

Void 1511

Chapter 1511 Desperation [2]

The passing months were still ongoing.

The siege against the Divine Order continued, and nothing else really changed.

The Vega Clan started paying more attention to the conflict as their information network was able to uncover more about what was actually happening.

Meanwhile, the Dragon Clan was silent.

They were notorious for their uninterest in worldly matters, so it wasn't a surprise. The Western Region was a gathering place for all dragons. It was a place where they could be surrounded by their own kind and live without concern for other races.

As such, the Dragon Clan's borders were almost always closed off to the outside world.

When the Holy Empire's forces made their way through Dragon Clan territory, they were forced to gain permission from the Dragon God himself, and even then, they were only allowed to move through a specific route that didn't allow them to interact with the inhabitants of the Western Region.

The Dragon Clan was a huge object of interest for a lot of people, but in the current state of the world, their attractiveness had died down.

All eyes were on the ongoing war.

And as the war raged on, the foregone conclusion became obvious for everyone.

The Divine Order would no longer exist after this.

Even those within the order realized this.

Yulia Veritas herself was leading their army, and while the Holy Emperor didn't appear, he sent six Archangels, a force with impossible strength.

7 of the 12 Gods in the council were killed in battle.

It wasn't just them either. The majority of the high level members of the order were gone. Some died in battle, others were assassinated, another group died while trying to flee, and some even ended their own lives.

The main headquarters of the order was already surrounded by all three armies.

It was hard for them to maintain hope. It didn't look like defectors and those willing to surrender would be spared.

Nobody knew whether to admire or condemn those who chose to die.

They were too busy considering something else to even think about it.

In this situation, what could the Divine Order even accomplish?

Was there a way out?

There had never been a situation where the great clans formed an alliance to deal with one of their own. Nobody had ever seen the strength of multiple great clans at once before.

But it was here in the world now.

And it was absolutely terrifying.

With all eyes focused on them, the five remaining Gods who represented the order had to cement themselves in the path they chose.

They didn't really have names. The five of them were unknown in the world.

They were Gods in their own right, sure, and they definitely had their places in the council, but they were never the real decision-makers.

They were the ones who stayed in the back and went along with the majority, quietly maintaining their status and luxury.

The reason they survived wasn't because they were strong.

It was because they were willing to do whatever it took to survive, even if that meant betraying any and everyone.

This time, they were planning to do just as they always did.

To secure their own escape, they would risk everything.

The current situation wasn't complex.

Void Palace was to the south, Veritas was to the east, and the Holy Empire was to the north.

The west was open...open water. It wasn't much of an escape route, but it could still be used.

However, it was easy for Gods to chase Gods if it just came to flying.

For the five of them to get out of this mess, they needed to provide a distraction that would force the other side to let them go.

What could they use?

What could possibly force all three of these great clans to allow them to pass?

That wasn't even a question.

While they may have lost control over the public in terms of brainwashing, they hadn't lost their ability to use the general public against their enemies.

When it came to dealing with the righteous, hostages were always the right option.

And if the number of hostages was in the quadrillions...

Not even the most indifferent of people could ignore them, right?

Dominic and Yiren sat in their tent on their side of the line.

Yulia and two Archangels were with them, while the other four Archangels were watching the line on the Veritas and Holy Empire side.

They were currently trying to figure out what the best method to siege the headquarters was.

Or at least, that was what they'd been attempting to do until a moment ago.

But at this time, something surprising happened.

A man appeared in the air above the headquarters. He wasn't someone anyone recognized, and from his aura, he most certainly wasn't one of the remaining Gods.

"I-I am speaking for the Great Order!"

His voice was filled with terror. Every word shook, but against his will, every word was projected across the lands to anyone willing to listen.

"Void Palace, Veritas, Holy Empire...!" He yelled.

"Your people wish for the destruction of mine, however, I cannot allow it!"

The man paused for a second.

His body began to shake uncontrollably.

He looked in a certain direction, unwilling to say any more.

But he was not allowed that luxury.

Bang!

His foot exploded into a shower of blood.

"AAAHHHH!"

He roared in pain.

Tears streamed out of his eyes, which soon widened.

"I-if any of you t-try to block our escape...!"

He immediately continued his speech, clearly in fear for his life.

"I-if any of you t-try to block our escape...we will...k-kill a...ll... of the citizens... of this region...!"

"..."

His words were met with silence.

Dominic and the rest had exited the tent and watched the entire event as it happened, and rather than eyes that took him as a joke, theirs were stern.

"It's not an empty threat."

Dominic spoke first.

The rest silently agreed.

Since it was the Divine Order, since they'd decided to torture this man in front of them to force them to believe it, they knew.

But that wasn't enough for those five Gods.

No, the example they were planning to make was far, far bigger.

They arrived on the horizon as one.

At the same time, the man who made the speech was blown to bits, turned into a deep red firework.

The five Gods stood there in the sky, their backs turned to the ocean behind them.

And they smiled, as if provoking someone, anyone, to try and fight them.

It was an open threat. Not a single person was excluded from it.

And while those with more common sense stayed their ground...

It was impossible for there to be not even a single person in the vicinity who wasn't reckless.

Nobody knew where it came from.

Maybe it didn't even come from the armies. Maybe it was organized by the Five Gods.

Regardless of its origin, it existed.

An attack. A firebolt that didn't seem like it could be fired by someone stronger than 4th class.

It didn't even reach the five Gods before it dissipated.

But that was the answer they'd been waiting for.

Someone decided to attack.

Which meant, only a few seconds later...

RUMBLE!

It didn't happen nearby, but everyone knew what that rumbling was.

For it to have been something capable of creating a shockwave that could arrive here...

if that truly was in a city somewhere...

...at least a few million people had died.

Just like that.

Chapter 1512 Domination [1]

The pregnant silence that followed the explosion while those present comprehended what had happened didn't last for long.

Yulia broke it within a few seconds, yelling towards the armies.

"SPREAD OUT AND SEARCH THE REGION! LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED!"

Dominic, Yiren, and the Archangels followed suit, giving the exact same order.

It didn't matter whether the explosion had actually killed the amount of people it had the ability to kill.

What mattered was the fact that the explosion that took place was too far away for it to have been controlled manually.

A true remote explosive.

Their existence wasn't a surprise. Remote explosives were just as common as any other weapon in this world.

However, the scale of that explosion, and the fact that it truly was pre-planted, made the situation extremely hazardous.

Whether it was a farce or not, as long as there was a possibility that such explosives were spread throughout the region, it could not be ignored.

Even more so because those explosives hadn't been sensed by anyone in any of the three allied armies.

It had to be known that this was the last step of the plan. This was the end of the Divine Order, which meant other than those in the main headquarters, everyone affiliated with them was dead.

The citizens had to be freed from mind control as well, so at least one combat army and one purification army had to sweep through every single populated area in the entire Cardinal Region.

The fact that not a single person was able to recognize the fact that there were mines below them was extremely disturbing.

Those five Gods were willing to do anything for survival.

Their willingness to call for extermination couldn't be doubted.

As such, despite knowing that there were several ways to make them stand down, Yulia and her fellow commanders decided to ensure the safety of the masses.

