

Void 741

Chapter 741 Eternal Hour [3]

A sea of black ink.

A forced encounter with death.

The terrifying cacophony of war.

Other than the third, something he'd been preparing himself to face for many years, none of these were things Tyler had been expecting to encounter on his first deployment to war.

But, fate wasn't something that could be controlled.

Tyler's legs slammed into the ground, shooting him up into the air. His form shifted rapidly, wings and reptilian scales appearing all over his body.

Raaaah!

He let out a ferocious battle cry as he flapped his wings and shot through the sky. Flaming breath left his mouth, creating widespread damage among the enemies.

Thousands of Lesser Nox died to his every attack, but the gaps formed by their absence were filled in an instant. He didn't have a single second to breathe.

'Dodge left. Defensive form. Switch.'

His form switched again, shifting back into the panther form he used most often.

Tyler's eyes darted around and his awareness spread out thoroughly so he could understand his surroundings properly. His body moved like a machine, completely contradicting his bestial appearance.

His body only shifted minimally at every interval, but he was able to dodge the swarm around him with relative ease.

His speed in panther form was unparalleled, but he sacrificed defense to gain such an effect. In battle, it was far less taxing on his body than some of his stronger summons.

However, it was still incredibly taxing on his brain.

'I need to find a way out. I can't stay surrounded.'

Tyler's thoughts rushed rapidly. Fighting alone in a situation like this was a terrible idea.

He, Synth, and Ash weren't powerful enough to take on those Higher Nox who came along. Even if they had power, their power was still in the range of mid-level 4th class.

Therefore, the best they could do was control the swarm so that Damien and Zara wouldn't be bothered as they fought.

It was an extremely uneven split looking at strength. Over a thousand Higher Nox with high-rank 4th class physiques were terrifying regardless of how many Lesser Nox were on the other side.

But that didn't make fighting the swarm any easier.

Millions were still millions.

No matter how many thousands died with each attack, more would always be present to replace them.

The Lesser Nox had always existed with this exact formation. To simply exist and push forward until the enemy ran out of strength was an extremely brutish yet effective strategy.

'I need to find the others.'

Tyler spread his awareness to its maximum, covering several thousand kilometers.

'I can't see them at all. We must've been separated while fight—'

"...!"

Tyler suddenly flipped backwards and turned into a retreating tail of light. Where he once stood...

BANG!

A massive crater formed.

Within the dust and debris, a lion-like man with wild hair and glistening yellow eyes brushed a hint of blood off his ash-grey skin.

"Hmm, you dodged?" He spoke casually as he left the crater, his eyes never leaving Tyler's form regardless of his speed.

"You're pretty fast," the man said with a smile. "But I'm faster."

BOOM!

The man's figure blurred and appeared directly next to Tyler. He slammed his arm to the side, blocking the young genius' path and forcefully halting his momentum.

Tyler panicked, narrowly evading the arm that would've punched a hole in his head if he'd run into it. He rolled on the floor and stood up, facing the man who stopped him.

'There's no escape.'

He realized it quickly. Escaping this lion-haired man was impossible with his abilities. His only options were to fight or die.

His form changed. It was a near-instantaneous effect.

His body grew and became more robust, his face became more primal, and tufts of fur began growing from his skin.

ROAR!

A powerful fluctuation spread from Tyler's body.

"Oho, I like your courage." The man said.

"My name is Elio. Remember it when you die."

The man, Elio's form blurred. A streak of light shot towards Tyler like a comet, reaching his body in an instant.

BANG!

Elio's fist hit Tyler in the center of his chest, but unlike before...

Tyler withstood the punch with sheer defensive power alone.

"You...won't kill me that easily." He grunted rebelliously.

The Titan Ape was one of Tyler's most powerful summons. It was slow and heavy, but it was equally tough and powerful.

To resist against a few hits from Elio was light work.

But to do it continuously...?

Tyler didn't wait to see what would happen. His fists became weapons of mass destruction. He didn't even aim for Elio as he fought, merely wishing to cause as much damage as possible.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Every impact felt like a nuclear explosion. The ground was torn to sunders, space trembled and cracked apart, and the surrounding tens of thousands of Nox were turned into ink stains.

Elio dodged like a cheetah and evaded the brunt force of every hit, but even he couldn't avoid the proceeding shock.

'Tch!' He scoffed inwardly. He could feel his organs rattling, but he had confidence in the physique that'd been built for him. His body wouldn't fall apart with just this much.

Elio's eyes turned cold. He'd come here to play around a bit since the three fighting the swarm seemed weaker than the two fighting the Higher Nox, but he didn't like what he'd encountered.

Talent.

Elio always hated the concept of talent.

The Nox didn't have talent. None of them were able to grow with their own effort to achieve power.

The Nox's way of gaining power was different, far more straightforward and adaptable.

Elio envied talent and he hated it. He hated the fact that no matter what level he reached, it'd never be wholly due to his own efforts.

He hated that the power he had was, to some extent, borrowed.

'Heavenly God Armor'

Talent deserved to die. So everyone could experience the same bleakness as him, so everyone would always be equal.

Talent had to die.

Elio's body was covered in oozing black mana. The mana solidified within sparks of a second, engraving itself with mystical patterns as it formed an ancient armor set that covered Elio's entire body.

A massive broadsword materialized in his grip.

He charged towards Tyler's titanic form and slashed downwards, ignoring the flurry of attacks that was taking place.

Shiiing!

The sword sound cut through the surrounding chaos and rang especially bright.

A spray of blood accompanied it, dying the sky red.

"Ack!"

Tyler clutched his chest as he backed away, his form changing once more into a panther beastman.

The gash running across his torso was clear as day. It was so massive that it almost looked like Tyler's body had been split in two.

'With just one attack...!' Tyler thought, trying his best to ignore the pain.

The Higher Nox experts who were leading the swarm...they truly weren't a force he could take on.

He didn't have the power.

'No.'

Tyler clenched his fists and threw away the thoughts in his head.

'I was going to die anyway, it's just a matter of how I go out.'

He'd never really cared for flashiness and he'd never really cared for pride, but now that he was on the battlefield, he felt differently.

It seemed...he'd been influenced by a certain reckless squad leader.

Chapter 742 Eternal Hour [4]

Tyler was a rational person.

Throughout life, he would rationalize all things in order to understand them.

He rationalized emotion so he could overcome it, he rationalized fear and understood courage, he even rationalized his relationships so he could maintain them properly.

When someone like him awakened as a contractor, he was originally ecstatic.

As a contractor, he could use his tactical ability more than his personal strength to command an army, allowing his talents to shine.

But...the Contractor class didn't function exactly as he'd expected.

Rather than the wisdom-centric class he expected, he got the most brutish possible subform of the class: a possession type.

His fighting style was rational. His mind could never adapt to the irrationality and primal methods of beasts, which led to him never being able to utilize the full potential of his class.

There was never a moment when Tyler chose to stop thinking.

Until today.

'If I'm going to die, I'll die with pride.'

It was a hot-blooded thought, something Tyler had never experienced before.

Something snapped in his mind.

And he turned off his rationality.

Tyler turned into a flash of light as he charged at Elio. His movements no longer resembled a human's at all.

The panther form was one of speed and dexterity. It was a form that relied heavily on instinct, as when moving with such deftness, one's senses were often too slow to properly utilize the full extent of that agility.

Tyler's natural disposition blocked his power and bottlenecked him.

With it out of the way, there was nothing blocking his full potential anymore.

He moved like a blur of black smoke. He dashed around Elio's body at a speed that even he couldn't completely follow. His body seemed boneless the way he continuously dodged attacks in the most impossible fashion.

But he wasn't merely dodging.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

His claws made high-pitched whirs in the air as they cut the wind in seven.

