about who was in the right.

But everyone knew that this was the start of something big.

Actually, it had already started with this move.

With this, not only did Void Palace confirm their open hostility, but the Divine Order also realized that palace members were moving in their territory to take down the schemes they'd spent years putting into place.

In the days after the two great clans made their stances known, countless people spoke about the events they made so big, and opinions continued to split.

But that wouldn't remain the case for very much longer.

Hidden in the shadows, Damien moved fast and precisely while all of this was underway.

With the memories he devoured from Giovanni, he gained the location of several homunculus development facilities all around the Southwestern Region.

After giving Nikolas a separate task, he started moving towards the nearest of said facilities.

Beginning at those near the cathedral and spreading further and further into the Southwestern Region, Damien infiltrated over fifty facilities.

But he didn't destroy them immediately.

He was now going to make the Divine Order's excuse completely fall apart.

After all, the 7th Sword was dead, but now, countless facilities disguised as historical monuments were going to fall.

It was a bit comedic that the order made every facility under a religious building. It gave Damien the perfect reasoning to disguise his actions as those of a religious hate group.

Damien had an absolute advantage.

His use of several different laws meant he could, by himself, emulate a group of Divinities with a variety of powers and styles.

But he waited first.

He needed Nikolas to leave the Southwestern Region before he could start.

He got confirmation about that after about a week. Since Nikolas was in the clear, there was no need to hesitate anymore.

It began on one fateful night.

Out of nowhere, a massive explosion erupted from the local church in another small city.

Flames burned through everything, decimating the church and leaving a hole so deep nobody could see the bottom of it.

The flames stayed contained within the church area but never spread further than that. And, if a civilian happened to get caught in it, they wouldn't burn.

Only the church burned, and only the homunculi under it would ever know the truth behind what happened.

That is, if any of them could magically gain sentience within the burning flames.

But, of course, that was impossible.

The fires burned until dawn, with any effort to put them out failing immensely.

No clues were left at the scene of the crime, but people began to tie it to the destruction of the cathedral quite rapidly.

Because it wasn't the only incident.

In the same night, three other historical sites collapsed in various ways. One was caught in a mysterious flood that, again, did not harm innocents. Another simply collapsed, as if the earth itself had given up on it. As for the last, it was caught in a storm of lightning of unknown origins, destroyed by Heaven's wrath.

Every few days, another incident would pop up. The destruction ensued at a rate that was impossible for a single person to cause, and, as the "motive" for the incident became clear, people started to forget about the allegations against Void Palace.

At least, before the media picked up the story.

Within the Southwestern Region, it meant nothing. Even if external media was introduced into their communities, they were too deeply brainwashed to ever consider the Divine Order in a negative light.

However, everywhere else, the people who'd been watching the commotion started to remember what the Divine Order had accused the palace of back then.

And that allegation was completely torn apart.

Combined with the fact that the accused perpetrator was dead at Void Palace around the time of the attack, crossing an impossible distance in just a few minutes, the continuous attacks gave the perpetrator a new face that was completely uninvolved with the palace.

The Divine Order had essentially lost its justification the moment they gained it.

As if that wasn't bad enough, their research into homunculi became obvious to the other great clans with a bit of investigation, so they'd been placed under an invisible pressure by not only Void Palace's allies, but others such as the Dragon Clan.

For the time being, they had no choice but to stay still unless they wanted to attract hostility.

They had touched a line by trying to mass-produce Gods.

If they stepped forward just one more time...

Well, the forced submission wouldn't last for long, but Damien was able to buy himself some unexpected time because of the whole situation.

He was also able to force the Divine Order to eat a loss, and from the memories of those like Giovanni, he gained the same amount of information on them as they had against Void Palace.

Not to mention, he learned a lot about the homunculus creation process and was able to gain a body that had yet to house a soul for Rein.

Overall, it was an amazing move from Damien that only benefited him.

The Divine Order was definitely enraged, and their rage would only grow as they chased the invisible "terrorist group" that kept destroying their facilities.

There were still around 30 that Damien hadn't touched yet.

They'd all experience similar fates to their peers in the coming weeks and months.

But, that wasn't a story that needed to be told.

By the time 3 weeks had passed, Damien received word from Nikolas.

He'd successfully accomplished the task assigned to him.

So it was time for Damien to go meet him.

To get his hands on the wild card he'd been eyeing.

Chapter 1433 Cooperation [2]

The task that Nikolas was given honestly wasn't hard for him to accomplish, but it wasn't due to his strength.

It was because of his status.

As the Flashpoint Sword God, he'd been active in the Heavenly World for several millions of years. Not only did he have a reputation created through those eons of effort, but he also had several connections throughout the world.

This time, Damien sent him to use one of those connections to his benefit.

He was able to do so in just a few days, but it took three weeks for him to finish everything sheerly because of the distance he had to cross.

But, in the end, he'd done it.

Through a fellow swordsmaster he'd been acquainted with since his younger days, he got his hands on the meeting Damien had been seeking.

It was scheduled for the day after the current one, which seemed troubling since Damien was still 3 weeks away by the fastest terms that could only be enjoyed by Gods, but it wasn't a problem.

Damien tagged Nikolas before he left, so he was able to teleport directly to him through a system similar to his Warp ability.

Nevertheless, the instant he got the news, Damien arrived there.

The Southeastern Region, land of the Kyushu Federation.

Run by one leader and a council of 24 sub-leaders, the Kyushu Federation was an influence that ran completely on money.

They only acted for money, and they only acted because of money. If wealth wasn't involved in the conversation, they weren't having it.

But that same Kyushu Federation was quietly eating up the Southern Region's borders.

They weren't the same as the Straea Clan and the Divine Order though.

They had been eyeing the border for a very long time and had been trying to negotiate for the ability to share it.

This was because the eastern border of the Southern Region was a hotspot for a certain energy source called Peromithium. It was a material the Kyushu Federation was extremely greedy for, and since they'd already exhausted the veins on their side of the border, they wanted to use Void Palace's too.

Now, the palace had no need for the material. It was only useful in technological advancement in research that didn't align with the palace's path.

However, they couldn't just hand it over for free.

Since the palace wasn't really available for negotiation, and they were having trouble protecting their borders anyway, the Kyushu Federation decided to move their borders inward and devour the area where the Peromithium deposits were.

