

Void 1741

Chapter 1741 Battle [3]

Dragons found beauty in the internal structure of mana. The way they wove their concepts, the way those weaves came together to form a spectacular picture, and other similar aspects were what dragons saw as pure beauty that could not be imitated.

However, that was only possible because dragons inherently had such a good perception ability. Humans didn't gain a similar level of ability until they'd reached a high level, so they could not share the same interests.

For humans who had yet to become Divinities, the beauty of mana came in its form. People were able to manifest things that they could only see in their imaginations, using mana to bring their dreams to reality so they could achieve their dreams in reality.

It was a bit more materialistic, sure, but wasn't that the nature of humanity? Why did it matter if it was materialistic in the eyes of others if it was beautiful in the eyes of those who mattered?

Humans loved using mythical creatures and weapons more than anything else. As these two concepts were close to both dreams and reality and unmistakably represented power, they were the easiest visualizations to imagine and use in combat.

When August, a mythical creature himself, used visualization instead of more draconic forms of manifestation...

Well, the sight would have been somewhat comedic to Damien if he had seen it.

Rather than mythical creatures or weapons, what August summoned was a "human."

A man made entirely of mana, a blue projection of sorts that bore a striking resemblance to a certain purple-eyed Supreme, separated from August's body and shot towards Wilhelm.

The mana creature almost contradictingly used physical power alone. It was like August's version of Estavian.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

BOOOOOOOM!

The sounds of the sudden physical onslaught that Wilhelm had to deal with mixed with another explosion that came from behind.

August used his awareness to find its source instead of turning around, but he was forced to see it with his own eyes due to the shock he received.

Estavian, who was just a problem for him to deal with, was now slammed against the same wall where he was. Melania stood in front of him with her fist still raised, making it obvious who was the cause of this incident.

August grinned.

'I'll have to properly thank her later.'

He didn't know exactly what was going on in his surroundings since he'd been focused on the crown, but he knew that Melania was fighting for his sake and keeping some of the other intruders back with the rest of his group.

For her to abandon that battle for this one, so that he could reach his goals...

Melania was probably one of the people August valued most in this life. She was his most trusted comrade and someone he could almost see as family.

He didn't have any qualms with turning his back to her, because he knew that she would never let it get stabbed.

Returning all of his attention to Wilhelm, his grin widened.

'He's quite weak physically, huh.'

His mana visualization, a form that, in August's mind, symbolized absolute power, was pressuring Wilhelm better than he ever hoped it would.

That gave him more than enough time to prepare.

August focused on a nearby wall, a place that bordered the underwater ravine and was far away from any of his allies.

Concentrating on the water on the other side, he created a drill out of that mana and started to break through the wall.

The water in that ravine contained extreme pressure already, so it wasn't hard at all.

It made a sound like hissing, but it was covered up by everything else that was happening.

So, when that portion of the cavern became a cavity leading into the underwater ravine, nobody took note.

August put up a film of mana in the cavity to keep the ocean from flooding in.

'Good.'

It was simple when he decided that all he wanted to do was banish Wilhelm rather than kill him.

His plan relied on a fact that was just as simple.

The twisted nature of the Liqua Clan's water made it distinct from any specific type of water body.

The Liqua Clan who called themselves a clan of Azure Dragons were not dragons of the ocean at all.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Wilhelm could not defeat the mana entity. His attacks were made to cause pain and devour living beings. Against a being of pure mana, he had to try other means.

The problem was the speed of the mana entity. It seemed to move on its own sentience despite the fact that it didn't have anything like spirituality. Because of the nature of the visualization, it had a different type of power than what Wilhelm was used to seeing.

He knew that he needed to attack the caster to get rid of it, but August was nowhere nearby.

Not until now, at least.

The second Wilhelm saw him, he aggressively dodged the mana entity's attack and threw his mana towards the other genius. The termite-like mana seemed to chatter as it rushed at him, eager to taste his blood.

However, August had been preparing for this.

He slammed his foot on the ground and created a mana wall to block everything. At the same time, he summoned several swords of ice and sent them flying back towards Wilhelm.

The Liqua Clan genius had to once again move out of the way, which put him in the mana entity's path.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Without realizing it as he attacked and defended, Wilhelm was led to the perfect spot, a place in line with the cavity August had created.

That was the end of this battle.

August dashed into Wilhelm's blind spot and used countless icicles to draw his attention.

Wilhelm easily blocked as he had easily blocked everything else that August threw at him, but he wasn't expecting the attack to not be aimed at taking him down.

Instead, it was nothing more than a cover.

In that very same instant, the mana entity got in close and cocked its fist. From mere inches away, it put all of the mana that went into its creation into an attack.

It dispersed in the same breath, but its job was already done.

Its purpose was only to transfer momentum. August made sure that the attack carried an extreme amount of momentum despite not being unreasonably forceful, and the result was exactly what he wanted.

BOOOOOOM!

Wilhelm went flying backwards. He tried to stabilize himself, but in that moment, August struck him with even more force to keep his body moving backwards.

Wilhelm turned his eyes and looked behind him with gritted teeth. He could see the cavity, but he had no idea what was on the other side. He put his arms out so he could grab the walls and keep himself from falling in, however, that wasn't quite what happened when he reached it.

August's layer of film had two effects. First, it kept the water from flooding into the cavern.

And second, it created a suction force in the outside water as if the cavern was a pressurized cabin.

The instant Wilhelm got too close to the force, his body became prey to it.

He was sucked into the cavity like a rag doll without sentience and thrown into the underwater ravine's powerful currents.

He was fated to be pushed and pulled by the forces of the ocean until he could find a way to escape.

But, since he was not an ocean dragon, it would not be easy for him.

By the time he returned, August would already have the crown, and that was all that currently mattered.

Estavian's head was sticking out of the earth comically, but that was only because Melania used her power to contain him before killing him.

There was only one other obstruction.

August stared at her for a moment, that dark genius who stood at the back of the cavern and watched everything unfold, before making a rush through the final few meters that separated him from the crown.

Once again, she did not move.

The thoughts in Eris' head that were only privy to her...

It seemed like she had no desire to stop him.

One meter...two meters...then three.

August lunged through the air and extended an arm, grabbing the pure white light with everything he had.

As the attention of everyone in the cavern turned to him, he placed the crown on his head.

And once again, the situation changed.

Chapter 1742 Battle [4]

It wasn't like it was a quiet event.

When August put that shining crown on his head, his entire body was covered in the same light. He was like a disco ball attracting all possible attention to himself.

Naturally, the people who came for the crown reacted.

Tens of geniuses and those who served them leapt towards August, and in response, the group of people he'd brought with him circled him and formed a wall.

They were confident in defeating everyone present. Except for just a few.

Iridia was staying back for obvious reasons.

In the first place, she had no interest in the throne. Raphael was the one representing the Ignis Clan in their fight for it.

She came here specifically so she could see how events went down, and when she met August and heard about his goals, her own desire changed into wanting to see how he held up against the rest.

