

Void 1701

Chapter 1701 Preparation [6]

Bastille was a world that developed similarly to those in the lower world.

Since there wasn't anything established and the people had to figure out their history on their own in the few tens of thousands of years that they actually had sentience, the world was divided into several territories controlled by kingdoms, sects, and other organizations.

It was a mixture of several cultures that were similar to those that existed in the outside world, which was interesting considering that there wasn't anything influencing them aside from the people of that world.

Perhaps all living beings evolved in similar directions, or perhaps it was just because this world was originally created by a single man.

If there was one thing to note, it was that everyone in Bastille was also a True Dragon. Damien made it easy for August and influenced their growth direction just a little bit so that they could properly enter Arulion without being questioned.

Otherwise, everything in Bastille had been influenced, caused, and created by its own people.

Whatever the case was, August found himself as a new disciple in an influence called the Forsaken Sea Sect. It bore many similarities to the Celestial Star Palace and other sects from the Cloud Plane, including the systems by which disciples were able to gain status and resources.

August's starting point was small, so he didn't have any immediate opportunities to create a following. He had to find a way around it.

The first thing August did was show his strength at the inner disciple exam.

His original intention was to dominate and make sure that he was promoted directly to a core disciple. It worked for the most part, but August underestimated his opponents.

There was a boy among the disciples. He didn't immediately stand out to an outside observer. Not until combat started.

That boy was perfectly juxtaposed to August. Instead of tsunamis born from the ocean, he controlled seas of magma. It was unclear why he wanted to join the Forsaken Sea Sect, considering its immediate impression as a sect meant for people who used Water Laws.

August learned later that there was a single elder in the sect who controlled flames. His techniques oddly incorporated properties of water, which elevated him to one of the strongest people in the world. Many flame practitioners came to the sect to try and take him as their master.

He had only taken eight disciples to this day.

That boy, Juno Vasquez, was the ninth.

August was also adopted by one of the elders of the sect. He was also a highly sought-after teacher, but the reason August chose him as a master wasn't because of the qualities everyone else focused on.

Oskar Piana was the furthest thing from an Azure Dragon present in the sect. His techniques focused on absolute precision and the ability to use weak strength to destroy strong opponents.

August didn't need a teacher when it came to the Azure Dragon Manual. Every night in his dreams, Qinglong himself would teach him. He didn't need a teacher for his bodily training. The things he'd learned from Damien were enough to support him for a lifetime.

The techniques that he'd need in times of peril, when he didn't have the mana, strength, or time to use Qinglong's techniques, belonged to Oscar.

It was a surprise for anyone who saw how he fought.

He and Juno had a huge clash after everyone else was eliminated. The entire stage was filled with waves of fire and water that crashed against each other with the sole goal of destroying everything.

August and Juno were too equally matched. Everything they tried was returned by the opponent. In the end, the elders were forced to interrupt their battle for the sake of saving time.

That was when the two boys' rivalry began.

Oskar and Stuart, Juno's master, didn't have much of a rivalry before they accepted their new disciples, but August and Juno influenced them so much that this changed within a few weeks.

August and Juno would fight whenever they got the chance, and over time, their rivalry evolved into a friendship.

Two months into August's stay in Bastille, the sect was invaded by a nearby enemy, the Burning Sea Sect.

It turned out that Juno was originally the bastard son of their leader and had killed his half-brother before fleeing. Since the Forsaken Sea Sect was sheltering him, they came under fire.

Immediately, Juno took responsibility for everything immediately. He told the story of how his mother was brutalized by the Sect Leader and forced to carry his child. He told of how he was constantly abused by the rest of the sect until, eventually, his mother died and he snapped.

His actions were justified from his perspective. They were justified to August as well.

And, though Juno didn't expect it, the Forsaken Sea Sect stood by his side.

The war continued for four more months.

August and Juno entered the battlefield over and over again, making contribution after contribution until they were famous throughout not only the sect, but also the region.

Six months into August's stay in Bastille, the Burning Sea Sect fell, giving Juno and the Forsaken Sea Sect freedom.

It was interesting.

August hadn't been there for long, but he already had an incredible following in the sect. The way he led the troops in battle was impeccable. They somehow gained loyalty specifically to him in that short period of time.

Juno knew from the start that he wasn't a general. He couldn't lead people, but he had something that August didn't.

Brutality.

It had been engraved in his flesh by his upbringing. August wasn't willing to do what was necessary all of the time. He had a moral code that he had to stand by, and though Juno did respect it, he also knew that a pure heart wasn't easy to maintain in this world.

August's heart was what drew people to him. It was what allowed people to believe that their fates could be put in his hands.

And it was what saved people like Juno from their darkness.

In order to protect that purity, Juno resolved himself to follow August and do what his closest friend couldn't.

That was the beginning of their adventure.

August developed a love for the Forsaken Sea Sect after being with its people for so long. Unlike Arulion, which was always enveloped in trouble, the sect was filled with people who were both loyal and kind.

This sect specifically only had a few tens of thousands of people in it, unlike most that took in at least a hundred thousand disciples.

There was a yearly examination to allow people in, but only after thorough screening were they truly allowed to join.

In fact, the sect's highest authorities likely already knew Juno's circumstances from the start.

Nevertheless, August decided to spend the rest of the time helping the sect grow.

He took many excursions to the outside world and explored everything Bastille had to offer. He made many friends and allies who became loyal to him, and as he brought them into the sect, it expanded and expanded.

Within just nine months, the elders had to make a decision.

August had practically taken control of the sect and Oskar's power had rapidly risen. How were they going to respond?

Well, it was probably obvious from everything else said about them, but they easily made the decision to promote August to the young master position. They gave the sect to him, because they knew that he only wanted to see it thrive.

But, a day needed to come when August told them the truth.

He eventually had to tell Juno. He had to tell Oskar and he had to tell the rest of the sect elders.

He was not from this world, and he was not meant to stay.

He would have to part from the tens of thousands of people under his rule whether he liked it or not.

The last three months that August had in Bastille were spent nicely. He enjoyed his time with his people, with the friends he'd made along the way.

Juno, a girl named Mikaela, a girl named Yuna, and a boy named Raul. The five of them had been inseparable until now, so when the final moment finally came, none of them could stand the separation.

August returned to Arulion with sadness in his heart. For a moment, he wondered if his father had to give him an experience like that, knowing that it would leave him with scars.

That was when he remembered.

His father was never a man like that.

And just a few seconds after he appeared in a plain far away from Qinglong's fortress, he suddenly felt a large presence behind him.

He turned around shakily.

He thought that it was an illusion. He thought that it was a result of his sadness. He wanted to pretend that he never felt it at all, because if he turned around and found nothing, he didn't know what he'd do with himself.

But, despite his misgivings, he couldn't stop himself from turning around.

"Ah..."

There they were.

Over fifty thousand people from the Forsaken Sea Sect who saw him as the young master who would lead them to glory, along with another few thousand from the influences and people August had met in the world outside the sect...

Juno, Mikaela, Yuna, Raul, Oskar...

They were all here with smiles on their faces.

Chapter 1702 Preparation [7]

"Yo!"