They never try anything special after that.

This was the reason Damien never considered the Kyushu Federation an enemy.

They did encroach on Void Palace territory, but their reasoning was clear and open, and they didn't push the line.

They were definitely forceful, and Damien definitely didn't appreciate their actions, but he could understand that they didn't possess any particular hostility against the palace.

They could still become allies.

As long as the money was right, that is.

But Damien was prepared for that.

Just like when he met the Sapientia Clan, he had the perfect product to interest the federation in a long-term cooperative agreement.

And today, he'd arrived in the Southeastern Region to discuss that proposal with their president.

It was the very meeting Nikolas left early to set up.

It came sooner than expected.

Damien was supposed to have a day in the Southeastern Region beforehand, but excluding the processes he needed to undergo before he could even reach that meeting, he really only had a few hours to rest and look around.

Damien was led through an office-like building and taken up an elevator over 1000 stories before he reached the penthouse where the president spent his days.

The elevator only took 10 seconds to reach the top and opened directly into the suite, making it obvious that this wasn't something just anyone could use.

As Damien stepped out of it, he was immediately met with the visage of that man.

Around 6 feet tall with broad shoulders and an appearance that looked more like a physical practitioner's than a businessman's was a man with eyes exactly like those of a snake and a face that practically screamed an obsession with wealth.

There was a strange juxtaposition in his features, but it worked well. It accurately displayed both his abilities as a president and a practitioner without him having to speak a single word or act a certain way.

He was called Matthias Quincy, and he was the man who currently led the Kyushu Federation and had been for the past 500,000 years or so.

When he heard that Void Palace's 2nd Sword had requested a direct audience for his acquaintance, Matthias immediately accepted.

He could sense the money.

From the moment someone like the 2nd Sword acted on behalf of another man, he sensed that this would be an interesting situation.

And it was more than just that.

"Pleasure to meet you. My name is Damien Void."

Damien introduced himself professionally and shook Matthias' hand.

Matthias reciprocated, and after a bit of small talk for them to get to know each other, they sat down at the table and faced each other for business.

"You must've been watching everything that's happened thus far..."

Damien began his pitch, prefacing the situation before reaching his main point.

Matthias listened intently, allowing Damien to tell him what he already knew.

Through discerning how much Damien could say, he could tell more about Damien's unsaid status in Void Palace.

Well, it was only partially unsaid.

He'd introduced himself properly, and he'd taken his disguise off. He was here bearing amethyst eyes and the last name Void, so it was obvious which family he came from.

But for him to command the 2nd Sword and negotiate with the president of the Kyushu Federation, he had to have much more authority than the other children of that same family.

There was really only one position he could hold, but it was almost hard to believe that someone had taken up that long vacant post.

Matthias had to wonder all about Damien, but Damien had no plans for letting him think too much.

He'd already reached his point.

"I'm here to make a deal with you, so I'll make my terms clear. I want long-term cooperation with the Kyushu Federation; real cooperation, not a facade for appearance's sake. As for the price..."

Damien's eyes hardened.

"...how does an entire cardinal region sound?"

Matthias could see the light in Damien's eyes.

He couldn't half-ass this at all. He truly had to judge whether or not he could make a deal of this level right here and now.

Even without hearing the details of what Damien wanted, Matthias was tempted to accept.

Damien's eyes were those of a madman.

And madmen were a gamble.

Either they'd fail at the beginning and disappear in the annals of time, or they would become the new leaders of the world.

If it was the former, Matthias wouldn't have thought anything of it.

But Damien was absolutely the latter.

He could feel it.

'The Kyushu Federation's future...'

Matthias smiled as if he was scared of his own imagination.

'Haha, I guess I have no choice but to hear him out.'

Chapter 1434 Cooperation [3]

Naturally, Damien wasn't going to give Matthias an entire cardinal region. It was stupid for him to even consider doing so.

Having sovereignty over a cardinal region came hand in hand with power. The reason the eight great clans were able to maintain their status without competitors for millions of years was precisely because of their status.

The resources they had access to, whether from the environment or the people, were monstrous. That went without even mentioning secret realms and the likes which would become the sovereign's property.

Those who served a great clan would gain benefits unlike any other, therefore, they'd always be the main choice for anyone who wanted to be someone, which meant geniuses would gravitate towards them without considering others first.

No matter what, Damien was keeping the regions he conquered.

The Kyushu Federation wasn't an influence that really craved land or power, but they did crave resources.

What Damien offered wasn't a one-time transfer of territory that would end instantaneously.

He wanted to make a deal that could last as long as possible, because the Kyushu Federation was loyal to those it had business with.

To make this relationship a stable one, Damien hatched an idea.

The Kyushu Federation would have priority bidding rights and discounted prices on any resources coming out of the regions Void Palace ruled.

In return, the Kyushu Federation would treat Void Palace as its proper ally like Veritas did.

Damien didn't skimp on the definition of an ally either. He made certain the Kyushu Federation couldn't just maintain a guise of cooperation without doing anything.

It wasn't an uneven contract despite how it looked.

Priority rights to any and all resources produced by a region was big. With the variety across a cardinal region and their unique environments that bred different resources, each and every great clan could create an economic situation that allowed them to passively maintain income that outweighed their spending at any time.

They could infinitely become wealthier as long as they maintained their positions.

Void Palace also used its resources for commercial benefit, but it didn't actually have a need to rely on them. The palace didn't dabble in anything that required them to purchase resources from foreign sources, nor did they need the resources in their own territory.

They had their own unique methods to do a lot of things others couldn't even dream of, including an entire clan specialized in the law of Creation.

Therefore, whether it be spending on architecture, medicine, or even the training of their disciples, Void Palace was able to do it without spending too much money.

Nevertheless, If the Kyushu Federation could obtain those same resources without spending as much money and while gaining far more in the process, it would be an amazing deal for them.

Especially if Void Palace went on to conquer the Northern Region as well.

But that was the crux of it all.

"For this deal to even begin to work, you have to win the wars you are planning to start."

Matthias pointed it out. He was definitely interested in the proposal, but it was prospective in nature. Unless Void Palace could do as much as Damien said they could, none of it mattered.

"Let me correct you on one thing," Damien replied, aware of his thoughts.

