

Void 1661

Chapter 1661 Half-Disciple [1]

It was mostly as August expected.

The emblems were indeed involved in a scheme. It wasn't that hard to figure it out just by knowing how the noble dragons felt about commoners.

Every single emblem would be and could be bound with mana. The matter about dropping blood into it was only mentioned to the common geniuses who entered the heir wars through the elimination around.

As for what it was for?

It would provide the noble clans with all of the information on the emblem. The genius' blood lineage, power, talent, laws, techniques, and bodily constitution would all be transmitted to those who had access to it.

With that kind of information, the noble clan geniuses wouldn't struggle against any of them. It was already enough to remove the chance for a common genius to win the heir wars.

However, that wasn't all.

Those who dropped blood onto the emblem would be signing their lives away. Their blood would activate a contract that allowed the noble clans to control their emblems. It forced them to promise that they would exit the heir wars if they were ever asked by a noble.

In a situation where a common genius was able to get past the nobles and prevail, they would be forced to forfeit the heir wars if they didn't want to die.

It practically turned them into slaves.

Though the noble clans had to act normal and make it seem like there was no corruption in the competition, they could easily blackmail a genius or two to betray others and create space for noble geniuses to win in any situation.

There was only one real issue.

"The noble clans?"

August was curious about it.

"From what I've heard, the heir wars are controlled by the Dragon Emperor's people. How did the noble clans get so much influence in it?"

The crux of the situation had already been revealed. Damien was also willing to provide the names of those involved and far more specific details, but would be far too lengthy a conversation.

Damien shrugged.

"That's a little too much for you to know right now. Just remember that there's a whole lot of corruption in the entire process that you guys will have to overcome with your talents alone."

The crux of the situation had already been revealed. Damien was also willing to provide the names of those involved and far more specific details, but would be far too lengthy a conversation.

Instead, Damien had put it all on a jade slip for August to read when he wanted to.

He gave it to him as he spoke. August took it while nodding.

"Okay. I knew it would be like that. I was just hoping for something better," he said, somewhat dejected.

Damien smiled softly.

"Well, it's like that now, but you're working to fix it, aren't you? By the time you're done here, it'll be a completely different Arulion."

"That's right. When I'm the Dragon Emperor, it won't be like this."

It was the first time he'd said it in front of Valerie and Melania.

Neither of them was competing in the heir wars to actually win, so neither felt provoked by his words.

They were mostly bewildered.

August had said it with such confidence that, for a second, they even thought that he could do it without a problem.

There were plenty of struggles in his path to that place. Even if he was able to overcome them, he would still face people who would do everything to stop his rise.

Still, August as a Dragon Emperor...?

They had to wonder what that would look like.

"Ah, you didn't put your blood into it, did you?" Damien said, continuing his conversation with August as his son remained unaware of the thoughts of those he brought with him.

"Of course not! I didn't trust it, so I waited," August replied.

"Good."

Damien put his hand out, beckoning for August to give it to him.

"I'll trick it so you don't have to worry."

August nodded happily.

"Ah, can you do theirs too?"

He motioned towards Valerie and Melania while looking at Damien with pleading eyes.

"You don't have to look at me like that, brat. Of course I'll help your friends."

August's smile widened. He didn't say anything to the girls, but they'd been following the conversation, so they didn't need to be told anything.

They took their emblems out and gave them to Damien. He held all three and put his blood into them as the three young geniuses watched curiously.

Damien's blood changed, mimicking theirs as it entered the emblems.

None of them had put their blood into the emblems in the first place. Melania had followed August, while Valerie had just gotten lucky.

She had gone to find August while deciding to put blood into the emblem later. That decision ended up dragging her into the father-son hide-and-seek game that he was about to play, and she lost her chance to do it at all.

It was a real lucky moment, because without forged qualifications, Valerie would've been one of the first people targeted by the noble clans.

She might have even been killed or blackmailed to turn traitor.

Nevertheless, since her luck did indeed save her, it was as easy to forge her specifications as it was to do August's or Melania's.

August became a regular water dragon who was only special in that he had a little bit more talent than the rest.

Valerie was the same. Damien had to give her some peculiarities to make her strength understandable, but the information was still a lie that would throw off the enemy.

As for Melania...

Damien passed their emblems back to them casually.

"Just put your mana in and it'll start working," he said.

They did as they were told.

The emblems changed, becoming circular devices that were mostly just screens.

Their faces appeared on them before shrinking and turning into square avatars in the top right corners of the screens.

The rest was soon filled with information about like a leaderboard, a page that mapped their individual statistics, and pretty much everything else that the man who distributed the emblems told them they would have.

The only one confused was Melania.

They could see the information that Damien had inputted for them.

While August and Valerie turned into completely different people, Melania's profile was just...her?

It was everything about her from just a day ago, as if she'd actually put blood in the emblem before they arrived here.

The information was saddening to see for any genius. It was a mathematical measure of just how useless they were.

But...

For Melania, the problem was that she wasn't like that anymore.

She had gained talent and potential. With Mountain God Draga's blood lineage, she no longer had the same stats as what was displayed on the screen.

That was normal.

That was how it should've been.

In fact, that was the entire purpose of Damien manipulating their emblems.

The thing that confused Melania was...

How did he know?

How did he know what her stats were like before she'd changed, and how did he know that she'd changed at all?

Her intuition allowed her to deduce that Damien was involved with the crow-masked man somehow long ago.

All of the trials were created by him, so clearly, he knew what she'd gone through and who helped her get to this point.

However, Damien knew more than she expected. He knew more than someone who was just acquainted with her benefactor.

It really made her wonder.

'Was he the crow-masked man?'

If he was, then she owed a great debt to both father and son, but that wasn't her concern.

That man was her savior. In a sense, he was the teacher that allowed her to become powerful.

A teacher...that was something she desperately needed.

And the crow-masked man was the only person she was willing to kneel to.

If Damien really was the crow-masked man, then this couldn't be the end of their encounter.

She had to find a chance to ask him.

Chapter 1662 Half-Disciple [2]

Damien chose the Shadow Lounge as his hiding spot not just because of its secrecy, but also its policies.

This lounge specifically was the type of place that didn't ask any questions as long as one was paying proper attention to the rules.

As for those rules, they were simple.

Nobody in the lounge would try to enquire about other guests's identities or conversations without express permission from said guests.

If this rule was broken, one would be banished from the lounge. Worse consequences would follow, varying from small misfortunes to the destruction of an offender's entire fortune.

No fighting was allowed in the lounge.

Peace has to be maintained, along with a certain level of decorum. If one was a nuisance to others in the lounge, then one would be banished.

It was a simple set of rules, but one that absolutely catered to the guests.

And it also left room for certain things.

"As long as you arrive in the lobby, it doesn't matter how you arrive."

The main entrance was only for potential new members. Even the people who had used the tailor shop were arranged to test if August and his group were worthy of becoming members.

They had recommendations from Damien, so of course they were shown a bit more lenience than a normal person.

August didn't have the Sanctuary.

He needed a place where he could escape to when he had no other options. That way, Damien wouldn't have to become an absolute presence in his son's life.

August couldn't forever exist thinking that Damien would save him from anything that was too hard for him. That would never allow him to grow.

