

Void 1811

Chapter 1811 Conspiracy [2]

"Ah, that..." Karlen smiled wryly.

"They are already gathered. I can take you to that location whenever you are ready."

Damien rolled his eyes.

'So it wasn't a choice in the first place.'

It seemed Karlan had been forced to grab him since he was being pressured by the fact that he was the only one missing the meeting.

He sighed once again, but he gave Karlen a hand motion to just get it over with.

With a grateful smile on his face, Karlen wrapped both of them in his aura and canceled distance.

Immediately, Damien found himself in a restaurant of sorts. It was only "of sorts" because it was too far removed from society for anyone to justify the existence of a restaurant. Everything outside was just green for as far as the eye could see.

There weren't other patrons either. It was Damien and Karlen at the entrance, and then another man and a woman who were already sitting at a table together.

'They're strong, but not to an impossible level.'

Damien had been ignoring a very important point that the entire plan revolved around.

His own strength.

As things were, he had 2 weeks to surpass the two people in front of him and reach a level where he could even fight an Area Lord.

A great deal of his improvement would certainly take place during the tournament itself, but that was not enough.

Damien needed to take time to train on his own if he wanted to accomplish anything.

'I have too much to do. If only I had two bodies...'

Well, that was something to consider later as well. As of now, Damien just had to entertain his competitors and see what kind of things they wanted to talk about that required the three of them to come together.

As it turned out, those things were mainly about who was going to fight the Area Lord.

'They want to decide it now and have the other two throw the battle. This is so stupid.'

They wanted to secure their chances to be the person in that position. Assuming that all of them were roughly at the same level, fighting each other seriously during the tournament could perhaps negatively impact the person who ended up fighting the final battle.

Damien had already decided that he would be the one to do it, but he didn't plan on arguing with them to settle it now.

'Whatever they decide doesn't matter if I don't decide to follow. As long as I fight seriously during my matches, they'll be forced to play by my rhythm.'

Damien stayed since the food in this impractical restaurant was actually pretty good, but he was dismissive of the entire conversation. The other two took this as an invitation to decide things without him, so he was stuck listening to them squabble as he ate his meal.

"Regardless, I have more of an advantage over the Dragon Lord than you. I should be the one to do it."

"That may be so, but I am much better at evading and have experience in endurance battles. You are only effective for short periods of time."

'Is it okay for them to be revealing their weaknesses to me?'

The two's argument was futile and counterproductive. Damien spent the time waiting for the moment he could leave, but it wasn't going to come to him so easily.

"Like I said, you are weaker than—!"

WHOOSH!

Damien's eyes darted to the ceiling. Without hesitation, he threw his hand forward and attacked.

Yanui, the woman from the water temple, did not bother finishing her words.

As one, the three of them and Karlen immediately rushed back in every direction as the table where they sat was turned into nothingness.

Damien's eyes darted to the ceiling. Without hesitation, he threw his hand forward and attacked.

He didn't think he could hit the enemy in this circumstance, so it was a better choice to evaporate the entire restaurant and reveal them.

It was a shame to the owner, but that was exactly what Damien did.

In a single move, he broke down all non-living matter above ground level, exposing everyone inside the restaurant to the artificial sunlight.

The restaurant owner, the server, and two chefs immediately ran away without asking questions. Meanwhile, five masked men dropped from the air and faced their group of four.

Damien's eyes narrowed.

'An assassination attempt? Really?'

No words were exchanged as the battle began.

Karlen took two of them on his own as the strongest one present, while Damien, Quill, and Yanui each took one enemy for themselves.

Domains were established instantly, turning the area into a battlefield.

With that development, the would-be assassins lost their chance to hide and escape.

Four simultaneous fights started, though nobody particularly moved.

Damien's opponent particularly seemed to enjoy tormenting people. He was using similar strategies to Kura but for different reasons.

The assassin had a strangely specific understanding of human anatomy. He targeted the parts of Damien's body that would cause him the most suffering, inflicting him with lacerations, internal bleeding, disease, and even mana loss.

Damien's style was to fight with mind attacks, but that wouldn't work in this situation. Assassins who had been trained specifically to keep their minds steady wouldn't fall for his manipulation.

As such, he temporarily dealt with the assassin using physical attacks while he cooked up a method to create another surefire killshot.

All the while, he kept his eyes on the rest of the battlefield. Karlen's fight was going surprisingly well considering that he was facing two enemies. The other two were struggling, but not to the extent that they were considered under serious threat.

'They're too weak.'

Was it because they were used to fighting from the shadows...

'...or is it that they don't want to kill us?'

Damien's eyes were cold.

He left himself open for a moment, allowing one of his enemy's attacks to slip through his defense.

Though it was subtle, Damien saw the hint of panic in that man's eyes before he narrowly dispersed its momentum.

'There's something wrong with this situation.'

It was too suspicious.

'And the fighting style of those two particularly...'

The ones fighting against Quill and Yanui...

Damien was certain that he'd seen them before.

He returned his attention to the fight.

Regardless of what he thought, these people were fated to die since they'd come here.

There wasn't a chance to question them. It was only Damien's thought at first, but it became clear as the battles reached their end.

To stop the enemy from attacking, they had to kill. It was as if they were being specifically led to commit murder.

'Conspiracy.'

It was a concept the third island was rife with.

Slowly but surely, the battles ended. Yanui killed her opponent, Damien killed his, then Quill finished on his side. The other two instantly went to help Karlen and the last two were dealt with easily.

It was an attack with no provocation and an assault against all three temples simultaneously.

Someone, somewhere was targeting them.

Quill and Yanui returned to their home temples after a short farewell and a message that they'd be in contact with the Earth Temple's superiors soon.

Meanwhile, Karlen hurriedly escorted Damien back to their own temple.

Everything moved fast.

Far too fast for Damien's comfort.

Chapter 1812 Conspiracy [3]

"I want to speak to the Temple Master."

Karlen barely acknowledged it.

This happened while he was being rushed back to his room after they teleported back.

"Hey, did you hear me? I need to speak to the Temple Master."

"I understand, but now is not the time. I must inform the Temple Master of the attack. He is not at the temple at the moment, and for now, it is better for you to remain in your room. Please be patient for a little while. I am sure he will grant you an audience when the situation is calmer."

It was a small attack that barely affected anything, but it felt more like a warning shot than anything else.

It may not have been any real harm towards the three tournament representatives, but the fact that they were targeted at all meant that someone knew about the temples' plans and wanted to interfere.

Karlen's rushed attitude didn't come from the fact that Damien was almost harmed.

It came from the fact that there was a leak inside the temple.

And since Damien was a new member, he obviously couldn't avoid suspicion.

Karlen told him to be patient and wait in his room, but it was more like he was kept confined there.

He was unable to leave without alerting the guards that surrounded the perimeter, and if he tried to sneak past them, he would only be giving into suspicions of his betrayal.

For his own convenience and for the temple's sake, it became a better option for him to remain "safe" inside of his room.

Damien didn't like it at all.

