

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

#Chapter 141: The Dangerous Dragon Back Mountain - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 141: The Dangerous Dragon Back Mountain

Chapter 141: The Dangerous Dragon Back Mountain

Dragon Back Mountain is a harsh and unforgiving place, especially in its central region. While the Everlasting Silent Forest is feared for the mysterious disappearances of those who venture into it, Dragon Back Mountain is known for its treacherous landscape, filled with steep cliffs and deep gorge. Strange phenomena in the area have cemented its status as one of the continent's forbidden zones.

Aldrian that now walking toward the mountain's center, could now experience the dangers firsthand. The deeper he ventured, the more difficult and steep the terrain became, with the landscape growing increasingly unpredictable. He had to be cautious of sudden gusts of wind that could sweep him off the cliff's edge, and he also sensed the energy becoming more chaotic as he pressed on.

The wind began to sting his skin but thanks to his hardened body, he remained unscathed. Behind him were Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard, both using their energy to shield themselves from the harsh environment. They eventually reached a narrow path with a towering cliff on the left and a ravine on the right, only wide enough for them to walk in single line. The path was dimly lit by moonlight, creating an eerie atmosphere.

Without hesitation, they continued forward, taking slow and careful steps. The wind, blowing toward them from the front, grew stronger, making each step feel heavier. Despite this, Aldrian still refrained from using his energy to protect his body. He sensed something unusual as they ventured deeper into the mountain's central region.

"This wind contains a high level of comprehension of wind laws. It's truly amazing. This place could be a sanctuary for wind element cultivators, but the wind is so intense that they'd be shredded to pieces before they could comprehend anything," Aldrian thought.

"Letting the wind hit my body, I can feel the energy and its laws. It's truly useful for increasing my own understanding of the wind element." He glanced at the deep ravine beside him, its bottom obscured by darkness.

When they finally made it past the narrow path, they reached a flat rock field at the edge of a gorge. There, they spotted an artificial land bridge spanning the chasm. The bridge was wide enough for three adults to stand side by side, which would seem ordinary anywhere else.

The problem was that the wind here seemed alive. As soon as it sensed approaching life, it grew even stronger. Xin Haotian had already formed a thin shield around himself using his mastery of light laws, keeping him protected. As for Duke Valiard, he had activated his peak heaven-grade defensive artifact, layering it with his own energy.

The sound of the wind slashing through the air was terrifying, its power reaching the peak of the King stage and continuing to rise. Aldrian felt all of this with an eerily calm expression, unfazed despite the situation. His clothes were already torn in several places, and blood began to trickle from multiple cuts across his body, yet he remained still.

Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard both glanced at Aldrian, wondering—what would he do next?

When the strength of the wind nearly reached the Emperor stage, Aldrian finally activated his defensive artifact, a peak heaven-grade armor capable of defending against even low Emperor stage cultivators. As he activated the armor, his mind wandered to Mardred Valiard, who had passed through this treacherous region and reached the cliff that Aldrian could now see from where he stood.

"If the blueprint had something to do with how Mardred managed to pass this massive formation, then... is the blueprint like a key to entering this place?" Aldrian wondered. "But how did Mardred know it would be useful here? Did someone tell him about the blueprint's significance, or... no, I need to put that aside for now. If the blueprint is the key to bypassing the formation, doesn't that mean he might be the only one who can enter this place? If so, we'll have no solution to our problem."

"The formation also enormous. It's similar kind to the one in the core region of the Forest of Despair, the nature formation, but on a much grander scale with wind laws. I can't use the same method I did in the Forest of Despair because of how massive this is."

While Aldrian continued to mull over the situation, the wind's strength escalated beyond the level of a low Emperor stage and approached the mid-Emperor stage. Realizing the situation was growing more dangerous, Aldrian unleashed his golden energy to shield himself from the onslaught of the wind. Comprehending anything under these conditions was now impossible.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, Aldrian froze, stunned by what he saw. The wind, which had been raging fiercely, seemed to split when it came into contact with his golden energy. Focusing intently, he noticed something shocking.

