

# Void 1751

Chapter 1751 Crown [8]

Wilhelm did plan to stand back and watch as August's friends were killed, but the instant they started fighting back changed his mind.

They were not giving up hope when faced with an unscalable wall. It annoyed him that they thought they could find a way out of this situation.

More importantly, if they stalled long enough and August came back, wasn't his surprise going to be ruined?

In order to slaughter them and leave their heads as a gift for the young Azure Dragon, he actually decided to move himself.

He knew just as well as they did that they wouldn't be able to fight him individually. On top of that, when he was backed by so many geniuses, he could torment them from a hidden position and take them down without a fight.

He was going to have fun.

That was his thought as he stepped forward to enter the fray.

However, it seemed that others had different plans for him. In that moment, Iridia, Eris, and surprisingly enough, Raphael appeared in front of him.

"You three...kindly tell me what you're doing in my way," Wilhelm growled.

The three of them looked at each other in surprise for a moment. Obviously this wasn't a coordinated movement. Each one of them assumed that they'd be the only one involved in this confrontation, but it seemed like somehow, they'd ended up here together.

"You cannot go."

Eris raised her voice first.

"Stay here and wait patiently until that boy comes back."

"What?!"

Wilhelm scoffed, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"Are you truly protecting them?"

"...? No. Not at all," Eris responded without a moment of silence.

"Your lackeys can kill them if they have the ability. You, however, are not allowed to join them."

"What is your purpose, Eris Noct?"

Wilhelm was already starting to get annoyed. He was known for his short temper, after all.

When someone like Eris, who was notorious for refusing to get involved in other people's business, decided to butt in like this, how else was he supposed to feel?

Did she develop some sort of feelings towards that boy?

'Impossible.'

Eris Noct never cared about other people to begin with. Let alone developing feelings, it would be a surprise if Eris even developed a friendship with another genius.

"You ask what my purpose is...?" Eris responded, reiterating his words as she ruminated over the question.

"I simply wish to see what happens when that boy returns. If you move now, then it won't be interesting anymore."

As aforementioned, Eris was chasing some kind of vague feeling in her heart that would lead her to benefits. She felt that it was related to August in some way, and if his path was interrupted here, it would be harder for her to find its source.

As such, she decided to help him, albeit slightly.

She was willing to stop Wilhelm, as he would overturn the situation. However, as she said, she didn't care about anything else.

If August's friends wanted to survive the assault of their current enemies, then they could do so with their own strength.

After all, if they lost, then were they even worthy of being the followers of someone who was trying to destroy the entire foundation of Arulion as they knew it?

Eris' reasoning wasn't satisfying for Wilhelm in the slightest. The fact that she was acting on a whim annoyed him even more, but that was Eris' nature.

This was exactly what he expected from her. A thought process that disregarded anyone and everything to get where it wanted to go.

The other two, however...

"Why is the Ignis Clan standing in my way?"

When Raphael and Iridia moved at the same time, it really did seem like they were following the Ignis Clan's decision.

They were both acting on their own. Neither of them understood why the other moved, but they were certain that if the clan learned of their actions, they'd undoubtedly be punished.

"Hmph."

Raphael sneered at Wilhelm.

"I have no obligation to answer you," he said.

But he was still going to. He wanted to see Wilhelm Liqua go into a rage.

He had only recently awakened. August's attack left him unconscious with a huge injury, so it was surprising that he was able to wake up at all. Still, he regained his mental faculties and immediately used a healing artifact to close his open wounds.

He watched as Wilhlem reappeared and as August's friends tried to fight. His original plan was to stay down and pretend to be unconscious, but that somehow changed on its own.

Raphael couldn't stand it.

The tactics that Wilhelm used were all cheap. On the other hand, while August did use tactics to his advantage, he never bullied his opponents.

"Unlike you, that guy has my respect. Even if we have to be enemies in the future, I won't stand here and let you defeat him through cowardly tactics."

That was it. If August was going to be defeated, then Raphael wanted to see it happen honorably. Even if he wasn't the one to do it, he at least wanted to stop this kind of battle whenever he saw it.

Right, it was the Ignis Clan's way to support honor and valor.

Their founding ancestor himself might have strayed from these values, but that was none of Raphael's concern. He knew what kind of person he was and what kind of values he held.

He may have discriminated against commoners at a time, and his prejudice wasn't just gone just because of a few outliers, but during the heir wars, Raphael learned just how much an honorable battle meant to him.

The fact that he used sly tactics himself and then fell to an even more sly tactic made him furious.

That wasn't the kind of battle he loved. That wasn't the heart-pounding beauty of a battle backed by honor.

As he fought for the position at the head of the Ignis Clan, he wanted to instill his values of honor into everyone and turn their people into a true warrior clan.

This was his first step towards that goal.

To throw aside his prejudice and acknowledge a true warrior from a lower class over a coward he viewed as an equal.

As Raphael expected, Wilhelm flew into a rage. So much so that he stopped caring about why Iridia stopped him.

"He has earned your respect? That commoner?"

"He may be many things, but he can no longer be considered a commoner."

India's interruption marked the destruction of Wilhelm's patience.

Now, he was really going to rage.

However, when confronted with three Holy Clan geniuses that he couldn't move past even if he tried his hardest...

Wasn't it more of a tantrum than anything else?

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As expected, he went on to spew a load of self-righteous nonsense.

If anyone present actually cared about what he was saying, then it might have been worth hearing, but was there even a single person who actually shared his views?

Every single Holy Clan genius in the room at the moment, at least of the ones that were still standing, hated Wilhelm for various reasons.

Whether it was his disgusting personality, his way of fighting, or his general reputation, he didn't really have anything going for him.

The only thing that people could latch onto was his strength. For dragons who liked to prioritize that aspect over everything else, it was enough.

Wilhelm had a grand following exclusively because of his talent. He had a clan that allowed him to act as deviously as he pleased without repercussions, and naturally that led him to become a person that nobody else could stand.

Even if their levels differed a little, everyone in this room had a similar level of talent. Given time, all of them could reach or surpass his strength.

So, what reason did they have to ignore his obvious flaws?

Wilhelm's tantrum mostly went along the lines of:

"You're all disgraces to the Holy Clans!"

"It is truly unfathomable that you can be so idiotic with your upbringings!"

"Wait until your elders hear of this. None of you will make it out unscathed."

...and various personal insults that didn't need to be repeated.

Truthfully, it all went in one ear and out the other for every genius who had the freedom to listen to what he was saying. But, it really didn't matter.

Since he was complaining like this, he knew that he couldn't get past them.

If Wilhelm still believed that there was a way for him to succeed in what he was doing, then he would put his head down and seek nonaggression until he'd found a way out of his circumstances.

He only complained like this when he had no better solution but petty tricks.

Nevertheless, Wilhelm's lack of involvement only gave Valerie and the rest some time. If something didn't change soon...

...their somewhat even struggle would end along with their lives.

There was only one person who could change things now.

And he...

He was still in the process of dying in a realm where nobody could hear him scream.

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August refused to believe that there wasn't a time difference in this realm.

It could not be flowing as it was in the outside world.

After all, a possible successor could not be contained in a secret realm with their body vulnerable for so long. They would be killed without mercy in ninety percent of possible scenarios. Especially considering where August entered from, he refused to believe that three years had passed in the outside world as well.

However, his body definitely experienced three years of growth.