This was a territory that would be under their influence regardless of whether the Five Gods lived or died.

If the enemy was going to escape, they had to be absolutely certain that they wouldn't have the ability to influence the newly conquered territory.

The armies that had gathered around the Divine Order headquarters dispersed into countless groups of somewhere between five and ten people and spread throughout the cardinal region.

Immediately as the search began, those closest to the headquarters reported that they had indeed found explosives buried under the town they'd reached.

The mines were filled with an extremely chaotic mixture of laws and contained within a case with the ability to isolate mana signatures.

Unless they were at the level of Claire or Yulia, no God would be able to sense these.

And Yulia, while she was indeed a participant in this war, never went near the cities.

She was fighting other Gods. To make sure they wouldn't harm the common population as they battled, she had to remain in the unpopulated areas between cities.

After all, even if Gods fought in the Heavenly God Plane, their presence would affect the world's mana. That atmosphere wasn't something anyone under Divinity could handle.

Nevertheless, the explosives that went unnoticed were finally uncovered. Proof that they existed had been found.

That was enough justification for the decision of the commanders.

Extra forces were called in to assist in the search for explosives, while those on the backlines kept their eyes on the movements of those five Gods.

They were being allowed to escape.

But nobody spoke about it.

Those Gods, in their minds, they were probably over the moon about their "genius" plan that allowed them to get away from such a massive enemy presence.

However, they had no way to know they were being watched.

Because the person who was watching them was not someone they could ever compete against.

It had been a few months.

Since time was nothing but a concept for Damien, it had been quite a bit longer for him and his people since his vacation started.

The Young Lord's residence and experienced quite a unique time flow for the last few months, to the point where those within had difficulty readapting when it was turned off.

Really, only Damien and a few others could go in and out of the residence without being knocked unconscious by the rapid change in flow.

But that was beside the point.

The point was that while vacation time was nice, Damien was raring to get his hands dirty again.

The timing was perfect as well.

Wasn't there a group of rats on the loose trying to stir up trouble?

'Gods of their level...'

Damien knew all about those five Gods. Unlike with Straea, Damien was able to devour beings from the order and learn everything about their inner workings.

He knew how strong they were.

'And they're definitely not stronger than a Count.'

Damien's Authority of Existence had gotten even more powerful since he fought the Count. If it was Gods at the bottom of their class...?

'They're nothing now, aren't they?'

'Status'

[Status]

[Damien Void]

????

Male - Age 120

Level ???

Divinity: Hegemon God

Legend: Enthroned King

Title(s): [●●●●●●, Apostle of the Void, Evolver, Heaven's Wrath, Supreme Genius]

Physique: Void Physique

Authorities:

[Devouring - 100%]

[Immortality - 80%]

[Elemental - 100%]

[Spacetime - 100%]

[Samsara - 100%]

[Cosmic Duality - 100%]

[Existence - 80%]

When his status looked like that, what did he have to worry about?

The system could no longer quantify his level. Damien was comprehending Existence, but his actual Divinity wasn't seeing much change.

He was extremely powerful, but technically, he was still the lowest-level Demigod.

Of course, Damien knew that he'd likely promote as soon as he comprehended Existence, but the system wasn't privy to such intuition.

All it knew was that he'd gotten stronger.

It had read his Legend, so it titled him a king.

It saw him control Existence, so it could only try to judge how far he'd gotten by reasonably increasing the percentages next to his Authorities.

It knew his titles, it knew his age, it knew his name, and it knew his physique.

But that was all the system could see from him.

He was practically already acting outside of its control.

'Isn't that fun?'

Was it because he'd spent time relaxing, or was it because he'd finally seen his wives after such a long time separated?

Whatever it was, Damien's mood was lighter than a feather right now, and his fighting spirit was in the clouds.

He wanted to go dominate on the battlefield.

He'd found that he didn't like extended fights anymore. They weren't any fun when the enemies weren't on his level.

He still had to go out and fight even if he couldn't find the perfect opponent.

So as he took some time to himself and thought back on his past experiences, he started to appreciate a different form of fighting.

Could it even be called fighting?

'No.'

What Damien wanted to feel was—

'Domination.'

Absolute supremacy.

A position where no man or god could ever rival him.

'Let me go feel it again.'

He was ready to take action.

And the five Gods who'd happened to become his targets...

There was no way they could know what was coming for them.

Chapter 1513 Domination [2]

Damien had two faces.

He was a man who liked using disguises and concealment. These abilities allowed him to act as he wanted to without facing consequences.

But he didn't use disguises because he was trying to be secretive.

Not in the slightest.

Damien was a man who liked concealment and used it frequently.

However, he was also a man who always fought his enemies face-to-face.

The enemies he'd met in the Heavenly World had generally only seen one of those faces. Even when he caused a stir, it was always in such a way that Void Palace wouldn't be brought into the mess.

His face was too recognizable, after all.

This time, he didn't try to hide.

He went out with the appearance he'd held since birth.

And he used his abilities without restriction.

Flash!

There was only one flash. It happened when Damien left Void Palace.

By the time he reappeared?

Not even a few seconds had passed, yet he was already in the Southwestern Region.

'Their last known position is...'

It was somewhere above the ocean.

They hadn't tried to return to land yet, probably because they were aware of what awaited them there, but they also hadn't stopped since they started across the ocean.

Their destination was unknown. There was a possibility that they were trying to find some discreet location on the ocean itself to hide away and gain strength.

On the other hand, it was also entirely possible that they had a goal in mind and were moving with the sole purpose of reaching it.

Damien didn't really care.

He could find out from their corpses.

What mattered was the fact that they were somewhere with no witnesses, a place where Damien could truly exert his dominion.

It was difficult to travel across the Heavenly World. Because of its scale and the strangeness of its land borders, it was hard to tell which areas were safe and which ones were dangerous.

Even if they were all dangerous, the amount of time one would have to spend, no matter what means of transportation they used, was great.

Damien was able to teleport people unreasonable distances within unreasonable timespans since long ago.

He'd managed to send messengers to the Northwestern Region in a mere month, hadn't he?

It had to be remembered that even starships needed years to travel across a single cardinal region.

The Absolute Perception ability Damien possessed allowed him to expand his teleportation range infinitely after he adapted to the Heavenly World's dense spatial layers.

Now, not only could he move from Void Palace to the oceanic region behind the Divine Order headquarters in seconds, he could even move from this place to the Straea Clan in the same amount of time.

Travel was no longer a problem for him.

The same, however, couldn't be said about his enemies.

Gods had a great deal of advantages in this world. Their speed and movement capabilities were some of them.

In most cases, Gods could travel faster on foot than by any other means of transportation.

The five Gods had managed to cross an impressive stretch of water in the time it took for the allied armies to find traces of explosives underground.

Unfortunately for them, there was nowhere in this world they could go to avoid Damien.

He was already above them.

He'd been watching them for a bit, but he waited before attacking to see whether the threats they made were legitimate or not.

Since he was now aware...

'Don't go anywhere.'

He didn't say it out loud, but the five Gods responded as if they'd heard him.

They stopped in place.

They couldn't move.

