

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

#Chapter 121: His Disappearance - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 121: His Disappearance

Chapter 121: His Disappearance

After Aldrian created the dagger, the next phase was what we could call his 'intensive training' to become a blacksmith. However, calling it "intensive" might be an exaggeration—at least that's how Duke Valiard saw it. To Aldrian, it was more like another typical Monday morning activity.

Once Aldrian finished crafting the blade for the dagger and completed the hilt according to the blueprint, Duke Valiard presented him with a new blueprint for a different artifact. This time, it was for a middle sky-grade sword, forged from a mixture of dark steel and blue iron—rare materials that can only be found in icy regions.

As before, Duke Valiard demonstrated the process, showing how to create a more complex, higher-grade artifact. He melted the dark steel and blue iron together in the furnace, using his energy to perfectly balance the materials. The steps after that were not too different from creating the middle earth-grade dagger.

When Duke Valiard finished forging the sky-grade sword, Aldrian followed the same process. The result? Astonishingly, the sword was nearly at the level of a Heaven-grade weapon! By this time, night had already fallen, and Sylphia, Eleine, Xin Haotian and Baek Ji-Min were waiting outside the duke's mansion.

They had spent the entire day at the workshop, and Aldrian explained the situation to the others, asking them to find an inn. However, Duke Valiard insisted that it wasn't necessary, as he would provide them with a place to stay.

After Duke Valiard provided Xin Haotian and the others with accommodations in his manor complex, he handed Aldrian another blueprint—this time for a low Heaven-grade shield. Crafting this intricate shield would take Duke Valiard a full day to complete. The shield was designed to be both lightweight and highly maneuverable, offering easy protection for all parts of the body.

Aldrian observed the process with intense focus, absorbing all the knowledge. With the aid of his Eyes of the Heaven, he was able to improve the techniques, elevating them to the next level. He didn't let a single detail slip by, no matter how small.

Once Duke Valiard finished crafting the shield, Aldrian followed the same steps to create his own. To Duke Valiard's amazement, Aldrian ended up forging a middle Heaven-grade shield. The duke was moved to tears, overwhelmed by Aldrian's

extraordinary talent. In his excitement and obsession with Aldrian's effortless accomplishments, he even forgot about Aldrian's earlier request to craft his sword and he even forgotten about the divine iron.

Days, even weeks, passed as they continued to create a variety of artifacts. The workshop was now filled with swords, spears, daggers, and shields scattered around, each radiating powerful auras. The highest of these reached peak Heaven-grade, turning the workshop into a veritable treasure trove.

Duke Valiard looked upon the scene with a satisfied expression, watching as Aldrian worked on yet another peak Heaven-grade sword. The duke had a vast collection of blueprints for weapons, and, with his generous spirit, he kept handing them to Aldrian, keeping him busy and training him in many different methods. However, he withheld the secret techniques exclusive to his family.

"It's strange. Maybe it's because so much has happened, especially after my elder brother disappeared, but I feel like I can trust this young man and pass my knowledge to him, even though he's not truly my disciple,"

Duke Valiard thought. *"Perhaps I should teach him my family's secret technique?"*

As he watched Aldrian finish crafting the sword, infusing it with his golden energy, Duke Valiard was once again amazed. The aura of an absolute peak Heaven-grade sword filled the room. The energy was so strong that it seemed to be on the verge of breaking through the barrier and reaching divine grade, but it couldn't quite cross that threshold. This phenomenon occurred with every peak Heaven-grade artifact Aldrian created.

After witnessing this, Duke Valiard made a decision.

"Now, after creating all these artifacts and seeing your otherworldly talent, young master Aldrian, I've decided to pass on to you my final technique. I believe it will greatly assist you in blacksmithing, and with your abilities, I'm confident you can take this technique to even greater heights. This is the secret technique of my family—the 'Heaven's Hammer of Creation,'" Duke Valiard said.

Aldrian had heard of the technique before, having seen it in Duke Valiard's records. The fact that it was named after 'Heaven' indicated that it must be a formidable technique, bearing significant karma. Still, he was stunned to hear that Duke Valiard intended to pass it on to him.

"This is actually an ancient technique that has been in my family since we established ourselves on this continent," Duke Valiard continued. "It's a divine-grade technique, but I've never fully comprehended it. Because of that, I haven't been able to unlock its full potential. Looking at you, I believe you might have a chance to fully master it."

Aldrian looked into Duke Valiard's eyes and asked, "I didn't expect this, but why do you want to teach me your secret technique so easily? We're talking about a divine-grade forging technique here."

He also tried to read the duke's mind, curious about his motives.

Duke Valiard sighed. "To tell you the truth, many things have happened since my elder brother disappeared. Strange things—frustrating things. After watching you these past weeks, observing your skill and potential, I truly believe you will surpass even my elder brother. You're a singular existence when it comes to blacksmithing... and battle prowess too."

"Has there really been no trace of your brother's disappearance? Tell me about these strange events. Maybe I can help," Aldrian offered. Duke Valiard met Aldrian's gaze, hesitating for a moment before speaking.

"Do you believe that the Forgeheart Kingdom possesses a blueprint for a peak divine-grade sword?"

At first, Aldrian was confused by the sudden, seemingly unrelated question. But a moment later, he realized the gravity of what Duke Valiard was saying, and a shiver ran through him.

"Are you telling me that there's a blueprint for a peak divine-grade sword in this kingdom? And that the Forgeheart Kingdom has such a weapon?"

This revelation shook Aldrian deeply. A peak divine-grade sword was a weapon of terrifying power. With such a weapon, even someone who wasn't a swordsman could potentially kill a top expert at the High Emperor stage, even with just peak King-stage cultivation!

That was the fearsome potential of divine-grade armaments—especially a peak divine-grade sword. Xin Haotian, a swordsman with a middle divine-grade sword, was already regarded as the strongest swordmaster on the continent, even at his low Emperor stage cultivation. Even sovereigns of the continent tread carefully around him.

What if the peak of this grade appeared in the hands of another swordmaster? Aldrian didn't need to imagine it. He could already see the potential threat of such a weapon, and he wasn't sure if other powers possessed artifacts of this level. He knew the Ivory Empire didn't have a peak divine armament, but they had the World Trees as their guardians.

Duke Valiard, noticing Aldrian's shocked expression, continued speaking.

"Yes, we have the blueprint for a peak divine sword. But do we possess a completed peak divine sword? The answer is both yes and no."

Aldrian's expression grew confused.

"To be more precise," Duke Valiard explained, "we have an incomplete peak divine sword based on that blueprint. We've been trying to create this sword for millions of years, but even now, we're missing something crucial. The blueprint is ambiguous in certain parts, but we've managed to complete most of the sword."

"After countless years of trial and error, we've come closer to finishing it. But there's still something lacking, something the blueprint doesn't explain clearly. My elder brother, Darund Valiard, was one of the people who helped with the research on how to complete the sword."

"Then, fourteen years ago, after the dragon and phoenix phenomenon shook the continent, my brother suddenly disappeared. And here's the problem—he disappeared with the blueprint."

Aldrian was stunned.

"The blueprint, which was safeguarded by the royal family, vanished along with my elder brother. He was a close friend of His Majesty, Douwin Forgeheart, and served as his right-hand man, spending most of his time in the capital trying to complete the divine sword. His sudden disappearance with the blueprint sent shockwaves through the royal family, and they suspected him of betrayal."

"I was equally shocked and confused by his actions. At first, the royal family thought he might have sold the blueprint to another empire. But after years of waiting for news, we heard nothing—no trace of him, no sign of the blueprint. It was as if he vanished into thin air, leaving behind only a symbol in the royal family's treasure vault."

"A symbol?" Aldrian asked, intrigued.

"Yes," Duke Valiard replied. "Before he disappeared, he left behind a drawing of a symbol on the wall of the vault. It looked like this."

Duke Valiard used his energy to recreate the symbol in the air. As Aldrian looked at it, a sudden tremor ran through his heart.

"This symbol..."

Chapter 122: Bring Their Attention To You!

Aldrian's mind was drawn back to the moment when he glimpsed memories of his time as a ruler—or something of that kind. During that time, he saw a symbol much like this one. The symbol was a large circle, emanating light that seemed to illuminate everything around it. Beneath the large circle was a smaller one, the symbol of yin and yang.

The symbol that Duke Valiard had drawn was the same as that one. It felt surreal to Aldrian, as if he had just uncovered a small piece of his true identity—an identity rooted in his 'past.' This also reaffirmed that what he had seen was real and not just some illusion.

Duke Valiard sensed the change in Aldrian's mood and wondered if he recognized the symbol.

"Young master, do you know what this symbol represents?" he asked.

Aldrian, after letting his emotions slip for a brief moment, composed himself and responded calmly to Duke Valiard.

"No, I just find this symbol intriguing. It piqued my interest," Aldrian replied.

Duke Valiard narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but continued his explanation.

"The only clue to my elder brother's disappearance is this symbol, which none of us had ever seen before. It appeared out of nowhere. We thought it might be connected to some organization, but no records mention anyone using this kind of symbol, even to this day. We began to suspect it might not be a symbol at all, but rather a hidden message. But we still don't know what that message could be."

"You won't find any message because this is a true symbol," Aldrian thought to himself.

"With the disappearance of the blueprint, there's a growing sense of anxiety among the kingdom's higher-ups. As for me, many of my rivals have begun to lay the blame on my family, suggesting that we've stolen the kingdom's secrets. The pressure on my family has increased, and my position as Duke is becoming less stable. The only thing keeping me in this role is the king's generosity, due to his close relationship with my brother."

"But I know His Majesty also has limited options due to the pressure from many high-ranking nobles. In these uncertain times, with the prophecies from the Heavenly Direction Church and all the signs showing that this continent is changing, the king doesn't want any instability within the kingdom. So, he gave me this chance to silence those nobles."

