

Void 1641

Chapter 1641 Elimination [6]

"Haa..."

August sighed to himself.

"Who are you?"

He asked the question that definitely should've been asked a long time ago.

The girl also relaxed after seeing that he'd lost his killing intent. She got off of him and straightened her clothes, patting her chest in relief.

"I was wondering when you were going to ask. You really act before thinking, don't you?"

"Not usually, but you asked for it, didn't you? How else was I supposed to respond?"

The girl shrugged.

"It really isn't my fault. If I knew you would react that way I would've never started off like that. You can't blame me for wanting to look mysterious."

August rolled his eyes. He was calmer now so he was able to put away his hostility, but he still didn't like that she'd evaded the first question.

"Am I getting an introduction any time soon?"

"Ah, right! I forgot about that."

The girl smiled sheepishly and held out her hand.

"My name is Valerie Revell," she said as August grabbed her hand.

She helped him up while continuing.

"I don't know if you remember, but you met my grandpa when you were still a kid."

August's eyes widened.

"Ah..."

Everything became clear at that moment.

Alcharist Revell was the name of the Wood Holy Dragon who'd helped him when he first transformed into his true body. Damien made sure that August knew the names of all sixteen ancestors who helped him back then.

He eventually needed to repay their favor, and beyond that, they would be a great help in his quest to take the throne.

He'd learned that wood dragons were a rare species. They didn't have the same reproductive capabilities as the rest of their species, only birthing a child once every ten millennia.

In return, they were able to have children later in their lifetimes compared to others. Even the oldest wood dragons would still have a part in reproducing, since every single one of them knew how important it was to increase their numbers.

Back when Alcharist was a Holy Dragon, he only had one son and one daughter. His entire clan had less than a thousand dragons in it.

Now that so much time had passed, not only had Alcharist's children grown up, but they'd also had many of their own children.

The wood dragon clan was booming now. It was not quite a Holy Clan yet, but it was almost at that level. They had lived in hiding because they wanted peace, but it seemed like August's birth changed their stance.

"Grandpa said that a new Azure Dragon had been born. I don't really know what that means, but he made it sound super important," Valarie explained.

"I see..." August said, nodding his head.

"If Senior Alcharist is the one who told you, then it all makes sense."

Those sixteen ancestors all knew what he was. They'd been there during his first transformation, before his aura was ever concealed.

They'd lived for long enough to see Qinglong when he was the Dragon Emperor, so it was only natural for them to understand his origins.

Damien made sure they were sworn to silence on the matter, however, the oath only applied when they were trying to harm August with the information they had.

"But...why are you here?"

It couldn't be because of the heir wars. She didn't need to participate in the elimination round if she wanted to participate.

It also couldn't have been out of sheer curiosity. Alcharist wasn't one to allow such reckless action.

The only possible way for him to let her participate in this competition was—

"—apparently Grandpa wants me to go out to gain experience. He said that this place would be good for my training, and more importantly, he said that a certain Azure Dragon could probably use my help."

Valerie looked August up and down.

"Though, it doesn't seem like you really need it."

August smiled awkwardly.

"Sorry about that."

"Eh, it's already behind us."

August nodded.

She was flattering him, but he knew otherwise.

He definitely needed help. Maybe not in the heir wars, but definitely in everything that came after.

Alcharist had sent her knowing this.

Her presence was a token of the entire Revell Clan's support.

They were fellows who shared the same goals as him. More importantly, if they were willing to back him in a situation where he actually had to go to war with the Holy Clans, then August could act with a lot more confidence.

He obviously didn't know how far their willingness to help went, but he was hoping for the best from the man who went as far as to come out of seclusion to help him gain confidence.

Even if it ended up being a minimal amount of support, August was still immensely grateful.

There were people who wanted to see him succeed.

That meant more than Valerie could ever know.

"Let me reintroduce myself," August said, his tone more formal.

"My name is August Void. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Valerie gave him a strange look.

"Pfft...!"

She couldn't help but laugh.

"What? What did I do?" August asked, slightly offended.

"Nothing, nothing," Valerie responded, still trying to stifle her laugh.

"It's just funny to see you acting all adult-like."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Didn't I say it's nothing, you brat?"

Valerie stepped forward and, in one move, put him in a headlock and started ruffling his hair.

"Did you forget that you're only ten? What are you doing acting like my dad?"

"Oi! Oi!" August exclaimed, trying to pull her arm off of him.

"That's just how I am! Let me go already!"

"Oh? That's just how you are? Really?"

August didn't know how he'd gotten into this situation, but he found himself being relentlessly teased by a girl he only just met.

He had to admit that this was the first time someone other than his father actually treated him like he was a child. It wasn't like he didn't understand what she was thinking, but he really was just like that!

He had been seeing an old man's memories every single night for far too long for him to not act like one!

What was he supposed to do?!

The actual competitive part of the elimination round ended when August decided not to kill her.

August ended up trying to wrestle Valerie off of him. They ended up on the ground and got covered in mud before he got her off of him.

At that point, they started sparring. They didn't get to finish their previous fight, and they were quite competitive people.

Plus, if it looked too still in the forest after all of the mayhem they caused earlier, what would people think when they both walked out without many injuries?

They at least had to simulate a fight.

And, they were both curious about who would actually win.

August was more than able to fight her on equal terms. If they both went all-out, would she be able to hold an advantage just because she was stronger on paper?

They fought to find out, and they fought well.

...well, for just a minute or two.

Just as they got into it, they heard horns blaring all around them.

"Ah...!"

"Oh, right..."

They suddenly remembered where they were.

In the fifteen or so minutes that they spent fighting, the situation had changed massively outside.

The elimination round was forced to come to an abrupt halt.

After all, rather than the fifty people they had originally planned to pass...

...only fifteen remained.

Chapter 1642 Gratitude [1]

There were around eighty people left in the elimination round when August first entered the forest.

It was around half the number of those who entered, but it was still a decent amount.

If things went as they were meant to, the battle would continue for another hour at least as these geniuses started confronting each other in single combat and abandoning their groups.

It was especially so since Valerie had stepped away from the battle to find August.

The only ones left with immense power in the arena were Lucas Stroll, the ice user, and Ophelia Bannar, the fire elemental.

And they barreled through their opposition.

It was hard for anyone in the arena to stand against them, and with their power, they could wipe out every single one of them in a minute if they wanted to.

The only reason they weren't using the full extent of a 4th class dragon's power was because they were testing their fellow participants.

They didn't just want to destroy people weaker than them.

They wanted to preserve the sanctity of the heir wars tradition by only allowing geniuses to pass.

In fact, of the eighty who were still in the arena, five of them had been spared by the duo and deemed worthy.

Those five were standing behind the line they created, not really sure what they were meant to do.

After all, they'd lost. They weren't supposed to remain, but they had.

The arena itself looked strange now.

The entire middle was split by a triangular area of forest that Valerie had created.

Tremors and explosions shook the very foundation of that forest. Occasionally, one could feel a burst of power or see something peek above the canopy to indicate what was happening inside.

It intrigued not just the crowd, but also those fighting in the arena. Ophelia and Lucas were deeply curious about who Valerie had met that could make her fight on such a level, but they'd find out when the round ended, so they didn't fret over it.

On each side of the forest, fire and ice raged as they continued their attack, somehow not affecting the trees in the slightest.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

ROAAAAAAR!

Ophelia was extremely aggressive.

Her fighting style was similar to what the Ignis Clan and other fire dragons preferred.

Flames were king. Fire was above all else. In order to prove the strength of their element, they didn't focus too much on making their techniques fancy and filled with intricacies.

It was the most basic form of power.

She slashed her claws out and created huge billowing flames that enveloped countless people. She roared with her entire heart, letting loose beams of fire that incinerated even the arena grounds.

