

Void 1491

Chapter 1491 Aftermath [2]

A thousand years of suffering.

That was Damien's punishment.

He had to spend a timespan that was almost ten times as long as the life he'd lived in a state of torture.

He was locked away in a natural realm made specifically for his punishment. The time in that place was nonexistent, so there was no way for him to measure how long he'd been inside once he was there.

He just had to sit there and suffer.

Physical punishment, mental punishment, torture of the soul...

Damien had a thousand years to experience it all.

But nobody would ever know.

He would return to reality not long after he left, and nobody would ever understand the kind of pain he went through.

Still, a thousand years was quite a long time, and with it, Damien was able to somewhat improve on the things he had.

Of course, it was difficult to do so while he was in extreme pain, but in the instances of respite he found over that millennium, he relentlessly meditated and practiced.

The jewel representing the concept of domination appeared in the Emperor's Crown.

It, originally, was meant to dominate the concept of Existence. However, it did have a relationship with the true definition of its name.

With domination and mist, Damien gained most of what he'd been wanting for a while now.

Damien could now control Existence to an alarming degree.

The only thing left was to find the last two concepts and truly complete his law.

But there were things to be done before he could do that.

Honestly, a thousand years of silence was something Damien needed.

He didn't need to stress about his thoughts because he knew that he would be stuck in the darkness for a long while more.

Damien now knew the location of the Celestial Prison. He knew how to get there from the Straea Clan's territory.

And, it was quite coincidental, but as he was shown the Celestial Prison, the Emperor's Crown accidentally showed him information about the Straea Clan's forces as well.

It was hard to find time to think, but the time eventually did come, and Damien used it to the best of his abilities to create a roadmap for both his and Void Palace's future path.

The pain was torturous. No matter how much agony Damien had experienced in the past, the cosmos could always find a way to make him suffer more.

In the Sacred Abyss Universe's perception, this was his first offense, so its standards were somewhat skewed. That was why Damien could find time to think and practice.

There was no second chance, though. Not here, and not in the True Void Universe.

If there was a next time, Damien was going to experience something unreal as punishment.

Nevertheless, a thousand years passed in an instant.

And about six months later, Damien returned to reality.

The light in his eyes had dulled a little, but that was it.

He had a plan, and he had the power to execute it.

He couldn't wait to go back now.

Because soon, it would really begin.

War.

A true war against the True Void Universe's greatest traitors.

It took a long time for life to return to normalcy in Count Verex's, or rather, Damien's territory.

For those who didn't know the context of what had happened and experienced what could only be called a glitch in reality, it was somewhat easier.

The people wrote it off as some sort of worldwide illusion and continued their lives normally.

They had no way to prove those events were real, and they had no basis to believe any one person had actually caused those events.

As for the Gehenna Tribe...

Damien's actions honestly didn't matter much to them.

No, it was more that they couldn't really find it in their hearts to react positively.

There were so many dead.

Damien couldn't save them.

They had died before he came to this place. Their souls had already entered the Wheel of Samsara.

If he wanted to save them, he needed to do more than just twist reality.

So, while the rest of the world regained their families, the Gehenna Tribe was forced to cope with loss.

The first three months were spent in mourning.

The bodies of those who'd passed were gathered and pieced back together before being burned in a massive fire pit.

It was the usual method of cremation the Gehenna Tribe used. Through ceremonies like this, they hoped their dead could join their ancestors in Gehenna, living out eternity in peace.

There were still a lot of people left in the tribe.

They were the women and children, along with those like blacksmiths and elders who had other roles in the village.

At the end of the day while almost half of their people died, they still existed. They could still live on.

And they had to. If not for their own sakes, then for the sake of those who died to give them that chance.

Thalia had spent the past six months learning to lead the tribe from the elders. For three, she led every funeral ceremony personally, sending every single one of her deceased brothers and sisters away personally.

Darius and Tiamat were helping the entire way.

They helped the tribe rebuild their homes and gave them the resources to survive in a situation where they didn't have any remaining hunters or battle-ready people in their group.

And, according to Damien's plan, they'd been trying to convince Thalia to take on a position bigger than herself.

When Damien came into possession of the territory, he knew he couldn't be the one to lead it.

His home was the True Void Universe, not the Sacred Abyss Universe.

He needed someone to take the reins here in his place.

And who was better for that task than Thalia?

To protect the Gehenna Tribe and to make sure they wouldn't be challenged in the future, to assure that someone trustworthy was ruling the territory in his place, and to honor the Saintess, who'd protected him in her own way, Damien wanted Thalia to take control of this territory.

But Thalia herself seemed...hesitant.

As long as Darius and Tiamat had been trying to convince her, she'd been shutting out their words.

For the most part, she didn't allow them to try.

She was busy with her duties, so it couldn't be helped that she felt swamped. The problem was more that she didn't seem receptive for other reasons.

Was she running from an opportunity?

Did she have some sort of problem?

The two of them had no way to find out, because she would not open up to them.

Her eyes had dulled ever since that day.

No matter how much time passed, the light in her eyes never returned to the way it was before.

As of now, there was only one way to find out what was holding Thalia back.

There was only one way to see what was going on in his mind.

Damien needed to return.

Now that his punishment had ended and it was time for him to come back...

Maybe, just maybe, the darkness that had been growing in Thalia's heart could be cleared.

Chapter 1492 Aftermath [3]

Six months without Damien.

To Tiamat, it was normal. Damien had a habit of disappearing for long stretches of time here and there when he ended up in situations beyond his control.

Darius was less used to this as he'd spent less time with his brother, however, he'd heard the stories and knew Damien would come back fine.

As for the Gehenna Tribe, it was a bit different.

For the most part, they didn't know how to view him anymore.

They didn't hate him.

Emotional instincts pushed them to antagonize him, since he revived so many people but the ones who died fighting to protect the tribe were left dead.

However, their rational minds allowed them to push back that instinct.

Damien killed a God for their sakes. If he had the ability to bring their people back to life, he would've done it.

As such, the dilemma in their mind became less about whether they should view Damien positively or negatively and more about how they should treat him from now on.

They all saw what he did.

They all witnessed his actions that were practically those of an almighty being.

Did they have to treat him like a God now? Did they have to view him with reverence?

It felt strange since they'd been interacting with him in such a friendly manner until now, but at the same time, it only felt right when the gap between them was taken into account.

Still, as Damien didn't return, this question slowly left everyone's minds.

The traumatic experiences they'd gone through were still fresh in their minds, but they still had to move on.

That was life.

So when Damien finally did come back and that question was brought back to their attention, they were once again stumped.

Damien really did return as if nothing happened.

The thousand years he spent in agony were his alone to bear. They were, at the end of the day, a valid punishment for his actions.

He didn't need pity or respect because he got punished for correcting his mistakes. Therefore, whether it was Tiamat or Thalia, Damien had no plans of telling anyone what happened.

As he entered the tribe's territory six months after everything went down, he found an atmosphere that was still solemn.