"A chance to prove that my elder brother's disappearance has nothing to do with my family. To show that I can offer something even greater to this kingdom, something that will make up for my brother's absence. Even though it's impossible to replace the blueprint of the peak divine-grade sword, His Majesty gave me the opportunity to prove my worth."

Aldrian finally understood what Duke Valiard was trying to achieve. With everything that had happened, and all of Valiard's abilities, Aldrian could now connect the dots.

"So, you want to shape me into a master blacksmith to help you? Even if it means giving me your secret techniques?"

Duke Valiard was silent for a moment before nodding.

"When I first saw you create that simple dagger, I thought you were a one-in-a-million genius. But after spending more time with you, observing all of your skills, I've come to the conclusion that no one is like you. You are on a level of your own. Sometimes, I even doubt that you're human—you are more like a higher being capable of performing miracles, with no bottlenecks in your learning."

"The timing of your arrival was perfect. It's as if the heavens themselves arranged this meeting."

Aldrian looked at the duke's face, which was full of optimism—something he needed at this moment.

"And why do you think I'll help you? You've just told me all of this. I could walk out of here and sell the secrets of the Forgeheart Kingdom, earning a fortune in energy stones or the backing of some powerful faction. You'd be branded a traitor, and with your brother's mysterious disappearance, it would drag you even deeper into the pit. You'd never regain your position, and your name would be sullied forever," Aldrian remarked.

Duke Valiard looked at Aldrian, acknowledging the truth in his words, but he still replied.

"Why, huh? To be honest, I don't really know. Maybe I'm just that desperate—to show those bastards who are pressuring me that I can still make a greater contribution to this kingdom. Or maybe, after spending time with you, I just know you're different from everyone else. No, I'm certain of it. All these factors... I gladly took this gamble. Maybe I've gone crazy, and if I'm wrong about you, then it's a fate I will have to face."

Aldrian was truly impressed by Duke Valiard's boldness. In the end, the duke seemed to have found a glimmer of hope—a hope he was willing to gamble his life on. Looking at duke Valiard's determination Aldrian took out the divine iron and placed it before them. He infused the iron with his energy, manipulating its structure, then sliced off 5% of the material and set it on the floor.

Duke Valiard watched in confusion, unsure of Aldrian's intentions, but as he stared at the divine iron, he suddenly recalled their initial agreement to teach Aldrian the craft of blacksmithing.

"You said you needed a greater contribution to atone for what your elder brother did, right?" Aldrian said. "Then I'll give you this piece of divine iron now. You can research it to your heart's content. This material will broaden your horizons as a blacksmith. And to be honest, I'm also very curious about your brother's disappearance. I can help you with that, but I have one request."

"What is it?" Duke Valiard asked.

"Can you bring me to the unfinished divine sword?"

Duke Valiard was stunned. His brow furrowed as he shook his head.

"I'm afraid that would be too difficult—almost impossible. The existence of that sword is only known to high-ranking nobles and the royal family. If I bring you to it, it's as good as openly revealing our kingdom's secret. It would be considered treason."

Aldrian leaned in, his voice steady. "What if you could bring the entire Forgeheart Kingdom's attention back to you? No, not just the kingdom, but the entire continent. What if you could make your name soar higher than ever? From what you've told me, it sounds like they don't see you in the same light as your elder brother. They believe the feat of creating the divine artifact was mostly his accomplishment, not a joint effort. They're underestimating you."

"You can start by making a contribution so grand that the entire continent will take notice, and the high-ranking nobles of the Forgeheart Kingdom will no longer look down on you. You'll gain more influence, and the royal family will have no choice but to listen to your request."

Duke Valiard clenched his fist tightly, anger bubbling beneath the surface, because what Aldrian said was the truth. While the world praised both him and his brother for their creation of a divine artifact, within the noble circles, most gave the credit to his elder brother alone. His brother had a higher attainment in blacksmithing and had made greater progress on the divine sword. Outside of that, they believed duke Valiard lacked the same abilities.

This belief had always been a thorn in his heart. He held his elder brother in the highest regard and had never resented him, but what he longed for was recognition—not just for his brother's achievements, but for his own efforts as well.

Duke Valiard loosened his fist, exhaling a long breath to calm himself. This young man had read him so clearly—Aldrian's intuition was razor sharp.

"I see what you're suggesting," the duke said. "You want them to listen to my request and allow you to visit the divine sword, don't you? That sounds good, but easier said than done. What kind of contribution could possibly make the royal family and nobles relent and allow me to show you the sword? You said we could bring the entire continent's attention to me... How do we do that?"

Duke Valiard grasped what Aldrian was suggesting, but he still had doubts. Aldrian smiled, his eyes gleaming with certainty.

"By blacksmithing, of course. That's your race specialty."

Duke Valiard frowned, deep in thought. Naturally, blacksmithing was their craft, but to impress the entire Forgeheart Kingdom, it would require something extraordinary. Something rare, on a monumental scale. Then, suddenly, his eyes widened as he realized what Aldrian was implying.

"You don't mean...?"

"Yes, let's create another divine-grade artifact!"

Chapter 123: Preparation to Create a Divine Grade Artifact

Duke Valiard knew the significance of attempting to create a divine-grade artifact again after tens of thousands of years. Even if it was just a low-tier divine artifact, it would be enough to prove to the Forgeheart Kingdom and the entire continent that, despite his brother's absence, he too had something to show those damned nobles.

The highest achievement for a blacksmith on this continent was to successfully forge a divine-grade artifact—whether done alone or in collaboration. If someone could do it alone, their name would be engraved in the history of the continent. There were some ancient blacksmiths whose names were still revered for this accomplishment.

However, in this era, no one could create a divine-grade artifact alone. The strange situation that had persisted across the continent for millions of years remained unexplained by its inhabitants. To forge such an artifact, one needed not only top-tier materials but also a forging technique capable of supporting its creation—specifically, a divine-grade technique.

The materials would have to be the finest available, which were incredibly difficult to obtain. As for the technique, Duke Valiard possessed a divine-level forging technique, though he couldn't yet perform it to its full potential. Even if he had all the required materials and mastered the technique, he would still need an immense amount of Heaven and Earth energy to shape the artifact's intricate patterns. Creating such complex patterns that could sustain a divine-grade artifact was still a daunting task, even for him.

That was why most divine-grade artifacts required more than one person to create, and at least one of them needed to be at the Emperor stage. No one at the King stage had ever created a divine artifact alone. For Aldrian to ask him to forge one while he was 'only' at the King stage, and Aldrian himself at the Earl stage, seemed completely unrealistic—at least for now.

While Duke Valiard wasn't surprised that Aldrian was pointing out the obvious—despite it being impossible at the moment—he still believed that Aldrian would achieve it someday with his immense talent, though not anytime soon. Aldrian's rapid development in blacksmithing was nothing short of outrageous, to the point where he could now be considered on par with, if not a greater blacksmith than himself.

He wasn't sure how long the current status quo with the nobles and himself could hold, but he hoped that time wouldn't come before he managed to create the divine-grade artifact. He also needed to begin preparations for its creation, starting with the design of the artifact he wished to make.

"I know you're thinking that creating a divine-grade artifact isn't something that can be achieved anytime soon. And you're uncertain about what the nobles are planning next. You're just hoping the status quo lasts as long as possible. Am I right?" Aldrian asked.

Duke Valiard was stunned by the young man's ability to read his thoughts, and he nodded.

"Yes, although your suggestion makes sense, it's still far from realistic for me to create a divine-grade artifact at this moment. If I want to craft one, I need to start by designing the artifact, gathering the resources, and your help—well if you're willing to help. But you're still at the Earl stage, and what I need is an Emperor-stage cultivator who can channel enough energy to create the divine-grade patterns. And that's not even mentioning the need to master a divine forging technique. There's just so much that needs to be prepared."

Aldrian nodded, understanding the complexity of the task, but his mind straightforward in confronting the problem.

"Then please teach me the divine technique for forging—your secret technique, the 'Heaven's Hammer of Creation.' With me comprehending this divine technique, it will fulfill one of the requirements. As for the material, you can use the Divine Iron. Believe me, this is the best material for crafting a divine-grade artifact. And, though it may sound arrogant, I have an enormous energy reserve within me—perhaps enough to make not just one divine-grade artifact. We can even work on the pattern together, you already know about my talent in that area, right?" Aldrian added.

If Duke Valiard had heard such remarks from Aldrian a few weeks ago, he would have kicked him out for his arrogance and absurdity. But now? He found himself thinking twice instead of dismissing Aldrian outright.

"Duke Valiard, you only need to believe in yourself. I'll do my part, but ultimately, your effort is the center of all this. In the end, it's your battle, not mine. I'm just a passerby," Aldrian said, his steady gaze locking with the duke's.

"Could he actually create another miracle?" Duke Valiard wondered. "If we manage to create a divine-grade artifact in such a short time, it would set a new record in blacksmithing history. The youngest, the fastest, the most brilliant blacksmith who went from a novice to creating a divine artifact in just months... Well, it's better than doing nothing."

"Alright, let's give it a try. It's better than standing still, even though I still have doubts about myself. I'll put my faith in your talent," Valiard finally agreed.

Aldrian smiled at the duke's response. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's get started."

After that, they set aside the actual forging for a while. Aldrian focused on comprehending and mastering the secret technique, while Duke Valiard began designing the artifact they intended to create—a sword. To Valiard's shock, it didn't take long for Aldrian to fully comprehend the technique.

Duke Valiard decided to test Aldrian's comprehension of the secret technique, and the results left him baffled. Aldrian's mastery was far more advanced and intricate than his own, leaving him questioning why he had struggled so much with cultivation. Why had he suffered all this time when someone like Aldrian made it seem effortless?