"The wind... it's avoiding my golden energy! If my energy has this effect, then..." Aldrian glanced at Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard before extending his golden energy to cover them as well.

Both men were stunned. The overwhelming pressure from the wind vanished the moment Aldrian's golden energy enveloped them. They had been on the verge of retreating, especially as Duke Valiard's armor had already begun to show signs of damage under the middle Emperor-level wind.

"I'm not sure why, but it seems my energy can neutralize the wind here," Aldrian said calmly. "Stay close to me, and we can move forward."

With Aldrian leading the way, they resumed their journey across the bridge, which stretched 700 meters. For cultivators this distance would normally be trivial, but in the face of the relentless slashing wind, crossing it became an almost impossible challenge.

The bridge bore witness to past failures—bloodstains marked various sections, and shattered artifacts lay scattered, remnants of those who had tried to pass before them. Aldrian suspected these were left behind by members of the Badin family or other unfortunate souls who had dared to venture this far.

"What a poor bunch." He thought.

After crossing the bridge, they arrived on the other side of the gorge, facing a vast, rocky field. The field was scarred with deep slash marks, testaments to the power of the wind that raged through this area. Bones and fragments of skulls were embedded in the rocks, further signs of the deadly force that had claimed many lives. Beyond the field lay the towering cliff, their next challenge before reaching their destination, where Aldrian could sense the blueprint's presence.

This place felt like a region of carnage, littered with scattered remains, as if the wind itself had torn the bodies apart. The aura of death was thick here, lingering in the air. Aldrian then sensed something new—something he'd only glimpsed in his visions but had never encountered in real life. The death aura that had settled over this place for so long had created an ominous energy, something intangible yet deeply unsettling. As Aldrian tapped into this strange energy, he felt as though he was glimpsing into the essence of death itself.

His natural curiosity urged him to comprehend this eerie energy, but he had more pressing matters at hand. Determined to return and comprehend further another time, he pressed on. By the time they reached the base of the towering cliff, the wind had intensified to the strength of a peak Emperor stage. If Aldrian withdrew his golden energy now, it would mean the end for all three of them.

Aldrian glanced at Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard.

"Now we need to climb this cliff," Aldrian said. "I'm not sure what awaits us as we climb, or what lies beyond, so be careful."

Duke Valiard looked uneasy. "Young master, I feel like I'm just a burden to you. I should head back and wait. You're wasting your energy by dragging me along."

"You're not a burden," Aldrian replied. "Besides, don't you want to meet your elder brother?"

"But—"

"Just let him help us," Xin Haotian interjected. "We just need to take care of ourselves. Aldrian seems unbothered by all this, haven't you noticed? Look at him."

"Yes, Duke Valiard, you should be as shameless as him," Aldrian teased with a smirk. "Like I said, don't worry. Let's get climbing."

Without waiting for a reply, Aldrian began ascending the cliff, with Xin Haotian following closely, ignoring the sarcastic remark. Duke Valiard sighed but joined them. For cultivators at their level, climbing the cliff was a relatively simple task, especially with Aldrian's golden energy shielding them from the harsh winds—the most dangerous element in this region.

Aldrian's energy consumption remained highly efficient, and thanks to his large dantian, which held far more energy than what was typical for someone at the High Earl stage, he didn't need to replenish it until now. And if the need arose to replenish his energy, he could do so without difficulty. When he had tested it earlier, he found that the chaotic energy in this area could be absorbed as easily as any other.

They climbed for at least five hours, with only the pale moonlight illuminating their path. When they finally reached a flat patch of land, Aldrian stopped, although they weren't at the mountain's peak yet. Before them is an artificial cave carved into the side of the cliff. Its walls were polished with a kind of white stone, but cracks lined its surface, suggesting it had been abandoned for a long time.

"We're close," Aldrian said, his eyes fixed on the cave. "The blueprint is inside."