The last thing Damien had for the three was a gift.

First, rings that were imbued with his power. Using them, they'd always be able to return to this place, even if placed under spatial restrictions.

It was only meant to be used during emergencies, so Damien made sure to warn them about their overuse.

They were specifically designed so that they wouldn't be indestructible. Misuse would lead to their destruction.

Secondly, he took them to a place outside of Fort Halleya.

The four of them were teleported to an island in the middle of the ocean. It was sufficiently large with a wild ecosystem of its own, and it was inhabited by any sentient or extremely powerful creatures.

It was a perfect training ground.

August would be close to the sea, Valerie would be close to the forest, and Melania would be close to the earth.

Here, they could spend the next two weeks honing their skills before their first match started.

And, since they were sufficiently distanced from civilization, Damien temporarily made their rings indestructible for the sake of transportation to the mainland.

It was enough to make Valerie and Melania's wonder fade.

They were forced to get used to the strangely high absolute power of the unknown being who August called "dad" so endearingly.

Instead, as Damien left them to their own devices, they immediately made use of their new blessings.

Two weeks was not a lot of time, especially when they knew the significance that this match held.

Melania didn't have to fight for a month, but that just meant she had to use her time to practice even better than her peers so she could truly stand on their level.

Her strength alone wasn't enough against people who would attack with massive swathes of mana that disallowed her approach.

Draga could split mountains with a stomp. He could raise the earth and wreak havoc because his physical body had evolved beyond its means.

Right now, Melania really was just at the starting point. She didn't have time to focus on vague matters unrelated to her training.

She, August, and Valerie were on the same island, but they each had their ideal training locations away from each other.

They had the ability to converge when they needed to, but most of their training would still be done alone.

That was how Melania found time to sneak away to the mainland in search of Damien.

He hadn't gone far. He decided to stay in Fort Halleya in case August needed him. Two weeks later, he would go watch the first official match before departing to actively search for the Dragon Emperor again.

The Shadow Lounge was not just a location, but a club. They had multiple safe areas around the city that served different purposes.

Damien had booked a room in their hotel. He was planning to head there, but he'd stopped at the lounge for a moment to speak to the person who ran it.

Melania just so happened to catch him before he left.

Damien raised his brow as he saw her.

"You are...Melania, right?" He said, nodding to her.

"Yes, sir," she replied respectfully.

"I see. Good luck with your training. I'm sure you'll do well."

Damien was already leaving, so he was planning to just go on his way, but Melania stopped him before he could.

"Sir, please wait!" She said, somewhat desperately.

"Please tell me if you are the crow-masked man!"

She didn't waste any time or try to skirt around the subject.

Since Damien was probably more knowledgeable about her situation than even she was, she directly told him what she wanted to say.

Damien raised his brow curiously. Being straightforward was different from this. Melania was just saying what she thought and telling him to confirm.

"What would you do if I was?" He asked, curious about what she wanted.

The crow-masked man was an avatar created to show her the way. He was meant for nothing other than the distribution of rewards.

In earthen terms, he was a non-playable character. Damien never expected Melania to see him as anything important.

But, he was wrong. Melania saw the crow-masked man as the one who gave her a chance. Unlike Damien, she didn't see it as the result of her own efforts.

She already knew what she wanted from him.

Damien's lack of refusal was practically admittance in itself.

She got on her knees and kowtowed in front of him to show her sincerity.

"Please be my master!"

The one who gave her the technique was the one who would know more about it than anyone else.

With Draga's techniques, there wasn't much to actually be taught. The process was quite straightforward.

The problem was that the environments necessary to carry them out were not.

Places like the mountain she'd been placed in before; she needed access to them so she could truly push herself beyond her limit.

That caught Damien's interest.

"Oh? You have already decided to pursue Draga's path?" He asked.

"That is correct," Melania replied.

"I've accepted the consequences. All of them."

"I see..."

In front of a person like Melania, there was no point in wasting effort denying her allegations. She believed them wholeheartedly and wouldn't budge.

Damien didn't necessarily have the time to take in another disciple. It would've been a problem if she needed him to teach her.

But, if all she wanted was help finding places to train and challenge herself?

Damien could do that without a problem.

'This one has a lot of loyalty towards August.'

She was already planning to stay by his side repaying him for as long as possible. If that belief didn't waver, then Melania at her peak would be one of August's greatest aides.

'It's not bad to give her a little bit of help.'

She had the worst start of them all. Melania just wanted to stand at the same level as the rest of them. When she'd accomplished that, she was fine with doing the rest on her own.

The beginning of her development had to be done in the harshest way possible.

Melania needed another mountain.

She was somewhat like Damien in that regard, willing to sacrifice herself and struggle tooth and nail for power.

He admired that determination. And for it, he was willing to give her what she wanted.

"Stand up," he said, a smile on his face.

"Let's go visit a place."

Chapter 1663 Half-Disciple [3]

Damien and Melania disappeared from the lounge. Their conversation has gone unseen by others, but it was quite monumental for Melania herself.

They reappeared in a place that wasn't even in Arulion.

No, beyond that, it wasn't even in the Heavenly World.

This place was created by Damien after he decided to accept Melania's plea for help.

It was an island in the void, flat and barren. It was sufficiently sized and had more than enough room for thousands and thousands of people to live peacefully.

However, that was not its purpose.

"Think of anything," Damien said.

"The environment will reflect your thoughts if it's able."

Melania's eyes widened in surprise.

The fact that they were here was a silent affirmation of everything she'd said.

Damien was the crow-masked man, and he had decided to help her with her training.

She didn't ask any more questions. What if she ended up ruining her opportunity by saying too much?

She closed her eyes and thought about the mountain where she first gained power.

It appeared in her memories so vividly that she felt like she was there. The dry breeze of the desert, the rolling cracked rock that lasted for eternity. The mountain that stood as a bastion in that place. The boulder that had become her only friend for those two years.

In the world of her mind, she saw it all. She felt it, she lived it, and she breathed it.

And when she opened her eyes...

"Ah..."

There it was.

Everything she'd imagined had reflected itself in the environment.

Surrounded by the blackness of the void was the same desert she'd experienced before. The same mountain, the same boulder, the same winds.

"I won't be teaching you personally," Damien said as she marveled at the scenery.

"You must walk this path on your own to truly understand its importance. Whether it's me or anyone else, you cannot expect help."

Draga, like Qinglong, was an enemy of Arulion. She would only find people who denied her lineage or wanted to destroy it. Those who wanted to help existed, but none of them had the power or dedication to do so.

"I'll give you access to this place for as long as you can maintain it. It could be until the end of this month, or it could be for the rest of your life. That is up to you to decide."

As Melania listened to his words, she changed the environment again.

A snowy tundra covered in an everlasting blizzard replaced the desert mountain. That tundra was then replaced by a thriving jungle that even had its own ecosystem.

Life was being produced by her thoughts?

While Melania didn't believe it, she saw the signs and wanted to investigate as soon as possible.

She heard what Damien said.

"How do I prove that I'm worthy to keep it?"

She knew what a space like this meant. If she could keep a training ground like this for eternity, then she would be able to achieve great heights faster than anyone else.

Damien smiled when he saw the determination in her eyes.

