

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

#Chapter 131: King Douwin Forgeheart - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 131: King Douwin Forgeheart

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As they walked towards the king, the expressions of various nobles ranged from pride and amazement to hatred and jealousy. However, none of this mattered to Duke Valiard. He and Aldrian's group arrived at the front of the throne platform, where two thrones were placed. One was occupied by King Douwin, and beside him sat the queen of the Forgeheart Kingdom, Alsanda Forgeheart.

She was, of course, a dwarf like her husband, with red hair styled in a bun and a noble aura that commanded reverence from all. Aldrian sensed a peak Heaven-grade artifact around her neck, likely a defensive necklace. Yet, the most striking presence in the room remained the king beside her.

Aldrian could sense a low divine artifact on the king's body. Beneath the kingly robe he wore was a defensive cloth artifact, and his crown appeared to have hidden mechanisms that even Aldrian couldn't discern.

Douwin Forgeheart

Age : 87,045 years

Race : Dwarf

Cultivation : High Emperor

Cultivation technique : Sky Garden of Battle Angel

Attack techniques

: Battle Axe Strike, Earth Splitting Chop, Axe of Judgement, 12 Strike of Battle Axe, Fire Axe of Sky Garden.

Defense technique : Earth Wall,

Movement technique : None

Supporting technique : The Ruler of Sky Garden Form

From the king's information, there was nothing particularly remarkable about King Douwin, as Aldrian had encountered far more impressive things in his journey. However, he had heard from Duke Valiard that the king was one of the finest blacksmiths in the kingdom. Although his royal duties kept him from being an active blacksmith, he was said to be only a step behind Duke Valiard's elder brother.

Some said that if the king had focused solely on being a blacksmith, his skills would have matched those of Mardred Valiard. The two of them were best friends, considering each other as brothers. It's no surprise that when Douwin Forgeheart ascended the throne, he brought Mardred with him to the palace to serve as his right-hand man.

"To make my move in the Forgeheart Kingdom, I must gain the king's trust and support," Aldrian thought as they bowed before the king and queen.

"We have arrived in response to your summons, Your Majesty," Duke Valiard said.

King Douwin looked at Duke Valiard before turning his gaze to Aldrian. His eyes were filled with amazement and curiosity, and he wore a proud expression as he regarded the two.

"I'm glad that my kingdom has produced another middle divine-grade weapon after such a long time. Duke Valiard has already made a name for himself in the history of this kingdom, but I've also heard about his mysterious helper. At first, I couldn't believe that his assistant was a young man with High Earl stage cultivation, but seeing you now, I'm convinced that the next generation will indeed surpass the old one," King Douwin said while looking at Aldrian.

"Duke Valiard is truly blessed by the Heavens to have crafted a middle divine-grade sword and to have found such a talented helper at the right moment. I've also heard that you were chosen by the sword itself. Are you the one called Aldrian?" the king asked.

"I am, Your Majesty," Aldrian replied.

"May I see the sword? I would like to witness this masterpiece for myself," the king asked again.

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'm honored to present this masterpiece to your esteemed eyes," Aldrian said as he retrieved *Eternal Spirit* from his storage ring. The moment the sword appeared in his hand, a tremendous aura swept through the entire hall.

All the dwarves in the hall were astonished by the mighty aura emanating from the sword. Some of them possessed middle divine-grade artifacts as part of their family

legacies, but even they could feel that this one was special, its aura far more intense. Several nobles gritted their teeth at the sight of the sword, particularly the other three dukes. Duke Valiard merely glanced at them and smirked before continuing to ignore their reactions.

King Douwin's face trembled as he sensed the aura of *Eternal Spirit*.

"May I touch it? I mean, if the sword allows it?" the king asked.

"You may, Your Majesty. This sword is quite 'tame,'" Aldrian replied, stepping forward toward the platform. He handed *Eternal Spirit* to King Douwin, who had risen from his throne. The sword trembled slightly in the king's hands before becoming still. King Douwin fell silent, as though feeling something deeply, before unsheathing the sword to behold its full glory.

"Amazing! It's a longsword, yet it's so light that I feel I could fight with ease using just one hand. What kind of material did Duke Valiard use?" the king thought as he swung the sword a few times, marveling at its balance. After a few swings, he sheathed the sword again and handed it back to Aldrian.

"This is truly a marvelous sword. It's my first time feeling like this when touching an artifact. What is this sword called?" King Douwin asked.

"It is called *Eternal Spirit*, Your Majesty. Duke Valiard is the one who named it," Aldrian replied.

"Eternal Spirit

. What a fitting name, symbolizing a never-ending spirit to reach one's goals. I could even feel my own spirit rekindled when I held this sword. A good name indeed," the king said, nodding approvingly. He then turned to Duke Valiard.

"Duke Valiard, you are truly incredible for creating this sword. After experiencing it firsthand, I must commend you sincerely. You have surpassed all of my expectations, and I am proud of you."

Duke Valiard's eyes gleamed with excitement, and he bowed deeply.

"Thank you for your compliment, Your Majesty!" he responded.

King Douwin then pulled out a dagger—a middle Sky-grade artifact. Normally, such an item would be unworthy of his attention, as he could acquire artifacts of this level with just a wave of his hand. But at this moment, his eyes regarded the dagger as if it were one of the most valuable treasures in the world. The nobles were confused, unable to understand why the king would produce such an ordinary-looking dagger. They waited in silence for him to speak.

"All of you, I want you to look closely at this dagger! What do you see?" the king suddenly asked, turning to the nobles.

The nobles exchanged puzzled glances before one finally spoke up.

"That is just a middle Sky-grade dagger, Your Majesty," he answered.

"Good. But what if I told you that this dagger was an ordinary dagger crafted from dark steel? A common dagger that any cultivator on the continent could buy?" King Douwin said.

The nobles gasped in shock. A dagger that was once worth only a few dozen low-energy stones, a typical middle Earth-grade artifact, had somehow been elevated to a middle Sky-grade artifact. How could such a thing be possible?

"Yes, my reaction was the same as yours when I spent the entire night researching it. What I can say is that this kind of masterpiece is truly one of a kind. The precision is incredible—even I doubt I could create something like this." He stroked the dagger, his fingers tracing the small, intricate patterns etched into it.

"Aldrian, you are the one who crafted this dagger, aren't you?" King Douwin asked, turning his gaze to him.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Aldrian confirmed.

The nobles were stunned by Aldrian's admission.

"Who is your master? How many years have you spent as a blacksmith to create something as revolutionary as this?" the king asked.

"My master? Well, I suppose you could say Duke Valiard, as he's the one who taught me the craft of blacksmithing. As for my experience... it's been about six months."

The throne hall fell into a stunned silence after hearing Aldrian's response.

"How dare you lie to His Majesty! You mock him with such nonsense!" a voice suddenly shouted from among the foremost nobles—Duke Badin. The rest of the nobles also wore expressions of displeasure, and even the king frowned. Despite the rising tension, Aldrian remained calm.

"It's the truth. I came to the Forgeheart Kingdom six months ago. At that time, my goal was to repair my sword, but it was beyond saving. Being a cultivator who thirsts for new knowledge, I asked Duke Valiard to teach me blacksmithing. One thing led to another, and I ended up assisting Duke Valiard in creating the divine-grade artifact. You can verify this yourself with Duke Valiard and any witnesses Your Majesty may gather from my stay at his mansion."

The king looked into Aldrian's eyes, scrutinizing him for a moment before shifting his focus to Duke Valiard.

"Is what he says true? Has he only just begun learning blacksmithing, and yet he's already created something this profound? And helped you forge the divine-grade sword?"

"It is true, Your Majesty. In fact, his natural talent for blacksmithing is unparalleled and unlike anything I've ever seen. I can personally vouch for the truth of his words—there is not a single falsehood in them."

The king's gaze grew intense as he studied Aldrian, as if trying to weigh the truth of his claim.

Chapter 132: The King's Shock

Throughout the history of the Barisan continent, many blacksmithing geniuses have risen to fame, leaving their names etched in the annals of blacksmithing history after creating high-grade artifacts early in their careers. Some were able to forge peak Heaven-grade artifacts within a mere decade of touching a blacksmith's hammer for the first time, while others crafted Divine-grade artifacts after a century of dedication.

These individuals are truly Heaven's chosen in the world of blacksmithing—talents so rare that surpassing them through hard work alone seems almost impossible. But now, the question arises: has anyone ever created a Middle Sky-grade artifact just six months after picking up a hammer for the first time? Most would agree that it's impossible.

To forge a higher-grade artifact, one must comprehend the intricate patterns of that grade, possess sufficient energy, and master the techniques that support it. If any of these requirements are unmet, creating a high-grade artifact or in this case a Sky-grade one—is unachievable. The patterns of Sky-grade artifacts are significantly more complex than those of Earth-grade ones, requiring considerable time for comprehension and practice. For a beginner, mastering such patterns in under a year is unimaginable.

The forging techniques must also be perfected to support the desired grade's artifact, a process that demands immense resources and years of practice. Even for someone with extraordinary talent and a sharp mind, experience is irreplaceable—experience is the keys to gaining profound knowledge!

So, when King Douwin heard that the young man who assisted Duke Valiard in creating a Middle Divine-grade artifact was only at the High Earl stage, he assumed the youth had at least a decade of experience in blacksmithing—a prodigy akin to the legendary geniuses of the past.