When he told Karlen he wanted to meet the Temple Master, he meant immediately.

However, as he remained confined, time passed and passed without a word.

Karlen would swing by daily with updates. It seemed that a few people in the temple had been taken away for questioning. The suspicion on Damien was low, but he was still required to remain confined for now.

The other two representatives had been attacked multiple times. Rather than fear of him being a traitor, they imprisoned him out of fear of having to find someone else to do his job in such a short amount of time.

Damien really wanted to break out, but he chose to be civil one more time.

This was the second strike. If he experienced something like this even one more time, he would stop considering others at all.

However, it was clear that the temple was also aware of his discontent.

It was a week later, which irked Damien beyond anything else, but he was indeed granted an audience with the Temple Master.

He found himself in the same room sitting across the same coffee table from the same man.

The only thing that was different was their choice of beverage.

This time, Damien summoned their drinks. "It is a kind gesture, but what is its purpose?" the Temple Master asked as he took a sip of one of Damien's personally created liquors.

He obviously tested it before did, but without showing signs of that it looked more like he was trusting Damien by drinking what he provided.

"There's no particular purpose," Damien responded.

"I wanted to meet with you about the assassination attempt. At that time, I only had questions in my mind, but I assume you can answer them now that a week has gone by, right, Temple Master?"

His eyes were not friendly, and his words cut like knives.

The Temple Master smiled wryly.

"I apologize for keeping you contained, but you must be aware of why. If I didn't suspect you, then I would have been an idiot unfit to run this organization."

That much was true. Damien was an outsider who had suddenly become an integral part of the temple's plans. If he somehow made contact with the Chaos Faction before he came to the temple, then it was very possible for him to be the mole that sabotaged them.

"However, after investigating your time on this island in more detail, we were able to clear your name. As such, I truly do apologize."

Damien shook his head.

"That isn't what I came for. Obviously, I'm not the mole. I came to see if you've made any progress on your investigation into the real suspect."

The Temple Master took another sip from his cup before responding.

"This is good wine."

"It's an original formula."

"To say we made progress would be wrong, but we have found the identities of the assassins themselves."

"And they are...?"

"Two you know well. They came from our temple. The other three were from the other two temples respectively. Either the Chaos Faction has decided to act to stop the tournament, or a group of them decided to act against their superiors' orders and do something reckless. Whatever the case, until the assassins revive, we cannot make further progress into the case."

'As expected...'

"I see."

Damien didn't show any outward reaction.

"Temple Master, I am not someone who easily lets go of my prey. Please keep me informed about the progress of the investigation. If possible, I would like to interrogate the assassins personally."

"I understand. If it is possible, then I will allow it. We can speak in more detail once we have apprehended them."

"You're not going to make me wait until the tournament is over, are you?"

"Haha, I will be at the temple more frequently now that there are only some days left before the event. If you wish to see me, I will gladly accommodate you."

Damien nodded. Standing up and thanking the Temple Master, he prepared himself to leave.

He already got what he wanted, and it wasn't anything that the Temple Master said.

No, it was only one sentence.

"This is good wine."

It was definitely good wine, but that's not all it was.

No, the concoction Damien served the Temple Master was specifically created to probe people. When the liquid entered their bodies, it would provide Damien with information about their physical condition, talents, and even concrete power level while he was within a certain proximity.

Through that wine, Damien could finally confirm the thought that had been nagging him in the back of his mind since the beginning.

'The Temple Master...' he thought as he left the room.

He didn't have any reason to suspect the man. If anything, he had more of a reason to suspect Karlen, who directly caused interferences that forced Damien to spend two weeks locked in the temple.

But, before he tested the Temple's Right Hand, he needed to test its Master.

His process was justified by the results.

'That guy is being controlled.'

The condition that he described for the Dragon Lord, the curse that controlled his every word and action until the moment he died, was the very same condition that he was suffering from.

Damien had been thinking for a long time that there was a larger conspiracy at play than what he was being led to believe.

And if even the Earth Temple Master and an Area Lord had been controlled by the true mastermind behind everything...

'...then I'm being confronted with a much larger enemy than I originally expected.'

Chapter 1813 Investigation [1]

For the time being, Damien returned to his room. There were too many parties keeping eyes on him for him to wantonly leave the temple.

'If the Temple Master is technically an enemy, then nothing here is safe.'

The Earth Temple was not at fault, and Damien could tell that the Temple Master wasn't an inherently evil person. Everything he said and did was being controlled.

'That means all the information I've received so far could be a lie.'

It really depended on how the enemy saw Damien.

If he was a threat to the plan, then everything he was told could be falsehoods meant to direct him into a trap.

If that same person saw him instead as a piece on the chessboard, then the information was partially true, but he was being used to accomplish a step of that person's plans.

'I can't easily decide which one it is.'

However, he was forced to treat the information as fact until he'd found evidence otherwise.

'The Temple Master is being controlled, and the Dragon Lord is somehow involved too. For someone to be able to take both of these figures into the palm of their hands...'

That person had to be incredibly strong.

It couldn't be another Temple Master. The pact they signed together forbade them from acting against one another, so if it was one of them the signs would have already been clear.

'Other than them, the only people on this island with that kind of power are a few individual wanderers and the Area Lords.'

Wanderers weren't too highly respected, but they also weren't scorned. It would be strange for a wanderer to find a reason to want to bring chaos into the island's structure.

More importantly, everyone who had the amount of power required to plot such a conspiracy was either on the island because they wanted to be, or—

"—they're trapped here by something and have a huge vendetta.'

The Area Lords were the most suspicious entities on the island.

For the most part, they didn't leave their associated arenas. However, their actions on the island were not controlled to a great extent. They were not allowed to fight anyone who didn't come to challenge them, they were not able to refuse a challenge they received, and they were forced to remain on the island until they had been naturally defeated.

These were the only rules barring them outside of combat. Even when in combat, the only added rule was that they were not allowed to go easy on their opponent. They had to use everything they had even to hunt a rabbit. 'Area Lords aren't able to touch other Area Lords, are they?'

It was too confusing. Somewhere, at some time, somebody found a loophole in the system that had remained impenetrable for so long.

The third island had faced chaotic plots for a very long time, and each time the people involved were thrown into prison and left there to rot. This was the very first time that the Chaos Faction had been able to create a stir to this degree.

'The prison...'

It was a location that had been suspicious to Damien for a very long time. It reeked of danger and nobody seemed to mind it. On top of that, its location was not hidden in the slightest.

It was guarded and watched by the Prison Master, an Area Lord who was said to have been upholding his duty for billions of years. Was that why they thought it was better for it to be above ground and hidden in plain sight?

'It's a good start.'

Regardless, if Damien wanted to investigate all of the Area Lords, then a week wasn't nearly enough time. They lived fairly separated from each other, and Damien couldn't cancel distance as he had never visited their arenas before.

'The Prison Master is in a more central part of the island, so it will be easier to reach the rest from there. Plus, it'll be good if I can see the state of that place for myself. I need to judge whether it's actually a viable solution or not.'