Juno immediately ran over and slung his arm over August's shoulders.

"You really thought you could get rid of me? You must be crazy."

"Yeah, I think I'm going crazy. I keep imagining this psycho clown who can't sleep unless he annoys me to death."

"Oh, and who might that be?"

"Who do you think?"

August looked over with a deadpan face just in time to see the fist flying at him.

He ducked down and returned the attack.

Bang!

Juno easily blocked it, but he didn't pursue the fight further.

"So it's real..." August muttered.

"It's real," Juno echoed with a grin.

"But...how?"

August was more confused than he'd ever been in his life.

He had been treating that world as an illusion. When he told everyone about having to return to his own world, he'd done it mainly to satisfy his own desires.

It was hard for him to believe that the people he'd been interacting with were fake, and that led him to make many memories and friends throughout his journey.

Yet, he never forgot the nagging feeling in the bottom of his heart, reminding him that all of this would disappear.

Seeing everyone in this world, "feeling" their existence, August was more than just dumbfounded.

Juno's expression became more serious as he backed away and shrugged, scratching his head.

"When you disappeared, a weird screen appeared in front of me. It asked me if I wanted to stay or follow you, and...well, it's pretty obvious what I picked."

August's eyes widened.

"The rest of you too?"

"That's right."

Oskar stepped forward with a smile.

"Each and every one of us was offered a choice, and all of us chose to support you."

"This..."

It was unfathomable. Wasn't that world just a product of Damien's power, a place created for him to prove his worth?

Weren't these people supposed to be illusions who could never be real?

Looking at them, seeing every single one of them agreeing that they made a conscious choice to come to this world, August almost wanted to cry.

'Thank you, Dad.'

First and foremost, he was incredibly grateful to the man who made all of this possible.

And secondly, he didn't know how to repay all of the people who'd chosen to abandon their conventional lives to follow him into a completely new land.

August wanted to react massively and show them how much it meant to him, but none of them needed such things.

They felt about him the same way he did about them. He had troubles in this world that he needed their help to deal with, so obviously they came.

There was nothing more to it.

"So?" Juno said, forcing August to throw away his original plans.

"Where is this place?"

"Oh..."

Perhaps that was indeed more important.

Bastille's strongest were barely Demigods, and they numbered less than ten. The most experienced experts of that world were in the nine revolutions of 4th class.

If August casually brought them into a world with not only Demigods, but True Gods galore, what would happen?

"Alright."

August steadied himself and put away his emotions, happily this time.

He brought them here, so they were his responsibility.

Looking at the time, he only had some hours to get them ready for this world.

However, There was one concern that had completely vanished from his mind.

Five hundred troops under one hundred, five hundred geniuses who could compete on the same level as everyone else in the heir wars...

He didn't just have them.

He had a surplus.

August was really, really cutting it close.

With only a few hours left before the event officially started, the teams had gathered to finalize their strategies.

On August's side, there was a more complicated atmosphere.

If he didn't return at this exact moment, then their entire operation would be ruined.

It wasn't just about his pride. If they had half of the soldiers that the other side had, then their loss was guaranteed.

Raphael hadn't said anything yet, but his expression was a sight to see. Even Seryius and Cera were starting to lose hope, despite being on more friendly terms with him.

It was silent only because they were trying to remain calm.

If they were letting their feelings govern them, then this entire fortress would have been up in flames already.

But it was good that they held themselves back.

Because, as a majority of the team expected, August did return.

The fortress was already filled with people. The geniuses and their troops would be transported to the arena grounds together, so it was necessary for them to stay in close proximity during these last few hours.

Everyone was gathered, and they all felt the massive aura that was approaching closer and closer.

The sixteen geniuses immediately rushed outside to be greeted by one of Raphael's mercenaries.

"Boss! There's an army approaching!"

"How many?" Raphael asked, his expression serious.

"It looks about five hundred. All above 4th class."

"Tch."

It was an army with roughly the same strength that they had. If those people were hostile, then there was a real chance that they'd lose a large portion of their troops before the third stage even began.

Rushing out of the fortress' entrance, the sixteen of them caught sight of the army for the first time. They immediately saw the person leading it as well.

"That guy..." Raphael muttered.

Their eyes were more than sharp enough to understand August's identity even at a distance.

"...he actually did it."

There was no way for Raphael and August to be friends. There was never a solution that would allow them to get along.

However, in that moment, even Raphael had to admit that he'd gained respect for the boy.

Somehow, from somewhere, he'd procured troops that proved themselves worthy with their aura alone.

As August approached, he grinned at the rest of his team.

"Let's get to planning, shall we?"

Their team was now officially prepared.

And just in time for the third stage.

August entered the fortress while his people stayed in the grounds with the rest of the troops.

The final few hours were spent well, and soon enough, the light of teleportation swallowed them.

Too much had happened in two weeks, but it had all been for this moment.

Thirty-four people were going into this battle, but only seventeen would come out.

With emotions at an all-time high, as screens filled the entire kingdom, broadcasting the event to the masses...

The war between geniuses finally began.

There were two big occurrences taking place in the shadows around Arulion that would soon come to affect the entirety of the kingdom.

They were completely unrelated.

One took place in the depths of the earth and involved several hundreds of thousands of people.

And the second took place in the depths of the kingdom, in the Aureat Clan's hidden territory, and only involved a single woman.

Their purposes were different, the implications of their actions were different, but the leader of those masses and that woman said the same exact thing.

"It's time."

The plans that they'd been working hard on for several months or years...

Now was the time to let them all unfold.

Chapter 1703 Third Stage [1]

Thirty-four geniuses were instantly transported into two separate territories along with two thousand troops.

Each of those troops had been vetted in the moment of teleportation to check if they had the right qualifications to participate. As for the geniuses, well, there was only one irregularity among them.

The first, second, and third-place geniuses were all participating in the war, so the question was...who was the seeded genius?

There were thirty-five of them in the competition, but an even number was necessary for the fairness of the round. One person had been left out.

Well, he wasn't going to be out of the war for the entire time, but he was definitely something of a trump card.

None of the Holy Clan geniuses could be chosen for that role. Because their clans and their fellow geniuses would complain in a way that the tournament administration didn't want to deal with.

The seeded genius couldn't be one of the weakest. At that point, what was the point of seeding at all? They were just saving someone who was going to be eliminated soon anyway.

The strongest were off the table, but there were many noble clan geniuses who had particular talents that would be more useful in war than others.

One of such geniuses was chosen to sit out for the beginning of the round. Later on, he would be returned to whichever team was able to claim him as one of their people.

As for why he of all people had earned this role...?

Well, it was purely due to his "domain."

Kashim Darkarm was a man who didn't particularly stand out in the heir wars. He had brushed by in every round, and when alliances formed around him, he stayed mostly neutral.

He had less of a connection to their group than anyone else, but he technically gave his allegiance to Mikael.

Nevertheless, he had sworn an oath to the heavenly order that he would remain neutral and properly aid whichever team he ended up a part of.

Kashim's ability made him an impenetrable fortress. Taking cities would be easy when his ability was in play, because even Holy Clan geniuses had to be wary of his territories.