As for the energy required for such a feat, the king speculated that Duke Valiard had likely compensated with an expensive elixir capable of continuously replenishing energy. Though such an elixir would be incredibly costly and might drain Duke Valiard's wealth, King Douwin thought it plausible, believing the duke to be desperate to prove his competence to the other nobles and to ease the lingering accusations surrounding his elder brother's mysterious disappearance.

The dagger Aldrian had forged further convinced the king that this young man must have a genius mind and extensive experience far beyond the norm. So, when King Douwin heard that Aldrian had only been forging for six months since first picking up a hammer, his mind froze. He slumped back onto his throne with a blank expression, it was as though the king's thoughts had come to a complete halt.

Seeing the king's lost expression, Aldrian decided to speak to him directly. He sent a voice transmission to King Douwin.

"Your Majesty, do you know how old I am?"

The king, still in a daze, was startled by the sudden question but responded out of instinct. He wondered why the young man had chosen a voice transmission but answered nonetheless.

"I don't know... perhaps 100 years old or more?" It seemed the most logical guess given Aldrian's youthful appearance and cultivation level.

"Wrong," Aldrian replied. *"I'm still 15 years old."*

"What?!" King Douwin leaped from his throne, shouting in disbelief, forgetting to use his voice transmission. The idea of Aldrian being only 15 was just as absurd as the thought of him having only six months of blacksmithing experience! His sudden outburst startled the gathered nobles, who exchanged confused glances, wondering what had caused their king to react so dramatically.

"You can verify my age using an artifact. I'm sure you have something like that,"

Aldrian calmly suggested.

Without wasting any time, King Douwin ordered one of his guards to fetch an artifact used to check a person's potential. Shortly after, the guard returned with an orb-shaped artifact, the same type of "Orb of Origin" Aldrian had seen in the Ivory Empire. The nobles were still perplexed, unsure of why the king had asked for this artifact.

"This is an upgraded version of the Orb of Origin," King Douwin explained. *"It doesn't just detect the type of energy a person possesses; it can also reveal their age and potential."*

Aldrian, observing the orb, quickly realized it was similar to how the Hall of Origin's work in the Ivory Empire, but in a much more compact form.

"It's like the Hall of Origin in the Ivory Empire, but reduced to the size of an orb," Aldrian thought to himself before turning his attention back to King Douwin.

"Is this artifact valuable to the kingdom? Is it produced in large quantities?" Aldrian's question puzzled the king, but he answered nonetheless.

"Yes, it's a valuable artifact, and we only produce a limited number of them. Why do you ask?" King Douwin responded, curiosity creeping into his tone.

"It's nothing, Your Majesty. I just feel bad about what's going to happen next," Aldrian replied with a bitter smile.

Behind him, Eleine shared a knowing smile, though she couldn't help but worry about the implications of what was about to unfold. She wasn't sure if revealing Aldrian's talent in front of these nobles was the wisest course of action.

King Douwin instructed Aldrian to touch the orb and infuse it with his energy. As soon as Aldrian complied, a blinding golden light burst from the orb, filling the hall and shocking the dwarves present. The brilliant glow lasted only a moment before vanishing, leaving the hall in stunned silence.

The nobles, confused and disoriented, turned their gazes toward the king, but what the nobles saw next was startling—the king stood frozen, his body trembling and his pupils dilated as he stared at the Orb of Origin in disbelief. Confusion spread through the hall, and one noble, Duke Badin, took the opportunity to speak.

"What is wrong, Your Majesty?" Duke Badin asked. He was one of the nobles who harbored jealousy and anger toward Duke Valiard's sudden fortune. The arrival of this young man had upended all his plans, and Duke Badin saw an opportunity to exploit any potential weakness in the boy to turn the situation to his advantage. If this young man failed in any way, Duke Valiard would also be blamed.

But Duke Badin couldn't understand why the king had brought out the upgraded Orb of Origin and allowed this boy to use it. Had Aldrian whispered something to sway the king? And judging by the king's paralyzed expression, something was definitely amiss. Badin didn't like this uncertainty one bit.

Yet, King Douwin remained silent, as if turned to stone. His unresponsiveness sparked worry among the others. Queen Alsanda, sensing something was wrong, approached her husband and gently tapped him on the back.

"Dear, what's wrong—?" she began, but her gaze drifted to the Orb of Origin. Her words trailed off, her eyes widening in disbelief at what was written on the orb. She was just as

baffled as her husband. The nobles saw her sudden change in expression and knew something significant was happening.

On the Orb of Origin, the following was displayed:

Age

: 15 years old.

Cultivation : High Earl.

Talent : Unmeasurable.

Potential : Unmeasurable.

Conclusion : Can't Conclude.

This kind of evaluation had never been heard of before, and Queen Alsanda still couldn't believe that this young man was only 15 years old! Suddenly, the Orb of Origin began to crack, snapping King Douwin out of his stupor. Moments later, the orb crumbled to pieces, sending a wave of shock through the entire hall. The king stared at the remnants of the orb, then turned his gaze to Aldrian, who wore a bitter smile.

Without hesitation, King Douwin gave a sharp command to the room.

"All of you, except Duke Valiard's group, get out!" he shouted.

The nobles, desperate to know what had been displayed on the orb and why it had shattered reluctantly obeyed the king's order and filed out of the throne hall in an orderly manner. The three dukes who had initially planned to confront Aldrian and use this opportunity to attack Duke Valiard were left confused, their plans completely derailed by the king's strange actions.

"This is bad! We don't know what that young man did, nor do we know the result from the Orb of Origin that shook the king like this. But one thing's clear—we can't pressure Duke Valiard any longer," Duke Calas said, using voice transmission as the three of them walked away from the hall.

"Damn it! Where the hell did that young man come from? He just appeared out of nowhere and ruined everything!" Duke Lorf added, frustration heavy in his tone.

"What do you think, Duke Badin?" Duke Calas asked after noticing Badin had remained silent since leaving the hall. Duke Badin seemed lost in thought, his expression unreadable.

After a moment, Duke Badin responded. *"The sudden appearance of that young man was completely unexpected. With Duke Valiard regaining his footing, it will be much harder to pressure him now. Even if we keep using Mardred Valiard's disappearance to weaken his position, it won't be nearly as effective anymore—not with him capable of producing a Middle Divine-grade artifact."*

Duke Badin's eyes gleamed as he continued. *"It seems we'll need the help of that 'guy' to turn this situation around. With a Middle Divine-grade artifact now in play, that 'guy' will almost certainly take an interest and come to our aid."*

The other two dukes exchanged knowing smirks, their previous frustrations fading. The mention of "that guy" filled them with confidence. With his involvement, the problem would resolve itself, and their plans would soon be back on track.

Chapter 133: Grant me permission...

Inside the throne hall, only King Douwin, Queen Alsanda, and Aldrian's group remained. King Douwin trusted his wife, so he allowed her to stay and hear their conversation. His gaze rested solemnly on Aldrian, his heart racing. *The man in front of him is a fucking monster!*

"Is his appearance one of the signs of the impending disaster foretold by the Heavenly Direction Church?" King Douwin wondered.

Without looking at Duke Valiard, he sent a voice transmission. *"Duke Valiard, do you know anything about him besides his name?"*

The duke, still processing the situation, felt lost. He was aware of the exchange of voice transmission between Aldrian and the king, but not the contents, so the sudden question caught him off guard.

"I don't, Your Majesty. He's been secretive about his origins. What I do know is that he comes from the north and has lived with his elder sister, one of the women standing behind him, since childhood. Is something wrong?" Duke Valiard hesitated to mention Aldrian's connection to Aldrey Flamecrest, as Aldrian had asked him to keep it private. To Valiard, Aldrian was not only a benefactor but perhaps even a friend, and he didn't want to betray that trust.

"Did you know he's only 15 years old?"

"What?!"

Duke Valiard's reaction mirrored his own surprise, confirming to King Douwin that the duke hadn't known this detail either. Such questions sometimes slipped through their mind, with people often guessing a person's age based on their cultivation and appearance. The king didn't fault Duke Valiard for his ignorance.

As for Duke Valiard, he was beyond shocked. His eyes widened as he stared at Aldrian. What the king didn't know was that, aside from Aldrian's exceptional blacksmithing skills, he was also a swordsman with a remarkable mastery of swordsmanship. Duke Valiard was even more stunned than King Douwin—like many others, he had assumed that someone with Aldrian's level of swordsmanship had to be at least 100 years old!

"I ordered everyone to leave the hall because I sensed that our conversation would turn toward something significant," King Douwin began, his voice heavy with solemnity. "But first, are... are you sure you're not using some forbidden technique or anything of that sort?" he asked Aldrian.

"What do you think, Your Majesty?" Aldrian responded with a smile.

King Douwin sighed and glanced at the destroyed Orb of Origin.

"He's right. There's no way that kind of energy could come from a forbidden technique. That golden energy—it's unlike anything I've ever seen. It's pure, even holy. My own energy trembled for a moment in its presence," the king thought.

"Do you have a master guiding you, or some kind of assistance in your cultivation? This is hard to believe—no, my mind is still reeling from what I witnessed. Even if you had a master, a 15-year-old High Earl cultivator is simply beyond the realm of possibility. No matter how much of a genius you are, there's no way to reach this level of cultivation in just a few years. Not even if you had begun cultivating in your mother's womb!" King Douwin's voice was filled with confusion and disbelief. He was trying to keep his composure, but the situation was simply too shocking.