The sound of metal clashing against metal was accompanied by a bright array of sparks. Though Tyler's claws didn't have the same durability as Elio's armor, he made up the difference using momentum alone.

He didn't think even once. He allowed his body to move as it pleased, and concentrated his thoughts on piercing through the armor.

It was Tyler's first encounter with tunnel vision.

And perhaps...it was somewhat better for him?

Without thought clouding Tyler's brain with calculation, it was able to fire off at a far faster rate. In a completely contradictory manner, the less Tyler controlled himself, the more precise he'd become.

Even as his battle with Elio moved like a hurricane, causing a massive scene within the swarm of Lesser Nox, Tyler adapted and moved like a predator who'd been surviving in the wilderness jungle for years.

Dragon, ape, panther, ox; his form changed so often and so randomly that his attack patterns suddenly became impossible to read.

Elio's fury grew with every second.

Talent, this was talent, this was exactly what he hated.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't grow from battle and grow from hardship. He couldn't enjoy the feeling of being a practitioner.

His prey was supposed to die easily when the Heavenly God Armor appeared. He was supposed to become an invincible figure that couldn't be moved.

Yet...what was the current situation?

Black mana flowed from his body like toxic fumes and polluted the atmosphere. His counters to Tyler's attacks grew stronger and stronger.

'Fate-Severing Slash'

Elio cut down with his broadsword. Its blade gave off a desolate and sacrilegious aura.

Tyler's bestial instinct immediately rang alarm bells in his head. If he was hit by that attack, or even grazed by its aura...

He'd die.

This wasn't a problem that could be solved by instinct.

Techniques were part of the reason why humans were so superior to beasts before the latter species gained intelligence.

Tyler's rational mind spun in search of a solution.

But with the time he had...!

"Hey! Who gave you permission to bully our leader?"

The sass in the sudden newcomer's tone cut through the atmosphere with such force that it felt like time stopped to welcome her entrance.

And then, she resumed it with her own hands.

BOOOOOOM!

A massive explosion descended between Tyler and Elio. While the force wasn't enough to stop the latter's swing, it pushed Tyler away with its sudden momentum and allowed him to dodge the incoming attack.

BANG!

Elio's slash followed through, and at the same time, a massive fist slammed into his skull.

"Haa...haa..."

The rough grunting of a female gorilla was especially clear at that moment.

Tyler looked up in shock.

"You...you guys...when did you get here?"

Synth scoffed in disbelief. "Unreal. You caused all that chaos and expected us not to notice you?"

"Chaos?"

"Look around, asshole."

Tyler did as he was told and surveyed the battlefield.

He was suddenly made aware of a massive trail of destruction that'd followed his battle with Elio. Thousands of kilometers of land had been laid to waste.

"Haa, seriously. If you didn't keep running in the opposite direction from us, we would've gotten here sooner. Since when did you become the reckless one?"

"OOOH!"

"See? Even Ash agrees."

"Haha..."

Tyler laughed uncomfortably at her question. Truly, this was his first time experiencing what it felt like to be Synth.

And it wasn't as bad as he thought.

Smiling, he stood up and popped a pill into his mouth. As he allowed his injuries to heal, he spread his awareness and pierced through the truths of the world.

"Since you guys are here now, I guess there's no need to fret."

His body morphed into panther form for the final time of this battle.

"Let's kill this son of a bitch together!"

With his words as a war cry, the three charged into battle, surrounding Elio with their usual strategies and immediately driving him into a corner.

The Heavenly God Armor barely withstood their attacks. Every time Ash's fist impacted it, the force resonated through the armor and shook Elio's bones.

Not to mention, with Synth's rear support, Elio didn't have any range of movement anymore. He was like a caged beast being prepared for slaughter.

From afar, a pair of eyes watched their battle. A smile formed on that being's face.

'They're doing pretty well.'

Damien slashed Mirage through the air and beheaded the Higher Nox in his grasp.

'If they can stand up to one of these generals with their combined strength, it's better for me. It means I won't have to worry about them too much as long as I attract the enemy's attention onto myself.'

It had only been 5 minutes since the battle started. While this was less than 10% of the time remaining until help arrived, it was an extremely long amount of time for a practitioner with their perception heightened to its maximum.

This battle had been going on for ages.

Damien defeated the first fatty in a minute and moved on to his next target, but even with his current pace, he wouldn't be able to get through the massive number of Higher Nox in an hour.

'If they decide to swarm me, it'll cause problems. But more than that...'

The butler hadn't moved yet.

Like an uninvolved bystander, he watched the battle from the sidelines with a calm smile on his face.

'Goddamnit. I want to punch his fucking teeth out...'

Chapter 743 Eternal Hour [5]

Time passed at an indescribably slow rate.

Every microsecond was clearly reflected in the eyes of the Stargazer Squad as their minds were forced to the limit by the endless wave of enemies that surrounded them.

But they still had 50 minutes left to defend themselves.

In total, only 10 minutes had passed. In this time, countless Lesser Nox and over twenty Higher Nox fell.

But this number was, in the end, nothing.

Damien pulled Hel's trigger and watched as it pulverized a Higher Nox's head.

'As much as I want to devour every single Higher Nox here, I don't think everyone will be able to last long enough...'

His eyes darted around in search of a new target.

'Zara's speed isn't much slower than mine, but even combined, we'll only be able to take a few hundred of them before an hour is up regardless.'

Damien suddenly twisted his body at an impossible angle, dodging the combined attacks of a long spear and a certain deathly breed of mana.

'These fuckers just won't leave me alone...'

His eyes hardened as he lifted Mirage up.

'I'll go for the butler after I finish these guys off. Even if he isn't actively contributing right now, he's the biggest threat on the battlefield. If I occupy him, even if I can't defeat him, everyone's mental burdens will lessen.'

Damien couldn't understand the thoughts of his fellow teammates if they didn't voice them, but he could clearly understand their predicament. In a situation like this, it was impossible for them to not divert a portion of their focus outside the battle just in case he decided to move.

'Annoying prick.'

Damien charged at the two Nox who ambushed him without giving them a chance to speak. He was tired of hearing the screechy voices of the Nox.

'Seriously, where did they get their inspiration from? They seem to have the intrinsic ability to spout the most basic villain lines in existence.'

Mirage turned into a flurry of waves altering the atmosphere. Its translucent blade blended in with the background, becoming one with the world, and using the world itself as its blade.

Damien himself was nothing more than a vessel for the sword's power. He allowed it to move how it chose to move, he allowed it to flow as it chose to flow. Mirage was a being with budding consciousness, and it had its own desires and battle sense.

Damien certainly wouldn't reject his weapon's desire for battle.

He wasn't a sword practitioner, and he would never be one. Even to this day, he only used the sword out of convenience. He had no real preference when it came to weapons, and if anything, he preferred using his fists.

But Mirage was once the sword of an expert swordsman. Its inherited memory was far more flexible and maneuverable in battle than Damien's own brutish methods.

When Damien's power and Mirage's technique were combined into one, it truly created a terrifying storm.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

The sound of wind being sliced into pieces was the only thing revealing Mirage's presence as its speed surpassed what the eyes could see. The two Higher Nox who had to face the barrage were placed into a position where they could do nothing but defend.

"Petty tricks!" The spear-wielding Nox suddenly scoffed. He lifted his spear into the air and surrounded it with a cyclone of mana. When he brought it down, it created a massive gust that pushed his companion away.

Damien was clearly aware of their goal, but he didn't try to stop them. Even if the mage was given distance, it wouldn't help him survive.

'The only reason...you're still alive...is cheats!' Damien roared inwardly as he swung his blade. If these Nox didn't have defense far surpassing their true power level, they would've died to a single one of his swings!