"That's simple," he said.

"Never let down your talents and never lose your desire for growth. As long as I can see that you are using this place to its fullest potential, then I will allow you to keep it."

"Never let down my talents..."

She liked the sound of that.

Basically, as long as she worked hard, she would be rewarded.

As someone who always worked hard for less than half of the rewards her peers received, just this promise was enough to completely satisfy her.

She turned to Damien and bowed sincerely.

"I will never forget this favor, sir."

Damien shook his head.

"With this, you have become something of a half-disciple of mine. There is no need to repay favors to your master. Instead, I should be the one thanking you."

"You? Thanking me?"

Melania somewhat lost her courtesy in surprise.

Damien chuckled at her reaction.

"That's right. I can see the loyalty in your heart, so I must sincerely thank you for staying by my son. He is still growing, but he will eventually be a great man. Having someone like you by his side will be a great blessing for him."

"Ah...but don't tell him I said that."

Melania couldn't help but feel embarrassed by the statement, but it wasn't like Damien was wrong.

She did plan to stay by August for as long as possible. He saved her life more than he could ever imagine. She wasn't going to let him go until she'd properly saved his.

And, now that his father was her master...

Well, it was certain that Melania was going to be glued to August from now on.

But that was beside the point.

"Your ring will be able to bring you here at any time. Unlike the lounge teleportation, I will not put any restrictions on this function. However, remember that this place is only meant for training."

Melania nodded, understanding the responsibility she took upon her shoulders when she accepted his kindness.

She had a duty to become great. She had a duty to show him that his trust was not misplaced.

In the one month before she had to compete, she would train so that she could show everyone during the heir wars.

She could compete against the greats just like August, Valerie, and the others could.

She was not one of those nine geniuses who only made it into the heir wars by luck.

She, Melania Achen, was not a soft persimmon at all.

The whole world would know it soon.

That was how two weeks passed.

Melania had become Damien's half-disciple. As such, she was given privileges worthy of her station.

Her growth was definitely far faster than both August and Valerie, but that was also because she had a lower starting point.

Nevertheless, the three of them only had contact twice during the entire duration of those two weeks.

The first was at the end of the first week so they could spar with each other and track their progress.

The second was the day before the first round for the same reason.

Melania only used her physical strength, but even that grew as she continued to train. Her two friends were already surprised, but they hadn't even seen her true capabilities yet.

Still, they weren't people she could pick on.

With time at their disposal and more knowledge about where they needed to improve, both August and Valerie became unstoppable forces.

The three of them...

Two of them had come from Holy Clan equivalents, but they were all in this competition as commoners.

They were all discriminated against by those who thought that only nobles could be geniuses. They were all seen as fodder who would be eliminated in one go.

Melania's determination wasn't hers alone.

No, all three of them felt the same thing, and as they fought each other more and more, their competitive spirit rose.

Perhaps August was the only one among them who was actually vying for the position of Dragon Emperor...

...but none of them wanted to lose.

Their true introduction to the scene was now.

And none of them planned to disappoint.

Chapter 1664 Half-Disciple [4]

August spent his weeks in the ocean.

He'd actually never seen it before with his own eyes, but he knew how instrumental it was in Qinglong's rise.

He didn't truly realize his power until he found his way to the ocean and spent years studying within.

Now that August had free access to one, he was naturally going to explore.

Azure Dragons could be born with or without wings. It didn't really matter to them either way. After all, regardless of their wings, they thrived most in water.

Once August got into the sea, a territory unregulated by the kingdom of Arulion, he was able to use his dragon form freely and embrace his most prominent qualities.

It was wonderful.

There weren't any oceanic dragon clans near the island that Damien chose. August would need more than two weeks if he wanted to make contact with them.

However, the ecosystem of the ocean, the power of the waves, the unique qualities that it possessed that rivers and lakes couldn't mimic...

When he was exposed to these things, August had another chance to thrive.

Two weeks. By the end of it, August was mad that it was all the time he had.

He was given so many chances to become stronger, but with such a time crunch holding him back, he couldn't take any of them.

He had to focus on what was necessary.

The techniques that he'd found flaws in during the elimination round, the techniques he was inspired to create by the same event; August could only make minute changes before the heir wars began.

And, he was still stuck at the cusp of 4th class, unable to find his way to his Baptism.

August had no say in the matter.

He noted down everything he learned and everything he was saving for later.

Once the first round ended, he could come back and truly put his entire soul into his training.

But, of course, the heir wars were equally as important as his training. August didn't let himself get too down since he knew that the competition was just as much of an opportunity as what waited for him in the sea.

And, it wasn't like he made no progress.

August's bar was high so he didn't realize it, but the power he had now was completely different from what he entered the elimination round with.

He just needed some opponents to use it on for him to realize what he'd accomplished upon discovering the ocean.

Competitors had to be present in the arena early in the morning, though the event only began in the afternoon.

Since they'd have to teleport to the arena immediately upon waking up and getting ready, August and Valerie decided to hold a small celebration the night prior. Naturally, Melania had also come out of her private island, where she'd been spending most of her time, for the occasion.

She couldn't be in the arena directly to watch them, since she never bought a ticket, but she'd definitely be watching them on one of the many screens that would be broadcasting their struggle.

August had plenty of money. The three of them were Shadow Lounge members as well, so they had access to some of the best entertainment that the city had to offer.

In fact, that privilege extended beyond the walls of Fort Halleys, but the three of them wouldn't learn about that for a while.

They ate well, enjoyed everything the city had to offer, and when night came, they slept while bearing all of the anticipation in their bodies.

This was the moment.

A lot had happened, so it felt like another passing memory in their would-be-long journeys.

However, the heir wars were everything. This was the moment where they fought to dictate their own fates.

If she failed here, Valerie would have to return to her clan to practice in silence for who knows how long.

If he failed here, August would lose everything he strived for. A path that should have taken decades at most to tread would turn into one that spanned for hundreds or even thousands of years.

Anticipation and sleep didn't go well together, but both of them eventually managed to rest.

And when the rays of sunlight awakened them the next morning, they brought their emblems out with confidence.

After one final goodbye to Melania, the two of them walked through their exclusive portals and arrived at the arena grounds.

Only a few hours separated them from that moment.

They had to be spent wisely.

August and Valerie were separated the instant they arrived at the other end of their portals.

They were in their own exclusive rooms. They didn't get many amenities, but it was more than enough to entertain them for a small amount of time.

Along with some light snacks and drinks and appropriate furniture, there was a screen that showed them what was happening outside. The arena was already filling up with people, and many reporters were talking about the event.

They'd procured information about all of the participants involved in the round and were presenting the facts to their audiences. Never did they believe that the geniuses themselves were watching their broadcasts to gain information about their opponents.

Most of the nobles already knew each other. They were a tight-knit and relatively small society, after all. The prominent members of every clan had met each other at least once or twice.

In the heir wars overall, only twelve geniuses were from the Holy Clans. Aside from the fifteen commoners, everyone else was from a noble clan.

There was only one genius from a Holy Clan participating in the first event, but that was already enough to make August, who just found out, wary.

'Eris Noct, they said...?'

If she was from the clan of Dark Dragons, then August had neither inherent disadvantages nor inherent advantages against her. In a battle of pure talent and power, would be fare well?