'Isolate this space.'

Domination.

Through this concept, the space in the surrounding hundred kilometers was isolated from reality and turned into its own dimension, entirely under Damien's control.

"Do you guys know what you've done?"

Damien walked through the sky and approached them.

The five Gods didn't have the power to respond.

They didn't even have the power to tremble as they feared for their lives.

Just...what kind of being had approached them?

The second his presence appeared in their perception, they lost all movement capability.

Not only that, but they also felt their Divine Energy lock up. It refused to flow as it usually did, and if they tried to control it, it backfired and injured them instead.

Those words Damien spoke were the most terrifying words they'd ever heard.

Especially when they finally saw the face of the one who spoke.

"Do you recognize me?"

The five Gods couldn't answer, but the emotions in their eyes still changed according to their thoughts.

Incredulity, confusion, and fear. Everything else was drowned out by these three emotions.

Damien Void.

If they didn't know his face by now, they'd be idiots.

He was a boy who'd only recently ascended to the Heavenly World, yet somehow he'd become Void Palace's Young Lord, the man destined to lead it in the future.

They'd tried to assassinate him many times already, but none of those attempts succeeded.

Rather, none of them were able to get close to him at all.

The assassins sent by them and all others who tried to kill Damien when he first ascended to the throne died mysteriously the moment they stepped into the main palace's vicinity.

It was like sorcery, even to these ancient beings who'd seen Godhood itself with their own eyes.

Those attempts stopped without gaining much traction. For the most part, people assumed that the 12 Swords were watching the borders like eagles.

The majority formed the opinion that Void Palace valued Damien a lot more than expected and left it at that.

After all, even when he left the palace to investigate the Dimensional Crack, the assassins sent after him were destroyed without a word.

There couldn't be any other explanation.

Except, there was.

It was right in front of them now.

It wasn't that Damien was being protected by an extremely powerful force.

The truth was far more terrifying.

"Are you all done pondering yet?"

His voice snapped them out of their thoughts.

Damien Void...

He was a monster beyond measure.

He himself was the one who'd been holding them back and ruining their plans from the beginning.

It was he who truly controlled everything from the shadows.

This was the first time they met him in person, and it was quite a first meeting.

Because despite the power they thought they had, despite all the cards they thought they'd prepared...

"It's not working, is it?"

They knew what he was talking about.

Since the moment he caught them, all five of them had been trying to detonate the explosives hidden throughout the Southwestern Region.

They didn't need mana or even physical motion to activate them. Exactly in preparation for a situation similar to this one, they'd devised a method that allowed them to trigger the explosions with their thoughts alone.

However...

"Your connection with the outside world is completely severed. You can think of it like you're in the home cosmos of those rats you guys worship. You wouldn't be able to control mana that exists in another cosmos, would you?"

Damien was kind enough to explain all the details to them.

It wasn't a bad thing to satisfy their curiosity.

They'd been dead since the moment Damien caught them.

Their heads were already severed from their bodies.

Their bodies had already been devoured.

Their souls no longer existed in this world.

Only their egos were eternally trapped in this illusion, seeing Damien speak to them and feeling the terror that seemed to originate from their souls.

In reality, they were already gone.

They were already drenched in Nonexistence.

Damien came to dominate.

And that was exactly what he did.

Whether in mind, body, or soul, they wouldn't forget his terrifying dominance.

That was something even Nonexistence couldn't erase.

Chapter 1514 Confusion [1]

The five Gods died by Damien's hand without much of anything else happening.

Nobody knew of it until a few days later when Damien brought back their heads, but that had yet to occur.

By the time Damien went out to take care of them, the search and rescue operations around the Southwestern Region were already in full swing.

Tens, hundreds, even thousands of explosives had been uncovered, and more were still being found.

They were placed everywhere.

It wasn't just in cities and populated areas. Practically the entire subterranean layer of the cardinal region was a sea of explosive material.

It was difficult to find it all, and it was even more difficult to disarm.

After all, these explosives were made in the simplest, most chaotic way possible, by forcing conflicting laws together and containing them so they couldn't react.

There wasn't necessarily a deactivation sequence. It was possible to do so by weaving together a combination of laws that brought order back to the mixture, but that took far more care and effort than the armies were reasonably able to give.

That left two solutions.

Technically, only one.

The bombs had to be detonated intermittently in uninhabited areas until there were none left.

The other solution was naturally Damien Void, the man who possessed the concept of order.

He could easily disarm the entire mountain of explosives in a few moments.

However, he couldn't do it publicly and risk his enemies learning about how much Existence Law he'd comprehended.

Therefore, a plan was put in place where a portion of the explosives would be detonated for the public to see, while the rest would be handled by Damien in private.

At first, the operation proceeded slowly because the armies had to take countless precautions to be sure that the Five Gods wouldn't do any more than they'd already done.

Unfortunately, no amount of planning or effort could've saved everyone.

Because, in the first place, from the moment the Five Gods decided to escape, they'd created countless contingencies.

Damien isolated them so their direct control was lost, but even without their control, the bombs were still set to explode.

Only, there was no method to the destruction they caused.

The timing and degree of the detonations were randomized.

RUMBLE!

It was a sound and feeling everyone had gotten used to after some weeks.

No matter what they tried, they couldn't save everyone.

The randomized bombings took untold millions of lives, lives of people who had nothing but faith in the order that governed them.

It was as if the people of the order wanted everyone to know that it didn't matter if they'd been defeated and destroyed.

Even if they were all dead, they could still terrorize the world.

If there was one good thing, it was the fact that a lot of the randomized detonations happened within the group of explosives already removed from their original positions.

Just as millions died, millions were saved.

And when the news got out that the Five Gods were no more, the race to remove all threats from the Southwestern Region became fierce.

People moved with more purpose and energy. Without the threat of conscious control always nagging them in the back of their minds, they could calmly and systematically take care of everything else.

Minimizing damage was the most important thing.

Sure, not everyone could be saved. But that didn't mean that those present wouldn't try to save as many of them as possible.

That mentality was what led to the armies spreading thinly around the entire Southwestern Region.

It was good for the efforts they were making.

But there was something they hadn't considered.

'This...'

It was a coincidence, really.

The first person to find themselves back in this general vicinity was Dominic Void.

The central area of the region had been mostly ignored for a while, since the security of that region was guaranteed.

Or at least, that was the thought everyone had.

Until now.

What Dominic saw was...

'It's...gone...?'

...a hole.

When it appeared was unknown.

How it was done was also unknown.

After he found it, he immediately informed those on the backlines. Investigations started as soon as the news was transmitted, but no clues were found as to the cause.

This hole...

It wasn't always a hole.

Rather, this was a location they'd been at only recently.

It was, at some point, the Divine Order's main headquarters.

But that tall, sky-piercing collection of buildings that seemed larger than life was already gone.

All that remained in its place was a crater roughly a hundred kilometers wide and a few thousand kilometers deep.

The absence of any kind of information from the crater was concerning, but that very pregnant absence was telling in its own way.

Obviously, this event was intentional.

It was a move made by "someone" to hide things present in that headquarters that they didn't want the allied armies to know.