But first, he needed to get out of the Earth Temple.

It wasn't that hard.

Damien was the only one in this realm with access to a power other than Nonexistence, after all.

'I was refraining from using it since it would inhibit my training, but this is a separate matter so it should be fine.'

The Void Physique was always with him.

Damien was restricted by the laws of this realm, but would that still be the case if he activated the physique's power?

Of course not.

The Void had not submitted to him yet, but that didn't mean it was unwilling to support its favorite Apostle when he needed it.

As long as Damien unleashed that power, nobody in this realm would be able to touch him.

'Still, I can't overdo it.'

He was using the Land of Nothingness to get stronger. Cheating its system wouldn't help him do that. No, there was a possibility that doing so without moderation would offend the concept and ruin Damien's efforts.

However, he was never planning to overcome the island trials with the Void's help.

He only used it to make his own life more convenient.

A pitch-black energy covered his body. In one motion, it peeled off of him and formed into a clone that matched him perfectly.

Damien's own body transformed until he looked like a completely different man. The convenience of a reality-breaking ability, really.

His mind was perfectly split similar to how he cloned himself in the Heavenly World before landing in this realm. And, his clone only had one ability: the power to utilize Nonexistence.

'Good.'

Damien grinned. There was only one thing left to test, and that was simpler than anything.

Damien himself canceled distance and left for Terra.

Sensing the disturbance, the guards outside the door burst into the room, only to see Damien meditating peacefully.

His eyes opened menacingly. "I'm not a fan of people who don't respect my privacy, but you came at the perfect time, so I'll let it go. You and you, come at me together. I challenge you to a duel."

The clone stood up and faced the two guards.

"Sir, that is not our job. We are only here to protect you."

They obviously weren't interested. However, Damien wasn't going to let them off so easily.

"Maybe, but you guys are also pissed off about having to do shit like this instead of your own thing, right? Come at me. If you win, I'll request a change of guards and get you guys some paid time off."

Nothing else Damien said really interested them. They were slightly annoyed about having to guard him at all times, but it wasn't much different from their normal work so they didn't mind it.

The important part came after that.

The concept of "paid time off" was nonexistent in this realm.

The prospect of being off work but still receiving salary...

It was something incredibly enticing to these men. And since Damien was someone who could really promise them something like that and fulfill it...

...they couldn't just let this opportunity slide!

Chapter 1814 Investigation [2].

Somewhere in the streets of Terra around ten minutes later, a completely disguised Damien could be seen smiling to himself.

He was looking at a badge that looked quite inconspicuous in his hands due to its dullness. To others, he looked like nothing more than a boy who had just received his challenger badge.

However, Damien saw a different picture.

He was worried for a moment. As his clone was technically a different entity, he didn't know if it would be able to level up his badge. It would be a problem if he was away investigating when the tournament started and his clone couldn't take his place.

Luckily, this event proved that worry unfounded. The change was slight since the two men weren't particularly skilled, but as the owner of the badge, Damien noticed it.

The clone would do just fine. It seemed like the realm accepted it as part of his power.

'Then, I can focus on doing my own thing.'

While the clone went to clean up his mess and apologize to the Temple Master, Damien left the vicinity of Terra on a journey to a place wanderers never dared to approach.

The prison was conspicuous in the same way as Death's Hold.

The land within several tens of kilometers was dyed a black and red color. It was uninhabited by anything other than the manor in the center that looked like an island amidst a bloody sea.

Immediately upon entering this area, one would feel one's body becoming sluggish. The closer they approached the manor, the more the effect would grip their souls.

He was only an Area Lord in name. In reality, this environment would suppress even the strongest platinum badge holders to the point where the Prison Master could kill them with a flick if he so desired.

Damien took some time to reach it. Terra was quite far, so even with his fastest methods of transportation, it took him two days to arrive at its boundary.

The manor was not meant to be approached, but those with enough strength and tenacity could indeed reach it.

'Still, I understand why the Prison Master remains unchallenged.'

He was only an Area Lord in name. In reality, this environment would suppress even the strongest platinum badge holders to the point where the Prison Master could kill them with a flick if he so desired.

Damien took some time to reach it. Terra was quite far, so even with his fastest methods of transportation, it took him two days to arrive at its boundary.

When he did, though, he was able to walk without facing the same problems as others.

It was not because of the Void's influence, but rather a product of Damien's actions in the Land of Nothingness.

The environment itself had accepted him in a way similar to how humans designated "close friends."

As such, Damien wouldn't be inhibited by others unless it was absolutely necessary for the trial.

He was "trusted" by the realm, a status nobody knew was possible to reach.

He made the difficult and oftentimes days or weeks-long journey to the center of the area look easy when he finished it in a measly hour.

Walking up the manor's steps, he knocked on the door and waited politely.

"Oh? A challenger?"

A voice came from the other side no more than a minute later. The large door opened, giving way to an aged wizard-like man.

"And who might you be?" He asked as he looked over Damien.

"Sir, I am not a challenger. I am merely someone who wished to meet you," Damien responded, putting his hand to his chest and bowing slightly.

"I see..."

A strange light glimmered in the Prison Master's eyes.

"Very well. Come in. It isn't as if I have a better way to spend my time."

Whether it was out of curiosity or something entirely different, the Prison Master didn't show Damien any signs of aversion as he invited him into the manor. "It is not a very welcoming place, I know, but make yourself comfortable. I will join you shortly."

Damien nodded at the Prison Master, who walked away without looking back. 'Does he trust me?'

No, it was just that he knew Damien wouldn't be able to do anything he wasn't allowed to.

'That must be the confidence of someone who's allegedly been guarding this place for an uncountable period of time.'

How many visitors had he received? How many did he fight, how many tried to deceive him, and how many showed good intentions?

The Prison Master had lived long enough to experience every unique experience. He could act on his whim confidently precisely because Damien was nothing more than a cornered rabbit from the very moment he entered the manor.

'It's an undeniable truth, but it still hurts my pride a little.' Damien thought as he observed the many paintings and art displays along the walls.

'It's a manor that only one person has ever and will ever live in, but it's oddly decorated with images of and representing everyone but him.'

There was a wall dedicated to the challengers that had defeated the Prison Master before. When an observer came close to any single piece, their mind would be sucked into a projection of that battle so they could view the great feats of this realm's past heroes.

There were only six of them to ever exist, and each of their battles was spectacular.

On another wall was a remembrance of those who faced eternal death on the island. It was a wall filled with names, a blank canvas intentionally left empty so that their names were the only thing one could focus on. Even at this moment, Damien saw a name appear.

It was someone who'd given up on life. From piece to piece, from wall to wall, the Prison Master's manor remembered different people, places, and events through the presented art.

However, other than the scenes of his defeat present on the first wall Damien saw, there wasn't a single trace of the Prison Master himself.

'Why?'

"It is because I am insignificant."

As if he heard Damien's unspoken question, the Prison Master entered the room and gave him an answer.