Lucas was her polar opposite in many ways. Even humans were influenced by their elements, so it was unsurprising that dragons, who were born far closer to them than humans, would have similar tendencies.

The conflict between fire and ice users had presented itself countless times through Damien's century of adventure through the universe. Except for unique cases like Feng Qing'er and Lunaria Snow from the 3000 Beast Mountain Range, almost all fire and ice users formed rivalries or feuds solely based on the views they developed through their abilities.

In this moment, they were united, but they'd been dying to fight each other since the moment they met.

That would have to wait until they were on a bigger stage. Currently, they had different goals.

There honestly weren't that many people who could meet their standards. Even the fifteen who were left by the time they were done were only standing because the announcer managed to stop the two wild geniuses before they could eliminate everyone in the arena.

Nobody did anything noteworthy. Aside from the original five, the rest were quite literally just lucky.

That included Melania.

"STOP! THE BATTLE IS OVER!"

The announcer's mildly panicked yet incredibly stern voice resounded through the arena.

It barely made its way over the crowd's cheers, but Ophelia and Lucas still stopped as he asked. They couldn't offend the administration running the competition when they were participants themselves, could they?

To them, it was a bit of a shame that the last ten people were still conscious, but to Melania and the rest, it was heaven's gift.

'Could I have survived?'

They saw the waves of fire and ice that approached closer and closer to them.

They saw as people tried their best to defend themselves, only to end up in corpse-like states riddled across the ground.

How many of them were able to even think of formulating a counterattack?

Not a single one.

Only those five who stood behind them. They had passed precisely because they tried to put up a fight before losing.

Melania wasn't certain if she could do it, especially with her current fighting style.

She wasn't afraid to try. Her mentality was there.

But, with today's event, she learned what real geniuses looked like.

August was, at least, still a 3rd class being. Even if his talent was unbelievable, the strength he'd reached at his age wasn't too far away from her.

These two, or rather, three, on the other hand...

Could she ever match up to them?

It was a serious doubt that plagued her mind.

On top of that...

'...where is he?'

She hadn't forgotten about what she wanted to do here.

She had been looking everywhere for August, but after being unable to find him despite truly making use of the entire battlefield, she was forced to believe that he'd been eliminated.

"Contestants, please come forward!"

Though, his job became redundant when the battle became more of a fight for survival.

Everything was a bit jumbled from the perspective of those in the arena. Only when the announcer said those words did their perception of the world return to what everyone else had been seeing.

It was also when they began paying attention to the announcer, who'd actually been speaking through the entire battle.

He'd highlighted the parts that people would be most interested to see so that the crowd didn't have to figure out what was happening on their own.

Though, his job became redundant when the battle became more of a fight for survival.

That was beside the point. The most important part was that the crowd was absolutely enamored with what they saw. That was the original goal of having an announcer in the first place, so he didn't take too much offense.

The geniuses stepped forward as he asked.

They all put away their mana and walked to the center of the arena.

The forest that once inhabited that space was fading, dispersing into mana.

Left in the center were two people.

When others saw them, they were immediately shocked.

Valerie had shown her skill before she started fighting August.

She sat in the forest without even showing herself, yet, she took out enough geniuses to match Ophelia and Lucas.

Those who saw August rush into the forest thought he was going to lose for sure. However, they'd been proven wrong multiple times already.

This moment stuck the nail in the coffin.

August and Valerie were both still standing. Covered in wounds, sure, but they were in good enough condition to fit in with the geniuses around them.

Ophelia went to August's side while Lucas stood next to Valerie. They both eyed the boy they'd never seen before as the other geniuses lined up next to them, facing the head of the arena.

"Everyone, do you see them?!"

The announcer yelled, his draconic voice echoing and booming off the walls.

"These are your geniuses! These are the youths who will represent the people in the coming heir wars! They are fifteen, not fifty, however...their might has already been proven!"

WAAAAAAAAAAH!

The rush of cheers overwhelmed a lot of them.

August, Melania, and most of the other commoners had dumbfounded expressions on their faces when they finally realized how many people they'd been fighting in front of.

It wasn't a number in the mere hundreds or thousands.

Tens of thousands of people were crowded into the stands, roaring with their hearts to support the geniuses who would represent them.

"Do you want to see them fight again?! Do you want to see them rise and face challenges beyond anything they've ever faced before...?!"

The announcer grinned as he heard the crowd's affirmation.

"...then you won't have to wait long."

He finished his sentence, pausing for effect.

"The heir wars, the event you've all been waiting for..."

"Huu..."

August took a deep breath, closing his eyes and reopening them.

He scanned the crowd until he felt a certain aura calling for him. Turning his eyes in that direction, he saw the person he wanted to see and grinned.

"...it officially starts now!"

The first stage was over. Originally, there would have been a few months separating the elimination round and the true heir wars, but all of that had changed.

The heir wars would begin as soon as possible. The announcer had just officially confirmed it.

And, to be one of only sixty-five people who had the qualifications to participate...

August had to admit.

He really loved this feeling.

Chapter 1643 Gratitude [2]

For the crowd, it really was an event to remember. The entire thing seemed to be plotted out well, keeping a sort of continuity that let them feel like they were really part of the action.

For the geniuses, on the other hand, it was a completely different experience.

They showed up, heard the horns, fought, and left.

At first, they were too focused. By the end, they were too weary to pay attention to anything else.

There was no closing ceremony. After all, they were all winners, so there wasn't much of a ceremony to hold.

They stood shoulder to shoulder and listened to the crowd for a few minutes before being ushered off through a door embedded in the side of the arena. It led to a place that visitors couldn't reach.

Only then were they allowed to relax.

August immediately collapsed against a nearby wall, creating water to drink.

It tasted like mana, but that was fine, since he didn't really mind it. Others usually felt awkward about drinking water they created.

"Damn! I wish we got to finish."

Valerie stood next to him. She hadn't been able to complain about their battle being cut short since they were in front of a crowd, but now that they were alone, she could truly let loose.

"I mean, I get that the battle had to end. Those two went overboard. But, still! They could've waited for a few more minutes, right?"

"That was never going to happen."

August wasn't the one talking.

At some point, the two in question had walked up to them and decided to join the conversation.

"You are...August Void, correct?" Lucas said, looking at him.

He was looking down since August was the only one seated, but his gaze didn't contain any notes of condescension.

If he was able to survive for so long against Valerie and even wound her a bit, then he was someone worth respecting.

Lucas nodded as he shook it.

"I look forward to seeing what you're capable of."

"That is indeed my name," August replied with a smile, holding his hand out.

Lucas nodded as he shook it.

"I look forward to seeing what you're capable of."

"You as well."

August and Ophelia exchanged similar greetings, though she was a bit more direct than the icy Lucas.

Her words were something along the lines of:

"Next round, you'll fight me. I want to see what you're made of."

...though, she didn't sound like she was being intentionally rude, so August didn't take it to heart.

The geniuses were being kept in this room. They were resting, sure, but they weren't allowed to leave.

It wasn't made clear yet why exactly this was the case, but since it was probably related to the heir wars, none of them made a fuss about it.

August sat and breathed calmly, focusing on that more than anything else while a conversation budded around him.

'These three...'

They were treating him kindly because they saw him as an equal.

'That's a lot of pressure.'

August knew they were stronger than him. His advantages were only enough to let him fight them.

Whether he could win or not was...not really a question in his mind.

'I know the answer, and the fact that the heir wars aren't going to start a few months from now makes that a difficult thing to think about.'

August needed to reach 4th class. Now more than ever, it was important.

'The elimination round isn't over.'

No, the entire heir wars was an elimination round. He had to pass and pass and pass, never losing even once.

