

Void 1711

Chapter 1711 Third Stage [9]

The tremors from Valerie's clash with Faldren were felt at the castles of both teams.

They reacted roughly the same as they felt the draconic auras of those who had entered their true forms, understanding that none of them would be able to refrain from doing the same anymore.

But, both sides kept most of their attention on the border cities.

"As expected, your friend over there was useless."

Eris stood over the projection table and watched the map change, addressing the only other person in the room.

"That's just how it is," Wilhelm responded with a smile and a shrug.

"You know his situation."

"Yeah, you're a sick one."

"You aren't being very nice, Eris. I think most people would call it 'strategy,' would they not?"

Eris glared at the blue-haired man.

Of the people in this competition, including August, he was the one she despised the most.

After all, her hatred for August was situational. When it came to Wilhelm, there was a page-long list of reasons why she never wanted to be near him.

'Unfortunately, we have to work together here.'

And because she was one of the most prominent figures on their team, she had to work closely with him.

Estavian was...well, that didn't need to be mentioned at the moment. The point was that he didn't have any power unless he was near Wilhelm. It was impossible for him to act outside of that man's command.

That was exactly why he'd lost so miserably, wasn't it?

"Still, I don't know why you thought it was necessary to do all of that. We could've lured them in without losing as many troops," Eris said.

Wilhelm had only one condition for him to leave her alone and let her properly command the army.

The first move had to be his. No matter what he did, she couldn't interfere.

Naturally, she agreed. Having him stay far away was just too appealing for her to reject.

Yet, when Wilhelm decided to sacrifice three hundred of their troops just to lead Raphael into their territory, she couldn't help but doubt it.

"It doesn't matter," Wilhelm responded simply. His always-casual attitude was part of what made him so off-putting. He was, after all, the complete opposite of a casual person.

"Did any of them matter? Would any of them have contributed anything to our cause before dying? Whether they're sacrificed now or sacrificed later doesn't matter. In the end, this is a battle for those of us who actually deserve to be standing on this stage."

"Regardless, if you think they're stupid enough to fall for your little traps—"

"—little traps? Eris, my dear, you aren't braindead, are you? Did you actually think those basic formations were my only cards? Don't be silly."

Wilhelm grinned.

"Raphael is a bit of a blockhead himself. Maybe your favorite muckblood will realize that something is wrong, but that kid...he has a mind like mine."

Eris gritted her teeth. She couldn't fight with him here. It made her blood boil, but that was the fact of the matter.

Wilhelm's plan was simple, and it was already being carried out.

The exterior border cities weren't sieged with as much force as hoped, but that didn't matter.

The main target was none other than Raphael Ignis.

Plus...

"...when we take him from them along with those bottomfeeders he brought in from the outside, what will be left of their army?"

There was really only one critical piece of information that Gianna was able to share before she was eliminated.

Raphael was being followed by a famous mercenary group from the outside. They were feared, sure, but they were still just an unruly bunch that barely earned their noble titles.

Other than less than a hundred soldiers recruited from various clans, the rest were unknown.

The only thing Gianna could confirm was that they were all dragons and none of them had lineages she recognized. She disappeared before she could understand what the strength of those lineages was, but since they weren't anything recognizable, nothing more needed to be said.

Those were geniuses recruited by August Void. His origins were mysterious, but not enough to cause concern.

'Despite that, they're the ones I'm most wary of.'

Unlike Wilhelm, Eris didn't take them lightly. Rather than the threat she knew, the one in the shadows was more fearsome.

They may not have been from recognizable bloodlines, but if they were all 4th class dragons as reported, then they weren't weak by any means.

'Taking Raphael down is still the first priority.'

Since they'd come this far, there was nothing left to be said. Raphael had to be eliminated before they could focus on the rest of the team.

And, if they were lucky, they would be able to take down more than just him with their schemes.

'It won't be long.'

They'd have to wait until they heard back from Gianna, but once they did...

"Haa..."

Eris couldn't stop herself from sighing.

After this ended, there was nothing they could do to stop public opinion from turning against them.

For each and every person on their team, the only option left would be to win the heir wars.

Only then could they truly shush any opposing voices.

BOOOOOOM!

The rest were unaware of what was being planned in that castle. Even Seryius hadn't explored it too deeply out of fear of being detected.

Everything that both Eris and Wilhelm said was recorded and displayed before the world, but nobody saw it.

Not a single person actually witnessed that conversation.

After all, with so much excitement going on, who was going to focus on the portion of the war that was being intentionally minimized?

Especially at a time like this, when everyone's attention was focused on the constant explosions ongoing to the west of the same territory, nobody was of the mind to see what anyone else was up to.

It truly was a sight to see. When two dragons fought, it created a scene that was as beautiful as it was brutal.

Nature itself responded to those beings.

In the plains only a few hundred kilometers away from the western border city, the earth had become Valerie's territory and the sky belonged to Faldren.

A massive expanse of trees of all kinds, dead and alive, had populated the previously empty space.

Flying above it was an emerald-green dragon that looked far too majestic to be of common descent.

Meanwhile, the sky was entirely gold.

The energy of fate flowed freely, causing a myriad of phenomena throughout the clouds. A golden dragon with accents of red flew there, above his peer in altitude but not stature.

The two had not fought seriously yet. They'd been prodding each other, colliding only occasionally to see where the other side's power level was.

They were right about even. Neither of them could win with brute strength alone.

Then, this was going to be a more intrinsic fight, a fight closer to dragonkind.

A battle that looked brutish on the surface, but was the most focused on complexity.

Through a method like this, they would not learn who was the greater genius.

Instead, they competed to see who was the greater dragon.

And, after gaining a sort of respect for each other through their exchange thus far...

Both of them were dying to find out.

Chapter 1712 Calamity [1]

The grand scenery around Faldren and Valerie actually wasn't created intentionally.

See, for dragons, creating phenomena wasn't a necessity. They learned how to do it only so they could more efficiently release power in their human forms. When they returned to their original forms, the need to have a medium to release power disappeared.

Humans created great forms for their abilities, copying mythical creatures or even natural beauties in order to execute their abilities properly. It seemed like the most natural thing to do exactly because it was.

Mabna was a mysterious energy, and humans, who didn't have a particular closeness to nature yet had an immense aptitude for adaptation had to find a way for them to exert this energy without melting their brains in the heat of its activation.

To mimic myths and legends meant quantifying that power, making it more easily understandable while never diluting the concepts within.

It was a genius solution to the problem they faced as a species, so much so that even dragons were impressed by their accomplishments.

Still, that was the end of it.

Dragons didn't have the "need" to take such detours. With their natural affinity for the energy and their heritages that gave them all of the information that they could possibly need, they were able to release mana in all its intensity without manifestations.

Sure, to humans, dragons seemed unskilled in precise control because they didn't fight the same way, but that was simply a false assumption made with lacking knowledge.

Where it was needed, precision could be used at any time. However, a true battle of dragons didn't contain anything like that.

To fight with nothing more than the strength of law comprehension, to only acknowledge the person who won as a victor if they fought without tricks and schemes; that was the dragon way.

It was the reason why people like the Ignis Clan, who faithfully adhered to it, were disgusted by the Liqua Clan's mentality and actions.

It was also why the crowds were so captivated by Faldren and Valerie.

The two had done nothing but release wave after wave of energy, but somehow, the environment responded to their presence and changed.

