

Void 1651

Chapter 1651 Hide And Seek [6]

The Minotaur really didn't deserve the treatment it received. It had been summoned and knocked out, and the moment it woke up, it faced another battle.

Luckily, it was not gifted with the sentience to understand the woes of its existence.

Its only goal was to kill, and kill it tried.

However, its opponents had other plans.

August found that his fighting style wasn't as much of a problem as he originally expected. He needed to focus more on the depth of his laws, so that he could have a more diverse arsenal to enter battle with.

As for Valerie, while her power was more than enough, her ability was extremely limited when she didn't have the support of the earth.

It was a weakness she never would have discovered on her own. Now that she'd realized it, she wasn't planning to stop until she fixed it.

The best way for August to train was just to fight.

He took the main role, keeping the Minotaur's attention and tanking most of its attacks. He rushed around its body, continuously attacking in every fashion that he could imagine.

He was causing damage, but it was healing just as fast. The Minotaur only got angrier as it continued fighting, so its attacks became stronger and stronger.

While August did an endurance trial with the beast, Valerie stood back and focused on controlling her power through her body.

She was able to pass her Universe Baptism with the sheer power of her laws when she was on the ground. She understood so much about the law of wood that it was almost preposterous that she was only fifteen.

However, she had never actually tried to use the wood element to focus on things other than trees.

Sure, control of vines and other similar structures came naturally because of her understanding of trees, but she couldn't use them effectively without the prerequisite of creating a forest.

If she hadn't been lucky, she might've never caught them when they were falling through the sky earlier. They truly might've just hit the ground and died.

The threat of death helped her perform to the best of her ability and unlock the potential.

Now that she had another environment where she could properly grow, she could focus on a deeper level and gain true control.

The ground was already covered in vines. Valerie's residual power caused a great change to the cavern.

Instead of focusing on them, she had all of her attention on her hands, where even smaller, barely visible plants were growing.

Wood was a versatile element, because it didn't just relate to wood on a physical level.

It was an element filled with vitality and something of a subset of Life. People who reached great heights with wood laws were indistinguishable from their fellow life practitioners, if not for the fact that they had a slightly less varied arsenal.

Instead of "wood," what had been helping her most in this game was the power to sense vitality.

That was her focus. It would take a bit before she could join the battle in full, but she was using her vines to help August restrain the Minotaur when he needed it.

The main concern was Melania.

She was a person who didn't necessarily know her own path.

She was a trapper, but was that the right path? She knew she could succeed in it, but she didn't know if it was enough for her to keep up with her current company.

Was she even good enough to be friends with geniuses of that caliber?

Doubts plagued her mind no matter how much she tried to push them down.

It wasn't that she was insecure. That wasn't the case at all.

Rather, she looked at the future practically and couldn't see her keeping up with them. Rationally, her talent and methods weren't enough.

'At a certain level, traps become irrelevant, don't they?'

Unless she could turn an entire region into a trap, but she was not a void dragon or anything. She was an earth dragon, and her methods were restricted to the earth.

Earth dragons were already the least talented of their species.

They were the most common, so their bloodline was spread quite thin. Their connection with their element was usually worse than what a human could produce, and mana took much longer to move through their bodies than anyone else's.

But there was a reason for that.

Melania didn't know it yet, but earth dragons were completely untalented not just because of their bloodline, but because of their physiques.

Their species was especially gifted in another area, but that was her to find on her own.

She hadn't quite been in a situation that could unlock that potential, so she had no idea.

It didn't help that there were no noble earth dragon clans that could be used as an example.

The three had their own worries, and at this point in their friendship, none of them were quite willing to ask each other for help.

One had to remember that no matter how it seemed, they had only known each other for a week at most and less than a day at the least.

Their connection was still new, and though Damien was giving them a slight push to help them bond faster, he wasn't able to make them completely trust each other immediately.

Melania was with August because of gratitude. As for Valerie, it was curiosity and duty.

For those feelings to turn into genuine trust and friendship, they needed a lot more time together than just this.

But, if they did happen to share with each other, they definitely would've been able to improve at a faster rate.

That was Damien's main reason for trying to rush their bond.

These two would have a positive impact on August's growth if it all went as planned.

Still, the "plan" could barely be called that.

Damien had seen the results of excessively controlling parents. He didn't want his son to detest him.

As stated before, it was just a slight push.

If they managed to do it, then they did it. If they didn't, then he would leave it up to time.

'More importantly, they have two weeks, huh.'

August couldn't see his schedule because he hadn't bound his emblem yet. Damien, on the other hand, could see it, because he had found a way into the system.

August and Valerie would be competing two weeks from now.

As for Melania, she wouldn't be included in the heir wars for another month and a half.

She had some more time to figure out what she needed to do. At least for now, she was still too confused to be of any help.

August and Valerie continued to harass the Minotaur for several hours before they finished.

And, when they finally put it out of its misery, they were once again left in the cavern alone.

There was no immediate teleportation and no obvious clue that told them what they earned from defeating the beast.

As the other two went to investigate the cavern in depth, Melania turned around and looked at the staircase they came from.

She immediately froze.

Those few beings that had been forgotten as the trio focused on the Minotaur...

They'd now returned to haunt them.

Chapter 1652 Potential [1]

August felt shivers down his spine that instantly alerted him to their presence.

It wasn't unfamiliar to him. He had been in the presence of these beings many times before.

"Don't look into their eyes!"

August shouted before he could fully turn around.

Valerie was startled and turned to look at him, but it was too late for Melania.

She saw them first. The first thing she saw was their eyes.

In front of the other two, her body slowly changed, becoming statuesque.

No, rather, she was actually turned into a statue.

"Tch!" August clicked his tongue.

"What are those things?!" Valerie asked, panic in her voice.

"Furies," August replied.

They were ghostly beings with the power to manipulate minds.

"Melania was caught in their spell. She'll be stuck in that stone state until she finds a way to break it from the inside."

"We can't help?"

"We can't. As far as I know, if we try to break her out of the stone, she'll be left unconscious forever."

It was an assumption, really. August didn't know much about the Furies outside what he'd experienced himself.

But, if there was one thing Damien warned him about, it was trying to interfere in a Fury's trial.

"What about the Furies? Can we get rid of them?" Valerie asked, looking at the rest of the situation.

August nodded.

"That's not difficult at all. They're undead. Just splash them with some vitality."

Valerie nodded and immediately moved towards the five ghostly beings that were slowly making their way through the cavern.

None of them actively attacked. They seemed docile unless one happened to meet their eyes.

Still, Valerie did more than just splash them. She barraged them with as much vitality as she possibly could and made sure they were destroyed.

Meanwhile, August approached Melania with a sigh.

'I'm not really worried, since I've been through this before.'

If anything, the Furies were more of a boon for Melania than anything else. The problem was more in the fact that she'd been caught without knowing anything.

'It's going to be hard for her to find a way out, but...I guess I have to believe in her.'

"Has she really turned into stone?"

Valerie had joined him next to Melania while he was in his thoughts. She, who now had assurance of her safety, curiously circled her frozen new acquaintance.

"I don't know either. I've never been on the outside watching this happen. But, usually when I escape, it feels like coming out of a cocoon," August answered.

He was somewhat curious as well, but he was a bit confused about what they were supposed to do.