For Aldrian, it was as easy as drinking water. To him, the Heavenly Demon's Scripture was far more complex, although incomparable since it was a different type of technique altogether. Reflecting on the Heavenly Demon's Scripture, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

"The Heavenly Demon's Scripture must be at least a divine-grade technique. The fact that I can comprehend all of these divine-grade techniques so easily must be tied to my past. The usual stories of divine-grade techniques being nearly impossible to comprehend clearly don't apply to me. Although, Baek Ji-Min and Kang Yong-Jin can also comprehend parts of the Heavenly Demon's Scripture. It feels like there's a missing link about why most divine-grade techniques are so difficult to comprehend on this continent, making them the stuff of legends."

He also knew others like Xin Haotian who seemed to have mastered divine-grade techniques, but he set that aside for now. His focus remained on blacksmithing. Aldrian continued practicing the forging technique, the 'Heaven's Hammer of Creation,' and successfully created several artifacts using it. The results were truly satisfying, although he hadn't yet forged a divine-grade artifact. He could feel he was just a few steps away from being able to create one on his own. He only needed an epiphany on how to take that final step, and he knew Duke Valiard's help would be crucial.

After five months inside the workshop, with Aldrian and Duke Valiard working tirelessly together, they finally completed the blueprint for a divine-grade sword. Duke Valiard's experience from creating divine-grade artifacts with his brother had been invaluable in this process. Meanwhile, Aldrian had gained a wealth of new knowledge from the experience, and he now had a much clearer understanding of how a divine-grade artifact was created.

The primary material for the sword was decided: Divine Iron, supplemented with a small mixture of Solar Illumination Steel—a rare material found only on Solar Peak Mountain, deep within the Buddhist sect's territory. Fortunately, Duke Valiard had a small supply of

this precious metal stored in his treasure vault. After months of research on Divine Iron, with Aldrian's help, Valiard was astounded by its profound nature and unparalleled sturdiness.

"It's incredible that such a material exists! Young master, you're truly fortunate to have something like this. I'm not entirely sure what level this material reaches, but I'm confident we can create a divine-grade artifact with it. This is also my first time seeing a material that connects with a cultivator, making it controllable only by you," Duke Valiard remarked, still amazed.

The Divine Iron was so dense and heavy that Valiard couldn't lift it, even with all his strength, despite it being only 10% of the total Divine Rock. It was also impossibly hard—resistant to any attempts to work with it. Yet, under Aldrian's control, the Divine Iron became as light as a feather and as soft as a pillow. Valiard couldn't grasp the principle behind it, but it helped him better understand the unique properties of this extraordinary material. In the end, they decided to use just 5% of it to forge the sword.

Finally, after all their preparations were complete, the day arrived when they were ready to begin forging the divine-grade sword!

Chapter 124: Eternal Spirit

Aldrian manipulated the divine iron, making it much softer but still hard enough for tempering. He didn't want to make it too soft for fear of damaging the divine iron when hammering it. First, he and Duke Valiard separated the true divine iron from the rock covering it. During this phase, they also extracted the impure elements from the divine iron.

After a long time, they finally separated the entire divine iron from the impurities. What they saw was a mesmerizing, pure, shiny obsidian material that emitted various natural laws. Cultivating near it would greatly enhance a cultivator's comprehension, tempting even Duke Valiard to cultivate on the spot.

He then instantly placed the Divine Iron into the furnace, and this time, Aldrian infused his energy into the blue earth flame to increase the heat. Even with the current heat of the earth flame, it was impossible to heat the Divine Iron, which astonished Duke Valiard, who had first discovered this in his research. The blue earth flame was the second strongest, surpassed only by the sky flame on this continent. To think that it couldn't even heat the Divine Iron left him in shocked at that time.

Duke Valiard was also impressed by Aldrian's golden energy, which could enhance the blue earth flame many times over. With Aldrian's control over fire laws and the divine iron, they soon saw the iron begin to glow red, showing signs of melting. At this point, they quickly added Solar Illumination steel to mix with the divine iron. This marked the beginning of the divine forging technique 'Heaven's Hammer of Creation.'

Together, Aldrian and Duke Valiard carefully adjusted the mixture, ensuring that the Solar Illumination steel complemented the divine iron rather than being devoured by it. Their goal was to merge the materials into a new steel rod, which they could later forge into a sword. They picked up the Heaven-grade hammer and slowly began hammering the mixture, which had become soft enough to hammer.

The *Heaven's Hammer of Creation* technique teaches how to combine different materials to create a new mixture of steel, while also balancing their properties. Due to Aldrian's higher mastery and comprehension of the technique, Duke Valiard assisted him in this phase. They carefully hammered the two materials, which had already fused in the furnace. Though they were exposed to the intense heat, they ignored it.

To conserve energy, Duke Valiard focused entirely on the hammering, neglecting to protect his body, which was now drenched in sweat. Aldrian, meanwhile, was also shirtless, his muscles exposed, but unlike Duke Valiard, his sweat came from exertion, not the heat. It seemed as if the heat itself avoided him—this was because he didn't bother conserving energy and kept himself shielded the entire time.

They continued hammering until the steel completely melted, achieving the desired result. Then, they poured the molten steel into a long mold and quenched it with a special oil. They needed to use a large quantity of oil to harden the new steel. This marked the final step in creating the new mixture of material—a fusion of Divine Iron and Solar Illumination Steel, now ready for tempering.

Duke Valiard chose Solar Illumination Steel after conducting research on Divine Iron with Aldrian's help. He discovered that the Divine Iron possessed a devouring energy property, capable of consuming energy in vast quantities—something that could be too dangerous if left uncontrolled once forged into an artifact. His hypothesis was that each time a cultivator used the artifact, their energy would be drained rapidly, leaving them vulnerable in prolonged battles.

Through his experiments, Duke Valiard decided to use Solar Illumination Steel, known for its energy-blocking properties, to counterbalance the devouring nature of Divine Iron. While the effect wouldn't be absolute, given the overwhelming strength of Divine Iron, he was confident that with Aldrian's help, the combination would be successful.

They placed the newly forged steel into the forge to heat it further. After a long while, the steel turned red-hot and was ready to be hammered. Aldrian swiftly picked it up with a pair of tongs and placed it on the anvil. Without hesitation, Duke Valiard began hammering.

Clang, clang.

The sound of hammer meeting steel echoed through the workshop. Duke Valiard's expression was focused, his eyes never leaving the steel.

"When was the last time I had this kind of spirit while crafting an artifact? Was it when I created a divine-grade shield with my brother? Or when I forged my first artifact as a young man?"

Clang, clang.

"Ever since I became a duke, it feels like I've lost the joy of crafting. Politics and intrigue have made me forget what once ignited my passion."

Clang, clang.

"The passion I once had. I've always been in my brother's shadow. Those nobles never sees my achievements, even when I succeed."

Clang, clang.

"I can be like him. I have the same potential. I'll show them. I'll rise, just like my brother."

Clang, clang.

After an unknown amount of time, Duke Valiard felt it was enough and signaled Aldrian to place the steel back into the forge to repeat the process. They continued hammering and reheating the steel, repeating the cycle until the blade took shape—a double-edged sword. Throughout the process, they also implemented the *Heaven's Hammer of Creation* technique, maintaining a constant, rapid hammering pace with increasing force, as the technique demanded.

Finally, they reached the stage of creating the sword's pattern. This was the trickiest part—any mistake would force them to start over, wasting both time and materials. Since they didn't have the luxury of fresh materials, they had to get it right on the first attempt.

Duke Valiard took on this task, with Aldrian supporting him and also learning the intricate art of creating a pattern for a divine-grade artifact. Despite his experience, Duke Valiard felt nervous, it had been a long time since he last did this, and the pattern for each artifact was unique, determined by his proficiency and comprehension. He hoped that the pattern he had been preparing for months would succeed in creating a divine-grade sword.

Pushing aside his hesitation, Duke Valiard etched the first line of the pattern. He hadn't felt this focused in years. Sweat poured down his face, and his eyes locked onto the blade like a hawk tracking its prey.

They didn't know how much time had passed, but the workshop remained silent as they worked on the sword.

"I can do this. I will do this,"

Duke Valiard thought, mentally encouraging himself.

"I'll have my name engraved alongside my brother's. I'll step out of his shadow!"

The pattern was nearly complete, just one step away from being finished. But as the final lines connected, the blade began to tremble. Duke Valiard froze, then watched in horror as the pattern started to crack.

"No! The pattern isn't strong enough to hold the energy flow," he thought in despair as the cracks spread. He was stunned—where had he gone wrong? He had tested the pattern on lower-level materials, and it had worked perfectly. Why was it failing now?

Just as the pattern began to shatter, Valiard noticed Aldrian intensifying his energy flow into the blade. Confused and alarmed, Valiard wondered why Aldrian was doing this. Wouldn't more energy just make the pattern break faster, rendering the steel useless?

Duke Valiard suddenly noticed something about the pattern. Though parts of the lines had shattered, the entire pattern wasn't ruined. In fact, the pattern was becoming clearer and smoother. Astonished, he looked at Aldrian.

"Your pattern was already good," Aldrian sent through a soul transmission, *"but due to the properties of the Divine Iron and Solar Illumination Steel, some of the lines made the pattern inefficient and fragile when I infused it with energy. I'm using my energy now to remove the unnecessary lines that would have lowered the sword's grade."*

Understanding the issue, Duke Valiard refocused on the pattern, learning from his mistake. After a while, the pattern, which had been on the verge of crumbling, began to stabilize. Though some shattered lines remained, they no longer affected the overall integrity of the pattern and could be cleaned up later.