"This war was not started by us. We're just reciprocating the treatment that was given to us all this time."

It might've been a small detail to others, but it really wasn't at all.

The Divine Order and Straea Clan were not stopped by anyone, but everyone was aware of what they were doing.

It had been years.

Therefore, no matter what Void Palace did, nobody was allowed to stop them.

'He didn't come here to make a deal.'

He did, but he didn't.

The deal he planned to make was never meant to be made today.

'No, this is more like...a warning?'

Matthias glanced into Damien's eyes in amusement.

'This boy is quite fierce.'

He was aware of what his people had done. He was the one who ordered it done in the first place.

Damien came here to tell the Kyushu Federation to move their borders back and wait.

The Divine Order would be an example of what happened when someone didn't listen to their warning, and the Straea Clan...

'...it seems he already has an advantage against the order, however, the Straea Clan is not on the same level.'

He was well aware of the differences between the eight great clans.

They weren't nearly on the same scale of power.

Some were weaker, like the Divine Order, and some...

Some were unimaginable even in Damien's current worldview.

The Straea Clan wasn't that great, but they were nearing that level.

Frankly, Matthias couldn't see how Damien planned to defeat them.

'But I'm interested.'

His senses had been tingling from the moment Damien walked into the room.

This man smelled of money.

This was an opportunity for him, as declared by the very senses he'd never doubted even once in his life.

They allowed him to reach his current position by making bold moves nobody else was willing to make and capitalizing on them.

So why would he suddenly stop believing in them now?

"Very well."

He grinned.

He felt like he was getting scammed, but it felt oddly good for some reason.

"We'll relinquish your territory back to you and wait, but if you don't show us something worthwhile..."

"Don't even mention it. There's no point in talking about something that isn't possible."

"Hahaha! I like your attitude."

Matthias laughed happily.

He got the feeling that he'd met someone just like himself, another gambler of fate.

And he was infinitely excited to see what their gambles would amount to.

"Then, I'll leave you to your work. If the deal you proposed earlier is real, then our Kyushu Federation will happily accept it."

Damien smiled and nodded.

"Just keep watching. When it's all said and done, I'll come back and show it to you again. For real, this time."

The two men shook hands and parted ways. While Matthias stayed in his office, Damien used the elevator to return to the ground floor, leaving to meet Nikolas.

'Good.'

Damien smiled.

He didn't know if it would work out, but it seemed he used the right approach.

He'd heard from Nikolas that Matthias Quincy was a huge gambler, and taking that into account, he made a gamble himself.

He placed his bets on Matthias being entertained by his threats rather than offended, and the payout was just as he'd hoped.

Damien stayed in the Southeastern Region for a few more days, over which he already began to hear news about the borders retreating.

And after just a bit of sightseeing, he made his way back home.

At this point, over a hundred years had passed in the sealed-off main palace.

The people there were still the same in soul, but if anyone who witnessed them before the palace was sealed saw them now, they'd be hard-pressed to hold the same opinion.

Void Palace itself had changed.

They were no longer turtles hiding in their shells.

After a ruthless century, they'd become predators.

And the time had come for them to hunt.

Chapter 1435 Cooperation [4]

Damien had been gone for almost 4 months now.

About a decade or so had passed since the day 100 years passed in the main palace.

During that time, not a single person skimped on their training.

Their reasons varied, but there was a surprising number of people who worked hard for Damien's validation.

Disregarding Hestia who looked up to Damien, Dominic and Yiren who respected him, and Darius who practically treated him like a god, the soldiers themselves had Damien in their minds as they trained for multiple reasons.

For those who were chosen during the recruitment, it was a sense of reverence.

Those like Hershel originally believed they were worth nothing. They didn't think they had a chance to join the army when they came, but the chance was presented to them regardless.

Taken into the main palace, they were immediately put under an environment of harsh training without extraneous thought,

It was difficult, but nobody complained.

The harsh training meant they mattered. If they were just going to become nameless members of the palace, they wouldn't have been forced to undergo it in the first place.

Hershel didn't know much about the world of practitioners, but he knew Damien was one of the best.

Because the talent he didn't have was given to him.

And because of that, the talents he did have were finally able to show themselves.

Hershel wasn't alone in this. There were over a thousand out of those who were chosen who originally had the worst talent imaginable.

They were all gifted the things they lacked because Damien saw in them a will and spirit that could trump many experienced practitioners, and as a result, he gained their absolute loyalty.

He gave them purpose, so they would live for him.

Of course, not everyone was the same.

There were those who were talented from the start along the 10,000, and among them, there were plenty who'd trained before arriving at the main palace.

What impressed them was Damien's mysterious power.

He seemed to be able to do anything.

When they saw him "giving out talent," they didn't know how to feel. Talent was something intangible, so it shouldn't be able to be created, right?

That was what they thought before they met Damien.

That was when they learned that talent could also be mass-produced if someone really wanted it.

However, what impressed them was something else.

It was the act of creating over ten thousand personalized training manuals for the soldiers he picked.

This was not only a show of dedication, it was a show of power.

For Damien to see through each and every one of them to the core and develop manuals that, as they'd found over the past century, eclipsed anything they'd ever seen before in their lives, just how expansive was his sea of knowledge?

Still, those who didn't experience it themselves couldn't believe the words of those ten thousand, and Damien's siblings didn't speak on things they didn't need to.

Those who weren't a part of Damien's 10,000 men took longer to fall into the web known as his existence, but they still did eventually.

As the people heard more about the Young Lord of Void Palace, they became intrigued by his mysterious persona.

When some of those who'd been with the palace for a long time learned of his age and what he'd done to get to his current position, they became embarrassed with their lack of effort.

Those people couldn't stand to see the new blood in the palace progress so well and leave them behind. They wanted to be the core of the army, since they were the seniors, but for that to happen, they needed to properly double down and train until they could hold the right.

Aside from these two groups, the last of those in the army were the Swords and the Sanctuary army.

The Swords naturally had their own thoughts, but all of them had pretty much conceded when Nikolas chose to follow the Young Lord when requested.

As for the Sanctuarians, they were a great basis for the other parts of the army.

They'd been under Damien for a very long time, so not only were they used to the way he did things, but they were also the example of how this forming army was meant to be.

