

Void 1691

Chapter 1691 Allegiances [5]

It was a joyful and adventurous story at the start.

The Dragon Emperor was once just a boy by the name of Zenith Aurora.

He was once a Holy Clan genius himself.

Zenith existed in an era when Qinglong was gone. His legacy had been reduced to ash, and though the people of the Holy Clans knew who he was, they always painted him in a bad light.

He was a powerful and dominant Dragon Emperor who did everything he could to bring equal opportunity to everyone of his race.

He had the Holy Clans at his beck and call. Even the strongest Holy Dragons were forced to obey him.

This definitely earned the ire of those in high positions. He had been gone for countless millennia, but Zenith always heard the elders admonishing and badmouthing him.

In fact, to even find those initial truths, Zenith had to dig for many years. In his youth, he also only saw Qinglong as a stain in the history of dragonkind.

However, after learning more, he saw it differently.

Qinglong was an ideal emperor. He was someone who could be looked up to. The commoners thrived and the kingdom was slowly becoming a true society of dragons, something otherwise thought impossible.

Their species was too used to being independent. When they came together, it was inevitable for them to either oppress each other or go to war.

How did Qinglong manage to unite dragons?

How did he manage to make Arulion a functioning society despite everything blocking his path?

Slowly, the image of a hero was formed in his mind. He had a new goal to strive towards.

Zenith wasn't one of the best geniuses in the clan. Rather, because of the uniqueness of his laws, he couldn't practice the clan's techniques in the slightest.

He was cast aside and given a minimal amount of training and resources, left to understand everything else on his own.

Perhaps that was why he related so deeply to Qinglong's story.

The Dragon Emperor's position didn't hold any weight anymore.

The emperor of his time was just a puppet controlled by the Holy Clans.

He looked powerful to the commoners, but in reality, he didn't have much power at all. He was a slave under contract who could only exert the will of the Holy Clans and take the brunt of the consequences on himself.

Zenith barely had status in the Aurora Clan, but even he was privy to that information. It didn't need to be explained further just how much the value of that position had diminished in the eyes of the highest elites.

He wanted to change that. He also wanted to see dragons as a whole thrive. There was a beautiful picture that formed in his mind when he envisioned the future that Qinglong was trying to create.

As long as the Holy Clans had full control, that future would only get further and further away.

Zenith never separated himself from the clan entirely. They were a good source of resources, albeit a small amount, and the status he gained as a legitimate member of the Aurora Clan gave him many privileges in the outside world.

They allowed him to leave as he pleased since he wasn't a high-profile individual, and over the course of the next few thousand years, he adventured through not only Arulion but also the Heavenly World to properly understand and control his power.

He realized that he had a gift. Everything possible needed to be done to improve it into a grand talent.

In the end, Zenith only returned to Arulion when he heard news of the previous Dragon Emperor passing.

At that time, he was still relatively young. He had developed his mind along with his power, but he wasn't immune to emotions.

He had an entire plan where he would suppress his power and trick the Holy Clans into believing him an ideal puppet. He would then use his strength and wits to quietly build himself up and change the kingdom.

Eventually, he would be able to face them directly and end their reign.

Eventually, he thought.

That plan succeeded to the level Damien already understood.

For a long time, Zenith was able to do everything he attempted. He did end up with a force on par with a Holy Clan, which made it harder for them to touch him.

But, he never became bigger than them.

When they realized what he was doing, they suppressed him and took away all of his options. He was driven into a corner and many of his people either defected or died. Those who stayed and were willing to run the heir wars were only those willing to die for him.

And, of course, those who were still planted.

Zenith knew that the heir wars wouldn't be able to take place without corruption. But, he had sent his people out to make sure that it never got out of control.

The trials would still take place fairly. The people who had real talent would still stand a chance regardless of their circumstances. Just...like always, the Holy Clans would have an advantage over everyone else.

It was the most he could do.

After all that he had been through, all that led him to hide here, Zenith was running out of time. His life force was dwindling, and he needed an heir to replace him.

Since he was still alive, he could at least attempt to find someone who would continue his mission and fight the good fight.

"That person is likely to become a martyr. Especially if you can't live to support them until they're ready to take the throne."

Damien said it plainly.

Zenith was a good man at his core. The problem was that he acted too early. Nothing he did from the start meant anything since it was impossible for him to grow bigger than the Holy Clans inside of Arulion.

He should've gathered forces in the Heavenly World and used them to take on the Holy Clans. Out there, not only was talent more easily accessible, but the people were also generally more accepting.

Nevertheless, that was old history. It didn't matter anymore.

The fact of the matter was that anyone who claimed the title of "Zenith Aurora's Successor" would become a target.

"I am well aware, but what am I to do? Am I destined to rot and die in this decrepit cave? Am I meant to watch the kingdom fall into depravity without trying to do anything possible to save it? Perhaps that young genius will become a martyr, but what if they do not? What if they are able to push the cause forward?"

Zenith's voice was filled with a sort of passion and desperation that Damien knew well.

This was the same emotion that everyone in Grand Heavens Boundary held.

When war truly came, despite the amount of corruption within the universe, people banded together with that thought,

"If not me, then the person who comes next."

If not that person, then the person after them.

If their hopes and dreams were carried through enough generations, they'd eventually succeed in achieving their goals.

And it worked, didn't it?

Eventually, an era of heavenly geniuses arose. People like Damien, his wives, Su Ren, hell, even people like Iris and Tian Yang were born, grew, and fought until the war was finally over.

Grand Heavens Boundary was broken many times, but it was now eternally safe within the Sanctuary under the protection of a great being.

How proud would their ancestors be if they saw what they'd accomplished?

Zenith was only the second generation in Arulion to carry the torch, but he still had hope.

Eventually, talents would band together and the kingdom would be saved. He didn't have to be there to witness it.

'This guy...'

Damien shook his head.

He was blissfully unaware of what was going on in the Heavenly World right now. The only thing he saw was the good of his kingdom and the dream that he'd had since he was a child.

That sort of blind and earnest hope was touching, even for a person like Damien.

'I want to believe him, but it's always best to double-check.'

Damien had to affirm that these qualities Zenith presented externally were not false.

Well, it was something he already knew, but he wanted to understand properly.

There wasn't even a question of what Damien would find in Zenith's existence. He bared himself to the first visitor he'd had in ages with no motive except getting his story out into the world.

As he expected, Zenith was the same inside and out. No, perhaps he was even more self-sacrificing and ambitious than he liked to let on.

'If August gets to learn from him...'

...then he would turn out to be a mighty fine Emperor.

If only Zenith had the chance, he would've been the same.

Damien had come here knowing that there were only two ways this interaction could pan out.

The first was the case where the Dragon Emperor proved to be reckless or a coward. If he was not fit for glory, then Damien would deprive everything from him and make him an existence that solely lived to give August guidance and protect him.

And the second case was this.

The Dragon Emperor was a man worthy of respect.

So, Damien had a different offer.

"Do you want to live?"

He asked a simple question that bore incredible weight.

Because the implications that came along with it were truly unthinkable.