The number of people in the village had gone down considerably. They were still somewhat plentiful, and their daily lives were relatively normal, but nobody could ignore the loss of those people.

There was now a massive stone monument at the center of the village dedicated to those who protected them.

And, unlike the generations before her, the deceased Saintess had a statue of her own, a show of respect by the people she once ruled.

The new Saintess, Thalia, was different than most of those who came before her.

She spent most of her time learning how to lead the tribe from the elders, but she also acted as the tribe's main hunter, bringing in enough resources to help the tribe survive through these harsh times x

Of course, Darius and Tiamat helped, but only minimally.

Thalia hunted because it helped her keep her mind in order. Yes, she was helping the tribe, but she mainly went out because she could only find peace in the jungle.

She had a spot just like Damien.

And that's where he went to find her.

While he didn't have the ability to respond, Tiamat had been sending him updates about the situation over the past half a year, so he was already informed about Thalia's attitude towards his proposition.

He had no plans of forcing her. If she really didn't want to take on the position he was offering her, he'd find someone else to take it.

But before he made that decision, he wanted to talk to her and see what was going on in her mind.

He walked up quietly. Unlike his spot, where it was best to go at night, Thalia's spot was better in the daytime.

It was a peaceful place where one could be free from the dangers of the jungle and purely enjoy the calm.

It was a clearing at the edge of a lake, clear and glassy. The red sun above painted it in quite a strange color, but it had its own ambiance that definitely felt relaxing.

When Thalia was here, she could have time alone with her thoughts.

That was pretty much the opposite of what she wanted right now, but that was exactly why she went.

No matter what was happening, she had to get her mind in order.

So she sat at the edge of the lake and stared at her reflection, wondering about many things.

She didn't expect to see someone else's face appear in that reflection with hers, but on this day, it did.

"I thought you wouldn't invade my private space," she said quietly.

"You did it first," Damien responded as he sat down.

Thalia looked over at him, her eyes the same as they'd been since that day.

"Did you come for the same reason as your friends?"

"I'm the one who told them to ask you about that stuff, so what do you think?"

Thalia sighed.

"I..."

She knew what she wanted to do. Logically, there were many pros and cons to Damien's offer that she needed to consider, but she'd gone over most of them on her own.

"I don't think the tribe will survive if we're put in the open like that."

That was the conclusion she came to.

She wanted to bring the tribe up to that point, sure. She wanted them to become more powerful so they could eventually grow out of their current status and become something greater.

However, it was too big of a leap to immediately take.

"Damien, we are weak," she said straightforwardly.

She didn't allow him to speak, but he didn't mind. It seemed she already knew what he was going to ask and say.

"I am glad we have befriended you. I am glad we have been given this opportunity. But we are too weak to take it. We always have been. Especially now, when our tribe can barely survive in our homeland, how do you expect us to survive out there, in a place where people like you exist?"

Damien almost wanted to say something witty, maybe something about how nobody like him existed outside either, but he refrained.

Thalia was right, after all.

He understood her hesitation.

Genuinely, the offer he made to her wasn't one she could ever dare to take. It was far too much of a risk.

Maybe another Damien didn't exist outside the jungle, but several Gods did.

And more than the fact that they existed...

"They are your enemies, are they not?"

Thalia looked straight into his eyes.

And Damien had no choice but to tell the truth.

"They are."

She nodded as if she'd been expecting it.

"I am happy to be your ally. However, if your enemies become my enemies, how will my people survive?"

They wouldn't.

She'd seen it personally the instant she returned from Gehenna.

When someone of that level got involved, there was no future for the tribe but extinction.

Damien watched her as she spoke.

Her hollow eyes, her demeanor that was completely different from the lively self she'd shown him until now...

Yes, in a sense, she'd matured into a ruler.

But that didn't mean she had to lose herself in her role.

And on top of that...

"You're only looking at things on the surface."

Damien swept his hand through the lake's surface, disturbing their reflections.

The offer he made was never as simple as just letting Thalia become the ruler of this territory.

Even he knew that their current strength was pathetic.

But there was one thing Thalia failed to consider.

Damien also wanted the Gehenna Tribe to thrive.

And with the resources he had in his hands...

As long as he could keep them close, he really could help them become something amazing.

Chapter 1493 Aftermath [4]

Thalia was different now.

The Thalia Damien knew was gone.

The way she responded to the Saintess' death was severe. She killed all the free will in her body and turned herself into someone who only acted for the benefit of the tribe.

Because if she could sacrifice herself and help her people, she would do it without hesitation.

It made Damien a bit sad seeing her current state. He didn't like seeing her without any light behind her eyes.

'But it's not my job to help her.'

She didn't want his help. If she did, she wouldn't have acted the way she did.

When he was put in this situation, what could he do?

At most, he could try to help the tribe and hope that its revival would help Thalia gain some of her normal self back as well.

"Do you want to become a God?"

He could breach the subject now, because after an incident like that, Thalia's worldview wasn't the same as it once was.

"I can make you one. I can bring the tribe up to that level as well. All you need to do is ask."

It was an arrogant thing to say, but it was true.

Thalia looked away, staring at her reflection again.

Frankly, she also didn't know how to act around Damien.

Back then, she definitely had some sort of feelings for him, but she always knew it was impossible for them so she never entertained them.

Now, she couldn't feel those feelings even though she knew they existed, so when she looked at Damien, she just felt awkward.

Especially when he talked about something like Godhood.

Thalia knew what she needed. Along with power, worldview was incredibly important.

The knowledge necessary to survive in the world outside the jungle was something she couldn't gain without help from others, and Damien was the perfect person to give it to her.

His backing was definitely something she wanted for the tribe.

But...

"What's the catch?"

Nothing in this world was free.

"You already know the catch."

"That's hardly a catch."

"Trust me, it definitely is. The world is massive. The world you'll see if you accept my offer is even bigger. If you really do choose to get involved with it, you will definitely find yourself facing dangers beyond your imagination."

"My promise is the power and backing to face those dangers. However, even with that, if you and your people don't have the will to accomplish what you've said you want to accomplish, nothing can be done."

Thalia didn't respond.

She had to make a choice.

Did she want to live safely but restrict the growth of the tribe? Or did she want to take a risk that could exterminate them but also had the potential to make them powerful?

It wasn't an easy choice to make.

It was something she needed to think about deeply, and it was something she needed to talk about with her people.

"I'll leave you alone to consider everything. Just come see me when you make a decision, and remember..."

Damien put his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm always on your side. Whatever you choose, I'll support it to the best of my ability, so make your decision without any pressure."

Damien told her his true feelings, and without staying past his welcome, he left her alone.

He would now return to the tribe to spend the last few days or weeks he had in the Sacred Abyss Universe.

Soon, he would have to return to his home to fight his own battle.

He could only help them until then.

And he could only wait until then.

Thalia sat staring at her hands.

Damien had already been gone for several minutes, but she hadn't left this position.

In truth, the worries she voiced were not her main ones.

She knew that Damien's support meant the world. She did have pride of her own, and she did want to help the tribe with her own abilities, however, she wasn't going to halt their growth because of those selfish desires.