"Relax, Your Majesty," Aldrian said, soothing King Douwin as he gently enveloped the king in his golden energy. As the energy spread across his body, the king felt a warm and calming sensation, washing away all his negative emotions. Although it only lasted for a moment, it was enough for him to regain his composure. King Douwin exhaled a long breath before looking at Aldrian again.

"There's no way this kind of energy could come from a forbidden technique," he thought again.

Aldrian did the same for Duke Valiard, who looked on the verge of collapse. The golden energy steadied him, preventing him from falling under the weight of his shock. Once they both regained their composure, Duke Valiard looked at Aldrian with wide eyes, his voice filled with disbelief.

"You're really only 15 years old?!"

"Yes, I am. What age did you think I was? I thought it was obvious from my youthful appearance."

"You... You... Never mind." Duke Valiard shook his head, still trying to process everything. Turning to the king, he added, "Your Majesty, I think I need to tell you about the first time I met him and how he came to me."

Duke Valiard then recounted the story of his first encounter with Aldrian, when Aldrian had asked him to repair his sword to the moment where they created the Eternal Spirit. He shared every detail, except the ones Aldrian had asked him to keep secret.

When Duke Valiard finished, the expressions on King Douwin and Queen Alsanda's faces were a sight to behold. Aldrian could see the king go through a range of emotions before finally accepting the reality before him.

"Aldrian, you truly are a monster. There's no one like you, I have to admit that," King Douwin said, then turned to Duke Valiard. "And you are quite bold for revealing one of our kingdom's greatest secrets to a stranger, someone you've only known for a short time. Normally, that would be considered treason, and I would have no choice but to execute you... but for now." He paused, looking back at Aldrian.

"Aldrian, now that you have your sword, what is your purpose here? I know you wouldn't still be in the kingdom unless you had another reason."

"Your Majesty is very perceptive," Aldrian replied with a smile. "Yes, actually, after hearing about the disappearance of Duke Valiard's elder brother, I have another reason to stay in the kingdom."

King Douwin's expression tightened at the mention of his old friend. "What are you thinking, Aldrian?" he asked, his voice more serious.

"Your Majesty, during my journey, I uncovered evidence that the devils are devising a grand plan for the entire continent," Aldrian explained. He proceeded to tell them about his findings from his journey, from the Ivory Empire up until now, including an artifact possibly created by the dwarves, capable of concealing the presence of devils, even from high-level cultivators.

King Douwin, Queen Alsanda, and Duke Valiard listened in silence, their expressions solemn as they took in the gravity of the situation. They were beginning to understand the larger picture, but it also brought with it an uncomfortable realization.

"Do you think... Mardred Valiard betrayed us by colluding with the devils?" King Douwin asked, his voice strained. Based on everything Aldrian had revealed, it made sense to

suspect that Mardred's disappearance might be linked to the devils' schemes, a possibility they all hoped wasn't true.

"At first, I admit he was the most suspicious person on my list," Aldrian began, "but after hearing Duke Valiard's story and learning about the disappearance of the Divine Sword's blueprint, I need to confirm something. There might be more to his disappearance than we think."

"We only have the symbol that Mardred left behind before he disappeared, a symbol none of us have seen before." Aldrian continued.

"So, what do you suggest, Aldrian?" King Douwin asked.

"Grant me permission to examine the symbol, your majesty. I may uncover something the royal investigators overlooked. No offense, Your Majesty, but it's possible Mardred left a clue, hoping that someone—perhaps even from outside the kingdom—might recognize it. That's my hypothesis," Aldrian explained, knowing that the symbol was familiar to him from his past visions.

King Douwin fell into deep thought, the room growing silent for a moment as he considered Aldrian's request. Finally, he looked up.

"Very well. I'll allow you to see the symbol in our treasure vault." Aldrian smiled at the decision, but the king added with a stern expression, "But be careful. Don't wander too much in that place. This is a warning."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I am only a guest here—I wouldn't do anything to cause myself trouble," Aldrian replied in a reassuring tone.

King Douwin nodded and glanced at Aldrian's group.

"There's no need to worry," Aldrian said. "They are my trusted allies, and they're already aware of the situation."

"Then follow me," King Douwin instructed, leading them out of the throne room. They proceeded to one of the dimly lit rooms heavily guarded by royal guards before passing through a narrow passage that could accommodate only two people side by side.

"Watch where I step and follow my exact path," King Douwin warned as they walked. "The traps here are deadly enough to kill even a High Emperor stage cultivator. This place was built by our ancestors, a testament to their wisdom and mastery in crafting."

They continued, carefully walking the intricate trap-laden passage for about fifteen minutes before arriving at a small hall with a massive double door.

As they reached the entrance, Aldrian inspected the door with his senses. He immediately detected a complex mechanism embedded with defensive artifacts. The door was thick and heavy—so formidable that even a Middle Emperor stage cultivator would struggle to move it.

King Douwin approached the door and inserted his fingers into the designated holes placed along its surface. He infused his energy into it, and after a few seconds, the sound of intricate machinery whirled from within. The double doors trembled before slowly opening, revealing the vast interior.

As the doors fully opened, a powerful aura of countless treasures swept outwards, surprising Aldrian and his group.

"Come in, the symbol is this way." King Douwin said, gesturing forward.

Chapter 134: ...To Look at the Symbol

Inside the treasure vault, rows of artifacts were on display, each one protected by a glass case. Aldrian knew that if anyone somehow managed to slip inside and break the glass to steal an artifact, the traps would be instantly activated. All of the artifacts on display were of at least Low Heaven grade, and their numbers reached into the thousands. These artifacts spanned the long history of the Forgeheart Kingdom, each possessing unique qualities that made them worthy of being stored here.

For example, there was a shield created by the 15th king of the Forgeheart Kingdom. This shield was forged when he was at the Low King stage, using rare material from a dragon's scale. In the past, when the dragon race still roamed the continent, their scales were renowned for being nearly impenetrable by physical attacks. With the disappearance of dragons from the Barisan continent, this shield had become an incredibly valuable item, sought after by many.

Another notable artifact was a sword made from Obsidian Poison Iron, a rare material found in the Poison Canyon within the demon territory. This is one of the most toxic materials on the continent, capable of poisoning even a Low Emperor stage cultivator. Without special precautions during its forging, the blacksmith would have been poisoned to death.

Aldrian was amazed by all of these artifacts and made a mental note of how much he still had to learn. Blacksmithing was clearly a field of vast knowledge, filled with countless things worth studying and mastering.

King Douwin felt proud, seeing the amazement on Aldrian and his group's faces as they admired the artifacts. They continued walking until they reached another door, identical to the one at the entrance of the treasure vault. King Douwin repeated the same process to open it, and as the door fully swung open, an aura even more terrifying surged out, with the energy of heaven and earth swirling beyond.

It was as if the long-trapped energy of heaven and earth inside the room was finally released. Aldrian and the others trembled when they looked inside, for all the artifacts on display here were of Divine grade. There were only a few dozen, a much smaller number compared to the Heaven-grade section, but the aura and energy were far more intense and intimidating.

The artifacts were arranged in a circle along the walls of the circular room. As they continued walking through it, King Douwin came to a stop in the center. He placed his hand on the floor, pressing several stone tiles before channeling his energy into them. Suddenly, the ground trembled, and a secret underground passage opened before them. Without a word, King Douwin stepped inside, and the others followed closely behind.

After walking for two minutes, they arrived at a vast underground hall. But their attention quickly shifted to the sword displayed in the center of the hall.

The sword was set on a platform atop a beautifully crafted wooden long box. When they focused their senses on it, they felt something strange. Although the sword's aura was weak, its presence demanded attention. The power radiating from it sent chills down their spines. Aldrian, seeing the sword, instantly guessed that this must be the one Duke Valiard had told him about—the top-secret weapon of the Forgeheart Kingdom.

Unnamed Sword (Unfinished)

Description: An unfinished Peak Divine Grade sword forged from various rare materials. It is the result of generations of effort within the Forgeheart Kingdom to create a peak divine-grade artifact. The sword still lacks certain materials to completed it.

Level: None (Peak Divine).

Aldrian glanced at the information screen and confirmed that this was indeed the sword Mardred Valiard had attempted to complete—an endeavor the Forgeheart Kingdom had pursued for a long time. The sword was a longsword with a golden guard atop a white grip, adorned with the most intricate pattern Aldrian had ever seen.

Despite the sword looking perfectly fine on the outside, Aldrian could sense that something was missing within. The weak aura it emitted was a stark contrast to the immense power he felt from it. According to the information, the sword wasn't yet a graded artifact—in other words, it was still an ordinary sword. It only needed that missing 'something' to be completed and unleash its true form.

"This is the sword we forged from a blueprint discovered in the Everlasting Silent Forest long ago. We don't know how our ancestors came upon it, but ever since, it has been our kingdom's greatest wish to complete a peak divine sword—something that has never been achieved on the Barisan continent," King Douwin explained.

"Many of the materials required to forge this sword were unknown to us—things we had never even heard of. Yet, over time, we found all the materials mentioned in the blueprint scattered around the outskirts of the Everlasting Silent Forest. But after all these years, we're still missing one final component." He continued.

"A final component? What is it?" Aldrian asked.

"A material called 'Divine Iron.' Its description is quite unbelievable, and we doubt whether such a material even exists," King Douwin replied, still gazing at the sword with a look of longing.

"Anyway, that's—" the king began to say, but then he noticed Aldrian's strange expression. Aldrian's face was that of a man who had just found an enlightenment. Puzzled by this, King Douwin asked,

"Aldrian, are you alright?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes, Your Majesty. I was just enlightened by the story of this sword. It's truly a marvelous and remarkable weapon," Aldrian replied with a smile.