Perhaps it was because his soul body was pulled into this realm rather than his consciousness alone, but August's body had been growing with the passing of time. He was fourteen now. He could feel that even his body had experienced these changes.

His musculature was maturing, and his mana was maturing alongside it. The power he had gathered in his short years of life was deepening as his body became more suited for controlling it.

There was a reason why the recommended time for geniuses to start training was around twelve or thirteen years old. If they were able to gain a sufficient amount of mana, then by the time they were sixteen, the age at which an average practitioner would optimally begin practicing, they'd already have a huge head start.

It was an important thing specifically for August at this time. His body naturally becoming taller and more robust helped him immensely in his quest to strike the First Dragon Emperor.

'He is growing at an unimaginable rate.'

The Dragon Emperor was truly surprised by August's potential.



He had been testing Dragon Emperors for a very long time. In order to ensure that his successors were all worthy of his throne, he sealed himself here and resolved to live eternally in order to keep the dragon kingdom alive.

Clearly, he wasn't doing the best job.

There had been many Dragon Emperors in the past who contributed to the kingdom's current situation. Qinglong and Zenith were outliers.

However, it wasn't the First Dragon Emperor's fault.

He wasn't aware of the outside world's situation. And, even if he wanted to keep the throne in the hands of those who deserved it, what was he supposed to do when he only had bad choices?

Before Zenith, no candidate could meet his expectations in the ambition and character departments. Every single person from every single era was unsuitable, but Arulion still needed an emperor.

Someone needed to sit on the throne so that the kingdom's fate would never die, so, even if he had to put a villain in that position, he made sure that it was never vacant.

The First Dragon Emperor was always waiting for the candidate to come who he could truly entrust his legacy to. As he watched August, he started to believe that the child had the kind of soul that he had been searching for.

'Not only has he come closer than anyone else in three years, it seems that he is using me as a training doll as well.'

August was no longer approaching rashly.

In the past three years, he'd found a way to easily dodge the first wing attack and several other abilities the First Dragon Emperor used. He, in his True Dragon form, weaved and dodged with a kind of proficiency that he didn't have before.

The First Dragon Emperor's element was light. He used the most basic light attacks, as even basic attacks from him were insurmountable for someone on August's level. Despite being a dragon of an entirely different element, August learned those light attacks and incorporated their mana sequences into his own abilities.

Speed was the key thing he took from the First Dragon Emperor.

Previously, August had been known for his dexterity only because he needed to make up for his lacking speed when compared to others. As a water dragon, he was definitely fast, but not enough for it to give him an advantage against other faster dragons.

Power was an Azure Dragon's speciality. Defense was not, but water was incredibly good at redirecting attacks so August didn't necessarily have to worry in that aspect.

The only thing he was lacking with his element was absolute speed, and from observing and fighting against the First Dragon Emperor, August found the path to that destination which was once hidden from his eyes.

'He might be the fastest finisher in history.'

For other previous emperor candidates, it had taken ten years at the very minimum to land a single hit, despite being stronger overall.

The First Dragon Emperor could have easily assumed that it was because he himself was expressing a weaker power to make it possible for August to get close, but he did not.

Precisely because of August's rapid growth that could not be ignored, he believed that August's feats were entirely the product of his own efforts.

In the former emperor's mind, he was certain that August would complete this trial in just a few years' time.

The only remaining concern was...

Without knowing how drastic the time dilation in this realm was...

...would a few years be fast enough?

Chapter 1753 Crown [10]

Twenty minutes could never be a long time.

In this world where people could live for millions of years, the value of a minute had fallen immensely.

Twenty minutes. It was an amount of time that could contain many events. Twenty minutes was more than enough time for an entire civilization to be destroyed, or for peace to be brought to a people.

Twenty minutes was more than enough time to destroy the situation in a very specific cavern on the edge of the dragon continent.

Juno stood with blood leaking from his lips, feeling the scarcity of mana in his body.

His grin never faded, and his thoughts were just as playful as ever.

'I always experience the craziest thing when I'm following that guy.'

Twenty minutes ago, he never would have expected that he'd get this far before he felt death approaching. At this point, Juno was confident that he could end the lives of every genius in his chosen corridor.

Though, he would definitely die in the process.

Valerie stood surrounded by shattered walls. Her side of the amaze wasn't able to stand the force of her battle at all. She was not bleeding, but her face was pale as she sacrificed the very essence of her bloodline so she could gain access to the power she needed to save her friends.

'This sucks.'

As expected, Valerie didn't like the feeling at all. She couldn't help but feel sorrowful, thinking about what kind of life she could have lived if she hadn't happened to meet August and Melania.

But, it wasn't like she would change her decision if she was given a chance. Every single time, she would follow the same path of ruin just so that she could stand by them proudly as an ally and comrade for life.

Yuna was out in the open. Her concealment wasn't working anymore. Her abilities surpassed anyone she'd ever met in the jungle, but the geniuses of the Liqua Clan were not beasts. They knew how to work together and scheme when they needed to, and as she fell to those schemes, her presence was exposed.

She...honestly didn't think as much as an ordinary person. Certainly when she was in battle, Yuna's entire mind would focus on the task ahead. Even with death around every corner, she would not sway.

This was the kind of mentality a hunter needed to have. Rather than ruminating over victory and defeat, she had to do everything possible to catch her prey before it was too late.

Yuna had decent abilities in the open as well, so she was able to stand against the hordes of geniuses without dying, but it became difficult as more of them approached.

Unlike the other two, she was a person who excelled at single combat. Her strengths couldn't properly shine when she was faced with tens of enemies at the same time without concealment.

She may not have been thinking it, but all of her enemies already knew that she'd go down soon.

And even if she didn't, the ones that made it past her while she was busy focusing on the crowd would kill the intended targets and finish the job, so it didn't matter.

Only those three had immediate fighting power.

Mikaela had already fallen to her knees. As the tremors shaking the walls became stronger and stronger, her control over the maze waned. The material she used to make up its structure started to crumble, and she felt the destruction in her soul. Sweat dripped down her brow, but her eyes did not lose their hardened expression. She gritted her teeth and kept her arms in the ground, controlling the maze to the best of her ability.

Raul was the one who understood how bad the poison in Melania's system was before anyone else. His stasis array could only slow its flow. It was still spreading and spreading and spreading. If he wanted to halt its progress completely, then he needed to constantly fuel the array with his mana, however, as enemies found their way to the central area of the maze, he found himself unable to do so.

Raul needed to lay formations across their protective walls to keep the enemies at bay. They didn't have the largest numbers, but ten of them could absolutely break through a wall that had become flimsy as Mikaela was forced to focus her power on other parts of the maze.

Raul had to choose between Melania and everyone in the central area. As he couldn't allow enemies to reach August or Melania and kill them before their time was over, he was forced to choose the latter.

That left Melania on the cold, hard floor alone to deal with the extreme pain that she was experiencing.

Her eyes were open. She saw everything that happened around her, and no matter how much her consciousness begged to be separated from the world, it refused to leave her body.

She felt every ounce of the poison's pain and every inch of its spread through her body. She felt as the world darkened around her and as the people she cared about struggled in order to protect her.

Her existence in this moment was futile. She had the strength to think, but what did it matter? She couldn't move. She couldn't speak. She could only suffer in silence as the world crumbled around her.