Once the pattern was complete, they dipped the blade into the special oil from the Diamond Abyss, leaving it to cool while they crafted the hilt and other accessories. Before long, they finished and lifted the blade to attach the final components.

When the sword was complete, they stepped outside the workshop and stood on a vast field nearby. Xin Haotian, who happened to be nearby, noticed Aldrian and Duke Valiard came out from the workshop and observed them with curiosity.

"After six months, they're finally out. But what is that sword? I can sense it's at the peak Heaven grade, already in its limit. Oh! Is that the divine-grade sword they tried to create that he mentioned?" Xin Haotian thought, watching with wonder.

Duke Valiard gazed at the sword before turning to Aldrian. "A divine-grade artifact should have a name worthy of its pride. We need to name it first, and then you must

inject your energy to its maximum capacity to complete the process. The energy required can be tremendous. Even I don't have enough energy for this, so that task falls to you. If we succeed, a Heavenly Tribulation will come to baptize this sword. If we fail, the heavens will deem this artifact unworthy, and no tribulation will occur."

Aldrian nodded. "Do you want to name it? It's mostly your effort, so it's only appropriate that you name it."

Duke Valiard thought for a moment before speaking. "Since this sword symbolizes our effort and proves that we have the ability to create a divine sword, to show that I won't be underestimated. I'll name it 'Eternal Spirit.'"

"'Eternal Spirit'? That's a fitting name. Then from now on, it will be called 'Eternal Spirit,'" Aldrian replied.

With that, he began to inject his energy to its maximum. A gust of wind whipped through the area, and golden energy radiated from his body. He continued for several minutes until he suddenly felt a shift in the sky. In that moment, he knew they had succeeded!

Chapter 125: The King's Dilemma

The sun was still high in the sky as the denizens of Valiard City went about their daily activities, expecting today to be no different from the yesterday. But suddenly, the appearance of a mass of black clouds in the sky shattered that routine, drawing everyone's gaze to the sky. The black clouds rapidly expanded covering the entire city, and the once bright sunlight was blocked, casting an eerie and gloomy atmosphere over the city.

The ominous scene grew worse as the clouds began to pulse with strands of lightning, accompanied by a sudden pressure that blanketed the city. A terrifying aura swept through the air, and everyone could feel its weight pressing down on them. It didn't take long for the people to realize what this phenomenon was.

"Heavenly Tribulation!" someone muttered in disbelief.

Inside a luxurious grand palace filled with numerous artifacts, there is a huge throne hall. The throne hall itself appears remarkable, resembling a typical throne room found in empires across the continent. At the center of the room sits a dwarf with a dignified aura, his fierce expression commanding attention. His regal royal clothes, themselves an artifact, exude an aura that makes the hearts of the surrounding dwarves tremble.

His short stature is contrasted by his large muscles, which reflect the experience he has gained with the craft his race is most proficient in: blacksmithing. Now, the red-haired and bearded dwarf listens to a report from one of his subjects. As the king of the

Forgeheart Kingdom, Douwin Forgeheart is a dwarf full of charisma. Despite the fierce expression on his face, everyone knows him to be a compassionate ruler.

At this moment, his expression is pensive as he considers the report just delivered by one of his subjects.

"What is he doing? He's spent the last six months with a group of humans. This is the first time I've heard of him acting like this. What is he planning?" the king thought.

As he pondered, a dwarf entered the hall and bowed before speaking.

"Your Majesty, Duke Badin, Duke Calas and Duke Lorf wishes to see you."

King Douwin raised his head and sighed.

"Let them in," he said.

Shortly afterward, three dwarves entered the throne hall. The tallest of them, by dwarven standards, stood in the center. When they reached in front of the king, they bowed their heads.

"At ease," the king waved his hand. "It's unusual for Duke Badin, Duke Calas, and Duke Lorf to visit the capital at this time. What brings you here?" King Douwin asked.

After raising their heads, Duke Badin, the dwarf in the middle, answered the king.

"We happened to be passing near the capital, so we decided to visit Your Majesty to pay our respects."

"What a load of nonsense. All three of you just happened to pass by the capital at the same time?" King Douwin thought.

"I appreciate your respect, shown by your willingness to visit despite your busy schedules. But I know you have something on your minds, so go ahead and tell me," the king said, addressing Duke Badin.

"Your Majesty is as sharp as ever. We admit that we have more than just respect to offer. Along with paying our respects, I've received a report from our sources that Duke Valiard is working on something with a group of humans of unknown origin, and it involves creating an artifact," Duke Badin said.

"Duke Valiard hasn't left his mansion, always with one of the humans. They've spent all their time inside his private workshop. With the amount of time they've been locked away, we suspect something is brewing behind Your Majesty's back," added the duke standing to Badin's right. He was younger than Duke Badin but had reached the Low

King stage in cultivation, showing that he wasn't far behind the other dukes. This was Duke Calas.

"With the disappearance of Mardred Valiard, we must investigate every tiny clue about his possible whereabouts. After receiving some signs from Duke Valiard's mansion, we suspect they're creating an artifact that might surpass the Heaven grade. With the blueprint's location still unknown, we must ensure what Duke Valiard is truly up to," said the last of the group. This dwarf, with black hair and sharp eyes, was Duke Lorf.

King Douwin felt a headache coming on as he listened to their reasoning, already sensing their true intent. Limiting Duke Valiard's freedom to act was, in essence, restricting his ability to make a great contribution to the kingdom. King Douwin knew that these three dukes were the most influential nobles in the kingdom, besides Duke Valiard.

Though the three dukes do not belong to the same faction, they share a tacit understanding when it comes to suppressing Duke Valiard and the Valiard family. Ever since the rise of Mardred Valiard, the influence of the other ducal families has steadily declined. With Mardred's sudden disappearance, it's understandable that they would now try to persuade the king to limit—or even suppress—the Valiard family's power.

These dukes, like many nobles, are experts in using 'legal' means to check the power and influence of other factions or competitors. King Douwin is well aware of this, but his hands are tied. Under each of these three dukes are numerous lesser nobles loyal to their respective factions, all of which oppose the Valiard family's growing influence.

The Valiard family certainly gained tremendous influence after the rise of Mardred Valiard and the Valiard brothers' ability to create divine artifacts, but they still cannot simply ignore the influence of the other ducal families. This is why, even though King Douwin understands their intentions, he feels frustrated. He has to be cautious in how he handles the situation, sometimes even having to act according to their plans.

The king is wary of causing instability in his kingdom by appearing too openly opposed to these powerful nobles, which forces him into a more passive stance on the matter. The only way to silence the opposition and make the dukes accept the Valiard family's superiority would be for Duke Valiard himself to make a significant contribution to the kingdom.

King Douwin doesn't care how Duke Valiard achieves this, though it would be ideal if he could create another divine-grade artifact, as that would prove he is not inferior to his elder brother. To be honest, however, the king believes that the creation of the last divine artifact that now in his possession was primarily due to Mardred Valiard's tremendous efforts, which is not entirely wrong.

Duke Valiard has long been overshadowed by his brother's brilliance, with little he could do to change that. The sudden disappearance of Mardred, along with the blueprint,

shook him deeply, leaving him to lament the loss of such a genius. However, even now, he refuses to believe that his best friend was a traitor. He knows Mardred's integrity too well and finds it hard to believe that Mardred would have taken the blueprint to sell to other powers.

"There must be something I don't know—something that made Mardred take the blueprint and disappear,"

the king had thought at the time.

But the king's belief in Mardred's innocence is not shared by others. The moment Mardred disappeared with the blueprint, those looking to take advantage of the situation saw an opportunity to bring down the Valiard family. They didn't care about the reasons behind Mardred's disappearance, they quickly branded him a traitor who had stolen their kingdom's secret. But they couldn't reveal the truth to the outside world, as it involved their closely guarded secrets, so they simply claimed that Mardred was in seclusion.

King Douwin felt exhausted by all the political maneuvering, but facing the three dukes, he knew he had no choice but to address the situation. He spoke:

"So, you want me to order an investigation into the humans and what Duke Valiard has been doing all this time?"

"We wouldn't dare ask anything of Your Majesty," Duke Badin responded, bowing slightly. "We are simply concerned that the appearance of these humans might be connected to the 'Divine Sword' blueprint. We only wish to ensure that there is no connection. Duke Valiard's activities with those humans seem suspicious, and we hope Your Majesty can ease our worries as loyal subjects."

King Douwin silently cursed the sly old fox for his roundabout way of speaking. He desperately wanted to put an end to this charade and set things right according to his own will.

"At times like this, I wish I had the power to suppress these bastards and rule the kingdom on my own," King Douwin thought. But in the end, he knew he had to act.

"If you believe something is wrong with them, then—"

Creak

Before the king could finish his sentence, a soldier rushed in, dropping to his knees as soon as he reached the king. All the dwarves in the room were momentarily confused by the sudden interruption, but their curiosity didn't last long.

"Your Majesty, urgent news!"

"Speak."

"The Valiard Dukedom—there's a Heavenly Tribulation forming in the sky above Valiard City!"

Meanwhile, Aldrian and Duke Valiard had already distanced themselves from the sword as the pressure of the Heavenly Tribulation's clouds weighed heavily on the entire city. They stood watching as the clouds began to churn, creating countless strands of lightning, the thunderclaps also grew louder.

Aldrian looked up at the center of the swirling black clouds and, strangely, felt as if he could reach out and touch them without getting hurt. It was an odd sensation, almost instinctual, like the Heavenly Tribulation wasn't harmful—at least to him. If anyone knew what Aldrian was thinking, they'd probably strangle him to death for daring to believe that the Heavenly Tribulation wasn't dangerous.

"It's coming," Duke Valiard said solemnly.

BOOM!

Chapter 126: The Heavenly Tribulation for the Divine Grade Artifact

BOOM!