The in-depth explanation of his ability could wait until he was also participating in the war.

When August and the rest arrived in their individual palaces, that was all they were told through their emblems.

Kushim would eventually be an important card to hold, but he wasn't the immediate priority.

The teams spawned in war rooms, complete with massive tables in the middle that had holographic projections of the arena map.

As if they were reading each other's minds, both teams immediately approached those tables before anything else.

"Three border cities."

It was the first thing August noticed and the first thing that was called out.

On both sides, there were three border cities staggered across the line that separated their territories.

Moving inward, August's territory had two cities to the east and one to the west, while the other side had territories evenly distanced from each other in the east, west, and center of the territory.

The castles were at the very end of each territory, separated from the closest city by several tens of kilometers. Even if they wanted to get there as soon as possible, any troops in the castle would need several seconds at the very least to reach their destination.

"Hmm..." Cera hummed.

"With a distribution like this, should we go for Plan C?"

"That would be nice, but they'll probably be able to read it easily. That plan telegraphs itself fairly obviously to those who are smart enough to see it."

"True," Cera agreed, nodding her head.

"Still, it's a good starting point. We can switch into Plan B and even use the more destructive elements of our first draft to catch them off guard. It really just depends on how they respond."

"Right. As you said, we can start there and figure out the rest after we see what they're up to. Regardless, the first step is to distribute our troops and do some reconnaissance. They're likely thinking the same."

Until this point, only August and Cera, as the team's tacticians, were talking.

Now that the conversation had continued into something that the rest could also contribute to, others joined in.

Mainly, Raphael and Iridia.

Raphael already had his army. The mercenaries he hired would only listen to him, after all.

He did it to make sure that his position would remain stable, but he unintentionally left Iridia with only August's troops at her disposal.

"Let my mercenaries take the frontlines for now. We have not vetted your people, so they can wait until they've proven themselves."

August narrowed his eyes, not appreciating the man's tone, but didn't say anything.

'In the first phase, most of the troops in the border cities will become sacrifices. It's better for mercenaries to take that role, especially since my people will be more useful for the rest of the battle.'

Raphael was strong. He also had a lot of training since he was one of the Ignis Clan's best prospective talents.

However, he had never seen war.

It was fine to let Raphael take some embarrassment first so he could take the rest of the war as a learning experience.

As for Iridia...

"I agree. Even if they are your troops, they will have to accept me as their general for now. Before we enter combat, I need to meet them."

She supported Raphael for a reason different from his own. It was definitely a more rational approach as well.

August had already informed his people that they'd be led by someone else at the start. They had accepted it, but it was still unknown if they'd get along with Iridia.

Logically speaking, keeping the five hundred of them in the cities closer to the palace was a better decision for now.

Somehow, everyone's opinions lined up.

Valerie and the rest, Seryius, and the Aurora Clan geniuses abstained from the conversation, merely observing as the two generals and two tacticians continued to make plans despite being somewhat unaware of their enemy's intentions.

They were unaware, but they made plans because that was only temporary.

The second they achieved their first victory, they could move their enemies along a predetermined path and manipulate them into playing into their hands.

For now, everything that needed to be done was still preparation.

But the third stage had already begun.

The announcer wasn't in the same arena as them, nor were the crowds, but they were all watching eagerly through the invisible cameras that recorded every move that both sides made.

Inside a massive swathe of land, enveloped in a golden light barrier that disallowed any communication between that place and the outside world, a little over two thousand people prepared for war.

And outside of that place, a far greater number did the same.

It was obvious which war would start first, but...

Would it be able to end before a similar situation manifested on a far greater scale?

None of these geniuses understood how close the situation in Arulion was to erupting. Hell, even the Holy Clans didn't properly understand the storm that was brewing.

But those few that knew that it would come...

It was safe to say that all of them had fled far, far away from the Kingdom of Dragons.

Chapter 1704 Third Stage [2]

It was like a game of chess, at least at the start.

Both teams moved their pawns into position along with stronger pieces that would control the game.

The three border cities were immediately occupied by roughly the same amount of troops. Raphael was there, as were Valerie, Melania, and Gio from the Aurora Clan.

Meanwhile, August, Cera, Bianca, and Iridia stayed back.

The nobles on their side were placed in the three inner cities and made to survey them before the troops arrived, and Seryius had mysteriously disappeared, off to accomplish a task of his own.

There were three geniuses in the border cities mainly for the sake of appearances. To make sure that the other side couldn't move rashly, they had to present a sufficient threat.

If it was anyone else, perhaps that goal couldn't be achieved, but with Valerie and Melania taking those support roles, everything changed.

The two of them had shown insane performances thus far, and more importantly, they had grown impossibly in the small amount of time between rounds.

Nobody could predict what their current strength looked like, so the nobles who mirrored them on the opposing team had to be careful.

It was odd. Since the other team was controlled by Wilhelm and Eris, it acted a lot differently from August and his people.

Originally, they had only sent three nobles to take the border cities. That changed, and one was replaced by Estavian Liqua, Wilhelm's fellow genius.

It looked like a clash between Holy Clans would spark from the start, but it didn't happen as people hoped.

Raphael was looking forward to it, but there was a reason why the Ignis Clan looked down on them so much.

Unlike the true Azure Dragon Clan before them, the Liqua Clan was sneaky and filled with people who only knew how to scheme.

It was impossible to expect them to play fairly or fight properly.

They tried to make themselves look better for the crowds in the heir wars, but Raphael knew what was at the core of their techniques.

Dirty, scheming bastards who only had a position as a Holy Clan because of a technicality.

He hated the Azure Dragon Clan just as much as anyone else in his position, but at least they were honest.

Raphael was rearing to go at the opportunity to take down the pseudo-Holy Clan that the Liqua Clan was. There were far better clans that could take their position.

Nevertheless, it wasn't time yet.

The other side's moves were oddly similar to theirs. The only difference was the distribution of troops.

He was a general, sure, but the first move in this war didn't belong to him.

There were only two geniuses actually moving around the map instead of waiting for the other side to move.

On August's side, it was Seryius Ether. From the enemy, it was a woman named Gianna Noct.

They were in charge of reconnaissance.

Both of them were in enemy territory already. The entire momentum of this battle would depend on which one was caught first.

Eris, as a member of the Noct Clan, knew a lot about concealment. In the same way, she knew how to detect it.

It was a bit more difficult when the method was using space instead of darkness, but darkness mimicked the greater law in many ways. In a sense, Eris understood how Seryius would hide himself.

The palace was already filled with traps that would undo his concealment. There were people in every city waiting for him to appear so they could mark his aura and take him down.

Seryius could feel the presence of these mechanisms from the instant he arrived past enemy lines.

'Hmm...'

It would definitely cause problems. Seryius couldn't easily enter any of the areas they'd blocked off with traps and formations.

'But, did they really think that was enough?'

He didn't know if he was being overconfident or if Eris was, but if he really wanted to get into a place, then no formation could stop him.

The main benefit of being born with a spatial affinity was the freedom of movement it granted.

And when one was a dragon on top of that, the benefits were even more pronounced.