This was the end. She could feel that vile mana corrupting her systems. It destroyed her mana channels first, ridding her body of its ability to maneuver the esoteric energy. Afterward, it focused on her heart, the source of vitality. It was not trying to kill her just yet. It dug microscopic needles into her heart as if to keep it prisoner and formed a cocoon around it so that the destruction in other parts of the body couldn't reach it.

Melania experienced the systematic destruction of her organs as she was forced to stay alive by the very same poison that killed her.

It was horrible.

It was even worse when the only thing she could see in front of her was the collapsed body of someone who gave up on life before she even did.

Lucas' betrayal was meant to shatter the spirits of everyone in August's group, but Wilhelm underestimated the cliques within their ranks.

Lucas and Ophelia were friends indeed, but they were new friends. They were allies who met during the heir wars and became friends for the purpose of winning that event. August and his friends had gotten much closer to them, but in a situation where they started off as competitors, would they be able to trust each other enough in a matter of a few months?

Lucas and Ophelia were still somewhat outsiders. They were acquaintances who only met every once in a while, not people who would invite each other to family gatherings.

As such, August's friends were able to recover and focus on what needed to be done as soon as possible.

But, it was different for Ophelia.

For her, Lucas was that person.

He was more than just a friend or an ally to her. He was more than just an acquaintance that she only checked up on when she remembered his existence.

She didn't want him to be at her wedding. She wanted him to be in her wedding.

That same person that she put so much faith and trust in...he betrayed her so easily?

For what?

For power?

There were plenty of other ways for him to reach his goals, so why did he choose this one?

Why did he so easily accept that everyone had to die in order for him to fast track to his desired position?

Right, it could only be that.

From the start, he never thought of her the way she thought of him. From the start, he had only been focusing on material benefits.

That fact broke her and left her in this state. She was known for her fiery personality, but how could she fly into a rage in a moment like this?

The realization was too shattering for her to react as she usually did.

She knew that people were going to die here. She knew that she could help prevent that from becoming a reality. She screamed at herself to get up, remembering Valerie's words before she bravely charged into the fray.

However, her body would not move. Her soul could not withstand the damage it took in that moment.

So, here she was. One of many broken souls in this cavern.

They all had different thoughts. They all had different circumstances. But, together in this small place where nobody would ever know what happened to them, they all awaited death.

It was really starting to look like there was no reason to hope for anything better.

Chapter 1754 Crown [11]

5 years.

'Five years too long.'

By the time August found himself in a state where he could confidently challenge the First Dragon Emperor and aim to land that blow, it had been five years since he first arrived in this realm.

He was now sixteen years old. He was the same age as his friends who were always far older than him. It was unbelievable, really. In the short moments of respite that he had between training and challenging, he sometimes wondered if it was necessary to grow as fast as he did.

However, he knew that there wasn't another option. The situation in Arulionn was too urgent for him to slowly grow and develop into who he needed to be.

He started to understand why Damien had him spend his childhood in that small village in the middle of nowhere. There, far away from his problems, August actually got a chance to experience what would have been otherwise impossible for him.

When August entered this realm, he was at the beginning of 4th class but could display power matching someone halfway through the same rank. Now, however...

He was far, far better than he was back then. If he had to face Eris again, he was certain that he could end their battle in ten moves or less.

That was the kind of strength he had to accumulate in order to even stand in front of the First Dragon Emperor with confidence.

Time passed and passed and passed, and he got better and better and better.



Now that five years had passed, now that his attempts were falling short by just a hair's breadth, August knew that the end of his trial would come soon.

'No, it'll come now.'

It was the same thing he said to himself every time he challenged the former emperor, but it was motivating nonetheless.

[Child, have you come again?]

The First Dragon Emperor had become quite fond of August in their short time knowing each other. He had provided a separate area for the young genius to train and occasionally told him stories of an era long forgotten to pass time.

He had truly taken August as a future successor, though, until August achieved what he was striving for, he didn't need to know that he'd practically already passed the First Dragon Emperor's test.

"I'm back. This time, you won't be able to catch me off-guard," August declared strongly.

[Hahaha! How long have you been saying the same thing? What makes you think that today is the day?]

They weren't malicious words. The First Dragon Emperor was truly curious about what August had planned.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Nevertheless, August didn't speak. Nor did he utter a single thought about what he was going to do. He lost too many times because the former emperor was able to understand his entire plan through his thoughts.

He merely took a stance, following Yuna's methodology to erase all thoughts from his mind.

'This time...'

It was the only thing the First Dragon Emperor heard.

'...I will succeed!'

August dashed forward.

If the former emperor was constantly changing his attack patterns, then five years wouldn't have been nearly enough time. August would have required at least a decade in that case scenario.

However, the patterns were always the same.

The first attack, a powerful flap of the wings. August learned how to dodge this one long ago.

Incorporating the new light-based concepts into his element, August attached mana to the ends of his wings and spread them as far as possible.

XIUUU!

His body created trails of white in the air as he accelerated to a degree that the environment couldn't track.

A furious burst of wind charged towards him, but, rather than avoiding it, August charged directly into it.

WHOOOOSH!

The roaring sound that he had become so used to graced his ears. Actually, in this moment, August found that his winged form wasn't the best option. In the past five years, he learned how to consciously switch between his two forms, and as he approached the winds, he did exactly that.

Without wings, August's body became somewhat more aerodynamic. He rode the wind as if it was a wave of water, swimming through it with such proficiency that even a first-time viewer would know that he was incredibly skilled at this maneuver.

'Now...'

On August's call, the second attack came.

The First Dragon Emperor opened his jaw wide and spat out a beam of light that could incinerate an entire city. It took August months to find a way to escape its trajectory, but once again, he eventually realized what he needed to do.

Still in the air, August transformed again. He spread his wings and used the wind to pull him away from the First Dragon Emperor. He lost some progress, but he also rose high above the beam, which gave him a few seconds of time. VOOOOOM!

Its light was only a few inches below him. The First Dragon Emperor was already raising his head and changing its angle to chase him.

As August arrived below the beam, countless smaller beams of light illuminated the sky. Thousands of densely packed light columns extended from the original beam, creating a maze that August needed to find his way through.

In response, August leaned and allowed his body to naturally fall backward. He did a few spins in the air to increase his momentum and rode the side of the light beam until he was almost under it.

That was enough for that particular attack, but the First Dragon Emperor's breath wasn't like any other. As August arrived below the beam, countless smaller beams of light illuminated the sky. Thousands of densely packed light columns extended from the original beam, creating a maze that August needed to find his way through.

'Left. Right. Left. Down. Spin.'

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu! Xiu! Xiu! August expertly avoided every single auxiliary beam. He knew exactly where they would appear. He died 43 times to learn the pattern of the first area alone, and another 68 times as he memorized the further patterns.

The light maze was a large portion of the First Dragon Emperor's attack pattern. They would continue for over ten minutes, tracking August so that he could never escape their golden-white walls.

Still, once he'd memorized it, the problem disappeared.

Rather than a difficult attack to get around, this one was an opportunity for August to get close.

As he dodged and whirled, maneuvering through every single beam that appeared, he got closer and closer to the First Dragon Emperor until only a kilometer separated them.

'Now.'

VOOOOOOOM!

August opened his own maw and gathered a ball of mana. It soon transmuted itself into water, and as a sudden unfamiliar property worked its way into the element, it took on a translucent white color like a hologram.

XIUUU!

It whizzed in a high-pitched tone as its speed reached untold levels. By the time it reached the former emperor, it was also an attack capable of leveling a city in one go.