She was tempted to just say yes and give him control over the tribe.

But she had a responsibility towards her people.

And frankly, she was scared.

It had to be remembered that Thalia was a village girl. She'd never left the jungle before, and it was the same for most of the tribespeople.

To suddenly thrust them into the wider world, and in a position of great power at that...

For them, it was absolutely terrifying. Everything would be new. Everything would change.

Thalia didn't know if they'd be able to adapt properly to the terrifying world outside, and more than that...

...she was afraid of her own power.

Domination.

Damien wasn't the only one who gained that power.

For Damien, it was the ability to dominate existence, but for Thalia...

It was the ability to control people.

She'd tested the ability already.

Not on people, but on beasts.

And as she'd learned, as long as she desired it and as long as she had the sufficient ability to do so, she could force anyone to do anything.

Thalia was afraid of what would happen if her power was allowed to grow.

She was afraid she'd become like the Count who'd killed her people for greed and power.

She thought back to the conversation she had with Damien, and she thought back to the way she accepted the advantages and disadvantages of power.

However, when absolute control was the power in question, she couldn't bring herself to accept her own acceptance.

'Will it be okay?'

She didn't know.

'Will I be okay?'

She didn't know.

There was nothing she knew right now, and that was exactly the problem.

Thalia couldn't be a risk-taker anymore. She couldn't put her people in danger because of her ambitions.

But wasn't it her job as the Saintess to help them thrive?

Was it right to hold them back?

Was rejecting Damien truly going to hold them back?

She held her head in her hands. Her thoughts were getting too chaotic.

'I...really don't know.'

She wanted to cry, but she couldn't force the tears out of her eyes.

'Saintess, what do I do?'

She wasn't ready for this position.

She wasn't ready for this responsibility.

No matter how much she tried to prepare herself, being forced into power like this was too much for her.

'I don't want it...'

The tears came on their own.

When she stopped trying to force them out, they flowed freely, wetting her face and falling into the lake below.

'Saintess...'

'Grandma...'

She couldn't do it.

It was too much.

Thalia cried her heart out.

She wailed because she knew nobody could hear her.

Life had been cruel to her.

She didn't want to live this cruel life.

She wanted it to just be over, so she could sit back and be happy.

But was that even something allowed to her anymore?

Was that something she could ever do?

The problem was never Damien's offer.

The problem was the weight on Thalia's shoulders crushing her into the ground and forcing her to die slowly as it killed her.

If she couldn't cope with that weight...

Thalia cried.

She cried and cried and cried.

And when night finally fell, her tears went dry.

Her eyes were back to their dull and indifferent state.

The decision she had to make was not about whether she accepted Damien's offer or not.

No.

What she had to decide now was if she'd fold right here and now...

...or if she'd persevere through it all.

To Thalia, who was still too young for life to hit her like this, it was a decision beyond any other.

Because giving up seemed far too tempting to disregard.

Chapter 1494 Decisions [1]

Everything went fast for the people of the territory from that point forth.

For the Gehenna Tribe, it was a tense time.

That night, Thalia pulled herself together. She accepted her role, and truly accepted her responsibility.

Truly maturing as she wanted to would be a slow process, but what mattered was her choice to persevere.

As long as she didn't give up, she'd get to where she wanted to be.

That was a foregone conclusion.

When Thalia returned to the tribe the next morning, she immediately gathered the elders and told them about Damien's proposition.

After speaking to them about it, she took it to the rest of the tribe.

Everyone deserved to have a say in this.

For the most part, they were terrified. They didn't think they were nearly good enough to become rulers above trillions of people.

That simply wasn't their role in society.

They were just common people, after all. Putting them in an aristocratic position when they had no knowledge or expertise in the role was absolutely not the right choice.

The reactions to Thalia's proposal were mostly negative.

Not because the tribe didn't want to grow, but because they wanted to do so slowly.

They hadn't even recovered from the calamity they'd just faced. How were they supposed to elevate themselves to the top of society right now?

Thalia and the elders decided that the matter would be put to vote, so the tribe could decide what the tribe wanted to do.

And that vote...

...ended in failure.

The majority of the tribespeople said no to the offer. Those who said yes were mainly the younger geniuses who still had the hot-blooded desire to see the wider world.

It was decided then and there that the tribe wouldn't accept Damien's proposal.

However, that wasn't the end of it.

The tribespeople didn't want to leave the jungle just yet, but they didn't want to limit Thalia's opportunities.

Maybe for them, it was too dangerous.

For Thalia, on the other hand?

It was the chance of a lifetime.

Thalia was still young. She was their Saintess, yes, but she'd always been an independent woman with dreams larger than any of them could imagine.

Times were tough right now, but tough times were exactly what bred heroes.

They wanted to see Thalia thrive.

And when Thalia thrived, she could come back to the jungle and bring the rest of them up to her position.

Because Thalia wasn't just a Saintess to them, she was a daughter and friend.

They respected her, but they also loved her.

There had never been a Saintess who'd been forced into her role as young as Thalia was.

In this special situation, where an even more special situation had presented itself, they also had to give a special answer.

The tribe as one declared it.

While they would remain in the jungle, Thalia needed to take this chance and become a ruler beyond all rulers.

That was the destiny she was meant for.

The support of her people meant more to Thalia than they'd ever realize.

It was this moment when they all came together to support her that she finally managed to overcome herself.

A little bit of light returned to her eyes.

And the ambition she'd gradually been killing slowly started to make its return to her heart.

That same day, Thalia went to Damien and accepted his offer, telling him about the decision of the tribe.

He, naturally, already knew what had happened, and he'd already made preparations for it.

Six months had passed since he killed Count Verex.

Those left at his estate had already been questioning their Lord's disappearance. At this point, a makeshift order had been created to take care of things in his absence.

Damien visited that place last night.

And he exerted his power.

Discreetly, he read every soul in that place and weeded out the good from the bad.

Afterwards, while removing the rotten parts of the estate, he used some mild brainwashing so the people there wouldn't make problems for Thalia when he brought her into office.

And, finally, Damien brought some Nox beings from the Sanctuary to fill in the positions that were left open and supervise the original members of the estate that were left.

The Nox could adapt to malakh far easier than regular denizens of the True Void Universe, and since the Nox under Yong An's control were loyal to him, Damien didn't have to worry about them falling prey to old instincts.

Damien had already removed any trace of Foreign Race control from the Nox's bodies. No matter what the Dark God's forces tried, they'd never be able to regain the control they once had.

Nevertheless, the Count's estate was prepared for Thalia's arrival already. From the Demigods who'd protect her to the people who'd help her manage managerial tasks, everyone was present.

As an extra safety measure, Damien also left one more person though.

Well, whether or not he could be considered a person was a real question at this point, but he was once one.

He, of course, was Void Palace's 6th Sword, Rein Winchester, who'd been reborn as a homunculus after Damien gained the concept of order.

He'd been in the Sanctuary until now, getting used to his new body. Damien originally brought him along as insurance against other Gods, but now he'd found a perfect place for the man.