Otherwise, all of his goals would go up in flames. A new Dragon Emperor heir would be chosen, and if he tried to rise up as a competitor to that person, he'd have to face a far harsher and less heroic path.

August had a lot to think about. It was a relatively short battle, but it was more than enough to teach him the things he needed to improve on.

'I was focusing on the wrong things all along.'

His techniques weren't the main problem. If he continued to use them in the way that fit him best, then they would naturally be molded as he grew.

'I need to focus on the foundational parts of the manual.'

He was already prepared to go into the mountains and train.

The question was...

How much time would he have?

As August pondered on it, a certain head peeked around the corner.

"August...?"

His gaze was drawn, along with those around him, who stopped their conversation to see who'd arrived.

After realizing that she was a face they didn't know, Lucas and Ophelia lost interest.

As for Valerie, she looked at August to see his reaction.

"I'll be right back," he said, excusing himself.

Valerie nodded and returned to her conversation with the other two.

Occupying them was better for him, since their views towards the less talented were...not so friendly.

August slipped away from the group and turned the corner.

Melania was already gone, but she'd left a path for him to follow.

'What's up with this?'

He didn't really understand her actions, but perhaps that was because he wasn't in her position.

To her, Lucas and Ophelia meant something completely different.

Nevertheless, August followed the trail and eventually found himself in a different connected room, where Melania was waiting for him.

When he arrived, her face instantly lit up.

"I knew you wouldn't be eliminated so easily!"

"You thought I was eliminated?" August replied, looking slightly offended.

"I couldn't find you, so I had no choice."

August shrugged. It was understandable indeed.

A slight lull fell between them. August didn't really know what to talk about, considering their last interaction.

Melania, on the other hand, just needed a few moments to prepare herself.

Once she had, she immediately bowed a full ninety degrees in his direction.

"Thank you!"

She had been dying to say it.

"I'm really sorry for the way I acted back then. For you to still come back and give me gratitude...you don't understand how much that meant for me and my family."

She didn't want to bore him with her life story. She also wasn't trying to appeal to his pity by letting him know what she'd been through.

All Melania wanted was to convey her gratitude to him by any means possible.

"Even if you want me to serve you for life, I'll do it without hesitation. If you have anything you want, then please ask me without worry. I can't let a favor as big as this one go unrepaired."

August was shocked by her sincerity.

It came out of nowhere, especially when he considered his actions nothing more than a small act of kindness.

But Melania was serious. The look in her eyes told him that nothing could convince her otherwise.

He smiled somewhat helplessly.

"Actually, there is one thing I wanted."

"Really? What is it? I'll really do anything, as long as it's not...well, never mind."

August snickered a little. He didn't remember Melania being this jittery, but it was definitely fun seeing a side of her that acted more her age.

'Is this what Valerie was thinking when we met?'

He couldn't say he didn't understand the sentiment.

'Acting more my age...'

Maybe he could try it sometime.

But for now, there was something more important.

"The one thing I've wanted since you showed me kindness back then...how about becoming friends?"

"Friends?" Melania echoed.

"Yeah. Friends and allies who support each other when things get difficult. That's what I want us to be."

Melania's eyes widened slightly.

Of all the requests she was expecting to hear, this was not one of them.

She couldn't help but smile.

"Friends, huh...?" she muttered.

"That doesn't sound too bad at all."

August returned her smile.

Yes, friends. That was all they were now.

But eventually, they would become allies who would conquer the world together.

And that...

That was August's one true wish.

Chapter 1644 Scheme [1]

Melania expected a lot worse.

The people she saw on a daily basis would've reacted to such a proposition completely differently.

If she offered to do anything to repay the favor she was given, then their minds would immediately go to places that would end in her exploitation.

August was different from them. She'd seen this from his behavior and the fact that her siblings liked him. Deciding to trust him was a leap of faith on her part, but she felt it was the least she could do after what he'd done for her.

So she said it. She said that she would give him everything if he asked for it.

And for him to just say that he wanted to be friends...

She wanted to laugh at herself for worrying in the first place.

It was easy for them to establish a friendship. Their personalities meshed well, especially when Melania put her guard down. Though they'd had different experiences in life, perhaps that was what allowed them to get along well from the start.

They wanted to learn from each other with a basis of respect. The lack of arrogance was all it took.

August originally meant to talk to Melania for just a bit before returning to Valerie and the rest, but they ended up getting to know each other for several minutes.

As their conversation continued, the two of them had their attention grabbed by a bell that sounded in the main room.

When they left to go look at it, they found the other thirteen also gathering. A stranger was standing at the door through which they entered, seemingly waiting for them to notice him.

Once they'd formed a small crowd, he opened his mouth and started talking.

"You may be wondering what happens next," he said, looking over them.

"For the sake of fairness, you will only be made aware of the actual challenges you face in the heir wars when you arrive in the arena. This holds true for the nobles as well. The only information you will be given beforehand is when you will be tested, and depending on the situation, who you will be facing."

The statement elicited many nods from the crowd of geniuses.

Knowing what the challenges actually were was a huge advantage.

If anyone was able to hold it, others wouldn't be able to compete in the slightest.

Honestly, August and most others didn't believe that nobles would follow the rules and regulations. They had too many opportunities to circumvent such things.

Giving them an inherent advantage over their competitors would ensure that a commoner didn't end up on the throne. It surely sounded like something the noble clans would do.

The "organization" that controlled the testing didn't belong to the Holy Clans or the nobles. They were only somewhat involved.

The main force controlling these matters was the Dragon Emperor's personal troop. They took care of the most important matters so that others couldn't interfere.

Still, their reputation couldn't pertain to every single individual.

There were sure to be people who were willing to provide information to those who could purchase it, but August and the rest just had to trust in the words of this man until they had seen it for themselves.

In the end, it would be quite obvious if it happened, wouldn't it?

Nevertheless, the man continued, unaware of their worries.

"I will now distribute your emblems. Using these, you can learn about when you specifically will be participating. It can automatically teleport you to the arena when the time comes, and, if you so wish, you can use it to view the leaderboard that will show you who is still in the competition and who is in the lead."

The man nodded knocked on the door behind him, leading another to enter the room.

He immediately scanned the geniuses before approaching them one by one, giving them their emblems.

August received his after most of the others since he was near the back of the crowd. As he gazed at it, he listened to the man's words.

"Please press your mana and a drop of blood into the emblem. It will be bound to you thereafter."

August frowned.

'My blood...?'

What was the purpose of that? A device like this could easily be bound using mana alone.

In fact, it was a far better way to identify someone than blood.

After all, one needed to draw blood before ever being able to examine it.

Mana existed naturally. Even those who hid their auras couldn't remain concealed when they actually used mana for anything.

An expert could recognize someone's mana from thousands of kilometers away. Each individual's signature was simply that distinguishable.

It also couldn't easily be replicated or forged.

As such, devices like these always used mana. Only less developed societies, like some of those in the lower universe, needed to use something like blood.

For Arulion to resort to these backwards methods...

'...the blood isn't for binding the emblem.'

It had an entirely different purpose.

'Let's stay cautious.'

August didn't immediately bind the emblem, waiting until he was alone to test it first. Melania, who was next to him, did the same.

She didn't know why, but she decided to trust August's actions and wait.

Nevertheless, as the rest of the geniuses bound their emblems, the man nodded.

"The next round will begin in two weeks. You can see if you are participating through your emblems. All other information you might find necessary will also be there."

It was a system that allowed geniuses to stay informed without needing to find people to inform them, which was convenient...

"That is all."

...and the man seemed to believe that it was better for them to learn the rest on their own. His only job was to deliver their emblems. Now that it was done, he was more than happy to leave.

"Ah..."

There was one more thing for him to say before he left.