"What if I—"

Valerie suddenly reached out to touch Melania's statue.

And, the second she made contact...

'There's no way, right?'

As it turned out, touching someone who had been affected by a Fury would cause one to fall under the same spell.

August had never faced Furies with other people before. Now that he had, he was left as the only one unaffected.

'Hmm...'

The problem was that he couldn't do anything to help them. The Furies were unique beings with unique powers. They forced people to face themselves, and only if they could personally find success could they ever dream of escape.

'With this situation, the strangeness of today's game has become more understandable.'

With August's personality, he never would've touched Melania directly unless he had some sort of assurance.

Valerie, on the other hand, was recklessly curious. She was pretty much guaranteed to do something foolish once she felt safer in the situation.

'These tests were designed for the two of them.'

August was used to the game. He didn't need to face the kinds of trials that Furies could present.

Plus, in the current situation, unless he consciously decided to join them under the Furies' spell, there was no way for him to be involved in it.

'Then, there must be someone else for me.'

While Valerie and Melania were being tested by Damien, August was meant to focus on the game.

They weren't just taking trials, after all.

Everything they experienced was a clue. All of those clues, if properly combined, could give August the answer he was looking for.

There was definitely another trial waiting somewhere. The clues leading to it could likely be found in the worlds that had been created in the two girls' minds.

However...

'I'm supposed to be using my brain.'

He never forgot the original purpose of the game. It was his job to read Damien and determine his location without overusing the clues he was provided.

'I have to know his mind.'

He had to remove the lens of their father-son relationship and look at him as a Supreme named Damien Void, an opponent that he needed to dissect.

'He's arrogant on purpose. He is the type to prepare for any situation while leaving holes intentionally for his enemies to exploit.'

In this situation, those holes were just for the fun of the game, but August was properly reading the character within Damien's actions to discern his thought process.

'He is intentionally confusing us, but maybe there's a simple solution hidden within the madness.'

There was a big chance that Damien wasn't as deeply hidden as they expected.

There was a possibility that he was, figuratively, right around the corner all along.

'It's my job to figure out which corner.'

Before the girls returned to reality, he was going to find his father.

August suddenly thought of something Damien occasionally said.

'I heard him say it before. I don't really get it, but it sounds nice.'

A grin spread across his lips as his eyes scanned the cavern walls.

'Let's speedrun this thing.'

His grin matched the one Damien had while watching him.

This competition between father and son...

...was it going to come to an end soon?

Was August going to exceed Damien's expectations? Or would he fail and be forced to try again?

Whether it be father or son, both were more than happy to play until they found out.

However long it took, however arduous it was, they would embark on the path together until they achieved the results they desired.

And eventually, their efforts would pay off.

In August's case...

Well, that was a story for another time.

There were different things that Damien wanted to test in Valerie and Melania.

With Melania's circumstances, Damien's curiosity leaned more towards her desire for personal growth. If she could impress him with her performance, then she would definitely be rewarded.

Valerie was a different story.

She came from the Revell Clan on Alcharist's orders. Damien could sense that she had a good soul, but her reckless curiosity was a danger to both her and her friends.

Obviously, as she continued to live her life, she would learn to fix these habits.

Obviously, right?

One would believe so, but depending on the kind of person Valerie was, a different outcome could present itself.

If she didn't learn from her mistakes and kept repeating them, she would end up killing everyone and everything around her.

She was young, so reckless curiosity wasn't a sin.

But, if she couldn't show the character to learn, to adapt, and to mature...

Then she didn't deserve a place anywhere near someone like August.

Chapter 1653 Potential [2]

Melania found her world completely changing the instant she looked into those gloomy, hollow eyes.

The cavern where she stood in reality disappeared, replaced by an arid desert and a large mountain.

She was alone in this place, standing at the base of the mountain. She wanted to explore and figure out what happened, but she was trapped, unable to move more than a few meters from her original position.

'What...?'

Melania was calm despite the sudden change in the situation.

'Judging by the timeline, this must have something to do with that creature.'

She understood that much from the very first moment.

She was already in the process of brainstorming a way to escape.

The problem was that this realm didn't support those kinds of thoughts.

A strange wave of energy swept over her body, and her memories began to rapidly leave her mind.

It pulsed and pulsed. The longer it was maintained, the more her amnesia grew.

She clutched her head and cringed as she coped with the headache she was feeling, but nothing she did could stop it.

It continued mercilessly until she couldn't remember that there were memories being erased at all.

By the time it was over, she was left with only her name and most instinctual desires.

She rose back up until she was standing straight and let go of her head.

She brought her hands in front of her face and looked at them in confusion.

'What...am I doing here?'

The first question that appeared in Melania's mind was still concerning the surroundings.

She glanced in all directions, turning in a circle as a dull pain struck her head.

'Who...am I?'

She couldn't recall anything. The only memories she had were of this place, of this sole mountain in the midst of an endlessly flat desert.

A man appeared behind her at an unspecified time.

She had forgotten fear, so she did not jump. She looked at him curiously and asked him as well.

"Who...am I?"

"Do you truly wish to know?" He responded.

His figure was cloaked in a thick black veil. The only thing visible through it was the crow mask he wore on his face.

He did respond, though, and his voice didn't seem to contain any malice.

Melania nodded, easily answering his question.

"Do you know why you are here?" He asked.

Melania shook her head.

"If I told you that you journeyed here in search of power, would you believe me?"

Melania nodded.

"Oh...? And why is that?"

Even the man was surprised by her willingness to answer these questions so easily. He didn't look friendly, nor did he try to.

Why was she entertaining him despite the suspicion she had to be feeling?

He became even more confused when Melania didn't answer his question.

She only stared at the mountain, a vague expression in her eyes.

"Do you wish for power?"

Melania nodded again, far faster than ever before.

"And why is that?"

"Because..."

Melania did respond this time.

"...protect?"

It was the first word that came to mind. There was nothing behind it but instinctual desire.

"To protect, eh?" The man echoed.

"What are you willing to do for that ability?" He asked again.

"..."

Melania took a second to answer.

She knew what she wanted to say, but something told her not to voice it.

Still, it was the truth.

For power, she was willing to do anything.

Despite her decision to not say anything, the man understood what she was thinking.

"I will give you an opportunity. If you can make use of it, then you will attain what you desire."

Melania turned to look at him.

"I...will?"

"That's right."

Melania nodded. She had clearly accepted his words.

At that moment, a boulder appeared between her and the mountain. It was three times taller than her at the very least, and big enough to crush her into paste if it happened to roll over her.

"Do you see that boulder?" The man said.

Melania was already looking at it, so there was no real point to the question.

"Push it to the mountain peak using only your physical strength. If you use anything else, you will fail."

The invisible walls around her disappeared. Melania was allowed to walk away if she wanted to, but the boulder seemed far too appealing.

It was practically torture. The mountain wasn't kind. Once she started, she wouldn't have the option to stop.

There were no ledges and no subtle inclines. There wasn't a single place for her to rest, so if she ever got tired, she'd have to rest with the weight of the boulder on her back.

Still, she walked towards it with the same empty expression.

Damien didn't take away her personality.

He didn't take away her rationality or her ability to process things. Her emotional age was the same as it was when she came here.