As Seryius surveyed the enemy team's cities and decided which one he'd infiltrate first, Gianna Noct found herself in the middle of August's territory with confusion evident in her eyes.

She was hidden in the pure darkness of the world, a place that couldn't be sensed by anyone on this team but the geniuses from the Aurora Clan.

Gianna took special precautions to stay away from them, but as she looked for other traps or methods placed to reveal her position, her confusion intensified.

'Are they stupid?'

That was the first thing she could think of. They had to be on another level of idiocy to leave this entire territory as free of traps as it looked.

Unlike her team, the enemy was casual. It seemed as if they believed in their strength enough to forgo some basic defenses.

'Hmph.'

She had a natural disdain for people like August, but she'd personally witnessed Eris getting humiliated by him and his comrades.

'That brat knows how to scheme. There must be something happening that I'm not aware of.'

Nevertheless, it was her job to find out what that was, so there was nothing for her to say.

Raphael and his mercenary corps were easy to read, so she didn't need to spend too much time investigating at the border.

As such, Gianna approached closer and closer to the castle, believing that there was nobody who could make her wary other than Bianca Aurora, who was stationed there.

Her belief was wrong, but through no fault of her own.

"Have you found them?"

August stood on the castle grounds with his people.

The one he spoke to was none other than Yuna, one of his closest friends from Bastille.

"Not specifically," Yuna responded with her eyes closed.

"It's a female. She's getting closer, but I haven't sensed her exact position yet."

"I see...well, that's fine. If she's coming here, then it won't be hard for you to find her for much longer."

Yuna was a True Dragon just as everyone else in Bastille was, but dragonkind to them was what humankind was in the Heavenly World.

They lived in many places, from civilized societies more advanced than some on earth to barbaric clans that survived in the wilds.

Yuna came from the latter.

Until August came along, she and her tribe had ruled the wildlands with an iron grip, proving themselves as the apex of the food chain.

There was a lot she lacked before she was introduced to society, but there were also a lot of things she had that people born in society couldn't mimic.

One of those, the most important ability for a dragon that grew in the wild, was the ability to hunt.

Yuna was important even in her tribe for one reason above all else.

Once she caught the scent of prey...

...she never lost it until that prey was eliminated.

The hunt was different when it was part of a war, but the basics stayed the same.

Yuna focused, and she found traces of her prey.

Now, all that was left to do was wait for it to deliver itself to her.

Chapter 1705 Third Stage [3]

The public was a bit dissatisfied for the first day of the third stage.

Neither side did anything crazy. It made sense for them to approach the situation rationally for now, but that didn't make it any less boring.

Some were even tempted to try and break the barrier to feed the teams information that would provoke them to clash, but since that wasn't possible, they had no choice but to wait.

Luckily, it didn't take longer than a day for their wishes to be answered.

Because, while Eris' side wasn't doing anything special, August and his team were about to start hunting their prey.

Gianna was given the chance to run around as she pleased for a decent amount of time.

She was allowed to tell her people that most of their enemy's troops were still at the castle and that the inner cities were empty aside from the simulated populations that inhabited them.

And, she was allowed to tell her team that there weren't any traps in place to reveal her. That put them at ease and made sure they wouldn't be checking up on her as often.

It created an opportunity for August and his people.

Gianna was, in almost every way, isolated from her people.

They could only contact her through the communication artifacts they had, and unlike Seryius, she didn't have any safety measures to immediately return her to her home territory in the case of danger.

Maybe since she was a Holy Clan genius, maybe since they'd been so dominant thus far, nobody believed that she would be taken down by August and his ragtag bunch.

But...August's people weren't a ragtag bunch, were they?

August had a conversation with Iridia the day prior. In essence, it went like this:

"Let me take their spy out with my troops. Come along with us and you can learn how to command them properly."

"Why would I do that? I'm willing to respect them as soldiers under my command, but you can't expect me to do something like this and completely diminish my authority."

"I don't know why you see it like that, but this will be helpful to both you and them. Plus, if you can show proper synergy, then you can one-up Raphael and get out of his shadow."

"You...!"

Iridia was obviously offended by that last statement, but it was definitely tempting. In the end, she did submit and decide to join August on his hunt to learn how his troops operated.

It was a small operation. Only August's main friend group of Juno, Raul, Mikaela, and Yuna were going with them, but these four were the most important.

As long as they were willing to follow Iridia, the rest would do the same.

Gianna had been staking out the castle for the past few hours. She had already found a way in, but she had to be certain that they hadn't concentrated their precautions in that area before she entered.

After all, the castle was the most sacred place in both territories.

If it was infiltrated, then there was no point in the rest of the stage.

The team that allowed such a blunder would lose from the start.

Gianna was obviously hoping that August left the palace as unsecured as the rest of the territory, but no matter how much she didn't want to acknowledge him, he had obviously come this far in the tournament through skills alone.

She refused to be blinded by prejudice at a critical moment like this.

As such, she had been careful in the past few hours, sending minions to scope out the castle in her place.

In Gianna's opinion, she was as covert as she could possibly be. The members of the Aurora Clan hadn't sensed her movements, and judging by the movement of the troops, nobody else had either.

Overall, she was just about ready to infiltrate the castle and gain real information that could benefit her team.

But she was only able to get this far because August allowed it.

The first move in any large conflict was gaining information on the other side.

Those who knew more would win nine out of ten battles with that information. As such, any sane person would do at least a little bit of reconnaissance before rushing into battle.

That was why the battle had been so boring for outsiders.

Still, if someone was going to be sent to gather information, it was necessary for that person to be aware of their limits.

Gianna was pushing hers from the moment she got close to the castle. Now that she was getting ready to fly into the sun, it was high time for August to cut her wings off.

He and his friends, along with Iridia Ignis, were currently in a field relatively far from the palace.

It was separated from everything mainly to make sure that the person who was soon to arrive here would have no way to escape.

And more importantly...

"Is everything ready?" August asked.

"The preparations were completed yesterday. Now that we are here, everything is in place," Raul responded.

Like Yuna, he was someone August met during his adventures in Bastille. He was also part of a large influence, but instead of focusing on power, they concentrated their resources on knowledge.

Raul specifically was always a fan of formations. He believed that they were the best way to get close to the absolute truths of the world, and spent his entire life studying them in depth.

Using the troops at August's command, Raul was able to oversee the rapid production of an array that encompassed a several-kilometer-wide area around their current position.

"And it looks like the star of our show is here."

August grinned.

There was a shadow approaching from the distance. It wasn't visible, but Yuna had already signaled its approach.

Mikaela's power was concealing them all, so Gianna couldn't immediately sense them.

She would definitely get the hint eventually, but by the time she did...

"...!"

Gianna's eyes widened as she suddenly felt a heap of presences just a few kilometers ahead.

She immediately sunk deeper into her concealment and changed her direction to avoid them, but in just a second, she slammed into an invisible wall.

"What...?"

She looked up as the barrier formed around her, trapping her in the area.

Turning around, she focused once more on the presences she felt.

"So, I've been caught."

Her reaction was surprisingly tame.

'Six of them. Among them, Iridia Ignis.'

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't let anything show on her face.