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"Do you wish to take me as a slave? If so, then it would be more apt for you to kill me now."

Zenith's immediate response was a wild accusation, but one that could be understood.

Dragons were a rare commodity in the Heavenly World. The fact of the matter was that the cultures of a world where people aged so slowly wouldn't change nearly as rapidly. Those practices, where dragons and men alike were enslaved for others' pleasure, were still very prominent in certain regions of the world.

Damien was not a dragon. He was either a human or a creature disguised as one. Either way, he was from the outside world.

It was practically impossible for him to have pure intentions.

As someone who had lived so long, Zenith hardly believed in goodwill. Hell, even if it was goodwill, what could he even do with more life?

All he would gain was more years trapped in this dark and desolate place, wishing for everything but never achieving anything.

It was better for him to die than live either of those two lives.

Damien shook his head.

He understood the Dragon Emperor's suspicions, but they were not warranted. When it came to Damien, "power" was never the end goal.

Arulion was, putting it bluntly, useless to him. The current Damien was on the verge of being able to create his own kingdom of dragons purely through the use of his mana.

He wanted this place to rejoin the rest of the world, to properly stand up against the incoming threat. And, he never planned to get their help for free.

"I have a son," Damien said.

It was a sudden shift in the conversation for Zenith, but he listened anyway,

"His name is August, and quite honestly, he is not my biological kin. Instead..."

Damien pulled up a projection. It showed August in the current moment.

Deep within the seas off the coast of Fort Halleya, August was currently on an adventure to find himself amongst the water dragon tribes that lived completely separated from Arulion's society.

It wasn't hard for Zenith to understand what Damien was trying to show him.

After all, not only was August cutting through the water in his dragon form, but...

"...that aura, that appearance..."

"It's exactly what you're thinking."

Damien confirmed his thoughts easily.

"When I was still young, I personally met Qinglong, your Ancestral Dragon Emperor. He entrusted me with his kin, and I have been raising that boy on my own for the past ten years."

"He is..."

"He was born and raised in Arulion. And, as you've guessed, he has already accessed his ancestral memories."

"At only ten years of age?"

"That's right."

Zenith smiled slightly.

"It is to be expected from that man's descendant."

He didn't think it possible, but if it was Qinglong's descendant, it made sense.

"You must be wondering why I'm showing him to you," Damien said.

Zenith nodded.

"It's simple. Currently, he is also participating in the heir wars to assume your throne."

"HIM—keugh?!"

Zenith raised his voice for the first time. He coughed a few times afterward as his body readapted, but his confusion and surprise were both evident.

Such a young child who was still growing was participating in such a challenge?!

"He already passed the first round. I guess he's trying to reach 4th class before he goes back for the next one."

"I see..."

It was hard for Zenith to be more surprised, so he decided to just accept it.

A ten-year-old who was challenging the 4th class barrier was fighting with people double to ten times his age to take the throne and become the emperor of all dragons.

It was nonsensical, wasn't it?

"I'm sure that you understand my purpose by now," Damien commented, bringing Zenith's mind back to reality.

Zenith didn't say anything for a while.

"I cannot help him win the heir wars," he said.

"And I'm not asking you to," Damien responded immediately.

"August can win on his own. All you need to do is be a proper mentor when he does."

"There are more challenges than just winning the competition. More importantly, is that child even aware of what he is doing?"

It was concerning. At that age, it was impossible for him to have enough rationality to understand the weight of his actions.

If he was being provoked into such a competition by the will of his father...

"It wasn't me."

Damien interrupted that thought like he could read it.

"He awakened his ancestral memories early and matured faster than anyone could control. The will of his ancestor was definitely involved in his decision, as was a bit of mine, but I never would have forced him to enter if he didn't want to."

A small smile appeared on Damien's face. It was uncontrollable, really.

"That boy has dreams of being a hero and an emperor. Rather than pushing him unnecessarily, wouldn't I just be a terrible father if I held him back?"

"Haa..."

Zenith sighed.

Ancestral memories were the best for a dragon's growth and potential, but when it came to the mental aspect, it had the potential to cause ruination.

It was impressive enough that a child so young was able to overcome it. For him to willingly take up the quest for the throne made him a beast in the best sense.

"You want me alive so I can properly train the successor to Arulion's throne. Even if that isn't your son, that remains true, yes?"

"Sure."

"Then, what will you do about the underlying issues? Whether your son or some other talented genius, they will all die the same if they decide to fight corruption."

"That's an issue for me to handle. I only need one thing from you, and that's an answer," Damien responded.

"So I'll ask you again..."

"Do you want to live?"

Zenith looked at Damien with different eyes than he did before.

This being whose name he still did not know...

No, this man, the father of August, descendant of Qinglong...

Was it okay to trust him?

The rest of Damien's conversation with the Dragon Emperor was for only the two of them to know.

It was best to focus on what was happening in the center of Arulion rather than the preparations that were being made in its depths.

The second round ended in roughly four hours.

The three geniuses who took the most time to complete every portion of the challenge were eliminated, those in the middle were awarded their single point, and the top three took the stage together to fight it out for their places.

Though, it really was just a battle for second and third.

The first-place spot had been dominated by such a large margin that nobody even hoped to compete for it.

Every single round, Melania showed the world just how powerful she was. Since she didn't have any unreasonably powerful Holy Clan geniuses to inhibit her, she was able to show a performance that others couldn't match.

But there was one thing that became evident as she progressed through the stages.

Melania Achen was definitely not just a 3rd class dragon anymore.

She had both achieved 4th class and progressed some of the way through it, which left onlookers with mainly one question.

How?

That answer was vital, because if she made some kind of great discovery...

...then she was about to become a target for many, many people.

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The masses were immensely curious about Melania, perhaps even more than August and Valerie.

After all, those two's origins couldn't be traced. They were commoners, but they didn't come from places close enough to the central region for them to be registered or investigable.

Melania came from Arragon. She was in the slums, sure, but she'd been working in and around the city for many years.

People were able to understand who she was and where she came from. They had access to almost her entire history.

It wasn't a problem for Melania, since she was able to hide on the training island just like her friends, but her family wasn't safe.

Melania had a mother and two young siblings. They had been moved to a better area of Arragon using the money August gifted her, but what difference did that make?

In the grand scheme of things, they were simply too vulnerable.

Melania and August both realized the potential dangers that came with their participation in such a televised event.

When she left the heir wars arena under the scrutinizing gazes of many others, she immediately returned to her home and took her mother and siblings to the Shadow Lounge.

Since Melania spent more time outside than August and Valerie, she had more of an understanding of just what they received for being members of the prestigious organization.

The lounge was backed by strong people unaffiliated with the Holy Clans. As an independent entity, they needed a way to assure their customers.

Everyone who had the privilege of staying in the Shadow Lounge's accommodations would be protected by their staff.

After all, if one person was compromised, then the rest could be compromised just as easily.

To ensure the maintenance of its reputation, the lounge's upper administration kept its existence hidden from even the highest elites in Arulion.

And if someone happened to find one of their establishments...

Well, nothing more needed to be said.