She just didn't have the context to think about the situation more than she had to. She couldn't weigh the benefits and disadvantages or second guess herself.

The crow-masked man, who was an illusion exerting Damien's will in this place, was confused by her behavior precisely because it wasn't something Damien did.

Was it because she'd allowed her instincts to take over?

Melania reached the boulder and slowly raised her hands to touch it.

The cold surface caused her to jolt. The rough texture, filled with imperfections, made her feel that everything she was experiencing was real.

And if it was real, then the offer that strange man-made was real as well.

Her palms pushed flat against the boulder. She took a position and bent her knees.

The boulder moved just slightly.

It was the very first movement it had ever made, but it wasn't anywhere near the last.

Melania was truly confused, but once she had all of the most important information, she disregarded everything else.

Even she couldn't say why, but there was a voice screaming in her head, pleading for her to become stronger and more talented.

It was a scream that told her that her entire life would be ruined if she was not able to attain her goal.

No matter how clueless she was, she knew to listen to a desire that came from such a primal place.

'Go.'

No words were spoken once the offer was made.

The subtle wind whooshed through the air, and Melania's breathing was the only thing that cut through it.

The man had already disappeared.

She was left to her own devices, given the chance to make her own choice without anyone else's influence.

Now that she had felt the weight of the boulder, she had to think it over for a second time. With a slight understanding of what was to come, it would've been completely understandable if she gave up.

But...

RUMBLE!

The boulder rolled slightly.

Even a small movement created such a noise because of its impressive weight.

Melania's muscles were flexing to the maximum as she exerted force onto the rock.

Her feet were dug into the dirt as she stabilized herself and pushed it forward.

She would be stuck here from now on.

Until she made it to the peak, she would not leave this place.

She would not give up.

Even if it meant she had to die to continue.

Chapter 1654 Potential [3]

It was hardest at the start. It would get easier as she got further into it.

That was an obvious lie.

At least on the solid ground, the boulder was able to slightly roll on its own. When Melania made it to the incline, everything got much harder.

She couldn't just mindlessly push the boulder anymore. She had to put thought into her every movement, methodically taking it higher and higher.

One step. Two steps. Three steps. Four steps.

Every single movement was intentional, so Melania was highly aware of when she made them.

She started sweating before she even made it to the incline. She refused to breathe heavily and tried to regulate it as much as possible, but she was still breathing loud enough for it to be heard over the wind.

She had only one goal, and now that she'd committed herself to achieving it, she was entirely focused on doing so.

Five steps. Six steps. Seven steps. Eight steps.

It was only just the beginning. Was it healthy to be this hyper-aware?

Whatever the case, it was her current state.

And in that state, she made it to the incline and started to climb.

She didn't make any extraneous movements or sounds in a bid to conserve as much energy as possible. Now that she was alone, though, she could struggle as she pleased without being judged for it.

All she had to do was push.

She wasn't allowed to think or be intuitive. She wasn't allowed to use energy. Her muscles, which were still largely undeveloped since she rarely used them, were now being pushed beyond their limits.

Honestly, it was already preposterous.

When Damien gave her this trial, he only wanted to see her dedication. Once she started pushing the boulder, she'd already passed.

The problem was that she wanted it more than he expected.

Melania never really showed a deep desire for power. What she wanted was the ability to protect herself and those around her, but it came from a place of survival.

That was what made her current demeanor curious.

Why was she willing to put everything else away to mindlessly to chase strength?

What motivated her?

The trial was never meant to actually provide her with anything.

In the end, she was to find that it was all an illusion and deal with the disappointment alone. If she succeeded, Damien was planning to give her back what she earned in the illusion, a chance.

However, if she truly managed to push that boulder to the peak with strength alone, she would end up unlocking potential that she didn't know existed.

And that...

If she was able to properly earn it, then Damien had no plans of taking it away from her.

Frankly, he'd already been impressed with her performance.

It was just a matter of how much she could do.

In the end, what should've taken only a few hours at most was turned into a task that would last for years.

How much time would pass in reality was a different story, but in Melania's mind, reality didn't matter anymore.

The motivation was there.

As was the desire for action.

In the first three hours of her ascent, she'd already made it past the base of the mountain and a ways up its side.

She wanted to rest, but she pushed on without showing a single bit of mercy to herself.

Only once six hours had passed was she forced to give up.

Well, she only gave up on a direct ascent. She was still absolutely planning to reach the peak at some point.

She put her shoulder against the boulder and dug her feet into the ground. The instant she removed her hands, she rapidly turned to rest it on her back as she bent her knees and took a small break.

From her current elevation, the endless desert below was already far away.

She could see deep into it, though nothing changed since the scenery was monotonous no matter how far away she looked.

"Huu...huu...huu..."

Her breathing was choppy. Her legs quivered. No, her entire body was trembling and threatening to give up.

She had stopped, so she was able to get at least the minimum amount of rest required, but that was it.

She could never forget about the thousands of pounds that were resting on her back.

The monotony didn't help. Whether it be in atmosphere, environment, or any other factors that could help her put her mind at ease, none of them changed. They remained dull, as if trying to provoke her into collapsing and letting everything go.

But Melania refused.

With the same single-minded determination she used to move for six hours without pause on a relatively steep incline, she turned back around and put her hands back on the boulder.

"Huu...huu...huu..."

It was hard to describe what was happening in her mind and body right now.

She was truly struggling. Her breath was more ragged than ever. Her body was hardly holding up, but she knew that she couldn't relax a single muscle.

It was hard. It was tiring. It made her want to lie down and die.

But...was it that those feelings were vague?

For some reason, she could barely feel them beyond the fog clouding her mind.

It started many hours ago. Melania started to redevelop complex thought as Damien released some of the restraints on her. Though her memories were still gone, she was allowed to keep everything else.

However, her complex thoughts didn't manifest into anything. At the same time, her mind became hazy and the task in front of her became her everything.

It was like Melania was watching herself push the boulder through a screen in her mind, controlling her body like it was a character in a game.

She could empathize with the feelings and sensations that her body was feeling, but she didn't feel like it was happening to her.

In the moment, this little fact seemed to be a boon. It helped her work without minding her limits.

Right, she was able to work while unaware of her limits. When the time came for her to hit them, when the time came when she should have rested, she was able to keep going.

That was her first mistake, and the cause of her first death.

As Melania worked ceaselessly for almost twelve hours, only taking a few short breaks in between, her body broke down.

She approached a steeper incline. More of the boulder's weight was pushed back onto her.

Her flimsy arms, weary from the constant exertion, couldn't keep up any longer.

They bent. The boulder crashed down, snapping them into pieces, and as it tumbled down the mountain...

What happened to Melania, who was directly underneath it, didn't need to be said.

A girl appeared at the bottom of the mountain.

She looked at it, and she looked at the bloodstained boulder that sat at its base.

'I'm...alive.'

She was given another chance.

With a mind suspiciously numb to the fact that she had just died, she put her hands back on the boulder and started pushing.

She had a second chance. That was all of the information she garnered from her position before she stopped thinking altogether.

Melania was never kidding about wanting to see things to the end.

Whether it took days, weeks, months, or even years, she would find a way to the top of the mountain.

She would obtain everything that had been promised to her.

And perhaps, in the process, she'd find out why this moment meant so much to her.

Melania had been sent on a journey of self-discovery against her will.