Gianna wasn't worried about the others in a situation where they were fighting head-on, but Iridia was definitely an issue.

Fire, which was infinitely close to light, was also a natural enemy to the darkness.

'That barrier seems strong. I'll need a decent amount of force to break it.'

Regardless, the goal now wasn't to get into an altercation with the other side.

It was most important to report back to her own people about what was happening here.

"Hello? Eris, can you hear me?"

She sent a transmission just to be sure, but as expected, it bounced off of the barrier and played loud and clear for the entire world to hear.

None of her words could remain private in this place. If she decided to voice them, then she had to voice them to everyone.

This was clearly a trap prepared for her, one that she'd fallen into without any resistance.

But if they thought she was just going to fall for this and be eliminated...

"...then you're sorely mistaken."

Chapter 1706 Third Stage [4]

In Gianna's opinion, this was her time to shine. She could use this group of geniuses to stand out from the rest, since the spotlight had been hogged by a select few for the entire duration of the heir wars thus far.

The only real problem was Iridia, but they were at the same level at least. Gianna was confident in winning a battle of speed, and since she was prioritizing escape, the rest didn't matter.

However, everyone else saw it differently.

Iridia saw it as a time for August to prove himself and his claims that she could learn something here.

And for the rest of the group, this was the moment where they could show the world their strength.

Juno and the rest weren't from here. Everything from the technology to the culture to the people was completely new to them.

There wasn't any time to adapt before the third stage began, so they were still perplexed, but there was one fact that rang true no matter what world they were in.

Only the strong had the right to experience happiness and freedom.

They were nothing in the eyes of this world's people. That much was obvious from the way Raphael and Iridia referred to them.

In order to prove themselves, in order to not stain August's image, they had to thoroughly dominate the genius in front of them. No matter what.

Juno moved first, just as he always did. Their battle formations had been ironed out through several wars and excursions they'd participated in together, so the five of them, including August, had impeccable teamwork.

August wasn't participating in this battle as actively since he was still trying to hide his strength, but Gianna was a step worse than Eris, and all of her opponents were also 4th class soldiers.

At the end of the day, no matter how talented a Holy Clan genius was, they were still under the age of one hundred. They were still 4th class practitioners who hadn't entered the nine revolutions left.

That meant that they were nothing but prey to these geniuses from Bastille.

BOOOOOOOOM!

Lava exploded outward, erupting from the ground everywhere and coalescing into a massive wave.

Juno stomped powerfully and pushed his arms forward, controlling the wave to attack Gianna.

"Hmph."

She snorted at the relatively simple attack.

Did they really think that something so basic could ever hope to corner her?

A wall of darkness erected itself in front of her, solidifying as the lava came closer.

BOOOOOOM!

Giana's expression changed the instant it made contact. She frowned as she was forced to throw away her casual control. She pushed mana into her barrier as its outermost layers melted away.

August and Juno were rivals. They were still rivals despite so much time passing. Juno was less talented than August if one looked at bloodline alone, but he always found a way to keep himself equal to his closest friend, even if he had to die to ensure it.

The concepts of fire contained within that wave of lava were complexly woven and strong enough to impress even Iridia Ignis.

As she watched on, she couldn't believe that a random dragon she'd never heard of was able to release such an insane amount of power. In but a single attack, Juno made her understand why August persistently insisted that she needed to understand them before trying to control them.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Juno didn't end at just a single wave of lava. He summoned more and more, controlling an entire sea that rose into a tsunami as it approached the wall of darkness. Wave upon wave crashed against it. The darkness itself was forced to burn, but Gianna's defense never fell.

She created an even larger wall and curved it to manipulate the flow of the lava around her. Under her command, it crashed into the barrier walls and bombarded them with mana, weakening the system that kept her trapped.

It was a solid plan, but it required her to focus on maneuvering her enemy's mana.

Frankly, in a battle where she faced multiple enemies at once, it only left her open.

Shing!

Gianna's eyes widened. She suddenly dropped her body, just narrowly avoiding a blade aimed at her throat.

Bang!

She turned around just in time to feel the impact of a kick that squarely struck her ribs.

Gianna flew back into her own darkness wall and used it to support herself as she regained balance.

VOOM!

Her mana raged, making it impossible for anyone to get close. In a single second afterward, countless blades of darkness were created and sent flying in every direction.

It was a rapid and random attack from someone who couldn't confirm her enemy's location, but it gave her more than enough time to try and find them.

Gianna's eyes scanned the small area that existed on this side of her barrier.

She caught sight of Yuna immediately, since she didn't make any efforts to hide herself.

Instead, she smiled and waved.

RUMBLE!

A huge earthen wall shot up from the ground and separated them.

When Gianna spread her awareness, she quickly found that it was just one of many.

The entire structure inside the barrier had been altered, boxing her in and limiting her range of movement. The maze-like structure of the walls also made it harder for her to predict where her enemies would come from and where she herself could move.

It was none other than Mikaela's power.

She was more skilled in concealment than the rest of them, but she wasn't an assassin. Like Yuna and Raul, she had a unique speciality that couldn't be easily found in this world.

Rather than having an affinity for a single element, Mikaela's affinity was the environment itself. She was incredibly skilled in controlling the surroundings, and when it came to group battles, she took a crowd control role.

The stage had been properly set up. Juno's lava tsunami was gone for now, and Yuna had disappeared, but they had Gianna thoroughly trapped in their web.

Slowly and systematically, they bombarded her.

Lava crashed through the corridors whenever they needed to force her on the defensive, At times when Gianna got more confident and tried to attack, Yuna appeared from the depths of nothingness and barraged her with close-ranged attacks aimed to take off her head in a single strike.

Dragons had an unbelievable amount of mana. Even for young dragons like these geniuses, it would take several hours of constant and unruly usage to truly run dry.

However, that changed when they were forced to pump more and more mana out every second.

That changed when their mental state was corroded by their circumstances.

Gianna was still aiming to escape. She wanted to find the barrier wall and direct all attacks into it until it broke.

The problem was that she could no longer see that wall.

At some point, she'd become stranded in the maze with no idea which direction was what.

In a situation like this, no matter what her status was, no matter how powerful she was...

...she had truly become nothing more than a pig on the chopping block.

Chapter 1707 Third Stage [5]

Gianna put up a good fight.

She was, in fact, a Holy Clan genius. Nothing August's group did could take that away from her.

Over half an hour passed with this constant bombardment. The walls changed over and over again, assuring that she couldn't memorize any sort of structure or pattern within them.

Juno was usually someone who liked to fight in close combat, but Yuna was far more suited for the role than he was at times like these, so he stayed far away and used his lava to put pressure on the enemy.

The killing blow belonged to none other than Yuna.

It felt like she was using blades. When she wasn't standing still, nobody could catch a glimpse of her body. They could only see the reflection of light coming from the sharp object in her hand.

But rather than being something she carried, that metal was a part of her body.

Yuna was a metal dragon, a variation of a common Earth Dragon. Like Melania, her abilities were mainly focused on her physique.

However, metal was a complex element when it wanted to be and could absolutely grow more powerful. As a hunter from the wilds, Yuna mainly focused on how to enhance her body with the element, but just like others, she also had the ability to use it at range.