They had only ever attacked each other, yet the manifestations changed and morphed along with their strikes to make their battle visible to anyone who couldn't understand their laws.

That was an entirely natural process, not something they provoked. It was beautiful exactly because nobody and nothing could mimic the feeling that a sight like this gave.

Neither Faldren nor Valerie paid it any mind. They were more focused on each other.

In a battle like this, it was impossible not to gain respect for the enemy.

They were showing each other the greatest truths hidden within their laws, so naturally, they were forced to acknowledge each other

And since their battle had started in full, there was no need for them to hold back anymore.

It was hard to explain to someone who couldn't feel the aura of that battle, but in the simplest terms, it was a fight between "Fate" and "Life."

The Aureat Clan's fate manual didn't have a specific route for their geniuses to follow. Fate was such an elusive element that it presented itself to every individual differently.

A genius had to first understand what Fate was saying to them and what it was willing to give them before they developed a style that worked only for them.

Faldren was a top genius of their clan because he had been granted the ability to "alter" Fate.

He could both take it from people and give it away. It was incredibly rare for people to gain both, and when they did, it was almost impossible for them to actually control both sides properly.

Faldren was able to overcome those struggles. With his power, he could boost his own fate and give himself more luck and opportunities than his peers. In the same breath, he could doom his enemies by severing their fates, leading them to an eventual death.

Faldren was not an absolute god. His power was conditional, and he couldn't just kill anyone regardless of level or ability.

There was a reason why Valerie was still fighting him.

The concepts of fate couldn't be as easily defined as those of proper laws.

That which Faldren was currently using against Valerie was best defined as "the futility of existence."

This was one of the greatest concepts of fate. It deemed that, when fate was a concept that led and controlled all lives, what was the purpose of existence?

If all people were but puppets under the control of this elusive force, then was anything they did truly something they achieved on their own?

Struggle, tragedy, the determination to overcome; did they ever mean anything?

Waves filled with such a concept flowed towards Valerie.

Then, she had to match it with a concept of the same strength.

What had her comprehension come to? At one point, Valerie was actually the worst in comprehension. She reached 4th class, but she was never able to understand what her new position entailed.

Through the heir wars, Valerie learned a lot of things. As she saw people who were supposedly at the same level as her do things that she could have never imagined and realized her inadequacy, she ended up growing at a similar pace to Melania.

The key was her fight against Remelia in the labyrinth. To realize that wood dragons were not just apostles of the forest, but apostles of life as a whole.

The forest was their homeland. It was where their vitality shined the most. But, for a wood dragon to truly reach their full potential, they needed to understand that their lives did not end in the forest.

Valerie started with only understanding what she could achieve with vitality, but it was more than that now.

As she watched such an esoteric concept, created from the heavens' response to the hearts of people through a multitude of already existing concepts, she didn't feel fear.

With sharp eyes that mirrored her determination, she released a wave of power of her own.

Choice.

That was the concept she chose.

Life, in the opinion of someone who wielded fate, was just something to be controlled.

However, for those who truly understood the law, it never adhered to that opinion.

Life was a series of choices. One would see the impact of a choice they made far in the past in their lives decades or centuries later.

Every choice mattered, and if even one choice was made differently, then one's entire life would change.

Could the luck involved in good choices be attributed to fate?

Could the misfortune from bad choices be attributed to fate?

Some people used fate as a way to remove responsibility from themselves. If their actions were the result of some mysterious force, then there was nothing they could've done, right?

No matter what, their life would always be as fate deemed it.

Valerie completely rejected that idea.

Choice was the clearest and most obvious way to show that fate didn't exist.

Fate could not influence the soul. A choice made in the depths of one's heart could destroy anything that fate had planned.

Living beings were born to go against fate, to carve their names into history, and destroy any paths that led them to misfortune.

Even if they didn't succeed, they could always make the choice to keep fighting until it was no longer possible.

No mere concept could form that kind of determination. Only the pure will and choice of a living, sentient being could keep them fighting even when hope and fate were against them.

Maybe fate existed. Maybe it was always trying to control every little part of every little person's life.

However, as long as they willed it, fate could become nothing more than a petty excuse that held no power.

Those two opposing concepts, those two opposing beliefs clashed in the space between Faldren and Valerie.

The beautiful manifestation of light that they created was a sight that audiences would remember for a lifetime.

Chapter 1713 Calamity [2]

If there was one negative to a sacred battle like the one that was currently taking place between the two young dragons, it was that a battle like this could go on for days before reaching a conclusion.

As seen, both geniuses needed to take time to release their most powerful concepts. Only when someone lost one of these collisions would the battle end, but since it was a place where honor was enforced, each genius was given the time they needed to create a concept that could match the other person.

If they couldn't create anything meaningful, then they could try to combine smaller concepts into a sort of amalgamation that could defend them, but how long would that last?

Eventually, the person who fell short would lose.

But that was just eventually.

At the moment, Faldren and Valerie's battle had only just begun. They decided to start with their strongest concepts, so even when several hours passed, they were still trying to see whose overall belief was stronger.

It would be many hours more before they switched to any other concept, so while they fought, it was better to focus on the movements of others.

Noticing Valerie missing and feeling the explosive force on the horizon, the people she'd brought from the Wood Dragon Clan immediately rushed to her aid, but, obviously, they never arrived.

They were immediately interrupted by the violent ringing of their communicators, through which August's voice greeted them.

"Return to base. Let Valerie fight."

The wood dragons immediately took offense to his words.

"But, sir!"

They still called him respectfully, since Valerie forced it into their skulls that he was someone to be treated as they'd treat her.

"Don't say anything. If you go over there, you will only obstruct her. Senior Revell sent her here so she could grow, didn't he? Do you want to be the reason why she gets stunted at a critical moment?"

It was a valid point that nobody could counter. No matter what was happening, Valerie wouldn't die. Any battle here truly was a great learning experience.

They saw how different the current Valerie was when compared to the irresponsible young miss they once knew. To Valerie, they wouldn't leave her side because they couldn't adapt to the outside world.

In reality, they did so to make sure she stayed out of trouble. The Valerie they knew would cause chaos with her lack of care for anything other than amusement, after all.

She clearly showed them time and time again that their worries were unfounded. There wasn't anymore a reason for them to be so overprotective.

They sighed, but in the end, they did return as ordered.

They were stationed in the border city directly opposite to the one they'd captured. Raul and Yuna joined them as well.

It was not August's order, but Iridia's.

She had taken the lesson August gave her to heart, and within the few hours that had passed since Gianna was defeated, she was able to connect to the army he brought.

There was no way for her to gain complete loyalty from them, but they respected her ability to lower her head and see them eye-to-eye. With Juno and the rest being the first to say they'd follow her orders, the rest soon acquiesced as well.

And Iridia didn't plan to lead them the way Raphael did his mercenaries.

She first split them into groups.

Yuna and Raul were sent to occupy the western border city with the wood dragons as they would later become an advance force.

Juno and Mikaela were similarly delegated to Melania, who had also returned to their side after destroying the other side's city.

Everyone was given that order. Raphael was the only one who refused to follow it and instead chose to occupy the city he'd conquered.

Nevertheless, with those who usually controlled them delegated to other roles, the rest of the army was forced to rely on the structure that Iridia gave them.