That person would become an enemy of the lounge, which barely any one organization in the world could handle.

The Shadow Lounge was a more powerful entity than the three young geniuses would realize for a long time.

Damien had chosen this place specifically because of how great it was.

Others didn't have the same guts or ability as the people who ran this lounge. If it was them, Damien could be assured that August and his friends would have a bastion of safety even in their darkest days.

Nevertheless, Melania put her mother and siblings into one of the Shadow Lounge's safe houses. She needed to pay a fee to keep them there, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle with her newfound power.

And since her family was secured early, Melania was able to focus on the more positive side of the second round.

Lucas Stroll participated alongside her. Though he had not a single good opinion of her based on the elimination round alone, he was forced to change his harsh attitude the second Melania reappeared in the spotlight.

This kind of change was genuinely insanity-inducing. It wasn't a feat that could be replicated easily.

After seeing how Valerie blew everyone out of the water with her ability, even he found himself doubting if he wanted to stand up to her.

But, it wasn't like he had the chance.

Lucas was defeated in the final round. He was just a second behind the person before him, but that still scored him a position equivalent to fourth place, though anything under the podium was practically the same.

Lucas was disappointed in his performance. He wanted to improve like Melania had to truly show the world what commoners could do.

That was why he accepted her offer despite being humiliated by it.

Melania approached him after the round and gave him a choice.

She, as someone who now understood August's goal and had a far more mature mentality than both him and Valerie, knew that they needed to form alliances if they wanted to properly make it through this competition.

The commoners would be discriminated against by their noble competitors no matter their results. Perhaps some would show different appearances, but the majority would be furious to see them succeed.

As such, it was best for all of them to stick together, for them to help each other when they could so that they didn't have to worry about suppression from the other side.

Melania wasn't averse to recruiting nobles, but the commoners would always be more open.

Lucas was a good first choice. Once she'd convinced Lucas, Ophelia would absolutely join them as well. There wasn't a question about it.

So, she proposed it to him in secret as the final ceremony took place, giving him some time to think it over before answering.

Though, he didn't really need it.

Forming alliances was obviously an advantage. There weren't any cons to it.

Lucas was also a commoner, though one with a bit more fortune than others. Whether he stood alone or with a group, he'd be seen with the same hostility.

So when he thought of Valerie, whose performance he'd seen in the first round, August, who dominated the labyrinth challenge, and Melania, who had just obliterated the second round...

Was there any real reason for him to not want to be allied with these people?

He voiced his agreement as they walked through the tunnel that would lead them to their respective homes.

It was a simple alliance, not something that provoked any feelings but mutual benefit.

At least, that was how it started.

Within two weeks, another two rounds were held.

Ophelia also participated in hers. She scored lower than most, but she still got one point, which put her on par with most.

She had heard from Lucas before the round started, and after experiencing the heir wars for herself, she returned home and immediately agreed to join their alliance.

And, by the time a month had passed, the first stage of the heir wars had ended.

There were three people in each of the five groups who had scored no points at all, adding up to a total of fifteen geniuses.

This stage ended, and their time in the competition ended along with it.

With fifty participants left, the competition would continue into its second round.

The impact that the first elimination had was a lot larger than expected.

There were a total of fifteen commoners participating in the heir wars at the start.

Usually, by this point, that number would have dwindled to zero.

It was definitely close. Seven of the fifteen who were eliminated came from common backgrounds.

But, the other eight were nobles.

For the first time in history, more nobles were eliminated than commoners in a single stage of any competition.

It was monumental.

Though subtle at first, a shift that started with the elimination round started to show more prevalence.

Pride.

Those commoners who never had an ounce of it suddenly learned what a dragon's pride felt like.

And as they reveled in that feeling, they unintentionally got closer to their roots.

Dragons were always solitary creatures who revolted in the face of oppression.

Dragons were creatures that would rather die than be enslaved or mistreated.

The common people had just forgotten the instincts in their blood.

It really didn't take much to change Arulion.

All the people needed was spirit and someone strong enough to put their hopes in.

One of those requirements was being fulfilled with every round of the heir wars.

As for the other one...

It had not come yet, but soon, everything would change.

A spiritual leader, a person who could bring all of dragonkind together to fight oppression...

That person already existed.

And it wouldn't be long before they returned to the scene.

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August, Lucas, Melania, Ophelia, and Valerie.

These five were the start of the small alliance. Whenever they found themselves in challenges together, they worked as a team and only stopped to compete with each other when everyone else was taken care of.

It was a way for them to monopolize wins while at the same time promoting teamwork between people in their circumstances.

When the second stage started and the first two rounds went by, the other common geniuses immediately realized the benefit of being part of a group.

The alliance grew instantly. Melania regrouped with August and Valerie once her round ended and the three of them caught up on many things.

Melania mentioned the alliance, and August immediately understood what she was trying to do.

This was the first step to creating a force that was loyal to him. For now, they only worked together because of the benefits, but that would eventually change.

August was certain of that because Lucas and Ophelia had already changed their attitude a lot from the moment they first joined the alliance.

They were all young. They were independent as they all focused on training over all else, but they needed friendships and bonds to facilitate their growth.

People would naturally grow closer when they were put together for long periods of time. This situation worked exactly the same.

The second stage of the heir wars didn't present any challenges.

Honestly, it ended without that many surprises, despite the audience being entirely engaged for every single round.

August and his friends matched the nobles in every game and gave serious competition to the Holy Clan geniuses who appeared every so often.

The problem was that every single one of those geniuses had the same mentality as Eris.

They wanted to dominate. Nobody below their circumstances was allowed to do better than them.

It didn't matter if it stained their image. As long as they defeated their competitors, that was enough for them.

That group of twelve was terrifying. It was hard to find a podium that didn't have one of them on it.

But it also became harder to find a podium without a commoner on it.

Whether it was August or one of his compatriots, at least one person would always end up there, showing the world that they weren't defeated yet.

And that spirit...

It was surprisingly inspiring, and not just to commoners.

August's alliance grew. Some nobles started to put down their pride and ask to join it, and when they found themselves so easily accepted, many of them started to warm up to their less fortunate brothers and sisters.

And, it wasn't just people joining August.

The entire format of the heir wars began to change as geniuses stopped competing alone.

As of now, with three months passing and the second stage ending, there were two main alliances.

The first belonged to August.

It was made up of six commoners and five nobles. That number was once higher, but many of their allies had been eliminated in this round.

The second was headed by none other than Mikael from the Dawn Dragon Clan.

He had another eleven nobles on his side, and they directly opposed August and his group at every turn.

The eleven people who joined Mikael truly hated commoners. They wanted to see all of them eliminated, and that was the only reason they'd allied.

The funny part was Mikael himself.

He...didn't feel the same way at all.

Instead, he felt a strong rivalry against August and Valerie after his defeat in the first round.

He respected their strength, and though he did want to join them, he felt like it would be more engaging if he competed against them with more fervor than ever.

And in the process, he just happened to become the leader of the second alliance.

August and Mikael had become friends in the past three months, but that wasn't information privy to just anyone.