But the difference between levels in 4th class was massive. After all, 4th class was a stage heavily reliant on comprehension, and the amount of comprehension one could achieve was somewhat connected to their level, as the heightening of their stats allowed them to get closer to the Laws of the universe.

At the same time, 4th class was a beginner course where one could experience what it felt like to interact with the laws before ascending to Divinity and becoming further in tune with them.

"Mid-level 4th class" and "high-level" 4th class didn't sound much different on paper, but it wasn't a difference that could be overcome with just skill.

Spacetime mana began to rage around Damien's body, countering the spear-wielding Nox's cyclone and taking hold of the battle's momentum. However, the spear-wielding Nox's apparent powerlessness was only a matter of circumstance. He wasn't some weakling that'd be killed off with a few swings of Mirage.

His spear was like a hummingbird, its presence loudly roaring in Damien's ears and its speed and stability keeping it steady amongst any winds or rain. The spearman stabbed and slashed with exquisite form, completely matching Mirage's skill level and disallowing Damien from landing a hit.

"Lance Cannon!"

A shout suddenly came from behind.

Damien felt the presence of something massive rapidly approaching him.

Without hesitation, he let go of Mirage, jumped up, and locked his legs around the spear-wielding Higher Nox's torso.

"You...what...?!" The Nox let out a confused exclamation and raised his fist to punch Damien, but in that instant he was distracted...

The so-called Lance Cannon appeared right before him.

Damien's body disappeared like it never existed.

And a massive lance the size of a tree pierced through the spear-wielding Nox's chest.

Damien appeared near the mage without worrying about the other Nox's life or death. Hel and Freya appeared in his hands, the crystals in his wrists shining as his mana was transferred into the twin armaments.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Like a school of fish, hundreds of bullets were fired out of the twin gun barrels, surrounding the mage from all sides as they curved through space.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

'I'll turn you into sashimi, bitch.'

The Twin Moons vanished from Damien's hands, allowing him room to wave them around like a zealous conductor. The space cracks created by his movements were like bladed crescent moons, flying through the air and decorating the bullet storm they accompanied.

Miniature explosions painted the air around the mage and forced him to focus wholly on defense. A thick barrier of black mana covered his body and protected him from the explosions, but at the same time, left him immobile.

'Checkmate.'

Damien grinned as he teleported into the cloud of explosions. He reached his hand out without hesitation and placed it on the barrier's surface.

'Material Shift'

With his words, the barrier began to change...

...along with everything inside of it.

It was like the work of the world's greatest alchemist. The world itself was transmuted, the atmosphere forcefully turned into stone by Damien's Midas touch.

"What is this?!" The Nox mage panicked. He waved his staff through the air and cast a plethora of spells, breaking pieces of the transmuted atmosphere one by one.

But the rate of freezing was far faster than his rate of casting.

If he didn't escape his confines fast enough...

He'd end up as another statue in Medusa's garden.

Chapter 744 Eternal Hour [6]

Damien's battle soon became far more heated. A third opponent appeared while he was dealing with the Nox mage, forcing him to divert his attention to others instead of finishing off the mage.

'It's not enough.'

A pair of eyes watched Damien's every movement, uncaring of the rest of the battlefield.

These sharp eyes were piercing and even a tad lustful in the intent they conveyed.

Naturally, these eyes belonged to the butler.

'The Master ordered him to be tortured to the brink before being killed. This isn't enough, is it?'

The butler bit his nails anxiously. Even though the elapsed time wasn't long, he wasn't satisfied with what he'd seen.

The battle was simply moving too slowly, it was too boring. It lacked the grandeur he'd imagined!

'These idiotic generals have no sense of unity. If they just worked as one, wouldn't he be captured simply? I refuse to let the Master's intentions be twisted by a group of barbarians!'

His thoughts swam maniacally through his head, tempting him into all kinds of scenarios he could use to entrap Damien.

At the same time, he remembered the conversation he had with the Saint Emperor months prior.

"Sebastian, I met quite an interesting child today."

The speaker was a tall grey-skinned man with black hair that flowed down his back like a river. His sclerae were black and his eyes were a piercing red color, but oddly enough, he gave off an impression similar to a scholarly young master.

"Who is this child, Master?" Sebastian answered his master's call.

"Haha, of that, even I'm not sure. However, he is extremely talented. He might even be a match for my son."

"For the Young Master?!" Sebastian exclaimed in shock.

"Mm, exactly. That child is a top talent that hasn't been seen in millions of years, yet the human side has a genius of equal standing. Isn't that interesting?"

The Saint Emperor smiled into the distance with blurred eyes. He didn't need them to see what he desired.

A boy with immense bravado and spirit, a boy with a bloodline that made his soul shiver, a boy with a strange yet familiar scent emanating from his body...

"Right, if anyone wished to match him, they must at least be at this level."

Turning back to the butler, he spoke once more. "Sebastian, I have a task I want you to execute. Even if it fails, I will not fault you. Consider it a simple...test, if you please. Find out whether this boy is a worthy opponent for Dante or just another ant that needs to be crushed. •

Sebastian bowed his head without a second thought and replied enthusiastically, "As you command, Master."

'The Young Master could kill these mere generals with a single slap! What does the Master see in that boy?'

The butler wondered as he looked at Damien. He was ordered to test the boy, but clearly, these lesser generals weren't enough to do so.

'If I'm to judge whether he is worthy of the Young Master's attention or not, shouldn't I test him myself?'

The butler smiled with a hint of mania as he stared up into the battlefield.

'To bring out one's full potential, one must first endure unspeakable torture, was it? Ah, Master truly has a way with words.'

With that thought, he made his decision. Though, it was better to say that he let go of his restraints.

'Master, forgive me if I kill him. If he dies, it just means he was too weak to face the Young Master anyway.'

The butler's body disappeared.

Time seemed to freeze.

And then...

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

The air for several thousand kilometers exploded.

Damien only felt a sudden breeze pass by his face before the world flipped. He didn't even register the pain in his face until he'd shot backwards several hundred kilometers.

"Nngh!" He groaned, realizing that he couldn't properly formulate words. Before he could even regain his senses...

Bang!

Crack!

His body finally crashed into a rock several thousand kilometers away from the main battlefield.

His spine cracked on impact.

"Fmghk!"

Damien failed his attempt to curse from the pain. Soon after, his body fell out of the rock indent he'd created and fell to the ground.

Crack! Snap!

The sound of Damien's bones rearranging and fitting back into place was especially jarring in the silence this far away from the battlefield.

His face was a mess. His jaw was hanging loose and his skull was fractured in several places. It was a miracle that his brain didn't take much damage.

After his spine returned to one piece, Damien stood up and grabbed his face, snapping it up into its rightful place.

"Ahh, fuck. I can finally talk again. You know, I'm all for appreciating culture, but I can't appreciate a culture where a punch to the face is your greeting."

He massaged his jaw casually as he shot a glare into the sky. There, a figure stepped out of the rippling space and appeared.

"Oh my, well I dearly apologize if I caused you any fright. As you said, this is how we greet people in our culture, so it can't be helped, correct?"

"Tch, I didn't know being a Nox meant having no friends. What's the point of all that power if you're going to live a lame-ass life of servitude anyway?"

"Hohoho, you may insult me as you wish, but please do not direct any ire towards my dear master."

"And if I do?"

"Would you like to experience the answer to that question?"

The butler's eyes turned cold and his aura flared outward. Space shattered, unable to endure its pressure.

"I only wished to play a bit when I dragged you out here. I suggest you do not force me to be serious."

Damien smiled a cocky smile. He smiled as if everything in the world was below him, ants for him to crush as he pleased.