'I'll just have to hope I don't run into her. It would be better if they told us what the event actually is, but I guess even the reporters couldn't figure that out.'

The geniuses were all present at this point. There had to be a reason. August didn't believe that it was anything good.

He had become quite paranoid after learning about just how much corruption-riddled the kingdom. He doubted everything and somewhat believed that he would only see the worst in people.

But, in this case, it was just an overreaction on his part.

This was the first event of the heir wars, so naturally, there would be a ceremony preceding it.

The geniuses here for the first round would represent all of their peers in this ceremony and thus needed to be present.

They had to learn about what they needed to do, rehearse, and then go on stage with the announcers to carry out the actual ceremony.

It was outside of August's assumptions entirely. He was still new to this world, so he had never seen a highly televised event like this before.

Though he had grown so much, he still did have a bit of naivety brought about by his age.

Nevertheless, with four hours of tiring press work ahead of him, August was about to learn about the side of an emperor that he had yet to see.

The side of an emperor that stayed at a desk for days on end handling paperwork and administrative duties.

And, as expected, his reaction really was a sight to see.

Chapter 1665 Labyrinth [1]

From the genius perspective, the ceremony was simple. They needed to rehearse it only because the organizers had to make sure that nobody caused trouble when it was actually taking place.

After around an hour of sitting in their individual suites and watching the events taking place on their screens, the geniuses were called out into a large hall and told what they needed to do.

This was their first time seeing each other since arriving in this place.

For the noble clan geniuses, it didn't mean much. If anything, they were just glad they had a chance to lay their eyes on a true genius from a Holy Clan.

Eris Noct was indeed present, but none of them had the chance to lick her boots or try to establish relationships,

The organizers made sure that the geniuses couldn't do anything besides learn what their roles were and practice their movements.

All they had to do was walk on stage and stand there as the ceremony took place. The rehearsal was mainly for the organizers themselves, but the geniuses had to be prepared to stand still for an hour without doing anything.

Frankly, the rehearsal was useful. Since they'd already heard everything that was going to be said, they could be ready for anything when the time came.

And it came soon enough.

With nothing more than a glimpse at each other's faces and the thoughts they'd formulated based on them, the geniuses were ushered to a side entrance of the arena to await their cue.

It really was streamlined in a way that kept them bewildered enough to not do anything they weren't told.

As they stood there and assessed each other, well, it was more apt to say as they stood there and eyed August, Valerie, and the two other commoners currently present, they looked out into the arena where the ceremony had already started.

At a time like this, it was best to go over how the heir wars actually worked.

It was not exactly an elimination-based system. Instead, it relied on points.

The top three geniuses in every round would be rewarded with ten, eight, and five points respectively. Those in the top ten would gain one point, while those who didn't place would get none.

At the end of every round, the geniuses who didn't have any points would be pitted against each other in a final standoff. Anyone who couldn't score points in that match would be eliminated.

This format would continue until there were only a few geniuses left. Those who found themselves in the topmost bracket would compete in single-elimination competitions that contained three challenges. Whichever genius won two would move on, while the other would have to leave the competition.

It was a relatively simple rule set, but that was exactly why the heir wars could take so long.

If geniuses were on the same level, then they'd compete and compete until one of them finally lost. That could take days, months, or even years.

Currently, in the arena, there were thirteen geniuses.

The sixty-five young talents in the heir wars had been separated into five groups for the first round.

August and Valerie were in the first group, while Melania had ended up in the second.

Perhaps she was the one that got lucky. Only the first group had to participate in tiring ceremonies, after all.

There was really only one good thing about the entire process.

The end of it.

Not just because it was all over, but because of what the announcer said.

"Now, you must all be wondering what the first challenge is!"

It was time to reveal how they'd actually be competing.

Every group had a different challenge to make sure nobody had an advantage.

For the first group...

VOOM!

Along with the announcer's words, a mana barrier rose to protect the crowd from the happenings on the arena floor.

Portals opened under the geniuses' feet, dropping them out of the arena.

Well, that was how it seemed, but they were actually still present. The announcer was actually the one who'd left.

The arena began to change. Structures rose from the dirt and created a huge maze spanning its entire length.

If it wasn't obvious enough from the shape of the maze, the announcer told the crowd exactly what they were looking at.

"Behold, the Eonian Labyrinth!"

Multiple screens flashed to life, displaying every genius in front of the crowd.

They weren't visible to those directly looking at the labyrinth due to the height of its walls, but the screens helped them identify who was where and what they were doing.

"The Eonian Labyrinth is filled with beasts of all kinds and powerful treasures! Today, your favorite geniuses will compete to see who can reach the center of the labyrinth and defeat its guardian beast first!"

The announcer made wide motions as he spoke, bringing attention to himself as the labyrinth's core functions activated one by one.

"It is a winding and changing landscape filled with unexpected twists at every turn! It is an arena with both dangers and treasures waiting for our young talents to discover! In this challenge, there is only one rule! The geniuses must attack the challenge on their own! If any signs of cheating are detected, they will immediately be disqualified from the heir wars!"

Nothing else.

"No killing" was a rule that didn't need to be defined because this was a public event. There was never an option to kill in the first place.

Aside from that, there would never be such a thing as rules in the heir wars.

This was a battle of emperor candidates. Every move the geniuses made would be viewed and judged by the public. Every decision and path they chose would reflect their qualifications as an emperor.

That was enough to limit their action to an acceptable level.

There was too much riding on the competition for them to risk it all for momentary glory.

Nevertheless, the concept was quite simple.

The geniuses had to navigate the maze and defeat anything that got in their way. They were allowed to fight each other. They were allowed to steal and plunder. They were allowed to do anything as long as it helped them get to the center of the labyrinth in the shortest amount of time possible.

Many of the nobles were already brainstorming on how to mess with their foes.

A lot of eyes had already focused on August and Valerie, since they were geniuses that people had to pay attention to after the elimination round.

And of those eyes, discounting the gazes of spectators, not a single pair was friendly.

A healthy mixture of battle and wits. A challenge similar to certain training regimens that Damien had made him practice during his formative years.

Unfortunately for those geniuses who couldn't stop thinking about him, August couldn't care less about them.

Rather, he was even more excited for the challenge itself than he was before.

'Labyrinths? This is basically my specialty!'

A healthy mixture of battle and wits. A challenge similar to certain training regimens that Damien had made him practice during his formative years.

The fact that his enemies were nobles left his mind. The implications of him defeating them did the same. He forgot about Eris Noct, and he even forgot about Valerie.

His mind absolutely focused on the labyrinth.

"Everyone, are you ready?!"

The announcer's voice.

Once again, like the elimination round, August only heard it when it was most important.

"This is the official first round of the heir wars, the first showing of our realm's greatest geniuses who are vying for the throne. They have prepared themselves on the grid, and I hope that all of you in the audience have done the same!"

The announcer grinned.

"Now, without further ado..."

He paused for effect as he swept his arm towards the arena floor, making his voice even louder with mana.

The thirteen geniuses who had but a minute to prepare themselves got into position.

They waited for those words to fall, for the horns to blare.

And only a few seconds later, the announcer granted their wishes.

"...let the games begin!"