The homunculus body Rein inhabited was not human, and responded extremely well to new stimuli. It could adapt unlike anything else, so Rein could use his power effectively even if he was placed in a new cosmos.

Everything was set.

And Thalia matched Damien's expectations perfectly.

With her commitment, there was nothing left to be done.

Damien took her to the Count's estate, her new residence, and introduced her to everyone and everything.

Unfortunately, he couldn't stay to watch how she grew.

Damien had to get back to the Heavenly World as soon as possible. Not just for his own matters, but for the Gehenna Tribe as well.

Count Verex may have been relatively weak, but he was not unknown.

His death was sensed by several people across the cosmos, and they would soon turn their eyes to this place.

Before that happened, Damien had to start a war with the Straea Clan.

The Celestial Prison was his goal.

And the Celestial Prison wasn't something that could be created by the people of the True Void Universe.

There was only one being with enough power to create a prison that could house Dante Void.

From beginning to end, it was because of that person that Dante was forced to suffer.

'The Dark God.'

Even after absorbing Count Verex's existence, Damien didn't know anything about the elusive figure but his title and gender.

All he could tell was that the man in question was more dangerous than anyone else in existence.

And he was the enemy Damien had been working all this time to face.

To save his father, to strike the Foreign Races, and to turn attention away from Thalia and her people, Damien needed to leave.

He returned to the tribe only five days later to regroup with Tiamat and Darius.

After saying their goodbyes, which were laced with the awkwardness of not wanting to part but being faced with a strange distance and dissociation, the group made their way back to the original Dimensional Crack's location.

With Damien's control over the Count's territory, he could now open the crack from this place at any time, but to arrive in the same position as he entered from, he needed to open it here.

He turned around, giving the jungle one last look.

'It was nice while it lasted.'

A little vacation away from struggle, albeit one that was interrupted, was something he really did need.

And now that the time had come, he opened that portal.

He could finally return home.

Chapter 1495 Decisions [2]

There were a lot of things left unfinished in the newly named True Void Territory in the Sacred Abyss Universe.

Damien wanted to supervise Thalia's growth so that she could rule more efficiently and provide him with the things he needed from her, but he didn't have that kind of freedom.

Since he'd left good people with her, though, he believed she'd meet his expectations once again, so he left without much worry.

It was a little bittersweet, though.

It was never mentioned, but Damien knew of the feelings Thalia developed when they were hunting together for a year.

He didn't say anything about it, and neither did she, but they both knew.

On her side, it was the fact that she was more worried about the tribe than romance and didn't think she had time for it. More than that, as a future Saintess, she would have to deprive herself of such joys.

She'd willingly chosen to shut her feelings off, and after the Saintess' death, whatever remnants there were got crushed.

It was a bit of a shame that her first glimmer of romance ended in such a way, but perhaps it was better that she cut those feelings off herself.

Because, though it was selfish, Damien would've felt terrible cutting them off for her.

He already had four wives waiting for him at home. He already didn't give them as much attention as they deserved as it was, so how could he bring another one home?

On top of that, with his current mental state, he frankly didn't have a single romantic bone in his body. He was too focused on his goals to look at anyone in any way that wasn't platonic.

It was always fated to end badly, but Damien still felt a bit sour about it.

Especially since, putting aside her feelings, they were still close friends.

Whatever the case, she made Damien's time in the Gehenna Tribe a memorable one, and their time together would always have a place in his heart.

It was such a mentality that let him arrive home in peace, without any excess emotion ruining his mood.

'I guess it's a thing with Saintesses.'

The two Saintesses he met were the ones he respected more than anyone else in that cosmos, and they were the reason he left there with a positive impression of it.

They didn't know it yet, but that positive impression would go a long, long way.

Damien didn't waste any time after returning.

Feeling the fresh aura of mana around him, he first checked how much time had passed.

Since the two cosmos operated on different laws of time, it was obvious that they'd have different time flows.

There was no accurate way to measure the exact relationship between them, but it had been around 2 months since Damien left, so that was something.

The short span of time he'd been gone was a great thing for him.

Some more difficult cracks did indeed take a long time to close, so nobody would question why the area had been closed down for so long.

And in only two months, the tension between forces couldn't have heightened enough for Damien to return to any unexpected situations.

If there was one thing to note, it was the fact that this area, unlike any other closed crack location, was not left corroded.

The Foreign Race territory that had formed here was completely gone. It was the first time in history that something like this had ever happened.

Damien met up with Dominic and the rest of the Void Palace forces guarding the crack the moment he got out, and as Darius began excitedly telling his brother about his adventures, the group made their return to the palace.

He didn't realize how much he missed this place.

The halls that had become familiar, the feeling of home he thought he wouldn't be able to feel for a while, the people who were all family to him...

He got another chance to remember just what he was fighting for.

Damien wanted to immediately go meet his wives. He'd been thinking about how little they'd been able to see each other recently a lot, but he first had to call a meeting and inform the people he ruled about what they'd be doing next.

This was an important moment. It could not be postponed for anything.

Before news even got around that the Young Lord had returned, a notice of an emergency meeting concerning all important personnel was called.

Everyone arrived with the same confusion, people like Claire and Serena, the 12 Swords, the Elders, and important military personnel.

Naturally, they were all surprised to see Damien standing at the head of the hall when they arrived.

For the most part, nobody asked questions.

Both from the look in Damien's eye, and the fact that he'd called this meeting before informing anyone of his return, told them that something important was about to happen.

And after everyone was present and seated, Damien finally opened his mouth.

"I've found it."

The first words he said.

He looked directly at his mother as he spoke.

"I've found the Celestial Prison."

The hall was instantly thrown into silent chaos.

Claire's eyes shook, as did Serena's.

Persia had serious eyes, while those from the 12 Swords had mostly surprised expressions on their faces.

They didn't even know Damien knew about the Celestial Prison, and he'd already come back telling them he knew where it was.

If it wasn't surprising, what was?

The rest of the room was filled with confusion, since none of them knew what the Celestial Prison was.

Hugo stood up and slammed his hands down on the table in front of him.

"Are you telling the truth?!"

His voice came out almost as a roar, which brought people's attention back to Damien.

Hugo, or rather, Brontus, was one of Dante's closest friends and someone Damien called uncle even though they didn't have any blood relation.

Seeing his excitement made Damien happy.

So happy, in fact, that he couldn't stop himself from smiling.

"I'm telling the truth. During my excursion in the otherworld, I gained an opportunity and saw it with my own eyes. I'm confident I can get there."

"Hahahahaha!"

Hugo immediately broke into excited laughter.

"Good! Good! Good!" He repeated the same word over and over again.

Meanwhile, Claire and Serena were already holding back their tears.

The news meant more to them than it did to anyone else, after all.

Damien looked around the room.

Looking at all these people, every single one of whose names he knew, his mood began to change.

Excitement, anticipation, all these emotions that were clouded by the events in the Sacred Abyss Universe returned to him.

His smile widened into a grin.