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

A golden shield covered the First Dragon Emperor, and the breath attack faded.

'Okay.'

The first phase was over. August now had a chance to get as close as possible before the second phase began.

Usually, he would only attempt to attack in the short break between the second and third phases, but he had a different plan in mind this time.

The First Dragon Emperor was going to assume that he was following a similar pattern because his head was empty, but he emptied his head precisely to form this kind of assumption.

The break between the first and second phases was barely noticeable, but it was a window that August knew he could exploit.

Perhaps this battle would end faster than any other that had taken place in this realm.

However, for the first time since his arrival, it would end in August's win.

Or, at least, that was the goal.

#### Chapter 1755 Crown [12]

When the second phase started, a huge omnidirectional wave of light would spread and incinerate everything in its path. To get through it, August needed to use his mana precisely to meld into the light's vibrations and phase through it.

This was an intensely involved process. August could do it, but he found that he expended too much mana in the process and wasn't able to sustain himself through the rest of the coming phases.

It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to attack before the second phase before, but the golden shield that the First Dragon Emperor erected was thick and unpierceable by physical or energy-based attacks.

There was only a fraction of a second between when the shield went down and when the light wave appeared. If August couldn't catch the exact timing, he would be turned into ash before he could do anything.

He'd tried over and over again in the past to hit that mark and evade the wave, but when he found a more reliable solution between the second and third phases, he switched his strategy.

It took him five years to realize a simple fact that he had been blissfully ignorant of beforehand.

The solution was actually incredibly simple.

He was thinking about it as a battle, so he was always doing everything he could to put himself in a better position for coming attacks.

But...why did he need to do that?

When he looked at what the trial itself entailed, he finally realized how stupid he had been.

August never needed to "survive."

He just needed to "land a hit."

If he didn't have to worry about living, then he could do so much more than he could before.

The strategy he was currently employing relied on exactly that.

After hundreds of deaths over the past five years, August was no longer afraid of the feeling.

He pushed himself forward with everything he had. The light-based concepts that pushed his speed, the basic concepts of water that made him nimble and dexterous, and the physique of a dragon that was naturally more versatile in the air than any other species.

With all three of these things backing him, August transformed his body into a blur of light that closed in on the First Dragon Emperor in the fraction of a second his shield took to deactivate.

And, as he had charged his breath as he moved, August was already attacking by the time the air around him turned hazy and golden.

Those two things happened at the same time.

August's attack flew past the barrier of light and made contact with its target.

And his body was turned into ash instantaneously by a kilometer-tall wall of light that formed around him.

In the next moment, he had already returned to the land of the living. Usually, he wouldn't be able to see the results of the previous battle after his return. However, this time was different.

He heard that explosion. The wall of light didn't make any sound. It was a silent and immediate killer. So, August knew exactly where that sound came from.

'I did it.'

He grinned wider than he ever had before.

'Finally.'

With his goal accomplished, the mental fatigue of five years of effort hit him all at once.

August fell unconscious right then and there. It would be many hours before he opened his eyes again.

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August did eventually awaken, and the First Dragon Emperor was waiting for him when he did.

[Congratulations, child. You have successfully proven your qualifications. I am proud to say that someone as talented as you will grow into the ruler of dragons.]

He had a wide smile on his face as he spoke.

August immediately stood up and bowed.

"Thank you," he said sincerely.

Not just for the acknowledgement, but for the years of training he'd received, August thanked the Dragon Emperor.

However, was this the end?

He felt a little forlorn as he thought of leaving this emperor alone in this realm, waiting for the next successor to arrive.

[There is nothing to feel sorry about. I am merely a shard of soul. Unless a successor enters this place as you said, my mind and body will enter a state of stasis along with the rest of the realm.]

Even he didn't want to torture himself. The realm had been created so the burden on this small piece of the former emperor wouldn't be too extreme.

[More importantly, I assume you have many things to address in the outside world. Do you really want to stay here with a boring old man like me instead of returning to your people?]



August frowned. He didn't like the way it was phrased, but the First Dragon Emperor wasn't wrong. It was better for August to leave as soon as possible so that he could address the situation outside and see how his plans were progressing.

"Then..."

[Say no more.]

The First Dragon Emperor shook his head.

[Return to your world and take your throne. Focus on the future, not the past. And, if you truly do wish to honor me...then carry my legacy well.]

"Sorry...?"

His legacy?

August was surprised by the words. The First Dragon Emperor never called the throne his legacy, after all. He must have been talking about something else.

[You will learn everything when you awaken. The Emperor's Record will visit you soon and explain to you the things you must learn. And, be mindful of your mind. I have left you a small present there.]

Feeling his body fading from the realm, August couldn't help but feel a little rushed. He felt that there was more he needed to do here, but the First Dragon Emperor refused to give him an opportunity to speak.

This realm was made to last until a successor candidate passed or failed their trial. Only a few hours after that moment would it shut down and return to stasis, but August had spent those precious hours unwillingly unconscious.

The information he needed would be transmitted to him regardless. As would the rewards he earned for his efforts.

Only, his conversation with the First Dragon Emperor ended here.

[Goodbye, child. May fate smile favorably upon you.]

Those words were the last August heard from the former emperor.

His world turned black without his consent.

But, no matter how much he wanted to stay, it was definitely best for him to leave.

After all, if he was even a single minute late...

...then everyone he cared for would die.

\*\*\*

The first thing he saw was the rubble.

It was confusing.

'Did more time pass than I thought?' He foolishly wondered.

But, as his vision cleared, he realized that the rubble was filled with corpses. Blood-stained pieces of rock littered the entire cavern.

August's eyes narrowed instantaneously as he felt something off.

The emotions he carried over from the other realm disappeared from his mind. He wasn't allowed to feel them anymore.

In the distance, Wilhelm was staring at him. It seemed that he'd returned at some point. Three Holy Clan geniuses stood around him, almost as if they were holding him back, while everyone else on the cavern's border was relatively in the same position.

Except...

'Lucas...?'

Why was Lucas over there with Wilhelm, and why was he looking at him with such a strange expression?

Only at this point did August think to look at his periphery.

And that was when it all sunk in.

That was when his ears stopped ringing and he finally realized that the cavern was currently filled with sound.

Valerie. She was pinned against a single large tree, her arms limp and her legs trembling. There were only two people in front of her, but there was a row of corpses leading to where they stood, all with the same blue hair.

Juno. His body was already on the ground. He was bleeding from head to toe, but he gripped the earth with all of his strength to exert even a little more mana to form a defense around himself. Again, there was only one enemy in front of him, but the incinerated remains of many others surrounded him in every direction.

Yuna. Collapsed atop a hill of corpses with a blade through her stomach, she took deep breaths as she tried to contain her life force. Mikaela. She was also collapsed, but with no clear injuries on her body. Her pale complexion and empty eyes made it clear that she'd suffered some sort of mental trauma.

August's eyes trembled when he saw Valerie and shook even more fiercely when they saw Juno, Yuna, and Mikaela.

When he looked down, though, they were practically quaking. Directly in front of him, practically in his lap, was a body with barely any breath left in it. That brown hair, that face...August knew it well.

'Melania...?'

Every visible bit of skin on her body was covered in dense black lines that looked almost like tattoos. They had a slight green tinge to them, especially in the skin nearby; the only indication that it was truly an infection.

A pair of eyes.

Eyes were sometimes called windows to the soul. They showcased such a wide range of emotions with nothing more than their expansion and contraction that it was almost like magic.