At the end of the day, they were enemies on the battlefield.

Nevertheless, there were now two alliances and twelve individual Holy Clan geniuses who refused to participate in their shenanigans.

They had a lot of conflict in the tournament itself. There were many moments where people were forced to question which side was in the right and if what they were doing was really ethical at all.

They used tricks against each other, schemed like they were fighting a war, and showed the audience just how desperate they were to win.

Still, it had been quiet on the external front.

In a certain sense, the heir wars had only just begun.

The narrative was being written by the commoners, but the only time they'd actually taken first place in the place of a Holy Clan genius was in that very first round.

Currently, the likes of August, Valerie, and Melania were still far below the three Holy Clan geniuses who were the overall first, second, and third-place contenders in the tournament.

On the leaderboard, it said that they were in 6th, 4th, and 5th respectively, but the gap between Valerie and Seryius Ether, who was in third, was five points.

It wasn't a large number, but it meant that if Valerie wanted to overtake him, then she needed to get a podium finish while he missed one.

And that...

Well, that wasn't something the Holy Clans would allow.

Tensions were undeniably heightening.

The pot was boiling deep underground so nobody realized that it was about to burst, but once it truly did erupt, heaven and earth would not survive its wrath.

That was the situation heading into the third round, which was set to begin a month later.

What more was there to say about the individual training of each genius?

They did everything they could to get stronger. Their competitors would only outdo them if they wasted a single second.

Perhaps that was also why August and his people didn't face too much trouble outside of the arena.

For now, they were still protected by the heir wars.

For now, nobody had been blackmailed or bribed into betraying their comrades.

For now, at least.

It was bound to happen eventually. Despite becoming friends with everyone that he could, August was still wary of that situation because he knew for certain that the Holy Clans wouldn't tolerate his existence for much longer.

August had become an anchor for those trying to diminish their power.

To get rid of him, wouldn't the Holy Clans use the most convenient method of using someone close to him?

He had to be ready for it.

And now that he'd been experiencing real combat for almost half a year, the roadblock in August's mind was completely gone.

What kind of fighter did he want to be?

What kind of dragon did he want to be?

These were the questions that held him back.

Now that he had the answers, the heavens rewarded him with a moment that had been waiting for his response.

As he meditated in the sea, surrounded by wildlife and even a few people from nearby water dragon clans, his eyes suddenly shot open.

They were filled with light. August's head jerked back, and their light shot into the sky to connect to the heavens.

An awakening was taking place in the depths.

After all this time, August was going to join the rest at that benchmark.

The 4th class.

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A dragon's Universe Baptism was different from what a human went through.

The concept was the same. The universe would ask them to prove their worthiness through a series of tests. If they succeeded, then they'd be allowed to proceed to the next level.

Dragons didn't have a class system. They trained like beasts, which was why their system relied more on bloodlines and the like. They passed the 4th class barrier to be granted a purified bloodline. Later, they would challenge the world to become Godbeasts.

Only Holy Dragons could be considered True Godbeasts, but they weren't the only dragons to reach this level.

Theoretically speaking, any dragon could become a Godbeast.

The 4th class barrier was exactly their opportunity. If they managed to cross it, all of them could gain bloodlines akin to nobles and the potential to improve them even further.

Sure, it was a long and arduous road to get to that point, but if the commoners knew that it existed, would they care?

If they also had the chance to become powerful, then wouldn't most of them immediately leap at it?

August had a bloodline whose power couldn't be unlocked so easily. The 4th class barrier was actually the start for him. Only at that level would he have the mana necessary to properly showcase the strength of an Azure Dragon.

August had gotten closer to the seas to prepare for this moment. With the ability to somewhat harness their power already, the version of him that would come to be after the Baptism would be able to immediately access immense power.

And, since his starting point was higher, his Baptism would be on another level compared to those dragons without much lineage.

He knew all of these things before it even started.

Still, he didn't expect it to be as hard as it was.

Just like most other things in the universe, the Baptism was separated into a mind trial and a body trial.

The body trial was relatively easy. It had to do with a lot of pain, and August's endurance wasn't the best, but Damien had trained him enough for this level to be manageable.

He was forged. His dragon body became more complete, more regal.

Through the bodily trial, his bloodline was purified as well.

The Azure Dragon bloodline was one of the purest lineages in the entirety of draconic history. Qinglong created his own Godbeast species when he rose, and technically speaking, August was his only direct descendant.

As such, all of the purity Qinglong had achieved throughout his lifetime was transferred to August.

The universe didn't have much to do.

But, the heavens took such truths as a challenge.

When faced with something approaching perfection, it strived to show that perfection was only a concept to it.

The universe was above everything.

Even if it was the purest of draconic lineages, it could be enhanced or destroyed as the universe desired.

Only, it took a bit more work.

August found himself submerged in magma. His water-based bloodline heavily rejected its interference and rebelled, but that was exactly what the heavens wanted.

The power of Azure rose up and consumed everything that August's body had. It used every ounce of mana, every ounce of vitality, and every ounce of spirit to fight back against the heavenly flames.

The fight between the most supreme form of each element was destructive. August's body was torn apart and forced to reconstruct itself in a better form.

The Azure Dragon lineage made sure that he reached a point where fire could never claim superiority over him.

As for his bloodline itself...

It was provoked to improve on its own through the circumstances the heavens placed it in, but the universe also added a twinge of its power, as if a sign of respect to the bloodline that made it feel challenged.

While all of that was taking place, August was elsewhere.

His mind was put to the ultimate test.

In this regard, nobody was spared.

Anyone who reached 4th class and beyond needed to have purpose.

It didn't matter if that purpose was good or evil, large or small. It just had to be strong enough to carry them through the nigh-

impossible levels of training that would come in the future.

That ideal would become engrained in a practitioner's soul, and when the time came to form a Divinity, it would act as a foundation.

For Damien, that desire was power.

He wanted to see the peak of everything. It was something he desired so much that he was willing to die multiple times for it.

For August, it was something even simpler.

He just wanted to be a hero, same as ever.

That desire was once childish. He had to admit that there was a point in time when he didn't know what supporting the people entailed, but it was different now.

In just a few months, he'd seen how harsh and cruel the world could be.

Being a hero didn't just mean saving people. It meant sacrificing himself for their sake, taking their pain on his own body so they could be shielded.

Was he prepared for that?

Did he really want to live a life that belonged to everyone but him?

It was definitely a question he had to ask himself, but oddly enough, the answer wasn't that hard to find.

He wanted to do it.

Despite all of the downsides, he felt that it was his life's purpose to play that role.

Just as Melania made the decision to end her lineage for the sake of power, August was willing to become a puppet of justice if it meant bringing peace to the world.

Not many people could make that decision. Even those who did came to regret it when they got older.

Still, regrets were for a different August to deal with. The current version of him felt nothing but steely determination to accomplish everything he set out to achieve.

The universe made August experience the pain and suffering that he'd likely experience in the future. It showed him the scenarios where he'd lose people, it showed him the times he would lose faith in people, and it showed him the times when he'd question everything and wonder if all of his sacrifices were worth anything.