But, it would end up being a pivotal point in her life, a memory she looked back on with pride.

This was the real start of her story.

And it was already guaranteed to be a grand one.

Chapter 1655 Potential [4]

August, Melania, and Valerie were all undergoing their own trials.

Melania definitely faced something leagues above what the other two were facing, but they were all being challenged in ways that would help them grow.

For Valerie, it was character rather than potential.

Damien truly put her in a situation to test her loyalty. Not to August and Melania, but in general.

He needed to see if she would betray others for her own sake, since she was generally someone who prioritized herself over others.

And, he needed to see if she would be a friend worthy of August.

Regardless of the outcome of her test, he wouldn't interfere in their relationship. If she truly was a person unfit for their group, then August would eventually learn the hard way.

That was a life lesson for him. If Damien interfered, then it would become meaningless.

He more wanted to know for his own sake, since he was naturally concerned with who his son kept in his company.

If Valerie failed the test, then he could at least be prepared for that fateful day when her mistakes caught up to her.

If it happened far in the future and truly put August at risk, then he'd be ready to save his son.

That was the most important thing.

As for what Valerie's results were...

Well, her loyalty was a bit surprising.

Valerie really was selfish. She did things for her own amusement regardless of how it impacted others. This was an arrogance that most geniuses possessed, including Damien at their age.

She was used to seeing others as below her. Not because she discriminated against them, but because that was the truth of the matter.

Still, she cherished those she held dear.

The Revell Clan and the Wood Dragon Clan it controlled were filled with compassionate people.

Their element was already peaceful, which is what led Alcharist to leave Arulion instead of defending his position. On top of that, because their numbers were so small, they truly cared about each other.

Valerie was raised in an environment where everyone chose love over hate.

It was both the reason for her recklessness and her loyalty.

Valerie was hardly scolded, so she never faced the consequences of her actions severely. That was the only method for people to truly understand the weight of their choices, and until they faced it, they'd always remain ignorant.

For her, that moment had not come yet.

Still, she was willing to throw herself in the way of danger to protect her people. And, as she battled in the imaginary war that Damien had fabricated for her, she showed the clear ability to grow and adapt to her circumstances.

It was a brutal simulation.

The Wood Dragon Clan was discovered by the Holy Clans and declared an enemy of the kingdom. They were hunted down by every other dragon clan and were forced to defend themselves to survive.

Valerie mentally aged many years in the span of only a few hours. Damien didn't let her stay in the illusion for as long as she wanted like he did Melania, but she still lasted for a long time.

It was only a few weeks in the illusion, but the aura of war forced Valerie to turn into a completely different person, losing the childish innocence that she still had.

'That won't do.'

Damien didn't intend for that to happen.

He wasn't going to deprive the girl of her youth just because he wanted to test her. That wasn't fair to her or Alcharist who sent her to August in good faith.

When Valerie had proven herself, Damien blurred her memories. He replaced the more harrowing experiences she'd had with more peaceful yet challenging tests.

In the end, the outcome was the same, but without the tragedy of that war, Valerie was able to stay the same person as she was before she entered this place.

The question was...

Did Damien feel guilty?

To toy with the lives of others in this way, was it really okay?

He didn't know. It wasn't something he considered often.

As he grew in power, his view became more detached from reality.

Like the young geniuses, Damien naturally ended up seeing others as below him.

That was why he consciously reminded himself of his humanity.

He made sure he felt guilty when he needed to. He considered the perspectives of others so that he could understand the consequences of his actions and avoid them as much as he could.

He was still toying with the lives of others, but that was the nature of a supreme being.

The fact that he tried his best to make sure they weren't ruined by his interference was the most consideration he could give.

In most cases, that was enough.

He never felt too bad about his actions.

Valerie was included in that. He thought it was for the best, so he didn't feel bad about manipulating her memories.

Melania, however...

Melania was a different situation.

Time didn't pass the same for her as it did for Valerie.

When Valerie felt a week pass, Melania only felt a few hours.

While Valerie's trial lasted for three weeks, Melania...

...had been in the trial ground for 2 years already.

And for that, Damien felt incredibly guilty.

2 years.

In that time, she had died three hundred times.

She'd become numb to death. She'd become numb to emotion.

She had climbed this mountain over and over again, and she'd even reached the cusp of the peak before.

But she always failed.

She was always crushed by the boulder and left stuck at the bottom of the mountain.

Melania had practically forgotten why she was climbing in the first place. All she knew was that she needed the boulder to reach the peak as soon as possible.

She had been struggling on her own, suffering from loneliness and doubt without anyone to support her or anyone to acknowledge the hard work she put in.

But Damien had seen it.

The entire two years that she'd suffered, he'd witnessed it.

Countless times he'd thought about pulling her out. She'd more than earned every reward he could possibly give her, so for her own health, it was better for her to leave this mountain and forget about its existence.

However, Damien couldn't do it.

He couldn't deny the efforts of this girl who put everything on the line for power.

Unlike Valerie, whose motivation was artificially provided by Damien for the sake of the trial, Melania had done all of this alone.

She had never given up. No matter how many times she failed, she always got back up and tried again.

It was amazing.

It was an undeniable struggle, a struggle that forced one to acknowledge the one struggling and feel genuine respect, no matter what kind of differences separated them.

Damien knew how much those kinds of struggles contributed to his own growth.

He was able to become the person he was because he was desperate at every step, doing everything possible to grow.

He even died for it.

So if she was willing to die for it, then he couldn't deny her efforts.

He had to let her go until she either completed the trial or gave up.

And that was how months turned into a year, and a year turned into two.

Melania stood on the cusp of the mountain again. She had been here many times already.

It was hard at first. She couldn't climb even a third of the mountain without spending an entire month.

Nowadays, she could reach near the peak in just a week.

The problem was that, at this level, the slope was practically vertical.

Melania could still find ledges to use to support herself, but she was forced to carry the entire weight of the boulder on her shoulders.

Plus, as she got closer to the peak, it got heavier.

The boulder weighed at least ten thousand pounds already.

For a young dragon, this was a maddening load to carry.

But, Melania's body wasn't the same as it was when she started.

She was covered in lean muscles that could only be seen when she flexed. They carried far more power than their appearance suggested, and with their help, Melania was truly able to support the whole weight of the boulder while keeping it stable.

There were only a few steps left before she reached her end goal.

She had failed here before because she got too confident.

This time, the same mistake wouldn't be repeated.

She took a deep breath, her eyes focused on the hard rock in front of her.

Fifteen steps.

As long as she made them precisely and safely, she would finally reach the place that she'd been dreaming of for the past two years.

Chapter 1656 Potential [5]

"Huu..."

The ledges were relatively spread apart, and because her arms were occupied with the boulder, Melania could only step in the ones that could properly support her weight.

She already had the movements mapped for the first ten of these fifteen steps. She'd made it that far before.

For the last five, on the other hand, her path was still only theoretical.

Melania's body was hugging the wall as best as it could with the size of the boulder.

It was almost being used as a backpack, since Melania couldn't do this section of the mountain without being able to see what was above her.

Her arms were at her side with her wrists backwards.

She was gripping the boulder with all of her strength. Indents had been created where her fingers were, and somehow, despite the boulder's weight distribution, she was able to support all of it from the grip she had with her fingers.