"I should be the one saying that to you, Cuck Emperor's Dog. You know, the same way I was talking to your bitchass emperor's wife last night."

"You...!"

"Hahaha! Your master is the Saint Emperor, so your Young Master must be the Saint King, right? It's crazy how I'm going to single-handedly curb stomp two generations of the same family line in the coming few years."

Damien almost cackled from the pleasure of insulting someone with such childishness.

Who cared?

Sophistry was meant for humans, meant for denizens of the civilized universe. It wasn't a tool that scummy barbarians like the Nox should be allowed to use.

'Right, everything belongs to us. For the ones who try to destroy it...?'

No mercy.

No negotiation.

No courtesy.

'Life is too short to be the bigger person.'

Damien thought it with a smile on his face as he revolved his mana carefully.

In the almost infinitely slowed time that Damien perceived, he was able to clearly see how the Box butler's face went from red to black.

He could clearly see how the aura around the butler's body became laced with killing intent.

And he could clearly see as the butler shot himself through the air like a comet, intent on slaughtering Damien with a single strike.

Chapter 745 Life And Death [1]

Sebastian's rapid figure appeared before Damien's eyes in a mere instant.

BOOM!

Two fists collided and split the air.

The earth cracked and shattered to pieces, creating a massive crater. Space trembled at the might of the collision, yet the two beings who created such force were unmoved.

"Oho, not bad for a human!" Sebastian, the Nox butler, commented with a grin.

"Yeah, and you're not bad for a scummy invader!"

Damien pushed his fist forward with a burst of mana as he shouted his reply. His left arm moved like a piston, shooting a punch into Sebastian's stomach before the latter could react.

Or at least, that was the goal.

Bang!

A dull sound rang out as Sebastian caught Damien's fist.

"Has the rush of battle made you forget our strength difference? How ignorant."

"Yeah, that's my bad."

Damien grinned and moved his right arm, sliding it across Sebastian's arm to parry his motion while simultaneously materializing an object in his hand

Freya's silver sheen reflected Sebastian's face as it fired off tens of rounds in a single instant. With Freya's immense speed, Sebastian truly wasn't given a chance to counter!

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sebastian's body was covered in a spatial explosion. Damien immediately teleported away and took Mirage into his free hand, mentally preparing himself.

'He isn't trying to kill me.'

Damien could at least surmise this much from their first clash. The reason he used his fist instead of a weapon was to test this theory of his.

In the worst-case scenario, his arm would've exploded, but that was merely a necessary risk.

In exchange for his gamble, he was able to understand a portion of his enemy's intentions.

'His killing intent is superficial. I can only tell because of the All-Seeing Eyes. Even my survival sense couldn't interpret his killing intent properly.'

The explosion began to clear up. From within, Sebastian's unharmed figure emerged.

"So you aren't a mere dullard as I originally assumed. Were you gauging me? Did you find anything worthwhile with your attempt?"

"Eh, this and that."

Damien shrugged and took a battle stance.

'That Saint Emperor bastard...I fucking hate that sadistic bastard...'

He shot forward like an arrow. Mirage swung through the air in a beautiful arc, marking the beginning of Damien's offensive.

Mirage's sword techniques drew mystical patterns in the sky. A flower of spatial distortion was formed in the air as Damien pressed Sebastian harder and harder. The butler continued his nonchalant act, however, and blocked every attack with a calm look on his face.

Damien's eyes hardened. Freya vanished from his left hand.

'Void Sword Art Fourth Form: Spatial Collapse'

Damien slammed Mirage downward, shattering space at its very roots and forcing the creation of a black hole.

Sebastian was naturally trapped in the middle. He gazed around the total blackness of his surroundings with interest.

Tapping the air, he found that the flow of his mana wasn't nearly as stable as usual. Even his internal systems were being somewhat influenced by the space.

'This human has some tricks up his sleeve!' The butler thought to himself.

But unfortunately, it wasn't enough. Sebastian tapped his fingers through the air, creating a spiderweb of inky black mana.

The second he pulled on one of the mana strings, his force was transferred to all the others, creating a resonance that immediately shattered Damien's spatial phenomenon.

'Seven Stars Encircling The Moon'

A bright white light too close to be natural appeared in front of Sebastian's face the second the spatial phenomenon shattered. Chaotic mana flowed together and bloomed into a beautiful disharmonic explosion that swallowed all things.

'This...!'

BOOOOOOOOM!

Sebastian's body shot through the air and crashed into the ground, deepening the already chasm-like crater that'd been formed by the force of their continuous impacts.

Damien's eyes tracked his every movement like a hawk. In this battle, he couldn't allow Sebastian even a single spark of an instant to counterattack.

His body turned into a comet as he trailed Sebastian's path. His speed continuously increased, gravity multiplying countless times around him to amplify his speed.

'Void Sword Art Sixth Form: Worldbreaker'

Xiu!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

An unhindered Worldbreaker, the first of its kind.

It lived up to its name perfectly.

From the point of impact where Sebastian was, the ground collapsed in a fan-like pattern stretching out over the horizon.

Rushing winds like hurricanes could be heard from below, signs of the various terrifying spatial storms and cracks that formed due to the pressure of the impact. Even after Damien's original attack lost power, these naturally formed phenomena would continue devouring the earth until they were full.

The continent nicknamed the Vinyard was only a little less than 100,000 kilometers across.

And Worldbreaker turned almost half of its area into a wasteland lacking in any of the harrowing plant species that forced people to avoid it for so long.

As for the other half, it was currently in the process of collapsing entirely due to the main battlefield's expanding presence.

It was truly a scene like world destruction.

But was that enough?

Damien didn't even halt to appreciate the tens of thousands of kilometers of land he'd just wasted.

'Stagnant Reality'

'Dimension Shift'

'Void Sword Art Fifth Form: Dimensional Severance'

'Spacetime Severance'

Damien cut the world in half with everything he had. Spacetime, the dimension, and even reality to an extent were torn to shreds by the immensity of his power.

Accompanying this destruction was the expansion of the Space-Time River Domain. With its help, not only was the surrounding destruction amplified immensely, but it was also contained within the domain's range so as to concentrate the attack's power onto Sebastian alone.

The environment once again suffered immensely. Sebastian's body floated limply in the air within an isolated spatial phenomenon, the earth around him vanquished to totality.

"Haa...haa..."

'That should've done something...right?' Damien thought as he wiped the blood flowing from his lips.

"Were you perhaps thinking that you could injure me with that attack?"

A voice whispered into his ear. Before Damien could turn around, he felt a force strike his head with power that felt like a direct impact from a tank round.

"Keuk...!"

Damien's body shot back, blood leaking from his mouth.

His skull almost shattered from that hit alone.

The Space-Time River Domain, Damien's powerful body, nothing could protect him from Sebastian's immense power.

"If that was your thought, then you'd be pleased to know that you were correct. You have indeed accomplished something outside of my expectations."

Sebastian's figure appeared a few meters away. There was a deep gash running down the side of his face, apparently refusing to close even with his healing factor.

This gash was only one of many. The butler's signature suit was drenched in its owner's blood.

However, Sebastian didn't seem bothered by it. Instead, he smiled wider than ever. His disgustingly black aura permeated the atmosphere and mimicked his expressions.

"Since you showed me something so interesting, I should reward you as well. Today, I'll allow you to witness the techniques of this humble butler!"

He disappeared into the wind with a deranged smile on his face.

And all Damien could remember about what came after...

...was pain.

Chapter 746 Life And Death [2]

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sebastian's movements were untraceable even with All-Seeing Eyes.

Boom!

Damien only felt the pain of impact after Sebastian had already moved onto a new attack.