He truly had to understand the weight of his decision, because he couldn't take it back once he'd made it.

This would define his future path. If he deviated from it, then he would suffer in a completely different way.

A whirlpool formed in the ocean as the barrier of world energy around him disrupted its flow.

Many a member of the water dragon clans was alerted to the commotion and came to watch.

What they witnessed was a heavenly phenomenon that couldn't be suppressed.

The seas danced around the world energy barrier like children who'd received their Christmas presents. A myriad of oceanic creatures swarmed the vicinity and followed the currents, as if practicing a sacred ceremony lost in time.

It was a beautiful sight that almost nobody was aware of, taking place in the middle of a sea that spanned too far away from Arulion for the kingdom's authority to hold weight.

Here, at just ten years old and barely even approaching eleven, August Void reached 4th class.

He was the first dragon in the history of their species to accomplish such a feat.

Chapter 1696 Preparation [1]

The heir wars were actually progressing faster than anyone expected, and the reason was pretty simple.

The gap between geniuses was too pronounced.

As they'd gone so far, it looked like the noble clan geniuses weren't anything to be impressed about. They showed skills that were great and flashy, but when they were consistently defeated by commoners who were far less creative in their movesets, it was hard for them to make a case for themselves.

Even the common people could see that this competition was no longer a place for people with their mediocre skills. There were real heavenly geniuses this time. Those people were stronger than people twice or even ten times their age.

The stage they deserved to be standing on wasn't one that those regular noble geniuses could stand.

It was a place for the best of the Holy Clans...

...and the five commoners that made them appear far less impressive than they really were.

The tournament faculty also came to understand this fact after seeing how the second stage ended, but they were in a predicament that didn't allow them to easily change the format.

The noble clans were nowhere near as powerful as the Dragon Emperors own forces, but they still had a significant degree of influence. The heir wars would become difficult to run if the noble clans decided to act against the event.

However, if their geniuses were eliminated during the competition due to their own lacking skills, then their respective clans couldn't say anything.

The third stage was partially created with the intention of removing everyone unworthy from the competition once and for all.

Instead of being split into five groups, the remaining thirty-five geniuses would all participate together in a single round with massive rewards and consequences.

And, the actual contents of the challenge wouldn't be hidden.

Around two weeks before the stage began, every genius received a notification on their emblem.

'War...?'

August looked at it with raised brows.

The concept was easy to grasp.

Since the geniuses had pretty much already split themselves into two teams, the tournament administration was giving them a chance to determine which side was truly better.

The third stage would be a war. The geniuses would be given their own territories to protect while also trying to invade and seize the opposing team's territory.

Whoever had better strategy, better power, and bigger ambition would win.

Up to here, there weren't any problems. It was a relatively even playing field, especially since the event itself begot the Holy Clan geniuses dividing themselves and joining the two teams.

The problem was more in why they were notified two weeks in advance about the trial.

'We'll be given time to enlist troops from the outside to help us. The only restriction on their strength is the same as what applies to us. They just have to be under a hundred years old.'

It was likely a measure to prevent noble clan geniuses from enlisting their elders.

'But it's still an unfair advantage.'

After all, the Holy Clan geniuses could also contribute to their side's troops. In their families, geniuses under a hundred were common.

As August continued reading, he confirmed that the sides would be even.

There were an odd number of them, so one person would need to be seeded in at some point, but there would be enough Holy Clan geniuses on his side to counter those supporting Mikael.

But, who would they be more willing to support?

Would they really lend aid to August and his people despite their directly opposing ideologies?

'This is going to get messy.'

The total limit of troops on each side was 1000. It would be a proper wartime battle where many different tactics could be employed.

'And since we already know who our allies are...'

August looked at the end of the message, where the teams were clearly outlined.

'...we should meet and start planning.'

War didn't begin when the fighting did.

The first step was always taken behind closed doors when people started plotting against each other.

August's eyes were narrowed.

He stood in the midst of the ocean. His Baptism had properly ended, and he could already see the depths of his newfound power.

Hell, he didn't even need to test it.

Because of the impact that his Baptism had on the ocean and the aura he possessed for but a second after the world energy barrier receded, the water dragon clans had already started to worship him.

Even their greatest elders showed him respect.

He felt like a king.

These were people he'd been interacting with for months now. They knew who he was beforehand, and seeing their behavior change was startling for August.

Still, he didn't undermine their feelings. Rather, he understood them.

Water dragons became enemies of the kingdom the moment Qinglong died. These remote locations were the only places where his legacy could live on.

But, because of their worship, they had to stay isolated from the world.

'Their help would be great, but it would immediately reveal my identity.'

When it came to other matters, though...

The water dragon clans were August's first followers. They had pledged loyalty to the last living Azure Dragon, and they would absolutely be willing to go to war for their new emperor.

'So, when it comes down to the wire, they'll be the most helpful people in the world.'

August smiled. He was more than satisfied with what he'd accomplished in these months.

'But now it's time to get serious again.'

August clutched the emblem in his hand and sent mana into it, expressing a thought to sixteen other geniuses.

It contained two lines.

The first was a location.

And the second was just two words.

"Let's talk."

They had their differences.

No, that was a massive understatement. His original group of eleven and the five newcomers who'd be joining them were already enemies.

It was his job to find a middle ground between them before the competition started.

After all, if their team was already eyeing each other with hostility, then what would they do when another seventeen geniuses at the same level came at them with the intent to destroy?

Most kingdoms at war fell to internal conflict rather than enemy fire.

August wouldn't allow his to be the same.

So, as he waited for a response from his teammates, he asked himself but one question.

'How do I melt a Holy Clan genius?'

He couldn't entice them with benefits, since he couldn't offer them anything better than what they received easily from their clans.

Rationality was a good approach. If they didn't cooperate, then they would lose. Perhaps they wouldn't be eliminated, but they'd lose too many points for them to easily catch back up to their peers in the rankings.

The only reason August didn't want to use this approach was because it would only be valid until the end of the third stage.

He wanted to form a connection that would exist beyond the competition.

The Holy Clans were his enemies, but not every member was evil or corrupt.

The first step to being a hero was believing in the people.

So even if they were the kin of his mortal enemies, the targets of his revenge...

'...I want to give them a chance.'

Chapter 1697 Preparation [2]

Every Holy Clan had sent two geniuses into the competition. They made up a solid portion of the contestants at this point, so it was a little surprising that August hadn't run into many of them.

However, they were definitely there. All of them, including the geniuses from the Ligua Clan.

The day when August met them and was forced to fight would come soon. After all, both of them were on the enemy side.

The geniuses from the same Holy Clan had to be placed on the same team for obvious reasons. The war wouldn't be much of a war if people from the same side were able to seize control over both teams.

The six on August's side were from the Ether Clan, the Aurora Clan, and the Ignis Clan.

Mikael was a follower of the Aurora Clan, so August had a good impression of them. The Ether Clan was more mysterious. He didn't quite know what to think of them. Finally, those named Ignis were known for their arrogance. They would likely be the most difficult to control.