The loud crash of thunder marked the beginning of the Heavenly Tribulation. A giant white lightning bolt struck with such immense power that it sent chills down the spines of any bystanders. Aldrian, too, was stunned—this strike could fatally wound even a low-level Emperor stage cultivator! He hadn't expected it to be this powerful.

"It's no wonder people fear the Heavenly Tribulation," Aldrian thought. "But to think that creating a Divine-grade artifact would require withstanding lightning as powerful as an Emperor stage cultivator's strike... It seems the universe balances itself this way. The strength of the lightning is likely because the creator is at the King stage. The heavens take the creator's cultivation into account and send a tribulation a few minor realms stronger than the creator."

Despite the terrifying power of the lightning and the oppressive aura of the tribulation, Aldrian felt a strange connection to it. He didn't sense the danger others would feel. In fact, he could almost 'communicate' with it. It was a strange feeling, like...

"It's like I'm connected to something from my past," he mused, as the second strike came down, stronger than the first. This time, it was powerful enough to cripple a Low Emperor stage cultivator.

"Eternal Spirit will have to withstand seven strikes of the Heavenly Tribulation," Duke Valiard said, standing beside Aldrian. "Each strike will grow stronger than the last. If Eternal Spirit can survive this, it will truly become a divine grade sword and gain sentience."

"I just hope Eternal Spirit can pass this trial," Valiard added grimly. "If not, there will be nothing left of it."

To create a divine-grade artifact requires passing through many steps and phases. Even when a blacksmith completes their creation, it doesn't guarantee success. Once the Heavenly Tribulation begins, there's no turning back—either the artifact ascends to the divine grade, or it's reduced to ashes.

This arduous process is fitting, given the power of a divine artifact, making the struggle worthwhile. It's no wonder that the legacy artifacts of major families or sects are often divine grade, serving as symbols of fortune and prestige for their factions.

The sound of the third strike reverberated through the entire city, terrifying the inhabitants. By now, many had already fled to the outskirts. They didn't know what kind of tribulation this was, nor did they care—the oppressive aura of the Heavenly Tribulation wasn't something they could endure calmly.

"Is someone breaking through to the Emperor stage?"

"Damn it! Why wasn't there any announcement?!"

"Fuck! That scared the shit out of me! Whoever triggered this tribulation is a real asshole for doing it inside the city."

The voices of those who had escaped echoed, their faces still filled with horror as they stared at the tribulation cloud. Heavenly Tribulations were rare occurrences, far too significant to go unnoticed. People usually knew when a tribulation was about to be triggered, unless the cultivator chose a secluded area far from any population. Even then, the signs of the tribulation would still draw attention.

The size of the tribulation varied, depending on how the Heavens judged the worth of the one taking it. The tribulation for Eternal Spirit was enormous, with dark clouds stretching across the entire city, covering an area of over 83,000 square kilometers, even extending beyond the city limits.

The fourth strike landed with a deafening crash, the sound of thunder rumbling in everyone's ears. The lightning grew brighter with each strike, while the aura and pressure continued to intensify.

By this time, Eleine, Sylphia, and Baek Ji-Min had already stepped out of their rooms, gazing up at the sky. They struggled to withstand the overwhelming pressure of the

tribulation, their hearts trembling with fear. Although they had each witnessed a Heavenly Tribulation at least once in their lives, its sheer power and terrifying aura were impossible to ignore.

"I've seen a Heavenly Tribulation when one of the Rivas family elders broke through to the Emperor stage, but this one is far greater in size," Eleine thought as she observed the clouds gathering for the fifth strike. She fought to maintain her stance, knowing that the duke's mansion, being closest to the epicenter, bore the brunt of the pressure.

All cultivators below the Viscount stage inside the mansion had already passed out. Fortunately, there were no mortals without cultivation present, otherwise, they would have died, unable to withstand the immense pressure of the tribulation.

Aldrian and Duke Valiard stood intently watching the sword as the fifth strike descended, creating a loud boom and cracking the floor beneath it. The sword still held strong, like a champion without any sign of damage. However, Duke Valiard remained tense, anxiously hoping for success. Aldrian, on the other hand, appeared calm, showing no sign of worry.

"This sword is forged from Divine Iron, the same material used to create God's artifacts. A tribulation like this isn't enough to destroy it," Aldrian thought. "It would need a much stronger Heavenly Tribulation, one capable of threatening cultivators above the Emperor stage, I suppose."

As for how strong exactly? He wasn't sure. But his visions and experiences had given him glimpses of powers far beyond the Emperor stage—beings who could affect reality itself, even if they were just figments inside his mindscape.

In his mind, Aldrian already considered Eternal Spirit to be a Divine-grade artifact. However, something else occupied his thoughts. As the sixth strike prepared to unleash its power, he focused his senses on the sword. Since the Heavenly Tribulation was triggered within his domain, he could feel the heavenly lightning with greater clarity.

"I can't shake this feeling," he thought. *"Every time the lightning strikes, I sense a connection to my past, but it's too vague. Could it be that I've faced many Heavenly Tribulations like this before, enough to form a kind of special karmic link with the heavens?"*

The idea seemed absurd—having a special connection to the Heavens—but it lingered in his mind. He almost wanted to facepalm at the sheer confusion of it all. His past identities felt overwhelmingly complicated, as if he couldn't fully comprehend who he was. His golden energy, his domain abilities, the Spirits—especially the king of the forest spirits, Dahan—the Heavenly Demon and his wife, and now the Heavenly Tribulation itself, all felt like parts of an interconnected web, tied directly to him.

Aldrian touched his head with one hand, as if trying to recall something elusive, but it vanished in an instant. Refocusing on the Heavenly Tribulation, he saw the black clouds gathering for the final strike. He could sense its deadly power—strong enough to fatally wound a middle Emperor stage cultivator!

BOOM!

A blinding light accompanied the strike, hitting the sword with its full might. The ground trembled, and the deafening sound was like the end of the world, spreading terror throughout the entire city. Duke Valiard, shielding his eyes from the brilliant flash, lowered his hand to look at the sword—and what he saw brought tears to his eyes.

"We did it!" he exclaimed. The sword remained intact, and its aura had grown even stronger. The surrounding energy was being drawn into the sword, further enhancing its power. The black clouds above fell silent for a moment before slowly beginning to dissipate. Aldrian observed the changes in Eternal Spirit before turning his gaze to the sky, watching as the dark clouds dispersed.

The sunlight began piercing through the gaps left by the dissipating dark clouds, and the heavy aura and pressure of the Heavenly Tribulation started to fade. Everyone around finally let out a collective sigh of relief.

Aldrian, still watching the remnants of the tribulation vanish, felt a strange emptiness, as if something important had just slipped away. When the last of the dark clouds disappeared and the sky returned to its normal state, it was as if nothing had ever happened. Aldrian sighed, perplexed by this odd sense of loss, before turning his attention back to Eternal Spirit.

The sword continued absorbing the immense energy around it, creating a visible vortex in the air. Its aura kept growing stronger, and Aldrian could sense that it had successfully ascended to a Low Divine-grade sword. However, it didn't stop there—the sword kept drawing in energy, like an insatiable abyss, its power intensifying with no signs of stopping.

Duke Valiard stood nearby, stunned by the unexpected development. He knew they had succeeded in creating a Divine-grade artifact, and that Eternal Spirit had reached Low Divine grade. But the fact that it continued to absorb energy, growing stronger with every passing moment? That was beyond anything he had anticipated.

"The level isn't stopping... Could it actually reach Middle Divine-grade?" Duke Valiard thought in disbelief.

It was natural for him to be shocked. He had designed the sword's blueprint based on his knowledge and experience, which was geared toward crafting a Low Divine-grade artifact. If Eternal Spirit could somehow ascend to Middle Divine-grade, the possibilities were beyond his comprehension.

Duke Valiard's gaze shifted to Aldrian, who stood there, his expression calm and unchanged, as if this unexpected outcome was nothing out of the ordinary.

"What the hell did he do?" Duke Valiard thought.

Chapter 127: Eternal Spirit's Preference

The Eternal Spirit's aura continued to rise, and Aldrian already sensed that the sword's aura had surpassed that of his Earth Shattering Bow. The energy absorption only gradually slowed when it reached the middle Divine grade, and it steadily reduced until it finally stopped, leaving behind the lingering aura of a Divine-grade artifact.

Aldrian and Duke Valiard rushed over to examine the sword. Duke Valiard's eyes trembled; he had finally succeeded in creating another Divine-grade artifact, this time without the help of his elder brother. He had tried to craft another artifact of this grade with his brother in the past, but those attempts had failed.

He still couldn't believe that the creation in front of him was his own, with the assistance of a young Earl-stage man whose true identity remained unknown—only his name and a vague connection to Aldrey Flamecrest were known. Duke Valiard then touched the sword and picked it up, but it trembled slightly at his touch.

"The sword has gained sentience," Duke Valiard said. "It's a newborn sentience that may only act on instinct for now, but in time, it will develop its own personality, like that of an adult human."

The Eternal Spirit continued to tremble, then suddenly slipped from Duke Valiard's grasp and flew toward Aldrian, who was stunned. The sword then dropped itself at Aldrian's feet and remained still. Aldrian was confused, and when he tried to move away from the sword, it followed him, dropping in front of him each time he shifted position. Finally, he realized something.

"It's like a cat that's found its chosen owner!" he thought.

Duke Valiard glanced at the sword, then at Aldrian, who had an awkward smile on his face.

"I didn't do anything," Aldrian said, but Duke Valiard just smiled, amused by Aldrian's expression.

"It seems the sword's instinct is drawn to you, young master. It's more attracted to you," Duke Valiard said. Though he was the one who designed the sword, and much of the research was his, he was simply glad to have successfully created this divine artifact. His pride and confidence were soaring, and he would gladly let his creation choose its preferred owner.