"The reason I've called you all here isn't just to reveal this news. I'm sure it's confusing to a lot of you right now, but it boils down to this..."

Damien's eyes narrowed.

"...get everyone ready."

Effective immediately...

"...we will be waging war against our enemies."

It all came down to this.

"With this operation, we will save Dante Void and bring him back to our palace safely, and..."

"...this time, we won't stop until they're all exterminated."

Chapter 1496 Charge [1]

Damien proceeded to lay out his plan before all these eyes.

He'd done a whole lot of pondering on this one. It was a plan he'd carefully formulated so that there would be no mistakes in the operation to rescue Dante.

Wars took a long time.

Damien had participated in many over his lifetime, and even the shortest ones raged on for several years before finally calming down.

In a certain sense, the war between Void Palace, the Divine Order, and the Straea Clan had been going on for a very long time too.

However, it was less of a war and more of a one-sided beatdown.

But Void Palace was not going to take it anymore.

And rather than letting this war become another one that lasted for years and years and cost more than anyone could imagine, Damien wanted to end it as fast as possible.

The complete extermination of the two influences that inhibited his path was his goal.

And the current Void Palace was more than just ready to help him accomplish it.

See, the barrier around the palace was never taken down.

The protections Damien put in place came with a function to alter the time flow.

When Damien asked his mother if she could look after the palace while he was gone, he wasn't just asking her to do the dirty work that he didn't want to.

He was asking her to train the palace members in his place and continue on the set trajectory they'd been following.

Claire understood her son's intent, especially when he gave her control over the mechanism that affected the palace's internal time flow.

Thus, in the two months that had passed in the True Void Universe since Damien left to explore the otherworld...

Claire may or may not have been a little bold with it.

Serena was also a Goddess who controlled Time, wasn't she?

Damien's barrier was amazing. To be able to turn every day into a year was something most couldn't dream of.

However, with Serena's expertise that focused specifically on time, that effect could be enhanced manifold.

As such, the barrier now had an even more wondrous capability.

And in the two months that Damien had been gone...

For the majority of the palace, almost 200 years had gone by.

Other than the areas that had their own unique time flows, like the Young Lord's residence, the entire palace was placed in a startling dilation that nobody else in the Heavenly World could ever dream of.

The results of that?

Naturally, the people of the palace had grown into monsters.

All those who hadn't been able to ascend to Divinity were taken straight there. Even the most common maids of the palace were now Demigods.

As for Gods...well, the barrier between regular Divinity and Godhood was far greater than any barrier a practitioner would experience before that level, so one couldn't expect a huge number of Gods to appear just because some time passed.

There were thousands of high-rank Demigods among the palace's warriors, though, and it wasn't as if nobody ascended to Godhood.

There were a few select individuals, people who were Elders or high-level members of the palace beforehand, who managed to gain the opportunity of a lifetime during these 200 years.

5 of them, to be exact.

The Void Palace Damien returned to had not 11 Swords like the one he'd left, but 16.

It was perfect.

"We're waging war on two fronts, so we'll have to be relatively careful with our movements. Here's the overarching plan..."

Damien had already assessed the palace's current strength before coming here. He knew exactly what to do with his people, and he knew exactly how to strike his enemies.

"We'll obviously hit the Divine Order first..."

Damien couldn't conserve his forces or split them when he was facing them.

The weaker of the two. They definitely had strength hidden that the palace's information network couldn't see, but Damien was confident that they couldn't stand against the current palace.

Plus...

"...but that's only a front."

The main enemy was the Straea Clan.

Damien couldn't conserve his forces or split them when he was facing them.

"We need to drop their guards, so we'll start a few skirmishes here and there with the Divine Order to make them doubt our overall strength."

"The core of this plan is elsewhere."

There were a few favors that needed to be called in.

But before that, Damien gave the necessary exposition for those who needed it.

He told them about Dante's imprisonment, then went on to speak about what he'd learned about the Sacred Abyss Universe and the Straea Clan's connection to the Foreign Races.

After that, he expanded a little more on the few connections he'd made since coming to this world.

Since everyone had the necessary foreknowledge for the coming conversation, Damien was finally able to get into the guts of the plan he'd concocted.

There was a lot of preparation to be done.

Some of it was in matters the people here couldn't even fathom, but since their Young Lord was speaking so confidently, they had no choice but to believe his words.

This was too serious of a matter for jokes and exaggeration, after all.

It took Damien over an hour to get through it all, and by the end, everyone in the hall was left speechless.

The thoroughness of this plan, the fact that it didn't even leave a single crack for the enemy to escape through...

It was quite a monstrous display of scheming.

And that's what they thought without knowing everything.

There was a certain fact Damien kept to himself.

His own power level.

He was confident in his plan mainly because of how much of it relied on his own participation.

He trusted his abilities more than anything else. The problem was, he couldn't let others have the same feeling right now.

He couldn't let them get overconfident because they were following someone powerful.

That was a fatal flaw that caused many an influence to fall during Damien's days in Grand Heavens Boundary.

Nevertheless, the emergency meeting soon came to an end.

The confusion that everyone entered the hall with was gone, replaced with a sense of anticipation and seriousness.

Damien gave them a month to prepare everything they needed.

It was only a month because there were things that needed to be done before the war could begin.

As the meeting hall cleared out, Damien stayed back with his mother, aunts, and uncles for some extra conversation.

He told them a more in-depth version of what he told everyone else, and more than that, he stayed back just to chat with them.

They were his family, after all. What was the point if he only ever talked to them about serious matters?

By the time that conversation ended, a few more hours had passed, and by the time Damien returned to his residence, it was already nighttime.

He'd spent the rest of the day finding the two fastest messengers the palace had to offer.

And the two in question had just set off for their own unique destinations.

Everything was moving according to plan.

The only real question was whether or not all this planning was really enough.

Chapter 1497 Charge [2]

Within the month that passed after Damien announced his declaration of war to his people, the two messengers he chose were able to effectively reach their destinations.

On one side, at the eastern edge of the Heavenly World, a woman with starkly white hair held a token in her hand.

There was a strange smile on her face that looked both incredulous and impressed.

"He sent this...?" She asked.

"Yes, ma'am. This message comes directly from our Young Lord."

The one who spoke was a man in black clothing that covered the majority of his appearance.

"Young Lord, eh...?"

She'd known the news for a while now, but it still surprised her every time she heard it.

'He really moved fast, doesn't he?'

She shook her head with a smile.

The message she received was a wild one. For Damien to be planning something of this scale mere months after he left for Void Palace was absolutely preposterous to her.

How could she know that it had actually been far longer than that?

It took more than just a few words for Damien to gain respect and position in Void Palace. Perhaps nobody in the world knew what the current palace looked like because of him.

Nobody knew how the people of Void Palace truly looked at their Young Lord.

Regardless of her information, or lack thereof, the things he'd done were not outside of her expectations.

'I've been scammed.'

She smiled wryly.

Five years of work definitely wasn't enough payment for a job like this, but...

"...oh well."