He moved Mirage in a desperate attempt to block, he used Freya and Hel to try and buy himself space, he even tried to outright teleport away, but Sebastian always managed to stop him.

It wasn't just a matter of power, but also precision. Using the special corrosive trait of his mana, Sebastian was able to shatter Damien's connection with his mana, effectively cutting off its activation entirely.

Under these conditions, Damien could do nothing but take the beating. His body collapsed multiple times, remaining functioning due to Transcendent Regeneration alone.

Sebastian's every punch was like a nuclear bomb, and when mana was involved in those punches, they became planetary destroyers. Damien took the force of the punches with a straight face only because of all the pain he'd experienced so far in life.

If it wasn't for the powerful body and healing factor he gained through Devour, he would've died ten times over by now.

The only respite Damien had was Void Mana's special property to devour. With this, his mana fought back against the corrosion, which allowed him to occasionally defend, even if his power was somewhat weakened.

'Do you think that's enough?' Sebastian thought smilingly.

Inky black mana covered his skin like armor.

'Heavenly God Armor: Balistic Form'

"The inspiration for this technique actually came from you humans, so I truly do need to thank your race."

The Heavenly God Armor morphed away from

It's original appearance and changed into something akin to a mech titan.

An array, a plethora, a true myriad of weapons emerged from within the mech titan's body.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

BOOOOOOOOOM

XIU! XIU! XIU!

The cacophony of sound formed by the combined attack of those weapons was soul-tearing. As for the damage...

Damien's body shot through the air with so much force that he truly turned into a meteor, completely exiting the world's atmosphere.

Sebastian bent his knees and shot upwards in chase. The two soon arrived in the vast starry sky, a stage for them and them alone.

"Now that we've moved here, you can also show your full potential, no? If you don't, you'll truly die, you know."

"So you really were testing me, you dog bastard."

"Ohoho! A test it may be, however master has given me full control over this operation. Do you know what that means?"

"That you'll kill me because I told your Young Master to suck my dick?"

"You are a human who truly knows how to test others' patience. Did I not beat it into that thick skull of yours yet?"

Sebastian's figure vanished.

Damien suddenly felt a hand on his face.

"Stop the cocky act if you don't want to die."

BOOOOOM!

A burst of inky black mana collided with Damien's face at point blank range. The terrifying black emission was like a jet engine, completely enveloping Damien's upper body in its flames.

'FUCK!' Damien roared inwardly.

His face was truly burning off. His body was going to be charred to a crisp anytime soon.

'Transcendent Regeneration can't keep up with the rate of damage...I need to escape his grasp!'

His body was trying its best, but in the end, he was still in the early-stages of 4th class. Even with his insane stats, he couldn't match someone at Sebastian's level at all.

In that moment of desperation, a moment that came without warning, Damien's mind suddenly became tranquil.

A certain prison in his spiritual world that'd remained dormant for many years suddenly shone with light.

Reality slowed to a crawl. The pain in Damien's body became distant. His mind functioned at a speed unlike ever before.

As he began to plan ways to escape his current predicament, he realized something.

He had never been so close to death. This wasn't a statement alluding to his mortality at all, however, as there were plenty of times throughout his life when he'd quite literally been a half step through death's doors.

Rather, it was a matter of spirituality.

Discounting his near-death state, his life that was hanging on by a thread purely due to Transcendent Regeneration, the Nox's inherent mana was a strange variant of death mana as well. Facing a Nox of Sebastian's level inevitably meant existing in an environment overflowing with deathly energy.

Mentally, Damien felt more connected with death than ever before. He felt like if he pried a little harder, he'd be able to understand the nuances behind the concept.

And along with that...

Within Damien's body, a strange interaction was taking place. A greenish-white mana and a harrowing black mana met within his Mana Heart and intertwined, interacting as if they were long lost siblings.

It was the interaction of Life and Death.

'Something...is changing.'

Damien didn't understand what was happening to his body at all, but he did know one thing.

'The longer I can prolong this battle, the stronger I can get.'

The interaction between Life and Death in his body was being fueled by Life Laws siphoned from the [Heal] trait and Death Laws from Sebastian himself.

Life Laws were overflowing in Damien's body not only because of [Heal], but also because of his very own Transcendent Regeneration skill.

The only lacking ingredient was Death Laws...

Death Laws that Damien could harvest in bulk as long as he could survive against Sebastian's strikes.

'Battle is the best course of action. The process taking place within my body is good for me, anyway. I can feel it strengthening me with every passing second.'

There was nothing to fear.

There was no reason to hesitate.

Damien, who had been forced into a passive position previously, ignored the consequences of his actions and completely shattered the flow of battle.

"ARGH!"

Damien cried out in pain as Sebastian's mana slammed into his body and madly burned him. Blood sprayed from his pores and his mouth. .

But he was prepared for this.

For power, any amount of pain just needed to be endured.

Damien used the opening created by his extremely sudden shift in strategy, he opened his mouth wide and roared as loud as he could.

A black beam of dragon's breath exited his throat and impacted Sebastian's hand with an immense force, at the same point blank range he'd struck Damien moments prior.

Sebastian's grip loosened due to the sudden pain. Damien didn't miss his chance. Using Dragon's Breath as a counterforce, he wildly tumbled away from Sebastian's body.

He flew several kilometers before finally stopping.

Transcendent Regeneration healed his body before he even regained his balance.

He stared at the distant Sebastian with a ferocious glint in his eyes.

Reddish-black sparks populated his aura like fireworks.

Black scales and bloody runic patterns modified his body into that of a monster's.

And he charged with only a single thought in mind.

'This is a new path to strength!'

Strength, everything he'd been chasing for so long, and the goal he still chased to this day. To one day stand at the peak of existence and overlook all things...

He'd been stagnating recently. Despite his focus being on something as esoteric as Spacetime itself, he felt a roadblock unlike anything he'd ever faced before.

In simple terms: something felt...missing.

Though he didn't know what was happening inside his body, Damien could clearly feel the emptiness in his soul slowly filling.

This was the missing piece, or at least, a part of it.

And Damien wouldn't allow Sebastian to leave until he understood it completely.

Chapter 747 Life And Death [3]

Time ticked by at an unbearably slow pace.

Damien's perception of the concept lessened as it continued flowing. With all his attention focused on withstanding Sebastian's attacks, he didn't have any awareness to spare for time.

After all, he couldn't just dodge or block, he couldn't perform in such a way that forced the battle's momentum in his favor.

At this moment, he needed to get hit. Constantly.

Mirage moved like a twisting serpent through Sebastian's never-ending barrage of punches. Its beautiful semi-translucent blade glinted with blood as it moved, creating a fierce and ethereal image.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, Sebastian's seemingly simple punches seemed to contain some sort of mysticism that Damien couldn't identify.

They were constraining.

They didn't seem supported by technique or skill. Instead, they were backed by raw physical strength and mana.

'There's a mysterious Law hidden within his mana.'

Damien realized it as he devoured Sebastian's Death Laws and used them to fuel the strange process taking place in his own body.

'I've always known Nox Mana as a variant, but could I have been wrong?'

The Laws entering Damien's body were undoubtedly Death Laws, so the Nox's connection with Death wasn't false, however, what if that was only a single facet of their mana?

'It's possible. His fists seem to be powered by...wind and space...? And maybe something else too. No matter how conceptual you get, you can't use Death Laws to completely mimic the powers of another Law.'

Damien's assumption about the Laws Sebastian used was merely his own, but he was sure about the latter half of his thoughts.

He stayed within Sebastian's attack range with immaculate precision. His body didn't go unscathed, but the new protection of his Demon Dragon Form allowed him to resist without being pushed back by the butler's sheer pressure.

'Still, this is way harder than I thought!'