"Or you could just consider it your new sword. I'd be happy to give it to you for free."

Aldrian was stunned, but he shook his head. "No, Duke Valiard, this is the result of your great effort. I don't feel right taking it without paying anything."

"You've already paid me, young master. This is my second time creating a Divine-grade artifact, and with this achievement, I can reach even greater heights. You also helped me realize what I've been lacking all this time," Duke Valiard replied. "So please, accept this sword as a gift from me."

Aldrian was moved by Duke Valiard's words. Not wanting to reject the duke's good intentions too strongly, as it would be rude, he picked up the sword. It trembled for a moment before calming down. He stroked the blade and could feel the immense power it held. The Divine Iron would double the wielder's strength, and with its middle Divine grade, Aldrian could only imagine what would happen if he unleashed the Slash of the End using this sword at full power. But he shook his head.

"There's no one on this continent worthy of my full strike," Aldrian thought. "With the peak Emperor stage as the limit here, I doubt I'll ever need to use my full power. Unless, of course, some unforeseeable situation arises where cultivators beyond the Emperor stage appear. Then, maybe, I could test my limits."

Based on his calculations and experiences, there was no need for him to use his full domain's power with this Divine-grade sword. Even a peak Emperor-stage cultivator would have to avoid him if he only used the power of one major domain, such as the Ivory Empire's domain.

He could also feel the sword's mood—it felt happy in his grasp. Aldrian wondered if this was because of the energy he contributed, which had caused it to recognize him. He smiled at the sword, now acting like a pet that had found its owner. He then picked up the sheath, secured the sword in it, and attached it to his waist. Although Aldrian hadn't built the same direct connection with this sword as he had with the Earth Shattering Bow yet, he could already tell that the sword was content, as if it knew it was in its rightful place.

Aldrian then noticed Xin Haotian standing beside him, having approached him since earlier. Xin Haotian gazed solemnly at the sword before turning his eyes to Aldrian.

"You're truly lucky," Xin Haotian said through voice transmission. "This sword is on the same level as my Illumination Sword, but I can sense something more profound about it. The power it holds is immense, even from here. What's it made from?"

"Something I got from the Yu family in Dual Peak Horns City," Aldrian replied. "Anyway, I never told you the details story of how Duke Valiard and I created this Divine-grade sword. But it seems we'll have to stay in this kingdom for a while. We've uncovered a major clue—most likely the key to the devils' plan."

Xin Haotian was momentarily stunned, but then he nodded. *"Tell me later."*

They both turned to see three ladies approaching. From the looks on their faces, Aldrian could already guess what they had experienced, but their gazes quickly fell on the Eternal Spirit. The aura of the middle Divine grade was impossible to ignore.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, ladies, but this had to be done," Aldrian said, tapping the Eternal Spirit twice. The three women exchanged understanding looks. They had never witnessed the creation of a Divine-grade artifact before, so the Eternal Spirit was a revelation to them. The tribulation it underwent was no weaker and even stronger than some Heavenly Tribulations for Emperor-stage breakthroughs.

"With all that commotion, this place will likely become busy. Many people will flock here. Do we want to stay?" Eleine asked.

"Yes, we have a development here that I need to confirm. We'll have to stay for a while," Aldrian replied, before turning to Duke Valiard. "Excuse me, Duke Valiard, but can we move somewhere more private? I need to speak with my people."

"Of course, young master. It's also a good time for you to rest after all this time."

"You should rest as well, Duke Valiard." They made their way back to the mansion, but as they walked, Xin Haotian eyed Aldrian intently before speaking.

"You really are a monster. What kind of cultivation technique do you use? It's only been a year since your last breakthrough, and you've already broken through another minor realm to reach the High Earl stage. Why does it feel like your cultivation speed is increasing?"

The three ladies trembled when they heard Xin Haotian's words and immediately turned to Aldrian. They hadn't paid much attention to his cultivation, but now that they sensed his level, their hearts skipped a beat. Aldrian had reached the High Earl stage—his cultivation speed was nothing short of insane, almost as if he were cheating. They had never seen him go into seclusion to cultivate, and his time seemed to be filled with sessions of comprehension instead.

It was true that comprehension could aid cultivation, but could it accelerate progress by this much? No. His secret cultivation technique intrigued them deeply. Aldrian hadn't switched to the Heavenly Demon's cultivation method, even after comprehending the Heavenly Demon's Scripture, which only reinforced their belief that his own technique was more powerful.

To believe his cultivation technique was superior to the Heavenly Demon's? What kind of cultivation technique was Aldrian using? Eleine remained silent, for she was the only one here who truly understood just how special her young master was from birth. All the strange occurrences before and after his birth were proof of his uniqueness.

There was no secret cultivation technique that she knew of, as Aldrian had spent all of his time in the secret realm before coming outside. She was aware that his father had taught him, but it seemed his cultivation technique was different from that of the Flamecrest or Rivas families. Even she didn't fully understand the depths of her young master's abilities and secrets.

Aldrian simply smiled.

"Who knows?" he replied, offering no further explanation.

Meanwhile, the Heavenly Tribulation that had shaken the entire city of Valiard quickly spread to the surrounding cities. Many were questioning what kind of tribulation had occurred in Valiard. Had someone broken through to the Emperor stage? Or was it something else entirely? Rumors also began to circulate that a new Divine-grade artifact had been born in Duke Valiard's mansion, but after several hours, no news had emerged to confirm it.

Speculation ran wild, and many people began to flock to the duke's mansion, eager to seek information. If a new Divine-grade artifact had indeed been created, who was the blacksmith behind it? Mardred Valiard, the elder brother of Duke Badin Valiard, was said to be in seclusion in the capital. So, if Duke Valiard had attempted to create another Divine-grade artifact, who had partnered with him?

There were many questions, but the duke had locked himself inside his mansion and was not receiving any visitors. Amidst the chaos in the city and the gathering crowds around the mansion, a group of dwarves dressed in formal attire emerged from the teleportation portal in Valiard City.

When the people saw the group's attire, they were shocked.

"An envoy from the royal family!"

Chapter 128: The Steward of the King

The envoy, consisting of a dozen royal guards and a dwarf at the forefront dressed in royal attire, made their way from the teleportation station to Duke Valiard's mansion. Along the route, the people respectfully cleared a path for them until they finally reached the mansion. Upon their arrival, Duke Valiard greeted them with a warm smile, as if he had been expecting their visit and was merely awaiting the appointed time.

Duke Valiard led them to the guest room, where he and the leader of the royal envoy could have a private conversation.

"What a surprise, Sir Steward, for you to come all the way from the capital. Is there something I can assist you with?" Duke Valiard asked with a smile.

"Duke Valiard, I believe you already understand the reason for our visit. It concerns the recent Heavenly Tribulation that appeared in the skies above Valiard City. Many people are uneasy, and there are numerous rumors and pieces of information we cannot verify. I've been appointed by His Majesty to seek clarification regarding this event," the steward explained.

Duke Valiard nodded. "I see. I apologize for the disturbance, but it was related to my recent activities. The Heavenly Tribulation was an unavoidable consequence."

"So the Heavenly Tribulation occurred because of something you did? May I ask what exactly caused it?" the steward inquired.

"As the steward surely knows, a Heavenly Tribulation is only triggered by something extraordinary, something like breakthrough to emperor stage, although that's not the only trigger." Duke Valiard replied, to which the steward nodded in agreement.

"Recently, I created an artifact," Duke Valiard said confidently. His steady voice carried an unmistakable sense of pride. The steward suddenly stood up from his seat, clearly startled.

"You created an artifact? Does that mean—" The steward's voice faltered as Duke Valiard nodded.

"Yes, it's a Divine-grade artifact."

The steward trembled, his voice shaky as he asked, "Did you succeed?"

"What do you think, Sir Steward?" Duke Valiard replied with a smile. That was all the confirmation the steward needed—he now knew that another Divine-grade artifact had been born.

"What kind of artifact did you create?" the steward asked.

"A sword," Duke Valiard said calmly.

"Where is it? I want to see it for myself," the steward said, his eyes gleaming with excitement. As a blacksmith himself, his curiosity was piqued, and this also aligned with the king's order for clarification. If Duke Valiard had truly forged another Divine-grade artifact, it would undoubtedly stir the noble circles once again.

"The rise of another genius like Mardred Valiard, his brother," many would surely think like that. The implications for Duke Valiard would be enormous. Since the mysterious disappearance of Mardred, along with the swirling rumors, the Valiard family—

especially Duke Valiard—had been suppressed by the other dukes, leaving him at a political disadvantage.

This suppression had steadily eroded Duke Valiard's influence, causing the Valiard family's gradual decline in recent years. He shared the king's frustration over this, but jealousy and politics were ruthless. However, the creation of another Divine-grade artifact could dramatically shift the dynamics in his favor. Even without his elder brother's presence, Duke Valiard's achievement in creating such a weapon would have immense strategic value.

The public's perception of Duke Valiard would solidify—his name would become etched deeper into their hearts. They would regard him as an irreplaceable figure, a man who had created not one, but two Divine-grade artifacts. All of this within a span of 70,000 years—though it was a long time, the difficulty of such a feat could not be overstated.

All of this is evident in history, where no other Divine-grade artifact has been created in such a span of time. The fact that the same person crafted yet another Divine-grade artifact makes its value even higher.

"To see the sword, I'll need to ask the owner's permission," Duke Valiard said.

The steward froze, as though cold water had been splashed on his head.

"The sword has already chosen its owner? You created it for someone else? Not for yourself? Is this person from outside the kingdom?"

"Yes," Duke Valiard replied calmly.