"You can leave at any time, however, I would not recommend it. There are...quite a lot of people trying to find you right now."

They had become overnight celebrities, so naturally, there were crowds outside waiting for them to leave.

It made life inconvenient, but what were they meant to do?

They had become overnight celebrities, so naturally, there were crowds outside waiting for them to leave.

It made life inconvenient, but what were they meant to do?

They were all aiming for the Dragon Emperor position, so this kind of treatment was simply something they needed to get used to.

Some of them left and some others stayed.

Lucas and Ophelia went their own ways the second they had the opportunity. A few of the geniuses rode their coattails to make an escape without facing the crowd:

Valerie stayed with August, who stayed back in the room with Melania.

To him, leaving right now was just pointless.

He did have an artifact that would allow him to subvert everything waiting outside, but there were too many people around for him to ever think about using it.

So, as he waited for the crowds to die down after satisfying their excitement through Lucas and Ophelia, he started investigating his emblem.

There was a scheme hidden within, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

Chapter 1645 Scheme [2]

August pretty much knew what he was looking for. All he needed to do was confirm.

'Unfortunately, I'm still weak.'

He couldn't do it on his own. He was talented, sure, but he was not yet powerful.

He and those around him could not stand against those who could actually move the world.

'If Dad were to fight against any of them, they'd all lose faith in their talent.'

That was the disparity between them and the true experts.

'Speaking of Dad...'

August's eyes brightened.

'...he can definitely help with this.'

His father could do anything. They'd been apart for only a week and a few days, but August had already experienced so much.

He saw Damien in the crowd when the battle ended. Knowing him, he was probably waiting for August to find him.

'But he won't just be part of the crowd.'

August changed his mind.

"I have to go," he said to the two girls nearby.

"Where to?" Valerie responded.

"Ah, I'm going to find my dad," August replied.

"Your dad...? As in...ah, can I come too?"

Valerie's eyes were practically shining.

Damien was someone she'd heard many stories about in recent times. From what her grandpa told her, he was a man whose existence was unreasonable even by dragon standards.

She wanted to meet such a being. She was practically begging with her eyes as she stared at him.

"I don't mind," he said with a smile.

"Why don't both of you come?"

"Me too?" Melania asked.

"Of course. Why not?"

August wanted his dad to meet his new friends.

More importantly, he wanted Valerie and Melania to get acquainted.

They had exchanged greetings a bit ago, but that was about it. Their only connection was August, after all.

If the two of them were going to be his companions from now on, then they would have to learn to like each other.

Perhaps having them spend time together would make them closer?

That was August's train of thought.

"He should be outside somewhere. I saw him in the stands before, but...I'm sure it's not going to be easy."

The girls were confused, but August just smiled.

His father was...never the type of person to give him anything easily.

He had to earn it if he wanted it.

'Actually, he probably already knows about the emblem problem.'

If so, then he would make it even harder.

'I should get started as soon as possible. The field is bigger than it used to be.'

Usually, their elaborate game of hide and seek would only cover Veridea Mountain. The arena was located in a city called Fort Halleya, which was completely unfamiliar to August.

Damien was going to be somewhere in the city. That much August could assure.

However, where in the city...? Whether it be in a random store, on the side of the street, or at the top of the tallest building, Damien's location would be something August had to actually use his brain to find.

Nevertheless, the first challenge was the same as what everyone else faced.

"Let's find a way out of here without being swarmed."

The crowd outside was filled with vultures, and they needed to escape without alerting even a single one.

It was hard to really play games with a dragon. Damien had to find ways to keep his son entertained with things that didn't have to do with training.

Books did a good job. August loved to learn, so it was easy to keep him entertained when he was in the house.

However, outdoor activities were a bit different.

They could go flying every once in a while, but they couldn't do it too often.

A dragon's version of fun would usually require another dragon to complete, and since Damien wasn't a member of their race, he had to find a way to compensate.

After all, he was still a human. Even if he turned into a dragon when August wanted him to, he couldn't raise him entirely as a dragon.

Instead, he found another way for them to play.

It was, in fact, an elaborate game of hide and seek.

Damien's job was to put himself in a place where nobody would think to look.

Sometimes he would even disguise himself as a different person to throw August off.

Meanwhile, August had to use his mind to find out where Damien was using the clues he left behind, and he needed to exercise his body to run around and actually chase his tail.

The first time they played, Damien found that this game was the perfect way to satisfy all of August's needs. It became a sort of tradition for them, and when he started to get more serious about training, he incorporated the game into it as well.

In the current situation, Damien decided to be even more creative with his hiding spot.

He transformed into a fire dragon in aura and appearance. Once that was over, he found his way into the VIP section of one of the most prestigious institutions in the entire city.

This place was hidden and inaccessible to those who didn't know about it. Logically speaking, it was impossible for August to find him.

'But that boy's intuition can hardly be called logical.'

August was able to infer things that were scarily close to the truth based on little to no information.

Even taking the current situation into account, August was absolutely correct.

Damien had indeed hidden himself in the city and made it harder than ever to find him.

He had already learned that there was a problem with the emblems.

Hell, he had already dissected the problem and unveiled the entire plot behind it.

If it was August, even a place like this wouldn't be able to stump him.

'Anyway, while I wait...'

The problem with the emblems was one of many things Damien uncovered as he journeyed through Arulion to find the Dragon Emperor.

'It's been so long, but that still isn't done.'

Damien smiled wryly.

He thought it would be easy. With his current power, sensing the locations and entrances of the Holy Clan hidden territories was light work. He could infiltrate any of them if he so pleased.

However, he couldn't find anything at all that led to the Dragon Emperor.

'At first, I thought he was a fake.'

For a second, Damien even believed that the Dragon Emperor was a being that the Holy Clans simply made up to keep their power solid and support their agendas.

'But he definitely exists. The problem is...I think he ended up in a situation similar to Qinglong.'

From what Damien could tell, the Dragon Emperor was basically being used as a puppet by the Holy Clans.

Still, he was trying his best to maintain his influence.

His people had revealed themselves when the heir wars began, surprising and confusing the Holy Clans.

They were put into a situation where they couldn't act against him because his role in society had become absolutely vital.

They couldn't touch the heir wars process either since they were bound by their blood.

The sacred tradition of the Kingdom of Dragons couldn't be interrupted or interfered with by anyone except the Dragon Emperor himself.

No dragon could disobey that rule.

The Dragon Emperor was hidden somewhere in Arulion.

And while Damien took a break to attend August's big event, his clone continued to search unceasingly for clues.

'I guess this isn't the only game of hide and seek going on.'

The Dragon Emperor was doing to Damien exactly what he was doing to August.

It was a bit of a funny comparison.

'Still, if my son can find me against all odds...'

...then he could find the Dragon Emperor.

Was it logical? Not quite.

But, was it true?

Well...

Chapter 1646 Hide And Seek [1]

It had been mentioned before, but Damien didn't leave August to figure it all out on his own.

He'd left clues all throughout Fort Halleya that would eventually lead him to the right place.

It obviously wouldn't be easy, but it was absolutely possible, even with the particular uniqueness of Damien's current hiding place.

Damien believed in his son, and August believed in his ability to read his father.

Making it out of the crowd was a problem at first, but for geniuses who put their mind to it, evading regular civilians wasn't a problem at all.

In a situation like this, they were permitted to use their power, weren't they?

August was able to maneuver in such a way that he could avoid all prying eyes without a problem. Valerie was more high profile, but after seeing her performance in the arena, hardly anyone was willing to stand in her way.

Melania didn't have either of those traits. She was good at concealing herself, but only at a basic level for now.

Still, she had the least problems out of any of them.

Her presence during the battle was barely a thing, so even when she left the same area as the other geniuses, people decided to focus on those like Valerie instead, so she was able to get through without a problem.