Chapter 142: The Origin

The moment Aldrian, Xin Haotian, and Duke Valiard entered the cave, it was as though a transparent shield blocked the wind. The strong gusts couldn't penetrate inside, and the terrifying sound of slashing wind also stopped. The three of them glanced back at the entrance, noticing an invisible barrier that allowed them through while blocking the external disturbances. Aldrian was curious about how it worked, wondering what mechanism allowed them to enter while keeping other elements out.

He then walked deeper into the cave, and as they took a few steps, the crystals on both sides of the path began to emit light, illuminating the road ahead. The path was quite long, and they remained cautious, wary of potential traps or signs of living creatures. Despite the serene and silent atmosphere, they knew better than to let their guard down.

After about 30 minutes of walking, they came upon a set of double golden doors, each 10 meters wide and 4 meters tall, with a symbol engraved in the center.

"This is the same symbol as the one on the box," Duke Valiard remarked. They attempted to push the doors open, but they wouldn't budge. They searched for clues to unlock the door, but their efforts were fruitless. They didn't want to force the doors open with destructive techniques, fearing it could trigger something dangerous.

As they continued searching for a solution, Aldrian examined the symbol on the door again, connecting the dots in his mind.

"If Mardred managed to pass through these doors without forcing them open, there's only one possible 'key' he could have used—the blueprint," Aldrian deduced.

"Mardred Valiard was able to overcome many obstacles on Dragon Back Mountain alone, and the blueprint is the most suspicious item connected to his success. That the blueprint has a special feature that allows the one carrying it to bypass the formations here. No wonder the Badin family couldn't figure out how Mardred managed to climb all the way up."

Aldrian released his golden energy and stepped closer to the door. *"If the blueprint and my golden energy have the same effect, then what about this?"* He placed his hand, now glowing with golden energy, on the symbol etched into the door. The symbol glowed for a moment, followed by the sound of cracking stone as the doors began to open slowly.

"It worked!" Aldrian smiled.

Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard, initially stunned, quickly moved closer to the now-opening door. To their surprise, beyond the door wasn't a room but a vast hall. Both men were awestruck at the sight of such a grand structure hidden within the harsh mountain. It raised a question in their minds: who built this? And for what purpose? They glanced at Aldrian, only to see him deep in thought.

"What's wrong, young master?" Duke Valiard asked.

Aldrian looked up. "The blueprint... I can feel it here, in this hall where we're standing."

Duke Valiard and Xin Haotian scanned their surroundings and extended their senses, searching for anything unusual. Yet all they found was an empty hall. The only feature that stood out was the same giant symbol at the far end of the hall.

"We're not finding anything," Xin Haotian said, perplexed.

"That's why I'm thinking... is there a trick here?" Aldrian replied, but he also felt a sense of déjà vu creeping up on him.

"Why does this hall seem so familiar? Where have I seen this before?—oh?"

Suddenly, it came back to him—his vision from before he left the secret realm. A vision he had nearly forgotten, where he saw a giant bone at the center of a massive hall, and he felt insignificant within it.

He had suppressed the calling from that place for a long time, and it had remained still. But now, remembering it again, that calling returned with full force, urging him to go there as soon as possible. Aldrian steadied himself, forcing the feeling back down and calming his mind.

"I remember now! This hall—it's the same as the one from my vision, though this one is much smaller. To think I'd find a clue here." Aldrian scanned his surroundings, walking around to inspect the hall thoroughly.

He checked every corner, leaving no stone unturned, but still found nothing. Frustration crept in as he began to ponder.

"Why did the blueprint lead me here if there's nothing to find? Was my assumption wrong? Could the symbol have guided me to this place for another reason, rather than to the blueprint? But from the memories of those people the blueprint is here."

As he wrestled with the thought, a new idea struck him.

"What if this symbol was never meant to reveal the blueprint's location, but instead, to lead me here?"

Aldrian approached the giant symbol at the far end of the hall and gently traced its surface.

"The symbol that illuminates everything, even encompassing yin and yang. But what does it truly represent?" He closed his eyes, focusing on the symbol and channeled his golden energy into it.