More than his body, it was Damien's mind that felt immense strain from the current battle situation.

His body could move instinctually to react as best as possible, but his eyes had to track Sebastian's movements and move in synchronicity to perfectly take enough damage to aid his growth without breaking his body.

His brain felt like it wanted to break out of his skull. His spiritual world was trembling at the mere level of focus he needed to show at this moment.

But Damien wasn't fazed. He threw any unnecessary feelings like pain and hesitation away into the Mind Prison.

The only thing left for him was rational thought and a portion of his emotion.

After all, the isolation of all emotions could lead to mistakes caused by ruthlessness that didn't fit Damien's personal code.

Nevertheless, his control over his spiritual world allowed him to enter a perfect battle state that he'd never achieved before. It allowed him to battle someone immensely stronger than him without dying.

Even if he could never take initiative, this alone was enough to show his power.

'However, it's not enough.'

Damien could clearly feel his body changing. Something within him was pulsating with the desire to bloom.

With every second, he became just a little bit stronger. His power became a little bit more consolidated.

Within Damien's Mana Heart, a small seed was slowly being born. It was pure white on one half and the darkest of black on the other. It rooted itself in the Mana Heart and became one with its form.

Damien could tell instinctually.

When that seed finally finished blooming, he would finally be able to stand up against Sebastian.

Back on the main battlefield, the situation only continued to deteriorate.

Damien was a force akin to thousands of men. To the Stargazer Squad, he was a major part of their fighting force.

That wasn't to say they were helpless alone, but the situation simply didn't favor them at all.

There were around a thousand Higher Nox remaining. The only reason the group wasn't dead was that these Nox didn't take them seriously.

They watched with smiles as their fellow comrades died. They even cheered occasionally, placing bets on the ongoing battles.

And when one died, another would come. Sometimes, they'd come two or three at a time, putting immense pressure on the Stargazer Squad.

But...where would the entertainment come from if the geniuses died?

The Nox might've been barbaric in their goals and emotions, but the Higher Nox did indeed possess intelligence. They were also beings who craved entertainment.

When their belligerence was paired with this trait, a scene like the current one became infinitely common.

Down on the ground, Zara slashed her arm through her opponent, killing him instantly. As his body bisected into two halves and melted onto the ground, she found two more coming her way.

'At this rate, it'll never end.'

Zara's eyes narrowed. These Higher Nox loved to talk before they fought, so she knew she'd have some time to think.

'Damien is gone. He was dragged away by the butler.'

She didn't see it personally, but the aftershocks of their collision were too ferocious for her to not notice.

After all, over half of the continent was gone!

It wouldn't be long until the main battlefield was also forced to shift into the air.

'If the butler is gone, is there a need to be careful?'

A glint of killing intent appeared in her eyes.

The reason she refrained from doing anything flashy was to avoid the butler's attention. If he entered the battle, their loss was a guarantee.

However, since the butler was no longer present, did she have to hold back?

Even if she couldn't kill the Higher Nox like flies, she could get rid of the entire swarm that followed them with general quickness.

'But how will they react?' Zara thought as she glanced up at the rows and rows of Higher Nox relaxing in the skies.

Even if she caused world-scale damage, these Higher Nox would survive due to their defensive abilities.

Essentially, it was impossible for her to avoid them or take them out quickly.

She didn't know which decision to make.

On one hand, she could allow the current situation to continue, which could possibly lead to an eventual win, but had a higher chance of leading to their slow deaths,

On the other hand, she could let loose and ignore any restrictions she'd placed on herself, killing as she pleased. This option would free Tyler and the rest of the squad's hands, which would allow them to work together and increase their killing efficiency.

However, this option would likely lead to a siege by a number of Higher Nox they couldn't handle.

But if they could...

Zara firmed her resolve,

In times like this, she was never able to make a decision.

She was still learning how to do so.

But that's why she had a solution prepared for this exact situation.

The person she idolized, what would he do?

'Right, he would act without care and bulldoze his way through everything.'

Zara's eyes ignited with proverbial flames.

She was a beast too, was she not?

Then, it was finally time for her to start acting like one.

With the sound of crackling bones, Zara's body began to change...

And Calypto was taught what it felt like to be despised by a World-Eating Wolf.

Chapter 748 Life And Death [4]

Zara's form expanded until a massive wolf with a body spanning countless thousands of kilometers appeared in the sky. Its beautiful fallen angel-like wings flapped, causing immense gusts of air that shook the world itself.

Back in her original form, Zara moved like a beast.

She jumped into the crowd of Lesser Nox immediately. The impact of her paws touching the ground alone was enough to kill thousands of them.

AWOOOOOOO!

She raised her head into the air and let out a fierce howl. As the sound waves spread and burst the eardrums of anyone too close, a massive curtain of blackness draped from Zara's wings and fell to the ground.

CRASH!

The curtain exploded into the ground and rose into a tidal wave that eclipsed the sky.

Every Lesser Nox that was caught in it instantly died and became a part of the curtain. Their essence and blood were devoured by Zara, empowering her and easing the headache she'd been feeling for a very long time.

Blood.

Cries.

Loneliness.

She could almost feel that strange man's feelings and experiences. She could almost feel the complete set of memories she was in the process of gaining.

But just a few Lesser Nox wasn't enough.

ROAR!

Zara roared with vigor and stamped her legs against the ground. Spiked shadows rose from the ground and impaled anyone they came across. The sky turned black and a rain of shadow arrows fell into the army as well, showering them with attacks from above and below.

Countless Nox died. Tens of thousands turned into hundreds of thousands in mere seconds. By the time the Higher Nox comprehended what was happening, Zara had already taken out a major portion of their army.

Over a million Lesser Nox died just like that.

After all, while Zara's ability to utilize techniques faded in her beast form, her power and natural instinct for movement was heightened immensely.

Without even needing techniques, she could use her affinities as efficiently as possible.

It was for this same reason why she didn't use ice in her attack. Currently, what she needed wasn't just to kill the Nox, but to absorb them as well.

Her barrage ended within 10 seconds.

By its end, over two million Lesser Nox had died.

The army that once extended into the horizon was essentially halved.

Zara's form changed back into a human immediately after she finished her barrage. At the moment, the entire horde of Higher Nox was shooting towards her position.

'As expected.'

Zara's body turned into an amalgamation of shadow. She didn't have an ounce of hesitation as she met the crowd head-on.

Immediately, she submerged herself within and took the role of an assassin. She was silent, she was hidden, and she was deadly. While she didn't strike often, the strikes she did take severely injured those she targeted.

"Coward!"

"Catch her!"

"I'll punish you like a bitch tonight!"

Crack!

The Higher Nox who spoke last found his spine immediately shattered by a passing shadow.

The Higher Nox were incredibly vexed by her behavior. With a crowd so big, fighting one person had both advantages and disadvantages.

Especially when the single person in question was skilled in concealment, it would be an uphill battle for both sides.

Zara was able to cause immense confusion within the crowd and make them unable to aim their attacks properly. She was able to draw the entire horde of a thousand Higher Nox's attention onto her, making them completely ignore the rest of the Stargazer Squad.

And though those three geniuses were relatively new to battle like this, they'd worked with Zara and Damien enough to understand their personalities and intents,

Damien was wild and domineering. When he was in command, they'd likely use sheer power as a basis for their strategies.

And while Zara was someone who behaviorally mirrored Damien in some cases, her approach to battle was often different.

She was someone who waited for the perfect opportunity and utilized it to strike a single, extremely fatal blow to her enemy.

With her acting as a beautiful diversion in this case...

...the fatal blow would obviously be left to them.

Tyler looked back at Ash and Synth. Seeing their smiling faces, he grinned.

If they'd won this level of trust from their seniors, they were clearly doing something right.