The majority of those on his team responded to his message. The rest didn't speak, but it was assured that they'd appear.

For some, this meeting was a time to create a hierarchy. August had been the figurehead of this group for the longest time, but the Holy Clan geniuses wouldn't easily let him tell them what to do.

For others, it truly was a time to create a strategy to defeat the other side. It was just a matter of who was taking the competition seriously and who was treating it as an ego battle.

The location August chose was remote, but everyone competing had the money to pay for private teleportation directly to the coordinates. Even those who started poor were now backed by sponsors who gave them that kind of privilege.

August arrived first. He looked around at the familiar yet unfamiliar area.

There was a broken palace here. It lost its significance a long time ago, but it once meant everything to dragonkind.

It was a fortress of legends back then, but it was currently completely unknown. Even the most informed geniuses likely wouldn't know what it signified.

But August knew.

Because he inherited the memories of the man who built it.

August chose this location mainly because he was still something of a wanted man. He, Valerie, and Melania all had the same status in that sense, so it wasn't great for them to go into society.

They'd been able to train peacefully only because Damien gave them the facilities. If it wasn't for him...well, their lives would have been hell by now.

Nevertheless, the fortress was separated from all of Arulion's society, several thousands of kilometers from the nearest small settlement.

It was from a part of Arulion's history that had been erased along with most of the old continent, so the newly forged Arulion was made where nobody could access it unless they knew what to look for.

August had never been here in person, but seeing it for himself sparked a different kind of emotion than what he felt when he was watching Qinglong.

It was decrepit, sure, but it was just as glorious as ever.

'It wouldn't be bad if I could fix it.'

That was a thought for another time.

For now, August entered the fortress and waited for the others to arrive.

Melania, Valerie, Lucas, and Ophelia came first. Within about ten minutes, they'd made their presence known.

The rest of their original group arrived within half an hour, and the last six geniuses, who were new, came somewhere within forty-five minutes and an hour.

Their attitudes were immediately as expected.

Though they couldn't help but express their initial surprise when they saw their surroundings, they remained stoic afterward, as if this meeting was a small war between them as well.

August smiled wryly.

'This is going to be harder than I thought.'

He clapped his hands and got everyone's attention. They were in an old meeting room in the palace, so the atmosphere was just right for them to start.

"Why don't we introduce ourselves formally? If we're going to work as a team, it's best we know each other's strengths."

In the end, he still started with the rationality tactic. His long-

term plans could be enacted later.

"I'm August Void. I'm a water dragon, no specific lineage, but I'm strong enough to defend myself. More importantly, I think I'm pretty smart, so I'll be best when it comes to strategizing."

He gave them enough of an outline of what needed to be said.

Valerie and the rest introduced themselves as well to create the proper atmosphere, and slowly, everyone joined in.

August and his group were all familiar with the nobles and commoners who'd joined them thus far.

The last commoner aside from those who were known was named Glendon Serria. He was a fire dragon like Ophelia, but they were on different levels.

Still, he was good enough to make it this far, so he wasn't someone to be underestimated.

The five nobles who joined them were named Hannen, Korra, Tassien, Quinn, and Zeno. The first three came from fire dragon clans that followed the Ignis Clan, while the last two came from subordinate clans to the Aureat and Ether Clans respectively.

Hannen, Korra, Tassien, and Zeno were instantly floored by the geniuses who had joined their team.

Their demeanor had changed and become more submissive, because all they had been taught since young was how to submit to the Holy Clans.

That kind of demeanor didn't elicit respect from their stronger peers. Instead, it generated a kind of ire that made August sigh.

Still, the fact that the rest of them had finished introductions provoked the Holy Clan geniuses to do the same.

The two from the Ether Clan were Seryius and Cera. They were brother and sister, and their abilities directly opposed each other. While Seryius was more combat-focused, Cera had a mind beyond minds and could handle the complex calculations of spatial support abilities with ease.

From the Ignis Clan came Raphael and Iridia. Once again they were a man and a woman, but they had no relation other than that of being from the same clan. As to be expected from the Ignis Clan, they were both combat-focused, but they did diverge. While Raphael was good at precision movements that were deadly against individuals, Iridia had explosive wide-area damage that was more destructive than anyone else in the competition.

And finally, from the Aurora Clan were two geniuses by the names of Gio and Bianca. They were dedicated healers for the most part, but if they didn't have the combat talent to match, they wouldn't have been able to survive in the heir wars no matter what their status was.

Their group was made up of mainly offensive players, but that didn't matter much.

"Alright. Since we have a basic understanding of our roles now, I'll tell you all the thoughts I've had so far. Feel free to interrupt with your own at any point."

August had taken the momentum of this meeting from the first moment. And, since he was focusing on the upcoming battle and giving only relevant information, nobody could find an opportunity to butt in.

There were at least a few who were looking for an opportunity, but August didn't plan to give them any attention unless they approached the conversation genuinely.

This time was provided to them so that they could work out the gritty details before ever touching the arena grounds.

So even if he had to take these Holy Clan geniuses on by himself, August would find a way to do it.

Unless someone better could prove themselves, August was not willing to give up his authority.

Because even if this team was a ragtag group of people who didn't get along...

...August was determined to lead them to victory.

Chapter 1698 Preparation [3]

The conversation went relatively well. There were some opponents to its stability, mainly the two from the Ignis Clan, but the Aurora and Ether Clan geniuses were surprisingly accepting.

Seryius was right above Valerie in standing. He didn't have the luxury to think himself better than her. Instead, she was a competition that he had to acknowledge.

As for Cera, she was tied with Valerie. Gio, Bianca, Raphael, and Iridia were also tied with August and Melania.

The so-called fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-place positions were ones shared by many people.

After all, there weren't many opportunities to gain points. Everyone only participated twice, which meant those two positions defined where they stood.

In every round, those geniuses had finished on the podium. However, since the rest had done the same, they all ended up in the same place.

They were all fighting a battle to make it into the top three as people who sat on its cusp.

The reason why most of the Holy clan geniuses were targeting August's group specifically was because they were the hurdles preventing them from moving any higher on the leaderboard.

Cera didn't hold a grudge. Like her brother, she was more open-minded.

The Ether Clan actually didn't participate in Qinglong's downfall. They ignored it as they'd ignored almost anything else happening outside of their clan. They weren't the types to have the inclination to lend aid to others easily, but they were quite amiable in general.

One just had to be sure not to trust them too much, since, at the critical moment, it wasn't odd for them to disappear.

Since Cera was also a skilled tactician, she volunteered to help August with strategizing.

His position as the leader was cemented with those words. After all, if Seryius and Cera were willing to see him as an equal, the rest didn't have an excuse to oppose him.

The plans that were made could only be left in their infancy since there wasn't enough information to finalize them.

Still, assigning roles was important.

It was a matter of consoling a conceited genius, but August allowed Raphael and Iridia to be generals. He would make the strategies, but they would be allowed to monopolize the glory.

Valerie and Melania would act closely alongside them, while the rest would be assigned to positions as needed once they'd actually seen their territory.