He yelled it with all his heart.

Horns blared, filling the arena with sound.

And thirteen geniuses shot forward, vying for their place among the greats.

With this, the heir wars had officially begun.

All that was left was to see how it unfolded.

Chapter 1666 Labyrinth [2]

The labyrinth challenge began.

All thirteen geniuses shot forward through their individual hallways, making a rush for the center of the arena.

August didn't do much thinking before he started. A challenge like this didn't need more explanation than what the announcer said.

As he dashed through the halls, his eyes darted from side to side, taking note of everything around him.

'There's no point memorizing paths in a place like this.'

The announcer already told them that the labyrinth would be ever-changing. The paths he discovered would be ruined by the time he left the area, so it didn't matter if there was anything he missed.

What mattered more was patterns.

A giant moving puzzle like this couldn't operate autonomously while maintaining true randomness. Every wall and structure had been given a set of rules to follow which dictated their movement.

When combined together, these many different patterns created an image of randomness, but in reality, it was all methodically planned.

Finding out the nuances behind these patterns, if even just one or two, would be massively helpful as one got deeper into the labyrinth.

When nothing seemed to make sense, these patterns could be lifesavers.

'Left...right...another left...let's go straight now.'

There wasn't a method to August's movements. He couldn't do much in that regard, so he just moved instinctually until he hit a dead end.

And that was what he eventually did, as would everyone who moved through the maze without direction.

August faced a solid wall in a short corridor. He could go back and move in either direction, but first...

RUMBLE!

The walls shook slightly, causing a great commotion as the sound bounced off of them and echoed.

The ground was doing most of the rumbling.

Something was approaching, and every single one of its footsteps spread tremors that were registered in August's body.

'Well, I could run, but in a situation like this, it's better to fight.'

He was currently being watched by millions who were judging his qualifications. If he ran now, what kind of image would he create in their minds?

He stood his ground as that being turned the corner. It was large, one-eyed, and barbaric. It wore only a rag around its waist, leaving its grotesque upper body visible for all to see.

August had to look up at it. It was at least triple his size in both height and breadth.

But...

'It's not as strong as it looks.'

August's senses were hardly alerting him of the beast's danger. That meant that it would only be able to do something to him if he dropped his guard and gave it a large opening.

'Since I have the opportunity, I'll just put on a little show.'

Power was important.

Without power as a prerequisite, people wouldn't even stop to consider his character and other traits.

For a Dragon Emperor, a person who ruled over all dragons, strength was key.

Dragons were, at their core, a society that worshiped strength.

August planned to dominate, so he didn't give the giant any time to attack. Hell, he barely gave it time to register his presence.

He dashed forward, covering the few meters that separated them in a second.

He jumped, spun, and pushed his foot forward. His sole slammed into the giant's knee, and mana immediately burst forth.

BOOM!

August used ice often because its piercing power usually surpassed water, but after feeling the ocean currents, he changed his opinion.

Water could also become a force capable of piercing and destroying.

He just needed to move it fast enough and make it extreme enough to do what it needed to do.

A laser-like jet of water blasted through the giant's knee, sending an explosion of blood into the floor behind him.

ROOOOAAAAAR!

The giant immediately roared in pain. It saw August, but he was too fast for it to do anything before the first attack.

However, it was already swinging its giant club before its knee was injured.

It smashed downward with all of its power. It wanted August to be destroyed in a single hit.

But, again, he was just too fast.

A being of that size wouldn't be able to properly use its power against a smaller opponent until it gained sentience and strength.

At its level, the giant wasn't able to follow him in the slightest.

August was already gone by the time its club reached his previous position. And, as a result of its extremely low intelligence, its attack actually slammed into its own leg instead, making the wound August created far, far worse.

BOOM!

ROOOOAAAAAR!

It happened again in the same order. The attack hit the same spot as well, and the giant dropped down to one knee.

Its right leg was completely useless after those two strikes.

His left still worked, but he was forced to land on that knee, since landing on his right would only cause more pain.

Its range had been limited to only the space in front of it, and that made it the easiest possible target it could be.

August was already behind it.

He held a blade of water in his hand, a staple of his at this point.

However, unlike the blades he used in the past, this one was moving, swirling at a speed so fast that the water blade looked more like one made of pure white light.

He rushed forward.

The giant heard his steps, but it couldn't turn around.

ROOOOAAAAAR!

It used its voice to try to scare him and brought its club up to try and hit where it thought he would be.

It crashed down, but its speed and power were nowhere near enough to be effective.

Instead, it became a ledge that August could use to support his step.

He jumped onto the club and ran up its length, jumping once more as he neared the giant's head.

One strike.

That was all he needed.

His water blade slashed out. It made a line in the air as it cut through the wind and continued cleanly through the giant's neck without any resistance.

Skin, muscle, bones; none of it could stand the pure heat and vibration of the water blade August wielded.

The giant's head slid off of its body and thumped against the ground below.

Its arm continued to swing weakly as its body carried out the final few commands that the brain had given it before its connection was severed, but in the end, the body fell as well, crushing the head beneath its weight.

August landed next to it, his blade sheathed.

He looked at the giant's body for a second before turning to the halls around him.

'Now, which way do I go?'

He looked left and right curiously, but before he could decide, he heard a strong rumbling behind him.

It was far more significant than the giant's entrance. It seemed to come more from the maze itself than the beings within it.

August turned around with a raised brow, just in time for him to see the dead end behind him change.

The wall that cut off the corridor was moving horizontally.

It was relatively fast, but gave August more than enough time to register what was happening.

There was another wall moving along with it that would soon close the dead end again, but between them, there was a small gap, just enough for a small person to fit through.

And on the other side, August saw the corridor continue, branching off into the rest of the labyrinth.

'That's the first.'

A "pattern."

If they were moving in a line like that, then there were several walls in a circular pattern that spanned the entire labyrinth that moved along with them.

If the pattern was continued in other rings...

August shook his head.

He had remembered the pattern. That was all he needed to do.

And since he'd found such a path, he didn't need to ask himself which way he was going anymore.

He rushed towards the dead end and contorted his body, just barely squeezing through the gap.

It closed behind him in the next second, and he was left in a position similar to his start, with a wall behind him and a corridor in front.

'Nice.'

August smiled.

He continued forward without an ounce of hesitation.

If he continued at a pace like this, he'd finish before anyone else had a chance.

That was the goal he was aiming for.

Chapter 1667 Labyrinth [3]

August's journey was definitely being followed, but compared to others, he wasn't as focused on.

People wanted to see the nobles, and more than them, Eris Noct.

These were dragons just like them, but people they could never meet in their entire lives.

The noble clans were shrouded in an air of mystery. Despite sometimes interacting with the common population, unlike the Holy Clans, many still didn't understand what exactly they did.

Why did they have a status higher than them?

Why were they meant to be revered?

To see for themselves, most of the audience focused on those geniuses with more status.

August, Valerie, and the other common geniuses were a bit forgotten, but it wouldn't be for long.

The maze was large, but the thirteen geniuses had been positioned in such a way that they would inevitably run into each other.

As August rushed through the maze faster and faster. He took down many beasts that inhibited his path and memorized patterns in the walls, making himself more knowledgeable about the maze's structure.