It was interesting, since he was an enemy who willingly walked into an inescapable trap because he thought his scissors could cut the net. As someone who wasn't particularly involved in the grudge between August and the Holy Clans, she just wanted to see how it all panned out.

If she got the chance, then she'd make use of the opportunities she stumbled upon as she observed that battle, but she wasn't particularly greedy for them.

After all, her goals had nothing to do with August or the throne. She chased strength so she could overcome the geniuses in her clan and prove herself.

Seryius and Cera were present as well, keeping back just as she was.

Their reason...was a bit different.

Cera had something of a friendship with August and his friends, while Seryius' relationship with them was more business-like.

Still, neither of them had particularly strong feelings towards the young Azure Dragon and the people who followed them.

The Ether Clan wasn't one to get involved in fights like this. In normal cases, they wouldn't have even come.

However, they received a strange order from the Elders.

"Chase the crown and observe the Azure Dragon. Do not get involved. Report the happenings when you return to the clan."

They couldn't make sense of it. Was it because the Elders were curious about how Qinglong's successor would react, or was it because of their obsession with history?

Whatever the case was, their orders were to observe August and his friends. Since they had a friendlier relationship, the two decided to carry their mission out in the open, which was what led to them strangely standing in the corner of the cavern, watching as everyone else fought their hearts out for their greed.

The last observer was Eris Noct herself.

She was the simplest to explain, as her only reason for both coming here and observing was her own curiosity.

Nothing motivated her. Nobody told her to be here.

Just...

After hearing the legends of the Azure Dragon and seeing how much August had grown in just a few months, she wanted to see what happened here.

She wanted to see if he would fail, and if he succeeded, she wanted to see if he could follow through and do what his ancestor couldn't.

Though it seemed contradictory, Eris' interest wasn't in August at all. She didn't care about him as a person, rather, what drew her attention was his history and journey.

Eris was someone who actually had contact with the Holy Dragon whose bloodline she carried. She always looked down upon the elders and leaders of her clan because they were never close to his level. Her ancestor was the goal she needed to surpass, the essence of true power in her eyes.

However, there were five others with relatively similar power to him, and all of them needed to work together to kill a single dragon.

There was something here for her. As long as she continued to observe, Eris was certain that she could see a higher peak, a place her ancestor could never reach.

Her goal had been devalued in her eyes and she needed a new one.

Whether that would come in the form of the young Azure Dragon or someone connected to him, Eris didn't know.

But her desire to reach the top of the world provoked her to follow this journey, promising her that she would receive what she wanted in the end.

Nevertheless, under the gazes of those four people who were all choosing to observe for different reasons, August's allies fought against the enemies from the Liqua Clan.

August said that Wilhelm came alone, but that was only partially true.

It was pretty much the same. Instead of bringing powerful forces like the elders from the Holy Clans who would obviously go uncontested, Wilhelm arrived with only a group of other geniuses from his clan.

They were below him in strength and could, at best, serve as cannon fodder.

But, maybe that was why Wilhelm brought them? He seemed to take pleasure in showing people that he was above them.

There were around fifty of them when they first arrived, but that number was only around twenty now.

Faldren Aureat could have also been included in that count, but he was only here for Valerie. She was taking care of him, while the rest dealt with everyone else.

Explosions rang through the cavern, shaking its very foundation.

One by one, the geniuses on the other side fell.

Valerie took down Faldren as soon as possible without using the most honorable means. Since he was trying to have a sacred duel with her, he had left himself somewhat unguarded. She felt bad for defeating him in such a cowardly manner, but it wasn't important for now. She was here to support her friend, not to resolve her own grudges.

To best utilize her power in the current situation, Valerie focused on healing her allies, while Melania covered large area damage so the others could act freely and fight multiple enemies at the same time.

The team dynamic was nearing perfection. To the best that they could in the short time they had, the group of geniuses had learned each other's patterns and adapted a cooperative battle tactic.

That kind of synergy was exactly what allowed them to clear the area without much of a problem.

When they were left as the only ones in the cavern, while Valerie kept watch on the geniuses that stood on the sidelines, Juno and some of the others sat down on the ground around August with exhausted sighs.

All of this fighting had taken a lot out of them.

However, now that August had put on the crown, their only job was to wait for him to finish.

After all, their circle was impenetrable. The barrier that Raul placed around them gave them even more protection against outside forces, so it was impossible for them to get caught off guard. Everyone had somewhat relaxed now that there weren't any more enemies in front of them.

That was why it was least expected when a blade stabbed towards August.

Yet, that was exactly what happened.

A pitch-black blade, a disgusting blade filled with malice and malevolence, was inches away from August's throat and still accelerating.

And, with all of their enemies defeated...

...it could have only come from inside of the circle.

Chapter 1743 Battle [5]

Frankly, when only three different influences had been roped into August's plan to save Arulion, it didn't seem like the scale was that big.

However, that was only if one didn't understand the scale of those three influences.

Starting with the smallest of them, August's people from Bastille.

Essentially the entire sect followed him to the Heavenly World. All of the people he'd brought in from different parts of the world, all of the subsidiaries that followed them, and all of the brothers, sisters, and mentors August had spent his year with decided to see broader horizons under his command.

There were hundreds of thousands of them. Sure, not all of them were combat-ready, but that didn't matter. They were not assigned to a combat-centric task in the first place. If even the smallest influence who wasn't going to engage in combat was made up of so many people, then what about those who were actually fighting on the frontlines?

The Wood Dragon Clan was the smaller of the two. With almost ten million members from the Revell Clan and its subordinates, they were a fighting force that didn't have problems with tackling the forsaken dragons alone.

Still, they had help from dragons that the world had never seen, dragons who lived and died in the seas and rarely ever showed themselves to even their own kind on the land.

The Sea Tribes were easy to underestimate. Since their size was never expressly mentioned, one might believe that they weren't that robust. After all, such a large number of people couldn't have submitted themselves to August in just a few months.

That kind of logic was partially true. Indeed, not all of them chose to follow August. Their highest elites, however, did. After seeing his lineage and realizing that the destiny of the Azure Dragon was going to unfold in this era, they obeyed the promise of their ancestors and chose him as their Lord.

The people who followed them naturally did not object, as they trusted their leaders' judgement. That was how August got a hold of thirteen clans and their subordinates, a force that could cover the seas and had hundreds of millions, if not billions of members.

Obviously, not all of them surfaced. Only the best came to August's aid. Still, their numbers already exceeded those of the Wood Dragon Clan by manifold.

These forces had come together to lay siege on a single influence, and that obviously didn't bode well for their enemy.

In the time that they'd been part of the war, which was a little over two weeks now, the Sea Tribes had started to attack the western region where the forsaken dragon clans made their stronghold.

Their numbers exceeded the other side, and the Sea Dragons had a particularly berserker-like tendency that allowed them to sacrifice themselves without qualms.

Perhaps it came from their insane reproductive abilities and crowd mentality. They didn't see themselves as individuals until they reached a certain level of power, and rather than being mourned, they'd be celebrated in death.