She was the one who agreed to it, so she was more than happy to deliver on what she promised.

"Send word back to your Young Lord," she said, addressing the messenger.

"The Veritas Clan will fully support his plans."

The messenger's eyes widened slightly.

It seemed he didn't know who he was talking to until now.

Someone who could speak for the Veritas Clan...

Someone who just said that the Veritas Clan would participate in their war...

Though it probably didn't matter in the long run, there was now one more person who religiously believed in Damien.

And that person was now returning to the palace with great news.

On the other side, the second messenger had to make a much longer journey.

Luckily, Damien's support meant traveling with means that others simply couldn't imagine. Despite the fact that the trip she made was meant to take at least a year even with teleportation arrays, she reached within fifteen days.

Somewhere in the Northwest of the Heavenly World, she kneeled before an old man who was dressed like a pope.

His face was clean and blessed with vitality, but one could still see the wrinkles all throughout.

He also held a token in his hands, which he looked at curiously.

"This...!"

He almost couldn't stop himself from exclaiming when he saw the contents.

"Hahaha...I truly cannot believe it."

He held his hand up to his head.

He'd never met the sender of this message, but he was thoroughly impressed with the man's ability.

"So this is your successor, Dante...?"

The man smiled happily.

"It seems he's carrying your legacy better than you could have ever imagined."

He looked down at the messenger, his smile still as warm as always.

It was as if he viewed all beings as equal, all beings as his sons and daughters.

"Please go inform your Young Lord. Our Holy Empire will absolutely aid him in his righteous endeavors."

The messenger bowed her head and immediately left. That was all she needed to hear.

Meanwhile, the old man turned his head to the sky, opening his eyes for the first time in a long time.

His irises were circles of gold, with nothing like pupils present anywhere within them.

He was looking at something others couldn't hope to see.

"Goddess..."

There was something nuanced about his expression.

"Is this perhaps...a hint?"

There was an answer he'd been seeking for a very long time.

And something about this moment gave him the feeling that he'd find it soon.

"Damien Void..."

The smile of the Holy Emperor was especially mysterious as he said the name.

"...I truly can't wait to meet him."

Other than those two meetings, which took place in absolute secrecy, nothing major happened during the month that passed.

Void Palace was still keeping a low profile. It mostly focused on ruling its own territory, just as it had done until now.

There was nothing particular going on that could raise suspicion from anyone uninvolved.

Tensions were, of course, high between the palace and its enemies, but it didn't look like anybody was willing to make the first move.

The Divine Order was still being forced to hide away by the Straea Clan, and when it came to the Straea Clan itself...

"Something big has happened."

The Divine Council was holding another meeting. This was the first they'd had since they received orders from the Straea Clan to turtle down.

"I am not sure of the details, but there seems to have been a stirring in the otherworld. Those at Straea have been concerned with it, but they haven't told us anything."

This meeting had one particular purpose.

And that was betrayal.

"We cannot keep on like this."

The Divine Order had been under the Straea Clan's foot for almost the entirety of its existence. Over this unbelievable span of time, they'd hardly received any benefits.

The way they were treated was like trash. They, of course, never wanted to be someone else's dog. However, they never had a choice in the matter.

Until now.

There had been a stir in the otherworld. The Foreign Races were pulling away from the Heavenly World to focus on it, whatever it was.

At a time like this, if the Divine Order could form a greater connection with them, one that could rival or even surpass the Straea Clan...

Wouldn't they have an opportunity to free themselves from the Straea Clan's rule?

It wasn't a surefire plan. But they couldn't deny the existence of the possibility, nor could they deny the ambitions in their hearts.

The 12 Gods of the council, who were now twelve again after their deceased member was replaced, had come together precisely to plan for that possibility.

However, their timing was quite bad.

The Divine Order's luck had never been good. It wasn't the first time that they'd experienced a situation like this.

But none of those other cases could compare to this one.

It was as if fate itself was against them.

Because while they were still in the middle of that meeting, while they were still plotting on how to increase their standing...

...they got the news.

The Southwestern Region was under attack.

Forces from Void Palace had already crossed the border and taken the principalities on it.

But that wasn't it.

On the border between the Eastern and Western cardinal regions, another army was also pushing inward.

The Veritas Clan was making their move.

And while the Divine Order was currently unaware of their presence, there was one more army approaching them from the north.

They were surrounded, immediately turned into prisoners of their own territory.

And as the horns blared...

A war between Great Clans had begun to rage across the Heavenly World.

Chapter 1498 Charge [3]

The favor Damien called in from the two influences his palace was closest to was simple.

He asked them to help him eradicate the Divine Order.

He didn't say a single word about the Straea Clan. That was his own battle to fight.

The Divine Order was just a small fish in comparison, and Damien didn't mind sharing the meat.

The Veritas Clan was present to provide real battle power, since most of Void Palace's forces against the Divine Order were just there for show.

And the Holy Empire was coming to free the citizens from their brainwashing.

It took Damien a while to figure out how to do so.

They had been brainwashed since birth, so none of them knew life outside of it. To remove them from the Divine Order's control was to leave them without any identity whatsoever.

That wasn't the right solution.

After a lot of research and even more postulating in his mind, Damien created a theory that was basically already tested and proven.

He modified that theory so that it could be used by others, and he gave it to the Holy Empire, since they specialized in, obviously, the more holy elements of the world.

It wasn't an end-all-be-all solution. All it did was remove the Divine Order's direct control over the citizens.

As for their belief in the religion, it wouldn't change. Nor would their daily lives, since it wouldn't be revealed to them that they were brainwashed in the first place.

For the Divine Order, Damien planned not only their extermination, but also their revival.

He would create a religion for the people of the Southwestern Region, a new version of their own religion that didn't exploit them.

For that purpose as well, the Holy Empire was necessary.

Still, that wasn't the entire reason behind the three-pronged assault.

To outsiders, it didn't look like Void Palace was leading this operation.

To them, it looked like the three great clans had formed an alliance for the sole purpose of destroying the Divine Order.

And with the Divine Order so deeply connected with the Straea Clan, naturally, they couldn't act indifferent to these matters.

They had to be wary.

The instant news got out about what was happening, the Straea Clan immediately secured their borders.

They now had to watch out on three sides.

Well, mainly just two.

To the Straea Clan, the rising Void Palace still wasn't enough of a threat to take seriously.

But also because of that, they had to be careful of the alliance in question.

Nevertheless, with the Straea Clan forced to watch themselves from every angle to assure their own safety, Damien gained several holes to exploit.

It was exactly what he expected.

His own part in this operation was quite a bit more important than everyone else's.

It was also the reason most of Void Palace's forces were still hanging back.

They were waiting for his signal.

At the moment, Damien was already in the Northern Region.

He spent the majority of the month of respite he had with his wives.

It wasn't much time at all, but it was at least something.

'But after this, I'll be free to spend a lot more time at home.'

This was a major operation. If everything went according to plan, the Void Palace would have no more enemies remaining in the Heavenly World, which meant this place could truly become secure.