Elvira and the rest aided the new and old members of the palace, and following Damien's ideas, they formed a healthy rivalry between the various groups.

Positions of power could only be held by those who deserved them.

Anyone at any rank could challenge anyone at a higher rank for their position.

Of course, there were several rules to assure that nobody could cheat, but the army essentially had a free-for-all atmosphere of internal competition that boosted not only their synergy, but also their strength as they endlessly competed to be the strongest.

And those competitions weren't easy.

Because, in a miraculous century, the 10,500 people Damien picked up from the outside had become a force to be reckoned with.

10,500 people who had just entered Divinity, each with their own individual Divinity that couldn't be found anywhere else in the Heavenly World.

Under Damien's guidance, they didn't just become regular Demigods. They became real geniuses that could even compete with the young talents of some massive clans.

This was proven through the exact same competition mentioned above.

The geniuses of the four Grand Duke Clans were suddenly forced to work ten times as hard as anyone else, because before they knew it, they'd been outshined by everyone else.

Before, they'd only been under the Void siblings. They were content with their position, thinking they were doing okay for their talent level and didn't have to compete against people born superior.

But they were being challenged by people who couldn't even be argued as superior to them, and they were being defeated.

They were ashamed and motivated at the same time, a similar feeling to what some of their seniors felt as well.

The only ones left out of the storm were the Void siblings because of their status.

Still, they didn't skimp on training.

It started because nobody wanted to challenge them. They were too important for any common person to stand up and say they wanted to fight.

But at some point, the siblings came themselves and began challenging people.

As time passed and they kept winning their challenges, people also started getting over their fears.

Perhaps Damien's siblings didn't have some sort of newfound motivation like the rest of the army, but their old dreams were more than enough.

Damien was the only one.

He was the only one among them who thought about bringing the palace back to its prime and actually acted on it.

The rest of them could never get past the mental barrier, let alone the heaps of physical hurdles.

Damien gave them an opportunity. With it in front of them, none of them could continue to suppress their desires.

They also wanted to see Void Palace grow.

They also wanted to see it thrive!

When Damien returned to the palace, he found this atmosphere waiting for him, along with an army far more stable and powerful than he ever expected before.

'This is great.'

Damien's eyes sparkled.

'Since it's a lot better than expected, it might be about time to start.'

For their first large move, for the move that defined the beginning of the palace's rise, they were going to secure their original borders.

But before that...

'...I learned quite a lot during my time in the Southwestern Region.'

...they were going to score a win the Divine Order could never see coming.

Chapter 1436 Strike [1]

"Here's the plan."

Damien gathered them all after spending a few hours observing and checking their progress.

From those in high positions like his mother to those who achieved squad leader positions in the army, anyone who'd be relevant for the next move was gathered.

Damien already had the plan thought out. He was wondering if his people could properly execute it, but after seeing how they'd grown, that wasn't a concern anymore.

Damien was excited.

He was particularly excited to see how a few key individuals performed, because from what he'd sensed, they'd made progress that even their peers didn't know about.

Nevertheless, he'd gathered everyone so he could inform them about what had happened during his trip outside and get them ready for the next move.

The first half of that had already happened. Everyone was up to date on the outside world's happenings and Void Palace's state.

Now, for the second half...

"Since you all already know the reasons, I won't explain it again. The Divine Order knows pretty much everything about us, so we'll have to do a complete restructure from top to bottom and fix any holes they could possibly exploit."

Damien's intro was already a tedious task, but he wasn't an unrealistic person.

"Of course, that's a long-term plan. To buy ourselves time to do that, we first need to strike them where it hurts and make sure they can't do anything to us for a while."

He didn't say it outright, but he wasn't just referring to the Divine Order.

The Kyushu Federation was solved, but the Straea Clan was still a huge problem.

Damien needed to do something that caused both enemy clans to back off and bide their time.

'For that, just attacking the Divine Order or killing their people won't be enough.'

He needed something more.

And fortunately, he had it in droves.

It had been mentioned before, but Damien now had just as much dirt on the order as they had on him.

They were already caught up in the plot Damien set before leaving and stuck searching for a terrorist group that didn't exist, but that wouldn't hold them for long.

Before they could recover, Damien had to do something even bigger.

"Let me premise this with an important fact that everyone needs to accept."

The Divine Order wasn't an ordinary enemy.

"We all know their nature, but it's a lot bigger than we originally expected. The Divine Order...is connected to the Foreign Races somehow."

Damien looked around the room.

For the most part, the reactions were as he expected.

Relatively mild.

Not many people understood the horror of the Foreign Races yet, so the majority of those who had been in the Heavenly World for a long time just thought of them as a passing threat.

However, it wasn't the same for everyone.

Obviously, those who came from the lower universe all had grave expressions, knowing that the Foreign Races were the progenitors of the Nox Race and the true culprit behind their suffering.

But it wasn't just them.

It was slight, but Claire, Serena, Hugo, and Persia all subtly flinched, but made sure nobody could see it.

It couldn't escape Damien's sight, though.

'I'll have to ask them about it later, but now's not the time. Regardless, it looks like they know something more. It's good that not everyone is unaware.'

Damien had to somehow convince the world of the threat the Foreign Races posed.

He was doing everything else for that purpose as well.

Whether it be the Veritas Clan, the Kyushu Federation, or any of those who came in the future, Damien wasn't recruiting them to his side just to win against the Divine Order or the Straea Clan.

No, those threats needed to be exterminated not only to save Void Palace, but also to secure the Heavenly World before war started with those from another plane.

Damien never forgot about the Foreign Races, nor did their importance fade because he had other things to accomplish in the meantime.

He would confront them soon.

He had been ignoring everything until now because he didn't have time, but as soon as he finished securing the borders, he would finally go confront them himself.

But that was for a different time.

Right now, the connection the Divine Order had with the Foreign Races had to be targeted for a different reason.

The Divine Order, as a great clan, could never admit that it was working together with the Foreign Races. Even if people didn't treat them as a real threat, none of them appreciated their attempts at invasion.

The Foreign Races were universally despised, and it wasn't like everyone was clueless.

Just like Claire and the rest, several powerful people knew what the Foreign Races actually represented, and if they learned of the order's actions, the repercussions would be brutal.