In just a short period, they managed to gain back a large portion of the land and push the core forces of the enemy into an edge of the kingdom.

Meanwhile, the Wood Dragon Clan spread through the rest of the kingdom. While slaying the stragglers of the forsaken dragons, they focused on healing everyone who could be healed.

Most of the enemy forces had retreated to their stronghold on their king's orders. Those who remained were only those who were too far indulged in killing to understand reason.

In fact, the destroyed cities that were left in place of the once-bustling cities were overrun by forests. The less injured had already joined the effort to find and save anyone else in the vicinity. Those who had injuries that were closer to fatal were enveloped by the trees and naturally healed by the forest's vitality.

From the looks of it, the forsaken dragon clans wouldn't be able to withstand their conjoined efforts for a very long time.

Other than their leader, Hendricks, and a few hundred of his men, there weren't many who could threaten such a large influence.

It just went to show how easily this war could have been ended if the Holy Clans had taken any initiative to actually confront the threat.

The problem that August's people encountered was actually opposition from a third-party force.

It was as if those clans wanted to show people how vile and disconnected from reality they were. Nobles from all different factions sent their people after the members of the two new dragon clans, aiming to erase them and rid the kingdom of their influence.

It seemed that the power they showcased came off as a threat to those who sat atop ivory towers. They didn't like that their citizens were shouting the names of others, and their response...?

Naturally, it was the elimination of those they deemed their enemies.

There was nothing more tone-deaf than trying to kill the people who were trying to save your nation for you, but that tended to be the characteristic of these kinds of forces, no?

Regardless of anything else, since their integrity was threatened, they decided to fight.

That, by the way, was something they refused to do even when their citizens were being slaughtered left and right.

To protect the people while fighting forces on two sides was extremely difficult. If it wasn't for the nobles deciding to fight, the war would have likely ended already.

Nevertheless, the movement of the noble clans was an expected event. August already planned for it.

See, he wasn't just trying to end the threat of the forsaken dragon clans.

He was making a bid for the kingdom, trying to wrestle it from the control of the Holy Clans.

However, dealing with the nobles was a bit different.

Surprisingly enough, that was a job given to the Bastille people.

They had split into two groups that spread out around both the central area of Arulion where the True Dragons lived and the outer regions that contained the dragonkin.

Their job was to set two different arrays. Once they were in play, this war could be considered ended.

It was a similar strategy to what August and his friends used in the heir wars, but on a much larger scale and in a much more serious circumstance.

If it weren't for Raul's clanmates, who were expert formation masters in their own right, then it would have been impossible altogether.

While they laid the arrays to defeat the nobles, their two allied influences were to take care of the forsaken dragons and stall for time. And, of course, if they wanted to avoid the fallout from everything they were doing, then August needed to properly claim the crown and become the heir to the throne.

All of the moving pieces perfectly aligned just as August hoped they would. The only problem left...

...was now his own situation, wasn't it?

After all, August's consciousness was not in Arulion anymore. It had traveled far, far away and detached from his body.

His body which was currently on a knife's edge, just seconds away from death.

Chapter 1744 Crown [1]

For Melania, the current battle was something that was always bound to happen.

From the moment she met Damien, she realized that supporting August meant standing against everything that the current Arulion was built upon. It wasn't a decision that could be made easily, but it didn't mean much to her.

For the boy who saved her and the man who gave her a second chance, she was willing to do anything.

From that day onward, though she didn't make it obvious, she'd devoted her life to August. She followed him in any mission she could and helped to the best of her capabilities. She had done so much that August began to view her as one of his most important people.

Even in the current battle, she'd focused on him more than anyone else. She put everything down so that she could help him succeed, and as she'd expected, he did just that.

August was not a person to disappoint expectations.

However, he was no longer here. When his body dropped to its knees, his eyes were clouded by a white fog. His consciousness was clearly in some other realm, partaking in some other adventure.

It was a necessary step for him to tame the crown, but it left him defenseless. That wouldn't have mattered in any other situation, but it was absolutely vital.

She could barely track that blade as it approached him. It was an attack made with such speed and ferocity that none of them could react, which, likely, was the attacker's goal from the beginning.

Melania noticed it before anyone else, as her physical senses were the best among them. Time seemed to flow in slow motion.

Every tiny bit of space that the knife covered took minutes in Melania's perception, but even then, she didn't have much time to think about the choice she was to make.

The thoughts flowing through her mind were related to other things.

Memories of her time with August, memories of her emotions, memories of how her life has changed since that fateful moment many months ago.

Those memories made a difficult choice into an easy one.

In that slowed world that only she could perceive, Melania jumped forward. She put all of her energy into the movement so she could arrive before it was too late, but that left her unable to defend herself.

In everyone else's perception, it happened in a single second.

A spike of hostility.

A rapid movement.

And the smell of blood.

SHIK!

The blade never properly made it to August. It stabbed into Melania's shoulder instead.

And that was when time returned to its regular flow.

Melania dropped to the ground. The hilt of the black blade was still embedded in her shoulder, and black veins were spreading across her body with every second that passed.

"MELANIA!"

Valerie immediately rushed to her and used her wood mana to try and heal her.

Massive roots escaped the ground and completely encaged the location from where the blade came. Raul created another formation around those vines, while Juno, Yuna, and Mikaela surrounded it to ensure that the trapped individual could not escape.

They were hidden within the vines, but it was obvious who had committed the crime when they looked around.

After all, only a single person had been isolated by the vine wall.

"Ah...!"

Ophelia let out a shocked gasp. She fell to her knees with widened eyes as she looked at the man within the vines.

"You...you..."

She couldn't formulate her words properly. The sudden betrayal hit her harder than anyone else, after all.

"How could you?!"

She looked at that man, she looked at Lucas Stroll with horror in her eyes.

However, his eyes contained not an ounce of regret or guilt.

Lucas and Ophelia.

Their story always started when they first met. It was a few years before the start of the heir wars when they fought at a separate competition with the same goal, to find sponsorships to take them higher than their social status allowed.

Back then, they were enemies through and through. However, with the passing of time, their hostility turned into a rivalry and they became closer.

They differed in many ways. The hot-blooded qualities of a flame dragon and the cold and indifferent character of an ice dragon hardly mixed, but at least in the aspect of dreams and morals, they were the same.

Those qualities allowed them to form a connection that went beyond their differences, even though they really were more different than alike.

That was what Ophelia thought. She believed that despite their differences, they were the same in the ways that mattered.

Only now did she realize how wrong she was.

Before entering the heir wars, they'd made a promise to each other.

"We said that we'd reach the top together, didn't we?" Lucas said, ignoring the several different mechanisms that kept him trapped.

"It's just that I found a way to get there first."

"Indeed, he did."

BOOM!

A voice came from the distance, and the prison around Lucas shattered into pieces.

His body disappeared and reappeared across the cavern, by the side of the man who just spoke.