To ensure that said security would become a reality, Damien left them once again after only twenty days, making his way towards the Northern Region.

And after changing his existence into one he'd never used before, Damien was able to enter easily.

The Northern Region, at least before the war began, was the easiest region to gain entry into.

Because the Straea Clan's territory was unique among all the rest in the Heavenly World.

It was called the lawless zone for a reason.

Criminals and people who couldn't find a place in normal society always migrated towards this place.

It was truly a land of evil, where crime ran rampant without any sort of punishment to follow it.

The only rule of the Northern Region was strength. As long as one was strong enough to commit the crime and strong enough to avoid persecution, one could get away with quite literally anything.

This was a land where one couldn't live if one wasn't evil.

This was the land that birthed people who'd go on to work under the Straea Clan and commit such vile deeds that they'd be known as the 4 Evils.

It was actually the most convenient setting Damien could have asked for.

In a place like this, he could act without worries.

The disguise he'd taken on was a battle-hardened man, bald with scars covering his face.

He wore a deep black cloak to hide the rest of his body, but anyone who saw him could tell he was strong.

Even if they couldn't sense his power, they could definitely sense his malevolence.

Damien himself hadn't committed much evil. When he did happen to do something against his morals, he always made sure to right his wrongs and fix his karma as he did in the Sacred Abyss Universe.

However, Damien had devoured the vilest of evils in that cosmos.

It wasn't hard for him to tap into their auras and use them as his own.

As such, he was currently bathed in a bloodthirst that made everyone around him stray away.

The funniest part, though, was the fact that he didn't even stand out.

'This level of bloodthirst is discomfiting to the people at the edge of the territory because most of the people here are just passing through.'

'Putting them aside...'

Damien only had one goal in coming here.

The further he got into the region, the more Damien saw people who were bathed in bloodthirst that matched and even sometimes surpassed his own.

'It's insane to see people just walking around like that, but I guess that's what it means to live in a lawless zone.'

It was a badge of honor for them, a survival mechanism as well.

'Putting them aside...'

Damien only had one goal in coming here.

'Infiltrate the Straea Clan.'

He needed to find a way to get in contact with the highest level of the enemy clan.

Because that was where his target was.

As he'd seen in the visions shown to him by his crown.

The one who held the key to his father's prison...

'...is none other than Malevalon Straea.'

The ruler of the Straea Clan, a man that really only existed in rumors...

'...I have to find a way to meet him, and not only that, I have to find a way to snatch the key from under his nose.'

That man was his father's main enemy.

More importantly, he was one of the top strongest people in the entire Heavenly World.

And Damien, as a mere Demigod, had to find a way to fool him.

"This is going to be fun," he mumbled wryly.

At the end of the day, he was the only one who could pull it off.

After all...

'...I guess I just have a very particular set of skills.'

Skills that would become more than just a nightmare for people who stood against him.

Chapter 1499 Charge [4]

Damien's current target was located in a study somewhere in the Straea Clan's manor.

There were several problems that stemmed from that fact alone.

It was a place Malevalon Straea frequented, and a place only he could go.

Damien didn't gain absolute information from the visions he saw.

He could only make guesses about most things, but he was certain he saw that man there.

It was the first time he'd seen him, but his identity immediately became clear.

After all, the study was filled with his aura. It was powerful, domineering, and filled with a cold cruelty that reflected a twisted indifference.

When an aura like that was let loose, nobody in the vicinity would be safe.

Only the owner of that aura was safe, along with those he decided to protect from it.

However, Malevalon was not a man who knew the meaning of the word "protect."

Whether it was ordinary people, his clan, or even his own wife and kids, he treated them all equally.

Like ants.

When Damien told his mother and family about the true nature of his mission, they gave him plenty of information about Malevalon himself, along with information about the Straea Clan.

The Straea Clan had always been something evil.

They never got along with the other great clans, and they were always doing their own thing, oftentimes butting heads with their peers.

Their rise was unquestionable, though. As was their power.

And more than anything, they were like a necessary evil in the Heavenly World.

The lawless zone acted as a massive prison that kept people who couldn't roam elsewhere contained.

As long as they were in the lawless zone, they'd feel like they were free.

And yet, they would no longer terrorize the places they were once terrorizing.

It had grown to the point where some people with more evil tendencies would migrate to the lawless zone before they even started committing vile deeds.

Overall, because of the Straea Clan's existence, the amount of trouble the other great clans had to deal with had lessened considerably.

They were allowed to exist.

At least, until they grew to the point where nobody could decide whether they were allowed to exist or not.

At some point, the Straea Clan became massive. Its growth genuinely couldn't be explained.

Unless one knew of their connection to the Foreign Races, that is.

Nevertheless, the Straea Clan was now massive, and though it hadn't been in any major wars throughout its existence, nobody doubted its military strength.

For Damien to have to break into their manor, where the best of their forces lived, and steal something from their clan head, a man second only to Dante Void...

Wasn't it just asking for the impossible?

When Damien had to just think about it, yes. Yes it was.

The problem was that he had to do it anyway.

There was no better alternative.

No matter how many people he brought, or how much planning he did, he was facing an enemy that could easily make all their efforts meaningless with the flick of a wrist.

In a situation like this, there was no better option than a single expert taking the risk alone.

Because, even in the case that something went wrong, it was still possible to extract relatively unharmed.

'Getting to the manor isn't the problem...'

Just like everyone else, the Straea Clan was quite grand in the architecture of their main edifice.

It was a pitch-black mansion that almost resembled Void Palace's main palace.

However, the aura around it was more eerie.

'It looks like a place people would go to learn necromancy or something.'

Damien was on the outskirts. Well, he was further than that.

He stood roughly a million kilometers away. His eyes could see the manor in perfect detail regardless of the distance.

'I need to find a way to see inside...'

'...oh wait, that's easy now.'

He'd become stronger so fast that he'd forgotten how strong he'd become.

For the current Damien, creating some type of organic life form that was connected to his own consciousness was easy.

The main problem with this approach was the fact that a place like the Straea Clan Manor didn't have any sort of animal infestation.

But if Damien went with something stranger, something more purpose-built, he could pull it off.

'I just need to create something that can traverse the manor without being noticed. It doesn't matter what the form is as long as it can do what I want it to.'

He contained himself within a barrier to prevent his mana from leaking, and using the Emperor's Crown and the mist's aid, he began the process of controlling Existence.

It couldn't be explained yet, because Damien was only borrowing the control. He didn't actually have the ability to do it for himself.

As such, the only thing he felt was the movement of his mana as his trusty helpers did the rest for him.

A "being" was created. It had no consciousness, it had no life signature, but it had life.

It looked stringy like a jellyfish, but without the bulbous head.

There was no way this organism would be taken by anyone as a living thing, let alone a spy.

As for how to get it into the manor...

Well, that was the easy part.

Perhaps it was just for show, but the Straea Manor also had a guard unit that regularly patrolled the outskirts and stood by the gates at all times.

These guards had their own accommodations within the Straea Clan's land, but the point was that it was beyond the gate.