She chose a few exemplary warriors to lead the rest before splitting them into the two nearby inner cities.

The third was left empty, part of a plan that had yet to come to fruition.

August and Cera mirrored Wilhelm and Eris as they stood in the palace overlooking the projection map, but the atmosphere around them was completely different.

"That idiot...he probably has no idea, does he?" Cera said, frowning slightly.

"I tried to tell him," August responded with a shrug, "but he doesn't want to listen."

August specifically included in his message that the ease they felt while taking the border cities was probably a trap, but Raphael didn't care.

"Don't worry about me and my people. Do your own thing and stop trying to interfere..."

"...is basically what he said. I guess it takes more than just merit and skill to prove myself to him," August continued.

"It's just Raphael. He's too much of a traditionalist and even the rest of his clansmen are always talking about it. Still, we can't leave him alone, can we?" Cera responded.

August shook his head.

"Based on your brother's information, there isn't anything we can do but watch. Hopefully, he survives, but if he doesn't, then that's completely on him."

August didn't want to give up on Raphael. If this was any other situation, he would've done everything possible to help Raphael despite his insistence on independence.

But, just like with Valerie, this was an opportunity for Raphael to learn and grow.

Whether he lost here or found a way out, he'd understand the consequences of his brashness.

In this place, that was the most important thing.

"After all, I never had Raphael in mind when I planned our victory from the start."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. More importantly, since everyone's in place, we just have to wait until they move, right? With all the chaos Valerie is causing, they'll realize that Gianna is gone pretty soon. Tell Melania and Iridia to get ready."

It was better that Cera didn't know what he said. She nodded and went off to prepare the things he asked for. Meanwhile, August looked at the projection map again.

'Wilhelm Liqua...'

That man was the one leading the other side, wasn't he?

August had heard so, so much about the Liqua Clan. No, at this point in Qinglong's memories, August had seen exactly the kinds of atrocities they'd committed against dragonkind.

'Even if everyone else can be saved...'

Even if August was willing to spare the other Holy Clans and give them a chance for redemption...

'...not them.'

When August first received Qinglong's memories, he was only acting out of filial piety.

Now that he had seen more, he had truly taken his ancestor's grudge as his own.

By his standards as well, the Liqua Clan needed to be eliminated for good.

Otherwise, dragons would never be able to thrive.

It wouldn't be more than a day before August's thoughts were validated again.

Because Wilhelm Liqua was about to show the world exactly what kind of person he was.

And the ones who felt the weight of that declaration would not be his people, nor would it be Raphael and those he was aiming to eliminate.

It was the common people.

They had forgotten through the heir wars just why they were so far below the Holy Clans in status and power.

In Wilhelm's opinion, it was about time for them to remember.

Just how powerless they were, that is.

Chapter 1714 Calamity [3]

A day passed without much change in matters. Faldren and Valerie occupied the western half of the battlefield, Raphael kept his ground in the central border city, and everyone else waited where they were assigned for their leaders to make the next move.

If there was one thing to note, it was that Estavian had gathered the roughly two hundred soldiers who managed to escape from the city's destruction and formed a line to confront Raphael.

Well, that was what Raphael believed their purpose to be, but he was severely overestimating his importance in this war.

Because he'd been allowed to gather most of their army and make them loyal to only him, because he was able to get whatever he wanted from August through trades that he believed only benefited him, he believed that he was the pivotal point of everything.

And in a sense, he was.

Just not in the way that he expected.

One had to wonder how Gianna's death came to light.

Well, it wasn't anything special.

Eris had been trying to contact her since the day before.

Every time a new event happened while she remained unaware, she screamed into the communication device for Gianna to respond.

They weren't the best of friends. Eris was clearly aware of Gianna's jealousy towards her, and she understood that the other woman would be willing to take on radio silence if it meant that she could monopolize rewards.

But, that wasn't enough to explain this level of silence. Certainly not when August and his people were moving so much.

Gianna was only hurting herself by withholding information from her team. At a certain point, even pride and jealousy would have to quiet down as they faced the wall of rational thought.

If Gianna was someone worthy of this competition as their clan believed, then she would feel that eventually and concede.

But she didn't.

No matter what happened, Gianna didn't report back.

That was when Eris was forced to accept the truth.

"She's dead. That idiot managed to get herself killed before anyone else."

It was a humiliating truth, but one that had to be acknowledged.

"This is what overconfidence gets you, isn't it? Or, are you lot from the Noct Clan just incredibly prone to throwing tantrums?"

Wilhelm chimed in as if someone wanted to hear his opinion, but obviously not a single person did.

"Take this seriously, bastard. We've lost one of our only usable forces, and they still have their information agent feeding them."

"Hahaha, you mean Seryius? He's definitely sneaky, but it isn't like he can get into the palace. If he even tries, he will die. He knows that, and that's why he's just been skirting around the edges this entire time."

"Whatever the case, as long as he's still able to freely move through our territory, he is a threat. You have a lot of confidence in your own schemes, but did you know? You aren't actually that much better than anyone here. Everything you've prepared will eventually be torn down if you maintain that attitude."

"Like Gianna? I understand your concern, but that will not happen. After all, unlike her, I am not overconfident. I am only as confident as I deserve to be in my position."

Put simply, even if he and Gianna had the same attitude, he deserved to have it and she was just pathetic.

As always, the man named Wilhelm Liqua had no such thing as a connection to reality. Everything in his world was a fantasy meant to raise him up.

"Putting that aside..." he said, his eyes never turning serious for even a moment.

"If Gianna is dead, then it's fine to do whatever I want, isn't it? I've been dying to see what happens when they receive my gift."

Their cue was supposed to be Gianna reporting back the enemy's movements, but that wasn't a possibility anymore.

Without certainty in their movements, they needed to be even more careful about when and how they acted, but Wilhelm disagreed.

He wanted to do it, and he wanted to do it now.

He wanted to see destruction rain down on the world, slaughtering anyone and anything that he hadn't personally acknowledged.

Wilhelm was not someone fit to be a ruler of people.

No, he was a slaughterer. If he was ever put in control of a kingdom, he would do everything in his power to watch it fall.

This was only a simulated environment, but it gave him the chance to do something he'd never been able to do in real life.

His face showed an expression unlike anything Eris had ever seen before.

His eyes shined with a murderous light as he grinned darkly. He looked like a wolf hunting for prey to torment.

"Do it."

He said only two words, but the individual on the other side of the communicator knew exactly what he wanted.

Aside from Eris and Wilhelm, he was the only one. He was in charge of pushing the button. It was the only job he'd been assigned in the war thus far.

And, eager to make achievements, he pushed it without hesitation.

He was in the palace, so he didn't feel it immediately, but for the people that were in the thick of it...

The entire battlefield changed at that moment.

It was an eruption that nobody expected. Even August and Cera, who'd predicted that there was something hidden there, didn't think it would be this insane.

That button was pressed and all hell broke loose.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

An entire strip of land containing all three border cities on Eris' side was separated from the rest of their territory by a massive barrier.

It started with just a few cracks, but they soon expanded into massive chasms reaching far into the depths of the world.

The earth crumbled, and immediately, those three cities were destroyed.

"Stay calm! Use mana to hover!"

In the middle of it all, Raphael tried to command his troops to deal with it.

They were surrounded by the screams of common people as hundreds of thousands of citizens were swallowed into the earth. Magma soon rose from those cracks, melting those who couldn't run in time and making them experience pure agony.