King Douwin looked at Aldrian suspiciously, then shifted his gaze to Duke Valiard, who wore a stiff expression. Sensing that something was off between the two, the king wanted to question them, but Aldrian spoke first.

"Your Majesty, is the blueprint for this sword kept here?"

King Douwin, setting aside his suspicions for the moment, answered, "The blueprint is inside that room," he said, pointing toward a door on the other side of the hall. They walked past the sword, and once again, the king had to repeat the intricate procedure to open the door, demonstrating the multilayered failsafes used to protect the kingdom's most important secrets.

As the door opened, they were greeted by a small room. It looked plain at first glance, but what King Douwin said next left them stunned.

"This entire room is a divine artifact. Its primary function is to store items within it. It has its own sentience and can adjust its size according to the will of its master."

Aldrian nodded as he listened to the king's explanation.

"No wonder I can feel such abundant spatial energy here. There's also a profound presence of space laws," he thought. "I feel as though I could increase my comprehension of space laws just by being here. The one who created this artifact must have had a high level of mastery in space laws."

His gaze trailed to the golden box at the far end of the room. Just as Aldrian began wondering if that was where the blueprint had once been stored, King Douwin answered his unspoken question.

"The blueprint used to be kept right there, before it was lost with Mardred's disappearance. The symbol he left behind is still inside the golden box. You can open it—there's no trap," King Douwin said.

Without hesitation, Aldrian walked toward the golden box and opened it. Inside, he found an empty box with a symbol he immediately recognized. It was the same symbol he had seen in his visions, one that represented a piece of his past. He felt drawn to it, his fingers brushing over the symbol as he stroked its surface, feeling a vague connection to it.

As soon as his hand made contact, the energy in his dantian trembled, and the symbol emitted a golden light. Then, a sharp pain shot through his head as he was pulled into another vision. This vision, however, felt different, it wasn't from his usual first-person perspective. Instead, he observed everything as though from a third-person view. He was able to move his transparent body freely.

In the vision, Aldrian saw a blurry figure. He had never seen this figure in his previous visions, but like other fragments of his past, the connection felt undeniable. This time, it was even more intense, the connection he felt to it was stronger than any he had ever experienced before.

He could only discern that the figure was a man. Dressed in regal robes, the figure radiated a serene aura, as calm as still water. There was nothing intimidating about him. In fact, just looking at this figure made Aldrian feel a deep sense of peace, as if he were returning home.

The man sat beneath a peach blossom tree, gently playing a guqin. The sound was beautiful, soothing Aldrian's entire being. He closed his eyes lost in the music, temporarily forgetting the situation he was in.

When the melody finally stopped, Aldrian opened his eyes and saw the blurry figure looking at him. Although the man's face remained obscured, Aldrian sensed that he was smiling.

"I see... at this point, it has succeeded, after all," the figure said softly.

Chapter 135: Leave It to Me

Aldrian felt puzzled by what the figure said. He looked behind him, wondering if the figure was talking to someone else, but all he saw was darkness. The only visible area was the ground they were standing on. He turned back around and was stunned to see a completely different scenery.

Now, he stood in the middle of a green garden, and in the center was a pyramid-shaped platform with a flat top. On the side of the platform was a large symbol that he recognized — the same symbol he had seen in some of his visions and on the golden box he had touched in the treasure vault. Atop the platform floated a sword.

Aldrian walked toward it and stopped just before reaching the sword. This was the exact same sword that the Forgeheart Kingdom had been trying to complete for so long. As he moved closer, he inspected the floating sword. Although it had the same shape and pattern, Aldrian could sense that this one felt more 'genuine.' He could even feel its power coursing through him, despite this not being his physical body.

After a few moments of admiring the sword's craftsmanship, he tried to touch it, but as he expected, his hand passed right through. He sighed in frustration, wanting to feel its details more closely. Suddenly, the sword trembled, and before he knew it, he was whisked away to another place — a dark space.

He frowned, feeling disoriented after being transported again so quickly. As he took in his surroundings, he finally realized where he was.

"This is my being's essence!" Aldrian thought as he gazed at the solitary 'star,' the only source of light in this dark space. He sensed something different.

"Is it just me, or is that star much closer now?" In the past, whenever Aldrian tried to move toward the 'star,' time seemed to slow down, and his mind was always drawn back to memories of the past. No matter how far he flew, the star never seemed to get any closer — it felt like he was chasing it endlessly.

But now, the star seemed nearer, and with it, Aldrian felt he was making progress in unraveling the mysteries of his past. He concluded that the figure from earlier and the sword must be strongly connected to one of his true selves from the past like the Heavenly Demon and his wife. He was tempted to fly closer to the star and learn more about his past, but after some thought, he decided against it. The last time he stayed in this mindscape, it had kept him in cultivation for months!

He closed his eyes, a smile forming on his lips, feeling as though he had gained something important. When he opened his eyes again, he was back in the treasure vault, where the golden box containing the sword's blueprint was. The symbol on the box was now slowly fading away, and after that something new had been embedded in his mind — a fresh knowledge.

"*This is how to create the sword,*" Aldrian realized. He now had the knowledge to craft, and even complete, a peak divine-grade sword. He felt invigorated, but a voice suddenly interrupted him.

"What just happened?" came the voice of King Douwin from behind him. Aldrian turned to see the astonished faces of King Douwin, Queen Alsanda, and Duke Valiard. Xin Haotian, Sylphia, Eleine, and Baek Ji-Min were all watching him curiously as well.

"Why is the symbol disappearing? What did you do?" the king's voice sharpened with suspicion.

Aldrian, noticing the king's shift in mood, remained calm as he replied. "Relax, Your Majesty. The symbol is reacting to my presence, and after inspecting it, I believe this symbol holds the key to our current problem." His tone was composed, showing no sign of worry, an attempt to ease the king's suspicions.

"What are you talking about?" the king asked, still on edge.

"This symbol is a type of complex formation that transfers information if someone is able to decipher it. Fortunately, I was able to crack it during my inspection. The formation vanished once I decoded it," Aldrian lied smoothly. He didn't want to reveal that he recognized the symbol, as that would complicate things and potentially lead to misunderstandings. What if the king assumed Aldrian had connections with some unknown group? He'd have to explain everything, which would be troublesome. It was easier to make up a lie and avoid unnecessary problems.

"Wait, you're a formation master too?" King Douwin exclaimed, clearly shocked, while Duke Valiard and Queen Alsanda mirrored his expression of disbelief.

"Yes, I am, and luckily, I have a high level of mastery in formations. Although this one was quite complex, I was able to decipher it in this time. By the way, how long have I been inspecting the symbol?"

The king seemed want to ask more questions, but he still answered. "It's been 15 minutes... That's also what I wanted to ask. You deciphered this formation in such a short time? And wait—are you sure the symbol is actually a formation? We've examined it countless times and never found anything that suggested it was a formation, so we interpreted it as just a symbol."

Aldrian nodded internally, agreeing with the king's assessment. "*Well, that's true, it really is just a symbol,*" he thought, but he continued his lie.

"Yes, Your Majesty. The formation itself is incredibly thin, and the symbol is merely the outer pattern of it. It's so delicate that the formation's pattern can't be sensed, and ordinary energy isn't able to detect it. Fortunately, my special energy is well-suited for this situation," Aldrian explained.

King Douwin remembered the golden energy Aldrian had used earlier. It was an unfamiliar energy, one he had never encountered before, and its properties were unknown to him.

"Perhaps it was true," the king thought. He then heard Aldrian continue.

"With this formation, I'm certain this symbol wasn't left by Mardred Valiard."

"Why do you thi—ah," King Douwin started to ask, but suddenly realized something important.

"Mardred Valiard wasn't a formation master," the king said, understanding dawning on him. There was no way Mardred could have created a formation this complex. Sword patterns were one thing, but formations required the manipulation of surrounding energy, forming points, formation eyes and connecting them to establish a complete formation. From what King Douwin knew, Mardred was no expert in formations, and even if he were, it was doubtful he could craft something so intricate that even the royal family's experts couldn't detect it.

Aldrian remained silent, letting the king arrive at his own conclusions. In truth, Aldrian had other reasons for claiming that Mardred didn't leave the symbol. The symbol had a strong karmic connection to him, and it had reacted the moment he touched it. From his experience, anything with such a deep connection to his karma was something that had existed since ancient times.

His gaze shifted to the golden box, and he asked the king, "Your Majesty, was the blueprint always inside this golden box when it was first discovered by your ancestors?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but most likely, yes. This golden box has been here for a long time, serving as the container for the blueprint," the king answered.

"If my elder brother didn't leave this symbol, then who created it?" Duke Valiard suddenly asked, his brow furrowed.

"I don't know, but I believe the creator had good intentions." Aldrian replied.

"And why do you think that?" King Douwin asked.

"This formation, besides giving me the knowledge to create the divine sword, also revealed the location of the blueprint. I can sense its presence from here, though it's quite distant," Aldrian explained. His karmic connection with the blueprint had strengthened after his recent experience, allowing him to pinpoint the blueprint's general location through the laws of karma, even though the signal was faint and far away.

King Douwin and Duke Valiard were taken aback. In a rush, King Douwin said, "Then what are we waiting for?! Let's head there immediately! I'll have the royal knights prepare to follow you. We must be ready for any situation when retrieving the blueprint."