It was an impractical level of strength, but that was the only thing that allowed Melania to make it this far, so she didn't question why it existed.

She unhitched her right foot moved it to the next ledge. Kicking into the wall, she created a small hole for her to wedge her toes into.

After putting weight on her right foot to check the ledge's stability, she unhitched her left and rapidly moved it to another ledge nearby, slightly higher than the first.

'One.'

She bounced a few times, keeping her body warm in the cold air that inhabited this high altitude.

Once again, she repeated the same movement.

'Two.'

Her left foot had to move first this time, but the path was still relatively vertical so she didn't have to make any crazy movements.

"Huu..."

'Three.'

"Huu..."

'Four.'

"Huu..."

'Five.'

One by one, she ascended through the footholds in the mountain that she'd long become familiar with.

The first step was always the hardest, but her muscle memory kicked in the instant she took it.

Ten steps. She took five minutes to take them, but she did end up in the position she desired.

There were five steps remaining.

She could see the edge of the mountainside. If she could just jump, she could grab it and hoist herself onto the peak.

Unfortunately, without hands, jumping was an impractical solution.

She'd already tried it thrice and failed, so she was assured of that much.

The first step was by far the most complicated.

She reached out with her left leg to find a ledge far away from her current path.

She had to move her foot against the wall to find the ledge, and once she did, she bounced her toes on it to once again check its stability.

In the same way that she'd done before, she embedded her foot into the wall and took a deep breath.

"Huu..."

Her flexibility was just as impressive as her strength.

She held the position for a moment, tightening her grip on the boulder. Her eyes were focused on a ledge near the one her left foot had occupied.

Melania put as much of her weight as possible on her left leg, and hopped, rapidly moving her right foot to where her eyes were looking.

The wind hit her from the right, which helped her move. Her hands sweated as she was forced to support the boulder on one leg for a moment, but...

Tap!

Her foot made a small sound as it landed on the ledge and dug into the cliff surface, rooting her in place.

Melania leaned back slightly as she lost her balance. She bent her knees, using every bit of strength in her core to regain control and bring herself back into position.

'No.'

She was swaying too much.

If she tried to stay here, she would fall back and turn into a puddle of blood on the side of the mountain somewhere.

The wind helped her move, but now that she was in position, it was just making her balance even worse.

She didn't have a choice. If she wanted to survive, then she needed to find another way to regain stability.

She was swaying left and right, slightly leaning back. If she made a mistake, she'd instantly fall. However, she had to take the risk.

The next move was a simple one. She wanted to use it to kill her momentum and regain control.

She needed to find a ledge that was at her chest with her foot.

It was a large reach that was made more difficult by the lack of room that she had, but it would force her to regain control, so she needed to do it properly.

Melania rapidly moved her right foot.

Her foot grabbed into a hole that already existed in the side of the mountain, forcing her to paste herself into the mountainside.

She immediately stopped moving back and forth.

As for the left and right movements...

As she reached the precipice of a swing to the right and started to move left, she removed her left foot and took it to the next ledge.

She gripped the boulder even harder and curled her toes as she tried to get as much grip with her feet as possible.

Her eyes were almost over the top of the cliff edge.

ledge.

She gripped the boulder even harder and curled her toes as she She wasn't completely stable, but she was confident that she could make the last few moves without falling.

Because from here on, she just had to go up.

One step.

"Huu..."

Her eyes saw the snowy flat clearing that was the mountain's peak.

"Huu..."

Two steps.

Her legs started to wobble from the rapid movements, but she stayed strong.

The end goal was more than just in sight. She could feel it, smell it, touch it, and taste it already.

Three steps.

She was over the edge with everything above her knees.

She unlatched her right foot and moved it to the flat mountain peak.

And, using all of her remaining strength, she pulled her left leg up to match it.

The instant both of her legs were on flat ground, Melania bent her body forward, balanced the boulder on her back, and adjusted her grip so that it was once again over her head.

Instead of taking three steps back because the boulder's weight was on her back, she now took three steps forward, losing her grip and letting the boulder slam into the snow.

BOOM!

It made a huge sound.

That was the last thing Melania heard.

She had done it.

She had finally made it to the peak.

She had achieved her goal.

And now, finally, she could rest.

There wasn't an ounce of energy left inside of her to celebrate.

Right then and there, on the cold snow of this mountain peak that somehow managed to exist in the middle of a large arid desert, she collapsed, losing consciousness.

740 days, 6 hours, 17 minutes, and thirty-two seconds.

The instant that amount of time passed since her arrival in this place, Melania passed a trial she was never supposed to attempt in the first place.

But to find out what she truly earned through her efforts...

Well, she had to wake up first, didn't she?

Chapter 1657 Potential [6]

By the time she opened her eyes again, the crow-masked man was on the mountain peak with her.

She looked at him from the ground. He stood there, unmoving, waiting for her to stand up.

She did. She looked at the boulder next to him and she looked back at him.

Her voice was dull as she spoke.

"I did it."

"You did," he responded with a nod.

"And for that, I applaud you."

Melania nodded. She didn't really care about any of that.

She had taken on the challenge not for affirmation, but for the rewards she had been promised.

Now that the crow-masked man was back, there was nothing in her mind but the desire to gain those things he promised.

The crow-masked man could sense her impatience.

"First, I will show you who you are."

Damien had preserved Melania's ego for the past two years to make sure that the weight of her actions didn't weigh on her too much.

She wasn't stable yet. Her mind was still in the state it maintained to help her climb the mountain.

Perhaps she wasn't ready to go back to her usual self yet. Or, maybe getting her memories back would be the perfect method to bring her mind back to peace.

Whatever the case was, she had earned her memories back, so Damien wasn't going to withhold them based on his own judgments.

"Khhh!"

Melania gritted her teeth to prevent a groan from leaking out of her mouth. She clutched her, feeling the same dull ache that she had when she first arrived in this place.

Everything that was taken from her was returned. The source of her desires, the experiences that made her unique, and all else contained within her memories flooded back into her system, melding with the memories of the past two years.

Melania's eyes had been cloudy ever since she lost her memories, but now, they had regained their clarity.

She looked down at her hands in shock.

"I...what have I been doing?"

She looked up at the crow-masked man, clamping her hands together to see if any of this was really real.

She remembered now. The reason for her arrival here was the creature she saw in the cavern earlier.

That happened in the real world, but this was not there.

"Was everything...a lie?"

The crow-masked man shook his head.

"It was not."

Melania was handling the fusion of memories far better than he expected. She didn't question their validity or anything of the sort. Rather, after comparing her past two years of memories with the ones that existed before it, she was more concerned with the supposed futility of her efforts.

However, nothing she did was futile.

"Do you remember why you started climbing this peak in the first place?" The crow-masked man asked.

"Because you promised me power if I did it."

"That is correct. I did promise you power, however, I did not promise it immediately."

Melania's eyes narrowed.

She wanted to rebuke the man and fight for what she earned, but he didn't let her speak.

"I will not give you power, for power must be earned. Instead, I will give you potential. Whether or not you can truly gain strength is up to you, but from now on..."

The crow-masked man reached forward and touched his finger to her forehead.

"...as long as you will it, you can become the most powerful."

VOOOM!

A foreign mana rushed through Melania's body and infested her blood.