BOOOOOOM! BOOOOOOM! BOOOOOOM!

Huge explosions were happening everywhere, claiming more and more lives.

Amidst all of the screams and cries, amidst the undeniable aura of death that spread through the border cities, Raphael was forced to defend himself over anyone else he saw.

He was going to die here.

That thought flitted through his mind and unsettled him to his core.

"DAMMIT!"

He roared as he maintained the mana barrier around him that diverted any force that headed his way.

That force went on to strike and kill many civilians around him, dying the ground with blood, but even that proof of his sin was swallowed by and submerged into magma, never to be seen again.

Everyone was already dying. The barrier that erected itself around the area made it impossible to escape.

As if this level of chaos wasn't enough, there was something rising from beneath the surface.

A huge maw, the mouth of something that should have never existed in this war, burst through the magma...

...and swallowed everything whole.

Chapter 1715 Forced Change [1]

There were no words that could be said to describe that moment.

Audiences watched with bated breaths as that "thing" shot out of the ground. It was too big to understand what it actually was. The only thing part of its body that people could actually see was the huge mouth that swallowed all three border cities whole.

It snapped its mouth shut with such speed that it sent a wave of turbulent air in every direction. It hit the barrier and didn't spread further into Eris' territory, but there were no such protections on the other side.

It hit August's border cities like a terrifying storm, destroying the walls entirely. If it wasn't for Valerie, Melania, and their people protecting the citizens inside, all of them would have died in that moment.

In the grand scheme of the war, it was nothing unexpected. Raphael was almost certainly going to fall in that moment and nothing could change that.

Yet, the implications of that move were not small.

Raphael did something similar when he took the city from Estavian. He didn't care about any innocents and let them die so that he could accomplish what he set out to do, but even then, crowds only felt a little displeased.

It was different this time. The brutal realism through which each and every simulated citizen died was too much for many onlookers to stomach.

When they thought of themselves in that position, sandwiched between two Holy Clans who didn't care about what happened to them, it became even more terrifying.

Wilhelm made his message clear.

The lives of the common people meant only what he decided they did. If he wanted them dead, then none of them would be able to retaliate, no matter what kind of power or status they held.

What was the point of all of the politics and schemes of their social hierarchy when there was a class of people so far above them? Were their lives truly as meaningless as he made them look?

The sentiment inspired rage in many a citizen in Arulion, but there was nowhere for that rage to go. They clearly learned what would happen if they directed it at those who provoked it, and there was no point in directing it at each other.

A deep sense of hopelessness was what spread from that moment.

August gritted his teeth as he watched it happen from a distance.

'So that's how it is?'

He felt the same sense of injustice as everyone else.

He couldn't believe that this was how the other side wanted to fight this war.

It easily could have been a battle of brawn from the start. If it wasn't for the populace living in their territories, then August also would have been as destructive as possible.

However, they were clearly added into the equation to ensure that the battle wouldn't end so simply.

'That message...was it for me?'

Though Wilhelm was never present and the event took place like a natural calamity, August knew better.

He could feel the malice involved in the decisions that were made on the other side, and it gave rise to boiling emotions in his soul.

'The long game isn't something we can play anymore.'

August had a good plan to take down the other side systematically. He was going to show the might of his mind and defeat them before they could do anything significant.

Unfortunately, his intelligence wouldn't spark hope in the people watching from beyond the barrier.

It was impossible for him to feel exactly what audiences did, but he got the gist of it through his own emotions.

They probably wanted to revolt as well. They wanted to let themselves be known, to show the world that their lives had just as much worth as anyone else.

He needed to be the person that returned that hope to them.

As a commoner himself, as someone who grew up surrounded by beautiful people who the world refused to remember, he had to show them that they could do it if they tried.

They could be remembered as heroes, as artists, as scholars.

Status wasn't what defined them, and Arulion was not what the Holy Clans presented it as.

'Fine.'

If he had to throw it all away, that was fine.

He wanted to hide for a bit longer, but if it was strength that they wanted to see, then it was strength that he'd give them.

Raphael was swallowed by that beast. His fate, the fates of his mercenaries, and the fate of Gio, who'd been following him, were unknown.

The beast below the surface had likely been living there for eons. Wilhelm was able to abuse its existence once, but he wouldn't be able to use it again.

And, since he'd sacrificed three of his own cities to create that atrocity, it would be far easier for August's side to win.

"Everyone, are you listening?"

August spoke into his communicator with cold eyes.

As he heard most of his team report back, he steeled himself.

"Forget everything we've done so far. We're switching to Plan Z."

It was a plan without a proper name because they never planned to use it from the start. August called it "Plan Z" because it was their final plan, one that was never to be employed unless they had no other choice.

This was not that situation, but everyone understood why August made his decision.

If the other side wanted blood, then they would show them blood.

Their losses were somewhat equal for now, and it seemed that Wilhelm and Eris assumed they had an advantage because they'd made the first real devastating move of the war.

August was more than happy to show them just how wrong they were.

August and the army he brought all had real combat experience. The wars they fought in Bastille weren't child's play. They were far more brutal than something like this.

People died in orders of thousands every hour. Blood flowed into the soil with such frequency that an entire portion of the earth was dyed red for years to come.

They hadn't used their experience there in this war because it was just a simulation. When August declared that they'd be using Plan Z, all of that changed.

Wilhelm's actions directly influenced the systematic destruction of his army.

Most of those troops were in the three inner cities that had remained untouched until now.

The entire territory was now separated from its sister territory by a massive chasm in the center, but it wasn't hard to cross.

Especially when those geniuses who wanted war decided to change into their dragon forms.

Under August's orders, massive attacks were carried out in every possible region of Eris' territory. Using technology from Bastille, which was still relatively new in Arulion, August's side was able to maintain an absolute advantage over the other side.

In the coming weeks, the war escalated and escalated. Most of the recruited soldiers on Eris' side had been defeated before they were able to show an ounce of their might, and as if to get rid of anyone who

wasn't important, August's troops specifically targeted the noble geniuses who had once banded together under Mikael and eliminated them.

It wasn't difficult. Once the heir wars became a battle of growth, it was supposed to be a stage reserved for Holy Clan geniuses. The noble geniuses had been outperformed constantly, and now that the competition was in its third stage, they no longer stood a chance.

Even those like Remelia, who caused problems for Valerie in the labyrinth challenge, were forced to die before showing anything notable in the war.

Within a month, the only people left on the enemy side were the Holy Clan geniuses, apart from Gianna, of course.

Valerie and Faldren kept fighting in their isolated corner where nobody bothered them, but that was the only part of the battlefield that didn't change.

August lost troops as well. In the more reckless combat that was taking place now, it was impossible for everyone to survive.

And since only those who actually had a chance of winning the competition were being kept in the war, everyone who was part of his alliance, barring himself, Melania, Valerie, and their Holy Clan geniuses, was eliminated.

Lucas and Ophelia went down after taking all of the nobles on the other side with them, so their performance wasn't to be overlooked.

Still, in the end, there weren't many who could confront Holy Clan geniuses and win.

There were only three outliers from the commoner faction and four more who August had summoned from thin air.

Nevertheless, August had an advantage in both numbers and power.

The only question was how the other side would react to their current predicament.

After all, Eris and Wilhelm never left their castle.