He was really just focusing on the environment itself. The beasts were merely obstructions that needed to be removed.

August thought himself relatively separated from everyone else. From what he could assume based on the information at hand, the maze was huge enough for them to never meet each other even if they intentionally tried to cross paths.

But, in the end, he also found himself crossing paths with another.

It was a boy roughly the same physical age as him. He strongly radiated the aura of a 4th class, but not one who had been at that level for a very long time.

They met in a long corridor with no exits to either side. They could either turn their backs on each other or fight.

And of those choices, only one was obviously correct.

August took a step back. His opponent took a step forward.

'Terion Blanche.'

A member of the Blanche Clan, a subsidiary of the Ether Clan. Though they also used space, it was to a far lesser degree.

The subsidiaries of the Holy Clans usually focused on the individual concepts within the main element of the clan they followed, but it was different for space dragons, since it was a much more esoteric concept.

Unfortunately, August didn't know the exact details, but he wasn't too worried.

It was good that he was able to learn about his opponents before the round began. Through the explanations those reporters gave, he was able to get a feel for his enemy's power.

This one was a bit tricky since he could teleport, but when it came to space users...

Whether they were human, dragon, or god, they couldn't match up to Damien.

The man who raised him showed him what space could truly do.

Compared to him, what were any of these geniuses worth?

Terion knew who August was. He knew that August used water, and he knew that he was nothing more than a commoner with no backing.

He, Valerie, Lucas, and Ophelia were all investigated by many of the noble clans once they arose. Lucas and Ophelia could be tracked, but August and Valerie didn't have any previous records in the world.

That meant that they were from such backwater places that they hadn't been registered in any way.

Terion wasn't one of those who saw the common geniuses as fodder to be destroyed. He didn't see them as competition, sure, but he didn't look down on August specifically.

It was more that he was confident in his power, especially against someone who had nowhere near his level of guidance or resources.

Terion teleported.

His body flashed away and appeared right in front of August. He meant to end it all in a single attack. With his element of surprise, most enemies couldn't do much against him before they were struck at least once or twice.

And with enemies on August's level, once or twice was enough.

It was enough, right?

Perhaps it would have been, but August was a unique case.

He knew exactly how spatial practitioners functioned.

Especially how they telegraphed their attacks.

The ripples in space were clear to see for anyone who knew how to recognize them.

August saw Terion coming from a mile away, and he was already attacking by the time the other genius left the spatial layers.

BOOM!

A solid punch landed square in the center of his face, throwing him back.

August followed, raising his leg in the air and dropping it down with immense force.

"Tch!"

Terion clicked his tongue and wiped the blood leaking from his nose.

Flash!

He vanished again before August's strike could touch him.

The air behind August rippled. Before he could turn around, Terion appeared in the air and spun, kicking towards August's head.

Bang!

August stumbled forward as he coped with the blunt impact.

A wall of water shielded his back to make sure another attack wouldn't make contact while he was stunned.

Terion tried to attack it only once before giving up.

The water curled around his fist and tried to consume him. It gave off a dangerous feeling, which provoked him to find other angles of attack instead of pushing on.

'He's better than expected.'

His life was more or less public. Everyone knew what Terion could do.

He attacked first not because he was reckless, but because it was pointless for him to try to hide his power.

August, on the other hand, was still an unknown variable.

He was definitely weaker than the rest. It wasn't just because of his status.

In the current arena, August was one of the only 3rd class individuals.

The heir wars were open to anyone under the age of one hundred. That meant that a ten-year-old like August was competing on the same field as people nearing a century in age who'd been training for their entire lives.

Those people were well on their way through 4th class.

Nevertheless, Terion wasn't one of them, and what he saw from August was definitely not a strength that could be ignored.

The two of them made distance from each other, eyeing the space between them warily.

Terion had learned that August could read him. He was also a stronger person than originally expected.

As for August...

'Does he only teleport?'

It didn't seem like Terion knew how to be diverse with his strength.

Perhaps it was the consequence of being a subsidiary space dragon clan, since space was an element that didn't quite work unless it was in its most complete form.

Terion had probably found ways to cope with his weaknesses. If he hadn't, then he would've never been a part of this competition in the first place.

Unfortunately for him, August didn't care about any of that.

If he was just going to teleport and pepper him with physical attacks, then August wasn't worried in the slightest.

'I'll end this quickly.'

The most important thing to remember was that the labyrinth challenge, at its core, was a race.

Battles could be stages for geniuses to shine, but they were also setbacks that prevented them from reaching the finish line in the fastest amount of time possible.

August wanted to win this competition. For that purpose, he needed to score as many points as possible.

So, while it was probably going to hurt his opponent's ego, August was going to finish this battle swiftly and efficiently.

He needed less than ten moves to do it.

Chapter 1668 Labyrinth [4]

The first step was simple. August created a "domain."

Domains were a power that not many actually used, since controlling the space could be done without them once people got to a certain level of power.

For 3rd class, however, it was very helpful. Their senses were heightened, their maneuverability was heightened, and most importantly, their enemies would be trapped in a limited range.

A third class practitioner didn't have nearly the range of those above them. More specifically when pertaining to this battle, a spatial practitioner was in their element when they had space.

August made sure that Terion could only move within the space he provided. That meant that even if his movements weren't telegraphed anymore, August could read where he was going.

The creation of the domain was the start of their true battle.

Terion slammed his fist into the barrier, causing huge ripples in the water. Its stability was shaken, but that was all. He wouldn't be able to break it without giving August several opportunities to take him down.

Since that was the case, then a direct battle was the only remaining option. August was correct about one thing. Terion could only use the spatial power of transportation. He could move himself through the spatial layers flawlessly, but he could not do the things that Damien or the Ether Clan could.

Just like many others, he had to find a way to succeed with just the power of his clan.

He was lucky that he had the talent and financial backing to support himself. With his clan's technique and his ancestral memories guiding the way, he was able to become someone worthy of the heir wars.

Bang!

His fist shot forward despite the fact that he was several meters away from August. August reacted curiously at first, but he rapidly moved to the side when a sudden sense of danger appeared to his side.

Space rippled, and a fist shot out, attacking August's previous position.

The wind pressure slammed against August's domain, causing it to ripple fiercely as if to show just how powerful the strike was.

Mana was already an amazing power with destructive capabilities. When it was combined with the ability to mobilize it anywhere, it could become more deadly than any element.

August understood more about Terion's power and made his second move.

He stepped forward, turning the entire ground into a muddy swamp.

He stepped forward again before abruptly jumping, narrowly avoiding another punch.

Terion appeared behind him while he was still in the air. August had the time to turn around, but not nearly the space to dodge.

Bang!

He raised his arms and blocked as best as he could, tanking the impact as he shot back and hit the water walls he'd created.

Still, he didn't wince.

'That was the third.'

Terion had yet to recognize it, but August had used that moment of contact to his advantage. There were already trickles of water coursing over his body, ready to activate whenever August gave them the signal.

This battle was still in its infancy in Terion's mind. It wasn't going to end any time soon, even though he knew he was more powerful than his opponent.

But, to August...

Terion teleported again. This time, he didn't use enough force to throw August away.