Damien was planning to take advantage of the deep secret that their cooperation was and use it against them.

He barely needed to raise a blade himself, but he still needed to do so.

First came a warning.

First, under the guise of arrogance, he'd push the Divine Order in battle and warn them about the information he knew.

And depending on their reaction, he would determine his next step.

There was a lot he could learn from this move and even more he could accomplish.

Therefore, the current meeting wasn't one to inform those relevant parties about the Divine Order's secrets, but to target people directly involved with them.

These were people of all different social classes without any sort of relation to each other, but if one knew about the hidden movements of said individuals, they'd be able to connect their deaths back to a single cause.

Their deaths were his current goal.

Damien didn't quite go into the "why" of it all with his people, since they wouldn't understand with their current worldview, but he gave them a rundown on their targets and how they were meant to move.

His orders were received well. Without any questions, those who needed to move prepared themselves to head out within the next few days.

Not all the killings would take place at the same time or in the same way. For the plan to unfold as Damien intended, to really shove the message in the enemy's faces, the people involved needed to act with pinpoint accuracy.

They weren't worried, though.

They'd had a century to prepare for this moment. If any of them still held doubt or hesitation in their hearts, it only meant they'd wasted the time they'd been given.

Those who were young sprouts when they came were now experienced experts. Some of them were even older than their own parents at this point, and the wisdom they gained with that age, along with the experiences they'd had in the various illusion worlds they'd trained in, turned them into people nobody could imagine had been training in seclusion for so long.

That night, over a hundred people set foot outside the palace for the first time in a very long while.

Like snakes slithering through the shadows, they moved, their venom primed as they approached the targets of their wrath.

Chapter 1437 Strike [2]

Squad One, a squad without much of a special name. It was composed of the weakest members who were sent on the mission, and their target was equally weak.

Their weakness wasn't a bad thing, of course. It was just a matter of time.

Plus, they were still Demigods.

This squad was composed of Hershel from the recruitment test, along with three others who passed with him.

One of them was also a man once called talentless who was discovered by Damien, Elijah Lester.

One was a woman who had talent her entire life, but didn't realize how wide the world was until she joined Void Palace, Rebecca Silver.

Another was a woman unlike the rest who'd trained as a mercenary for many years before the recruitment test, Helga Rowe.

And the last was a boy who didn't look older than 15. He stood out from the rest, but none of them underestimated him because of his appearance.

He was the same age as them and had come from the same group. Nobody really noticed him during the recruitment test, but as they spent years training together, he slowly showed everyone his worth.

His name was Butcher. No last name.

His origins were unknown, and so was the reason for his appearance.

He was usually silent, but for a mission like this, he was perfect.

The rest were just his support.

Squad One's target wasn't just one man. Rather, it was a group of people.

There was a village on the outskirts of the Mairia Principality in the most southern part of the Southwestern Region.

It was home to only 35 inhabitants, and as it was quite far from society, nobody really noticed its existence.

If there was one peculiarity about this village, it was that there were no men among them.

Yet, for hundreds of years, they'd been able to maintain their number of 35 inhabitants without any change.

Their mystery had never been revealed to the outside world. Even if it was, it likely wouldn't have become anything big.

To put it briefly, they were succubi.

Every ten years, they'd leave the village and infiltrate the nearest cities, taking life essence from hundreds of men before returning to their homes.

However, they were more than just that.

They were accidents.

The reason for this village's continued and unknown existence was that they were being protected by the Divine Order.

They wanted to know how their test subjects acted in the wild.

Those 35 women were a product of fusion experiments between humans and members of the Foreign Races, similar to what Richter was trying to accomplish but with a much higher rate of success.

Damien was curious about why people obsessed over the transmutation.

Whether it was here or in the lower universe, people were always trying to take the traits of the Foreign Races and use them to enhance their own.

But why?

There had to be something about their bodies that these people desired. Damien had never noticed it before, but now that the problem had become bigger, he wanted to find out their reasoning.

Squad One was being sent to that village for two reasons.

Firstly, they were going to kill the succubi and mark the start of Damien's plan.

And secondly, they were going to bring back one of their bodies for Damien to examine.

With those goals in mind, they approached the village.

It had been over half a year since they left the main palace. They had to travel through many teleportation arrays and cross several hundreds of thousands of kilometers on foot, but they eventually arrived.

They didn't need to do too much planning.

Elijah was particularly skilled in controlling his awareness. His perception spread far wider than a normal Demigod, so even from a distance of several hundreds of millions of kilometers, they could see the village's situation.

When night fell, they'd strike. By the time day came, they'd be gone.

Damien made sure none of his people went in blind. They had more than enough information about the given targets to form a proper plan of approach.

As for the task given to the weakest group, naturally it was just as easy.

This place wasn't constantly surveilled by the order. There was no need for them to actively watch over these women, since instruments to monitor them were in place all around the village and the surroundings.

With Rebecca here, they didn't need to worry about the monitoring technology, and since the time for those women to feed wasn't any time soon, they didn't need to worry about stronger people coming after them.

And even if they did...

Nonetheless, with the plan set, they waited at a safe distance under a veil that made them invisible to the surrounding technology.

When the sun was replaced by a moon, they used the shadows to progress towards the village.

They split up from there.

Rebecca and Elijah stayed at the entrance, maintaining everyone else's cover.

Helga followed Hershel. The two of them had similar abilities, so they worked well together.

As for Butcher, he went alone.

The second they arrived in the village, he took a single step and disappeared.

Not even his own teammates could discover his location when he vanished.

A knife appeared in his hand. His other hand remained open in a relaxed position.

Whoosh!

The wind blew lightly.

He appeared inside a house. It was as if he phased through everything material to reach his goal.

He approached the sleeping succubus with such lightness that his steps didn't even raise dust off the ground.

She didn't realize his presence at all, despite being a Demigod herself.

His knife went in the air and came back down in the same instant.

Blood spurted from the succubus' throat.

Her eyes widened in shock. She grabbed his arms, baring her fangs.

Butcher twisted his knife.

Blood spurted again.

The succubus' eyes rolled back into her head.

It wasn't just a knife. There was something else on it, something that killed her instantly.

She couldn't determine its presence, nor did it show itself in her body at all.

But she died without a fight.