"These people are heroes. They are practitioners with hearts that must be acknowledged, places with extreme importance to our island's heritage, and events that shaped everything we know now. Among them, I am no more than a passing memory, as this manor and what lies beneath it are the only reasons for my existence."

"I'd say that 'reason for existence' is exactly what makes you as important as everything else here," Damien responded, turning around to face him.

The Prison Master smiled slightly.

"That may be so, or it may not. However, young man, you have not come to merely speak to an old man like me, have you? I can sense that your intentions are not bad. Tell me what you seek."

It was clear that the Prison Master was trying to change the subject, but Damien wasn't going to push the topic. The Prison Master's perspective on life and his own meaning was for him to decide. Damien had his own opinion, but he could tell that it would do nothing to change how the man thought.

As such, he nodded and went along with his flow.

"Yes, I have actually come with a bit of an odd request. I have been struggling in my training lately, and I was hoping to find new inspiration in places that an ordinary man cannot reach. I have already climbed the volcanic spires of the far east and explored the rugged snowfields of the North. This is where I've chosen to come next."

It was an explanation filled with lies, but Damien needed something to justify his request.

After all, his request was quite absurd.

"Please allow me to take a tour of the prison you guard. I believe that I will gain great inspiration from seeing its structure and mechanisms."

Damien spoke it with confidence, but even he knew how stupid he sounded.

"Please allow me to take a tour of the prison you guard. I believe that I will gain great inspiration from seeing its structure and mechanisms."

Damien spoke it with confidence, but even he knew how stupid he sounded.

Why would the Prison Master ever let anyone see the prison's mechanisms? Wasn't that the same as giving military secrets to a random gamer in a very niche community and expecting them to not share it with everyone they knew?

In Damien's opinion, he was going to get rejected and would need to take a roundabout path to see the prison for himself.

But, surprisingly enough...

...the Prison Master's reaction wasn't bad...?

Chapter 1815 Investigation [3].

Damien could barely garner anything from the Prison Master's expression. It changed several times. His original response was as expected. His eyes narrowed and he glared at Damien in suspicion, but that only lasted for a few seconds at most.

After that, his face looked slightly inquisitive, serious, curious again, and then turbulent as he frowned deeply.

Still, the look in his eyes didn't seem like it belonged to someone who was planning to reject the request.

"Is it truly for your training that you wish to see the prison?" He asked.

Damien looked into his eyes and tried to understand what he was thinking, but it wasn't possible in the short term. He nodded his head with firm eyes and responded simply.

"Yes."

"There is no other reason?"

"There is not."

"Hmm..."

The Prison Master had a certain quality that allowed him to see through people. When he looked at Damien, he could see that there were hidden intentions laced all throughout his words.

The strange thing was that those intentions, while concealed, didn't seem harmful. The aura emanating from Damien seemed to be one of...a helper?

The Prison Master fell into thought for a second, seemingly debating over something. However, he made his decision relatively fast and without the need for Damien to provide any more justification.

"Very well. You are a promising junior, so I suppose it is not a problem. You won't mind if I come with you, will you?" "Of course not," Damien replied with a smile.

"Rather, how would I be able to walk such a place without the Prison Master himself at my side guiding me?"

"Haha, so you were planning to use me as a guide from the start."

The Prison Master nodded.

"You look to be a busy man, so let us not delay. Please follow me carefully, and from this point forward, only step where I step."

Damien easily agreed.

They were still in the same greeting room where Damien was left when they first entered the manor, but their path seemed to start here.

The Prison Master walked casually so it didn't seem like there was anything special about his movements to an outside observer. Nevertheless, Damien watched him carefully and did as he was told, moving exactly like the man in front of him.

The two of them left the greeting room and entered the long hallway in the center of the manor. They walked it to its end until they reached a living room and exited the doors into the connected courtyard.

Before the bloody landscape that Damien had traversed only moments ago, the Prison Master did something of a ritual. He bowed to the eternal sun and prayed to the corrupted land. Damien stood behind him in silence, watching carefully until he finished.

In his mind, this was a ritual that he would also have to imitate, but he was incorrect. By the time the Prison Master finished his movements, the world was already fading away into a deep and murky darkness not dissimilar to that which existed in the Sacred Abyss.

'I see. This isn't the normal entrance. This must be the ritual that's undertaken when new prisoners are brought to the prison.'

If they entered through this method, then Damien would technically be considered a prisoner. He wouldn't be allowed to leave if he pulled anything that the Prison Master found suspicious.

And, if he decided to sneak back and re-enter, he would be unable to escape. 'It's a little inconvenient for me, but I'm sure it will be fine.'

Damien refocused on the world around him when it came back into focus.

The floor was made of cobblestone. No, the entire structure was made of damp and musty cobblestone.

Damien and the Prison Master were in a very narrow corridor sandwiched on both sides by prison cells that spanned as far as the eye could see. "Welcome to the Eternal Sanctum," the Prison Master said as he turned around.

"This is the place that you have been so eager to see."

Damien was still looking around. Something like this would not slide on his homeworld. The prison cells themselves were small enough to barely fit a grown adult male. They were stacked on top of each other ten high and submerged in eternal darkness.

It was clear that these prisoners weren't granted any sort of human rights. They were thrown here like pigs waiting for slaughter so they could suffer for eternity. 'Eternal Sanctum...I guess it could be called that, but this isn't sacred in the slightest.'

Did Damien feel pity for the prisoners? Of course not.

Some of them may have deserved their sentences and some of them may have been innocent or reformed, but in the end, they all did something to end up here.

To be placed in the Eternal Sanctum meant one's crimes were enough to shake the foundation of the island's peace.

If a murderer appeared here, then they'd killed at least several cities' worth of people.

The Prison Master walked Damien through its halls. He could not see the prisoners through the darkness in their cells, but their occasional screaming and manic ranting made them hard to ignore.

The Prison Master walked Damien through its halls. He could not see the prisoners through the darkness in their cells, but their occasional screaming and manic ranting made them hard to ignore.

Still, his focus was, as he told the Prison Master before, mainly on the structure of the prison itself.

He wanted to see this place and understand if it was a viable method of containing those who could cause harm to society. He didn't care about the conditions of the prisoners, but about the conditions of the mechanisms themselves.

'It's incredibly sturdy.'

Damien could see that even if he reached a level where Area Lords were fodder before him, he still wouldn't be able to break through the Eternal Sanctum. It was designed in such a way that power wasn't the only thing necessary to destroy it.

'If I'm reading it right, then you need a group of maybe ten or fifteen people on the same level as an Area Lord to work in perfect harmony to crack these defenses.'

It was definitely worthy of being the most secure prison on the entire island.

'But...if it's gathering people with platinum badge strength, then someone's already doing that, aren't they?'

As long as both the Earth Temple Master and the Dragon Lord were both involved in some way, Damien could confirm that much.

The Prison Master did give him a tour around the prison despite grumbling about it jokingly. Those near where the two of them appeared were the less serious offenders, which was why their treatment was so "good."