For the majority of the battle, Yuna led her opponent to believe that she had to be in close proximity to cause any damage. That built an expectation in Gianna's head.

So, when that defining moment came, when Gianna was delirious from the chaotic battlefield and relatively low on mana, she changed everything.

There was a constant barrier of darkness around the genius from the Noct Clan. She never let it diminish, because it was her main lifeline.

Her eyes darted from side to side as she followed her awareness and picked up on any small movement in the surroundings.

She was also playing the long game.

Since she was depleted far more than her enemies, they would likely believe that she was on the verge of giving up.

However, it was far from that. Even now, Gianna was waiting for her chance to turn the tides.

Yuna's next approach would be the moment.

When that woman arrived again, she would fall, and the rest would follow her to their elimination.

All she needed to do was wait for the proper moment.

That was all she needed to do if Yuna truly was as she'd characterized herself to be.

Unfortunately, she was not.

The ground beneath Gianna began to change. Because the maze had taken on metallic properties beforehand, she barely noticed before it was too late.

BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Spikes made of metals that many humans would do anything to take hold of erupted with the intent to impale Gianna.

She jumped into the air to avoid them, but it was already too late.

Now that they'd appeared, Gianna's chance to escape was gone.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

The spikes chased her everywhere she went.

Gianna was forced to withdraw her large barrier and create several smaller ones to defend against every individual cluster.

BOOOOOM!

A wave of lava appeared around the corner and split into several tens of snakes that moved with sentience.

They wrapped around each other and occupied the entire corridor on both sides of Gianna.

She glanced around, still in the air, and frowned deeply.

She had to choose.

Either she defended against the lava or the spikes. There wasn't a way to do both.

In that split second, forced to make a choice, Gianna grumbled to herself.

"Well, this is just unfair."

Status and power no longer mattered.

There was one thing that this battle proved to the entire world.

From the moment the heir wars began, the gap had been getting smaller and smaller.

And by the end of the third stage, it probably wouldn't be noticeable anymore.

Now that everyone else had access to great resources, teachers, and techniques...

...it was going to be hard for Holy Clan geniuses to reign supreme just because of their origins.

BOOOOOOM!

In the end, Gianna chose to defend against the lava.

As she fell to the floor, the spikes rose to meet her, and under Yuna's precise control, they morphed into formless blades that cocooned Gianna's body.

The rest wasn't visible through the chrome exterior of that structure, but the sound was enough to confirm the suspicions of those watching.

Blades piercing through skin.

The screams of a defeated genius.

In that moment, facing an onslaught of people not far from her level, Gianna Noct was defeated.

She was the first person to be eliminated from the third stage.

And despite the violent nature of her departure...

...not a single soul realized that she was gone.

The barrier came down to show a clean terrain to all outside viewers.

All of the lava, metal, and earth that had transformed that few-

kilometer-wide area disappeared, leaving only the six geniuses inside.

"Raul, how is it?" August immediately asked.

"The barrier never lost functionality. All fluctuations of her elimination were dispersed before it was taken down," Raul responded simply.

"Nice!" Juno joined in with a grin.

"It should take two days at most for them to realize that she's gone.:"

The certified hunter in their group knew it best.

They had been able to hide it for now, but the other side would get suspicious after too much time passed without contact.

"These two days are our opportunity," August said.

During this time when their information was steadily flowing in and the other side was stuck in the darkness, they had the opportunity to take control of this battle's momentum.

August glanced at Iridia.

"Have you understood a few things?" he asked.

She nodded with a complicated expression.

"You could say that."

August nodded. It was sufficient enough to show Iridia that her arrogance was misplaced. The way she interacted with his people would change from here on, and perhaps she could even become someone he called a friend.

But that was a story for the future.

For now, it was time for war.

"Someone call Raphael," August said with a grin.

"I'm sure he's been dying to go wild, and now that we're done here..."

"...he can finally get his chance."

Iridia felt a little bad for her fellow Ignis Clan genius.

He was definitely going to get a chance to shine. It didn't seem like August had anything nefarious planned either.

Just, with the way he spoke about him, it felt like August considered Raphael a child.

'He is a mysterious guy.'

He was like an open book that allowed everyone to read him, but that forthcoming exterior was nothing more than a facade.

The August that brought her here and showed her a scene like that was a schemer beyond schemers. That kind of person was the tactician controlling their armies from the shadows, and though that was definitely a good thing for them...

...Iridia had the feeling that every Holy Clan genius on his team would become nothing more than a pawn in his schemes.

That, for them, was the most humiliating outcome possible.

But, unfortunately, it was already starting to look like indisputable fact.

Chapter 1708 Third Stage [6]

Raphael got the message soon enough.

"You're clear to attack."

It was the message he was waiting for. He went to the frontlines to fight, and that was exactly his original plan, but he was forced to promise that he wouldn't act without orders.

To August, it was a pretty easy negotiation. All he had to do was give up some vain privileges to make Raphael listen to him. If that kind of mentality wasn't enough to make August see him as a child, then nothing was.

Raphael had a simple mind produced by a simple and straightforward upbringing. He had never experienced real struggle, and he'd been granted anything he ever wanted as long as he performed well enough.

That kind of person could not easily become a general. He wasn't nearly level-headed enough to command people through tumultuous tides, but in a scenario like this one, he was probably more than enough.

After all, the people on the other side were just like him, and this wasn't a struggle.

It was a competition.

In this setting, power was more important than all else.

Raphael immediately gathered his troops and approached the border separating the two territories.

He didn't give many orders, only to kill anyone they saw on sight.

They knew enough about who they were facing. Seryius sent back plenty of information on the type of soldiers that were recruited by the other side.

Unlike theirs, who came from multiple places, the soldiers on Eris' team were exclusively sourced from Holy Clans and noble clans.

Each one had a name that was at least somewhat recognizable, which, in most cases, would be a problem for the opposing army.

But it only made Raphael grin.

He knew of his own inexperience. He understood where he was lacking, and that was exactly why he chose to make a mercenary corps loyal to him instead of only gathering people from his clan.

They were experienced in war.

They had seen more blood than anyone else who was participating in this war.

Or so Raphael believed, but the truth didn't really matter. They had more experience than the people they were fighting against. That was most important.

"Ready your arms!"

Raphael shouted, raising his arm into the air.

A row of one hundred stepped out of the masses and gathered their mana.

"Aim!"

They formed their arms as if they were preparing to shoot bows, but they weren't holding anything. Mana eventually coalesced to form a shape, but it was not that of a traditional bow that one would expect.

Even if dragons used arms, they only used weapons catered to their species. To maximize their power in their human forms, and to do so in a way that showed their pride in their species, the dragons recreated human weapons in ways they claimed to be far better.

These weapons couldn't be related to their human equivalents unless one had special knowledge, but even humans had to admit that when dragons used their arms, they could truly create havoc.

The one hundred bowmen took aim, raising their bows to the sky.

Their aim was focused past the city wall roughly a hundred kilometers away.

It was a decently long distance, but for trained draconic archers...?

"FIRE!"