Suddenly, the symbol blazed with a blinding golden light, forcing Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard to shield their eyes. Time seemed to freeze for all of them as the radiant light filled the entire hall.

In that instant, Aldrian's mind was transported to a place of absolute darkness—different from his being's essence. As he tried to make sense of it, a familiar voice echoed through the void, the same voice he had heard not long ago, a voice of that 'figure'.

"This was your past destiny... but what about your future?"

Unbeknownst to Aldrian, his physical body in the hall had shifted to another place. When he opened his eyes, he found himself in a beautiful garden, with vast grasslands stretching toward the horizon. Looking around, Aldrian quickly realized that this was the same place he had seen when he first glimpsed the 'divine sword,' except now there was someone else here.

"Is this... a secret realm?" Aldrian wondered.

He walked towards the figure sitting cross-legged, facing the sword platform. As he got closer, he froze, stunned by the resemblance the figure bore to Duke Valiard.

"Is he... Mardred Valiard?" he thought, and when he looked into the figure's information, it confirmed his suspicion.

Mardred Valiard

Age : 87,043 years

Race : Dwarf

Cultivation : Middle Emperor

Cultivation technique : The Energy of Creation's Flow

Attack techniques : Battle Hammer Strike, Hammer of Destruction, The Dawn of Inferno, Hammer of Inferno.

Defense technique : Earth Wall

Movement technique : None

Supporting technique : None

The features of the figure's face were strikingly similar to Duke Valiard's, with the only difference being that Mardred looked far more mature and older. At the moment, Mardred sat with his eyes closed, seemingly lost in his own world, unaware of Aldrian's

presence. Aldrian then shifted his gaze to a floating sword—the same sword from his vision.

The Origin Sword

Description: The origin of all swords.

Level: --

Reading the sword's description sent a shiver down Aldrian's spine.

"The origin of all swords? What the...?! Is this the first sword that ever existed?" he thought, stunned.

No wonder the process to create this sword was so grueling, taking the dwarves millions of years, and yet they still couldn't complete it! And after he absorbed the knowledge from the symbol, he also knew that the dwarves were destined to fail because...

"The true knowledge required to create this sword lies within that symbol. The blueprint merely shows how to craft the sword's outer appearance, not the true sword itself, the Origin Sword should be of higher grade than divine," he realized. *"And that symbol... it could only be activated by me, which means..."* Aldrian's eyes narrowed with the realization. *"I'm the only one who can create this sword."*

He stepped closer to the sword and carefully examined it, noting the severe damage it had sustained. When his hand touched the hilt, the sword trembled, and a man's voice echoed in his mind.

"You've finally arrived. I'm glad you've made it this far." Aldrian froze, stunned by the sudden voice. He wanted to ask something, but the sword continued speaking.

"This may be our last meeting, so please listen carefully to my final message. I am part of the past, and you hold the future. If you've reached this point, then you already have the answer or are at least close to it, even if you haven't realized it yet. Tell me, young man, what is your name?"

"My name is Aldrian Aster," he responded, still in shock that this damaged sword still possessed consciousness.

"Aldrian Aster... just as it was foretold, even though you are separated by time, you are still you. But now, you've fully shaped your own destiny." The sword thought to itself.

Suddenly, the sword began to crack at the edges.

"It looks like my time has come. To be honest, I wanted to follow your journey and see how you return to your place when you finally find your answer, but natural fate has consumed me in the end. All beings will eventually meet their end, including me."

The cracks spread rapidly along the blade, reaching the hilt.

"May the glory of the ultimate ruler always follow you." With those parting words, the sword crumbled into pieces, disintegrating before Aldrian's eyes.

Aldrian felt an unexpected pang of sadness in his heart as he looked down at the remnants of the so-called "Origin Sword." He sighed, his emotions stirred by the loss of something important. Suddenly, he sensed movement behind him. Turning around, he saw Mardred Valiard slowly opening his eyes.

Chapter 143: Mardred Valiard

Mardred Valiard blinked several times as he opened his eyes, trying to adjust his sight. He felt disoriented at first, but as he finally focused on his surroundings, he was stunned to see a figure before him—a person, or perhaps a human. Though still confused, he asked,

"Who are you? Where am I?"