And to hide the things they wanted to hide, that "someone" had to create a crater this big.

Honestly, this amount of information could be gathered by anyone, but it didn't really amount to anything.

They could guess that the Straea Clan was involved, since that was the most obvious conclusion, and they could guess that "something" was going on in this place, but they'd have no way of ever knowing what that "something" was.

This time, Damien wasn't the only special person to take into consideration to solve this problem.

Of course, Damien already had the answer. He'd devoured the Five Gods' existences, so he knew more than he'd ever possibly need to know about what was happening in that place.

But there was someone who'd been able to deduce the same things he'd learned.

Without taking the easy route.

Hestia Void.

She was never a fighter, so Damien didn't train her to fight.

He made sure she'd receive an education beyond any other. He allowed her to gain practical experience and grow her mind in every way she so wished.

And as a result, Hestia had gained a talent of deduction far beyond what reality should've allowed.

Logic began to follow her, rather than the other way around.

And precisely because of that, she could infer about the things that were hidden by the destruction of the Divine Order's main facilities.

That, however, was a topic for another time.

Many people were killed, but overall, the matters of the Southwestern Region were handled properly.

The territory had fallen into Void Palace's hands, but nobody outside the great clans was aware of that.

To them, the war taking place was practically imaginary.

It was over before they realized what was happening, and the most important battles happened in places where nobody could bear witness.

Nevertheless, the world was lulled into a silence.

Almost unnaturally so.

It was something subtle that not many people had realized.

Among those on his side, Damien was part of only a handful who noticed the strangeness.

It wasn't just time and space.

It was reality.

Reality itself was subtly flexing. The degree of this warping was increasing by the day. At first, it was barely anything at all, but by the time the war with the Divine Order ended, everyone was asking themselves the same question.

"How did we get here?"

Chapter 1515 Confusion [2]

Damien noticed it first, but even for him, it took months.

How many months...?

He genuinely wasn't sure.

'The law of time has changed. It's not stable anymore.'

Months, days, weeks, it was hard to tell which one was passing when the day and night cycle ended.

Months had passed since Damien returned to the Celestial Prison. That much was for certain.

But how did these months pass?

He wasn't quite sure. It all happened so fast that it was hard to take reality as reality.

Damien's mind immediately began to race.

At this point, he was still above the western ocean of the Divine Order's territory. He'd only recently sent news back of the Five Gods' death, and he was already receiving news back about the things that happened afterwards.

But wasn't it only a few moments ago that they'd died?

How was time able to move in such a way that the Southwestern Region could be cleared and left for him to take over?

At first, Damien thought it was just him.

He'd just left the Celestial Prison, after all. He'd been subjected to a space unlike any other he'd been to, so if reality warped around him when he left, it made sense.

If it was solely his problem, it was easy to solve. The source of the issue could only be one of a few options, so if Damien isolated and took care of them one by one, he'd find himself back in a stable reality.

But it wasn't only his problem.

Others had experienced similar things, though, not to the same extent as him.

He still didn't know this, but he could infer based on the way events played out that this problem wasn't exclusively related to him.

'What's...happening?'

The realization came just as fast and hard as reality itself when it hit him.

In the first place, where did all of this come from?

Was it the fact that conflict was at a minimum right now?

'The Divine Order subjugation went pretty swimmingly. Even if there was a hiccup at the end, it wasn't much of a hiccup at all.'

That "hiccup" must've felt like the end of the world to those who were its victims, but to Damien, it was really just a drop in the ocean, something without much presence.

It shouldn't have been like that.

'But it just doesn't feel real.'

Damien frowned to himself.

That was the problem. At the very core of everything, that was the answer.

Reality didn't feel real right now.

No, reality was really collapsing, wasn't it?

'I have to check.'

Damien didn't waste time returning to the palace. He descended where he was and controlled the nearby ocean to create an isolated environment to protect him from external forces.

In that place, surrounded by the waters of this realm, Damien delved deep into its systems.

He studied the Heavenly Order. He studied the earth and the people who lived on it.

His mind went into the depths of those ethereal concepts that others could only dream of.

And the laws that governed the world unraveled themselves before his eyes.

The elements were—

'—fine. There's nothing wrong with the most base elements like Fire and Water.'

It was the same for most of the branching laws that were formed as a result of other laws existing, such as illusion or poison.

Life and Death were—

'—just a little skewed. It looks like the average lifespans of all beings will be elongated, but it's also far easier to die an early death.'

The Law of Life was more powerful than usual, which led to the first change. However, the Law of Death was also enhanced, even more so than Life, hence the latter half.

Creation and Destruction—

'—can't be touched by anyone, at least, that's what I think. There aren't any problems with them, so I should be correct.'

But most importantly...

'Space and Time...that's the most concerning disruption.'

Unlike the other foundational laws, which showed only small signs of disruption at most, space and time were completely twisted.

'Their operation looks normal on the outside, to the point where nobody would ever notice the difference in their daily lives. Over time, however, it accumulates.'

For instance, this very moment.

Wasn't it strange?

Wasn't it strange that the armies were able to sweep the Southwestern Region in no more than three months to clear all the explosives planted throughout its lands?

Putting aside the amount of time it took to remove those explosives and put them somewhere secure so they couldn't hurt anyone, just the travel time was far longer than that.

Even if the armies were massive, even if they spread incredibly thin, it should've taken at least a few years to finish doing what they'd done.

Yet, in only three months, the situation had been wrapped up.

'The Heavenly Order...no, the Heavenly World itself in all facets is being affected by something grander.'

It was changing, molding to something other than the other it had relied on for so long.

And for unknown reasons, the first step in that change was Space and Time.

'Do I need to do something about it...?' Damien questioned.

In the first place, what could he do?

'From what I can sense, this isn't necessarily a man-made problem. It wasn't caused by anyone voluntarily.'

If so, was there a need to stop it, or was this a natural progression that the Heavenly World was always bound to make?

'Right now, it's actually somewhat convenient. The annoying things pass fast, which means we can get to the most important battles sooner and with less suffering.'

However, that convenience could very well be a facade hiding something terrible.

Damien really didn't know.

As someone who'd become unreasonably strong in recent days, it had been a long time since he'd felt this way.

'And here I was wanting to run around dominating the battlefield...'

Why was it that every time he found himself superb confidence the cosmos decided to bring down his mood?

'No, if I look at it in another way, isn't it only the cosmos itself that can make me feel this way?'

Damien shook his head and cleared his thoughts.

'For now, the best thing to do is observe and see if anyone else has noticed anything. It won't be too late to act when the problem becomes more concerning.'

He didn't want to make any rash decisions. Especially not when it came to decisions concerning the fate of the cosmos.

'But if this is really something that threatens the existence of this reality...'

Damien's eyes hardened.

'...then I'll make sure to fix it myself, no matter who or what the cause is.'

That was the end of his involvement with the issue for now.

He returned to Void Palace, ready to live his life as he always had.

However, his naivety, his general lack of knowledge on the issue, was truly a concern beyond what he'd expected.

Because the changes in the cosmos weren't simple.

They weren't some small changes, nor were they changes that were meant to take place.