August's panic and confusion; his pain was clear when his eyes trembled and quaked.

However, when his mind finally put all the pieces together, when it looked at the blue hair of the corpses, the state of its allies, and the presence of that man in this place, his eyes did something entirely different.

Right, they stopped quaking altogether.

In a single instant, they narrowed so much that they almost disappeared entirely. "You..."

It was a single word. It came out of a body that had aged five years in the past few hours, so it was quite raspy and awkward.

Yet, the chilling quality it contained, the pure hatred and rage laced within, made it impossible to take lightly.

August's eyes were on Wilhelm.

As the person he was aiming his eyes at, Wilhelm saw the emotions contained within more clearly than anyone else.

No, it wasn't just emotion.

Contained within those eyes was a single concept.

Death.

Death and only death.

The innocent and joyful appearance of August Void that people knew, the calm and tactical appearance of August Void that people knew; neither was present in this moment.

The current appearance of August Void could only be described in one way.

'A monster.'

It was a thought that many in the cavern shared as they watched him.

But, the fact that this particular thought came from Eris Noct made it all the more significant.

Even those who didn't know fear felt that emotion when they looked at him.

And before any of them could prepare themselves, he showed them exactly why.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

## Chapter 1756 Vengeance [1]

August's return wasn't unexpected. Everyone who could turn their attention to him already had their attention on him when he opened his eyes. After all, his success in the trial was a broadcasted phenomenon.

His whole body suddenly shined with light, illuminating the entire damp, dark cavern. He was like a shard of glass refracting sun rays in every direction. The light originated from both his body and the crown on his head as the two merged into a single entity.

It naturally disappeared into August's body, signifying that he'd been acknowledged as the true successor of Arulion. Unfortunately, he wasn't in an environment where he could be celebrated.

The cavern was filled with blood, not flowers. And, as he found out in his first few seconds of consciousness, everything had gone wrong.

August didn't know how to feel at first. The sheer devastation overwhelmed him and made his mind go blank.

As he saw more and more, something inside of him broke.

His actions had led all of his friends close to death.

No, even from a single look, he could tell that Melania wouldn't live for more than a few more minutes.

He couldn't believe it.

What had gone wrong?

Right, as he didn't know about the crown's hidden realm, he thought that he could finish everything before Wilhelm returned. A single wrong assumption ended up giving his enemy a chance to end him, and as his friends protected him, they found themselves in this kind of situation.

No, it was two wrong assumptions. Lucas...

August didn't even think about it. His mind was already blank, and as he saw the people up there standing around and doing nothing, he couldn't hold it back anymore.

If even one of those geniuses stood up to help, then they would have been able to leave the cavern without a scratch.

August obviously knew that they had no obligation to help him. In the first place, they were not his friends, but people chasing the same benefits that he was.

Still, his mind wasn't prepared to register that yet.

The only thing August felt was rage.

And he knew exactly who to take it out on.

August slammed his arm sideways.

Water gushed into the cavern in quantities it had never seen before.

It rushed towards the two geniuses in front of Valerie before they could react. They, of course, instinctually put up shields. In their eyes, once they registered the attack, it would be enough for them to survive and attack back with only minor injuries.

That assumption was based on the foreknowledge they had of August's strength. He may have been powerful in the heir wars, but not enough to fight them. They were over a hundred years old and had trained to another degree, achieving power that August couldn't imagine yet.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

...or so they thought.

The instant that wave hit them, their shields shattered. Their bodies were thrown back and rag-dolled by the flow.

In the end...

SPLAT!

They went into the nearest cavern wall and turned into patches of blood.

Dead in an instant.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

There wasn't even a moment of silence for people to process what had happened. The singular genius in front of Juno was the strongest of Wilhelm's deployed reinforcements. If it weren't for his power, which was nearing the nine revolutions already, then Juno wouldn't have been put into such a terrible position.

He frowned when he saw August flatten those two, but he didn't panic. He had time to put up his own defenses. Unlike them, he could properly block it.

...or so he thought, right?

Flattened. Without an ounce of resistance, he was thrown into the wall and slaughtered like a pig. His life held no meaning in August's eyes, and his attacks conveyed that message clearly.



August was focused on Wilhelm. He didn't even look at the other geniuses as he killed them.

Wilhelm's teeth were gritted to the point where blood was leaking from his lips.

Seeing August's expression, seeing that he was back, the other three backed off. Their job was over, so they were back to being observers.

It was unfortunate for Wilhelm. Their presence served as a sort of protection for him. Now that they were gone, he was left to face every ounce of that murderous intent on his own.

"You...there is no way that you were acknowledged..."

Those were Wilhelm's first words.

And that was August's first step forward.

His aura grew even further. Wilhelm's eyes shook slightly as he was forced to take a step back.  
'I...stepped back?'

He was confounded by his instinctive decisions.

He felt fear from that boy?

He felt danger?

When they fought previously, Wilhelm allowed August to dominate so that he could gain a false sense of security. He didn't feel danger from anything the young genius did. The only problem he saw was the difference in their bloodlines, but that was not something that could be changed.

In any case, Wilhelm was stronger, so he didn't have to actually worry about August. He could toy with the young genius as much as he wanted before killing him.

"Don't kid me! Even if you have been acknowledged by the crown, it does not mean anything. In the end, you will be nothing more than a puppet for us to control as we—"

BOOOOOOOM!

He was only talking to himself in the first place, but his words were still cut off by an explosion.

Eris and the rest were forced to jump away as the entire upper half of the cavern was destroyed.

Rock crumbled down as the ceiling collapsed. Luckily, the cavern wasn't flooded, but it wouldn't be able to take much more damage before the entire thing collapsed.

August's friends were left behind a wall of debris in the healing water that he surrounded them with. He didn't have to summon anything new. He just repurposed the water that had already flooded the cavern while Wilhelm was blabbering. The fight would take place on this side, ensuring that they would not be harmed. This way, August could do whatever he wanted without worrying.

Wilhelm was floored by his power. His words ended not because he got hit, but because he barely had time to both dodge and put up a shield to block the pressure waves of August's punch.

'Fast.'

He could no longer try to justify it with excuses. Somehow, August had gotten incredibly stronger.

Even though the Holy Clans knew that there was a secret realm inside the crown, they didn't know exactly what happened within. The First Dragon Emperor always forced his successors into a pact that forbade them from spreading his existence into the world. This was primarily so that incoming successor candidates wouldn't try to kiss up to him or manipulate the trial somehow.

August didn't realize how special he was to be given the former emperor's trust, but that was beside the point.

The point was that Wilhelm didn't have any way of knowing that August had been away training for the past five years.

For geniuses and dragons with their level of talent, five years was a monstrous amount of time. It was more than enough to surpass anyone and everyone at the same level, and as August showcased upon his return, he had done exactly that.

He had only attacked Wilhelm once so far, and with a punch at that, but he made the Liqua Clan genius' hairs stand on their ends. Panic and fear were emotions that Wilhelm had never felt before in his life.

Not until this moment.

And how did he respond...?

Chapter 1757 Vengeance [2].

Naturally, his first instinct wasn't to steal himself and fight so he could escape or defeat August. His first instinct was to use any means possible to get the other genius away from him.

"Come out!"

He screamed in a panic as he backed away.

August was already turning to look at him again. He was purposefully moving slowly so that Wilhelm could observe the intent behind his every action. Perhaps it was a way to taunt or torture him, but it actually worked in Wilhelm's favor.