The further they went, the more serious the crimes became, and the more serious the punishment was.

Those at the very end, those who needed to be teleported to because they were so deep in the prison, were undergoing torture that was crueler than even the depictions of Hell present in Earthen civilizations.

Damien did gain some insights by seeing how the prison was upheld, and he was able to confirm that the structure itself wasn't anywhere close to breaking. With that, he achieved everything he wanted to do here. Understanding the state of the prisoners was just an added bonus.

The Prison Master took Damien out of the prison easily when they finished their tour. The man was as genuine as he first said, so there was no reason to still be concerned about him.

Rather, the Prison Master's intentions were elsewhere.

"Young man, I presume you are ready to leave now?" He inquired. Damien nodded and replied, "Yes. I must sit down and ponder the insights I gained. This trip was just as fruitful as I thought it would be."

Damien thought that the Prison Master's words were an invitation to leave, so he spoke frankly. However, he was wrong.

The Prison Master was not ready for them to part yet.

"Come, sit down for a moment," he said, his eyes a bit more serious than before.

"Let us talk."

Chapter 1816 Investigation [4]

The fact that the Prison Master wanted to sit down and have a conversation was strange. The things he said were even stranger.

He spoke like an old grandpa who truly just wanted to have a conversation with his junior, going on about the things he'd experienced as the warden of the Eternal Sanctum.

However, Damien couldn't believe that a man like the Prison Master had this kind of side to him.

As everything else about him stated, he had lived for far too long and seen far too much to have emotions like this. His world had to be a dull grey color by now, highlighted only by his sacred duty.

There had to be a reason for his attitude, and as they continued their conversation, Damien did his best to find it.

"...the many challengers on the walls are not the only ones who have come. There have been those like you in the past, people who wanted to explore the sanctum out of nothing more than genuine curiosity," the Prison Master said.

"I have always entertained these kinds of guests. They are interesting prospects, children who have bright minds that will take them far. I have always wanted the sanctum to inspire them, but none of them ever bear the fruits of their efforts."

He looked at Damien with a slight smile.

"You are the only one who has left the sanctum with a different light in your eyes. I can see that you have truly grasped a principle present in its design and are willing to incorporate it into your strength."

He wasn't wrong. The concept of restriction was already important to Damien's Nonexistence fighting style.

Currently, his power manifested as a spider web that trapped his opponent before slitting their throat. In a lot of ways, his strategies resembled the concepts used to create the Eternal Sanctum.

He felt that if he took a few months to train using those concepts, he would be able to solidify his spiderweb and truly create an impenetrable cell for his enemies to die in. Still, what did that have to do with the Prison Master? Why was he bringing it up?

Damien didn't speak, but it didn't look like the Prison Master wanted him to. He was more than comfortable with rambling now that he had someone who was willing to listen to him.

"This land, the Land of the Forgotten, is a cruel place. It is a cruel place that raises many monsters, but none of them are able to escape their fates. The people who became strong without thinking about anything else always fail, whether that be here or on the coming islands. From my observations, the only ones who manage to succeed are those who maintain spirits like yours, people who truly put in effort to comprehend the Nothingness rather than treating it as a tool that will grow as long as one completes the trials."

"People like you are a hope that drives me. After guarding this sanctum for so long, I have been forced to find reasons to justify my continued tenure. In the end, perhaps it is only a sense of duty or a sense of justice, but I like to believe that I do it so that people like you have an environment where they can properly reach their potential and thrive."

The Prison Master's eyes contained a strange light as he looked at Damien.

"Still, there are people in this world who do not respect my ambitions. They are people who are willing to do anything to foster an environment where only they thrive while everyone else is forced into an eternal cycle of death. This prison was built to hold such people so that society can thrive. Guarding it is the only thing I can do to fight against the perpetrators of chaos."

Damien's eyes narrowed just slightly. He saw it in the gaze that was trained on him, but those words...

What was the tone he used to speak those words?

That was not the way he should have been speaking. That hint of sadness...

'No, it's not that. It's the hint of struggle.'

Damien's eyes went to the Prison Master's lips. They were sealed tightly when he didn't speak, and even when he opened his mouth he did it in such a way that Damien couldn't see within.

He sharpened his hearing and his scent. He tried to pick up traces of one specific thing, and he found them almost immediately.

'Blood.'

His gaze returned to the eyes of the man who was still speaking even now.

That gaze...

"Haa..."

Damien waved his hand, interrupting the Prison Master before he could continue.

"I am delighted to hear your stories and praise, but..."

He summoned a certain concoction along with two cups.

"...why don't we continue this conversation over a drink?"

The next time Damien was seen on the third island, he'd already left the Prison Master's manor. They didn't speak for much longer after that, as Damien had matters to urgently attend to.

'I hate when things go as I expected.'

The Prison Master was hiding the blood pooling in his mouth just so he could continue to speak. That alone was enough to confirm Damien's suspicions.

'To think that even the Prison Master was controlled. Whatever the instigator has planned, it's going to end with the extermination of everyone on this island.'

The Prison Master, with his unreasonable strength and mind, managed to grasp an opportunity against the parameters he'd been granted by the control skill that enslaved him. Those words could still be interpreted as his desire to speak to someone for the first time in a long time, so the owner of the skill wouldn't be suspicious.

However, he chose Damien as the person he wanted to ask for help.

'The Prison Master, the Dragon Lord, the Earth Temple Master... No, it's safe to say that all of the Temple Masters are under the enemy's control.'

If even the Prison Master was involved, then this was a plot that had been brewing for a very long time. Damien happened to appear at its climax, and somehow he'd attained himself a spot as one of its main characters.

'Dammit. I only have five days left. I need to find a real lead soon.'

There was only one place he could go if he wanted to be absolutely sure that he'd gain some kind of useful information.

'The Dragon Lord. Considering that the person who told me about his situation is currently being controlled, it's highly likely that the information about him was a lie.'

The Earth Temple Master was being used to get Damien to kill the Dragon Lord even if he had to risk his life for it.

'The Dragon Lord's death has to be a trigger of some kind.'

He needed to confirm. Once he had that piece, he would be able to see the whole puzzle. The only thing left would be to find the one putting it together.

'I don't have much time.'

In five days, the tournament would begin.

But, at the same time, it would take Damien at least four days to reach the Volcanic Spires where the Dragon Lord resided.

'It'll be on the wire.'

He was really cutting it close.

The only question was if he could win the race against the still-hidden mastermind behind everything.

Chapter 1817 Investigation [5]

Damien took the shortest possible route to the Dragon Lord, but it was by no means short. The main issue was the terrain, full of inclines and dips that made it impossible to teleport casually. When he reached the volcanic region, it became even worse.

There were thousands of spires surrounding the main volcano. The Dragon Lord's lair was in the very center of them all, right at the base of the volcano.

Damien was forced to weave through thousands of spires without making any sound. Avoiding the detection of the many people in the vicinity was also a problem, but he managed to do it with the help of the Void. Finally, he reached the lair itself. It was more of a mansion than a dragon's den, but it was built to look like a natural hole in the volcano. The magma that flowed from the top was used as lighting for the structure, creating a beautiful backdrop and scenery that elevated the ambiance to another level.