Fixing them wouldn't be a small task even for someone who could completely control Existence.

And the cause...

The cause was the very thing Damien least expected.

Chapter 1516 Straea [1]

With the Southwestern Region cleaned of the Divine Order's presence entirely, one would expect several changes to take place.

However, for the most part, nothing much happened.

As months went by, the citizens slowly forgot about the events of the past and went back to their daily lives. Trade resumed in the region, and those from external forces finally found themselves able to enter the cardinal region again.

At first, they thought everything was the same, but there was a subtle difference.

The people...weren't they acting a little different?

They weren't as "kind" as before, but that wasn't a bad thing. In the past, the kindness most people received from the citizens unnerved them. It didn't seem natural, and the cult-like feeling that was ever present here made people want to leave as soon as possible.

Other than those who succumbed and became brainwashed citizens of the region, everyone else viewed the common people of the southwest like they were a plague.

That feeling was gone now.

They seemed to be minding their own business, living their lives without being overly concerned about others.

That was it, though.

After the Divine Order was destroyed, everyone expected there to be a new influence controlling the Southwestern Region, but that was a flawed assumption.

The Divine Order still existed.

Even its old headquarters were rebuilt, leaving the territory looking like nothing happened at all.

But the people weren't the same.

That was the key difference.

The Veritas Clan didn't have to do much after the war ended. Other than an envoy party that went to Void Palace, the rest of their army returned home to await further orders.

Void Palace and the Holy Empire were the ones who really cooperated in the reconstruction of the region.

It was Damien's idea.

Though he still hadn't had the opportunity to meet the Holy Emperor, he'd been exchanging letters with the man for several months.

Through those interactions, Damien was able to learn a great deal about religion and how to act if one was in control of one.

With this knowledge, he was able to create a new Divine Order. His own people were sat at the head of the order, so it would never stray off its original path again.

The citizens of the Southwestern Region were able to resume their lives so soon precisely because of this.

Damien gave them a sense of security and stability, making them feel like nothing much had changed.

He was able to bring peace to the territory, and though he couldn't hang his banner over it quite yet, the fact that he was the one controlling it from the dark still held true.

The Southwestern Region needed time to stabilize entirely. In terms of economics, geopolitics, and other similar matters, the people Damien put in charge of the order had a lot of work to do.

Namely, the 8th Sword of Void Palace, Fabio Viviani. He was the one at the absolute peak of the new Divine Order.

He, along with the council of aids provided to him, would be in charge of ruling the entire Southwestern Region, a mission they took as a blessing from their Young Lord.

The Holy Empire didn't care about artificially expanding its territory, so it didn't interfere much with what happened afterwards, only offering help where help was needed.

The Vega Clan remained silent as they continued to observe how things progressed, while the Dragon Clan, as always, remained unconcerned with the happenings of the Heavenly World.

The only other influence who had a stake in this matter was the Kyushu Federation, who'd been oddly silent since everything began in full swing.

Matthias Quincy promised Damien nonaggression, and that was exactly what he provided. He, like the leaders of Vega, decided that watching and being entertained was the best course of action for the current moment.

However, he did have a promise with Damien.

And Damien had shown him exactly what he promised to.

The Divine Order was gone, leaving only the Straea Clan.

Matthias knew better than to take their silence as submission, but regardless, he was a man who never went back on the promises he made.

In return for a number of resources that seemed unbelievable on paper, the Kyushu Federation would become a true ally of Void Palace, attacking and retreating together, living and dying together.

As he looked over the tens of reports telling him about everything taking place in the outside world, he had a wry smile on his face.

He saw it when they first met. That was the only reason he entertained the young boy who had ambitions beyond his station.

But now that they'd come this far, in a matter of months at that, he was forced to truly accept the conclusion he'd made.

"Damien Void...wants to rule the world."

Maybe "rule" wasn't the right word.

Whatever it was, Damien was trying to bring any and everyone together, creating a united front.

The only question was...

What was this united front for?

Who was he trying to face?

Even if Matthias was a member of the Heavenly World's elite, he wasn't aware of the true threat the Foreign Races presented.

He was aware of the Straea Clan's collusion with them, but just like everyone outside the palace, he was completely unaware of what they'd done to Dante, and what they were planning to do to the world.

The masses still saw the Foreign Races as a small threat.

Damien had plans to change that.

He couldn't just tell them. For people like Matthias, words alone weren't enough to prove anything.

They needed concrete evidence.

That sort of evidence wouldn't show itself as long as the Foreign Races had any say in the matter.

'But what if they didn't?'

What if they couldn't continue being underestimated anymore, no matter how hard they tried?

Well, they'd find out soon enough.

With the war against the Divine Order over, most people assumed that the palace was too focused on internal stabilization and the handover process to care about anything else.

They were wrong.

Void Palace didn't need to put much effort into those things. Their internal situation was at the best it had ever been, and when it came to the Southwestern Region, they didn't have to do much work at all because of Damien's preplanning.

The majority of their forces were free and ready.

After all, they knew that they weren't done yet.

Their Young Lord had led them to victory against one of their enemies, but there was still one left.

And while they were all still in the mood to wage war and conquer...

Damien couldn't betray their expectations, could he?

He had no plans of doing that at all.

Even for him, the feeling was the same.

The Straea Clan had been quiet for long enough. Whatever they were doing, Damien wasn't going to give them more time to do it in peace.

War was tedious and tiring, but it was also incredibly rewarding.

So until everything was over, Damien refused to stop.

The Divine Order was gone. The Straea Clan was next.

Until Void Palace hit the absolute peak of all worlds...

Well, nothing more needed to be said.

Chapter 1517 Straea [2]

The Straea Clan.

Not much was known about it to the outside world.

It had been mentioned before, but despite the grandiosity of their existence, the Straea Clan somehow managed to keep their internal structure hidden from the masses.

They weren't exclusive in this.

Void Palace was also quite mysterious to others. Their disjointed dimensional monstrosity of a palace made it difficult for anyone to get anywhere they weren't supposed to be.

On top of that, with how close-knit the people of the palace were, it was difficult to gain information from within.

However, since the palace was active in the world and openly showed its strength here and there, people were somewhat aware of its structure.

For instance, the 12 Swords were known in both name and appearance.

The Straea Clan also had their equivalent of the 12 Swords, but nobody knew who they were.

They were headed by Malefice Straea and served Malevalon directly. They'd never appeared in the outside world before, at least, not in ways that other people could see them. But that didn't mean they'd never appeared at all.

The Straea Clan was actually quite simple.

It was an authoritarian clan even internally. Malevalon held all the power, so there was really no need for a complicated structure.

But that didn't mean there was none. After all, Malevalon himself wasn't going to do all the work necessary to run a clan.

Malefice was in charge of these types of matters, and the ones who worked under him were the closest thing Straea had to leaders outside Malevalon.

Other than them, everyone was equal.

The geniuses were lauded as all geniuses were, but even they didn't have much status.

It was confusing.

Why would a genius bother to stay in the Straea Clan with the kind of treatment they received?

They were used and abused. They were treated like trash, demeaned and taught to become dogs rather than individuals.

This treatment started from childhood.