His fists shot out one after another, barraging his enemy with attacks.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

August dodged where he could, but they were too close for him to stay on the defensive.

He responded, blocking and fluidly diverting every attack like water.

His eyes stayed focused on the target. Terion's every move was registered in his vision, and when August was confident enough in reading his patterns...

'Four.'

The fourth move was the start of a chain that would lead to the enemy's untimely end.

August stomped on the ground and disturbed the muddy floor. Terion's feet immediately sunk in, trapping him in the ground and throwing him off balance.

August threw his fist forward, slamming it into Terion's face.

Bang!

He was still thrown backwards, but with his feet stuck, only his upper body moved.

Terion's balance was thrown even further off. He needed a second to bring himself back to normal, but August wouldn't provide him with that time.

August switched positions. His palm struck down onto Terion's chest, crushing him into the ground.

His feet were naturally freed by this move, but not in a good way. The rapid distribution of force broke his ankles, making it impossible for him to stand back up in a short period of time. The seventh move was the activation of the third.

"ARGH!"

Terion groaned in pain as a sudden sharpness pierced his body in multiple places.

The water August had left before was a mine. It could've been used to restrain him if other methods didn't work, but it looked like Terion's teleportation still needed work.

It couldn't be activated when he couldn't focus, which left him stuck in his current predicament.

If August was aiming for the kill, then this would've been the end of it. That water would have infiltrated Terion's bloodstream and destroyed him.

However, August was aiming for a knockout, which was marginally more difficult.

The water turned into knives that made sure that he would stay in a state of pain so he couldn't teleport.

What came next was simple, barbaric, yet effective.

Bang!

A punch straight to the face.

Bang!

Another one.

Terion's brain struck his skull over and over again. He was already concussed, but he was still barely conscious.

His head swiveled from side to side as he struggled to hold it up. He looked at August with blurry eyes, barely registering the situation.

'This...'

He blinked slowly as he saw August raising his fist again.

'...is totally unfair.'

Bang!

His vision went black. The next time he saw light, he'd already be outside of the arena.

Terion wasn't wrong. It was completely unfair. That wasn't a fight that August was supposed to win so fast, but his mind made everything different. Terion wasn't given the chance to display his strengths. Most of the time, the wariness people developed after seeing him dominate clouded their minds and threw them off of his weaknesses.

August didn't know anything or want to see anything. Without anything inhibiting him and with the prior knowledge of spatial users, August only saw the flaws.

He exploited them well to end a genius above his level as if he were just an ordinary mortal.

And he was already on his way to conquer the rest of the labyrinth.

"Did you see that, everybody?!"

The announcer's voice boomed through the arena. The geniuses couldn't hear him, but the crowd did.

Many of them had indeed seen what he saw.

Terion was a genius many people had their eyes on. The Ether Clan was one of the most mysterious Holy Clans, so people wanted to get a glimpse of them through the clans that followed them.

Unlike August, the crowd had seen Terion's journey to reach that point of the maze.

They were already in awe of his power.

The way he could move unpredictably and exert so much power made every beast and genius before August into fodder that could only serve as stepping stones for him.

However, that great genius whom they had all started to revere...

He was defeated so easily by a commoner?!

All of the eyes that had been watching Terion moved to August, along with many others who were completely unaware of his presence until now.

He had a real audience following his moves.

And with his current performance as a precedent, not a single one of them had to worry that he wouldn't entertain them.

Chapter 1669 Labyrinth [5]

As August learned only a few minutes after his fight with Terion, traps were also a very important element of the labyrinth.

he had been fortunate enough to avoid most of them, but others weren't as lucky.

Most of the geniuses had been struggling more against the labyrinth itself than they did with beasts or other competitors.

They all seemed simple, the most primitive traps that could possibly be placed in a structure like this.

Walls that closed shut with people in between them, floors that gave way to spike pits or pits filled with vicious beasts, minefields that would reveal harrowing consequences to those who didn't tread carefully; looking at these traps, one might be confused as to how they could actually harm these draconic geniuses.

Well, they'd been prepared for that exact purpose, so it wasn't much of a question.

The walls weighed hundreds of thousands of pounds. Mere geniuses weren't enough to move them. Leaving the maze was something disallowed if for longer than a few seconds, so that also wasn't an option.

It wasn't stated in the rules only because it was a very clear violation that didn't need to be stated.

That trap was unavoidable. There was always a way to escape, since it was a challenge and not a real death trap, but if the challenger didn't find it quickly enough, their fate would be sealed.

The other traps were similarly scaled so that they'd do their jobs.

The spike pits had gravity magic imbued that would forcefully slam geniuses into the serrated tips of those spears. The minefields, the pitfalls, the hidden machinery, and everything else were perfectly enabled to kill these geniuses if they so desired.

But, again, the goal was not to kill.

Anyone close to death would be extracted before it could actually happen, so the audience could watch the festivities without worrying about real consequences.

August himself ran into a runaway wall. He got trapped in a dead end while he was waiting for the wall to move so he could slip through.

The walls had other plans for him. As if the labyrinth got tired of him exploiting its functions, it shifted and tried to crush him into a paste.

Perhaps it would have worked on another genius, but August knew how to exploit rules.

He climbed the walls and jumped out of the maze.

He wasn't allowed to spend more than five seconds above the walls. This was to prevent people from just walking across them and reaching the center without any effort.

However, it was never stated that they needed to land in the same position as they started, as long as they didn't touch any of the walls.

August vaulted over the moving wall that he had been originally waiting for because he was confident that there would be a corridor on the other side.

In most cases, they would be impossible, but this one was special.

No, rather, this specific trap was designed so that it could be exploited in such a way.

August became mindful of traps from that moment forth. He was able to detect and avoid them relatively easily after he got used to it, but he did get to experience every kind at least once.

It wasn't all bad, though.

The traps actually turned out to be quite convenient when others didn't know that they existed.

He was able to trick three or four beasts into killing themselves, and though he didn't meet any geniuses to test it on, he surely wanted to.

The universe was indeed planning to answer his wishes. August would have no small number of encounters in this labyrinth.

However, as he moved towards the next one, the crowd focused on those in more exciting predicaments.

For instance, Eris Noct.

Her screen was perhaps the most boring of them all. There was no excitement whatsoever, no challenge that could ever halt her progress.

Still, it was precisely this lack of challenge that made it impossible for the crowd to take their eyes away.

Eris Noct. She was twenty-seven years old this year, but she had already progressed a long way through 4th class.

She hadn't reached the nine revolutions yet, but she would definitely be well within them by the time she was fifty.

This labyrinth scaled to match those who fought in it.

August's enemies matched his strength, which was why he could take them down so fast.

And Eris was able to do the exact same thing, just at a much higher level.

Seeing creatures that were stronger than anyone they'd ever met before, creatures that could destroy their livelihoods with a flick of a finger, be destroyed as if they were made of paper was more than they could ever hope for.

It was mesmerizing.

There were two geniuses who were unfortunate enough to run into her.

What happened to them didn't need to be exclaimed.

Along with Terion Blanche, the two of them had become guaranteed failures, people who would not score a single point in this round of the challenge.

Everyone else had been guaranteed a point now that three had been eliminated. Even if they were defeated, they'd still be able to gain at least one point.