The group took their positions in a triangular formation. However, unlike their usual strategy, Ash stood in the back, Tyler stood in the middle, and Synth took the lead.

A floating mechanical ball appeared in the air, hovering next to Synth's head.

"Illusion Force Field: Activate."

The ball whirled to life, and with a few flashes of blue, it covered the group in a small dome-shaped barrier.

While it only looked like such on the inside, their presence had actually completely vanished from the battlefield. The outside of the barrier was a real-time reflection of the surroundings that even fluctuated realistically when waves of aura passed over it.

"It's not as good as the Vice Captain's concealment, but it'll be enough in a situation where the enemy is preoccupied," Synth said, flashing a peace sign.

"Mm, it's more than enough," Tyler responded. "Then, let's go!"

The three began to run and approach the battlefield. They looked up into the air from below, watching how the battle panned out.

"The Vice Captain...is truly terrifying," Tyler muttered.

He feared Damien, sure, but after interacting with him, Tyler realized that Damien was extremely accommodating towards humans. The act he showed against his enemies wasn't anywhere near how he treated his allies.

But Zara was different. Zara's ruthlessness was cold and sinister. Whenever he saw how mechanically she was able to move her body and kill, he was almost reminded of the Nox's belligerence.

'Haha, what am I thinking?'

Tyler shook off the thought and returned his attention to the battlefield. Zara's strategy was still successful at the moment as the Higher Nox scurried around in the air to catch her, but it wouldn't last forever.

'Eventually they'll get tired of this cat and mouse and decide to approach her assault with a more practical counter.'

Zara's main weapon in the current instance was confusion. The second she lost it, the efficiency she possessed would vanish.

'So we have to move before that happens.'

Tyler's eyes narrowed. At most, they could trail Zara and finish the Nox she fatally wounded, but what else could they do?

'We're...too weak.' Tyler sighed inwardly.

'Even if we split up and take the Nox individua—'

'Am I stupid?'

Tyler nearly smacked himself across his face to sober up.

Right, they couldn't do anything individually. Even if they used their impeccable teamwork, they wouldn't be of much help.

However, what if their power itself was combined?

'The indestructible body of a Berserker and the variety of elemental powers and physical boosts of a Contractor supported by the flexibility and adaptability of a Mechanist...just what kind of monster would that be?'

Tyler's mind whirled to life. Infinite possibilities swan through his head. Like fish within a river of temptation, each and every one provoked his interest.

However, he could only choose one.

The perfect strategy, the strategy that'd allow them to get out of this scenario without getting too deeply injured...

'...doesn't exist.'

If they were going to do this, they were going to sacrifice more than they'd ever expected.

Their mana was already running low. With Damien occupied by the butler, they didn't have any way to rapidly replenish themselves.

This would be a last-ditch attack. Perhaps they could barely defend themselves after taking a few pills afterwards, but that would be the extent of their continued contribution.

'However, the alternative is death.'

Before the battle started, support was estimated to arrive in an hour at the earliest.

At this point, it had only been 30 minutes.

Tyler's eyes burned with determination, and...

He made his decision.

Chapter 749 Black Ink [1]

'Let's do it. I don't believe that our combined strength can't bring at least some change to this battle!'

As Tyler made his decision, the rumbling earth below finally lost its structure.

RUMBLE!

Large cracks split across the ground as it shattered into an exponentially increasing number of pieces.

The ocean surrounding the continent began to flood inward.

VOOOOOM!

Yet another powerful fluctuation spread from the distance. A single clash between Damien and Sebastian was enough to destroy half of the continent and destabilize its entire structure, but the current battle had also reached a point where it did the same.

With so much force, how could the continent endure?

Its foundation was shattered. Hot magma spewed into the ocean, creating a reaction that massively impacted the atmosphere.

Tsunamis raged deeper into the ocean, ash covered the skies, and throughout all this destruction, Tyler...smiled.

'Perfect!'

It was something that would've happened eventually, but the timing couldn't have been more perfect.

With the continent sinking and an underwater volcano erupting, the environment had been perfectly prepared.

"Let's go!"

Tyler straightened his body and used mana to increase his speed. He charged into the ocean like a fish on its last breath, followed by Synth and Ash.

In the air, Zara's eyes glinted as she caught their actions.

'Bring them to the ocean?'

She smiled lightly. It was an interesting plan that she hadn't thought of.

She didn't know what kind of advantages the rest of the squad had underwater, but the darkness of the ocean was extremely beneficial for her.

'30 seconds.'

If they needed time to prepare, that was all she could give.

And as if they could feel Zara's expectations, the three geniuses swam deeper into the ocean with dignified faces.

Tyler exhaled to calm his mind.

'The fifth...'

His fifth summon was one he rarely used. The summon rarely allowed him to borrow its power, and the necessary conditions to guarantee its cooperation were too strenuous.

However, this situation was perfect.

'I still don't know what it is, and its effects always seem to be random...'

Tyler was hesitant about trusting a summon he didn't have a fully fleshed relationship with, but he knew for certain the level of power that his fifth summon possessed.

'I didn't choose it, it chose me.'

With a sigh, Tyler revolved his mana and activated his contract.

'You won't tell me your name so this process is pretty annoying. Just come out already.'

Immediately, Tyler's body began to change.

"W-what the fuck?!" A rare curse slipped out of his mouth due to the absurdity of the situation.

His body wasn't turning into another animal form, and he didn't feel many enhancements at all.

Instead, he was being condensed into something...metallic.

'How can this be called a summon?!'

Tyler's rational mind almost combusted. He couldn't make heads or tails of the situation, and he couldn't explain anything about his current predicament with what he knew about his power.

However, Tyler's thoughts didn't change the fact that he continued to change.

Until he was a metallic metal ball floating in the air.

A slew of information flowed into his mind.

'Flexible...Armor Parasite?'

Everything about his current form was explained to him through this mysterious flow of information. And when he finally understood the implications of his current form...

'Is this even allowed?'

...was the only thought in his head.

A giddy smile decorated his nonexistent face. 'I don't know what this summon is, but I wish he'd show up more often.'

Tyler's globular body shot through the ocean until it arrived in front of Ash. Without hesitation, he charged into her chest.

"W-what?!" Synth exclaimed.

But before she could say anything, the black glob suddenly expanded and covered Ash's body.

A suit of threatening black armor dawned her.

Calling the armor would be an insult to its brutality.

'Ash, Synth, can you hear me?'

A voice transmission appeared in the two's minds, leading them to simultaneously nod.

'Good. As I've just learned, this form is a parasite of sorts, but different from the ones we've been destroying.'

'Currently, my body has been connected to Ash's Mana Circuits. As long as we are connected, I'll be able to use her abilities and she'll be able to use mine.'

The duo's eyes widened at the revelation. If Tyler could use Ash's power, he could become a nigh-invincible armor. And if Ash could use Tyler's power, she could exponentially increase her own.

As for the problem with Ash using an ability she had no affinity with, since Tyler could utilize Ash's Mana Circuits, he could easily help her control the fusion so she could display its full potential.

'Now, for the final touch...'

Synth grinned. "It's my turn now? If you guys are going hard, then I guess I'll have to do the same."

Synth's surroundings immediately became filled with technology of various shapes and sizes, their uses unknown.

"Just stand there and let me overgear you like crazy! And, don't worry about learning what everything does and controlling it. I can do that remotely while supporting you."

The three smirked together.

It was a level of teamwork far surpassing anything they'd tried before, something they could only pull off due to circumstance.

But...would it be difficult for them?

They were comrades who'd been through hell and high water together. They were each other's support pillars and most trusted allies.

Even if they were to die here, they'd do it together.