Whether they were hiding like turtles or preparing something more devious than their last move was still unknown, but it was high time for them to be confronted.

Those two geniuses who liked to act like nothing that was happening concerned them...

August was patiently waiting for the moment he could slap them across their faces.

Chapter 1716 Forced Change [2]

More than just a few spectacular events had taken place in the past month, but in the end, not much changed.

The chasm actually made it impossible for either side to raid the other's territory covertly, and though the inner cities had suffered through many battles, they had yet to fall.

On August's side, it was because of their planning. The three cities had become inaccessible unless one knew how to get past the mechanisms protecting them, so every time a force was sent to raid them, it fell under pressure.

This was the main strategy used outside of just slaughter to bring the armies of the other side from over seven hundred to just around fifty.

August still had two hundred people at his command, but in the current situation, the armies had faded into the background.

Wilhelm seemed to hate following the rules. Whenever possible, he stirred the pot and absolutely ruined the civilized warfare that was going on. He made it impossible for August and Eris to have the tactical showdown they were trying to have, and more importantly, he completely ruined the essence of the third stage.

There weren't any civilians left on his side of the arena. They weren't killed as collateral damage from battles, nor had they been slaughtered by August's troops as they marched.

Each and every one was murdered in a terrorist attack performed by none other than Wilhelm Liqua.

He just wanted to see chaos. For Wilhelm, the heir wars were just a game. He didn't care about who won, and he had no interest in winning, because, at the end of the day, the newly crowned Dragon Emperor would still be a pawn for the Holy Clans to control.

All of these geniuses were trying to win the competition so that their clan could hold more power over Arulion, but did they think that was actually possible?

As long as the Liqua Clan existed, anyone who tried to break the balance would die.

They did it to Qinglong, they did it to the Dragon Emperors who came after him, and they did it to Zenith.

Wilhelm was the most arrogant person August ever had the displeasure of meeting, but there was nothing he could directly do about it.

Not yet.

That man was from the clan that ruined his ancestor, but he was also technically a distant relative. The Liqua Clan stemmed from the blood lineage that August carried in his veins. Even if he had measures keeping the aura of that bloodline hidden, he couldn't be sure that he wouldn't be detected by someone who shared a portion of his lineage.

The audience's perception of the battle had changed since Raphael's elimination as well.

Rather than a competition between the kingdom's best geniuses, it had become a battle of good and evil.

August's side, filled with people who kept the common populace in mind and attacked in ways that didn't affect them, was the side of justice.

Meanwhile, everyone around Wilhelm had been sucked into his vile reputation. Whether they agreed with his actions or not, everyone on that side of the competition was now a villain in the eyes of the crowd.

Thus far, the main focus had been territory. Eris was the one who controlled the armies in most matters, so she and August properly underwent the challenge as they were meant to, fighting in the light and in the shadow to see which one was the better strategist.

Eventually, Wilhelm's schemes led the competition into nothing more than a combat test. Genius against genius, they were to fight until only one side still stood.

It was annoying, quite frankly.

Nobody wanted to see the stage be ruined by an unruly brat, but that brat had too much power. His influence had woven itself too deeply into the nature of the third stage, which left everyone else dancing in his palms.

'Eventually, I have to confront him.' August thought to himself.

That day had to come, but it was not now.

It was a miracle that Valerie and Faldren hadn't found a way to end their battle yet, but that truly was the case.

He had even been over there to see what they were up to, but it truly was a stalemate. Everything they threw out was properly countered. With the passing of time, they ended up learning from each other, which gave them even more ammunition to use.

Still, they had to be running out of comprehension. Their battle was already in its final stage.

Melania was currently with Juno and the rest, confronting Nathaniel Aureat in their quest to siege the palace.

Wilhelm and Estavian were being cornered by Seryius, Cera, and

Bianca, while Iridia led the remaining troops to lay claim to the

three inner cities on the enemy side.

Everyone was busy except for him. Well, for now.

He was waiting for an opponent of his own. She was coming

over the horizon now as if they'd agreed upon a time and a

place.

'Well, that's because we did.'

The third stage was, for lack of better terms, going to shit

because of Wilhelm.

August and Eris secretly communicated just a few days prior

and came up with this.

The two of them would fight, settling the grudge they formed

in the first round. The goal was to settle everything before their fight ended.

August sent his troops out without keeping anyone in reserve.

It was easy to find everyone else, but it took Eris' help to catch Wilhelm.

Their unlikely alliance was the only thing keeping the third stage from sinking entirely into chaos, but it was made only out of necessity.

This stage needed to end so they could move back into a proper competition again.

And, this stage needed to end so they could get Wilhelm out of this competition.

At the heart of Eris' territory, there was a great battle taking place. Several separate clashes in close vicinity were creating a

scene that all audiences would have loved to witness.

However, their focus remained on these two.

It was subtle, the rivalry they'd formed. At first, it was just Eris

chasing a pointless grudge against someone who beat her

honestly.

As the third stage went on and the two of them tried their best

to compete under Wilhelm's tyranny, it evolved into something

more.

Even August wanted to see who would win between them. He

had seen Eris' good qualities through her tactics which

remained honorable.

Unlike Wilhelm, she wasn't inherently a bad person. She just had

a bad personality.

Though, it wasn't like August was going to tell her that.

Eris arrived in her human form, which was surprising when

everyone else had switched to their true forms.

It was likely because August refused to transform.

He couldn't.

No matter how much Damien's artifacts helped him conceal

himself, they'd lose their entire purpose the moment he

transformed. It really didn't matter if his aura was hidden at

that point, because the sheer majesty of his appearance would

immediately give him away.

The current state of events was scary for August specifically. If

he was forced to take his true form, what would happen?

It was a question he considered many times, but this was the

moment for his hypotheticals to become reality.

Eris Noct, a woman who was far more powerful than him just a

few months ago. Facing her directly, August truly couldn't be

sure.

Either he would be able to end this fight without either of them

transforming...

...or he would be forced to reveal his greatest secret to the

world.

It was either one or the other.

There was no in-between.

Chapter 1717 Forced Change [3]

"August Void."

Eris said his name with a nod as she landed in front of him.

"Should I say I've been looking forward to our meeting?"

August shook his head with a wry smile.

"It probably isn't for the right reasons, so I'd prefer if you didn't," he responded.

They'd come for a duel, so it wasn't like they were going to start fighting immediately. Still, it wasn't easy to make small talk when they weren't on the friendliest of terms.

They stood there, neither willing to make the first move before the other was prepared.

The duel they tried to have was ruined by a third party.

Eris had practically lost all of her control over their army. Everyone listened to Wilhelm, because he had a charisma that they couldn't avoid being sucked into.

Eris definitely had more of a chance to bring them to victory, but Wilhelm made them feel like winners. To these young geniuses who more often than not hadn't lived long enough to develop some sense, the latter was far more appealing.

They shared his mentality, after all. They also saw commoners as dirt. They also wanted to wreak havoc and use their power in ways they weren't allowed in the outside world.

Perhaps Eris and the rest were the strange ones for being different.

Nevertheless, Eris was now a puppet leader who couldn't do anything about what her team was doing. Since they wanted to be idiots, she figured it was better to end this whole thing and stop giving them chances.

Just her and August fighting wouldn't be enough to end this war, but as long as August's troops could occupy the castle while everyone else was busy fighting, then everything changed.