It wasn't beautiful for Damien, though. The magma made it difficult for him to stay concealed, and since he wanted to do this whole mission covertly, the fact that he didn't know anything about the mansion's layout wasn't helpful.

Still, he had to find a way to do it.

'And the magma ends up being the best method.'

Damien only had a few hours to spend investigating the area. It had been four days and it was already the night of the fifth. Soon, the tournament would start and he'd reach the real final moments of this confrontation.

He couldn't still be looking for information at that time. From a short search, he could only see that there was a system of channels through which the magma was directed so that it flowed how the Dragon Lord wanted it to. It looked like they ran throughout the entire mansion, which was good for Damien.

However, it wasn't as if sneaking through the magma was an untested strategy. Many had tried, and just as many had failed. That magma was supported by the Dragon Lord and to an extent was the source of his power. Anyone who stayed submerged in it for too long would find the very essence of their soul burning.

It was an effect with no counter in the Land of Nothingness, which made the Dragon Lord one of the most difficult Area Lords to face when he was in his home territory.

'Unfortunately for him, I have cheats.'

With the Void around him, Damien could be impervious to the magma and remained concealed without an issue. Rather than approaching the mansion and crawling into the tunnels from there, he entered one of the magma streams and swam against its current to reach the entrance of the channel.

It was just barely large enough for a human man to fit through. For anyone who was just slightly larger, it was impossible.

Damien was relatively tall, standing at six feet and two inches in height, and he had a wider frame that was built as he continued to fight and gain muscle. If he was in his original body, even he would have been too large.

The form he was taking to avoid surveillance was skinnier and smaller, meant to blend into society and look unassuming. This kind of stature was perfect for the task and allowed Damien to infiltrate the mansion without problems.

Still, he had to navigate the maze of channels and find one near the Dragon Lord.

'I sensed his aura near the back of the mansion. It'll be difficult to reach.'

The northwestern corner of the mansion was both the furthest from Damien and the deepest part of the mansion. It bordered the inner side of the volcano and was practically one with its magma pool. 'Maybe it would have been easier to dive from the top?'

But it also would have been more time-consuming.

'Troublesome.'

Damien put away his thoughts temporarily and focused on navigation.

'Right, left, up...I'm glad that it's all relatively uniform.'

At the end of the day, the system was like the plumbing pipes in a house. They had a defined form and purpose, so as long as one understood where the start and end points were, finding a path between them wasn't the most difficult thing in the world.

The magma was relatively friendly to Damien. It was warm rather than scalding and blanketed his body, lulling him into a sense of peace.

'It may be a different kind of danger, but it's still dangerous.'

Damien had to consciously make sure that his mind remained on edge as he swam. With his attention focused on keeping himself stable, he was able to reach his destination after no more than three hours of searching.

Finally, he could sense the Dragon Lord's aura directly underneath him.

'Good.'

The Void's energy changed and Damien's body became ethereal. He phased through the pipes and into the walls themselves, giving him access to the sound coming out of the room.

He didn't care about the conversations the Dragon Lord was having with whoever he was entertaining. He was focused on that man's arrhythmic heartbeat. Du-Dun! Du-Dun! Du-Dun!

One short one long, one long one short. His heart was never able to beat properly as if there was something inhibiting its path.

Damien sharpened his hearing to another degree and gained an understanding of all of the Dragon Lord's body functions.

He was looking for a location, and he found it through this method.

'His heart, his stomach, and his eyes.'

Those three places were giving off very strange readings as if they had been tampered with. It was odd viewing the man as more of an object, but the approach made it easier for Damien to find the actual problem.

He sharpened his eyes to see through the wall and finally laid eyes on that man for the first time. He was just as robust as the Earth Temple Master but with fiery red hair and an equally flame-like beard.

If Damien used his own mana to probe, he would immediately be discovered by the mastermind. Damien had to find a roundabout method now that he wasn't in a position to use the same liquor strategy as before.

But, the base of that strategy was enough.

'Conveniently, they have food and drinks.'

Damien waited patiently for over twenty minutes, waiting for the Dragon Lord to grab something to consume.

When that moment finally came when he was most unsuspecting of interference, Damien widened his eyes slightly and shot a strand of mana inside.

It was digested along with the food and became a part of the Dragon Lord's regular bodily processes without being detected, and soon enough, information was pouring into Damien's head.

The Area Lord's strength, bodily abilities, mental power, and other stats came first.

But Damien's focus was on the lumps of malevolent mana that were present in the locations he'd marked earlier.

Despite being unable to immediately decipher their structure, Damien didn't take long to understand what they were.

As he thought, this piece brought the entire puzzle together.

Because the Dragon Lord...

'...that guy has been turned into a living nuke.'

Chapter 1818 Investigation [6]

The Dragon Lord's state was unusual. If one observed his body at a glance, one would find nothing wrong. If a more in-depth approach was taken, then perhaps only signs of the control skill would show.

To find the truth about what was going on in the Area Lord's body, Damien had to pierce through the layers of control and find the mechanisms hidden beneath. And it was exactly as he said.

The Dragon Lord had been turned into a living bomb that would blow when it was disturbed.

'Thankfully, I had the Void obscuring my mana. Otherwise, this entire volcanic region would have gone up in smoke.'

No, perhaps that was for the better? If he blew up here, then the number of casualties would definitely be decreased.

Damien's killing intent rose just slightly, but he suppressed it just as fast.

'No. I want to maintain the established order of this island. Even if it happens here, everything will go to shit if the Dragon Lord blows up.'

The plan was not extremely convoluted, but it likely took ages to set up.

From start to finish, the tournament was not a stage to get rid of the Chaos Faction.

No, it was a sacrificial altar.

'I was supposed to kill the Dragon Lord at the end of the tournament and trigger the bomb. It would decimate Terra and kill all three of the Temple Masters who are being forced to watch from the stands. That'll act as a trigger for the Prison Master to let the prisoners loose, and the Chaos Faction has an easy road from there.'

The Area Lords wouldn't be able to stop them because of the restrictions on their bodies, and the temples would be in shambles after the deaths of their masters.

Chaos would take hold, and the mastermind behind everything would become the king of the world.

'That's probably what he wants, right?'

A great upheaval where vile beings became the majority, where even normal citizens would be forced to turn into cruel people if they wanted to survive. Only the person who created that upheaval and established control over the world's strongest forces would be able to stand above it and claim it as his own.

'There is one good thing I've learned, though.'

It was easy to say that forcing the Temple Masters to die because their close friend turned into a human bomb was plotted to make them feel hopelessness before their fall, but it was just as easy to say that the mastermind was not confident in killing the three Temple Masters on his own.

'If he's of the same strength as them but used some esoteric methods to control them, then my life definitely becomes mildly easier.'

Not having to face a force stronger than the strongest people on the island was enough for Damien.