Because, again, the Straea Clan didn't need young geniuses.

It needed pawns who could carry out orders.

Geniuses would be systematically groomed so they would be mindless in all matters that didn't relate to the clan.

This education had never failed. There had never been a case of internal rebellion even once in the clan's history.

There had never been a case of a young genius obtaining their own free will.

There had never been such a case...until now.

Somewhere in the Straea Clan's hidden manor, the place where young talents were groomed, a boy was thrown against a wall.

Thud!

His body slid down and fell to the ground. His legs were too weak to bring him back to his feet, and his body was covered in gashes and bruises from the beating he'd taken.

However, the look in his eyes never changed.

Ptui!

He spit on the floor next to him, glaring at his attackers.

"Is that all?"

The group of three boys didn't respond. After staring at him indifferently, the one at their head clicked his tongue.

"Tch. Let's go. We can break him tomorrow."

The boys left without much of a fuss.

After all, they weren't actually bullying the boy or anything like that.

It was just the task they were given by the instructor.

In fact, the boy who was getting beat had the same task, just for another person who wasn't currently present.

The talents of the hidden manor were frequently turned against each other like this. They were made to find ways to destroy their fellows, whether mentally or physically.

To do so physically was easy. Everyone in the hidden manor was more than capable of that.

But the mental aspect...

Well, with the type of training they'd been through, no amount of physical torture could make their minds break.

The three boys who attacked had tried just for the sake of trying, to see if that assumption was true.

Since the boy had been beaten within an inch of his life and still kept his spirit, he obviously wouldn't break if they did more, so it was pointless to keep trying.

It was normal. To be beaten, to be betrayed, to be killed. Here, any of these things were just daily occurrences.

Food was scarce. To gain enough sustenance to fully maintain one's physical condition, one had to make an unspeakable number of accomplishments.

The talents were were forced to do anything they could to survive.

And at the same time, they were forced to kill themselves so they could survive.

After all, if the instructors realized that they were having unique thoughts...

...their fates didn't need to be described, did it?

That was a problem for this boy.

The boy who unfortunately donned the name of Straea.

'Fuck.'

He couldn't say anything out loud.

He stood up, brushed himself off, and ripped off the clothes on his back to bandage his wounds.

By the time he was done, he wasn't wearing anything more than a rag. He walked through the halls in that state, but nobody looked at him strangely.

'It's normal, after all.'

There was no medical center here. If one succumbed to one's injuries, it was nobody else's fault.

'I hate this fucking place.'

It was quite strange, wasn't it?

Somehow, he'd managed to maintain a sense of free will despite being raised in a place like this.

He'd never seen the outside world before. He had no idea what society looked like.

Still, he managed to form the mind of someone who'd been living independently in the world for their entire life.

Nobody knew that he'd done so.

He was smart enough to hide it. If there was one thing that he'd gained here, it was survival instinct.

'I have to find a way out.'

It was the same thought he'd been entertaining since he was 6 years old.

Escape.

Now, he was closing in on eighteen. His strength had been raised to an unreasonable degree by the hellish training he'd undergone, but it wasn't nearly enough for him to get out of this place.

'But I'll do it one day.'

He'd been plotting for twelve years.

On how he'd escape, and what he'd do when he escaped.

And at the top of that list...

'I'm going to destroy this bullshit ass clan.'

Since birth, he'd been told about the greatness of the Straea Clan.

Since birth, they'd been trying to indoctrinate him.

But all that did was breed his hatred.

The Straea Clan's methods were good. Disregarding the morality of it all, they did indeed succeed in producing the mindless soldiers they wanted.

However, in this sole case where the method was flawed, the method itself created a monster that only wished for the Straea Clan's demise.

His name was Ezekiel Straea.

And while he seemed like an insignificant character that wouldn't have any say in the matters of the outside world...

He'd soon find that his fate was connected to forces far beyond his control.

Forces that would help him attain the goal that seemed impossible to him.

Forces that would show him what it meant to truly be a monster.

But that was a story for another time.

For now, Ezekiel was no more than an ant, trapped in a cage that he could never escape.

Chapter 1518 Ezekiel [3]

A year passed.

Was it a year?

Truthfully, Ezekiel didn't know what a year was in the outside world's time.

The hidden manor didn't allow its students to keep track of time, nor did it teach them how to.

Ezekiel figured out the units of measure by eavesdropping on the instructors, but he could only assume how long each unit actually was.

Nevertheless, a year in his time had passed.

It was enough time for the talents to cycle. New ones entered and old ones left. As for those who remained through the transition, a large number of them disappeared mysteriously.

They'd been deemed unfit, so they'd been killed.

'This isn't the first time, so it's not like it's surprising.'

Life was mundane in the hidden manor.

Sure, there was a lot going on. Every day was filled with trials and tribulations that tested one's grit and forced one to grow stronger.

However, even that became mundane after it was done for decades.

The children here were made to start training the moment they started walking. From that moment on, they were raised so they wouldn't be fazed by anything they encountered.

Ezekiel had been through every form of torture that existed in this world, and even some that didn't. He had been killed over and over again only to be brought back to life for more training.

His body was practically indestructible at this point. That was why he allowed people to beat him up when they decided they felt the need to.

He'd heal from any wounds with just a night of sleep, and if he really got pissed off, it didn't take much to kill his peers.

'It's mostly just annoying because I have to hide.'

He had to hide his strength, he had to hide his ability to think and process information freely, and he had to hide his emotions and capability to learn.

Ezekiel was a talent beyond talent. He'd mastered the skills others were being taught with only a single glance.

But if he wanted to survive in this place that raised talents, he ironically had no choice but to hide his own.

He didn't feel burdened by his life. Despite his independent mind, the teachings of the Straea Clan were quite effective.

Those kinds of negative emotions couldn't affect his mental state.

It was just tiresome.

'When can I escape?'

He'd schemed all he needed to, but he needed both an opportunity and a whole lot of luck if he wanted to pull anything off.

'But I think I can do it now. The past year made me stronger than the instructors, didn't it?'

Their skills, their movements, their experience.

He'd copied it all.

In a case where he happened to make it to the outside world...

He truly did have the capability to become the bane of the Straea Clan.

'Haa, but it's pointless to think about it.'

There was nothing he could do.

Life was bleak.

He was stronger than the instructors, but he'd learned about the clan that was waiting for him outside. No matter whether he escaped or not, wouldn't he still die at the hands of those stronger experts of the clan?

'I'm not enough by myself, and it's not like I can convince these mindless rats to help me.'

Even he didn't know how he'd managed to develop a brain like his. Everyone around him was without a brain at all, only able to act on orders they'd been given.

Hell, even the boys who usually came to beat him up were the same.

They "acted" like they had personalities. To someone unaware, they would seem like regular stuck-up children from a major clan.

But it was all an act in the end.

The behaviors they showcased were learned and mimicked; never internalized.

'It's boring.'

That was the conclusion Ezekiel came to.

'Life is boring.'

That was why he always craved the outside world.

Would there be fun things to do there?

If he made it there, would he find a way to make this bleak life less bleak?

He really didn't know, but he really wanted to find out.