The steward let out a deep sigh. "It's a shame that such a powerful Divine-grade sword has fallen into the hands of an outsider. But, no matter. If you've truly succeeded in creating a Divine-grade sword, that's all that matters. Still, I would like to see it for myself so I can report accurately to His Majesty."

"Of course. Please wait for a moment. I'll see if I can invite him here," Duke Valiard responded.

"The owner is still here?" the steward asked in surprise.

"Yes," Duke Valiard confirmed before leaving the room. He returned a few minutes later with another person. The steward's gaze fell upon a tall young man, about 180 cm in height, with a handsome face. The young man's black hair was as dark as the night, and his blue eyes gleamed like clear seawater. Although the steward couldn't sense the young man's cultivation level, his instincts warned him that this individual was not to be underestimated.

His gaze then shifted to the sword at the young man's waist—a beautifully crafted weapon. The moment the steward sensed the sword's aura, his body trembled, and he nearly collapsed in shock.

The difficulty of creating a Divine-grade artifact is well-known. Even if someone manages to craft one, it's most likely to be of a low Divine grade. To create something of a higher grade requires not only immense effort but also an extraordinary level of comprehension, rare resources, natural abilities, and even a stroke of luck. And even then, the creation of a low Divine-grade artifact is already a monumental achievement.

In the past million years, the number of artifacts that have reached the middle Divine grade can be counted on one hand. The last successful creation of a middle Divine-grade artifact occurred 160,000 years ago in the Forgeheart Kingdom, and all those involved in its creation have long since been buried, leaving only their glorious names behind.

When the steward sensed the aura of a middle Divine-grade artifact from the sword at this young man's waist, he nearly stumbled from the shock. Could this mean that Duke Valiard had forged a middle Divine-grade artifact in this era? If true, it would not only shake the Forgeheart Kingdom but send shockwaves throughout the entire continent. A blacksmith capable of producing a middle Divine-grade artifact would be an unprecedented revelation!

"It might be wise to steady your breathing, sir. Don't let yourself suffocate," came the voice of the young man. The steward snapped out of his shock, suddenly aware that his breathing had become erratic, and a tightness was building in his chest. He took a deep breath, slowly exhaling to calm himself.

"Sir Steward, as you can see and sense, the sword at his waist is the one I mentioned," Duke Valiard said.

The steward turned to Aldrian, offering a slight bow. "I apologize for my unsightly reaction. May I ask for your name, young master?"

"You may simply call me Aldrian," the young man replied. "I understand that you, Sir Steward, appointed by His Majesty the King, wish to see this sword."

"Yes, young master Aldrian, I'm here to seek clarification regarding the Heavenly Tribulation that suddenly appeared and caused unrest among the citizens. After Duke Valiard explained that it was caused by the creation of a Divine-grade artifact, I wanted to see it for myself as proof. Now, with this sword as evidence, there's no issue, and His Majesty will surely be pleased with the news."

They both sat down on the sofa, but the steward's eyes were constantly drawn to the sword. Aldrian smiled, noticing the eager expression on the steward's face.

"Would you like to touch it, sir?" Aldrian offered, placing the Eternal Spirit sword on the table in front of them.

The steward was momentarily stunned but then nodded, reaching out to touch the sword. The sword trembled for a brief moment before settling down. As his hand made contact, the steward felt it—a surge of hidden power emanating from the middle Divine-grade weapon. The craftsmanship was profound, and he could sense that this sword wasn't just a weapon but also an object capable of law comprehension. Faint traces of intertwined laws flowed within the blade, though they were subtle.

Aldrian knew the reason for this. The laws within the sword were not as pure as they had been when the material was still untouched Divine Iron. After being tempered and forged, the purity of the laws had diminished. However, with continued use and Aldrian's infusion of his own laws into the sword, its power and clarity could evolve in the future.

The steward continued to admire the beauty and intricacy of the craftsmanship before turning to Duke Valiard.

"You crafted this? Do you have a highly skilled helper? As we know, your elder brother is in seclusion in the capital," the steward said, glancing at Aldrian. "And none of the Emperor-stage blacksmiths we know of are present in your mansion. Did you receive assistance from someone outside?"

"You could say that, sir steward," Duke Valiard responded with a smile. "In fact, you've already met him."

The steward looked puzzled. "I've already met him? When? Where?"

Duke Valiard pointed beside him, towards Aldrian. "Right now. He's sitting in front of you."

Chapter 129: The Commotion

The steward stared at Aldrian in shock. This young man is the helper? But he looks so young—he doubted that Aldrian had even reached the Emperor stage. Aldrian's disguise was nearly flawless, and with his deepening comprehension and rising cultivation, his disguise appearance seemed no different from his real face.

As a Low King stage cultivator, the steward couldn't detect anything suspicious about him, a testament to the perfection of Aldrian's disguise. Furthermore, Aldrian exuded no aura or signs of his cultivation, making it impossible for the steward to discern his true level.

With a teasing smile, Aldrian finally released a faint trace of his aura—just enough to shock the steward to his core, though for an entirely different reason.

"You... you... he's only at the High Earl stage! Are you telling me he's your helper?!" the steward shouted at Duke Valiard, his face full of disbelief. He even wondered if Duke Valiard was joking—or perhaps had gone mad from the effort of creating a divine-grade artifact.

"I'm 100% serious," Duke Valiard replied. "He is my helper, and one of the most talented blacksmiths I've ever met."

"But he's only at the High Earl stage! How could someone with that cultivation level possibly help you?"

"Well, he's special. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, but he's the one who pushed me to create the divine-grade artifact."

The steward looked back at Duke Valiard, searching for any sign of humor or exaggeration. But all he saw was the duke's serious expression. He turned his gaze back to Aldrian, who was still smiling confidently. Somehow, that smile alone was enough to convince him—he could feel the young man's unshakable self-assurance.

"I'm not foolish enough to lie about something like this, Sir Steward," Duke Valiard said. "You know how important a divine-grade artifact is. If I say he's my helper, then he is. Don't judge him by his cultivation level—judge him by his abilities. You'll see for yourself if you take a closer look."

The steward looked at Duke Valiard again, still struggling to believe what he was hearing.

"It's hard for me to accept, you say he's the owner of the sword, but he is also your helper? And he still at High Earl stage!" he said, turning his gaze to Aldrian. "I apologize, young master Aldrian, but may I ask where you come from? What family do you belong to?"

"I'm from the north," Aldrian replied. "As for family, I've lived with my elder sister since I was a child." This was the default answer he had prepared whenever someone asked about his background. He had also asked Duke Valiard never to mention his connection to the Flamecrest family, specifically Aldrey Flamecrest. The risk of being discovered by his parents outside the secret realm was too high.

Even now, knowing that Duke Valiard was aware of his connection to his father, Aldrian felt that the day he would be found out might come sooner than he expected. He didn't want to worry his parents—he wanted to reunite with them on his own terms after completing this journey.

The steward studied Aldrian silently for a moment before finally speaking again.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to see your blacksmithing skills firsthand. After that, I'll report everything to His Majesty immediately. This is a matter of great importance. Are you willing, young master?"

"Of course," Aldrian replied with a confident smile. "If it will ease the doubts in your heart, I'd be glad to demonstrate."

They walked toward the workshop, the place where Aldrian had spent all his time here in the mansion. The steward was shocked when they entered, finding all kinds of scattered artifacts emitting auras that sent chills down his spine. He had visited this workshop in the past, but he had never encountered anything like this. Typically, completed artifacts were moved to a special storage area.

What left him even more stunned wasn't just the auras—it was the quality of the artifacts. Most of them were Heaven grade, with some Peak Heaven grade, touching the absolute peak of Heaven grade. This place felt like a treasure trove, and the steward couldn't help but wonder what this young man and Duke Valiard had been working on all this time.

"What would you like me to create, Sir Steward?" Aldrian's voice broke through the steward's thoughts.

The steward, still in disbelief, replied, "Just create a simple dagger, one commonly used for self-defense."

Aldrian nodded and, without further delay, began the crafting process. What followed was like a dream for the steward. He watched in awe as Aldrian worked with such effectiveness, precision, and profound mastery that every step seemed perfect. Even more astonishing was the result, Aldrian had crafted a middle Sky grade dagger using only common materials.

The steward couldn't comprehend how this was possible. If a dagger like this were sold on the open market, it would spark fierce competition. Sky grade artifacts were never made with such cheap, basic materials.

"This could revolutionize the entire armament market on the continent!" the steward thought, already imagining the implications of Aldrian's abilities. He envisioned the Forgeheart Kingdom gaining an unassailable advantage in the lower-end market, where cultivators sought affordable weapons.

"I must inform His Majesty! We need to bring this young man to our side!" the steward decided internally.

Aldrian could already read what the steward was thinking, and it was precisely what he had hoped for. With this, he would have an even stronger bargaining chip if he ever had to negotiate with the king. This was his failsafe plan, in case Duke Valiard's contribution

in creating a middle divine-grade artifact wasn't enough, although Aldrian doubt it. Having this additional leverage guaranteed that the higher-ups in the kingdom would have to take his requests seriously—especially if they didn't want to lose a talent like him.

"Young Master Aldrian, you are truly a genius among geniuses. I've never seen anyone craft a dagger with such skill, and the quality is simply astonishing," the steward said in awe. "It seems I must return to the capital to report this to His Majesty. Duke Valiard, I suggest you prepare yourself; His Majesty may call for you soon."

He turned to Aldrian. "May I bring this dagger to His Majesty as proof?"

"Of course, Sir Steward," Aldrian replied with a smile. "Consider it my 'gift.'"

While the dagger itself might not be impressive enough to awe the king—perhaps even inappropriate as a gift at this level—the steward knew the implications of this creation were far more significant than even a Heaven-grade artifact.

"Then, I shall take my leave. No need to escort me, Duke Valiard; I've already taken up too much of your time," the steward said, bowing slightly.