Along with twelve others in the twelve closest houses.

It was a power Butcher mastered after learning the method from Damien.

He only had to kill one with his own hands, the rest would die because they were unfortunate enough to be in his range.

Almost half of the thirty-five total residents of the village died that easily. The rest didn't last much longer.

Hershel snapped their necks like he was breaking pencils. Helga's axe wasn't something a mere succubus could handle.

With all three of them acting together, thirty-five succubus who had no idea they were being attacked wasn't a task at all.

They may have been the weakest of the Void Palace groups, but they were by no means weak.

They were finished with their task. Butcher already took several bodies into his spatial ring, and according to Elijah and Rebecca, an unexpected factor was approaching.

They could feel the aura of strong people on the horizon, but the atmosphere around them wasn't negative at all.

In fact, they were grinning fiercely.

Those who approached stood no chance.

Because as they stood together in a circle and gave the command they'd been given to memorize, they vanished.

Nobody could ever be able to discover their presence here no matter how much time passed.

But the corpses of those who remained were enough.

This was the first gift Damien prepared for the Divine Order.

And, of course, it was the first of many.

If there was one thing people needed to know about Damien, it was this.

He certainly wasn't a stingy person.

Chapter 1438 Strike [3]

Five years later.

A lot had happened throughout the entire Heavenly World, just as it had always been.

Several rebellions arose, and several rebellions fell. Several empires arose, and several empires fell.

There was far too much going on in the great amount of society that existed in the world, but not much of it was remembered by all.

Only a few conflicts could become prevalent in the eyes of the entire general public. In these five years, most of those came from the Southwestern Region.

The Southwest had always been relatively calm in comparison to the other cardinal regions, but their reputation was being ruined recently.

It started with the terrorist attacks they dealt with when they first falsely accused Void Palace.

When everyone thought they were over, it turned out the terrorists had just switched targets.

Nobody understood the connection between those events until recently, and even then, the people who knew they were connected were few.

However, everyone knew the Southwestern Region was in turmoil. It had become far more dangerous in recent times.

It started on that day five years ago.

After the destruction of the succubus village, three more attacks were carried out by Squad One within the same few months, all in the same region.

By the time they left 3 months later, another slew of attacks had already begun.

There were a total of 100 teams that left Void Palace. Some were filled with four people while others were singular individuals, but they all had set targets from the start and communicated with each other to make sure their timing was perfect.

Therefore, when the second squad began their activities, the Divine Order had just barely begun to investigate the deaths of the succubi.

By the time they finished, the Divine Order was stuck with two disconnected cases without any clear motive.

However, the motive didn't keep itself hidden for long.

Attack after attack made it exceedingly obvious. Villages and facilities filled with people were massacred and left ridden with corpses, leading the common populace to believe someone was committing atrocities throughout their homeland, but it was nothing of the sort.

Only those directly involved in the cooperation between the Divine Order and the Foreign Races were targeted. It was just that their number was high, and quite a lot of them were maintaining disguises as normal people, likely to keep their actions a secret from larger powers.

Still, Damien knew who all of them were, and so did his people.

They died one after another, and eventually, the Divine Order began to realize what exactly was happening.

They started to get wary.

They pulled their troops back into their own territory, not because they were afraid of Void Palace, but because they needed to find those responsible as fast as possible.

But they still showed open hostility.

Throughout the five years, tensions between the two great clans had heightened immensely.

Large and small battles had swarmed the borders as Void Palace began to bare its fangs, and though the order wanted to respond, they never saw the end of the attacks taking place within their borders.

It only took five years because some groups had to travel excessively far distances to reach their targets, but it eventually did end, and everyone Damien wanted dead was taken out.

There were no mistakes whatsoever, almost to an unbelievable degree.

The reason for that wasn't strength.

The people were strong, but the reason they succeeded without any mistakes was that they were supported by a perfect web of information and strategy.

Damien knew everything he possibly needed to know, and as he was delivered the corpses of those he needed to devour, his knowledge only became more expansive.

Plus, Hestia had taken up her position in the back lines and supported them with strategic advice that, more often than not, led to success.

Void Palace's every member had synergy with the rest, and because of that, the Divine Order couldn't even hope to stop them when they started acting.

And when they finished, they left their signatures in the dirt, making sure their presence would be known.

Damien never intended to hide their identities from the start.

Once all his people had safely returned home, he made it clear.

Everything wrong that had been happening to the order in the last five years...

...it was all a gift from the palace.

The Divine Order was run by a pantheon of 12 Gods. They all held "equal" power without anyone at their head, but there was a noticeable hierarchy among them.

Nevertheless, they had held many meetings to discuss how they wanted to deal with the perpetrators of the many crimes they'd had to deal with in recent times, and when they learned that Void Palace, their eternal enemy, was the very culprit they were looking for, they fumed.

It was difficult for them to reach a decision.

After all, it wasn't just elusive test subjects like the succubi who died.

Every Void Palace team targeted a higher value target.

And the strongest palace member who acted was a Sword.

Succubi, other test subjects, people who'd worked on the experiments, people who'd acted as contacts between other people, and even people who had extremely high positions in the order died.

At the end of it, the pantheon of 12 Gods became one of 11.

Yet, the others didn't even realize who'd done the killing until Void Palace revealed themselves willingly.

"Anyway, it is better for us both to pull back for now. You should completely retreat from their territory. Feign cowardice. Otherwise, can we still assure that they won't end you?"

The one who spoke only appeared as a dark shadow projected from a glass ball in a room just as dark.

The one he spoke to was one of the 12 Gods of the Divine Order, Seneca Church.

Seneca acted as a connection between the Divine Order and their close cooperator, the Straea Clan. As for who he was speaking to, it became clear from that.

They hadn't discussed the current happenings yet. The order was expected to take care of it themselves, but the issue had blown up beyond what they'd ever expected.

"We cannot retreat now."

Seneca voiced the joint opinion of all the remaining Gods.

If they retreated now, they'd practically be declaring defeat. It couldn't be allowed to happen.

However...

"Do you think you have a choice? In the first place, isn't it because of your mistakes that they learned the truth? Turtle down without complaint for now. Besides, can we even say you will surely win if you decide to fight anymore?"

The Straea Clan representative's voice was laced with mockery, but Seneca could do nothing but accept it.