He discovered that August was still alive through a certain source in another Holy Clan. The information was planted for an unknown reason, but once Wilhelm confirmed it with his own people, he immediately made a plan.

Rather than telling his elders so they could send someone who was overqualified to kill August, he wanted to do it himself and earn the glory.

As such, he gathered many people under his command and made the expedition himself under the pretext of fighting for the crown.

His plans never went awry, so he wasn't worried. Still, he had to watch out for even the slightest possibility that he would die.

He brought insurance. He would not die as long as a Holy Dragon didn't appear, and considering how they felt about August, why would they help him?

It was a simple method. It was the same method that everyone in his clan loved so much.

When Wilhelm screamed, a shadow came out of the wall and manifested into the form of a person. That person's eyes were hollow, but he had an air around him that only the highest authorities in a Holy Clan could possess.

That person was not a living being anymore. At most, he was a puppet. However, he was not a puppet that Wilhelm could create or control. Instead, it belonged to his father and contained a trace of his will.

Its only job was to protect him against any and all enemies. In this case, August was the person standing on the other side.

Wilhelm was already preparing to gloat when the puppet appeared, but he was not given the chance.

After all, August prepared insurance too, didn't he?

He specifically added a thirteenth person to their group with the sole purpose of preparing for the worst.

Unfortunately, that person only agreed to help if he was in danger of dying.

August made the assumption back then that he would be fighting alongside his people, so he figured that the enemies they faced would be taken care of in the same breath as his.

That, obviously, did not happen.

Still, it was enough that he was moving now.

OOOOOOOOOOH!

A huge sound filled the area. It did not come from nearby. From its echo, one could deduce that it was created in the underwater ravine beyond the cave system, but how did it still contain so much power when it arrived this far into the earth?

That bellow froze everyone in the cavern at the same time. Wilhelm's dark helper turned to face it, and, ignoring August, it chased the source.

After all, it was merely a puppet. It determined that there was a greater threat to Wilhelm's life outside, so it left.

Wilhelm himself, on the other hand, was left in August's hands.

"What did you do?!" he screamed.

"I brought a friend to talk to yours."

That was the extent of the explanation August was willing to give.

In the next moment, he was already in front of Wilhelm with his fist extended.

BOOOOOM!

Wilhelm's strength had never been properly defined. Though dragons had access to the system, they didn't really use it the same way that humans did. After all, not many dragons focused on creating their own skills. They also measured strength differently. They used the same markers, but levels were meaningless in their eyes.

To put it simply, Wilhelm's strength was above Eris' enough to make her wary but not enough for him to defeat her without a prolonged battle.

If one looked at his level, he would be somewhere around level 375.

Then, what about August now that he had left the hidden realm?

He could definitely defeat Eris in some minutes at most, and if his level had to be estimated...

...then he would already be at level 399, just on the cusp of the 9 revolutions. With his ability to fight above his class, he could display power beyond that number.

What was taking place now was less of a battle and more of a beatdown. Wilhelm, who was once an enemy August could only strive to defeat, was just a doll for him to abuse now.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Though he could have ended it faster by using his abilities, August only expressed physical strength against his enemy. He used extreme speed to take away Wilhelm's chance to counterattack and extreme power to cause as much pain as possible.

Wilhelm couldn't feel anything but pain. His vision was blurry. The cave swayed from side to side as his head was snapped left and right by August's fists. His elevation changed occasionally, but he hardly realized as his vision blurred further when his skull slammed against the roof of the cave.

He couldn't make a sound other than the guttural and unreplicable sound his throat made as he was flung around.

With a powerful kick, August pushed Wilhelm out of the cavern and into the system of tunnels that led there.

Wilhelm's body was covered in blood. At this point, it was hard for him to even register pain anymore, but August didn't care in the slightest.

BOOOOOM!

With a powerful kick, August pushed Wilhelm out of the cavern and into the system of tunnels that led there.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Every time he landed, August appeared to kick him again, breaking his ribs and causing heaps of internal bleeding.

However, August did not want Wilhelm to die yet.

Even from a glance, he saw how bad his friends' injuries were. They had suffered so much because of him. August needed to make him suffer just as much.

BOOOOM!

One more powerful kick threw the now limp body of Wilhelm Liqua out of the cave system entirely and into the underwater ravine.

Well, it wasn't a ravine anymore. The entire structure had been destroyed. The remains of the ravine were now just a deeper part of the ocean. That was why, when Wilhelm's body entered it, he immediately started healing.

August specifically used the sea's power to bring him back to full health.

A physical beating was only step one.

In his state of absolute rage, all of August's mental faculties were focused only on finding ways to make Wilhelm suffer for as long as possible.

He who was always praised for his mind had a moral code that led him to always prioritize the safety of his allies over the damage he could do to his enemies.

However, in this moment, he had lost all that qualified him to be a hero.

August Void had become a spirit of vengeance.

And...

If he kept down this path, then it was unknown whether he could find a way back to the light.

The four observers who followed the battle with their eyes and awareness were stunned.

They had never seen August act without bounds before. They never imagined that a boy so young could carry within him a monster capable of inflicting such damage.

In the end, he was still a practitioner.

There wasn't a single practitioner in this world who could really live only for others, forsaking killing and pursuing reform.



No matter how much August wanted it to be otherwise, he would always be someone carrying darkness within him. That kind of person could never become a light for others.

That was what they thought.

But...were they correct?

It still remained to be seen.

After all, though he looked like he didn't have an ounce of reasoning left in his body, that was not true.

August was very aware of what he was doing.

And, even in this moment, he had a plan to save everyone.

Chapter 1758 Vengeance [3]

The destruction of Wilhelm Liqa took place over three separate stages.

The first stage was physical. His body was beaten and bruised by the fists of another until even his mind could no longer function properly.

The second stage was energy. August took Wilhelm into the seas and used their sheer power to once again mutilate the body of his enemy.

All of the surrounding water was under his control. Even if Wilhelm was able to find the mind to counterattack, he would not be able to wrestle control away from August.

This was an environment filled with his element. However, it was an environment where he had no access to mana whatsoever.

In this place, water invaded his veins and polluted his blood. It went up his nostrils and into his brain, turning into multiple tiny blades that cut into the fleshy interior of that organ, slowly taking away its ability to function.

In the process, Wilhelm lost his ability to feel fear, panic, and pain. He lost his memory and lost his understanding of why he was being tortured. However, that was exactly what August wanted. Wilhelm in his current state had regained consciousness. Though he could not directly feel the results of his torture, his soul was more than aware of what was happening and forced him to feel the things he could not feel through his body.

One might wonder how August could possibly create a third stage of destruction at this point. Wilhelm was nearly crippled in both mind and body. His methods were already cruel and unusual until now, but if he continued at this point, he would only be tormenting a living corpse for his own amusement. That was why the third stage was a matter of the soul.

August didn't have any access to the soul, so he couldn't directly target Wilhelm in that aspect. However, he had his means. Damien had equipped him with several artifacts. Some of them could be catastrophic if misused.

August displayed the power of one of those artifacts to read Wilhelm's soul fluctuations. With the data he received, he precisely attacked Wilhelm in the physical plane so that his soul would enter a state of eternal suffering.

Once enough trauma was induced in a person who had been driven into such a tragic state, their soul would replay that memory over and over again, as it was the only thing left for it to remember.