With that, he exited the workshop, walking toward the royal guards. Before they departed from Duke Valiard's mansion, the steward paused at the front entrance, where a crowd of people had gathered, clearly waiting for something.

"The people of Valiard City, ease your hearts! The Heavenly Tribulation you witnessed is a sign of our great fortune—the fortune of the Forgeheart Kingdom!" the steward announced in a booming voice to the gathered crowd. "The tribulation occurred because Duke Valiard has forged a middle divine-grade artifact! Now, you can return to your usual activities. There is nothing to fear. Please allow Duke Valiard to rest after this monumental feat!"

Without waiting for a response from the crowd, the steward and his entourage continued on their way. At first, the people who heard the announcement couldn't believe their ears. A middle divine-grade artifact? But as the realization set in, an uproar erupted. Although they hadn't created it themselves, the crowd shared in the joy of Duke Valiard's achievement as if it were their own.

Many wanted to see the duke immediately, but they knew, as the steward had said, that Duke Valiard needed rest. It was no surprise that he had declined visitors—except for the royal family, of course.

By the next day, news of the creation of a middle divine-grade artifact had spread throughout the Forgeheart Kingdom and was beginning to reach the rest of the continent. When the continent heard of the new middle divine-grade artifact, it caused

exactly what many predicted—an uproar. Numerous people began planning their trips to Forgeheart Kingdom, particularly to Valiard City, where Duke Valiard resided.

For the nobles, this was a rare opportunity. If they could negotiate with the duke for the artifact, they would try to add it to their family's inventory. A middle divine-grade artifact was not something to be taken lightly, and no one could afford to let it slip away. Typically, only large factions possessed artifacts of this caliber, and now that one had appeared, it had drawn the attention of every powerful force on the continent.

For commoners and smaller factions, simply seeing and admiring such an artifact would be enough, as they stood no chance of competing with the continent's behemoths to obtain it.

The Forgeheart Kingdom had already implemented preventive measures to manage the impending chaos. They limited the use of teleportation stations in Valiard City and dispatched royal guards to aid Duke Valiard in maintaining security.

Today, Duke Valiard and Aldrian received a summons from the royal family. They had been invited to the royal palace to meet with the king. The time had come for them to face not only the king but also the kingdom's nobles!

Chapter 130: Visiting the Royal Palace

Duke Valiard, Aldrian, and their group had to use a secret passage to leave the mansion for obvious reasons. The area around the mansion was already packed with people, each with different intentions, and they had no time to respond to them all. The secret passage was one of Duke Valiard's safe exits for emergencies. When they reached the other end, they found themselves in a dark alley in a secluded part of the city.

This area is quite remote, making it an ideal place for hiding. They emerged from the passage and made their way toward the main street, where a discreet carriage was waiting for them. The journey in the carriage wasn't long, and they soon arrived at the teleportation station. Everything was pre-arranged, so they could use the teleportation portal immediately, leaving Valiard City without anyone noticing.

At least, that's what they thought, because hidden in the shadows, some silhouettes watched as Aldrian and his group entered the teleportation portal.

As Aldrian stepped out of the teleportation portal, he found himself inside a massive building. It was unlike the usual plazas he had encountered when exiting a teleportation portal. This time, he was inside a grand, dome-shaped hall, and he could sense multiple formations and defensive artifacts embedded throughout the structure.

"It serves as a preventive defense mechanism, the teleportation station in the capital is housed within this enormous dome, which is equipped with layers of defensive mechanisms and detection formations. The capital city of the Forgeheart Kingdom, Dalahan City, is full of valuable artifacts—so much so that you can even find random ones along the roads. You can imagine the kind of people with ill intentions who would try to come to this city." Duke Valiard explained, noticing Aldrian's look of awe.

Aldrian nodded, and they walked outside the building into the bustling streets, filled with people of all races and factions. On both sides of the road, numerous stores offered blacksmithing services—something also common in Valiard City, but here it was even more hectic. After walking for a short while, they were picked up by another carriage that would take them to the royal palace.

"The news of the middle divine grade sword has already spread across the entire continent. The Forgeheart Kingdom will be quite chaotic for the next few days, maybe even weeks. I can already see some young masters and misses from noble families outside kingdom on the streets. They're likely here for the same reason—to see the sword," Duke Valiard remarked.

Aldrian had already stored the Eternal Spirit inside his storage ring to avoid detection, but given the current situation, he realized he needed a more preemptive plan to avoid trouble. Closing his eyes and remaining silent, he concentrated, sending out a voice transmission in his mind.

In a dimly lit room filled with scrolls and books, an old man sat cross-legged, deeply focused as he circulated his cultivation technique. Suddenly, his concentration was interrupted by an unexpected voice inside his mind.

"Arson Vuran, my slave, how are you?"

Arson Vuran, leader of the Thunderous Shadow Pavilion assassin group, was stunned. He hadn't heard that voice in over a year. How could this young man send a voice transmission here? Was he nearby?

"I'm in the Forgeheart Kingdom, you don't have to worry." As if reading his thoughts, Aldrian answered the question that had just crossed Arson's mind. This left Arson even more shocked—how could Aldrian send a voice transmission from so far away?

"It's one of the perks of the Everlasting Demonic Follower

technique. You can communicate with your slave no matter the distance. If you want to speak to me, just focus your intent, and I'll sense it," Aldrian explained. Arson Vuran was taken aback, realizing that Aldrian could not only speak to him over such a vast distance but also read his

thoughts. For Aldrian, this was easy due to their karmic link and the *Everlasting Demonic Follower* technique, allowing him to read Arson's mind even from afar.

"Master, it's good to hear your voice. I thought you had forgotten about me." He decided to push aside his amazement and tried to flatter Aldrian, even though it made him want to throw up.

"Okay, stop with the flattery—it doesn't suit your age, and it makes me want to kill you," Aldrian responded bluntly. *"Arson, I have a task for you. You've already heard about the middle divine grade sword, right?"*

"Of course I know, Master. There's no way one of the most talked events of the century could escape my notice," Arson replied.

"I want you to send some of the Fingers to the Forgeheart Kingdom to assist with reconnaissance. There are too many things I need to monitor. With so many nobles from across the continent gathering here, I can't watch them all, and I fear the devils might be planning something during these chaotic times."

"Understood. Oh, speaking of devils, it seems the Golden Swan Commerce is in quite a difficult situation, Master."

"How so?" Aldrian asked.

"As we know the rumor of their involvement with the devils has already spread across the continent. Initially, most people didn't believe it, since the source came from the demon territory. However, with the Ivory Empire despite not having close relations with the demons tacitly agreeing with their actions in suppressing Golden Swan Commerce in Ivory empire, many have begun to doubt the truth behind the rumor."

"The Golden Swan Commerce is experiencing internal strife because of this. Outwardly, they're still operating as usual, but internally, they're starting to break apart. Also, I took this opportunity to withdraw from our mission to eliminate you and the Yu family. We refunded their payment, Master," Arson Vuran explained.

"Good, very good. Keep me informed if anything new comes up."

"Yes, Master."

"Oh, I almost forgot—if you hear any news about the movement of Flamecrest family, inform me immediately."

"As you wish, Master. Do you have a grudge against them?"

"No, you don't need to know the details. Just keep an eye on their movements."

"Understood."

After Aldrian cut off his communication with Arson Vuran, he sighed. He also wanted to learn about the movements of his mother's family, but he didn't know their family's name. There were too many noble families that fit the description he had of her. All he knew was that his mother came from a noble background, but that wasn't nearly enough. He needed more specific information to uncover her family's identity.

Looking back outside, Aldrian noticed the road was packed with carriages and people, slowing their journey. Since they were on a secret mission, they couldn't afford to be conspicuous. As they moved along, he spotted many artifacts displayed on the streets.

Just as Duke Valiard had said, there were various artifacts casually placed along the side of the road, as though they were worthless—despite their clear quality. To Aldrian's amazement, he even saw *Sky-grade* artifacts, and, to his shock, there were *Heaven-grade* artifacts openly displayed, free for anyone to inspect or even take—if they dared.

"This city is full of active blacksmiths, all competing with each other to attract customers," Duke Valiard explained. "Every city in the Forgeheart Kingdom is similar, but none are quite like the capital. Here, Sky grade and even Heaven-grade artifacts are displayed on the roadside. The competition is fierce."

Aldrian was truly amazed. He now fully understood, with this bold method of promotion, it was no wonder such displays would attract bad intentions. If he were in someone else's position, even he would be tempted to steal these Heaven-grade artifacts. As they neared the royal palace, the level of artifacts on display grew even higher. He had already spotted some *middle Heaven-grade* artifacts—something usually reserved for nobles and high-ranking individuals.

After a few minutes, they finally arrived at the royal palace. The massive palace was surrounded by white walls and many watchtowers. Aldrian could sense that each watchtower housed both defensive and attack artifacts and formations. They passed several sentries and defensive lines before reaching the main gate.

There, the steward they had met the previous day was already waiting for their arrival and gave them a respectful bow.

"Welcome to the royal palace, ladies and gentlemen. This way, please. His Majesty is already expecting you," the steward said, before leading them towards the throne hall.

As they walked through the hallways, Aldrian noticed they were lined with artifacts, similar to those he had seen in Duke Valiard's mansion—but on a much grander scale. Many of these artifacts were even Heaven-grade.

They finally arrived at the double doors of the throne hall, and as the doors opened, Aldrian's group was greeted by a crowd of dwarves in noble attire. He could see various

expressions on their faces as Duke Valiard entered the throne hall. Aldrian then looked to the center, where a dwarf sat on the throne—he was the most impressive figure in the room, his aura demanding reverence.

This was the king of the Forgeheart Kingdom, *Douwin Forgeheart!*