It boiled as it responded to the foreign invader, causing searing pain throughout.

Melania gritted her teeth and took it, because through the pain, she could feel her blood changing.

It was becoming stronger, denser, and vaguely, it now carried the aura of something she didn't recognize.

Something familiar, yet far more powerful than she ever believed she could be.

"This is the blood lineage of Draga, the God of the Mountain. He is an ancestor to your earth dragon lineage, one who has been long forgotten. With his legacy, you can easily match the current Holy Clans if you so choose."

This wasn't a lineage Damien had access to.

Instead, it was one he had recreated through Qinglong's memories.

It was a perfect replica, one that even Draga's residual thoughts approved of.

It not only contained the bloodline memories his true descendants would have received, but other tricks and techniques from earth dragons of the past that Damien has been able to study through the lens of an Azure Dragon.

The bloodline was on par with what Valerie carried. It was more than enough for Melania to match the talents of those around her.

As the crow-masked man said, she had arrived at the same starting point as them. The rest was up to her.

"And..."

As Melania fell to her knees, adapting the last bit of the new bloodline in her body, the crow-masked man withdrew his hand and turned around.

"If you are still dissatisfied with what you have earned, then let me give you some advice. When you return to the outside world...well, just try punching something. I guarantee you'll enjoy it."

The crow-masked man's tone had changed entirely, becoming more playful.

Melania looked through her pain and saw his back.

It was clear that he was leaving.

"Wait!"

She yelled, reaching out as if to stop him.

There were too many questions in her mind for her to let him go easily.

But, had he chosen this moment on purpose?

Her body had locked up as it acclimated to the changes he'd made, so she couldn't do anything to stop him.

He did stop for a moment, though.

He looked back, seemingly with a smile on his masked face.

"We will meet again. If you can find me, then I will answer all of your questions. Until then, keep working to achieve your dreams. After doing something like this for two years, everything else will come easily, right?"

The rest was up to her to discover.

Nobody else could give it to her.

So, the crow-masked man disappeared, trusting such a stalwart genius to decide her own path.

The mountain started to break apart. The sky started to crack.

Melania's vision went black. She found herself standing again, but her knees still couldn't support her.

There was something on her body, keeping her in this position.

It was suffocating her.

CRACK!

She pushed her limbs outward and shattered the material that cocooned her.

GASP!

She took deep breaths as she fell back to her knees.

Crumbling pieces of dust and debris fell beside her. The damp smell of an underground space flooded her nose, and as her eyes found their sight again, she realized that she was back in the real world.

She stayed on the ground, still feeling the rolling waves in her bloodline that affirmed all of her experiences.

'It happened.'

It was an illusion, but everything that happened inside was real.

'Then...'

She didn't question how. Just as she didn't question the events that happened in the illusion, she decided to just go with the flow for her own health.

She staggered to her feet, ignoring the voices of August and Valerie who were calling out to her in concern.

'He said to punch something, right?'

She dragged herself to a nearby cavern wall and raised her fist.

She didn't have proper form, but it didn't matter.

All he said was to punch something, so that was all she was going to do.

Her fist slammed forward and made contact with the wall.

Perhaps that was the first time Melania realized just what she'd gained.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

An unbelievable sound.

And...

A wall that was now more of a tunnel.

With a fist alone, Melania had destroyed the entire cavern wall and created a ten-meter-deep hole that a person could easily walk through.

August and Valerie immediately went quiet.

Their jaws dropped to the floor.

"You...that..." Valerie stammered.

Melania grinned.

'It was worth it.'

Everything she had done was rewarded.

That was all she needed to regain her happiness.

Chapter 1658 Reward [1]

This was the talent of an earth dragon.

There were a few different paths that their ancestors had taken, but few were able to properly thrive.

After all, the earth dragon bloodline was the thinnest of them all.

Other dragons came into being through various magical means. Those who evolved did so mystically and became beings far beyond their original stations.

Earth dragons were simply evolved lizards.

They could fly, but they didn't have wings like their peers. They were massive, but they were shaped like lizards with draconic features rather than true dragons.

Their species had always been discriminated against. They rarely gained access to resources, and since they didn't have a powerful ancestral bloodline in their heritage at all, they weren't able to harness the same talent that the other dragons had.

Hell, even the common fire dragons and water dragons had some sort of lineage, even if it wasn't powerful. They were the only ones that started at such a low threshold.

Draga, the Mountain God, was a unique case.

He grew up in the mountains alone, unaware of how weak his bloodline was.

No, rather, he didn't even know what bloodline was since he didn't have any ancestral memories supporting him.

He was forced to find out how to survive. And, since he was unaware that being a dragon was something special, he formed a different perspective on their existence than anyone else.

Draga never prioritized magic. The creatures around him only had their inherent skills, so he focused on his own.

It took a while to find them. Since mana didn't respond well when expelled, he couldn't mimic the ranged attacks of the creatures he saw.

But, what about his physical strength?

As he continued to train, his strength grew exponentially. He was able to rule the mountain with it, and he was able to expand his domain beyond it.

The mana in Draga's body stopped resisting him.

Though it still couldn't be emitted properly, it sunk into his flesh and bones and made his body infinitely stronger.

By the end of his reign, he could easily pluck stars out of the sky. Even other Supreme Gods had to be wary of him.

Once he went out into the world and saw how it functioned, he created an empire for himself where earth dragons could feel at home.

There was just one problem.

He was infertile.

His body lost its reproductive capabilities when it started being hardened by mana. His techniques were important for earth dragons, but at the same time, they were detrimental towards their population.

It was a technique that couldn't be widespread. Without descendants, Draga passed his skills on to disciples who chose to enter the same path he did.

And as his life continued, Draga focused his efforts on finding a way to make all earth dragons prosper.

He wanted to create a blood lineage that could promote them to the same starting line as their peers.

Perhaps that was what alerted the other dragon clans.

They saw him as a barbarian. He was uncouth and came from a place outside of draconic society, so he was nothing more than an animal to the Holy Clan equivalents of the time.

Watching him gain influence was one thing. He didn't intrude in their territory, so they didn't bother with him.

But once he became a threat? Once he started trying to change the society they created?

Naturally, he had to be exterminated.

Draga and his apprentices were all slaughtered together to ensure that his legacy could never make its way into the world again.

Earth dragons were left without a leader and forced to return to the kingdom that would later become Arulion, and Draga's story became a fairy tale that wasn't even told in the current day.

Melania had been given his bloodline because it was the strongest earth dragon lineage to ever exist.

But, as soon as she finished digesting it, she was made aware of the consequences.

She had to make the conscious choice of whether she wanted to follow his path or not.

Luckily, until she figured out what she wanted to do, her natural strength talent as an earth dragon would support her.

The hole she made in the wall was an extreme shock to both August and Valerie.

"Melania...?" August said, frowning slightly.

He didn't understand what had happened, but he remained calm since all of this was simulated by his father.

Melania turned around with a curious look on her face.

"Yeah? What's up?"

She acted like nothing major happened. She still remembered every second of the past two years she'd spent on the mountain, but she immediately realized that no time at all had passed in the real world.

Adapting was something she'd become used to through her circumstances. Even if it was something on this level, she was able to play it off and keep her mind stable.

August was even more confused after hearing her casual tone.