The two geniuses had come to an agreement.

Whichever of them won this fight would win the war.

If August lost here, his troops would forfeit no matter what kind of progress they made. If he won, then their occupation of the castle would be confirmed and they'd automatically gain victory.

It was a simple solution that actually took a painful amount of planning to set up, but now that everything was set into motion, it all came back to them.

"So, are we going to do this or what?" Eris said impatiently.

"I'm ready whenever you are," August responded easily.

Eris nodded and took several steps back, putting roughly ten meters between them.

She primed herself for battle, dropping her stance. The look in her eyes changed as she became the cold-blooded killer that August knew.

And as she did, he also took his battle stance, becoming the killer she had yet to meet.

A cool wind blew between them as if to set the stage. As a single blade of wandering grass slowly drifted down to the earth, they both dashed forward.

Bang!

Their first collision was physical.

August already knew what she could do with her mana, but she really didn't know many of his abilities. Aside from the one time she'd seen him fight in the second stage, she never had the opportunity to understand exactly what his power was.

Plus, if she tried to view him through the lens of who he was in the last stage, then she would immediately lose this fight.

August had a new aura about him. It wasn't anything about his power, but rather, his demeanor.

Something told her that he had improved beyond anything she could expect, and based on that instinct, she decided to test him first.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

They exchanged blows one after another.

Dragons were already physical creatures. Their bodily talent was just as strong as their affinity for mana.

When they were given the maneuverability of a smaller, bipedal body, they were like tigers given wings.

Unlike human practitioners, dragons liked to use the entire potential of their bodies.

Eris was more prone to use her lower body. Her kicks were like lightning, moving with extreme speed and covertly enough to only be sensed when they actually struck.

She was also extremely flexible. Her body twisted in ways that August never thought possible, both to dodge and attack.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

She was always in motion. Her legs generated insane power from all directions, barraging August and giving him no room to maneuver around her.

August blocked in the best way he could. He matched her in flexibility, but he'd never fought someone with this kind of lower-body focus.

She kicked out and he blocked with his forearm. When he thought he had a chance to escape, she hooked her leg around his arm and twisted her body to essentially climb him, trying to snap his neck in an instant.

Boom!

August slammed his foot into the ground and countered her rotation, refusing to allow her close to his head.

He slammed his arm out to the side and forced her to jump back as he chased her.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

It had a different effect when August attacked.

He and Eris both moved a lot when they were on the offensive, but they did so in different ways.

Eris was always pushing forward, but August liked to strafe around the enemy and make his attacks less predictable.

She had more speed, but his every attack had more power.

On top of that, August used his fists.

He swung from both his left and right as if he didn't have a dominant arm, and though he couldn't maneuver his arms like Eris could her legs, he had more than enough experience to understand how to use them.

BOOM!

Eris' entire body was pushed back through the dirt by the sheer force he exhibited.

It wasn't hard for her to block his attacks, but the force transmitted through her arms was still enough to cause serious damage. She had to match him and move constantly so she could dodge as much as possible within his unpredictable routines.

In terms of physical skill, there wasn't a huge difference between them, but it was definitely there.

August approached again with extreme power and struck out.

BOOM!

The impact hit only air as Eris ducked below it. She twisted her body and kicked upward with the aim of disrupting his momentum, but August had already moved.

BANG!

Two fists slammed into her stomach and sent her crashing into the ground. Without being able to lower her leg in time, she lost her footing and lost the ability to correct her fall.

Yet, if she hit the ground here, then she'd be at an immense disadvantage.

'Damn.'

In their first clash, she was the one to lose.

VOOM!

She summoned her mana, turning into a shadow that teleported several meters away.

Now that she'd used it, mana was no longer disallowed.

But that was fine.

In this aspect particularly, Eris was certain that she'd be the one to come out on top.

A sea of darkness appeared around her.

In the same breath, the ground rumbled and water responded to August's call.

This time, it was a battle of precise control of mana.

Eris definitely thought she was better. With the resources in her grasp, it was hard to think otherwise.

However, August had a teacher that others could only dream of having, and when it came to control, he was particularly talented.

Perhaps many people thought the battle would end here, but little did they know...

It would be a lot closer than any of them expected.

Chapter 1718 Duel [1]

In terms of immediate impact, Eris' actions definitely had more.

The darkness she summoned instantly encompassed a wide area around her and created an impenetrable domain.

August, on the other hand, didn't summon a massive amount of his element immediately. This space wasn't really able to contain an ocean. August had taken control of the underground rivers and reservoirs and was keeping their power hidden until he needed it.

Though, they wouldn't remain hidden for long.

The battle had changed from close combat to ranged. The two geniuses didn't approach each other and instead summoned their power with the time they gained from their separation.

Eris moved first.

'Dance of Ten Thousand Demons.'

Her arm raised parallel to the ground and a huge amount of mana burst forth. The darkness around her morphed, and an ability that August had seen already returned to the light.

An army of dark beasts summoned by Eris' power rushed towards him at unimaginable speeds. Individually, they weren't the most powerful, but their strength in numbers couldn't be underestimated.

If they were allowed to approach, they could cause damage that August had personally experienced. They got his legs first, and once his movements were limited, they swallowed him whole.

If it wasn't for Eris defeating him before they could, his elimination from the first round would have been much more painful.

Luckily, August was no longer the same person he was back then.

VOOOOM!

His mana immediately raged.

In that moment, there was no more concealing it.

Both Eris and the onlooking crowd realized that August had successfully reached 4th class.

Now, that didn't mean he'd have an easy time by any means, but the notion that he'd easily lose was wiped from everyone's minds.

'I don't really have cool names for my skills...'

Damien told him that naming the skills he used in his human form was important only for remembering them properly. Having a name and an action reserved for an attack allowed for faster visualization and mobilization of mana.

For that purpose, simple names were best. Efficient names that could be recalled at the fastest speeds to put his attacks in motion were all he needed.

So, instead of something like "Wrath of the Ocean God," August merely thought a single word.

'Arise.'

BOOOOOOOOOM!

Rushing water burst from the ground in the form of countless geysers that formed in the earth. The only difference from a normal geyser was just how much water was being produced.

The entire area was soon turned into a muddy mess, and once the soil couldn't absorb any more water., it flowed out in rushing waves that slammed in every direction.

The army of shadow beasts crossed only half of the distance between the two geniuses before they were intercepted by the powerful water currents.

It started with a bang as the first wave faced the sheer physical impact of such a large body of water, and it was followed by an array of squeals and screeches as they were drowned within.

Darkness and water didn't particularly clash, but they didn't particularly meld either.

If darkness and water wanted to be one and the same, then they could absolutely accomplish it and show a completely different kind of power. However, in the same way, if they wanted to be opposed, then darkness would be like oil to water's, well...water.

The dark beasts were made with the earth in mind. They were meant to walk, not swim. When they were placed in a situation where they were surrounded by nothing but water and its pressure, they bursted and dispersed.

Eris' eyes narrowed as she prepared her next attack.

How did a dragon's darkness work? Naturally, it was a darkness created to swallow the world.

Eris' darkness specifically was more similar to the night and death than any other element. Through death, she was able to corrode the world and summon creatures from another plane.

And through night, she was able to control space itself and turn the world into her own domain.

It was like day turned to night when Eris released her mana for the second time. A canopy of darkness shadowed everything, throwing August into a world of darkness.