"Wait, Your Majesty," Aldrian interrupted, his tone calm. "I have a better approach for this situation. Deploying the royal knights could be risky. We don't know the exact location of the blueprint yet—I can only detect the general direction of it. If it's hidden within the territory of a faction hostile to us, sending a large force could compromise the blueprint safety. And let's not forget we still don't know the true cause of Mardred Valiard's disappearance."

The king paused, thinking carefully about Aldrian's words, before nodding. "Then what are you suggesting?"

Aldrian smiled. "Leave it to me. I'll retrieve the blueprint with a small team. Myself, Duke Valiard, and him," he said, gesturing toward Xin Haotian, "will be enough to secure the blueprint."

Chapter 136: Good Luck Finding Him

The capital of the Forgeheart Kingdom, Dalahan City, named after the kingdom's first king, Dalahan Forgeheart, is quite hectic at this time. Many newcomers from outside the kingdom have arrived, using the city as a transit point on their way to Valiard City, or waiting for the sword to be presented to the royal family. Logically they know that Duke Valiard must have reported the sword to the king, which has drawn significant attention to the capital. But the question is when? So, they wait in the capital.

Many famous names, particularly swordsmen, have arrived in the city, and it wouldn't be complete without mentioning the Ten Great Swordmasters of the continent. There is already some commotion in various parts of Dalahan City.

A muscular man with an intimidating aura walks through the crowds, who instinctively step aside to make way for him. His red hair, adding to his fierce appearance, makes people avoid him from a distance. His infamous name has already spread across the continent—he is the one who follows the path of the Demonic Sword of Pure Annihilation.

"Oh, if it isn't the Sword Demon," a voice interrupts his walk. It belongs to a black-haired, middle-aged man.

The Sword Demon glances at him, recognizing the man with two swords at his waist—Bourdin Smith. Ignoring him, the Sword Demon continues walking. Bourdin Smith just shrugs and takes a different path.

Many people witness the brief interaction between two of the Ten Great Swordmasters. But it's not just the Sword Demon and Bourdin Smith; others have also arrived in the city.

In one of the city's largest taverns, a beautiful woman in a tight black robe that accentuates her curves sits quietly, gazing at her drink. Her striking, mature face attracts the attention of many men, but they know better than to approach her.

She appears lost in thought, absently playing with her drink. *"The appearance of this sword could attract that mysterious swordsman, right?"*

As a swordmaster herself, the news of a middle divine-grade sword excites her. Of course, she wants to see the sword and, if possible, claim it. But more than that, she hopes to see the mysterious swordsman who caused chaos in the Ivory Empire.

She was curious about the kind of person capable of creating a technique so destructive yet equally profound. It was as if she had witnessed a living sword in action. After Balin, the mysterious swordsman's last known trace was in the Ivory Empire's capital, Evergreen City. There were signs of a battle there, but she couldn't uncover anything further because the Evergreen Imperial family had seemingly covered up his trail.

Many speculated that the mysterious swordmaster was an elf of the Ivory Empire, but this theory was often debunked. After all, the elves had never produced a renowned swordmaster in all of history. Their natural affinity for bows made swords a secondary weapon for them.

She shared that belief. The technique displayed in Balin was too destructive to have come from elves, whose nature was more harmonious. After losing the trail in Evergreen City, the mysterious swordmaster had remained inactive, making no further moves.

Still, she found it hard to believe if the appearance of a middle divine-grade sword wouldn't attract that person. No matter how elusive they were, they would surely be drawn here to obtain such a rare weapon.

As she mused over these thoughts, a sudden commotion erupted outside the tavern. She looked toward the entrance, where a handsome, blonde-haired man in knight's attire stepped inside. His holy aura seemed to soothe everyone in the tavern, and many gasped at his presence. It was a rare sight to encounter even one of the Ten Great Swordmasters, and now there were two in the same tavern.

"Arthur, is the Heavenly Direction Church also interested in the sword?" she asked.

"Elena?" Arthur glanced at her for a moment. "Rather than the church, it's my personal interest in the sword. Coincidentally, the church also has an interest in this artifact, so they've permitted me to come here. Though the church may not be particularly

interested on the sword itself, this is a middle divine-grade artifact we're talking about—it's bound to attract attention from the higher-ups." Arthur replied, taking a vacant seat beside her.

Arthur ordered his drink, and only after it was served did Elena speak.

"Tell me, Arthur. When I was searching for traces of that mysterious swordsman two years ago in Evergreen City, I received some information. They said that the Heavenly Direction Church sent an envoy to Evergreen City at the same time there was a sudden disturbance across the swords of the continent. I wonder—what was the church doing there?"

Arthur paused, his drink halfway to his lips, and glanced at her for a moment. "Why do you ask?" he replied before taking a sip. He clearly remembered that day—the day he met that 'monster,' who had since established a strong connection with the Heavenly Direction Church.

After their duel, Arthur spent much time in introspection. He still vividly remembered the feeling of near death when that man's devastating slash came at him—an experience he hadn't faced in a long time. That battle had driven him to intensify his training, and thanks to that slash, he understood some of his weaknesses and sought to improve himself further.

Elena observed Arthur carefully, looking for any hint in his gestures or expressions, hoping to glean something more.

"I'm curious about the person who can create such a technique," she said. "If possible, I'd like to learn a thing or two from them."

Arthur thought for a moment. *"You'll need to prepare yourself if you ever meet him. I'm afraid you'll be shocked to death when you try to learn from him."* He looked down at his drink. *"By the way, where is he right now? Last I heard, he was journeying to the west, but there's been no news since then. With the appearance of a middle divine-grade sword, he must show up, right?"*

There was a brief silence before Arthur finally spoke again.

"It was only a coincidence that the Heavenly Direction Church was visiting Evergreen City at that time. As for who created that slash technique, I still don't know. But based on my observations over the last two years, it seems that person is no longer in the Ivory Empire. Maybe you should look for him outside the empire."

Elena glanced at Arthur again for a moment before taking a sip of her drink. "Forget it. I think that person will come to this kingdom for the sword. Events like this don't happen every million years."

"Yeah, you might be right," Arthur agreed, drinking again.

"By the way, don't you find it strange that we haven't heard anything from the Sword Saint either?" Elena asked.

"Isn't that normal? We sometimes go years without hearing from one another, so what did you expect?" Arthur replied.

"You're right. Maybe it's just my intuition," Elena said thoughtfully. "But ever since the Sword Saint visited Balin and felt the power of that sword intent, it seemed like he was looking into that person. Wouldn't it make more sense if he left some traces during his search? The fact that there's been no news about him since then, and no trail to follow, makes me suspect that he may have already found that person. And after that? Who knows—maybe he fought him and they are fatally injured?"

Arthur pondering for a moment. *"What if they met each other and fought? Who would be stronger?"* Remembering his battle with Xin Haotian long ago. At the time, Xin Haotian had become famous for his mastery of light laws and the illumination sword. Arthur had to admit, Xin Haotian was the strongest swordsman he'd ever faced—until Aldrian came along.

Aldrian was younger and had a lower cultivation level, but he humbled Arthur in a way no one else had. These two men seemed like Heaven's chosen ones, geniuses of their generation. Yet when Arthur compared himself to them, he felt a sudden wave of frustration.

"Maybe, maybe not," Arthur replied, standing up. "Anyway, I think it's time for me to go. This place is already packed, and I need somewhere quieter. Good luck finding him." He left a few low-energy stones on the table before walking away.

Elena looked at Arthur's back, there were gleams in her eyes. *"So he knows that person, and that person is a man,"* she thought.

Not long after, she also left the tavern, blending into the bustling streets of Dalahan City.

At the city's teleportation station, an entourage emerged from the teleportation portal. The moment they stepped out, people instinctively parted to make way for them. Their striking red hair and piercing red eyes were like beacons, instantly recognizable even before one noticed the symbols on their noble attire.

"Master Aldrey, we've already secured an inn for us to stay. We can head there without any issues," one of the men in the group said.

There was no doubt—this was the Flamecrest family, and leading the entourage was none other than Aldrey Flamecrest, the successor of the family!

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Chapter 137: Set Off to Find the Blueprint

As the afternoon sun leaned toward the west, Dalahan City remained bustling, but Aldrian paid no mind to the commotion. He was now staying in the most luxurious inn in the city. King Douwin had offered him a place in the royal palace, but Aldrian had politely declined, citing reasons such as his desire for more freedom. However, his real motive was to meet with whomever he wished without the need to secretly infiltrate the royal palace.

At this moment, Aldrian sat cross-legged on the bed in his room, eyes closed, waiting in silence. A few minutes passed when suddenly, he sensed a disturbance in the flow of energy around him. He knew that someone had arrived and was fully aware of who they were.

"Come in," he said calmly. "I know you're there—two men in black cloaks."

A moment later, two figures materialized before Aldrian. Their faces were hidden behind black masks, with only their eyes visible. Even so, their eyes revealed astonishment. For this young man to detect them while they used their stealth technique—one they believed even Low Emperor-stage cultivators would struggle to notice.

Their leader had given them a new mission, one unlike any before. They were to travel to Forgeheart Kingdom and meet a young man named Aldrian Aster. Their leader's orders were strict, they were to obey every command he gave and assist him by any means necessary. Though confused by the importance placed on this mission, they had no choice but to carry it out.

"So, you are the First and Second Finger?" Aldrian's question snapped them out of their amazement.

The first figure responded promptly. "Yes, young master. I am the First Finger, and beside me is the Second. We are here by the leader's orders to assist you."