'But he can't be an Area Lord and he can't be a Temple Master. The only people left with enough power to do anything...'

Damien's eyes narrowed.

'The prisoners.'

It seemed that someone did indeed find a way out of the impenetrable Eternal Sanctum.

'I have to find him.'

Before the Dragon Lord died, he had to find the real mastermind and kill him.

That was the only way to stop the era of chaos from dawning.

Damien had been gone for a week, but the only one aware of his actions was himself. The clone Damien played his part perfectly. The majority of his time was spent training on his own as he pretended to follow the Temple Master's orders to stay inside, while the rest was spent with the Temple Master himself, discussing the plan for the tournament.

As the event drew closer, the pain in the Temple Master's eyes became clearer and clearer, but Damien pretended not to see it.

'I can't alert anyone of my actions. Not even him.'

He didn't have a reputation on this island, which meant that he could play the part of a mercenary willing to follow orders for rewards well.

There were always eyes on him no matter where he went or what he did, so it was definitely a constraining lifestyle. He lived it only for as long as it was necessary, and when the time came for the tournament to start, the clone got excited to play his part in everything.

'It will take time to find the mastermind. I have to go back to the Eternal Sanctum and look for clues in places I didn't check before, and if he isn't inside, then I have to search the island until I find him.'

The main body had a difficult few days ahead of him, but it wasn't going to be any easier for the clone.

'I can't stall since the matches are timed. The best I can do is draw out my fight with the Area Lord when I get to him. Still, I have four days at most. In four days, someone will fight the Area Lord regardless of what I want.'

That was the structure of the tournament, after all.

With the gathered power of the people here, it was impossible to cause a disturbance and get the fight delayed. The main body only had four days to do more than he'd done in the past seven days combined. "Thank you for joining us on this momentous occasion!..."

'Haa...it's not like it's my fault that I showed up at the very end. If I was here a few years ago, I could've taken care of it without all the hassle.'

It was only difficult because of the time crunch, but this was also something Damien was involving himself in due to his own whims.

"...the heroes of our nation have gathered..."

He could technically go fight an Area Lord right now and move on to the fourth island, but did he want to do that?

The position of Absolute seemed like a lonely place.

This was a realm that only existed to provide future Absolutes a place to hone their power.

Damien wanted it to be able to carry out its purpose without interference. He wanted to see more people rise from the rubble and become Supreme.

"...give thanks to the Temple Masters who created this glorious event..."

The Chaos Faction couldn't be trusted with a duty like that. The Temple Masters weren't much better if they let themselves get fooled by the mastermind, but they at least had the heart. They could train their strength when this incident ended.

"....now, introducing our champions!"

The announcer's speech ended before Damien could give it any more thought. He and the three hundred or so competitors walked out of the tunnel and into the stadium's light amidst the cheers of the crowd.

Damien sighed again.

'I'll have to trust them with the aftermath.'

He directed his gaze upward at the platform where the three of them sat.

The Earth Temple Master, the Water Temple Master, and the Fire Temple Master. Three fools who found themselves in a bigger situation than they could handle.

If the main body was able to free them from their curse in time...

'...then everything will be up to you.'

There were still some days before the climax of this event, but it somehow felt like it had already arrived.

And that was a fact that nobody who knew about it was happy about.

Chapter 1819 Investigation [7]

The history of the third island was vague.

For a very long time, countless trillions of years ago, the entire Land of Nothingness was enveloped in chaos. Gods came and Gods died. Gods populated the earth and acted as the soil that birthed later civilizations.

When the era of chaos ended, all of the islands drifted apart and a more linear trial was created for those who entered this realm. With that development, the pointless slaughter became meaningless and most people stopped their reckless actions.

From that point on, every island changed on its own, becoming more suitable for the trials in place. The first island was for the weakest of the weak, so it remained in a more primordial state. The second island was able to form something of a civilization, but many factors held it back from truly thriving. The third island was a unique case even when compared to the two islands that came after it. It was the only place in the entire Land of Nothingness where such a widespread civilization of innocents was created.

The fourth island was bare, and the fifth island's people could hardly be called a civilization.

What made the third island special?

Sure, its development could be partially attributed to its trial and the convenience it had as the middle of the five islands. Since this island's trial required at least a semblance of order to exist, it was bound to develop in a different direction than its peers.

The middle island was also a great stopping point. Even before the three temples were established, the aura of the third island was already far more welcoming than the rest. Even Damien felt it when he arrived, that cool breeze that made him feel like he was back at home.

An environment that made one complacent. The third island possessed it in a way that could not be replicated, and when they were faced with their own lack of talent or understanding, it made it easy for practitioners to choose surrender over battle.

However, these developments only happened because the third island was originally special.

It had a past that was unknown to even the three temples, as it was erased before any of them came to be.

During a period of great war following the establishment of the trials, at a time when the Prison Master was not yet an Area Lord and was only establishing himself as the warden of the Eternal Sanctum, countless heroes and demons rose and fell.

They stood at a level that modern people could not hope to reach. It wasn't because they were untalented, but because society had developed too much.

The primordial mentalities of people who only studied the relationships between elements with their eyes and hearts were able to perceive a world that people could no longer see. They had too much information, which completely changed the way that their techniques were manifested.

If the two generations were placed against each other, it was hard to say that one side would have a definite advantage, but both sides would absolutely be able to pull out techniques that the other simply didn't have the perspective to understand.

The Prison Master remembered those days.

More than his dreary life as a warden that he only kept living because of the weight of his duty, his mind drifted to the days when he was still young.

It had been a very long time since he last saw a hero of the caliber that existed back then.

And, it had been just as long since he'd seen a crueler demon.

They did not operate together, but it was wrong to say that they operated alone. They were an organization that was not an organization, a group of like-minded people who only followed chaos.

Chaos...

It was once the name of a concept. At the very beginning, it was an entity without form, an energy of pure disorder that drove people who witnessed it into fanaticism.

But one day, that disorder took form.

The cause was assumed to be a reaction between the faith of those people and the realm of that which did not exist, creating an entity that should have never been born.

Most of this island's development could be directly attributed to that entity. Whether to combat Chaos or follow it, people built and destroyed civilizations. People fought and fought and fought, and when Chaos was eventually imprisoned, society was finally able to rise from the ashes to ensure that another being of the same kind would not appear. Chaos was kept in the deepest depths of the world, sealed in a facility that far surpassed the Eternal Sanctum in security. In fact, today's Eternal Sanctum was developed based on what others hypothesized was used to seal Chaos itself.

But the Prison Master knew better than anyone else. This prison could not even come close to the location where Chaos was sealed.

That place was far, far too complex to be the development of someone on the third island. Rather, it was more likely that an Absolute found a way to return to this realm and calm its chaos. For that reason, it could not be Chaos.

Chaos could not rise again. Even the level of belief it received in the current era was far from its peak. It was considerably weakened, as it was a force that could not survive without people believing in it.

A so-called Spiritual God. That was what Chaos became.

However...

'...has that age dawned on us again?'