Gio and Bianca would be most useful for their healing skills in a wartime situation. All of the combatants would need to be pitted against geniuses on the other side.

Those arrangements required detailed effort to produce.

The key points to tackle in the current moment were team building and recruitment.

The first would take some more time, but the second...

The families of the nobles on August's side probably wouldn't have supported them beforehand, but now that members of their mother clans were on the same team, it was different.

They would easily be able to get a few tens of troops from those noble clans, but it was nearly enough.

August's main goal for this meeting was to secure support from the Holy Clans he was now attached to.

He knew how to differentiate people.

And, though he would believe in the good in people who deserved it, he knew who was evil and how to treat them.

Eventually, he would take them down with his own hands.

But for now, he would milk them for everything they could offer.

The act of convincing them was simple.

First and foremost, Seryius and Cera already promised the Ether Clan's help.

According to Cera:

"It is our battle too. If we lose here, then it will be worse for us than what will happen if we work together with everyone. It might not be to the same extent as what the others will get, but we will at least promise as many troops as the noble clans provide."

With that, a tenth of the necessary army was provided.

The Aurora Clan geniuses spoke along the same lines.

"We're willing to help since all of us are in the same boat now, but our clan probably won't be as friendly as the ones on the other side."

It was the general sentiment they all shared.

Even the Ignis Clan geniuses.

But, they were willing to fight it.

Raphael and Iridia would be the ones leading the army, which gave them more of a stake in things than the others.

Raphael was unwilling to cooperate with the people he disliked, but his pride disallowed him from being worse than others.

Rather than promising whatever their clan could provide, he gave his word for something else.

"I'll provide at least half of the army. If you are so great, then you take care of the rest."

He spoke directly to August.

"If you want to act like the leader, then show us that you have worth."

That was the message in the underlying tone of his words.

August's eyes narrowed, but he nodded nonetheless.

Everyone wanted everyone else to prove their worth. That was the way of the world.

Instead of getting offended by the attitude, August let it slide and decided to correct it through his actions alone.

Plus, he got more than he thought he would. Now wasn't the time to push for more.

"Then, we'll reconvene every so often to confirm our plans. Otherwise, I will see you all in two weeks."

The only person who needed to stay behind was Cera. She and August had to get acclimated to each other's thought processes so they could properly scheme against their enemies.

It wasn't an easy task at all, especially when considering that their team only had Seryius.

The two people above him on the leaderboard...

Eris Noct, who hated August with a passion, and Wilhelm Liqua, a man who would target him solely because of his element.

They would have more support from the outside, they would have better troops, and, more than likely, they'd have more power from person to person.

August and Cera had the most important role.

To overcome that strength with tactics.

And, to create a stage where each and every person on their team could shine.

The event wasn't meant to eliminate one team or the other.

It would show everyone who was worthy of staying in the competition and who needed to be taken out.

It didn't matter what team they came from. If they didn't do anything noteworthy, they'd be eliminated.

The contestants didn't know yet that the intention of the tournament administration was to cut their number down to only fifteen.

At least twenty people would get eliminated through the third stage.

The rest would become enemies.

All alliances would be destroyed and only rivalries would remain as they all vied for first place.

Everything was meant to change in the fourth round.

But the question really was...would they even make it there?

From August's perspective, only positives had risen from the heir wars thus far.

He was still naive.

There were terrifying undercurrents streaming through Arulion. There was an entirely different threat approaching from behind that none saw coming.

And when it finally arrived...

It was safe to say that the entirety of Arulion would tremble.

Chapter 1699 Preparation [4]

August and Cera were forced to spend a lot of time together in the coming days.

The others stopped by every once in a while to check their process and report on the collection of troops, but the two who gave the old fortress life again were none other than August and Cera.

They had easy access to information on the other participants, so they were able to somewhat form a strategy based on eliminating them.

But, the coming challenge wasn't just about eliminating the enemy. Actually, it was a little friendlier to weaker geniuses.

The main goal was to seize the other team's territory. While they inevitably needed to clash throughout the war, actually eliminating every genius on the other team wasn't a requirement to win.

August kept that in mind and kept the planning to how they were going to deal with individuals.

It was like hunting beasts. Every single one of those geniuses had their own kinks. Once their patterns were observed enough times, a strategy to defeat them could easily come into being.

People like Eris Noct and Wilhelm Liqua were definitely terrifying to encounter out of the blue. The fear factor they used to their advantage so well, however, was completely removed by August and Cera.

That was all that could possibly be done in the short amount of time they had.

After all, August still had to recruit five hundred troops.

The rest of the army was slowly filled by the forces from various clans to the expected degree. Even Raphael delivered on his promise, gathering over four hundred mercenaries who were absolutely loyal to him.

For what it was worth, the commoners also tried to contribute.

Those like Melania could only produce one or two reinforcements since they didn't have wild connections, but even Valerie brought over ten people from her clan to help.

August had to do his part.

Somehow, he had to find a way to bring hundreds of people together in a matter of weeks.

He had some connections, sure, but the main source of his resources was none other than Damien himself.

Was he to ask his father for help, or was it his turn to independently win over the people he needed?

August wanted to be independent. It was in his best interest to do as much as possible without asking for help, so he could prepare for the day when it was impossible for him to receive it.

Though he loved his father, he didn't want to be too reliant on him.

To live his own life and to make his father proud through his own achievements, August wanted to do everything on his own.

He just didn't have enough time.

The third stage was only a week later by the time August had the freedom to start recruiting.

He knew his father was busy, but he didn't have another choice but to ask for help.

And so, that was exactly what he did.

He called Damien through a device very purposefully modeled after a smartphone and hesitantly posed the request.

"Dad, can I ask for a favor?"

At this point in time, Damien had already left the Dragon Emperor's lair to start preparing for other things, so he was more than free to answer his son's call.

"Sure, what's up?" he said casually, a hint of curiosity in his tone.

"So, it's like this..."

August quickly explained the situation with the third stage, and Damien immediately understood what he wanted.

But, instead of giving an immediate answer, Damien asked another question.

"If you had the time, do you think you could do it on your own?"

"Absolutely," August responded without hesitation.

"Then..."

Damien smiled, though August couldn't see it.

"...prove it to me."

The world faded away around August.

Damien wasn't anywhere nearby, but that wasn't how his power worked anymore. As long as he knew what he wanted to do, he could do it with ease.

There would never come a day when Damien was averse to just giving August anything he wanted.

Hell, if August decided to give up right now and just ask for Arulion, Damien didn't mind dealing with its internal struggles personally and gifting it to him.

He didn't do it because he had an ambitious son. August's voice clearly portrayed his dissatisfaction at having to ask for anything at all. Since that was the case, Damien gave him the opportunity to earn it.

He had been sent into an imaginary world, sure, but whatever he achieved there would be reflected in reality.

Damien gave him a year in that world.

What he achieved there was up to him, but there was one thing Damien made sure of.

It wouldn't just be the number he needed.

As long as August could achieve something greater...

Every troop he recruited, and every connection he made, would follow him back to Arulion.

'If he really has some ambition...'