The First Finger knew exactly who Aldrian was. After all, he had been the one to take the assassination request from the Golden Swan Commerce's leader and hand it to their group. Yet, something had changed. Ever since their leader returned from the Demon Territory, he had been insistent that they keep their distance from Aldrian and anyone connected to him.

In the end, their attempts to eliminate the Yu family or any of Aldrian's closes one had been half-hearted at best. Eventually, their leader abandoned the mission entirely and refunded the spirit stones back to the Golden Swan Commerce. To this day, the First Finger and his companion remained curious about what had transpired between their leader and Aldrian, as their leader seemed determined not to mess with the young man.

"You guys, come here and lower your heads. I have something special for you," Aldrian said with a smile.

They obeyed without question. Aldrian placed his fingers on their foreheads, and a sudden sensation coursed through the First and Second Finger's head. They felt their very souls being bound by an invisible force. They realized what had happened, but it's already too late. Aldrian had cast the Everlasting Demonic Follower spell on them—enslaving their souls with a seal before they could react!

The First Finger's voice was sharp with rage as he demanded, "Young master, what is the meaning of this?" Both he and the Second Finger felt the same, and a growing killing intent brewed within them.

But before they could hear Aldrian's answer, a surge of extreme pain assaulted their souls. It was as though their very essence was being torn apart, forcing them to clutch their heads in a desperate attempt to alleviate the agony. Although they had been trained to withstand all kinds of torture, soul torture was different—after all, the soul is the most fragile part of any living being.

Aldrian let them suffer for a few seconds before finally releasing them from the torment. The First and Second Finger gasped for air, feeling a wave of relief after the unbearable pain had subsided. They looked at Aldrian, who was now smiling like a demon, and a deep sense of horror filled them. This young man could control their very lives with ease.

"So, this is why the leader changed! He's already become this young man's slave!" they both realized in shock.

"Yes," Aldrian confirmed. "Your leader is just like you. Consider yourselves lucky that I didn't kill you after all the assassination attempts your group made against me and my people. I made you slaves because you're still useful for my purposes."

The two fingers gritted their teeth in frustration. They wanted nothing more than to strangle Aldrian, but as soon as they thought of acting on their anger, the threat of that soul-crushing pain returned, making them quickly suppress their murderous intent. In silence, they bowed their heads, unwilling to speak further.

Aldrian watched them for a moment before finally addressing them again.

"You don't need to be upset about your life being in my hands. You see, I'm not an unreasonable master. If you do your job well, I'll even reward you," Aldrian said.

"Now, for your first assignment, I'll be leaving soon. While I'm gone, one of you will guard this place, especially the three women in the next three rooms to my right. Report to me if anything unusual happens. The other will blend into the city, become my eyes and ears, and look for any strange movements. Is that clear?"

The two fingers nodded silently.

"I didn't hear an answer," Aldrian said sharply.

"Yes, master!" they replied in unison.

"Good. Now, I expect you to do your jobs properly," Aldrian said, rising from the bed with a slight smile. "Because if you don't, it'll be... painful." He flashed them a knowing smile before vanishing from sight.

Stunned by his sudden disappearance, the two masked figures exchanged uneasy glances. They realized Aldrian had comprehended space laws and used teleportation to leave.

"Where on earth did this guy come from?" the Second Finger muttered. "His abilities are terrifying. To enslave Emperor-stage cultivators like us, while he's only at the High Earl stage? It doesn't make sense."

Suddenly, a thought struck the First Finger. "Two years ago, I checked his cultivation, and he was only at the Low Earl stage."

The Second Finger's eyes widened in shock. "You're telling me he broke through twice in just two years?!"

The First Finger hesitated, but then nodded. It was unbelievable, even to him. To advance twice within the Earl stage in two years was unheard of.

They stood in silence for a few moments, absorbing the reality of their situation, before letting out a sigh.

"Let's go," the First Finger finally said. "We have our tasks to complete."

Without another word, he vanished, utilizing his mastery of darkness laws to blend with the shadows, even in daylight. The Second Finger followed closely behind, disappearing just as swiftly.

Aldrian now stood on the side of a bustling road, with Xin Haotian at his side. They waited patiently until a short figure, cloaked in brown, approached them. When the figure revealed a bit of his hood, Duke Valiard's face came into view.

"I'm ready. Let's go," Duke Valiard said.

Aldrian and Xin Haotian nodded, and the three of them moved, blending into the crowd effortlessly.

"What are the places to the west with an estimated distance of more than 10,000 kilometers?" Aldrian asked Duke Valiard through voice transmission.

"To the west? That would be the Dukedom of Badin. Beyond that, there are smaller noble families like Marquess Ringad and Baron Buwan. Beyond them is the territory of the Buddhist sect," Duke Valiard replied.

"Then we'll need to use the teleportation station to get closer. The Dukedom of Badin will be our first stop. I can detect the blueprint more accurately once we're nearer," Aldrian responded.

With their plan set, they made their way toward the teleportation station. Moving discreetly, they were cautious not to draw any unwanted attention. Each of them had slightly altered their appearance to ensure they wouldn't be recognized, even by those who had already seen them arrive in the city. Their changed in disguises were also to erase their traces and confuse anyone who might try to follow them.

After arriving at the teleportation station, they quickly took a number and told the operator their destination: the Dukedom of Badin. As they waited for their number to be called, Aldrian suddenly felt a strange sensation, as if he had just missed something. He couldn't quite place it, but the feeling lingered.

Frowning slightly, he scanned his surroundings, his senses subtly extending outward to pick up any unusual activity. However, everything appeared normal. Nothing stood out as suspicious, yet the the feeling persisted.

When their number was called, Aldrian shook off the odd sensation and stepped toward the teleportation portal with Duke Valiard and Xin Haotian. But just before entering, he glanced back one last time.

"Strange... why do I feel like this?" he thought, before stepping into the portal.

What Aldrian didn't realize was that, if he had arrived just ten minutes earlier, he would have crossed paths with his father!

Chapter 138: Towards the West

The Dukedom of Badin is located in the western part of the Forgeheart Kingdom, close to the Buddhist sect territory. It is one of the four dukedoms in the kingdom and holds the greatest influence after the Valiards. The Badin family is one of the oldest in the kingdom, with a long history.

There was a time when their power and influence surpassed that of any noble family in the kingdom, to the point that even the royal family had to be wary of them. They were also capable of creating divine-grade artifacts in the past, which solidified their family's legacy in the kingdom's history.

However, after a long absence of divine-grade artifacts, the ascension of King Douwin Forgeheart, and the rise of the Dukedom of Valiard with the emergence of Mardred Valiard, the golden era of the Badin family came to an end. Their position was overtaken by the Valiards, whom they once regarded as competitors.

To this day, the Badin family still views the Valiards as their rivals and blames them for their decline. While they still hold significant influence in the kingdom, it is not to the extent of their golden era, when even the royal family had to heed their opinions.

At this moment, Duke Badin sat in his study. He had returned from the royal palace just a few hours earlier and had yet to change out of his formal attire. He reached under his desk and retrieved a long communication device from a secret vault. This device was part of a special line he had established to contact a certain individual.

After activating the device, a raspy male voice crackled through.

"It's surprising to hear from you so soon. Are you that eager to hear my voice?"

Duke Badin suppressed his disgust at the voice and its tone, replying calmly.

"There's a problem with our plan, and it's quite severe. If we don't address it, we're on the verge of failure."

"Ah, you must be referring to Duke Valiard, he can craft a mid-tier divine artifact, right? It's truly surprising, even our 'lord' had to make an adjustment," the raspy voice replied.

At the mention of "the lord," Duke Badin shuddered but quickly calmed his mind.

"So, what's the next step?" Badin asked.

"With so many powerhouses converging in the Forgeheart Kingdom, we'll need to tread carefully. But with that many in one place, they're like fish caught in a giant net. We've already planned something for this, you just need to continue as usual."

"What about Mardred? What are we going to do with him? Do we still need him?"

"Of course, we still need Mardred. He's vital to our plan since he's the one with the blueprint, and we can't afford to lose it."

Duke Badin frowned, lost in thought for a moment, before voicing his concern.

"What if the king becomes suspicious behind Mardred's disappearance and links it to us? Wouldn't that jeopardize our cooperation?"

"Why should I care about that? If our arrangement falls apart, you'll bear the consequences, not me."

Badin clenched his teeth, feeling humiliated. The man's words stung, but they were true. Their cooperation was purely for self-interest, and if exposed, the Badin family would suffer the most.

"Anyway, I have other matters to attend to. Until next time." With that, the connection was severed.

Duke Badin gripped the device in frustration, knowing he was powerless in this situation. He leaned back in his chair, his face showing the weight of his exhaustion.

"I wonder if accepting their help back then was the right choice after all..."

Badin City, the capital of the Dukedom of Badin, is the third-largest city in the Forgeheart Kingdom. The region boasts a long history of master blacksmiths being born there. Due to the recent news about a mid-tier divine-grade sword, the city shares in the hectic atmosphere as people traveling from the west either heading to the capital city of the kingdom or to Valiard City often have to transit here first.

When Aldrian, Xin Haotian, and Duke Valiard stepped out of the teleportation portal, they were greeted as usual by the bustling activities of the city. Though not as chaotic as Dalahan City, it was still clear that Badin City was alive with constant movement, illustrating that big cities never lack people.

"I can feel the blueprint more clearly from here! It's still quite far to the west, but I can pinpoint its exact direction," Aldrian sent through a voice transmission to the others.