He narrowed his eyes now and then, clearly feeling some sort of headache. He massaged his temple to ease the pain. Aldrian, standing nearby, looked at Mardred with a confused expression. From Mardred's question, it seemed like he didn't know how he had arrived here.

"You don't know how you got here?" Aldrian asked.

Mardred glanced at Aldrian and replied,

"It feels like I was just in the royal palace's treasure vault. That bastard, Badin..." He suddenly recalled something and jumped to his feet.

"That bastard! We need to stop him! He's trying to steal the blueprint of the divine sword!" He looked around in a panic, searching for an exit. But the sudden appearance of a golden energy wrapping around his body seemed to calm his frantic mind.

"Relax, Sir Mardred. Please, calm down and tell me what happened. And the blueprint—isn't it with you now?" Aldrian asked.

"With me? No...the blueprint disappeared right in front of me. That's when that bastard Badin showed up with his men and said he was going to take it."

"Can you tell me the details so I can help you?" Aldrian asked. But Mardred only looked at him suspiciously.

"Before that, who are you, and where am I?" Mardred asked.

"I'm Aldrian Aster. His Majesty, King Douwin, appointed me to find the blueprint, but also to look for you, Sir Mardred. You're currently in the depths of Dragon Back Mountain," Aldrian explained.

Hearing this, Mardred's eyes widened.

"Why am I here in the forbidden zone? Wait, no—like I said, the blueprint isn't with me. That bastard surely took it."

"No, Duke Badin doesn't have the blueprint. He's even surrounded the mountain, hoping to capture you and recover it."

Mardred stood stunned.

"But—"

"That's why, Sir Mardred, I need you to tell me everything. What happened the last time you saw the blueprint, and how did you end up here?"

Mardred took a deep breath before answering.

"When the phenomenon of the Dragon and the Phoenix suddenly appeared in the sky, I felt a wave of unease directed toward the treasure vault. I went to investigate and found that bastard Badin already inside the Divine Sword Hall., about to enter the blueprint chamber. When I confronted him, he threw something at me—an artifact that disrupted my energy. I couldn't use my powers. There were five others with him, people I didn't recognize. Three were at the king stage, and two were emperor stage. They were strong."

He paused, his eyes narrowing as he recalled the events.

"Luckily, I always carry one of the Valiard family's legacy artifacts, the Storm Hammer—a low-grade divine weapon. I managed to thwart whatever they were planning before they could enter the chamber."

Mardred inhaled deeply, gathering his thoughts.

"After that, I grabbed the blueprint and intended to warn the royal guards. But suddenly, the blueprint vanished in a flash of golden light, and I blacked out. It felt like I fell into a long dream. I don't know what happened after that. I thought that bastard, Dovani Badin, successfully took the blueprint."

Aldrian was momentarily stunned but finally pieced together the situation.

"Duke Badin thinks Mardred has the blueprint and ran here, while Mardred believes the blueprint disappeared because of Duke Badin," he thought, before asking, "You don't remember anything after that? Is that the last memory you have?"

Mardred furrowed his brow, trying to recall something.

"Ah, yes, there was a voice... faint, but I heard it. It said, 'You will be one of the people to open the path for 'his' return.' That's the only thing I remember before I blacked out."

Aldrian glanced around, deep in thought, processing the new information.

"So, the moment he blacked out, someone or something took control of his body and led him here? Who could do such a thing without being detected in the royal palace, and who knows the secrets of this place?" Aldrian pondered, a figure flashing in his mind. A figure he saw when he touched the symbol in the golden box.

"Is it him? The one who took control of Mardred's body and brought him here?" He didn't dismiss the possibility, as the coincidences in this case were too many to ignore.

"The people who will open the path for 'his' return'—could 'he' be referring to me? I've been told many times that I will return to my place. But where is that place?" Aldrian thought, his face then turning solemn as he remember something. His tone became serious.