August was violent. Far too violent to be the same person he once was. By the time he finished tormenting Wilhelm, the other genius' body bore not a single resemblance to either a human or a dragon. Several of Wilhelm's organs were floating through the open seas. His flesh and bones had been restructured until he was the same kind of grotesque puppet as Estavian.

August was getting revenge. That much was true. However, in his mind, he was also dishing out justice.

A justice that was long overdue, for the people who had been tormented by Wilhelm in his twenty-something years of life.

The number of victims under his belt was in the tens of thousands at the very least. August didn't even know how many others had been destroyed and transformed like Estavian, but he knew just how many commoners had mysteriously disappeared for the sake of Wilhelm's experiments and whims.

He didn't care if his actions couldn't be justified by such matters. He didn't care if others saw him as a monster who was unforgiving to the extreme when it came to his enemies.

He did what he felt that he needed to do.

The main lesson he learned from his father, the one thing Damien made absolutely sure that August internalized before he left, was to follow his heart.

Whatever he felt was right, he couldn't question. If it was right to him, then others didn't matter. Not unless they were people whose opinions August valued.

Did he value the opinions of anyone observing his actions?

Not in the slightest.

And...

Once he brought his friends back to full health, he didn't need to mention this particular event.

August stood there and stared at Wilhelm's remains.

He said all of that, but he couldn't lie and say he wasn't feeling empty.

In the back of his mind, he was feeling disgusted by his own hypocrisy.

How could he do something like this and act like he was different from the people he criticized?

Was everything he stood for just a front to hide a madman who loved the taste of blood?

It was obviously a meaningless thought, but how was August supposed to know that? Despite all the time dilations he'd been through and all the things he'd experienced, he was only sixteen years old.

He was questioning himself, questioning his values, and questioning the world. This was the natural behavior of a young practitioner who was still finding his way.

If he had to be compared with the father he viewed as his idol when he was the same age, then...

Well, at sixteen, Damien was doing nothing but wallowing in self-pity and trying to survive, so August was definitely in a better place.

Still, he had a path of his own to walk, and to do so properly, moments like these where he doubted himself and reaffirmed his will were necessary.

Nevertheless, as August's rage faded and the emptiness swallowed him, he stood blankly in the sea for several seconds. If it wasn't for his attention being grabbed by an approaching presence, then it likely would have continued for longer.

"Senior..."

August slightly bowed to that being.

Since he was here, Wilhelm's helper was also dead. It wasn't like he stood a chance in the first place.

In a sense, the man who aided August was also an Ancient Dragon, but he was on a completely different level.

He had lived for several million years at the very least. His form in the water was more like that of a whale than a dragon, but his lineage could not be ignored. He, as the person who stood above all of the Sea Tribes as their supreme ancestor, was a being that even the Holy Dragons needed to be wary of. His presence was exactly what secured the seas.

It took a lot for August to convince him to help, but since he was already here, he was doing his job properly.

"That puppet has been slain. It seems you have taken care of your enemy as well."

His voice was transmitted through every ounce of water, making the molecules vibrate.

August nodded slightly, his mind still focused on other things.

He was lucky to have someone present to remind him of what was important.

"Regardless of what kind of battle you are fighting internally, it can wait. Child, do you not have more important matters to attend to?"

August's eyes widened.

Right, he'd forgotten. He hated himself for forgetting, but that was what had happened.

He needed to return to the cavern as soon as possible.

Otherwise, Melania and the rest would die.

August put all of his mental issues aside. In the end, his doubts were just doubts.

The friends who protected him and used their lives as shields to keep his enemies away were far, far more important.

Right now, they were the ones who deserved all his attention.

#### Chapter 1759 Vengeance [4]

August rushed back into the cavern as fast as he possibly could. He completely ignored the five observers who were watching his every move. He didn't know exactly how to feel about them yet, so it wasn't worth acknowledging their presence. When he reached the cavern, he took a quick look around to determine everyone's situation. Juno would be fine as long as he kept healing with the water. Valerie looked okay on the outside, but her aura was much weaker than normal. That was something August needed to look into.

Yuna was close to the edge of death, but she had used a skill to seal her blood flow. Once the sword was removed from her stomach and she was introduced to the healing effects of the surrounding water, she was brought back to an acceptable state. As long as she received proper treatment soon, she would be fine. Raul hadn't taken much physical damage. He was merely exhausted beyond belief. As for Mikaela...the healing water didn't seem to help her much, but if her issue was a mental one, then the solution to her problem was elsewhere.

Still, even Mikaela saw some progress when her body was submerged in the water. Her eyes were still cloudy, but her complexion was far better and her body seemed to be in good condition. The only one completely unaffected by the effect was Melania.

The black lines on her skin didn't fade. Rather, she had turned a different shade of green as the poison gripped her harder.

August rushed over and felt her pulse.

"Melania!"

No answer.

'Tch.'

He knew what was devouring her instantly upon feeling the flow of her blood. However, it wasn't a known poison. It had definitely been made for the sole purpose of this attack. August couldn't find a solution in the small amount of time he had. Melania really only had seconds left. Her hands were limp, and though he was right in front of her, she couldn't seem to recognize his presence. 'I have no choice.'

August put his hand to his chest.

He gritted his teeth and stabbed his fingers into his own flesh. He dug three inches deep until he touched a piece of metal that should not have been there. This was an artifact he was never supposed to use, let alone tell people about. This was an artifact that would set the world aflame if its existence was publicized, as such, it could only be used a single time.

Damien inserted it into August's body while he was asleep to ensure a painless procedure. The next morning, he told August of its presence, but he didn't tell him where it was.

That was something August learned on his own as he fought the First Dragon Emperor.

As he died over and over and over, his chest pulsed as if something that was meant to happen was being forbidden. The First Dragon Emperor was actually the one who told him exactly what that feeling was, and though August planned to exploit it for his own benefit in the future, he couldn't do that anymore.

He closed his fist around the metallic object and ripped it out of his chest without hesitation. He ignored the blood leaking from the gaping wound he created as he created water to clean the artifact and make it pure again. The moment it was withdrawn from his body, it no longer considered him its owner.

Instead...

August pressed the artifact into Melania's chest. It shined as it recognized the flesh it was placed against, and on its own, it moved into her body.

Instantly, her entire body was covered in the same light.

The use of this artifact was simple, and this simplicity gave August an absolute certainty that it would work as intended.

Its one and only use: to save its owner from death.

No matter what kind of situation they were in, no matter how close to a corpse they were, as long as it was in their body, they would be healed back to their peak state.

It was meant to be August's life-saving card. In the rare situation where he was on death's door and Damien couldn't help him, it would be the factor that made it so August would never meet his fate before his time truly came.

However, he had sacrificed that life-saving device for Melania's sake. If he had to do it again, he would do it without hesitation.

"Khhhhh!"

The only problem was that the flesh he gouged out of his body couldn't be healed easily. As the artifact was directly connected to his life force and he forcefully removed it, his life force was currently refusing to flow into that area of his body.

The wound in his chest had already blackened from necrosis, but he wasn't worried.

'It'll heal eventually.'

He knew he wouldn't die before he found his way to a proper healer.

The most important thing was that the dark lines that covered Melania's body were rapidly fading. Her skin was losing its greenish color and returning to its original luster.

She had not awoken yet, but it was just a matter of time before she did.



'Hmm...'