"Let's move. While it's still light, we might be able to reach the blueprint's location or at least assess the situation," he added.

They then made their way toward a carriage rental shop since the city gate was quite far from the teleportation station. It would take them a few hours to reach the nearest gate.

While scanning the area for a suitable carriage rental, Aldrian noticed a group of people he had never seen before. They had bald heads, wore simple robes that left one shoulder exposed, and carried staffs on their backs.

"The monks of the Buddhist sect?" Aldrian thought.

It wasn't surprising to encounter a group of monks here, given that this dukedom was close to Buddhist sect territory. However, it was unusual for monks to appear outside their territory, as they typically lived like hermits. It was rare for them to venture outside unless something urgent or important was at hand.

Occasionally, a small number of monks would travel the world to spread the Buddha's enlightenment or to gain life experience. In any case, the sight of Buddhist monks was rare, and seeing a group of them here made Aldrian guess it had something to do with the Eternal Spirit.

"Truly, the mid-tier divine-grade artifact has the power to attract people from far and wide," Aldrian mused to himself.

After securing a carriage, Aldrian, Xin Haotian, and Duke Valiard continued their journey towards the nearest gate, located on the western edge of the city. They planned to stop there and continue on foot to maintain secrecy, as the carriage would be too conspicuous in the vast savannah that lay not far from the city.

After reaching the city gate and disembarking from the carriage, they continued on foot heading further away from the city. They wanted to give the impression of being wandering cultivators, blending in with the landscape and avoiding unnecessary attention. Only after they were far that Duke Valiard talked to them.

"Not far from here, we'll reach the savannah," Duke Valiard explained. "Beyond that is Dragon Back Mountain, part of the territories of Marquess Ringad and Baron Buwan, and eventually the Buddhist sect's territory."

"The place I sense is still quite far," Aldrian added, "but it's within 10,000 kilometers. Let's move quickly—we can fly and might reach the location before dark."

Duke Valiard was puzzled. "Fly? But what about—" he began to ask, curious about how Aldrian and this other man called Hua Lingtian, who was seemingly only at the Peak Marquess stage, would manage. Before he could finish, his eyes widened in shock as he watched Aldrian lift off the ground and soar into the sky. In that moment, Xin Haotian released the seal on his cultivation, revealing his true power at the Low Emperor stage.

Duke Valiard swallowed his question, realizing how unnecessary it was, shocked that they had been traveling with an Emperor stage cultivator all along. Without hesitation, he took flight to catch up with them. As they flew, Duke Valiard remained baffled by the fact that Aldrian could fly—a feat unheard of for someone at the Earl stage.

"Oh well, with Aldrian, everything seems unprecedented. I suppose I'll have to get used to it." He thought.

Aldrian smiled to himself, noticing that Duke Valiard refrained from questioning his ability to fly, which should have been impossible at his cultivation level. Though the technique drained his energy more quickly, unlike when he was inside his domain, where he had access to infinite energy, he had no other choice. To travel swiftly, he had to rely on his precise energy control and mastery, pushing his abilities to maintain flight.

His energy consumption was minimized by his mastery over energy control, but maintaining the same speed over a long period was still a challenging task for him.

"Maybe an hour at most, and then I'll need to rest to replenish my energy," Aldrian thought to himself.

This was his current limitation, but it was still much faster and effective than running or keep teleporting to the blueprint's location. For Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard, covering 7,000 kilometers with their flying speed was easy, but for now they continued flying for an hour matching Aldrian's pace, before stopping to allow him to recover his energy.

With his increased cultivation and stronger domain, Aldrian's energy replenished faster. However, due to the larger energy reserves that came with his advancing cultivation, it still took him around 15 minutes to fully recover, something that once again left Duke Valiard in awe.

After their brief rest, they resumed their flight, passing over the vast expanse of the savannah. In the distance, they could finally make out the towering peaks of Dragon Back Mountain.

Chapter 139: Dragon Back Mountain

The Dragon Back Mountain is a mountain range that spans the territories of three noble families of Forgeheart kingdom and the Buddhist sect. Its name comes from the shape of the mountain, resembling the back of a dragon with many scales. Due to its location between these four territories, it has also become a point of intersection between them.

Aldrian, Xin Haotian, and Duke Valiard land at the edge of the mountain region before proceeding on foot. Walking is preferable because the strong winds that sweep across the mountain range can make flying dangerous, even for those at the Emperor stage. If one isn't careful, they could be swept away by the currents.

The group finds themselves on a road with a steep cliff to the right. This road serves as a functional route connecting the four territories, but it is largely devoid of travelers. Thanks to teleportation stations, most people prefer those faster methods of travel over a time-consuming journey on foot. As a result, the road is mostly used by merchants transporting large quantities of goods or heavy packages.

Aldrian narrows his eyes, sensing the blueprint's location now much closer. He looks towards a higher point on the Dragon Back Mountain and points toward it.

"I can feel that the blueprint is in that direction."

Duke Valiard frowns, puzzled by the location Aldrian indicates.

"Are you sure, young master? To reach that place, we'd have to climb the mountain the old-fashioned way. It's one of the forbidden zone because it's so dangerous—even for an Emperor stage cultivator. The energy flow there is unusual, making it impossible to absorb the energy of heaven and earth. The wind currents are even more treacherous—not only strong enough to sweep away an Emperor stage cultivator, but they also form blade-like gusts that can slash through cultivators at that level. For my elder brother to have reached that point with his Middle Emperor stage, it would be a miracle if he survived."

Xin Haotian nodded in agreement with Duke Valiard's statement. The central part of the Dragon Back Mountain is one of the forbidden zones of the continent. Although it's not as famous as the Everlasting Silent Forest, due to its location in the southwestern part of the continent and the fact that it isn't frequently visited by many, this place has its own notoriety.

"I've tried to visit that area, and like Duke Valiard said, it's dangerous. The strong wind currents are enough to make even Peak Emperor stage cultivators hesitate to enter. Essentially it's impenetrable, if somehow Mardred Valiard managed to get there, we still wouldn't know if he's alive or dead," Xin Haotian explained.

"Also, that area is particularly strange. The disturbance in the energy flow seems unnatural, at least based on my observations," he added, using voice transmission to communicate with Aldrian.

"Why do you think that?" Aldrian asked.

"When I stepped into that extremely windy area, the energy flow became chaotic, making it incredibly difficult—almost impossible—to absorb the energy of heaven and earth. Thanks to my divine-grade cultivation technique, I was able to absorb some of it, but the wind also felt strange; its strength suddenly spiked when I entered. It made continuing to climb quite dangerous, but I managed to avoid the slashing winds thanks to my light laws."

"Oh? That's quite interesting. If what you said is true, then I can guess one thing that might have caused all of this."

Aldrian and Xin Haotian exchanged glances.

"A formation," they both thought simultaneously.

"That's what I thought, but what kind of person could create a giant formation that covers such a vast mountain? If that's true, how powerful must they be to accomplish something like that?" Xin Haotian asked.

"Extremely powerful. I need to see for myself what kind of formation this is; maybe we can learn something from it," Aldrian replied.

Duke Valiard observed Aldrian and Xin Haotian, who had fallen silent. He knew they were exchanging thoughts through voice transmission and felt curious about their secretive discussion, but he chose not to ask them about it. After a moment of contemplation, Aldrian finally made a decision.

"Let's move closer first and see what we can do. Let's set aside the status of Mardred Valiard for now; our priority is to reach the blueprint. After that, we can solve the mystery surrounding Mardred Valiard's disappearance."

Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard nodded in agreement. With their swift movement techniques, they approached the central region.

As Duke Valiard and Xin Haotian had said, the moment Aldrian stepped closer to the central region of the Dragon Back Mountain, the wind began to blow stronger. Their senses struggled to penetrate far into the area, as something obstructed their perception.

Aldrian decided to stop in this windy region. They hadn't fully entered the central area yet, but this place was sufficient for him to assess the situation.

"Yes, I can feel it. Although subtle, the flow of energy is becoming chaotic from this point. No wonder cultivators can't absorb energy beyond this area; even here, the flow feels like a wild horse that refuses to be caught," Aldrian observed, looking around at his surroundings. *"The chaotic energy doesn't follow any discernible pattern, and I can only imagine how chaotic it must be in the central region."*

After contemplating for a moment, he decided to establish his domain here. It would aid him in his investigation and serve as a safe haven. As he harmonized himself with nature and the universe, he successfully created his domain. However, he was stunned when he detected something.

"There are some people here," Aldrian said to Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard.

Two and a half kilometers from Aldrian, dozens of dwarves had gathered inside a simple base camp. Their cultivation levels were notably high, with an average at the

Earl stage and the highest among them at the Duke stage. Aldrian's group masked their entire presence, using the surrounding environment to conceal their auras.

They were now 700 meters from their target, a distance where they would usually be detected. However, due to the special conditions in this area and Aldrian's control over energy, they were undetectable even to the cultivator at the Emperor stage.

They kept a close watch on the group, which appeared to have been there for a long time. Traces in the surroundings indicated that many supplies had already been used. Aldrian, using his sense that spread throughout his entire domain, detected many presences in this region of mountain, as if creating a perimeter. While Aldrian was unsure of their intentions in forming some kind of barrier around the mountain, Duke Valiard was stunned when he noticed the symbol on their clothes.

"That's the Badin family's symbol. What the hell is the Badin family doing here?" he exclaimed to Aldrian and Xin Haotian. Even though this area was still considered part of the Badin dukedom territory, there was nothing here that warranted a base camp, especially since they seemed to be guarding something.