"Unlike all of you, this one has some sense."

The plan August had in mind crumpled instantly.

Because Wilhelm Liqua had already returned.

And he was no longer alone.

"Your friend seems to think that everything will go his way just because he has some sort of a brain. He seems to think that our influence means nothing just because he has a few backers. But, did you know? We didn't rise to our position because of luck."

"Filthy commoners with no power and no influence, if there was a way for your kind to gain status, then the kingdom would be engulfed in chaos, wouldn't it? Look, with just the slightest bit of temptation, I could bribe one of your own to stab you in the back."

Wilhelm ignored everything as he spoke. He ignored the glares from the group of geniuses he was facing, and even the sour expression on the face of the man who had just joined his side.

"He was originally meant to kill that brat in the middle, but I'm a little happy that he didn't succeed. Seriously, I can't wait to see the expression on his face when he sees what's happened here."

Wilhelm grinned. He motioned at the crowd around him.

"A scene where he wakes up in a pile of his friends' corpses, how beautiful would that be?"

He spread his arms with a gloating expression.

"Well then, with the exposition out of the way, shall we set the stage?"

He motioned at the crowd around him.

Right, it was a crowd. The few geniuses he'd brought earlier were only present to lure August into a false sense of security.

Wilhelm's real plan would unfold here.

Over a hundred geniuses from the Liqa Clan, all of them either at Wilhelm's level or higher, surrounded the group of ten geniuses as Wilhelm stood back and watched.

Among that crowd were several forsaken dragons with empty eyes, slaves that had been taken as war trophies.

Lucas was not a part of that crowd. He stood back with Wilhelm, his eyes cold.

From the start, he never had any feelings towards anyone from that group.

He grew up learning how to befriend the right people to propel him to greater heights. With the sense he'd developed, he was able to reach a point where even Holy Clans were giving him offers that he couldn't resist.

He knew that all of those people who considered him a "friend" would die here, but what he would gain in return was the Liqa Clan's bloodline and support.

It was the chance for him to become a Holy Clan descendant himself.

Those resources, those connections, and that status...

Who could reject it?

It was a shame to see that someone like Ophelia would also be involved, but such was life.

He didn't doubt that she'd received similar offers.

It was just that he made the right choice and she made the wrong one.

Now, while she suffered the consequences, he would embrace the life of a king.

Those were the cruel workings of fate that had been laid out for them.

Chapter 1745 Crown [2]

"Raul!"

Valerie ignored everything that was going on around her. While Ophelia tried to figure out why Lucas had betrayed them, the rest didn't care.

He was a traitor. Nothing else mattered.

Valerie tried to heal Melania in the time she had, but her power wasn't working. Originally, she left the blade inserted so Melania wouldn't bleed out, but that wasn't the decision she should have made.

She only realized it after following the path her mana took and sensing the changes in Melania's body.

Leaving Juno and the girls to guard the prison, Valerie hurriedly called Raul over.

"She's been poisoned," she said with a stern expression.

"I can't heal her with ordinary methods, and now that he's here, we can't lose any bit of our fighting power. I need you to put her in stasis."

The poison in Melania's body was made to instantly kill a dragon. It was vile poison that forced its victim to suffer pain even after death. If Valerie kept trying to heal Melania with her wood abilities, she'd only rush the threat of death.

Melania needed to be carefully treated with the right antidote if she wanted to live. However, none of those antidote materials could exist in this place, and Valerie couldn't figure out what they were when they were facing such a massive threat to their survival.

The only option was to halt the spread of the poison through Melania's body and wait to treat her until the current issues were solved.

Raul was the only one capable of performing such a technique. And he knew how important Melania was to August.

"Leave it to me. Will you be fine on your own?"

Valerie nodded.

"We can manage. Just...try to finish as soon as possible without rushing. We'll need all the help we can get."

Raul nodded solemnly and went to work drawing an array around Melania's body.

Stasis arrays were the height of his clan's formation techniques. It was also their speciality, which was the only reason why both Raul and Valerie could maintain their hope of saving Melania.

Still, her body could only be kept in stasis for so long. She would eventually succumb to the poison if nothing was done to save her.

Valerie was certain that she could trust Raul. She heard the story of Bastille from August. These people had abandoned everything to follow him. They would not betray him.

The traitor was elsewhere, and he'd brought with him a calamity for their group.

When Valerie stood up again, her eyes were freezing.

"Get up."

She looked at Ophelia, who was unable to hold in her tears as she saw the dark side of Lucas Stroll.

In all honesty, she was fine with killing the woman now. If she was affiliated with that man, then there was no telling what she would do.

She didn't care what bothered the woman. She didn't give a single fuck about the trauma she received due to the betrayal or the personal emotions that shocked her into such a state.

Still, she was here for August and she remembered that. He was the type to try and maintain as many lives as possible. Since Ophelia hadn't given them a reason to be suspicious, he wouldn't want her dead.

Lucas, on the other hand...

"I don't know why you'd shed tears for a shithead like that. He's a fucking asshole who dumped you by leaving you to die to enemies he brought here. Stand up and stop being a bitch. If you want to live, then you better fight."

She didn't care what bothered the woman. She didn't give a single fuck about the trauma she received due to the betrayal or the personal emotions that shocked her into such a state.

Because she wasn't the one whose closest friend just got stabbed.

She wasn't the one whose friend was dying on the cold rock.

Valerie was fuming. If she was still the same person that she was when she met August and Melania, then she'd have already allowed her rage to put her in a dangerous situation.

But these two people had changed her. Staying by their side, she was able to learn so much and experience so much that had been absent from her life.

Valerie had friends in the Wood Dragon Clan. She was never a loner.

However, to have people that she was willing to live and die for was a completely different feeling.

They showed her a better way to live, and for their sake, she had to find a way to get everyone out of this predicament.

Now wasn't the time to be overwhelmed by emotions. Now, they needed to be as cold as possible so they could survive and deal with everything that haunted them.

Ophelia didn't immediately respond, but Valerie's attention was already elsewhere.

Whether she died or not was her own concern.

Around this time, Wilhelm had finished his monologue. He had sent his troops to surround the group of them, and the circle around August had been tightened.

The barrier that once separated them from the world was gone. Raul had to focus all of his energy on saving Melania.

So, without the two of them or August, there were only five of them.

This battle had already become impossible for them to win.

However, Valerie, Raul, Yuna, Juno, and Mikaela had the same exact thought.

No matter what happened, they would survive and see the light again.

All of them, without a single member missing.

This wasn't where they would fall. This was only the start of their story.

Even if impossibility stood in their way, they were prepared to cut it down.

Time was in a strange state after Serena's array was completed. The geniuses hadn't even realized that they'd entered a dilation when they found their way into the cave system.

Likely, their perception didn't find anything because it wasn't a natural phenomenon.

To make events parallel, an unknown third party influenced the cavern to extend its time flow.

That was how a week passed in the dragon kingdom in the time between their arrival in the cavern and the moment August grabbed the crown.