She seemed to be fine, but how was she able to produce that kind of power?

From what he'd seen, Melania was more of a smart person than a strong one.

Clearly, he had underestimated her severely.

Seeing the two of them look at her strangely, unable to find a way to breach the subject, Melania smiled awkwardly.

"Well, I guess I got some benefits from that," she said, glancing over at the chunks of rock that used to be her cocoon.

August and Valerie could only nod and accept it.

Valerie was positively stunned.

She had been looking down on Melania. It didn't take much for her to admit that.

However, was she always this powerful, or did she have more talent than Valerie had ever expected?

It seemed she had to reconsider her previous views.

And, now that Melania had shown her such power, she had to start seeing the girl as competition, just as she saw August, Lucas, and Ophelia.

It was a bit easier for August, since he knew what his dad could do.

Melania saying she benefitted meant that Damien had done something and she had been rewarded. If that was the case, then her strength didn't need to be explained.

The more concerning part was that Damien never gave things to people easily.

For Melania to see such an immediate increase in her strength meant she'd done something worthy of such a reward.

If August knew that her current strength was only a byproduct of her trial...perhaps he'd never be able to lift his jaw off of the floor again.

Nevertheless, Melania didn't give them much time to think about it and realize that there were more than a few things wrong with her vague answer.

"What happened while I was trapped? Did you guys find any clues?"

"Ah..."

August nodded, accepting her redirection.

"There was a clue inside the Minotaur's horn. When the Furies died, it appeared and showed us a map that leads to the ocean again. This time, it's probably underwater instead of just on the pier," he said.

"But, I think I've found something else. If I try to read my dad's thought process, then there should be a shortcut somewhere. I've been looking around the cavern walls, but I haven't found it yet."

"As for me," Valerie chimed in, "I also just escaped a cocoon, so..."

Melania nodded. It was an easy situation to understand, especially since it hadn't changed much since her most recent memories in the real world.

"If it's not on the walls, then why don't we see what's beyond them?" She suggested.

"Pardon?"

"I mean, can't I just destroy them? It doesn't hurt to try, right?"

Melania's thoughts had definitely been influenced by her experiences. She still had her wisdom, of course, but she wasn't averse to using brutish methods anymore.

And, if August was being completely honest...

"That's probably for the best."

Melania seemed...different now. She seemed more confident in herself, and that made August more confident in her.

Their attempts to be intuitive hadn't reaped any results.

So, it wasn't bad to try another solution before they moved on, was it?

Chapter 1659 Reward [2]

August and Valerie gave Melania space to destroy the cavern as she pleased.

She looked at the hole she'd made before and assessed her strength before positioning herself somewhere near the middle of the cave.

It had to be remembered at a time like this that 3rd class practitioners were not weak.

When compared to Divinities who could easily destroy worlds, they seemed like nothing at all, but they were still a bane to common people.

After all, a peak 3rd class could destroy a city with their own power.

Merely, when they lived in a society, they couldn't really use these powers wantonly.

Just like everyone else, they had to suppress themselves to a level that kept them out of trouble. Or, if they couldn't, they had to find an empty field to use as a battleground.

Melania had a bit more room to exercise her power in this cavern because it was deep underground and empty of anyone else.

Her comrades had already moved up the staircase a bit so they wouldn't bear the brunt of the impact.

So, as she reeled her fist back, she couldn't help but smile to herself.

Feeling the muscles tense, feeling the power coursing through her body, she felt like she was high.

This was exactly what she wanted.

A fist of fulfilled dreams slammed through the air.

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

The air pressure wave it created expanded and slammed against the parallel wall.

It, of course, couldn't handle the impact. The rock collapsed and turned into a pile of stones on the ground. The gap she created was several meters deep. Instead of punching a hole in it, it was more apt to say that Melania was excavating the cavern.

She turned to her right and repeated the same motion.

Another area of the same size was opened, connecting to the previous one and widening the cavern even more.

Melania did it one more time, destroying everything aside from the staircase itself, leaving the trio in a much wider area than they saw before.

Nothing changed about the fact that it was all rock in the surroundings.

August and Valerie were still in awe of what they just witnessed, but they came back down into the cavern when Melania finished and started searching the newly expanded space.

It was the best way for them to keep their minds off of the incredulity of it all.

Still, August wasn't too preoccupied with his shock to not focus on what was actually happening.

'There was a difference.'

It was subtle, but there was a difference in the sound produced by the righthand wall.

As the pressure wave Melania creates spread through it, it struck something other than the same rock that they had been seeing until now.

August immediately rushed there and investigated the new righthand wall. He pushed his hand into it to feel its texture, and when he couldn't find a difference, he slashed, using a serrated knife of water energy to cut the wall into pieces.

Or, at least, that was his aim.

'I knew it.'

Despite looking the same as the other walls, this one was far more reinforced.

"Melania, do you mind destroying this one again?"

Regardless of how it happened, she was now physically the strongest one in the group.

Melania nodded, happy to help. She walked over and as August made his way past her, she punched out again.

BOOOOOOOM!

RUMBLE!

The wall shook.

The dirt on its outer layer shook and fell to the ground. Hidden behind it was a sheet of black metal that didn't look natural in the slightest.

"There was something like that?"

Melania walked up to it and knocked on its surface.

She hadn't punched it directly the first time, but maybe if she did...

BOOOOOOOM!

She had done it before her thought even finished. And the result...?

"Ow!"

She shook her wrist and bit her lip.

"That didn't work at all."

Her wrist which didn't get sore after pushing a boulder for two years was now aching after a single hit?

Clearly, this metal wasn't something ordinary in the slightest.

"Is this the clue you were looking for?" She asked, turning to August.

"Yeah. That's exactly it," he responded smilingly.

"If that's really a wall separating us from something, then it's a place that pretty much nobody can reach. That--"

"--is exactly the type of place where your dad would be, huh?"

August nodded as Valerie finished his sentence.

"The entrance probably won't be easy to find, but now that we know what we're looking for, it'll be easy."

If they went along with Damien's machinations, it would probably take them more than a few days to find him.

However, if they were able to properly make use of this information...

"...if we're lucky, we can even find him today."

August's words motivated all three of them.

Melania wanted to see the person who could give her hints about what had happened on the mountain.

August wanted to find his dad not only just to meet him, but to enlist his aid in unveiling the schemes surrounding the heir wars.

And Valerie...well, Valerie just wanted to meet the man who even her grandfather held in great respect.

If they could find him today, meet him, and then spend the next two weeks training as they had been throughout these trials, then they would be more than just prepared when the heir wars truly started.

"Good."

August grinned.

"Then, let's get started."

The three of them rushed back up the staircase. The instant they entered the library, the staircase disappeared and the library itself shrunk around them, leaving only a cafe that now had regularly named dishes.

They were now on a timer they'd given themselves, and before it finished counting down...

...they would surely find Damien Void!

The Shadow Lounge was a distinguished place. Unlike many other VIP areas in Arulion, it didn't allow any kind of debauchery within its premises.

It was a place for business, for relaxation, and for activities that could only be done with a level of class.

More importantly, it was a place that could still be considered kid-friendly, so Damien thought it would be for the best.

It was an exclusive place that only specific guests and people of high status could enter, but it actually wasn't that hard to find.