It was a bit humiliating, but since August and Valerie didn't see it that way, Melania was less self-conscious about it.

Nevertheless, the three of them escaped the arena and met up at a nearby cafe to discuss strategy.

August had somewhat explained the game to them.

They had to follow his lead since he was the only one who could track the clues left for them, but both Valerie and Melania were prepared to play any role they could to help.

Though, they didn't believe it would be that hard.

It was just a friendly game between father and son, right? What was the worst that could happen?

August didn't bother telling them otherwise, since they'd find out on their own soon enough.

'First off, clues.'

"Knowing my dad, the first clue is going to be super obvious. It's going to get progressively harder from there, but we can worry about that later," he said, involving the other two in his thought process.

"The question now is: where is that obvious place?"

He didn't know anything about this city. He could spend time learning if he wanted to, but what was the purpose of having teammates if the work wasn't distributed?

Melania hadn't left Arragon before so she couldn't help in this area, but Valerie had explored a decent amount of the kingdom under the guidance of her clansmen, so it was different on her side.

"Fort Halleya isn't a crazy popular city, but it's still a spot that tourists really enjoy. There are a few monuments that matter more than others, but if it's as obvious of a spot as you say, then it has to be a staple of this city," Valerie said, her brows furrowed.

"If I had to guess, then the best place to start would be the Monument of Truth."

"The Monument of Truth?" August echoed.

"Yeah, it's not really anything special. It's just called that. Anyway, it'd be too boring to just talk about it, so I'll just take you there."

August nodded, and Melania also agreed.

Fort Halleya was a port city, or at least, the draconic equivalent of one.

They didn't need to use the seas to trade with others, but there were several clans that lived in the water. They would surface at places like Fort Halleya to accumulate resources and trade for things they couldn't get in their natural habitats.

The Monument of Truth was located on that port, at the very west end of the city, outside of the walls that allowed this place to call itself a fort.

It was really just an obelisk made out of a dark obsidian-like material. Its height was commendable, but the actual artistic creativity behind its design was questionable.

Still, when a well-traveled or well-informed dragon thought about Fort Halleya, the Monument of Truth was one of the first things that came to mind.

It was put in place when the city was first created and had withstood trials and tribulations for hundreds of thousands of years.

The reason it was valued was not because of its design. It wasn't even because of the materials it was made of or its originally intended meaning.

The reason people valued the Monument of Truth was because it managed to survive no matter what kind of arduous situation it was placed in.

Through countless wars and countless disasters, it stood strong, reminding people of what they could do if they just kept themselves stable and refused to lose hope.

As such, what was originally just a monument used to praise a long-forgotten king was now a symbol of the people, a site that Fort Halley's denizens took pride in.

August could feel their pride as he approached it.

Along with something else, an aura that only he'd ever be able to sense.

"You were right," he said, looking at Valerie.

"It looks like our quest starts here."

He walked up to the obelisk with the girls. They could only follow him as he circled it before stopping at a specific spot on the side that faced the pier.

"Am I allowed to touch it?"

"Not if you don't want to die."

"Then..."

August reached out, his fingers just an inch away from the obelisk.

There were people who immediately turned their eyes to him with hostility, but he didn't plan to move his fingers forward to cross that final gap.

Instead, he took a drop of mana to the very edge of his fingertip and sought a connection with the aura he felt.

Zap!

Like a small arc of lightning, a bolt of mana connected August's finger to the obelisk itself.

A galaxy appeared in his eyes. Darkness enveloped him and the two behind him. The obelisk flipped on its head and started ticking like the minute hand of a clock.

Valerie and Melania were already confused and panicking. This situation wasn't anything like what they were expecting.

August, on the other hand, was comfortable in the darkness.

'It's a clock...?'

Was this the clue, or did he have to do something else to unveil it?

'Hmm...since it's the first one, it would usually end here, but...'

August started drawing in the air with his fingers.

Mana was released from his hand. It first surrounded the obelisk in a circle before forming numbers and even a second hand to complete the image of the clock.

The second hand ticked according to the flow of the minute hand, and over time, as they synchronized, August saw a different picture.

"Coordinates?"

Melania was actually the one to voice it. August looked back at her in surprise.

"How did you know?"

"Ah, I don't really know. The hands aren't really following the flow of time, so I thought they were trying to point us in a certain direction instead. The easiest way to do that is to either give us a range to explore or give us coordinates to find."

It was quite an intuitive answer.

Melania had spent a lot of time trying to discover what she was good at. She'd read as much as she was able to with her status, and she learned a variety of trades to support her family.

Reading coordinates wasn't really a useful skill, but she learned to decipher them as part of a job that she had taken in the past.

After gaining an interest in cartography, a skill that dragons didn't make much use of, she did some extensive research on her own and actually developed a decent skill set to become an explorer.

Of course, she couldn't leave her family at home alone, so she never pursued that path.

Still, her skills never became useless. This moment proved exactly that.

"Nice!" August said with a smile.

Whenever Damien gave him coordinates, he'd struggle. He hardly knew his way around a map, and to understand the position of a few numbers in a place where he didn't know left from right was genuinely just impossible for him.

By chance, he had someone in his party who could make up for his weaknesses.

And because of that, what would've been a taxing task that took several hours or even a day to complete could be finished in a much shorter time period.

'See, ancestor?' August thought as his smile widened.

'This is why comrades are always important.'

He was hoping Qinglong was watching from the heavens as he gained prominence in the world.

Because that ancestor of his...while they differed a lot, he was still the only blood-related family that August had.

The urge to make that ancestor proud, to show him what kind of excellence he could achieve in the path he'd chosen...

Moments like these helped him satisfy that urge.

And, it solidified his own thoughts.

He would conquer this world with his comrades.

Not a single one of them would be left behind in the process.

He would make sure of it, no matter what it took.

Chapter 1647 Hide And Seek [2]

Longitude and latitude obviously weren't universal concepts. They were defined by earthlings to define Earth.

However, the concept of having coordinates to denote locations was widespread. It was important, especially when setting up teleportation arrays.

Without coordinates, arrays would have to be operated manually. That was a waste of spatial talents, wasn't it?

The system in Arulion was different from even what was used in the rest of the Heavenly World. Luckily for these three, Damien had learned it and used it for their convenience.

Still, it wasn't as simple as just finding coordinates and chasing them.

Melania immediately went to work as the other two gave her space, decoding the code she found in the clock's movement.

"Five...stop...sixteen...stop...twenty...stop..."

She said a total of forty-five numbers.

It was too many to form an actual destination by any means, but to identify those numbers, one needed to understand how to find coordinates.

'The actual task to accomplish with those numbers is different.'

In classic Damien fashion, the answer wasn't simple.

Melania stepped back, staring at the clock intently as she tried to figure out what she was supposed to do.

"The clock has to be relevant."

The Monument of Truth was important because of the time it had withstood. When they were transported into this space, they'd been faced with a clock that showed them the way.

"Maybe...?"

Melania curiously turned around and took a step forward. A slight yet noticeable "ding!" sounded as her step landed.

To her surprise, the ground below her foot glowed in a hazy blue color.

Ding!

Ding!

Ding!

Ding!

She took four more steps forward and the light continued to follow her.

However...

The second she moved once more, the lights disappeared, clearly telling her that she was doing something wrong.

"It's a pattern!"

Melania went back to the start and walked again, stopping when she'd moved five steps forward.

"Stop..."

There were pauses in the code she decoded. Were they there to denote how long she needed to move in each direction?

'If it's a clock, then the movements..."

Melania turned to her right and took a step.

As expected, she was greeted with a blue light and a ding.

Fifteen steps later, she'd already confirmed it.

"Guys, follow my steps. I found the pattern!"