In that time, the war had not progressed much. The Sea Tribes and Wood Dragon Clan focused on stalling for time, so while losses did increase, it wasn't by a large margin.

There was one main difference between the current situation and the one from before the week passed.

The arrays being laid by the Bastille people were finished.

Using handheld teleporters and coordinates that had been plotted since before they even began operating, they were able to move with precision and spread out enough to put together the complicated arrays in a short period of time.

Their efforts could be compared to Serena and the Krone Clan in the Heavenly World. On a much smaller scale, they'd completed a similar operation.

Both arrays had been laid in tandem, and they would activate the same.

As soon as news was sent back to the Surge Dragon Tribe which acted as a control center and a connection point between all of the different divisions working together, everyone came to know the same fact.

The moment to counterattack was here.

A long-awaited revenge against the nobles, and the extermination of a threat that was once salvation for the people of Arulion...

...both would happen soon.

Chapter 1746 Crown [3]

The function of both arrays was actually not too complicated, but the complexity that allowed them to achieve the feats they strived for was too much for any common man.

When they activated, two things happened simultaneously. Firstly, the central area of the dragon kingdom was enveloped in a crimson-red haze. Energy filled the air and infested everyone the spell targeted.

Specifically, the common populace of Arulion.

Their bodies bulged as new muscles formed where they were needed. Their blood screamed out as it underwent a massive change.

The array's functions dug deep into the ancestry of the common people and drew out the blood of their nearest possible Divine ancestor. All of today's dragons existed because of a select group of no more than fifty. If their ancestry was traced back far enough, one would be able to find the bloodlines that had been lost through eons of dilution. The main goal of the array was as simple as that. It aimed to awaken the draconic talents of any and everyone in Arulion.

And it worked perfectly.

As the commoners awakened to their blood lineages, their suppressed draconic instincts came loose.

In normal cases, this kind of influence would lead them to become like the forsaken dragons, machines that would kill wantonly until they were satiated.

However, the array guided their hostility towards the people they truly hated.

It marked all forsaken dragons and all those with noble blood, letting the berserk dragons loose on these parties.

Arulion's chaos deepened even further, but this was a necessary step. Those dragons needed to find their instincts and return to their original pride and stature. For that to be possible, they needed to adapt to their new bloodlines and properly accept that they were no longer inhibited by anything other than their own unwillingness and insecurity.

The best way to show them that they'd changed was to allow them revenge against the people who killed their loved ones and the people who oppressed them.

After all, they were berserk, but they had not lost all rationality. They would change once they experienced what it was like to be powerful.

The bigger change was created by the second array.

In the outer regions of the continent, the light that shined was not red, but blue.

It infected the dragonkin just as the commoners had been, invading their systems and changing them.

In essence, both arrays did the same thing.

Only, it meant something entirely different to the dragonkin.

See, unlike the commoners in Arulion who became content with their weakness, the dragonkin were always striving for strength so that they could eventually become True Dragons. Surprisingly enough, their lives were probably far better in the outer regions than they'd ever be in the central region.

August's plan for them was simple.

He was going to give them what they wanted in exchange for loyalty.

Taking inspiration from his father's methods, August instructed Raul's clansmen to give the dragonkin a choice.

A holographic window appeared in front of each and every one of them; a contract of sorts.

What it said was simple.

Pledge fealty to August Void and instantly become a True Dragon.

Obviously, not everyone believed it at first, but the widespread phenomenon was bound to attract one or two risk-takers.

When the scale was so large, it was impossible to not know or know of someone who took risks.

Just a few people signed the contract at first. They felt the pull in their souls as they were bound to another entity, but they hardly cared.

After all, the bloodlines they'd been working to complete their entire lives suddenly reached perfection.

It wasn't actually that involved. Once a process was created to find the hidden lineages within the common people, it was easy to find a way to improve already existing semi-draconic bloodlines so they could reach their full potential.

The requirement of fealty was implemented only so that any chaos caused by the rapid influx of True Dragons could be quelled. They would not be required to show any sort of loyalty beyond what they naturally possessed. Not in moments aside from this one, at least.

They had been given such a gift so they could participate in the conflict of the central region.

And though most of them were hesitant to get involved in a war that they had no part in, they had been drafted with an amazing gift.

Even those who took pride in their efforts and didn't want to take the easy road to power had to admit that it was almost impossible for any of them to actually evolve into True Dragons.

Everything they'd been through turned them into the people they were, but their paths from this point forth...

...would continue from the same point.

The only change was that they'd have the lineages they always dreamed of.

That person, "August Void," was their benefactor for life. They were at least willing to repay him for the gift he'd given them.

Like that, countless new forces entered the war on the side facing the forsaken dragons and nobles.

The situation was rapidly overturned, leaving the nobles in a position where they had no choice but to retreat if they wanted to survive.

Well, until even their homes were raided. Unlike the Holy Clans, they could not create highly functional and discreet hidden realms to support their clans.

They lived isolated from the majority, but their methods were easy to destroy with the methods available to their newfound enemies.

It was unacceptable.

Unacceptable to the point where the Holy Clans needed to intervene.

Right, it was about time for them to do something about the forces challenging their regime, wasn't it?

But..

For some reason...

No matter how many nobles died, no matter how their clans were turned into nothing more than remnants...

...where were the Holy Clans?

It was the worst possible situation.

When they were needed most, they disappeared to a place where nobody would be able to find them.

Though, it wasn't by choice.

It wasn't by choice at all.

For tens of millions of dragons to find themselves in a darkness beyond darkness, a void beyond voids, was not an expected event for them at all.

Still, that was what happened. Everyone who was in the hidden realms that they called their homes was instantly transported to another realm all at once.

From the Ancient Dragons to the youngest geniuses, not a single one was spared.

The heads of each clan immediately went to work trying to learn more about their situation. They flew as far as possible to find the boundaries of the realm, attacked the ground and sky to try and break it open, and looked for clues or array lines that could be read to understand the nature of this place.

However, there was nothing like that.

No borders, no sky, no clues.

This expanse was seemingly infinite and indestructible. It was a prison made so that those within could never escape.

As for the man who put them here...?

Naturally, he wasn't going to show his face.

After all, they'd been removed from the world so that all things in Arulion would wrap up smoothly.

The decision of what would be done with them...

Well, that would be made at another time, by another man entirely.

Chapter 1747 Crown [4]

Having Damien as a father, August had become more than used to being transported into separated realms.

His consciousness had been pulled into many spiritual realms to help him comprehend his law and strengthen his spiritual energy.

His body had been pulled into many hidden realms for different trials that gave him opportunities to adventure and train.

And illusions were something he'd become used to, as they were the best way to bring experiences into reality so he could experience them in a simulated environment.

His mind immediately recognized its spiritual state when he arrived in that place with rolling hills in the distance. Within the first second of being there, he already knew that his consciousness had been separated from his body.

With the preceding events painting an obvious picture, August could deduce that he was within a realm of the crown's creation.

He was only left to wonder what kind of trial he'd be facing here.