It didn't take long for Synth to cover the armor with her gadgets. When the two factors combined, Ash truly looked like a titan sentinel who guarded the universe.

'Is it about time?'

Accompanying Tyler's thought was a massive explosion on the ocean's surface.

"AAAAGGGH!"

A muffled scream rang out. An explosion of ink dyed the ocean's surface black. The man's eyes widened. The ink overtook his body and flowed down his throat, disallowing him from rejecting his embrace.

His lungs collapsed.

He was suffocating.

His eyes widened to the point where they almost burst.

Until they finally did.

The man's head exploded violently into a pool of ink, but it was devoured by the massive splatter in the sea the instant it transformed.

"How dare you?!"

"Why can you use that power?!"

Various shouts emerged from the distance as more and more figures plunged into the ocean depths.

Within a few seconds, a little upward of 900 Higher Nox stood in a circular formation within the waters. In the center of their formation was a single woman.

A woman surrounded by a sea of black ink.

Her golden eyes glinted with bloodthirst as she looked at her enemies.

"Who are you to ask for my name?"

"I am—"

"Dead."

A pair of golden eyes covered the man's entire field of vision. Zara appeared in front of him before he could even register what was happening. Her arm snapped out like a whip and clutched his neck, digging into it with her claws.

The sea of black ink behind her moved on command, swallowing the man and slowly killing him as it did the man before.

Zara stood like a predator looking down on her prey and swept her gaze around the remaining Higher Nox.

As for Tyler and the rest who stood below, they were utterly flabbergasted.

This...

Weren't things supposed to be direr?

What were they supposed to do in this situation?

Chapter 750 Black Ink [2]

'30 seconds.'

Zara's mind raced rapidly. She could instinctually feel that if there wasn't a change in the situation soon, her strategy would quickly fall apart.

But, she had to buy 30 seconds for her juniors. Since she'd entrusted them in being the change this situation needed, she could only allow them to shine when they were ready.

Until then...

Zara's body became semi-material, like a black shadow of death swirling through the skies.

This form was far more conspicuous in normal circumstances, but with the Nox's black mana flying through the air, they could hardly pinpoint her location.

The only way for them to see her would be to stop attacking completely, but wouldn't that just be asking for death?

"Don't hold back! Kill her!"

With the yell of one came the spirit of others. This massive group, if they couldn't even kill a single woman, wouldn't they become the laughingstock of the whole universe?

The atmospheric mana began to shift. The Higher Nox weren't just going to throw attacks wantonly to avoid injuring each other, they were going to use genuinely destructive techniques.

Zara could feel it clearly. As if she was connected to the mana through the ink she'd devoured, she could feel how it moved and twisted according to her enemies' wills.

'There's no place to dodge.'

Zara shifted to the right, avoiding a massive fist that charged towards her. Just as that happened, however, she found a brutal stake threatening to impale her from below. A dark phoenix swooped in from the sky and let out feathers like arrows, showering Zara's surroundings in hostile mana.

The more she dodged, the more she realized there was nowhere to go.

'Shadow Dominion.'

Zara's domain spread tens of thousands of kilometers into the surroundings and enveloped the Nox within. While this couldn't stop them, it would at least allow Zara more control of the situation.

With this control, she was able to become far more agile and sensitive to mana fluctuations. Every attack was within her sight.

But not every movement of hers could match this new level of sight.

"Khhh!"

Zara let out a rough exhale as her shoulder was impaled by an inky black spike.

She saw it coming, but she couldn't dodge it. If she dodged, she would've been impaled through the chest by a different spike, which was far more inhibiting than a shoulder injury.

Zara's eyes flashed with a piercing light. The shape of her domain began to change, becoming more fluid.

This subconscious change took place silently, and with such thick blackness surrounding them, nobody noticed its presence.

However, Zara could feel her state of mind wavering.

Cruelty, brutality, ruthlessness. The more she fought, the more she devoured, the more this feeling grew.

Despite feeling how dangerous it might be, she didn't fight it. If anything, this danger only meant she was getting closer to her origins.

The fight continued.

10 seconds passed, and besides the injury on her shoulder, Zara wasn't touched once. 5 Higher Nox died by her hands, and the domain continued to shrink into a more bulbous liquid form.

20 seconds passed. Zara's injuries worsened, but she fought as if they didn't exist. Her bodily functions weren't inhibited by her wounds in the slightest, almost like they never pierced past her flesh.

7 more Nox died under Zara's hands. Every time they fell, the waters below their feet would rise up and swallow them whole.

It was a terrifying sight. Even though they far outnumbered her to the point where it was embarrassing, they still weren't able to kill her.

And yet, she was killing them brutally and devouring them, something that they'd never seen happen without any side effects.

At first, they wondered whether or not capturing Zara was a better idea than killing her.

But in the end, she was a threat too dangerous to keep alive.

As they fought more fiercely, Zara's eyes became bloodier and bloodier. Her killing intent materialized in the air and fused into the fluid domain, empowering it.

The domain moved around Zara like a scarf. The blackness flowed with the smoothness of water and the burning ferocity of fire. It held the infinite despair of death and the horrors of darkness.

With this weapon in hand, Zara became a monster. Her claws were made for ripping apart flesh, and she used them as such. She flashed from one place to another, tearing apart any living organism she could find

And finally, 30 seconds passed.

BOOOOOM!

The ocean imploded from the pressure of their collision with it. Zara immediately killed the man in her hand when she finally arrived underwater.

A cold rationality filled her head as the surrounding water calmed her emotions. It was an immediate change that didn't feel natural in any way.

"Who are you to ask for my name?"

"I am—"

"Dead."

The Higher Nox's death was instant. It wasn't anything like the struggle Zara put up every time she fought one of them previously.

She turned her eyes and looked at each Higher Nox surrounding her individually.

Prey.

These were her prey.

And they were delicious prey that allowed her abilities to develop each time she ate one.

Didn't she have permission to go wild?

Wasn't she told to do anything she needed to do to solve the questions plaguing her mind?

Didn't she have someone who could support her no matter what happened?

Then...for what reason did she need to fear her current state?

This...was exactly what she wanted.

Flickers of a man's life appeared in her mind as she stood silently. Memories of a life she didn't know, a life unrelated to her. Yet, every time she saw a piece of this life, her heart ached with endless sorrow.

She needed to know more.

And the prey in front of her would allow her to do so.

That was the last rational thought that surfaced in her chaotic mind.

Her body leaned back, her arms spread to the side, and her eyes closed.

The sea of ink exploded.

Blackness spread through the already dark ocean and made it impossible to determine anything like direction or distance. In fact, the entire concept of space became negligible under this blackness' influence.

Movement? Even thinking about it felt like a joke under the disgusting stickiness.

Zara's coldly gleaming gold eyes were like a beacon in the darkness.

When she opened her eyes, when those eyes shone...

Mayhem and madness spread.

The darkness spread like an incurable disease and infected the surroundings wholly. The more it grew, the more powerful Zara seemed to become.

Yet, she wasn't killing the Higher Nox. She was slowly torturing them, taking away their sanity before she took their lives.

Because as long as they could think, they could fight.

If they could fight, they could work together to destroy her suppression.

Destroying their minds was the quickest and most efficient solution...

...and it was a solution Zara quite enjoyed.

As Zara's torture continued, muffled screams resonated through the waters. It was gruesome to imagine what was happening to those men.

However, time wasn't on their side.

35 minutes had passed.

They only had to wait 25 more minutes for support.

And a chance like this one wouldn't come again.

The sadistic desire of a blood-crazed wolf was, unfortunately, ignored.

Before she could fully enjoy herself, a...being...appeared from the depths.

A colossal titan in a strange suit of armor...

...charged straight into the blackness and exploded.