August and Valerie smiled.

They'd already realized what she was doing when she took those first steps, but seeing her so excited, they let her keep the lead.

They didn't really need to ask anyone to know that Melania had some insecurities about her talent and power.

If she compared herself to the rest of the geniuses she was competing against, it was obvious for her to feel insecure.

However, August knew from the start that she had talents worth acknowledging.

With a display like this, Valerie was starting to see it too.

The two of them did as she said and followed her steps. They went around in a square pattern that ended up forming a strange rectangular spiral.

Their steps first took them wide, creating the larger parts of the spiral. At a certain point, they were led in a straight line that cut through the pattern so they could create the center.

And when the three of them stood at its center, seeing the entire, frankly ugly, pattern around them, the blue lights that denoted their steps combined into a single flowing stream.

The energy started to move, pulsating from the center to the outside edges, and subtly, the pattern changed until it was swirling at full speed.

The floor beneath them had changed.

It lost its permanence. The blue light became the entire floor, transforming everything into energy.

And naturally, an ethereal floor couldn't necessarily be stood on.

"Woah!"

"Ahh!"

"Don't reach out for anything! Keep your hands to your side and focus on landing properly!"

August warned the two, hoping to get through their surprise.

He had assumed the form he recommended. His attention was focused on his legs.

The three of them fell into the blackness of the space around them, but deep inside of it, August could see the makings of a city.

It was not within the space.

Rather...

WHOOOOOOSH!

The blackness was replaced by a clear sky.

The brush of wind against their bodies reminded them that they were back in reality.

However, instead of being at the Monument of Truth, they were in the sky around a thousand feet above the tallest building in the city.

'This is...unexpected!'

August's previous advice went out the window.

Usually, he would be dropped close to the ground somewhere, but this time was definitely different!

'We can't use our dragon forms.'

At a time like this, one would obviously default to the form with wings.

Unfortunately, it was illegal for commoners to transform unless they had received permission.

They had to find a way to land safely with their bodies.

Given their altitude, however, any sort of landing on the ground would kill them.

'The spire!'

August suddenly heard Valerie's voice in his head.

"Aim for the spire!"

His eyes focused on that building, the only one that was somewhat visible from this height.

He then looked to find Valerie and Melania's positions.

'Okay.'

He wasn't close to them but they weren't far away.

Melania was falling, unable to do anything about it. Meanwhile, Valerie had already started using her mana.

Vitality was birthed out of the air, and small vines immediately grew out of her hands.

There wasn't much Valerie could really accomplish without the ground nearby, since most of her power relied on the forces it contained.

She could still grow trees and forest around her body, but how could it spread without the earth's vitality?

If she was alone, she really would've been unable to do anything until she got closer to the ground.

In this case, though...

Combined with her message, August understood what Valerie was thinking.

He immediately went to work, summoning as much water as he possibly could.

WHOOOOOOOOSH!

The ever-rushing winds made it impossible for him to transport his water to Valerie, but that was exactly where Melania came in.

An earth dragon, a water dragon, and a wood dragon.

Using their power together, why couldn't they replicate the properties of the natural earth?

Melania provided the soil, and August provided the vitality. With those factors, Valerie was able to root her power into theirs and let her vines grow into thickly packed structures that were stronger than tree roots.

They were falling fast. The more matter they summoned, the more their overall weight was, and the faster they fell.

The spire was approaching closer by the second, and what did they have to show for the time they spent airborne...?

Their waists were wrapped by thick vines that connected to a web of roots shielding them from the ground,

Cocoons of water enveloped them to dampen the force of impact and dense rock armor shielded their bodies to make sure they didn't jolt too much when they suddenly came to a stop.

The plan definitely wasn't to just hit the ground like this. Their preparations weren't enough to save them if that was their goal.

Instead, with eight seconds passing, this was the best they could do, and the spire was already upon them.

"Get ready!" August shouted out.

The three of them braced themselves, and Valerie especially made sure to concentrate.

Everything looked like a blur, but in that moment of truth, time slowed down.

Valerie made her move.

The instant before the spire made contact with the structure, the web of roots below them unraveled.

Like a predator catching its prey, they instantly wrapped around the spire's roof, flinging the three dragons within off to the side.

They swung down the side of the spire, almost crashing through its highest windows as their bodies were jerked upward by the abrupt stop.

Their shoulders met their jaws. Their necks were nearly crushed, but the many provisions they'd put in place protected them from certain death.

The three young geniuses kept their eyes closed and their bodies in position, trying their best to resist the forces acting against them until they finished bouncing and swinging from side to side.

Thud!

It took a solid ten seconds for their momentum to finally disperse.

Their bodies created a soft thudding sound when they hit the spire's windows, but for the most part...

"Huu..."

The water barriers crashed down to the ground below, giving the pedestrians who watched them pull such a stunt a complementary shower with the show.

It was quite a sight for said pedestrians, and had definitely alerted more than just a few people.

However, August, Melania, and Valerie weren't thinking about it at all.

They looked at each other with wide smiles on their faces.

Since they'd survived, they were allowed to admit it.

"That...was fucking fun! Wow!"

Valerie was the most crass of them, but she voiced their thoughts well.

It was an exhilarating experience, but it was nothing more than the solution to the first clue they'd found.

By August's experience, there would be at least two more.

And as he learned to expect from his father by now...

'...it really never gets old.'

...he was once again surprised by a thrill unlike anything he'd imagined.

Chapter 1648 Hide And Seek [3]

"Let's get down quickly."

August came to his senses within a few seconds and quickly noticed the crowd that had gathered below.

There wasn't really a law enforcement force in Arulion, but there were means in place to deal with people who were causing mayhem.

The risk of being caught was definitely a thing that August didn't want to risk.

The spire itself was around two hundred meters tall. They had the option to jump down, but even if they cushioned their impact, they'd end up destroying the streets.

Since that wasn't possible, slowly lowering themselves with mana was definitely an option, but as they soon found out...

Snap!

The roots holding them up snapped and rapidly dispersed into pure mana that drifted away in the wind.

Actually, it wasn't just the roots, but everything they'd summoned.

The three geniuses suddenly felt a sense of emptiness inside of them, and as they tried to find the source of that feeling, they found that they'd been placed under a restriction.

"Our mana is locked."

As August said it, the vines that kept them suspended disappeared, and they were dropped onto the ledge below them.

"From this situation, it looks like we have to climb down on our own, but...there should be a clue somewhere around here."

They managed to stay surprisingly calm. Maybe it was because of the adrenaline pumping through their systems, but the fact that they'd been left stranded on a random ledge high above the city didn't seem that daunting anymore.

More important was the quest they were on. After an experience like that, all of them were far more invested in it than they were at the start.

Valerie was already plotting the best route down the spire, while Melania was observing the surroundings in search for another hint.

August had his eyes closed. He spread his senses as far as possible in search of the vague aura Damien would leave to indicate where clues were located, but he couldn't find anything.

"How's it going for the two of you?" He asked.

"It doesn't look like there's anywhere to find a clue here. The windows could mean something, but I doubt it'd be that easy," Melania responded.

"Right, our wits were tested in the last trial. This time, the basis should be something different," August agreed.

"What about you, Valerie?"

"Ah, it should be pretty easy to get down from here. This place is surprisingly accommodating of climbers."

The stone that made up the spire's exterior walls was set in intervals. Some stuck out while others were depressed into the wall.

This pattern was set to give the spire a more unique appearance, but it actually gave them a lot of ledges to use as they were scaling down its side.

"If there aren't any clues up here, then we should just go down. We're drawing way too much attention."

"Ah, right."

"That was a thing, huh?"

The other two had somewhat forgotten about their circumstances while searching for clues, but now that they'd been reminded, they immediately agreed.