Raphael roared and swung his arm down. The archers let loose their arrows, and immediately, a whizzing sound filled the air as countless mana projectiles blasted through the atmosphere.

It was quiet for a few seconds as the arrows flew too high into the sky for their sound to project. As they came over the horizon, everything changed.

The sky was dyed red and orange. A wave of mana rushed into the surroundings as the aura of those attacks presented itself to the world, and though the enemies being struck felt their presence extremely clearly, what were they supposed to do?

This wasn't just an attack of provocation.

This was a move meant to completely eradicate anyone who stood in that city.

As for those who survived...

Raphael's eyes blazed with the flames of glory.

"Charge!"

He led his troops across the border.

...survival for those people simply wasn't an option.

Estavian's city was far more orderly than Raphael's operation.

He was a strategic genius. Not at the level of August or Cera, but as a member of the Liqua Clan, he had to know how to scheme.

It wasn't because they all liked to scheme against their enemies. More so, it was an attitude they developed in order to survive in their clan that just happened to manifest further when they were facing external enemies.

Wilhelm was taking the head of the armies. He was a far more tactical individual than the rest of their teammates, even Eris, who insisted on being their tactician.

Estavian and Wilhelm didn't have the best relationship. Nobody in the Ligua Clan actually liked the people around them.

Still, since his clan member had delegated him to this role, he wasn't in a position to object.

Everything had been normal. There were some curiosities about why Gianna wasn't responding to messages, but it was just like her to act on her own, so there wasn't much to be concerned about.

Until she finished her mission, nobody else was planning to move. Seryius Ether also hadn't been caught yet.

It was getting a bit boring even for him.

Perhaps that was why he entered a house and took a break from the war.

It would've been fine if he was still coming out occasionally to check on the situation, but after a day passed, he was practically spending all of his time holed up inside.

'When is this war even going to start?'

He stared at the ceiling and asked himself, as if it could only ever start if they decided to start it.

But he was about to face a rude awakening in the form of a flaming hell.

Right about now, in fact.

As Estavian faced the ceiling, he noticed that it was starting to feel heavier, which was strange.

'Heavier?'

That wasn't right, was it?

'I should probably—'

BOOOOOOOM!

The roof exploded and the entire house crumbled as the entire city erupted into a ball of flames.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Arrows rained down hell upon the simulated citizens of the city. They screamed and cried like real people as their loved ones were turned to ash, but there was nobody there to help them.

The noble clan geniuses under Estavian's command were already panicking.

When their defenses failed and they were exposed to the calamity around them, the only thought in their heads was to run.

The geniuses brought from the Liqa Clan itself fared a little better. They managed to survive and keep themselves calm, but there were only a few tens of them in the army of several hundred.

Left with no leader as Estavian never showed his face, they could only react passively to the ongoing chaos.

That was the kind of situation that they were in when the city walls crashed down.

BOOOM!

Raphael broke through any defenses that were once present and made his way into the battlefield.

"KILL!"

""KILL!""

The mercenaries followed his lead, their bloodlust at an all-time high.

What would follow was a slaughter that didn't discriminate between the innocent and the guilty.

And there was nothing that anyone present could do to stop it.

Chapter 1709 Third Stage [7]

There were two types of war.

The first was a war between only those involved, where civilians were excluded as much as they possibly could be.

And the second was a war where the common people lost everything because the ones fighting didn't care about them in the slightest.

August always preferred to fight the first type of war. There was no such thing as a kingdom without people, so it was pointless to fight a war where they were slaughtered without remorse.

However, Raphael was different. Even if the people in the border city were real, he wouldn't have changed his strategy. He would've similarly destroyed everything so he could get rid of the enemies in that place.

Perhaps August didn't agree with this kind of warfare, but he was not the one in command of the armies at this point in time, so there was nothing he could do about it.

Just, he had to be careful about what he let Raphael do in the future.

Nevertheless, it was too late for anyone to stop him now.

Raphael crashed through the city walls with his mercenaries and instantly started slaughtering anyone he came across.

Anyone who had an ounce of life left in their body as they fought against the rain of fire was swiftly decapitated or chopped in half. The simulated population had their blood splatter on the ground that their corpses infested, while Estavian's troops were covered in blue light and sent out of the arena.

Those who didn't die retreated far away, and among them was none other than Estavian himself.

Why would he stay in combat when the situation was already so far gone? Rather than trying to save the people who he deemed doomed from the start, he thought it was better for him to regroup with the rest and prevent any further marching from the opposing army.

Raphael knew his limits. If he tried to move further than the middle border city, then he would absolutely be confronted by a force that he couldn't stand against.

Instead of risking his own untimely defeat, Raphael ordered the fires to be put out as he took the city for himself.

Raphael's movements were only a single step in August's plan to control the entire border.

At the same time that he moved, Melania and Valerie pushed forward as well, branching off into the two other border cities to confront the geniuses stationed there.

The most important reason to secure the border was to make sure that the other side didn't have easy access to their territory.

In order to even get close to the border, they'd have to go through enemy troops.

When the entire battle shifted into their territory, how would Eris and the rest react?

Would they even be able to retaliate?

The other two border cities weren't nearly as secured as the central city. It was mainly because people expected more from Estavian. If he was able to properly control his troops, then it wouldn't be a problem for him to defend all three at once.

Since he showed such a terrible performance, there really were only two noble clan geniuses and around twenty troops that were acting as a scouting party waiting for Melania when she arrived.

BOOOOOOOM!

Standing outside of the city, Melania stomped her foot into the ground. A huge earthquake spread from below her and destroyed the ground around the city.

The air was immediately filled with screams again, but not those of agony.

If one watched the situation from above, one could see tens of thousands of simulated citizens fleeing the city through the other side, heading to the inner cities of Eris' territory.

The number of presences in the city rapidly depleted, and along with their mass migration, a blaring alarm bell rang to alert others of the invasion.

Twenty-two people rushed to the gates of the city to confront the person on the other side.

Seeing Melania standing there, the two noble clan geniuses hesitated.

They knew what she could do, and there was no way they wanted to fight her with that knowledge.

Their troops were not the same.

Perhaps they'd seen her on a screen, but to them, Melania only looked strong because the tournament administration made her look that way.

Her strength was nothing more than propaganda.

She was a commoner, after all. Where could she possibly gather enough strength to actually stand against people in their positions?

As if the command of their leaders didn't matter, the twenty of them charged, aiming to take all the glory of the third stage for themselves.

These people who originally didn't get the chance to participate in the heir wars wanted to prove that they deserved to be here more than the actual contestants.

But, if that was the case, then they would've been here from the start, right?

Melania grinned as she watched them approach her without fear.

'If it was a few months ago, I'd be terrified.'

A mob of noble clan geniuses was something every commoner feared. Even if they had the power to fight back, they'd lose everything if they tried. Their families, livelihoods, and dignity would be torn apart by the power of the noble clans.

The heir wars presented someone like Melania with a unique opportunity.

It was a chance for her to pay back all of the oppression she'd suffered under their rule without facing retribution.

Maybe these soldiers didn't know it yet, but every step they took was leading them closer and closer to humiliation.