Damien's smile widened into a grin.

'...then he could come back from that place with an entire army of his own.'

That was how it began.

A single week in the outside world. A week when August Void suddenly vanished.

Nobody knew what he was doing or where he had gone, but they all had the same thought.

He would either return as a hero, return as a failure, or disappear like a coward.

There were no in-betweens.

It wasn't hard for Damien to create a world.

It actually came quite easily to him.

He was new at controlling Existence, but he was a veteran in the matters of stars.

As a Celestial himself, he had personally witnessed the creation of planets, stars, and the universe.

Perhaps it was still too early for him to birth an entire universe, but if it was just a single world...?

His three main World Cores from Apeiron, Earth, and the Cloud Plane were still present in his mind. They didn't talk nearly as often since they were busy managing many processes of the Sanctuary under Reva, the Universal Core Fragment's supervision, but he could still hear them occasionally.

And he could feel their presence just as well as he could when he first bound them.

Even if he didn't remember everything he'd learned, he could revisit them and relearn at any time.

Plus, it was actually easier than he thought to make a world as simple as those in the lower universe.

Damien birthed a World Core with its laws and its foundational elements. He established a heavenly order, and as the ingredients of life spawned one after another, he sped up time to give the world millions of years to develop.

There wasn't a need to create the complex minds of living beings or the biological processes that allowed every single individual to function. A process with that level of involvement and precision would burn even Damien's mind.

Those living beings were created on their own by the functioning world energy.

They developed sentience on their own, discovered mana on their own, and eventually rose to form their own societies, hierarchies, and power systems.

The world that August entered was entirely real and entirely illusionary at the same time.

He spent a year there, understanding that he was in a trial presented by his father.

As for what he'd accomplished before it came time for him to leave...

Well, that was to be seen, wasn't it?

Chapter 1700 Preparation [5]

August didn't really have time to leave a message for people to see before he vanished, but their plan for the time before the third stage began was thoroughly fleshed out, so there wasn't a need for them to have someone giving direct orders.

One would expect there to be complaints about such a sudden disappearance, but everyone on the team was at least a little perceptive.

August had left to find troops to make up the other half of their army. Until he came back with good or bad news, nobody was going to say anything.

His most fierce opposition came from Raphael and Iridia, but they were especially understanding in this case. Raphael was the one who pushed the responsibility onto August in the first place, so he had the least right to complain.

For the most part, all they had to do was individual training. Since there wasn't a way for them to form actual bonds in the time they were given, most of their strategies relied on each of them acting mostly independently from the rest.

However, they still tried.

August's worries were mostly unwarranted. The Holy Clan geniuses definitely weren't happy to have to work with commoners, but they prioritized winning over prejudice.

Not all of them were as short-sighted as Eris.

Rather, even Eris wasn't short-sighted. She had acted on her emotions in that moment, but it was a weak point for her. She usually had more sense than that. She had a calculating mind that was bred into her by the Noct Clan, but when she got too emotional, it all disappeared.

Still, in this situation, there wasn't a single person who wouldn't willingly cooperate with their teammates.

And though August and the rest didn't know about it, there were definitely rivalries between the Holy Clans.

The tournament administration didn't sort them randomly.

The Ignis Clan and Liqua Clan had several grudges against each other because both believed themselves the pinnacle species of dragonkind.

The Aurora and Aureat Clans had conflict over their interests, since the Aureat Clan insisted on monopolizing control over the economy.

And the Noct Clan liked to make enemies with everyone, but they were mainly hostile to those two clans: Ignis and Aurora.

The Ether Clan was the only one among them who didn't specifically have conflict with another clan. They were obviously still involved in everything since they were also a Holy Clan, and if it had to be decided which side they stood on, then it was relatively clear.

The main incentive for the Holy Clan geniuses was the opportunity to humiliate the competition from hostile clans in front of an audience of millions.

Perhaps that was why Raphael and Iridia stopped raising as much of a fuss when it was decided that they'd lead the armies from the frontlines and take all of the glory.

It only happened three times over the course of two weeks, and August was only present for one, but the team had indeed trained together for several hours, learning each other and understanding how they could fit their skills together in one cohesive picture.

They were playing a delicate game. Each and every one of them understood that, at the end of the day, they were all enemies.

When this round ended, they'd go back to being at each other's throats.

Yes, they needed to work together to succeed.

However, they could never truly express themselves to the people around them. Their best cards and real strength had to remain forever hidden in wait for the day when it truly needed to be released.

The days passed slowly for each individual, but the world experienced them quite rapidly.

The public was unaware of what was happening in the third stage at first, but it was hard to hide it from them when such massive preparations were necessary.

Two large swathes of land just outside of Arrion, another city bordering the central region like Arragon, were claimed by the tournament administration and transformed.

Both territories were roughly the size of a European country. They were large enough to fit several million people if necessary, but still small enough to be easily traversed.

Not only were palaces built at the far ends of both territories, but several cities were also erected throughout to simulate a war between two real kingdoms.

When the competition started in stride, the cities would be filled with simulated populations to make the situation even more realistic.

The preparations made on all sides were extensive.

August's group had some troubles. Their opponents, on the other hand, had fluid cooperation from the very first day.

August was able to establish control over the group because of his unique position. He was both the smartest person on the team and the most trusted. His original group alliance made up the majority of the group, which meant that he already had established control that others couldn't interfere with.

Mikael had control over the other team, sure. The problem was that they had only come together to deal with a mutual enemy. There wasn't anything like trust among them.

When the Holy Clan geniuses were delegated to their team, they instantly took control. Wilhem Liqua took the position of general, and though many people tried to oppose her, Eris Noct became their primary strategist.

They'd heard news about the other team just as the other team heard about them. They hadn't done any real reconnaissance, but Eris at least knew that August was the one who held her position on that side.

She had been waiting for the day she could have her revenge for a long time now. If she fought him, nobody would acknowledge her win. The strength difference between them was too much.

But, if she beat him in his own game, in a strategic battle, she could both defeat him and redeem herself in the audience's eyes.

It was a good plan if she could execute it properly.

Still, it wasn't confirmed that she and August wouldn't fight.

After all, August was now a 4th class dragon as well, and the power he gained access to when he reached that milestone wasn't small.

August's aura was completely hidden by the artifacts Damien gave him. They were meant to keep his lineage hidden, but the aura concealment was an extra benefit.

Nobody knew that August had ascended. Not even Valerie or Melania.

He didn't need to use that power actively since he was taking a backline role in the war, but he couldn't contain his excitement for battle.

Especially once he returned from Bastille, the world that Damien created.

Originally, August thought that Damien would give him troops when he came out.

He made real connections in Bastille and met people that he had gotten extremely close with, but he had to treat them as illusions.

Knowing that he had to return at some point, August hid most of his emotions from the people who came to follow him and respect him.

It was a bittersweet feeling returning to the real world, but since it was expected and there was much to do, August tried to put it away.

That was until he truly took note of his surroundings.

Eventually, a wide smile appeared on his face.

This round of the heir wars...

August didn't even have to question it anymore.

This round belonged to him.