The three of them were quite nimble, and their draconic physiques set their grip and core strength leagues above humans.

To make it to the surface wasn't even a problem with the architecture of the spire. In but five minutes, they were already on the ground, and, of course, bolting away from the spire.

They couldn't help but laugh as they rushed through the streets of Fort Halleya and hid away in a nearby store.

There were probably a lot of confused onlookers wondering who they were, but they weren't yet recognizable enough to actually draw attention.

"Do you think anyone will come after us?" Melania asked, slight fear in her voice.

"It'll be fine," Valerie responded in the complete opposite tone.

"We didn't break or damage anything except our own bodies, so nobody will complain. If that spire ended up destroyed, though, we would definitely be in for some trouble."

It was the convenience of a draconic society. They were rowdy creatures, especially in their youths, so unless they were truly causing damage, nobody would raise a fuss.

"Still, we ran away before we could figure anything out. What if the clue was back there?"

Melania's concern wasn't unwarranted.

"But, I don't think it was back there at all?"

August's response was strange.

The two girls turned to look at him inquisitively, only for their eyes to follow his to see what he was looking at.

"What the—"

"Where are we?"

This was the first time they'd looked at the store they were in.

It should've been a regular street-side restaurant or cafe. Due to the layout of Fort Halleya, the dimensions of its interior could be estimated easily.

And those dimensions definitely weren't as massive as this place truly was.

Though the rows and rows of bookshelves on the walls begged one to believe this place was a library, it did indeed have a sort of cafe inside that was serving the visitors coffee and small snacks.

The atmosphere was quite quiet and peaceful. The main problem was the fact that it was several tens of meters long, surely too long to fit in the amount of space it had.

"Spatial expansion magic."

It wasn't something a common vendor would be able to afford.

"Just what the hell did we stumble into?"

Valerie was asking a good question, but August had a better one.

"Did we come here on our own, or were we led here?"

When facing a supreme being, was free will truly a thing?

How could they know that they weren't merely acting according to his plans, subconsciously being led by his flow?

This was part of the main lesson Damien taught August during these games.

One could never lose one's sense of wariness when facing an unknown enemy.

Even the most intricate of schemes could merely be playing into that being's hands.

Especially against a being with limitless power, all schemes fell apart.

But, no power was limitless.

As long as one could read the mind of a supreme, understand the way they thought, and replicate it, one could outsmart them the same way one could outsmart a child.

Wasn't it a classic quote from a certain earthen strategist?

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

It all came down to the level one was seeing the world from.

For Damien, that level had gone through immense changes. It wasn't wrong to say that he viewed the world as something he could change as he pleased.

He could hold it in his hands, and if he so wanted, he could manipulate all living beings.

How did a person of that stature think?

How did the gears in their minds turn?

August didn't know, so he was bound to face defeat.

But, he was in a position to learn, so that he could eventually earn victory.

This was a game of hide and seek, sure, but it was entirely led by Damien's flow.

One of these days, August would diverge from it, using his own means to track his father.

Compared to even the Holy Clans, Damien was a more terrifying opponent.

So once August learned to perfectly read him, he'd be able to outsmart the Holy Clans with ease.

He took his first steps into the library cafe, curiously scanning the bookshelves to see what the contents of their pages were.

He was sure that this was a place Damien wanted him to reach.

The only question was...

Why?

Chapter 1649 Hide And Seek [4]

The three geniuses split up without a word. They had a mutual understanding of each other's specialties after the solving the first clue, so they made sure to make the most of their individual talents.

August had been intelligent since birth. He went straight to the bookshelves on the walls to see if he could find anything significant.

There were at least 10,000 books in this place, far too many for him to read through, but he was hoping that there would be something in the way that they were organized that would show him the way.

Melania went to the cafe and looked at the menu, curious about why it even existed in this space.

It wasn't that coffee and books didn't go well together. The problem was more in the aesthetics of the two things.

This wasn't a modern library, after all. It had clean wood floors and dark shelves that were reminiscent of a more medieval age.

And within that aesthetic was a modern cafe with tile floors, glass cases, and kitchen equipment that couldn't even be found in Arulion.

The first impression Melania received was that the cafe was the original owner of this space and the library was expanded around it, but she couldn't be sure.

Especially since the cafe's menu seemed to be directly connected to the library.

The two of them were the more intelligent members of their group.

Valerie, on the other hand...

Well, it was best to just say that she was more talented in fighting.

She was the brawn, and since there wasn't really anything for the brawn to do in a library cafe, she went up to the barista and decided to order herself some snacks.

The transaction went as usual. Valerie bought a few treats and paid, finding one of the five small tables in the cafe to sit at.

Right, she originally believed that she'd be able to sit back and let the other two take care of the matter at hand, but...

"Guys..."

She called them over, trying to be subtle since they were indeed in a library.

Well, her reasoning was different, but she chose to use sound transmission over her voice.

August and Melania both noticed her and turned around.

"Don't make it obvious, but do you see that barista? She...no, nobody else here is alive."

August raised his brow.

As someone who couldn't respond through sound transmission, he didn't have a good way to communicate it.

He could only stance himself in clear confusion and try to make it as obvious as possible what he was trying to ask.

And, nobody could say it wasn't obvious.

Valerie had certainly never seen a stance that screamed, "What does that even mean?!" more than how he was standing right now.

Valerie glanced around. There were only five other people in the library cafe, but she could confirm now that she'd sensed it from up close.

"Not a single one of them has vitality in their body. They're either undead, or their illusions."

"Hmm..."

'So it's basically confirmed.'

August didn't need more proof that his father had led them here.

It looked like Melania and Valerie were planning to stay calm, which was good.

If these were beings summoned by Damien Void, then the worst thing to do was provoke them.

'How does this work?'

He'd felt it a few times as Valerie used it. The sensation of someone talking in his head was strange, but it wasn't hard to interpret.

'It should just be...'

Transmitting his voice through mana, letting the energy carry his message.

"Is...this working?"

Valerie's eyes slightly widened.

"It is," she responded.

"O...kay. Act norm...al. Don't pan...ic and they pro...bably won't attack. Tell Mel...ania too."

Valerie nodded and transmitted the message.

Melania also agreed.

The people here were acting on a set pattern. It had nothing to do with their current task, but as long as those patterns weren't interrupted, they would just continue to act as puppets without any specific purpose.

This gave them the freedom to explore as long as they were mindful.

August made sure the other two were alright before returning to his search of the bookshelves.

The most important conclusion he'd made was the fact that none of these books were real.

'They're filled with nonsense. What even is "the dissection of how a chicken's thought process could possibly lead it to cross the road?"'

Every book had its name written on its spine, and none of those names made sense.

The organization was also completely off.

They weren't sorted alphabetically or by genre. Instead, it seemed more like completely different books that had somewhat similar tones were kept in the same section, as if the library was meant to be traversed as one's mood changed rather than anything else.

It was interesting, sure, but these books held no value.

August tried to take one out and flip through it, but they were embedded in the shelf, purely for decoration.

On his own, he came up with nothing more than an interesting fact.

And that was the same for the other two.

The strange names of the snacks caught Melania's attention and she kept trying to decipher something from it.

As for Valerie, her findings were definitely even more odd. She was simply eating the food she paid for, but she found that nothing tasted as it seemed.

A small cake would taste like a parfait. A parfait would taste like a brownie. A brownie would taste like a snickerdoodle cookie.

The tastes themselves were good, but it was too disconcerting for her to honestly enjoy the experience.

The three of them were forced to gather without much to go on.

However, perhaps they had more information than they thought...?

Melania spoke first. She brought a menu back from the counter and put it on the table for them to see.

"I found these, but I can't make heads or tails of any of them. The names are just confusing," she said.