'It would be nice if I could get out soon.'

Regardless of how promising the situation outside looked when he left, he didn't want to leave his friends sitting in the cavern for too long. If Wilhelm or some of their other enemies appeared, the situation would become quite troublesome.

August immediately went to look around and learn something about his situation. It didn't take long for him to realize that he didn't have much space at all.

In fact, the hills in the background didn't actually exist. They were just created through illusions to extend the environment.

'If there's nothing here and the space is so small...'

...then he had no choice but to wait.

August sat down where he was and closed his eyes. Meditation was never a bad thing. It wasn't as if he would be able to comprehend anything in this fake environment, but it was still a good way to pass the time.

August could indulge himself in thoughts or empty his mind completely, allowing the waves of reality to take them to whatever destination they sought.

This time, he didn't choose to think. He had been overworking his mind recently. Every decision he made had to be considered three or four times. In moments when he wanted to let his emotions take control, he was forced to take a step back and think about the greater good.

He couldn't do anything for himself in the situation he was in. It was frustrating at times, especially when he couldn't even confirm that the decisions he made with so much thought were actually the right ones.

'Is this the path I've chosen for myself?'

It was something he'd never taken the time to ponder.

The consequences of trying to be responsible for so many people when his experience level was nowhere near enough for him to have that kind of ability; he accepted them in theory long ago, but only after carrying out an operation concerning the lives of so many people did he experience the reality of those theoreticals.

It was a difficult path that would drive one insane. August definitely had something of a hero complex, but he wasn't naive to the point of mindlessly following it. He didn't have that sort of innocence that was usually possessed by people with the same mentality, so he was forced to actually think about how much he was sacrificing to act selflessly.

However, even if he considered it for years and years...

'...could I stop myself?'

If the same situation repeated over and over again, could he really stop himself from trying to save as many lives as possible, even if it meant risking everything?

'No.'

Nothing could convince him otherwise.

He chose this brutal path exactly because he knew that he would never be able to turn away from the suffering of others.

He wanted to become the Dragon Emperor. He wanted to bring glory to the dragons. He wanted them to thrive as they'd thrived in the past.

Qinglong's memories flashed through his mind. The image of the kingdom that could have been, the grand dream of a place where opportunity was available to anyone and everyone...

'...if everything is going according to plan, then we're already halfway there.'

August opened his eyes, a slight smile on his face.

That was when he finally noticed the entity before him.

His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He was unable to immediately respond to the situation at all.

[That is quite an interesting thought process you have, child.]

The being immediately made it clear that nothing August could think in this realm would be hidden. Those words, spoken in a deep and rumbling voice that was similar to an earthquake, jolted August out of his stupor.

"Nice...nice to meet you?"

He spoke without really knowing what to say, quickly getting to his feet.

That being also had a slight smile on his face.

[It seems you recognize me.]

August nodded his head shakily.

It would have been odd for anyone else from this generation to know who he was. But August did.

He had seen many pictures of this very being in Qinglong's memories.

Even back then, he was ancient and revered.

With a body spanning over a kilometer even in his smallest form, pitch-black scales with accents of red that screamed of destruction, blood-red eyes, horns that looked like a metallic crown with two sharp blades protruding from it, and those very telling patterned wings that had never been seen in another dragon, this man had an extremely telltale form for anyone who had heard his legacy.

August caught his breath and steadied himself. With a bow, he properly introduced himself.

"August Void, descendant of the Azure Dragon, greets the First Dragon Emperor."

[Haha, good manners. The Azure Dragon...indeed, I remember meeting such a character in the past. It is good that his bloodline has survived the tests of time.]

August smiled wryly. He wanted to tell the First Dragon Emperor that he wasn't quite correct, but he refrained.

Now wasn't the time for him to tell his life story. This being was far too noble to care about anything like that.

Rather, seeing him now, August could confirm that what Iridia told him was not a lie.

'The throne of the Dragon Emperor is more than just a position. It is deeply interconnected with the fate of the kingdom.'

Otherwise, there would be no need for someone like the First Dragon Emperor to contain a piece of his soul in the crown to meet future emperor candidates.

[You are well informed, child. If you wish to learn more, however, you must first pass my trial.]

August nodded with a grin.

"In the first place, I came here to take your trial."

[Good!]

The First Dragon Emperor extended his wings and flew into the air.

[Boy, your task is simple. Land one blow on my body. Once you have achieved this feat, I will tell you all that you wish to know.]

August's eyes narrowed.

'He'll tell me what I want to know, not acknowledge me as a successor.'

Then, there was some other condition he had to fulfill if he wanted that privilege.

August cracked his neck and stretched.

Landing a single hit on the First Dragon Emperor...

'How hard can it be?'

Chapter 1748 Crown [5]

Very, very hard. That was the obvious answer.

August started small by trying to probe the First Dragon Emperor's strength, but that was not something he could do in a single battle.

Boom!

He dashed across the ground and summoned just as much water as he always did. It was a massive wave, but compared to the Dragon Emperor's size, it looked like nothing more than a puddle.

Using his manifestations, August tried to force the Dragon Emperor to split his attention into multiple different enemies, which would give him more room to maneuver.

However...

VOOM!

The Dragon Emperor did no more than flap his wings.

A powerful burst of air was created. It instantly dispersed August's mana and destroyed his manifestations. Before he could react, it struck him as well.

The only thing he felt was numbing pain as his body exploded into a blood mist.

In the next moment, August was back where he started. No signs of the prior battle remained.

"Haa...haa...haa..."

August breathed heavily as he dealt with the phantom pain of his death.

[How does it feel?]

The First Dragon Emperor teased him, a playful light in his eyes.

August smiled wryly. He had to admit that he was dreaming if he wanted to probe the First Dragon Emperor the same way he probed his other opponents.

This was a battle against a force that, with August's current power, was just as indomitable as Damien.

A single hit?

It was only easy if the person being hit was sitting still and waiting for it.

The Dragon Emperor clearly had no plans of doing so.

As such...

'This is going to be a long one.'

August straightened his back and charged again.

And again, and again, and again.

Naturally, every single time he died in the exact same way.

The First Dragon Emperor only needed to flap his wings once to kill August. If he wanted to cause more pain, he could kill him in an even simpler fashion.

What August found in his first few attempts was that he would never get anywhere if he couldn't find a way around the Dragon Emperor's first attack.

But, how long would it take him to do that?

August had died ten times already, and he had only been in this realm for a few hours.

When days turned into months, or when months turned into years, how much would that number change?

Unfortunately for August, he was about to find out.

After all, it would take more than just some months for him to properly meet the First Dragon Emperor's expectations.

August's soul was in a relatively calm situation. He was dying over and over again, sure, but it was happening in a controlled environment.

The cavern was nothing like that. It was an environment where only chaos reigned.

Fighting over a hundred enemies that were at the same level as them wasn't possible no matter what kind of magic they used. This predicament that they'd found themselves in couldn't be escaped with anything like cheap tricks.