And as if he hadn't had the exact same thought every single day for the past who knows how long, as if this wasn't the only thought allowing him to maintain a little bit of sanity in this insane place, he entertained it for hours on end.

While he was tortured by the instructors, while he was beaten by his peers, while he beat his peers into the ground, and while he suffered endlessly, he thought about what was happening in the outside world.

Still, life remained mundane.

Another year passed in Ezekiel time.

He wasn't too far off in his measurement. His years were roughly six months in normal time. In the two years since his first introduction, only a single year had passed.

Ezekiel's mindset never changed. It was hard to speak about him as a person, since his thoughts and actions were monotonous like a robot.

He had free will, but he didn't know how to use it.

He had never been given the opportunity.

So another day began, and another day passed.

Another day of suffering, another day of pain.

Another day that Ezekiel spent staring at the ceiling, dreaming of the outside—

BOOOOOOOOOM!

"What?!" Ezekiel exclaimed.

He was so confused that he forgot to muffle his voice.

A massive explosion shook the hidden manor.

It was a building built so that no outside forces could interfere with what was happening inside, yet, somehow, an explosion rocked it to its very foundation.

Ezekiel leapt out of his bed, well, he did the best he could considering that his bed was just a wooden floor, and rushed out of his room.

The other talents had done the same. There was chaos in the hidden manor, but the instructors were moving through the halls and making sure everyone retained order.

They were being raised as tools. They were not allowed to be surprised by a surprise attack.

Ezekiel gritted his teeth.

'Something big is happening.'

He didn't know what it was.

But there was one thing he gathered from that single explosion alone.

'This might be my chance.'

The outside world was being shaken by an immense force.

The hidden manor was shaken in kind.

With the instructors busy trying to control the young talents they were in charge of...

'...I can find an opening.'

It was the exact thing he'd been trained to do for so long.

Observe the enemy. Find an opening. Exploit it and accomplish the given mission in the least amount of time and effort possible.

The current mission:

'Escape this hellhole.'

It locked into Ezekiel's mind.

The instincts he'd trained throughout his life roared to life.

His feet pressed into the ground.

And he made a run for it.

This perfect opportunity wouldn't be allowed to slide.

This time, he would finally...!

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

"ARGH!"

Another explosion rocked the hidden manor, ripping an entire outer wall to shreds.

Ezekiel was thrown back by the force. He raises his arms to absorb the shrapnel headed towards his face.

THUD!

He slammed against another wall and lowered his arms.

His eyes widened.

He could see it only a few meters away.

Sunlight.

A sight he'd never seen before.

Chapter 1519 Ezekiel [4]

Q!

Ezekiel hardly had time to comprehend the beautiful scene.

It blinded his eyes. He could hardly see anything in the first place, since his eyes had become accustomed to darkness.

In most cases, the talents who graduated from the hidden manor would leave blindfolded and would be slowly adjusted to the outside climate. Otherwise, it was difficult for them to function properly.

Obviously, Ezekiel couldn't really get the same treatment.

Because the explosion that filled his arms with shrapnel wasn't the first, nor was it the last.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

With the sound isolation that once protected the hidden manor gone, Ezekiel's sensitive ears were finally able to pick up everything that was happening outside.

Countless explosions, something completely unexpected.

And as if the sounds from the outside weren't bad enough, it seemed the hidden manor was being targeted purposefully, because after the first wall fell, the rest soon followed.

Wood and metal flew through the air, crashing into the internal structures of the manor and destroying its foundation.

Some pieces managed to perfectly locate living targets, slamming through the heads of some of the talents and directly killing them.

Blood began to fly through the air just as much as the shrapnel did.

The amount of sound became overwhelming.

No, the overabundance of stimuli itself was the problem.

For Ezekiel, who'd been in a controlled environment for the entirety of his life, it was maddening.

Maddeningly exciting.

'Is this...the outside world...?'

He hadn't moved yet.

His eyes were only starting to adjust, and while they did, he was ducking and picking out the metal that had gotten stuck in his arm.

Once he was certain there wasn't anything else flying wantonly through the air, he spread his awareness as he was taught and searched for any signs of nearby life.

'They're not here.'

The instructors weren't in the vicinity. There were a few other talents nearby, but they didn't concern him.

'I can actually...'

Ezekiel's eyes lit up.

'I can actually leave!'

He stood up and took one last look around, taking in the scenes of the hidden manor that were now more visible than ever.

And with not even a single drop of lingering emotion remaining in his body, he rushed out of the destroyed building, finally feeling the sun on his skin for the first time.

XIU!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"AAAARGH!"

There were a lot of sounds, and even more sights to accompany them.

As Ezekiel's eyes adjusted, he found himself in the middle of a true war zone.

Starships flew through the sky, dropping law-infused bombs across the Straea Manor territory.

On the ground, several tens of thousands of troops, if not more, fought head to head, engaging in a bloody battle that claimed countless lives.

This much was already surprising to Ezekiel.

BANG!

This much already made his heart beat like it had never beaten before.

But this was only the tip of the iceberg.

BANG!

Ezekiel jumped back, narrowly avoiding being caught in a crater that formed as an unidentified object fell from the sky.

"DAMMIT! YOU VOID PALACE BASTARDS!"

A voice came from the crater, followed by another bang as the figure who created it shot back into the sky.

"That was..."

Ezekiel only caught a slight glance of it, but he was sure of what he saw.

'The Straea Clan logo!'

A top fighter from the clan, one of the very people he didn't want to meet.

'Luckily he seems preoccupied.'

The situation finally sank in for Ezekiel.

'I should find a place to hide.'

He looked around, but there was nothing around but flat ground.

In the sky, that fighter he saw earlier was confronting a woman with emerald green hair, a member of the so-called "Void Palace."

'Is she strong...?'

In Ezekiel's memory, women were never very strong. The female members of the hidden manor were usually killed off first, and rarely any of them were able to survive long enough to graduate.

'I think she's going to—'

He didn't even have the chance to think it.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three massive wooden tendrils thicker than anything Ezekiel had ever seen before burst out of the ground only a few feet in front of him and shot into the air faster than he could comprehend.

The tendrils slammed into the Straea Clan fighter, throwing him forward as he coughed up blood.

The emerald-haired woman watched as he flew towards her, her eyes calmer than an undisturbed lake.

Ezekiel's eyes opened wide.

'Now.'

He saw the opportunity.

As did she.

Her hand sliced forward, jutting through the Straea fighter's body and coming out the other side.

'He's done.'

Ezekiel raised his brow in admiration.

'The outside world...is really special.'

He didn't think there were other people capable of making an attack like that, but it seemed he was more ordinary than he expected.

As his gaze moved across the horizon, he saw many other scenes that wowed him in the same way.

He saw the strength of Straea.

Those fighters were not soft permissions. Their attacks made the sky shake and the earth tremble, striking genuine fear into Ezekiel's heart.

But fear translated to excitement for him, and that excitement only grew as he watched how those amazing fighters were killed one by one by their enemies.

He didn't know what was happening.

All he knew was that there was a lot of battle going on.

And Straea...

'Is the Straea Clan actually weak?'

...was obviously on the losing side.