The only prerequisite was that one had to find out that it existed in the first place.

And, for people who were not of the status to be invited, if they were able to find it naturally, they would earn the right to use the lounge as they pleased as long as they were able to abide by its standards and rules.

August, Valerie, and Melania weren't necessarily high-class people in personality, but they were indeed budding adventurers who knew how to sniff out a scent once they caught it.

They searched the entire city throughout the night, using their abilities to find clues that would otherwise remain hidden from their eyes forever.

Anyone who had prominence in the city was investigated. Anyone who could possibly be a member of the lounge was followed until it was assured that they weren't worth investigation.

And by the time day arrived again, the trio had regrouped with more information than they could ever hope for.

The Shadow Lounge was in sight.

All they had to do now was reach it.

Chapter 1660 Reward [3]

The entrance wasn't actually anywhere near the location where the actual lounge was.

In reality, it was a door far away in a random tailor shop that nobody would expect, a place that didn't have nearly enough business to stay open yet had been open for hundreds of years.

Finding it was difficult only in that it took a great deal of time.

The trio noticed that a lot of the influential people they followed wore clothes tailored at that shop, but to actually realize that it was the location they were looking for took some more time.

They had to actually visit the tailor shop before they confirmed anything.

But, the second they made that visit they no longer had to ask any questions.

The tailor glanced at them only for a second before returning to the book in his hand.

As they were left with free reign over their actions, they looked over the clothing selection and tried to find out what exactly they needed to do to get to the Shadow Lounge.

They found their way into one of the changing stalls, and as they fiddled with the many decorations on the walls...

Voom!

The back wall gave way to a swirling blue and purple portal.

Looking at each other with excitement in their eyes, they stepped through it without fear.

The trio arrived in a reception area. It was extremely classy, with mahogany-like wood everywhere and sleek yet stand-out pieces of art and decor lining the walls.

A woman stood at a desk adjacent to the back wall of the reception area. The wall was open to both of her sides, leading further into the space.

Large round sofas could be seen in the near distance. Many were occupied, and there were even a few people at the six seats in front of the quaint bar from which they were being serviced.

It was an area like none of them had ever seen before, so when they got to the receptionist, they didn't actually know what to say.

Hell, they barely even knew where they were. They had found out about this place through the words of others, so at most, they understood its purpose.

Luckily for them, the receptionist spoke first with a cordial smile on her face.

"Is there an August Void among you?"

"Um...that would be me," August replied, raising his hand.

"I understand. I will show you to your table."

She didn't say anything else, immediately walking through the door on the left and beckoning August and the rest to follow her.

They did, and they quite stood out compared to the people around them.

After all, they'd been adventuring around the city for a day now, and that happened immediately after the elimination round. They hadn't quite had the time to clean up yet.

Still, nobody paid them any mind. Since they'd come here, they would follow the rules of this place or be ejected. That assurance was enough to keep them unbothered.

August, Melania, and Valerie were led through the circular couches and towards the private rooms at the back of the space.

By the time they arrived at the door of the room they were meant to enter, August could already feel his father's aura.

If Damien had released it earlier, then August would have immediately found him. The boy was especially keen in the regard of sensing Damien.

However, now that he'd successfully reached this place, the game had already ended in his defeat.

Damien released his disguise, and as the door swung open, he was already back to his original appearance.

"Dad!"

August immediately ran over to him.

Damien grinned and ruffled his hair.

"You've gotten trickier, haven't you? Congratulations on making it here on your own for the first time," he said.

Damien was truly impressed by his son. He expected August to eventually learn to read his thoughts. Though, he never thought it would come so soon.

He intentionally telegraphed his thoughts a lot more so that August could learn how to read them before actually facing challenges beyond his current level.

But, that ended up biting him in the ass, because his son was more of a genius than he gave him credit for.

"Dad, I know it's only been a week, but so much crazy stuff happened!"

August's demeanor changed entirely. He looked like a teenager, but he was now properly acting his age, like someone who'd only recently turned ten.

Valerie smiled helplessly, since she was aware of that little fact.

Melania, on the other hand...

Well, it was strange for her to be seeing this side of August after getting to know him. He seemed like a completely different person.

Nevertheless, August was too busy telling Damien about the elimination round and his adventures before it to care.

He knew that Damien was there to watch, and he wanted to ask his dad about his performance, but that was a conversation for them to have when they were alone.

Currently, August had company, didn't he?

"You brought your friends over, right? Are you going to introduce me?"

Damien segued the conversation since August forgot that they were ever-present.

"Ah, right!" He exclaimed as he remembered.

"Dad, this is Melania. I met her in Arragon when I went to the testing facility. And this is Valerie. Remember the green dragon senior who helped us when I was small? She's his granddaughter."

Well, as someone who, at this point, could know someone just by looking at their soul, Damien didn't need to be introduced to the two girls.

But, it was courteous for him to pretend, right? He couldn't embarrass his son at a time like this.

"Nice to meet you," Damien said, smiling at them.

"Haha, I'm just kidding."

In his defense, every parent had to embarrass their kid at least a few times. What was the fun if they didn't?

"I'm Damien Void. Thank you for being friends with my son. He really needed some."

"Dad!" August shouted in embarrassment.

"Haha, I'm just kidding."

In his defense, every parent had to embarrass their kid at least a few times. What was the fun if they didn't?

Valerie and Melania respectfully returned his greeting, but their minds were in other places.

The main thing was...

The two of them didn't look alike?

Damien clearly wasn't August's biological father. Putting aside those striking purple eyes that couldn't be replicated anywhere else, just his age made things strange.

When August said that he and his dad played games like the one they'd just participated in all the time, the girls were able to get a feel of how powerful Damien was.

His external age said a lot. For him to maintain such an appearance meant he'd become powerful at an extremely young age.

Was he a talent from the previous generation? Or was he someone completely unknown?

They didn't think about it much as it was happening, but they were now wondering if he was some sort of Void Dragon variant, since only they could control space to such a high degree.

The man known as Damien Void was a curious case to them, and while they wanted to know many things about both him and August, they withheld that desire.

It was a bit awkward. The girls didn't know why they were here, since there wasn't much more to converse about with Damien after their introductions, but August knew exactly why he was here.

"Dad, since I won, I get a reward, right?" He said.

"That's usually how this works, yeah. Did you have something in mind?" Damien responded.

"Yup!" August replied.

He pulled out the emblem that had been sitting in his spatial ring since he got it. Valerie and Melania looked on curiously to see what he was going to do with it.

"There's something hidden within here and I feel like it's a big scheme. Can you tell me what it is?"

The strange expressions on the girls' faces became more pronounced.

How was Damien supposed to know that?

August didn't say anything that could give him clues. He didn't even hand over the emblem for Damien to inspect.

But, against their expectations, Damien nodded his head casually.

"Sure. If that's what you want."

That scheme was above August's weight class, but it wasn't too far out of range. Damien didn't mind letting his son set it as a goal to strive towards.

After all, that issue was related to the crux of the problem that he would also need to deal with. Splitting the work was never a bad thing, especially if it had a positive impact on those involved.

Since his son had chosen information as a reward over all else, despite there being better options, Damien would give him more than he hoped for.

Besides, he was curious.

If given all of the necessary information to understand the ins and outs of a certain situation...

What would August be able to accomplish?