Aldrian focused on their activities, his domain now extending three kilometers, which was why he could detect the group as soon as he created his domain. Duke Valiard was once again amazed by this miraculous young man, who could sense things more than two kilometers away in such a chaotic energy environment. As for himself, he couldn't even sense anything beyond the one-kilometer mark due to the obstructions.

"Let's wait here. I want to observe their behavior and activities. After that, we can then 'nicely' ask them about their purpose," Aldrian suggested.

Duke Valiard and Xin Haotian nodded, they stay still for hours as they observed every movement, listened to every conversation, and noted every sign left behind. Day turned to night, and they finally caught a new development when they saw a fresh group approaching from the opposite side of their position.

After waiting for a while, he noticed another group, this time emerging from the mountain itself. Their cultivation levels ranged from Grand Duke stage, with the highest at Low King stage. Duke Valiard was stunned by this composition.

"What are they trying to accomplish with this lineup from the mountain? Are they attempting to climb it?" he wondered aloud, knowing full well that even those at the Emperor stage couldn't scale the mountain.

"Do they know the location of the blueprint? Are they trying to climb the mountain for that reason?" Duke Valiard asked Aldrian.

Aldrian smiled as he watched the incoming group. *"Why don't we ask them ourselves?"* he replied. Duke Valiard felt puzzled and then shocked when Aldrian stood up from their hiding place and walked toward the base camp.

Chapter 140: What Are They Doing in This Place?

A group of Dwarves in full armor walked with tired postures. They looked as though they had just experienced a long, grueling battle, their armor covered in dents and scratches. Some had even lost limbs, being carried on stretchers by their comrades.

At the forefront was a dwarf with the highest cultivation among them, at the Low King stage. His armor, though almost broken, emitted the unmistakable aura of a divine-grade artifact, setting it apart from the others. He wore a grim expression, and all the signs pointed to a costly failure.

"Sir Vandal, did it fail again?" asked a dwarf with the cultivation level of a Grand Duke, part of a new group that had just arrived.

Vandal looked at the dwarf and replied with exasperation, "What do you think?"

"Well, it seems we've failed again, and there are casualties," the man sighed. "It looks like the low divine-grade armor wasn't enough to breach the barrier. We might need to try using the middle divine-grade next time."

"What is Lord Badin thinking, wasting our family's legacy here? Today, he seems to be in a rush for some reason," Vandal said.

"I don't know. Ever since he came back from the royal palace, he's been more anxious. He's been pushing us to take action, even though he knows it'll cost us dearly if we proceed recklessly," the dwarf replied, looking at the now battered armor. It was a pity to see this masterpiece, one of the Badin family's legacy artifacts, so damaged.

"Let's bring another—" Before the man could finish his sentence, another voice interrupted.

"Wow, you guys are really something. To do this to low divine-grade armor... I wonder what you've been up to?"

Vandal and the other dwarf were shocked by the sudden appearance of the young man who was now inside their base camp. They had neither seen him approach nor heard voice. Instinctively, they attempted to release their techniques to subdue him, but their bodies refused to respond. They felt a sudden, overwhelming heaviness, and before they could react, the young man teleported in front of them and punched them in the gut.

The low divine-grade armor on Vandal merely let out a dull sound, absorbing the impact. However, the other dwarf wasn't so lucky—he instantly fainted and collapsed to the ground.

"As expected from a divine-grade artifact," Aldrian remarked, dodging an incoming punch from Vandal. "Even in such a pitiful state, it's still divine-grade."

Despite Aldrian's control over gravity, Vandal's sheer power and will as a King stage cultivator enabled him to retaliate. The gravity around him had increased a hundredfold, yet Vandal's strength allowed him to fight back.

Vandal's fist, which never reached its target, was caught mid-air by Aldrian. Without warning, Vandal's face met a direct punch from Aldrian, but with his hand firmly held, his body remained stationary. One punch wasn't enough. Aldrian punched him again, and then again, with relentless force. Finally, Vandal managed to shout through the pain.

"Spare... spare me, plea...se," he stammered, only then causing Aldrian to stop his assault. With a swift motion, Aldrian sealed Vandal's cultivation. Despite being a King stage cultivator for quite some time, Vandal now felt the crushing humiliation of defeat. The helplessness that came from his sealed cultivation left him no choice but to surrender.

Vandal, bruised and beaten, glanced around with his swollen eyes. What he saw left him in shock—his colleagues and subordinates had all been subdued by a man wearing a conical straw hat, of course he was none other than Xin Haotian. Vandal's entire group, which included dwarves at the Marquess, Duke, and Grand Duke stages, lay unconscious on the ground, felled with clean strikes and no visible external wounds.

The realization hit him like a hammer—this was a planned attack! He tried to look at Aldrian again but froze in disbelief when he saw another figure appear.

It was Duke Valiard.

"Duke Valiard! Did you plan this attack? What is the meaning of this?" Vandal shouted, his voice full of anger and confusion.

Duke Valiard ignored him, and said to Aldrian. "This is Vandal Badin, one of the guardians of the Badin family, and that man over there," he said, pointing to an unconscious dwarf, "is Mariz Badin, a trusted aide of Duke Badin."

Aldrian nodded as duke Valiard glanced over at Xin Haotian. "With this mess, they'll surely blame me and report it to His Majesty."

"Well, if they act as I suspect, we'll be the ones applying pressure instead. Even if they've done nothing wrong here, you don't need to worry—every witness here will forget ever meeting us." Aldrian replied.

They had refrained from killing any members of the Badin family to avoid complicating matters between Badin and Valiard family. However, that could change if the Badin family had any involvement in the disappearance of the blueprint. If it turned out a high-ranking noble family had conspired to steal one of the kingdom's secrets, it would cause a massive scandal.

Vandal, feeling enraged by being ignored, shouted once more at Duke Valiard, "Duke Valiard! You're making a huge mistake by coming here! You will face severe retribution for trespassing in the Badin Dukedom and attacking us!"

Aldrian looked at the dwarf and quickly deduced that whatever they were doing here was related to the blueprint located further up the mountain. Without hesitation, he placed his hand on Vandal's forehead and used a memory-reading technique. The moment he did, Vandal fell silent, his eyes rolling back as his body went limp.

Duke Valiard observed Aldrian's actions, waiting for the result. After a few moments, Aldrian finally released Vandal's head.

He then turned to Duke Valiard and Xin Haotian, who had already finished sweeping the area to eliminate any remaining "bugs" that could interfere with their operation.

"It's confirmed, they're here because of the blueprint." Aldrian said. "It seems they've been here for years, ever since the blueprint disappeared from the royal family's treasure vault. From Vandal's memories, the blueprint is with Mardred Valiard."

Duke Valiard trembled at the mention of his elder brother's name. "So my elder brother is...?"

Aldrian nodded. "Yes, they've been tracking him too, and he's up there," he said, pointing toward the heights of Dragon Back Mountain. "He has the blueprint. But as for how he managed to climb up there, I don't know—or rather, he doesn't know. There's something strange about your brother. However, I might be able to find someone who does."

Duke Valiard's worry deepened at this revelation. "*Elder brother, what happened to you? Why would you bring the blueprint to such a remote place?*"

Aldrian carefully sifted through the memories of each person present, hoping to find a clue about how Mardred had managed to reach the top of the mountain. However, the result was the same—they had no idea how he had done it. Still, Aldrian found something interesting within a few of the memories. The Badin family had been chasing Mardred, who at that time was in possession of the blueprint. When they reached this place, Mardred had somehow climbed the cliff of Dragon Back Mountain without being torn apart by the fierce winds that normally shredded anyone who tried.

The witnesses had gasped in shock, and when they attempted to catch him, the winds had brutally slashed the pursuers to pieces, costing them several members—including a few at the King stage and even one at the Emperor stage. Since then, the Badin family had established a perimeter around the mountain with the help of Marquess Ringad and Baron Buwan, nobles loyal to their faction.

They had tried every method imaginable to break through, but nothing had worked. They also suspected the region was under the influence of a powerful formation and had called in several formation masters, but all had failed to unravel the mystery.

Today, Duke Badin had ordered them to make another attempt, even at the cost of their legacy divine-grade artifacts, to test the waters. Until now, they had been reluctant to use divine-grade artifacts, not wanting to risk them in this strange place. They feared that the winds might grow stronger with each attempt and destroy the artifact.

Today had proven their fears justified—the wind had indeed intensified, nearly destroying the Low divine-grade armor they had brought. With their lord's orders and permission, they were now preparing to use a Middle divine-grade artifact in their next attempt.

Aldrian explained everything he had uncovered to Duke Valiard, detailing the movements of the Badin family and the strange situation surrounding Mardred Valiard, who had managed to climb the mountain unscathed. Now, he was curious about what had caused the formation to make Mardred an exception, allowing him to bypass the deadly winds.

"Now that we know your elder brother is up there, the question that remains is: why did he do that? The only way to find out is for us to climb the mountain and confront him," Aldrian explained to Duke Valiard.

"But how? How are we supposed to do what my elder brother did?" Duke Valiard asked, concerned.

Aldrian paused, deep in thought. *"What could be inside him that made the formation exclude him?"* He mulled over the possibilities, then suddenly an idea struck him.

"Could it be... the blueprint?" Aldrian's eyes narrowed as he looked toward the mountain. Without further hesitation, he stepped forward, preparing to approach the perilous region.