Damien easily attached the life form to one of the guards, and when he went inside to switch shifts, he controlled it to move onto a nearby maid who was headed for the main manor.

Really, it was that simple.

The hard part came later, since the life form would have to make a far more dangerous journey starting from the moment it entered the manor.

Damien didn't know where that study was.

He needed to find it.

And after he found it, he needed to observe it for a considerable amount of time so he could figure out exactly when was the right time for him to strike.

This time, the stakes were extremely high.

The Straea Clan couldn't be allowed to gain a clue about what was happening. If they happened to mobilize their army because they sensed something wrong, the entire operation would be ruined.

In the worst-case scenario, the Celestial Prison key would be placed under even more protection, making it impossible to reach.

Malevalon Straea didn't believe anyone could enter his study.

Because of that, he displayed the key proudly.

So he could always look at it and remember the day he defeated his greatest enemy.

He spent a good amount of his time here. It was actually rarer to find an instance when Malevalon was out roaming.

But Damien was only going to find that out as he continued to observe the space.

The habits of his enemy were just too stubborn.

With Malevalon as the enemy in question...

...it really became a question if success in the operation was possible without a direct confrontation.

Chapter 1500 Celestial Prison [1]

How much time did Damien need to spend observing the study after his life form made its way there?

Realistically, the answer was several months. There was no such thing as being too cautious in an operation like this.

However, realistically, Damien didn't have nearly that much time.

There was a war going on, and a lot of things related to it needed him to complete this mission and get out of the Straea Clan.

The fact that they had Dante imprisoned was really the only thing the Straea Clan could hold over Void Palace's head.

The second he was saved, the palace would be free to act without restrictions.

Until then, they had to walk on eggshells and make sure they didn't do anything that could lead to Dante being lost.

Such an attitude wasn't fit for war.

Since the operation had already begun, it was too late for failure or extraneous thought.

Damien observed the study for a week.

The string-like life form he created for that purpose was doing its job properly. After leaving the body of the maid it inhabited, it managed to find the study quite quickly by tracing Malevalon's aura signature.

It was impossible for that life form to enter the study. The moment it did, it would be discovered.

But that was fine, since Damien had already seen the inside of that place.

He knew exactly where the key was placed. It never moved, because Malevalon had no reason to move it.

The position in which he placed it was already perfect.

Not being able to enter the study was definitely detrimental in some ways, but what Damien wanted was to find a way to get into that place without being noticed.

And more than that, he had to find an opportunity when Malevalon himself left the room.

However, over the week that passed, Damien realized that the opportunity he was looking for wouldn't come soon enough.

Malevalon simply wasn't leaving the study. No matter what happened outside, he stayed there, and even when he gave orders to his people, he did so remotely.

Was there a reason why he couldn't leave the study?

Damien didn't know.

From what he'd seen of the man, he was strong and healthy. There shouldn't have been any external circumstance that could force him to hole himself up in the study.

But that didn't change the fact that it was exactly what he did.

'I have no choice. I have to risk it.'

Damien's eyes narrowed.

Malevalon wasn't accommodating at all.

Well, that was obvious, but it was still annoying to experience personally.

If he wanted to pull this stunt off within the timeframe he allowed himself, he needed to take the risk of direct confrontation.

'In the worst case scenario...'

He made his way towards the manor.

'...it's not shameful to run.'

The path Damien took to infiltrate the manor was similar to the life form he'd sent prior.

He first snuck onto the periphery and scanned the area, checking for any formations or arrays.

There were hundreds, but none that could directly penetrate his stealth as long as he used Existence.

That was all the information he needed.

The rest he'd already done once, so it was just a matter of going through the motions.

Damien slipped through the cracks in the guard easily, and by the time he was inside the manor grounds, he had already changed his existence to mirror one of the maids he'd seen frequently go in and out of the main manor.

He didn't really have a choice, since there didn't seem to be any male servants allowed in the manor.

What happened from there...?

Well, it was fairly straightforward.

Damien found the maid he impersonated and kidnapped her into the Sanctuary for the time being. He took her place, doing her duties for a few days, before finally finding an opening to make his move.

The study was relatively deep into the manor, so there was no way for him to justify himself if he tried to approach it naturally.

As such, he needed to be a little careful about it.

First of all, he used his memories of the past few days to alter the original maid's memory and make her believe nothing strange had happened to her.

After that, he switched places with her once more, giving her life back to her.

As for Damien himself...

He'd turned into a familiar form, a stringy entity that didn't look like it could ever be alive.

He inched towards the study and made it outside easily, meeting up with the life form that had been waiting for him there.

Surprisingly, he didn't have any interaction with the main members of the Straea Clan during this time.

Was it because of Malevalon's strict rule? From the gossip of the other maids, it looked like they hardly made contact with people outside their family, and they spent most of their time hidden in their rooms training.

The Straea Clan had been laying low for a long time in order to execute the plans given to them by the Foreign Races.

The power they needed to execute those plans...

Now that Damien had seen how they lived, he could tell that they weren't aiming for something as selfish as the destruction of Void Palace.

Their goal was bigger.

But for now, that didn't matter, because they'd be exterminated soon enough.

From this point on, Damien had to be absolutely focused.

His first move was sending the inorganic life form into the study so he could see if Malevalon would notice its presence.

He did.

Damien didn't know exactly what happened, but the second that entity moved past the door to the study, it was eradicated entirely.

'This isn't looking good for me...'

Regardless, he had to push forth.

Damien covered his microscopic form in a layer of stealth formed through Existence and made his way inside.

"Huu..."

"Huu..."

"Huu..."

He could hear his own breathing, but it was all in his head.

His current body didn't need to breathe.

As he made his first move through the door frame, he held his mental breath and carefully inched his body forward.

It was a scary moment, imagining himself combusting instantly with no idea what happened.

However...

"Huu..."

Another breath.

He made it through without problems.

And the first thing he saw was Malevalon.

'He can't see through my mana.'

It was a relief.

But the moment Damien made his move...

He saw the Celestial Prison key on the desk. It was no more than a few feet away from him.

"Huu..."

Six feet...

Damien inched forward. He didn't think about anything but getting that key in his hands.

Five feet...

Malevalon still hadn't noticed his presence. The man was looking out of a nearby window, observing the world as if nothing could bother him.

4 feet...

Damien was close enough to grasp it, but to do so, he needed to return to his real form.

In that fraction of a second that it took for him to transform, Malevalon would notice his aura and attack. He needed to get closer.

Three feet...

Two feet...

The desk was only a single foot away.

The key that was on its surface was already within Damien's grasp.

Damien glanced over at Malevalon.

No matter how unaware the man looked, his suffocating aura made it hard to believe he would allow this heist to happen.

Damien glanced back at the key.

It was so close.

Even in the situation where he was indeed caught...

'Fuck it.'

Hesitation now was just stupid.

He gathered his resolve.

He focused all his attention on the single movement he'd have to do to get that key.

And without a single extraneous thought, he moved.

Instantly, the calm study was sunken into chaos.