But Melania let them have their moment.

After all, rather than defeating people who knew that they were fated to lose...

...it was far more fun to crush people who were high on misplaced arrogance.

It was like they were moving in slow motion. The crows knew what was going to happen. The two noble clan geniuses behind them knew what was going to happen. Melania knew what was going to happen.

Still, it was fun to see them charge with such vigor, showing their desire to be seen.

Melania slightly bent her knees and prepared herself to pounce like a tiger.

Strength flowed through her veins and pulsed through her flesh and bones.

Thus far, Melania rarely had to use the techniques of the Mountain God. Most of his doctrine relied on martial strength surpassing anything that intricate mana techniques could create. The specific moves that he created for himself and his disciples were incredibly destructive, meant to wreak enough havoc on any battlefield to make any enemy lose their will to fight.

Melania knew she was being watched. Eris Noct, Wilhelm Liqua, and the rest of the geniuses in the castle were probably watching to see what she, Valerie, and Raphael would do.

To an extent, it might have been unfair to these poor soldiers, but now was the time for Melania to make a point.

BOOOM!

She launched off of the ground and flew several meters into the air.

She gathered mana in her legs and circulated it through her body in a specific pattern to maximize her output.

And as she crashed back down to the ground...

'Tsunami.'

The most simple skill of the Mountain God, Draga.

...a tsunami of earth consumed the heavens.

Chapter 1710 Third Stage [8]

Raphael still had some troubles to deal with before he was completely in the clear. Melania had a clean sweep of the few nobles and troops that she had to face, but there were reinforcements on their way to take her down.

But, compared to what was headed towards Valerie, it wasn't anything much.

Valerie moved with a platoon of ten soldiers. Obviously, she didn't need their help just as Melania didn't, but they refused to leave her be.

The few noble soldiers on their side refused to follow their lead. Instead, they only obeyed commands from other nobles and Holy Clan geniuses, so most of them were delegated to Raphael's part of the army.

Valerie was the only one among the commoners who was able to find troops, since she had something of a Holy Clan supporting her as well. The ten young geniuses she'd brought from the Wood Dragon Clan were not accustomed to the outside world, and though Valerie tried to get them more comfortable in the week they had before the war started, none of them could easily adapt.

For now, they were more comfortable acting under Valerie's supervision. This would change by the end of the war, but, for now, they still needed some time.

Valerie and her ten supporters moved to the border city on the western side of the opposing territory. What they met originally was around the same as what Melania faced.

When the ten wood dragons worked together, the enemy group was easy for them to eliminate.

The entire border city was turned into a jungle. Trees and plants inhabited the space that buildings once took, and the dampness changed the entire climate into a humid and hot ecosystem.

Within that domain of wood, the twenty or so soldiers on the other side and the noble who led them fell quickly. Under Valerie's orders, her own platoon started to move through the city and secure it.

Meanwhile, Valerie left and scouted the perimeter, making sure that there wasn't anything nefarious waiting for them.

There was.

Countless explosives that could be detonated at a distance, countless tripwires and other devices that would activate deadly mechanisms within the floor, and countless other traps laced the city, all controlled by a formation that was etched along the outer wall.

'I have to get rid of it.'

Theoretically speaking, a formation etched with a method like this could be destroyed as long as she broke down the wall. It was the most vulnerable method of creating arrays, but it was also the quickest, so it made sense why they used it.

Valerie was preparing to take down the existing wall and replace it with one made of her power.

That was when she felt it.

'Someone's approaching.'

There was evident hostility in their aura, which was completely visible as if the individual in question didn't have the time to try concealing it.

That kind of aura was extremely telling.

'Aureat Clan.'

Metallic yet esoteric, as if related to both material values and the most ethereal concepts in existence.

The Aureat Clan was strange when compared to the other Holy Clans as their power wasn't derived from anything like a law or element existing in this world.

And because of that, they were the hardest to predict in combat.

Valerie looked back at the city for a moment.

'Well, it'll be fine as long as they don't find out.'

Just like everyone else, Valerie had grown immensely since the last time the audience had seen her.

At this point, whether it was a Holy Clan genius or someone even better, Valerie wasn't afraid of facing them in combat.

She dashed forward, her steps becoming quicker and quicker until she was flying through the air.

Her body changed. Green scales that shimmered and blended into the ground and trees, eyes that would terrify any human child, and a head crowned with horns made of the most ancient wood in the world, all contrasted by a tan underbelly that seemed unprotected, yet was anything but.

Her wings expanded into the vicinity and flapped fiercely, pushing her forward at an even faster speed than before.

The enemy was approaching in his dragon form, so Valerie did the exact same.

Now that the third stage had begun, she didn't need to hide it anymore.

It was right about time for her to start spreading the Revell Clan's name, to force people to remember those who had been buried in history.

The first step was to show the world their majesty.

Dragon forms were never banned from the heir wars. There weren't any rules that prevented their use in any stage either. After all, in a competition to determine who was the next Dragon Emperor, wouldn't it ruin everything if the contestants were forced to remain bipedal?

Some stages were more friendly to staying bipedal, so there was no need to ask why people didn't switch when those were ongoing. In other cases, geniuses were eliminated before they could ever show off their true power.

There were plenty of reasons why people refrained from transforming thus far, but the main one was the same for almost everyone remaining in the competition.

In the dragon form, they had access to the most power they could possibly output. Their attack forms were simplified, sure, but the actual complexity hidden within would be amplified manifold.

Against a genius in their human form, it wasn't always guaranteed that a dragon form was enough to win. But, it was certain that the competition would reach a completely different stage the moment people started fighting as dragons.

One by one, everyone would be forced to reveal their true forms and power lest they be left in the dust.

Nobody wanted to break the balance.

Not until now.

Faldren Aureat had only used his true form as a method to travel faster. He just wanted to reach the border cities as soon as possible so that the threat could be dealt with before any serious damage was done.

But, he'd unintentionally provoked a monster.

Audiences watched on as two dragons approached each other at incredibly high speeds.

Their trajectories were in such a way that it was impossible for them to avoid each other, and considering Valerie...Faldren would've been forced into battle regardless.

Closer and closer, closer and closer, the two screens that showed them individually eventually merged into one.

In that moment, the only things the audience saw were a green blur and a golden blur.

And the only thing they heard was—

XIUUUUUUUU!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The two dragons collided with physical force alone. They were above a plain, but the environment was still eviscerated by the pure force that they released.

The grass was torn from the ground and vaporized into ash. The earth itself instantly dried and cracked as the environment transformed into a desert.

There were no longer two blurs, only one massive storm of light as their mana collided fiercely.

The two dragons had already met eyes.

Golden mana, pure green mana with hints of white; they combined and clashed, refusing to coalesce as they created explosion after explosion.

That was a collision felt by everyone, no matter where they were on the battlefield.

And it was the trigger that changed the heir wars entirely.

In the coming days and weeks, seeing humanoid beings on the battlefield would become rarer and rarer until it was completely impossible.

This was a battle of dragons in the first place, but now...

Now, it truly looked like the most sacred event of dragonkind.

This was what the heir wars were always meant to be.