They were the weaker party from the start.

Of course, they had hidden forces, but how could they use those?

"In any case, once 'that thing' is finished, we can directly strike them down. Until then, we must make sure no hidden variables arise."

No matter what Seneca wanted to say, he knew the other party was correct.

He gritted his teeth and bowed his head.

"I...understand."

"Good. Then, we will not contact each other for now. I will send word first if the need presents itself."

The projection disappeared as the other party cut the connection, leaving Seneca alone in the dark room with his thoughts.

His eyes were practically red in anger.

"For now, for now, for now..."

Every single time the Straea representative said "for now," he wanted to rip him to shreds.

But it couldn't be done, just like everything else.

"Fine."

Seneca took a deep breath and calmed himself.

"We will hide ourselves until the time is right, however..."

They wouldn't drop this matter here.

"Whoever is running that palace..."

Seneca gnashed his teeth.

"...I will tear you to shreds with my own hands."

Chapter 1439 Strike [4]

Flashes of light so fast they hardly registered as flashes.

Pain. Endless pain that continued to get worse without any signs of stopping.

Was this the end of a True God?

It seemed even their lives were finite, despite all the work they did to achieve eternity.

Damien watched the memories of Patrick Holmes, the member of the pantheon of 12 Gods who'd been slain by Void Palace's 3rd Sword, Yusuf Mooncrest, in intrigue.

Yusuf's movements were wild and ferocious. He had the composure of a swordsman but the heart of a barbarian, and with that combination, he was able to completely overpower Patrick.

The God didn't have a single chance to fight back.

Such an overwhelming defeat caused Damien to question how the Divine Order managed to maintain its position at the top of the world, but he got his own answer through the same memories.

'It's mainly due to the Foreign Races.'

Because of them, the order was tied to the Straea Clan, and with their help, nobody could ever take down the order.

Plus, the order had several hidden armies filled with troops like the homunculi Damien met previously that could wipe the floor with most normal influences.

Of course, whether or not Void Palace was included in that list was up for debate, but the main point was that the majority of the Divine Order's status was not deserved, but given to them for free.

Damien practically learned everything he could possibly know about them through Patrick's corpse. Whether it be their current plans, future plans, or past atrocities, Damien could pick between various points of Patrick's life and view them all.

At this point, the Divine Order had already faced true defeat. Only, they didn't know it yet.

At the current moment, with months steadily flying by after the five-year period of activity, the order was actively withdrawing its troops from the borders, focusing on internal defense instead.

"I guess it worked."

Damien sighed to himself. It was one of relief, not worry.

He was still somewhat concerned that the order would act impulsively and strike back now, which was the worst possible move for both parties, but it seemed they'd held themselves back.

"Or rather, they've been held back."

More than likely, the Straea Clan pressured them to withdraw and hide for a while.

'As for why...'

Damien's eyes hardened.

'I need to speak to mother.'

He was keeping it down.

He wanted to hear from her before choosing how to react.

But he was calmer than expected.

When he found Claire and sat her down, she was originally curious about what he could possibly need her for.

The two of them made sure to spend a sufficient amount of time together, and using most of her spare time, Claire was helping with the army matters, however, for Damien to come out of nowhere like this...

"Mom, please tell me. What is happening to my father?"

Her heart skipped a beat.

"Y-your father, you say?"

Damien nodded with serious eyes.

Claire could see from his expression that he wasn't playing around. More than that, she could see that he already knew something about the situation.

This wasn't a question that came out of nowhere.

It was merely Damien's wish to confirm the truth with those he trusted.

Claire sighed.

"I knew I was going to have to tell you at some point, but I didn't think it'd come so soon."

She wanted Damien to live in peace for at least a small while, but he had no thoughts of doing so.

That wasn't the way Damien did things.

Rest only came after work was finished. Until Damien cleared away everything that prevented him from resting, he wouldn't even think about it.

Claire didn't know what to do.

Her son really took after his father.

"Haa..."

She sighed again.

Since it had come to this, there was nothing left to hide.

The truth had to come out.

"Your father, in the eyes of the public, disappeared several millions of years ago. As you know, the amount of time is skewed because of the time we spent in the lower universe, however..."

She struggled to speak through it, but she endured for the sake of her son.

"When your father was forced back into the Heavenly World to protect Earth and Grand Heavens Boundary, it was all due to the schemes of his enemies."

"Since the moment I returned, I have been unable to meet him."

"I do not know where he is, nor do I know how he is, but there is one thing that's become clear after years of investigation."

Damien's breaths were short as he listened for the main point.

This was the part he knew.

"The Celestial Prison. That's what they call it."

It was a cage made specifically to hold Dante Void.

And it was hidden somewhere within the Straea Clan's reach.

"Your father has been trapped for at least a million years, unable to escape. And we...no matter how much we search, we cannot find the location of that prison."

It was the sad reality of Void Palace.

The reason for their fall was orchestrated from the beginning. Dante didn't disappear, but was forced to stay away from his people, trapped in the middle of nowhere.

Damien's reaction was surprisingly mild.

"Is it just the Straea Clan?"

He wasn't unaffected. When he saw the memories pertaining to Dante, he also felt a myriad of emotions bubbling up from the depths of his soul, however, he pushed them down and replaced them with calmness.

Emotion wouldn't get him anywhere. Dante wouldn't be saved because he was angry.

He needed to keep his head on right so he could properly bring his father to safety.

So he asked the question.

And Claire gave him the answer he was looking for.

"No. It is highly likely that the Celestial Prison is located in a Dimensional Crack somewhere, hidden deep in the territory of the Foreign Races."

Damien nodded.

"Alright."

He wanted to talk to his mother more, but this was the most important thing for now.

Since he had a moment of freedom after pushing back the Divine Order and the Straea Clan, Damien could finally take a moment away from the palace.

"Mom, can I leave the palace to you and Aunt Serena?"

"You...what are you planning to do?"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to do anything dangerous. It's just..."

Damien glanced into the horizon.

"...there's a place I need to visit."

Claire didn't want to let him leave, but with his decision made, nothing could stop him.

She could only nod, suppressing her worry like every mother who had to watch her child leave the nest.

"We will make sure the palace thrives in your absence. You just need to focus on staying safe."