'Tch.'

August's eyes sharpened to get used to his new conditions, but this artificial darkness didn't give him a chance to perceive anything but it.

August felt like he was covered in a tight blanket. His every sense was being overloaded by the darkness close to him, which made it impossible for him to perceive the threats that were further away.

He stomped his foot on the ground, making sure that it was still the ground he knew. He summoned more geysers to surround him and created a makeshift barrier before taking further control of the water to make it swirl around him.

He was just in time.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

August's attention shot to his left as three arrows cut through the blackness and struck his barrier. The centrifugal force stopped them and turned them into nothing more than particles, but they were only the start of Eris' assault in the blackness.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

Bang! Bang!

BOOOM!

A myriad of impacts, all made by attacks in different forms, slammed into the barrier. They came from every direction, clearly delineating Eris' constantly changing position.

'I won't be able to counterattack as long as I'm stuck here.'

Either he had to find a way to break her pattern, or he had to form a domain inside of her domain.

He didn't think it was yet time to start competing in their ability to dominate. But, it wasn't impossible to make it out of this situation with brute strength.

'Okay. Stay calm.'

Even if he didn't show off his power, at this point, his lineage was already in question.

Nobody believed that he was a commoner anymore. That much could be affirmed.

'Since it's come to this, I just have to make them think that I'm anything but an Azure Dragon.'

It was a good thing that August was currently using groundwater.

Until he summoned the power of the sea, they didn't have any reason to suspect that he was from a bloodline considered long eradicated, right?

'Wow, I never thought of it like that.'

The second he realized that he could just cloak the true nature of his bloodline instead of hiding his power, August's entire world changed.

'Great.'

He grinned to himself and connected his senses to the underground water sources.

'Come.'

He summoned it all.

August's awareness as a 4th class dragon went several hundreds of kilometers into the ground and awakened the essence of the earth that slumbered within.

Water. Without it, the world could not exist. It was a force taken for granted more often than not, but it was just as crucial as something like space.

Without water, life could have never appeared. Though they'd never admit it, even dragons were once merely lizards who relied on the water to survive.

That force of life, that force of death, August forced it to remember exactly what it was worth.

Every ounce of water that would answer his call rose to the surface.

And in one cohesive wave, a huge mass of liquid crashed through Eris' darkness domain.

BOOOOOOM!

Chapter 1719 Duel [2]

It was like they'd teleported into a completely different environment, really.

When the groundwater tore through the earth in its desperate rush towards the only man it deemed worthy to control it, the floor beneath both him and Eris crumbled away.

The soil mixed into the massive waves and was swept away to somewhere random. Massive chunks of rock and stone were broken apart until they were crumbs and thrown out of the newly created lake entirely.

The battleground on which August and Eris had been fighting was sunken deep into the ground. They were now fighting an aquatic battle in a field of August's creation.

Naturally, the darkness domain was disrupted by the sudden appearance of so much water. Even more so when Eris was swallowed into it.

She diverted her focus to precision control. Using the darkness present inside the water itself, she propelled herself out of the waves and into the air where she currently stood.

Meanwhile, August was in his element when he was surrounded by water. He didn't follow her into the air, but instead immediately attacked from his position standing atop the waves.

'Form.'

August twisted his hand, and the waves morphed into twin dragons.

'Charge.'

The dragons rushed into the air. They chased Eris down and opened their maws, ready to devour her.

'Damn!'

Eris gritted her teeth.

She put up a hasty defense, but it wasn't anywhere near enough.

BOOOOOM!

The two dragons slammed into and through her darkness, and she was instantly drowned in their power.

The laws of water allowed both flexibility and rigidity. When they were used offensively, they could manipulate the enemy's body into positions that completely disarmed or even killed them.

Eris was a flexible person, sure, but she wasn't anywhere near the level of water. Her body was contorted by the currents inside of the water dragons, twisted in unimaginable ways.

Before she could right herself, the water turned rigid, trapping her in her uncomfortable position.

It would have been comedic to see her like that if it wasn't for the situation.

Besides, August wasn't finished yet.

'Pierce her.'

With another command, multiple streams rose out of the lake and turned to ice. They followed their dragon-formed brethren on their path and pierced as they were ordered.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

With the sound of them whizzing through the air, first blood was taken.

The icicles cut through the water dragons and put holes in Eris' shoulder, thigh, and stomach.

"Hssss!"

She hissed in pain as her eyes sharpened.

BOOM!

An aura of darkness spewed from Eris' body and polluted the surrounding water.

As it corroded into poison, August lost control over the dragons that contained her.

They instead became Eris' power.

She stayed within the poisonous substance only because it provided a natural barrier for her.

With the moment she had, Eris patched the holes in her body with mana and instantly prepared a move to throw off August's momentum.

The question was how she could do it.

With a body of water that big, it was like he had infinite mana while she was constrained within the limits of her own body.

She could form darkness to counteract that sea, but in the end, she wouldn't be able to compete.

August used a natural resource that was being strengthened by his mana and laws. He didn't have to use mana to create his medium, so his consumption would be far less than hers.

Considering that he was able to stand up to her properly and injure her so easily, it was clear that August wasn't far below her in power anymore.

If he had more mana, then this battle would be his win if it continued for too long.

Eris either had to match him and find a natural source of power or end this battle before it got to the point where mana capacity was the most important factor.

The first option...

'...isn't impossible.'

The time they agreed upon was in the evening, after all. The sky hadn't turned dark yet, but it was darkening with every passing second.

'If I want to gain access to that power source, then I need to prolong the battle.'

And prolonging the battle would give August the advantage.

She was stuck in a difficult position. It would be easily overcome if she transformed into a true dark dragon, but she wasn't so dishonorable to force her opponent into that situation when they were already in the middle of a proper battle.

If she had no choice, then she would transform.

Either way, judging by the way they were currently using their laws, a battle in their dragon forms wouldn't last very long.

What mattered now was bringing the battle back to its starting point, on an even playing field.

Her eyes went to the lake that supported August.

'That...'

At the bottom of every body of water was darkness. In smaller bodies, that darkness didn't have much of a presence, but the larger the body became, the larger the darkness grew as well.

A majority of the ocean was darkness. The creatures that lived there had to adapt to it just as much as they had to adapt to water pressure.

This lake wasn't nearly as deep as the ocean, but it was still considerably large. Almost a kilometer of rock had been destroyed in the creation of this lake.

With the amount of darkness contained within, it was definitely possible.

Eris put her arms out and controlled her energy.

She focused her will on the depths of the lake, connecting to the darkness where only a handful of creatures could survive.

It was a conceptual darkness, nowhere near as definitive as the shadows caused on the land. Still, if she could find a way to harness it, then this battle would turn in her favor.

August felt the subtle change in her demeanor. She was no longer releasing mana, focusing instead on maintaining the mana she already had existing in the world.

Her attention and focus had been diverted elsewhere, and when he followed the flow, he was able to see exactly where that was.

'I see...' he remarked to himself.

'So you want to make this a domain battle after all.'

Her domain had been crushed and his had been created. In retaliation, she was doing exactly what he refrained from doing earlier.

'But if you want to create a domain within mine, then you'll have to work harder than that.'

The stupidest thing August could do was give Eris the chance to make a big move. As long as she was restricted to only using smaller more precise abilities, she wouldn't be able to take the upper hand or injure him.