The man who did not understand how he came to be trapped in his own body wondered as he looked out of the windows in his manor.

Some days ago, he met someone who resembled the heroes of the previous era.

And, the one who took him hostage and schemed against civilization itself bore an eerie resemblance to Chaos itself.

Whether a new Spiritual God was born or a strand of Chaos escaped, the Prison Master did not know.

But, even if there was a hero attempting to change fate, he could not believe that the era of chaos was not destined to return.

It was already too late.

'Perhaps it is time for change.'

The Prison Master by no means supported the Chaos Faction. If he was someone who could ever harbor dissident thoughts, he wouldn't have been able to maintain his role throughout the countless changes that civilization had undergone in the past billions of years.

Nevertheless, he was a man who understood that the seas of fate were already churning.

"Change" would inevitably come to this land.

Only...

'Will it be a change instilled by a hero or one controlled by a demon?'

In this realm, he was nothing more than an observer. In this conflict, even more so.

Thus, he watched as a change in the force surrounding the manor disappeared as if it never existed in the first place.

He did nothing even while knowing that an intruder was making their way into the prison that he'd kept guarded for so long.

When that disturbance that even he could not sense appeared, the Prison Master made a firm decision.

He would no longer have a part in this conflict.

Now that its main characters had entered the stage...

...it was up to them to decide whose path was true and destined.

Chapter 1820 Investigation [8]

'I feel like I've been seen through, but that's impossible.'

Damien only believed that he could solve everything in four days because he didn't have to travel the long distances anymore. Now that he'd been to the Eternal Sanctum and the Volcanic Spires, he had enough points across the map to be near any destination he might want to reach.

He was able to cancel distance from his place inside of the Dragon Lord's magma channels and return to the Prison Master's manor without any trouble at all. Unfortunately, he couldn't enter the Eternal Sanctum with the same method, but that was obvious. If people could freely enter and leave by canceling distance, then it wouldn't be much of a prison to begin with.

More than that, what concerned Damien was the strange feeling he got when he first stepped on the property.

The Void was concealing him, so there reasonably shouldn't have been any force capable of perceiving his existence. However, Damien could feel the eyes on him for a moment. He shook off the feeling, thinking of it as built-up stress.

'There are more important things to focus on right now.'

Even if he was truly perceived, nothing happened. Nothing happened, which meant the person who perceived his existence was not trying to interfere with what he was doing. In that case, it was better for him to leave it alone and focus on getting into the Eternal Sanctum.

'The ordinary methods won't work. They're set up so that they activate loudly. Even if the Prison Master doesn't see that I was the one who broke in, he'll know that someone did.'

Damien had to create a method to break into the impenetrable prison for the first time in history. Easy, right?

'Actually, it's not that hard either.'

Easy was an overstatement, but hard was the same. If Damien didn't know anything about the prison before he tried, then it would be nigh impossible. However, he got to see its inner workings with his own eyes, so the situation was different.

Damien's own Nonexistence and the Eternal Sanctum shared many common factors. Using those comparisons, he could create his own iteration of the prison. By reverse engineering his own design, he could find a way into the prison.

It sounded like a time-consuming effort for a Damien who'd been extremely busy for the past week, but was it the same for the other Damien who'd been cooped up in his room?

His clone did the difficult comprehension work, and since they were one being, those comprehensions were directly reflected in Damien's mind.

He already had the framework. The rest of the work didn't need to be mentioned.

'Basically, it's a prison that functions on a single core concept, and that's Nonexistence itself. Those within have their very ability to think inhibited and their power sealed behind a much stronger version of itself. That makes any attempt to escape impossible. The rest of the concepts just branch off of that to take care of loopholes.'

It was a web. It was made of steel wire and would shred anyone who attempted to bypass it, but it was a web nonetheless. The exterior concepts had far more space between them than those on the inside.

That amount of space was not enough for anyone to slip through, which was why the prison had never been compromised, but Damien was confident that he could do it.

'As long as I target it properly and aim to bypass instead of break, I think I can do it.'

He closed his eyes and concentrated his power, putting even more emphasis on the Void around him. He saw that web in his mind and carried out the careful plan he'd created.

Like a fly too small to be hindered by such a massive web, he maneuvered through the complex defense mechanism and granted his mind access to the Eternal Sanctum.

To allow his body to follow after that was simple. In only a matter of five or so minutes, Damien was already walking its long and narrow corridor.

He rushed through the prison, widening his senses so that every single cell was inside his range of perception. 'Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.'

He couldn't find a single trace of tampering. There wasn't a single missing prisoner, nor were there any who had been swapped for fakes.

'It's not here.'

The clue Damien had been searching for was somewhere else entirely.

'But...'

He couldn't have come here for nothing. The answer was still certain. The person who cooked up the entire scheme plaguing the third island had to be a prisoner.

Damien scanned the rooms around him.

'Vile. Vile. Crazy. Crazy. There.'

He pierced their souls and observed the core of their existences, only stopping when he found someone who fit his criteria.

The man with shaggy brown hair and a beard that could practically be called a lion's mane was not like the prisoners in the cells around him. Rather than wishing for more chaos or revenge, rather than going insane due to the prison's influence, he maintained his mind and thoughts of atonement.

A person like that was worth speaking to. Unlike those around him, there was a chance that he'd actually be willing to provide good information.

Damien approached his cell, causing the man to look up at him.

"The one from before..."

Damien already removed his concealment, so it wasn't strange that the man recognized him from his previous visit.

"I'm glad you remembered me. I've returned with a few questions, if you don't mind answering."

The man's eyes widened.

"You...can respond?"

His surprise was warranted. The prison made it impossible for prisoners to communicate with anyone, so this was the first time the man had been acknowledged as an individual in millions of years. "I can," Damien responded simply.

"However, I do not have enough time for a long conversation. For that, I apologize."

"No. No need," the man responded, shaking his head. His voice quivered slightly as he held his emotions back.

"Please ask your questions. To have a conversation at all, no matter its length or subject, is enough of a blessing for me."

Damien looked at the man without speaking for a moment.

A thought came to mind, but he left it for after everything was taken care of.

"Were there any other prisoners here? Maybe one that escaped or got moved to another place?"

The man shook his head again.

"There has never been a prisoner that escaped from this place. It is the same for those who were transferred. I have never seen anyone or anything leave this prison once entrapped."

Damien frowned.

'Is there really something I'm missing? Maybe there's a wanderer or faction that has a grudge against—'

Before he could finish his thoughts, the man spoke up again.

"Ah, but there was one man."

His hair covered his eyes, so Damien couldn't see the expression he was making, but he could feel it.

The fear emanating from that man's body was unmistakable. As he recalled memories of that person, his body shook.

"There was one person who was not confined in this prison. For him, they were forced to create a special containment unit elsewhere. He...was the most terrifying person of my generation."

Damien's eyes narrowed.

This was it. The identity of the person he was chasing was right in front of him.

The brown-haired man looked up, meeting Damien's eyes for the first time.

"His name..."