"I will, mom. Don't worry."

He was lying.

Damien had received news recently that perfectly aligned with his current goals.

It was news of a Dimensional Crack that opened in the Southern Region.

Since the Foreign Races had sent him an invitation, why would he reject it?

He wanted to see what the people who kidnapped his father, tried to destroy his home, and plotted against him for his entire life were really like.

And more importantly, he wanted to see if they could withstand the weight of his emotions.

Chapter 1440 Enlightenment [1]

Regardless of the storms outside, it will always be peaceful at home.

It was a saying not everyone could relate to, but it was perfect for this moment.

Soft winds breezed through the main palace. It, standing high and proud over the rest of the Brightmoon Principality, always gave off a domineering appearance, but it was never arrogant. Rather, it was comforting.

Surrounded by lush, green grasses and tall natural foliage that perfectly bordered the palace's territory and the cries of beautiful beasts that resided in those greeneries, wild yet free of negative intent, the main palace had a particular aura to it today that it usually didn't possess.

Countless people were gathered. Everyone even slightly important to the palace, anyone who'd gained a position from a Sword to a common maid, was gathered in the palace's main hall.

Those who didn't reside in the main palace didn't have the privilege to be here personally, but they were watching through projections spanning the entire territory.

The main hall was decorated particularly today.

It wasn't lined with long tables that could seat hundreds at once. Rather, it was a collection of seats that took up the entire hall, leaving only a single strip of land in the middle.

Grand decorations lined the walls with countless precious materials that normal people couldn't even dream of, and murals with ancestry dating back hundreds of millions of years painted the ceiling.

It was almost as if Void Palace was planning to host a grand wedding.

But that wasn't the case.

"Are you ready, Milord?"

A maid spoke to the man of the hour, the reason why every chair in the main hall and even the space outside it was crowded with people, respectfully awaiting his presence.

"Of course I am."

Damien responded with a smile.

He didn't look like his usual self today.

His hair was properly tamed, flowing down to border his face perfectly and showcase his natural charm. His clothes weren't randomly put together from what was in his subspace, but instead were custom-made for this day with his measurements in mind.

It was a somewhat ancient garb that felt burdensome to wear. It was heavy, colored black and purple to match Void Palace's tones, and large, as if meant to be worn by an Emperor who only needed to sit on his throne.

However, Damien had to admit he looked good.

As he saw himself in the mirror, he questioned if he was even the man he saw.

He didn't look how he remembered himself.

He'd gotten older. His features became more defined and set, and an air of maturity surrounded his face and body that was never present before.

He'd gotten bigger. His body wasn't just built to be optimized for battle anymore, but was versatile and perfect for a variety of things.

He looked like a man he once aspired to be, and when he realized that he wasn't anywhere near his end goal, he smiled.

'Well, this is a pretty big step in and of itself.'

"Since you are ready, then please make your way to the main hall. Everything else is already in place."

Damien nodded at the maid's urging. He was more than prepared for what was to come.

Today was the day he walked down the aisle.

Not to become someone's bride, but to officially take his post.

He'd been acting covertly so his presence wouldn't alert people to the palace's revival, but the time for that was over.

They'd revealed their intentions, and at a juncture like this, it was actually better for Damien to become a target and take attention away from the palace itself.

He entered the main hall confidently.

Even as he felt the auras of those he loved and cared about, along with those he'd just recently gotten to know enveloping him, he didn't budge.

For today, he needed to be stalwart in all things, giving off an image that wasn't the Damien Void anyone here knew.

The main hall was engulfed in silence the moment his presence was recognized.

Claire, Serena, Hugo, Persia, and the 10 Swords stood on a raised platform at the end of the aisle, waiting for him.

He approached them with the same confidence, his back straight and his eyes up.

When he arrived in their midst, they parted ways and made space for him.

They lined up in two rows on either side of him, creating a straight line to the final seat in the hall.

This was the throne Damien would one day inherit.

He looked at it intently, but frankly, he didn't feel anything.

Maybe it was because this one was just a prop for the sake of the occasion, but the throne just felt so small to him.

Nevertheless, it was his birthright, and he didn't plan to ignore it.

He walked towards it, and in the eyes of everyone present, he took his seat.

This was the day he officially became the Young Lord of Void Palace.

This ceremony was being held because Damien had gained the respect and loyalty of those in the palace, and since it was time for him to head into the fray again, it was about time for them to announce his status to the entire world.

The event was a mess of grand speeches and ceremonious rituals, but to Damien, it ended the moment he sat down on that seat.

Now he could do it for real.

He could use his authority without worry.

And, he could set a net for a few fishes he'd been trying to catch.

Damien planned to set out that very night. While the celebration would continue for a few more days, he couldn't tell the Dimensional Crack to just wait for him.

However, he encountered an unexpected obstacle.

And it wasn't necessarily a bad one.

The scenery got to him.

The peace, the calm, the security, he suddenly felt it suffocating him.

He almost couldn't believe this kind of harmony was possible in the world.

He'd never seen it before, that much was for certain.

No matter where he went, there were always countless conflicts that never seemed to end. Any time one conflict was solved, another would arise. No place could simply maintain peace because it wanted to.

But Void Palace was different.

They didn't brainwash people like the Divine Order and they didn't rule through fear or money like the Straea Clan or Kyushu Federation.

They didn't have the strict ancestral rules of the Dragon Clan nor did they adhere to a certain faith or ideology like the Holy Empire.

They were just naturally themselves, and the atmosphere it created was so genuine Damien almost couldn't stand it.

'What...is this feeling?'

There was something resonating deep within him that he couldn't understand.

He couldn't focus on anything, so, in the dead of night, instead of leaving for the Dimensional Crack, he took an aimless walk around the main palace.

He allowed the planar layers to teleport him around randomly, and somehow, he ended up outside the palace entirely.

He found himself at a small waterfall leading into a creek, surrounded by only three or four trees that didn't seem like they had any inhabitants.

It was a small area that didn't seem to have any relation to anything, but since the palace's teleportation led here, it must've had some meaning.

Damien didn't really question it, though.

Instead, he found himself sitting down at the edge of that creek, staring at his own reflection in its clear waters.

Something unexplainable was happening in his mind.

Almost like...

Enlightenment.