Valerie nodded as well.

"And they're not even accurate. Look at this one. The description says it's chocolate, but it doesn't taste like one at all."

"What does it taste like?" August asked.

"Um...cake?"

August glanced at the menu again.

"These names..."

He didn't recognize them, but didn't they look strangely similar to the book names he'd seen?

He stood up and went back to the shelves to find them.

'That chocolate thing was called..."an egg that never gave up and ended up becoming a sacred being?'"

The sheer number of books made it difficult to find, but August caught the feeling that the book would be in the same section as the chicken one he saw earlier.

And sure enough, within five minutes, he'd found the book on the shelf.

'Can I pull it out?'

He couldn't, but the book definitely moved. He tried pushing it in next, and that had a completely different effect.

'Oh?'

Valerie and Melania saw him do it.

They immediately went to work to figure out the actual pattern, since it had become clear how to input it.

To just go based off of the names of the menu items was possible, but Valerie had a different thought.

None of them tasted like what they were supposed to be, right?

Then, wasn't that meant to confuse them?

If she had never decided to sit around and eat, then they never would've realized that there was another layer to the entire problem.

But since she had, they had all of the parts together from the moment they exchanged words.

Valerie went through every item on the menu and tasted them. Afterward, she and Melania went from top to bottom and matched the names to their specific tastes rather than appearance.

The list was reordered, and when August pushed the associated books in with that order in mind...

It was only natural for a library to have a hidden staircase into an abyss, wasn't it?

A part of the shelves lining the walls pushed inward and revealed it, showing them where they needed to go.

As they stood in front of it, August took a deep breath.

"This isn't the end of the trial," he said.

When they went down that staircase, they'd find out what they really needed to do.

"Are you guys ready?"

"More than ever at this point," Valerie responded.

"Agreed."

With Melania's affirmation, they had no more reason to hesitate.

The three of them walked down the stairs together, their guards raised high.

And in the library they left behind...

The six people inside, including the barista, morphed into their true forms.

They were creatures of unknown form, grey clouds of smoke that had hollow eye sockets filled with flickering blue flames.

Their eyes turned to the staircase, or rather, the beings who had just descended it.

And as they had been ordered to do upon their creation, they followed.

Chapter 1650 Hide And Seek [5]

The three young geniuses were completely unaware of their ghostly pursuers. The staircase was eerie enough on its own. It didn't need their help to frighten them.

The darkness was lit by twin torches on the narrow walls. When the trio walked between them, they'd flicker with blue flames and reveal that there was far more staircase waiting for them than they ever expected.

It was a much longer descent than it needed to be.

Was it meant to destabilize their minds? If so, it definitely worked.

There was a haunting aura to each and every step. The further down they went, the more they felt like they were walking into the underworld.

The fact that they were together was a huge help. If any one of them had to do it alone, they might not have been able to.

Still, they took it step by step and eventually made it to level ground again.

When they looked up at the path of torches they'd left in their wake, they found that the surface wasn't visible in the slightest.

Even with the light, it was a staircase that led into an abyss.

The place they'd arrived in was a large cavern. There was nothing developed here, which made it look more natural.

Actually, there wasn't anything waiting for them to explore at all.

Instead, it was just a single being.

As their eyes adjusted, they were able to make out its figure in the darkness.

Impaled by over ten extremely thick chains that were pulled taught by their ends that were embedded in the ground and the ceiling was a being with a head like a cow, but a physique more like a giant.

He was over ten feet tall, covered in fur that couldn't hide his bulging muscles, with crimson red eyes and a large bull ring in his nose.

Perhaps his most prominent feature was his horns. They were not too tall or too thick, but they adorned his head like a crown that he clearly took pride in.

They were clean and pristine, completely lacking the dirtiness that the rest of his body seemed to have.

Except for one thing. The dull crimson stains that looked to have existed from long ago, the remnants of the blood that they had once drawn from their foes.

"That...what is that?"

Valerie's eyes widened. It was a creature unlike any other she'd seen before, and if it managed to get its hands on the axe stuck in the ground in front of it...

'...it's dangerous.'

"...it's a Minotaur."

Valerie and August spoke at the same time.

Valerie's point was obvious, so August was the one who continued talking.

"It's a Minotaur. My dad told me about them when I was a kid. They're mythological creatures with great strength. For us to find one here..."

"...this is the actual trial we were supposed to find."

"Correct."

August did say that the test wouldn't be judging their minds a second time.

It seemed a bit too obvious for it to be a mere battle, but this was just a game, after all. It wasn't meant to test them too much or be complicated enough to be seen as an actual challenge.

"In the end, our job is simple," August said, a slight grin on his face.

"That thing has an amazing regeneration ability. Do you guys know what that means?"

He looked back, and slowly, Valerie started to match his smile.

For Melania, who was still confused, she voiced it out.

"That guy is free target practice."

For the three of them, who were competing soon in a competition beyond all competitions, training was the most important thing right now.

They had 2 weeks to become the best versions of themselves before they faced the world with their talent.

For a target like this to be provided to them in a friendly setting where they could guarantee their lives...

It was truly a blessing.

"Guys...what are you doing?"

Melania stayed back because she was still a bit apprehensive about the creature, but August and Valerie immediately approached it without fear.

"Just watch," August said with a smile.

"Look at what we do, and you'll naturally join in when you're ready," Valerie continued.

GRRRRR!

A rumbling growl resounded as the Minotaur recognized their presence. It glanced at its surroundings, and immediately, it roared out in fury.

ROOOOAAAAR!

Its arms bulged as it exerted the most force it possibly could.

Like they were made of butter, the chains that kept him contained were destroyed, shattered into thousands of pieces.

It reached into its chest and gouged out the chains stuck in its body, and as its flesh visibly healed, it picked up its axe and looked at August and Valerie.

They grinned, and the Minotaur huffed, letting steam billow out of its nostrils.

As if they had a mutual understanding between them, all three bent their bodies and prepared to rush.

In the same moment, they charged.

The battle immediately began in front of an audience of only two.

Yes, not one, but two.

After all, a certain Damien Void was also spectating from far away.

'That one needs some mental training.'

Damien wasn't just watching his son's adventure. He was assessing the people he'd chosen as companions.

Their personalities were good enough. The problem was more in their talent.

'Alcharist's girl isn't bad. She just needs to gain some experience and she'll blossom. As for the other one...there are a lot of barriers, but if she can show some potential, it's not impossible to help her thrive.'

When Damien was an upcoming genius, he had the convenience of the Void at his beck and call.

Because of its aid, Rose, Ruyue, and Elena were always able to somewhat match his progress so they didn't get left behind.

It was the same for even people like Long Chen and Su Ren who he befriended. Every single one of them received a boost in talent that allowed them to rise fast enough to face the threats that were coming at them.

August bore the same last name, but he did not have a connection to the Void. The people around him would eventually be left behind, unable to even see his back in the endless desert that power was.

Damien could change that future. He also knew how much it hurt to reach a level where old comrades started to view one as a god.

It was painful, and it was lonely. Damien didn't want August to ever have to go through that.

Eventually, he would have to suffer some pain. This aspect would probably cause a good deal of it.

But, while he still could, he wanted to help.

And it started with the first few friends that his son had made.

'Even for me, it was the ones who were there at the beginning who stayed until the end.'

Those three would definitely beat the Minotaur with ease. He made it specifically so that it could be killed whenever they decided they were done with it.

However, the next trial...

Well, it was a bit more intuitive.

'I know these tests will probably repeat themselves in the heir wars, considering that it's those uncreative people organizing it, but...it's good to prepare them, right?'

They were new friends, so he obviously didn't expect too much from them.

But he really was curious.

When it came time to unravel that third clue...

Just how would they react?