It was wishful thinking in a sense. Eris wasn't someone who could be stopped using ordinary means once she'd set her mind to something.

If she wasn't such a person, then she would have never pursued August to this point.

She was the first real rival he'd had in this world. Juno was different. They were friends and would never actually do anything to hurt each other.

Eris was purely a rival. She was someone he strived to surpass and someone who refused to be surpassed by him.

For a second, August thought that this battle meant more to him than he originally expected.

But that thought didn't last long.

WHOOOOSH!

The waters of the lake fluctuated. They swished from side to side, clashing against each other until a massive whirlpool was formed.

In the middle of the lake was a gaping hole that led deep underground.

And at its bottom, the only thing present was darkness.

VOOM!

It was as if that darkness opened its eyes and grinned a grin filled with malice.

August knew what Eris was trying to do, and he was already in the process of creating a counterattack.

Yet, she'd already completed her move before he had the chance to do anything.

'That's a real genius.'

She was also someone with the blood of a Holy Dragon flowing through her body. She wasn't someone August could defeat easily like the noble clan geniuses, but a competitor that had both the same starting point and potential as him.

Against someone like her, tricks wouldn't work.

The only way to win was to genuinely be more skilled.

But that was exactly what got August's heart pumping so ferociously.

A true test of skill, a battle where nobody could doubt the victor...

'...I'm starting to understand why Valerie's been ignoring the war for a month.'

This kind of battle was addicting, especially for a young genius who wanted to grow.

He supported her precisely because he understood this already.

Still, it was different when he was feeling it himself.

He looked at Eris with flames burning in his eyes.

It didn't matter if it would take a minute or a year.

He would defeat her properly.

That was something he swore to make a reality.

Chapter 1720 Duel [3]

The sinkhole that was created in the lake was exclusively caused by Eris' attempts to seize control. Her darkness wanted to find a way to make their connection stronger, and the best method it discovered was to remove all obstructions that stood between them.

The darkness spread throughout the water, so it wasn't as if Eris could only control what was in that small area of the lake, but that was where she directed her will. Through the sinkhole, which contained a darkness she was more familiar with, she was able to connect to the more elusive form of the element that existed in the depths.

It was August's water. That much never changed. But, swimming within it were the shadows she controlled.

Neither of them moved. They stopped attacking each other, because the nature of their battle had changed.

They were now vying for control over the domain. This was a similar concept to the true sacred battles that dragons could have but simplified so it could be undertaken in human form.

August and Eris had their eyes closed as they merged their minds with their elements.

August felt the water from the surface to the depths. He could confirm that it was all his to control, but the depths were going through immense changes.

The darkness was becoming more concrete. The water was being morphed into something that could no longer be called as such, and with every molecule that shifted, August's control was dispersed.

Eris was on the offensive. Separating the darkness from the water was difficult at first. Since it was naturally occurring, it didn't have the same tactile nature as darkness created by mana. Still, because she was using a medium to control it, she was able to abuse some loopholes to mimic the separation.

Once that step was accomplished, the rest was easy.

Death and darkness were always thoroughly connected in the hearts and minds of people. Their fear of death, their fear of the unknown manifested itself in the color black and made them fear it.

At first, this kind of association didn't mean anything. However, the laws of the world were always changing in accordance with how they were perceived and comprehended.

Eventually, even darkness, which started as nothing more than the absence of light, gained a more esoteric meaning.

That was why Eris could perfectly control concepts of death despite it not being her main element.

The waters of hell were not the same as the waters of the overworld. In that place, the rivers and lakes were made to torture those who had done wrong, to erase their egos and memories and refurbish their souls to be sent back to the land of the living in a different form.

When Eris started to transmute August's domain, turning the water into a murky, liquid, yet extremely tangible darkness, it made even August himself feel sluggish.

He could no longer abuse this domain to pressure Eris. Instead, he had to find a way to counteract the spread of her influence.

Then, how was he supposed to do that?

Eris had the inherent advantage of using the darkness within his water against him, but the substance she was transmuting it into no longer fell under August's dominion.

It was so far removed, in fact, that he didn't believe he could transmute it into water again. Eris had properly secured herself a region of the lake that was untouchable.

That murky darkness, thick like ooze yet able to maneuver freely, slid through the lake, infecting every ounce of water it came across.

'There has to be something I can do.'

August sunk deep into thought. The best temporary defense he could use was ice.

By freezing an entire layer of the lake and creating a border between the water and the darkness, August could, at the very least, delay Eris until he found a solution.

'In the end, isn't there water in everything?'

It wasn't hard to reach that point of thought. In the end, everything Eris created was formed with water as the base. She eradicated its presence as much as possible so that August couldn't seize back control, but it was still in there somewhere.

'I'm just lacking.'

He wasn't skilled enough to perceive those minute traces within such a large mass. He wasn't, but he had to be if he wanted to win this part of the battle.

August kept his eyes shut tight and concentrated his awareness on a single point, a single fleck of water.

He observed the droplet in as much detail as possible, understanding the materials within and the way they connected to create a single, perceivable drop of water.

Minutes passed by.

With Eris constantly on the offensive, the ice wall that August made was practically destroyed already.

She encroached further and further on his territory while he continued to look for a way to fight back.

And though his study of the droplet didn't immediately give him the solution, it gave him the path.

If he could sense a single drop of water within this large body, if he could dissect it and see even further into the land beyond the eye's perception, then he could absolutely do the same when the subject was not a body of water, but a body of darkness.

It was still a sea, wasn't it?

Riding from the depths was a sea of darkness that tried to swallow everything.

While Eris was making big moves to gain as much territory as possible in a short amount of time, August covertly separated a small portion of her darkness and sunk his senses into it just as he'd done the droplet earlier.

He dissected it, understood it, and in less than five minutes, he found the water hidden inside.

The texture of this darkness was disgusting. It was sticky and clumped up like expired milk. Like oil and coolant mixing in places they were never supposed to mix, the curdled darkness had an essence of water hidden deeply behind everything else that was going on.

Once August found it, he finally had a case. The problem was what Eris had done in the time he took to do so.

The entire lake was dyed a deep black color. The portion that August controlled was nil. Despite being confident in taking back his territory, August was forced to jump away from the lake's surface and into the air.

After all, the darkness was already grabbing at his feet, trying to pull him into the deepest and darkest depths of its existence.

He pushed his arms out and focused again, knowing that he wouldn't be attacked at his current altitude.

'Water...'

It was there.

Hidden, yet screaming out for his aid, it was waiting for him.

August merely needed to know how to sense that call, to understand what it wanted.

And with the knowledge he gained through rapid experimentation, he did exactly that.

He visualized the darkness as oil and pulled it away from the water. Creating barriers around the base element alone, he slowly connected each little trace he found until they got larger and larger.

It was just a speck in this sea of darkness, but it was a hint of blue nonetheless.

Over time, it would spread and spread and spread until there wasn't a darkness left to control.

Or, well, that was what would have happened if August wasn't in the middle of a fight.

See, Eris knew exactly what he was trying to do, and she knew exactly how to stop it.

Mana control and domain control were her biggest strengths.

No matter how strong her opponent was, no matter what kind of talent he had, she refused to lose in these aspects.

So, when August started to spread his influence, Eris immediately moved to suppress him.

That was the first large clash of their domain battle.