Still, they were fighting for the top three places.

August had gotten used to being around people who were participating in the heir wars for the experience.

On this stage, however, everyone was aiming for the throne.

Whether they deserved it or not, whether it was their personal desire or something pushed by their families, all of them wanted to see themselves above all dragons.

They wouldn't concede, even if the opponent was a Holy Clan genius.

Many others had been defeated by their peers, but none of them had been knocked unconscious.

They stood up as soon as possible, ignored or healed their injuries, and continued their rush to the center of the maze.

It was a simple thing.

Left, right, or straight. Every choice individually was easy to make and mostly brainless.

However, when put together, they became an unsolvable riddle.

Everyone was aiming for the center. That part was true.

But, really, only five of them were headed in the right direction.

Another three were moving sideways, staying practically in the same place, and the last two were moving towards the edges of the labyrinth.

They were already counted out of the competition.

Valerie was one of those who was moving in the right direction.

She'd had a calmer experience than most others thus far. Beasts and traps assaulted her the same as they did others, but she didn't run into anything that could seriously stop her.

At the moment, she was actually further into the maze than August was.

But, she was about to face a challenge that might halt her progress entirely.

She was coming up on a genius who was regarded on the level just below Eris Noct. That person was the second most dangerous genius in the labyrinth right now.

Valerie was strong. Unlike August, she had reached 4th class already.

But...Valerie came from a clan that had been cast out of Arulion.

When faced with a genius from a real noble clan, how would she react?

Chapter 1670 Labyrinth [6]

Valerie knew about the Revell Clan's history. She was one of its successor candidates, so she had to.

It was something she'd thought a lot about. It was something she hid from other people under her careless exterior.

But, as Damien had found when he tested her, Valerie's thoughts were a lot deeper than she made them seem.

And, she was far more loyal to her family than anyone knew.

Valerie placed her clan above all else. Deep down within her heart, she held the desire to bring her people back into Arulion.

To rule wasn't something wood dragons could do. It was an impossible wish precisely because they didn't want the throne.

However, when she met August, everything changed.

He was a being with an emperor's destiny, and he was supported by a supreme being that even Holy Dragons had to fear.

If he could make it to the top, then her wish would be granted easily.

If she helped him reach that point, then her clan would be raised beyond their previous standing, and she could even grant her grandfather's wish of fixing the dying kingdom.

August was a good person. She felt like his influence would be a great help to her, and she genuinely did see him as a friend.

With their newly formed relationship, her reignited desires found a way to shine.

Valerie wasn't just participating in these things because she was curious anymore.

She had a genuine urge to win, to beat these geniuses at their own game.

After all, they were descended from the same people who drove her clan out.

When they found out her affiliation, wouldn't they all cough blood and die in shame?

Well, that was what she hoped, and her progress through the maze emboldened her.

She rushed at an even faster pace, and that was exactly what led to the fateful meeting of two forces.

The person on the other side was also a woman. She had features similar to Ophelia, likely because they shared the same element.

The woman's name was Remelia Haze.

The Haze Clan wasn't one of the most prominent under the Ignis Clan's banner, but Remelia had been raising their status for the past few years with her existence alone.

She was just barely below the Holy Clan geniuses. If she had access to the same amount of resources, she'd be on their level or beyond them.

The Ignis Clan had been trying to scout her for many years now, but she refused to leave her family, even at her parents' and siblings' insistence.

The Ignis Clan didn't find fault in her. Instead, they tried to make the terms of their agreement even more appealing to change her mind.

The Haze Clan had become one on the same level as the Scorch Clan, a direct subordinate with a decent amount of contact with the main clan.

She was just on the edge of joining them, but for now, she was still representing the Haze Clan.

'It's just my luck to run into her.'

Valerie's eyes narrowed.

Her opponent had already turned to face her. It was obvious that Remelia wasn't just going to ignore her and continue on her way.

'Wood against fire...?'

She was at an inherent disadvantage already.

'But, this kind of battle is exactly what I've been training for.'

Though Valerie didn't keep her memories of the trial Damien put her through, he allowed her to keep her inspirations.

They would slowly trickle into her mind as they were needed, and the realization that she needed to eliminate all of her most obvious weaknesses was the first to do so.

Fire was a clear nemesis of hers, and it was also one of the most common species of dragon.

Did she want to always be at their mercy even when she knew she was stronger than them?

Absolutely not.

Remelia was a threat, a challenge that she might not have been able to handle.

But, she was also a perfect tool to see if the training Valerie had done over the past two weeks was worth anything.

She stepped forward, unfaltering in the ambient heat created by her opponent's mere presence.

She raised her hand first.

No words were exchanged, but the spirit of battle was already high enough for them to understand each other's intent.

BOOM!

The best way to deal with a fire user was to corner them before they could take control of the environment.

Roots burst out of the ground and the walls around Remilia, slamming into her and throwing her back.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Like spikes of pure earth and metal, the roots erupted from the ground as Remilia flew by, attempting to skewer her and end her before she could do anything.

However, Remilia was ready from the moment they locked eyes.

VOOM!

The Haze Clan, like the Scorch Clan, had their own specialization within the element of fire.

It was "heat."

The air under Remilia's back was superheated to a monstrous degree.

Any roots that approached were vaporized into ashes that floated into the air.

She still hadn't corrected her posture, but Remelia's eyes were still on Valerie. She raised her arm and flexed her hand, mobilizing her mana.

Nothing seemed to happen. That was because Remelia's power didn't have color or real form.

Valerie only realized that something was approaching when the air in front of her started to wobble.

Her eyes widened.

WHOOOOOOOOOSH!

In the simplest sense, it was just a wave of hot air that blasted through the labyrinth corridor.

But it was far more than that.

Valerie didn't even waste time on blocking.

She put up a barrier for the sake of appearance and leapt into a nearby corridor, blocking off the entrance instead.

She heard the blazing wind passing by.

She felt as the vines and roots that shielded this corridor were burned.

But the real marker that told her just how powerful the attack was...

That was the moment it struck, the moment it instantly incinerated the barrier she left in the corridor.

'I would've been done.'

In one hit, she would've gone down.

This was a completely different fire element than the one she'd trained to face.

It was actually far worse. Valerie had trained for the Ignis Clan so she was confident that she could beat them.

The Haze Clan was an anomaly, and their power was practically made to destroy wood dragons.

'It's fine.'

Looking at the bright side, this level of challenge would be great for training.

The situation had to be approached with a calm mind.

As long as she tried her best and did everything she could, it didn't matter if she won or lost.

This was just round one. She would have chances to make back what she lost in later rounds.

So, what mattered now was exploiting this opportunity for everything it could give her.

If she won, it was great. If she lost, it was still good.

As the barrier burned away and heat started to infiltrate the corridor she was hiding in, Valerie grinned.

This was just a competition, so she could view it with that kind of mindset.

With the same confidence she'd entered the battle with, she covered herself in mana and returned to the corridor where Remelia was.

Wood versus fire.

The outcome seemed obvious, but...with the way Valerie was acting, would it really be so?

She had an applaudable mentality, but she was outclassed like Terion was against August.

Fate itself was her enemy in a setting like this.

Whether she could overcome it or not...

Well, that was to be seen.