They had to find a way to take down each and every one of these geniuses without losing any of their own.

To turn impossibility into possibility, the best they could do was plan ahead.

The instant Valerie returned to command, she put exactly that in motion.

She ordered Mikaela to use her power. Under Valerie's command, she created a large maze around them.

If Raul was available, it would have been better, but they had to manage without him.

Juno and Yuna were fighters who couldn't contribute to support efforts, so it had to be left to Mikaela alone.

"No matter what happens, make sure they can't break through the walls," Valerie said.

Mikaela nodded. It was difficult but possible. Since her mazes were created from the same material as the surrounding environment, she could use the cavern's strong rock, built to withstand the pressure of millions upon millions of gallons of water, to strengthen them.

Valerie could somewhat help as well by finding any dirt or other wood-related elements in the ground and using them to tether the maze walls to the earth.

It was enough to force their enemies to actually follow the formation instead of bouldering through it.

This was all they could do. From here on, they could only fight and hope that they wouldn't die before they killed all of their opposition.

Valerie, Juno, and Yuna chose three separate paths to move through.

The other two left immediately, but Valerie took a second to glance at Ophelia first.

That woman who was still unable to lift herself off of the ground... "Tch, pathetic."

...only one word was necessary to describe her.

There was no point paying attention to someone who was content with sitting around and waiting for death.

She turned her attention to Mikaela instead.

"Close the walls."

"Close them? But...!"

"You heard me."

Valerie didn't let her speak.

"Close them and fortify them. Even if you hear us pleading from the other side, do not open the walls. If the worst comes to be...collapse the maze and run with Melania."

Mikaela's eyes hardened.

"You won't die here. None of you will."

Though she was unable to believe it herself, Valerie still smiled slightly.

"Yeah, let's leave it at that."

Without another word, she turned and moved into her third of the maze.

Hearing the walls close behind her, sealing the clearing where Melania and the rest were, her smile widened. 'I'm sorry, but there's no way I can guarantee that none of us will die.'

She looked down at her hand, at the pulsing green mana hidden deep within her veins.

'But, if it comes down to it...'

Her feet moved faster and faster until her walk turned into a run. Through her awareness, she could already sense the first group of enemies she had to face.

Her attention moved away from her thoughts, and yet, that statement somehow managed to finish itself.

'If it comes down to it, I can at least make sure that only one of us dies. As long as the rest of you make it out, it'll be worth it.'

Valerie was never a heroic individual.

Valerie was actually the person in August's group of close friends whose thought process was least similar to his.

It was because they were her friends that she was willing to fight for them, but she was never someone willing to sacrifice herself for the greater good.

She wanted to live. She wanted to see the world and reach her goals even if it meant she had to turn a blind eye to some things that were going on in the world.

If it meant that she could live...perhaps she would be willing to abandon someone else.

However, that same Valerie, whose mentality never changed, was having such thoughts of self-sacrifice.

'I feel stupid.'

Really, it was a miracle what emotions could do to a person.

'But...'

The only goal in her mind now was making sure that Melania survived. Regardless of what her prior feelings were, regardless of what her brain told her to do...

...Valerie was prepared to do anything necessary to make that goal into a reality.

Chapter 1749 Crown [6]

Damien made sure to avoid contact with August's people so that he wouldn't cause any anomalies, but when he made such a big move, he had to inform someone about it.

For the Holy Clans to disappear entirely was something nobody could have ever expected. And, when it happened when the Holy Dragons themselves were gone, it became even more of an unexpected boon.

Those six dragons weren't even in Arulion anymore. They were in the Heavenly World, prioritizing the artifacts Rose stole over everything else in the kingdom.

After all, if they regained those artifacts, then the kingdom's destruction wouldn't matter anymore. They could just create a new one.

Nevertheless, their presence being nonexistent in the realm gave August's forces more room to move freely. Now that they were only dealing with nobles and forsaken dragons, they didn't have to keep being cautious about the movements of other uninvolved parties.

Damien contacted Alcharist with a short message to let him know.

"The Holy Clans are no longer a problem. Act without caution."

That message alone found its way into the former Holy Dragon's ears, causing him to stumble a bit in surprise.

"Sorry? All of them?"

He tried to communicate back, but that seemed to be an impossibility. Damien's presence was already gone from his mind.

'As expected, great beings are hard to talk to.'

Alcharist smiled wryly. He thought he was someone great until he met that person, but since his horizons had been broadened, there wasn't much for him to say.

That person would not lie about such important matters.

Rather, that person saw no point in lying from his position above the clouds.

If he said that the Holy Clans were dealt with...

'Boy, you are lucky to have such a man as your father.'

Alcharist sent a message to August that naturally went unheard. As Damien said, they could now act without caution. All of the more powerful members of their force had remained on the backlines for the most part so as not to provoke the powerhouses from the other side to act too early.

Originally, it was only because they believed that the Holy Clans would also get involved if they saw so many Ancient Dragons and others close to that level dying, but there was no need to hesitate anymore, was there?

There was only one force close to the level of a Holy Dragon left on the enemy side, and that was none other than Hendricks himself.

By the time Alcharist finished processing Damien's message, he was already in the air, flying towards that man's last known position.

And, when he sent the word to Yusuf, who then spread it to anyone else who needed to know, many others started moving as well.

Calling it an indiscriminate massacre wouldn't be right. There were definitely a few specific clans and people who were innocent and not drenched in the same sin as their peers. Those people had been properly listed in the information Yusuf received and were crossed off the list of targets.

It was unknown how August managed to get that information, but it was inconsequential.

None of them wanted to kill innocent people.

If they did slaughter everyone they saw without worrying about right or wrong, then how different would they be from the enemies they scorned with their righteous eyes?

Every single person fighting under August's banner was forced to keep that fact in mind as they moved. The people who stood at the heads of the noble clans, the people who represented the forsaken dragons...

They now shared one thing in common.

Their fortresses were being encroached on by incredibly powerful enemies whose only goal was to kill them.

When did everything go wrong?

'Right, the moment I decided to allow their actions, fate turned against us.'

Hendricks sighed to himself.

He understood that their plans had gone awry long ago.

Rather, the moment he saw his citizens murdering children without remorse, he realized that there was no hope left.

This was not the populace he ruled. These were not the same people who lived with him and peacefully coexisted for eons.

What kind of bloodthirsty madmen had he released into the world?

Hendricks was able to justify his actions back then because he didn't realize just how bad their bloodlust was. He believed that not many would have to die in order for their clan to attain peace, so he assumed that if he apologized in his heart, he would be able to forgive himself.

He was wrong.

Everything he believed was wrong. He was blinded by the golden lens through which he viewed his people.

Because he could contain himself without blood, he thought that they would regain their senses eventually after getting it out of their system.

How was he to know that they would become addicted to the sensation of killing? What was supposed to be a short event had become a war that threatened their extermination, and all he could do...

'...is fight.'

In the end, regardless of who they became or how he felt about them, he was their king. He was the person who was supposed to lead them and give them stability.