August smiled wryly. He didn't realize how distant he'd become from mortality. After five years of not being allowed to die and an entire life knowing that he would always be saved before death, he had forgotten what it felt like to be so close to death.

It was an odd feeling, an empty yet relieving one. August eventually had to stand on his own, didn't he? He spent too long under his father's protective umbrella. Now that he was an Emperor's Successor and someone who would lead the dragon people in the future, August needed to become self-reliant.

It was definitely nice to have a backer as strong as Damien, but it could definitely be inhibiting if August decided that independence wasn't a necessity.

Rather than falling into a pit that would leave him as someone who could never improve, August would much rather take a stand on his own, even if he had to fall over and over before finding success.

Now that Melania's situation was secured, August could let go of his greatest worry.

He moved from person to person, checking on his friends until he'd done an in-depth analysis of all of them.

The only person he really had to worry about was Mikaela, but even she had just sustained a heavy mental shock. With the help of a dragon with psychic tendencies, she could be easily brought back to consciousness. There was only a single remaining concern.

August glanced around and placed his hand on the cave floor. Under his influence, the entire area was turned into a fortress that would protect his friends for just a few more minutes.

In the meantime, there was somewhere he needed to go.

After all, Wilhelm wasn't his only enemy. Wilhelm was just the most important one. Other than his five observers, there was only one person left who had been forgotten since the beginning of the battle.

But that was because he'd disappeared exactly then.

Just because he was focused on Wilhelm didn't mean he had forgotten the main perpetrator who allowed such a tragic event to happen.

That man who stood with Wilhelm when he was meant to be on the ground with the rest...

August was now going to confront Lucas Stroll.

Chapter 1760 Succession [1]

When the world faded into darkness, Melania thought she was dead.

The last thing she saw through the small space left in her vignetting vision was August's figure covered in light.

She wanted to smile and welcome him back, joking about something random as they confronted their enemies together. She wanted to have some sort of reaction to welcome him back from whatever realm he'd gone to.

Unfortunately, she could not.

After watching all of the rest of her friends fall one by one in her paralyzed state, Melania was sent into the blackness. Her consciousness was enveloped by the murky waters of the underworld as she unwillingly bathed in their current. If only a bit more time passed, she'd finally be able to let go of this life and pass over like everyone else.

In her mind, all possibilities of survival were gone now. Melania didn't want to give up hope. She wanted to grab onto every tiny rope she could find if it meant that she could live for even a few seconds longer.

However, the ropes in the sky above were all frayed. She grabbed and climbed, grabbed and climbed, but all she gained was an inconsequential amount of time. Looking back at it, there was never a reason to resist. She willingly threw herself into the jaws of death for August's sake. Since she was able to see him safely return to the world before she died, she should have just been content.

Most people in her situation would die before they saw if their sacrifice meant anything.

Still, Melania wanted to be selfish.

She wanted to be the person who saved him, but she also wanted to live and see what happened afterward.

Even as her soul disappeared into the embrace of samsara, she looked into the sky, hoping for a miracle.

And it arrived.

Somehow, her prayers had been answered.

The darkness above that could only be considered a sky because there was a sea below; in that place, a golden light shone. It formed a pair of wings like those of an angel surrounding a circular runic symbol that she'd never seen before.

As its light illuminated her soul, the pieces that were fading into a haze became corporeal again. The murky water that was up to her hips by now receded along with the blackness. Warmth filled Melania's soul, and subtly, she once again felt a connection to the physical plane.

Her body...

She didn't realize that her soul had been separated from it until she gained it back. The tactile feeling of her nerves firing signals in every direction, of her mana flowing through her veins, and of her heart beating powerfully was an unimaginably beautiful feeling to her.

She had almost died.

However, her vitality told her that she was alive. The angel who saved her from the darkness assured her that she'd live.

The process of cleansing Melania's body took several minutes even for the heavenly artifact. Not only was her physical body practically dead already, but her soul was nearing the border to the beyond and needed to be retrieved from the grasp of samsara.

It was possible as she hadn't completely died yet, but she really didn't have any more time. With a few more seconds, even the artifact wouldn't have been able to save her.

Nevertheless, to Melania, it felt like no time at all. She was so deeply enveloped in warmth that she could not register time. The only thing her mind saw was the beauty of life, the beauty of being returned to the world.

And though the real world could never be as glamorous as it was in her head, none of that mattered.

Melania opened her eyes and saw a destroyed cavern filled with water. It was dark, damp, and disgusting.

However, compared to the murky waters of the underworld, the bloody waters of reality were far more enticing.

Compared to the dark sky of that place, even the dreary rocks above had a kind of majesty that couldn't be explained.

Looking down at her own hand as it responded to her desires and gripped itself over and over again, Melania smiled.

'I...I'm back.'

She couldn't stop the tears from falling. She hugged her knees and cried happily, celebrating her return from that place.

It was scary.

It was so much more terrifying than she expected. Just like August, Melania had died many times in a realm where she was invincible. As such, she had lost her fear of death.

She was able to run into danger without qualms specifically because she'd done it so many times, but now that she had experienced what true death felt like, she didn't know if she would continue to be reckless.

The hopelessness was completely unlike what one felt when dying in a realm like that. The realization that nothing could be done, that even having consciousness was meaningless for anything other than realizing one's own insignificance.

She didn't understand exactly why she'd lived, but now wasn't the time to question it.

She cried for no more than two minutes before she got herself together and stood up. It was only then that she noticed there was a barrier separating her from the cavern. Looking around, she saw that everyone else was enveloped by similar barriers.

Melania sensed the strength flowing through her body. Her mana, which had been destroyed by the poison, was back.

As such, she easily popped the barrier and stepped into the water-logged cavern.

All around, the others were waking up too. Valerie was already standing. As was Juno. Those two never lost consciousness, so they saw what August was doing from the start. Of course, August assumed that they were focused on healing, but he was not correct.

The things he was planning to keep hidden from others had already been revealed, though the two who watched didn't plan to mention it.

Yuna had awoken. She checked the wound on her stomach in surprise and looked around to see everyone else.

Raul was the same. Whether it was by coincidence or design, all of them woke up and looked around to see the rest doing the same. And though August was not present, there was definitely a place for all of them to turn their attention.

Valerie's hands shook as she saw the face of the friend she thought she'd lost.

"Melania!" She yelled in shock and bewilderment.

Melania smiled. This time, she was able to hear her name being called.

"Yeah, I'm here."

She responded warmly. It was all she really got the chance to say. After all, in that same moment, Valerie charged in and hugged her with all her might.

It was a reunion both of them thought impossible, but one that was allowed to happen through a collection of miracles.

The two of them, no, everyone in this cavern had chosen to sacrifice themselves to help their friends. In the end, when thoughts of escaping left their minds, they did everything they could to kill as many enemies as possible before going down themselves so the rest didn't have to face as much.

In the moment of battle, all of them wondered if now was really the time to die. None of them held such thoughts, but as death filled their minds, they were forced to wonder if it was really worth it to do all of this for the sake of others.

However, all of them came to the same conclusion. Standing here now, none of them doubted themselves in the slightest.

Right, each and every one of them tried to sacrifice themselves for the rest. That meant that each and every one of these people was a cherished comrade and a trusted friend.

For the sake of the people who would do the same for them, why would they hesitate?

As everyone gathered and began conversing about random topics, glad to be alive, their last member also arrived.

It had been too long since they had last talked.

Wasn't it about time for August to reunite with his friends?