The chaotic situation was no place for someone like Ezekiel, who had no practical experience. However, he was tempted beyond belief by the mayhem.

He wanted to join in.

His body involuntarily moved, taking him closer and closer to the warring masses.

'I want...to kill.'

His instincts roared. This was what he'd been trained for.

But rather than the enemy, the entire brunt of his bloodlust was directed at those who had the Straea Clan's insignia displayed on their bodies.

'The outside world...'

'...is it fun?'

His thoughts were inconsequential. They flowed for no purpose other than flowing. They voiced his inner desires in the form of questions that he already knew the answers to.

Was it fun?

Of course it was.

Would he enjoy it to its fullest?

Of course he would!

His walk turned into a run, and his run turned into a sprint.

His steps gained more and more weight, yet they became lighter, pushing him forward with extreme speed.

'I'm going to kill.'

'I can finally kill.'

'I will—!'

"...huh?"

"What's a boy like you doing in a place like this?"

Before Ezekiel knew what was happening, he'd been caught by the collar.

He looked back, only to see the emerald-haired woman from earlier standing behind him with a curious look on her face.

"I'm..."

"This is no good."

She interrupted him before he could explain himself.

"Reya, are you there?"

"I am here, Empress."

Another woman appeared from the shadows and kneeled to the emerald-haired woman.

"Take him back to the palace and get him some fresh clothes. If he wants it, let him join the armies or the staff. If not, let him leave to live his life freely."

"Yes, Empress."

Ezekiel was handed off just like that.

The environment became a blur as he was hastily transported according to the given instructions.

The whole while, he was trying to process what was happening to him.

'H-huh?!'

He stammered internally.

Before he could have any fun...

Before he could kill even a single person...

It was over just like that?!

It was.

At least, for now.

But Ezekiel had no way of really knowing, did he?

This interaction, this sudden "kidnapping" that took him away from the battlefield...

For him, this would turn out to be the opportunity of a lifetime.

Chapter 1520 Ezekiel [5]

Ezekiel's case seemed like a strange one.

There was no reason for the palace to take him in, especially not under Elvira's orders.

Could it be that she saw something in him?

To an extent, that was correct, but that wasn't the entire story.

Actually, Void Palace had been in the business of saving people for quite a while.

Though Ezekiel didn't know it, the Straea Clan had over ten hidden manors used for the same purpose as the one he grew up in.

When the war began, Damien and his people were unaware of these facilities, however, after accidentally uncovering one during a siege, they began to offer refuge to the young geniuses trapped within.

They'd been mistreated in every way possible. It was cruel, especially when considering that a lot of the kids in those places weren't even ten years old yet.

Void Palace had a lot of space to accommodate people, and more than that, it had an environment perfect for recovery.

Those who needed solace could find solace. Those who needed structure could find structure.

And those who needed revenge could find revenge.

Damien never intended to choose a path for these young geniuses.

They'd been controlled for their entire lives, so what he aimed to do was similar to what he did for the citizens of the Southwestern Region.

He used his resources to teach them how to live for themselves. Whatever decision they made from that point on was the one they'd have to live with.

Truthfully, most of the talents who were rescued decided to leave after recuperating.

They offered their sincerest thanks, sure, but they were not comfortable with joining another large influence.

What they did with their lives after leaving was none of the palace's business, but if there was one thing Damien made sure of, it was that none of them returned to the Straea Clan.

There was a relatively decent portion who decided to become servants so they could stay at the palace and live peacefully. As for those who joined the army, that number was by far the smallest out of all the categories.

The main problem was those who were too young to make such decisions.

The palace had taken responsibility for their education and growth for now, but whether it would stay that way or not was to be decided in the future.

Ezekiel's choice...

When he got to the palace, which was an experience in its own right, he saw a lot of things he'd never seen before.

The technology they used, the ability to move unreasonable distances in a matter of seconds, the strength of their armies...

It was all exciting and refreshing for him.

There were a lot of choices presented to him.

He could've lived peacefully. He could've become a wanderer who decided his own fate.

But he didn't choose either of these options.

For him, there was only one thing. One goal that made his life worth living. One thought that got him through his torturous daily life.

"I want to see the end of the Straea Clan."

That was what he told them.

And they understood his intent.

The best way to see that scene for oneself was obvious.

The best way to achieve revenge was a path Damien set up specifically for that purpose.

Ezekiel was a special case. He didn't need to develop freedom of thought, so he was able to make his decision far faster than anyone else.

He really only had one question for the man who asked him what he wanted to do from this point on.

"That emerald-haired woman...is she a member of your army?"

And the answer he got...

"Emerald hair...? Ah, you must be talking about Commander Moonwind. Not only is she a part of our army, she was an integral part of its creation and training process. If there was anyone who has been as involved in the army's development as the Young Lord, it would be her."

Wasn't that all he needed to hear?

That woman was strong, stronger than him and the instructors, stronger than anyone he'd ever seen before.

If someone like that was produced by the army of this place...

"...I want to join that army."

He wanted to grow stronger.

Not in a way that made him a tool, but in a way that made him a true fighter, capable of standing up for himself.

The man smiled, nodding his head.

"Very well. I'll have to do a few checks to make sure your information checks out, but we should be able to get you registered in the next few days. Until then, just rest and recuperate. Life in the Straea Clan...must have been difficult for you."

The man gathered a collection of files and departed, leaving Ezekiel alone in the room he was provided when he arrived here.

It was quiet.

'It's not the same though.'

When it was quiet in the hidden manor, it meant someone was about to try and kill him.

Here, the silence felt...secure.

He didn't know how to explain it.

'Was my upbringing worse than I thought?'

There was no way for him to know. He didn't have a standard to compare it to:

But from the way he'd been treated since the moment that woman called Commander Moonwind ordered her subordinate to take care of him, the life he'd experienced thus far was more than just a tragedy.

He'd been brought to this place and given a room with a bed for him to sleep on.

He'd been provided a bath and new clothes to change into.

His internal injuries, though not serious due to his insane healing factor, were completely removed through a variety of treatments.

Wasn't he practically being treated like royalty?

'There must be a reason they're doing all this.'

After all, nothing in this world was free.

'But as long as they can give me what I need to get back at those bastards, it's fine.'

In any case, this place was obviously leagues better than the one he just came from.

There was a lot of naivety in his thinking. His basic needs were met, and he suddenly believed Void Palace was a good place.

It, of course, was. However, who was to say that others didn't employ the same strategies to swindle people and lead them into the mouth of a lion?

Ezekiel was young. Moreover, his worldview was developed purely through imagination.

He had more to learn than just techniques that made him stronger.

But of all the children who were saved from the hidden manors, Ezekiel was the one Damien took a personal interest in.

Though the boy himself was unaware, the Young Lord of this very palace was watching him closely and had been ever since he set foot within the palace grounds.

It wasn't because of his mentality, nor was it because of his desire for revenge.

It was for a reason neither he nor the Straea Clan instructors who raised him knew.

A "talent" that only Damien could see.

And with Void Palace's army as the stage...

Damien planned to let that talent bloom to its fullest potential.

Well, that was if Ezekiel could even make it through the training.