They had gone too far down this path to turn back now. Even if he said something, none of them would be willing to retreat.

Perhaps it was of their own doing, but hundreds of thousands of their brothers and sisters had died. They would not retreat without spilling more enemy blood.

Their chosen leader was supposed to be the one who ruled them, but in this moment, he chose to be ruled by their opinions instead.

If they wanted to fight until the last man, then he was willing to fight alongside them.

"Haa..."

He sighed to himself as he felt a presence approach. This place was relatively far from where his people were. Out of range enough to keep them away from the damage the fight caused, but close enough for him to always remain aware of their circumstances.

Nevertheless, he didn't have much time to think about them at the moment.

A daunting foe had approached.

With glistening green scales and a domineering appearance, Alcharist Revell flew in the skies above Hendricks.

He stood up from where he sat, his body transforming.

His form was still mainly draconic, however, his scales were made of metallic material and had a dirt-like appearance. There were jagged pieces of earth sticking out of his body in many places, replacing other draconic features like his horns.

It was the appearance of a dragon who was forced to embrace the earth to survive. It may have been less regal than Alcharist's form, but it contained a far greater story.

He did not flap his wings to fly. He didn't have wings in the first place.

However, hovering his body with mana was not a problem.

Hendricks met Alcharist in the air, fully aware of the nuances behind this fight.

If he lost here, then his people would be exterminated. Worse, they would be enslaved and even their future generations would suffer the consequences of their misdeeds.

Regardless of right or wrong, he had to win for their sake.

That was his fate as king.

Chapter 1750 Crown [7]

Yuna had stealth aiding her. She was able to move through crowds of enemies unnoticed and pick them off one by one to give herself some leeway.

However, Juno and Valerie only had one thing to rely on. As someone who used fire, Juno's fight against the Liqua Clan geniuses was the same as August's fight against Raphael. He could win against all of them as long as he could produce powerful laws.

On Valerie's side, water was naturally supportive of wood. Technically, they wouldn't be able to harm her as long as she used their laws to enhance her own. Of course, the Liqua Clan's water was acidic and incompatible with life, but Valerie could dissect the essence of the law and find the pure essence of water within, destabilizing their attacks and empowering her own.

Obviously, that was just as hard as it sounded. Valerie knew what she needed to do. It was easy to theorize about how to defeat these people.

Still, they had numbers. They had strength. They had the element of surprise.

Valerie's abilities were known to the world after the heir wars. On the other hand, these geniuses, while using relatively similar techniques, had hidden skills that they could pull out to surprise the enemy.

Juno, Yuna, and Valerie were making progress at different rates, but regardless of how many geniuses they defeated, it always seemed like there were more coming. And, at the end of the line, there was Wilhelm Liqua, a man that none of them could defeat individually.

Could they fight him if they worked together?

Absolutely.

Would they all be able to reach him before he decided to target them individually?

Probably not.

Valerie had to keep his presence in mind through everything she did, but for now, she had to focus on his henchmen.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

She was in a battle with the third group she'd encountered.

The first only had two people, and the second had five. She was able to defeat them quickly because she caught them by surprise and took their lives, but if she had to actually fight them, it wouldn't have been so simple.

That was why when she met a group of ten of them, she was stuck fighting for a considerable amount of time. The environment inside the maze already resembled a forest. The entire corridor was enveloped in Valerie's domain. As she had focused on speed, she had yet to find a method to counter the water mana of the Liqua Clan. So, she was currently fighting until she discovered it.

'There are more approaching.'

Mikaela didn't have the freedom to choose how the forces in her maze were distributed. She created a structure that would separate them as much as possible, but that didn't mean they were actually separated.

There were over a hundred of them in such a small space. The groups that were separated from each other were able to find each other quickly. Especially when they weren't being hunted at a rapid pace.

Valerie could feel another group of six approaching. In the group she was fighting now, there were still seven left.

Her eyes narrowed.

'Fine.'

It wasn't yet time for her to burn her blood, but she definitely had to start taking it more seriously.

In order to get through the situation, her long-term plans needed to be paused. Discovering how to counter the Liqua Clan's mana specifically could be done as she continued fighting group after group. It wasn't worth halting her progress in order to look for it.

Valerie's approach to the fight was more technical than it had ever been. Her thought process somewhat resembled August in these moments as she tried to imitate him in order to save the people she cared about.

Juno was a lot more gung-ho. He had a grin on his face the whole time, uncaring of the life-or-death struggle that he was in.

Death meant something different to him.

He had experienced too much of it. His family had betrayed him and forced him to kill them. That experience changed him forever.

Juno had long been aware of the darkness in his heart. He was even worse than Valerie in that sense. Even in this moment, he wasn't thinking about saving anyone.

He knew that he was never going to be that person. He had accepted that fact back when he first decided to follow August.

Juno wanted to be his sword, the person willing to indulge in darkness so that August could stay away from it.

Right now, Valerie had taken August's role. She was the one thinking about saving everyone.

Juno was incredibly thankful to her. After all, if it wasn't for her being the central point that brought everyone together and provided hope for success...

'...then I wouldn't be able to act as freely.'

His eyes were cold.

Juno had a talent that others in the group didn't possess. Maybe only Yuna could somewhat hold a candle to him.

That talent...

...was his talent in killing. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

They were not explosions. The sound coming from this part of the maze was caused by the gargantuan waves of liquid flames that crashed into the walls as they flooded the corridors.

The specific nature of Juno's fire, the unavoidable waves that forced each and every person in his path to take a defensive position before he even found them benefitted him immensely.

Juno could maneuver through the flames like they didn't exist, but to others, the pure weight they carried was already enough to be a threat.

This was Juno's speciality. A battle where he stood against an army with the only goal of killing as many as possible before he died himself.

'Dead.'

The enemy Juno met was already dead by the time he arrived to fight.

'Dead. Dead. Dead.'

The following three were able to stand against the flame wave, but Juno's arrival was like the call of the reaper for them.

He maneuvered around them and used the techniques he learned from his master. His arms turned into blades of plasma, and as he dashed by the geniuses in question, he got around their defenses and slaughtered them before they could recognize his presence.

People didn't know how strong Juno was, but he was someone that even August, who grew at an unbelievable rate, had to view as competition.

Juno was stronger than Valerie, stronger than Iridia or Raphael, stronger than ninety percent of the people who competed thinking they had what it took to become the dragon kingdom's Emperor.

He wasn't afraid of individual geniuses like Valerie.

But he also wasn't conserving mana at all.

Even for Juno, a person who was able to breeze through the enemies like they were nothing, this battle felt impossible.

Because, even though he was stronger...

...Juno knew that he would run out of steam before they ran out of forces.

In the end, he was only one person, wasn't he?

Infinite mana simply wasn't a possibility.

He, Valerie, and Yuna were all making different progress. Nonetheless, they were not yet losing.

As for how long that state would last, however...

In Juno's own estimates; twenty minutes at most.