"Do you have any connection to the devils, even if it's just a little?"

Mardred was stunned, but his expression quickly shifted to anger.

"What are you talking about? Why are you suddenly bringing up the devils? If I had even the slightest connection to those evils, I'd kill myself before allowing such disgrace! Are you accusing me of having ties to the devils?!"

Aldrian observed Mardred's furious expression and nodded slightly to himself.

"He's telling the truth," Aldrian thought.

He then relaxed his posture and expression.

"Alright, Sir Mardred, there's no need to be angry. I was only asking. To be honest, there's been a growing problem on the continent related to the devils, and we suspect there may be a traitor among the dwarves. With you being here, I just needed to make sure you weren't involved. Don't worry, I trust you."

Mardred's angry expression shifted to a frown.

"What kind of problem? Have things changed that much while I've been here? And how much time has passed?"

"You've been here for fifteen years," Aldrian replied calmly.

"I see... so it's fifteen—" Mardred's eyes widened as the realization hit him.

"Fifteen years?! Are you serious?"

"Yes, Sir Mardred. You disappeared fifteen years ago. A lot has happened since then."

Mardred froze as if turned to stone, before dropping his body and lying on his back. He stared up at the sky, unsure if what he was seeing was real or not. Aldrian stood by, giving Mardred a moment to absorb the shock.

After a few minutes, Mardred sat up again and looked at Aldrian.

"So, I guess His Majesty thinks I took the blueprint and fled, and that bastard Badin took advantage of the situation?"

"Yes, you're correct. The condition of the Valiard family has been under immense pressure since your disappearance. However, you don't need to worry; thanks to His Majesty, the Valiard family has had enough time to navigate their troubles. As for the details, we need to get out of this place first, it's not suitable for telling such a story. Moreover, your little brother is waiting for you outside," Aldrian said.

"Darvin is outside?" Mardred's eyes lit up. "Then let's go! I want to meet him."

He glanced at Aldrian, who was looking around the area, seemingly unsure before finally understood the problem.

"You don't know how to get out?" Mardred asked.

"I don't know," Aldrian admitted.

"Then how did you get in?"

"Getting in was one thing, but I haven't found the way out yet. If my guess is correct, we're inside a secret realm," Aldrian explained. "Wait, let me think for a moment."

He walked back towards the sword platform, eyeing the shattered pieces of the sword for a moment with a sigh, before focusing on the platform.

"This is our only clue to getting out. If channeling my energy into the symbol brought me here, then this platform must also hold the key to our escape."

Aldrian examined the four symbols carved on each side of the platform, as well as the spot where the sword used to float. A similar symbol was engraved on the floor, and his instincts told him that he could inject his energy there to activate the exit.

"Sir, could you stand on the platform? I think I've figured out the way out of here."

Mardred stood up, stretching his stiff muscles.

"Ah... fifteen years of sitting still. My body feels so rigid," he groaned, walking toward the platform to stand beside Aldrian.

Once ready, Aldrian placed his hand on the symbol etched into the floor and began channeling his energy. The symbol glowed with a bright, golden light, causing Mardred to shield his eyes. In an instant, their bodies vanished from the platform, leaving the serene beauty of the secret realm in silence once more.

When Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard saw Aldrian channel his energy into the large symbol, a blinding light erupted, forcing them to shield their eyes. As the light faded, they were left speechless, staring at Aldrian—now standing with another person. Duke Valiard's eyes widened, trembling as they focused on the man's face. With a voice heavy with emotion, he said shakily.

"Elder brother?"

Mardred, still disoriented by the sudden change in location, was momentarily taken aback by the voice. Though it felt as if he had heard it not long ago, he knew from Aldrian that, for his younger brother, fifteen years had passed. A gentle smile formed on his lips as he looked at Duke Valiard.

"I'm sorry for making you worry. I'm back," he said.

As the two brothers reunited, Aldrian turned his gaze toward Xin Haotian, sending a voice transmission.

"It seems like the region of the mountain is rather lively at the moment."

Chapter 144: The Unexpected Situation

30 minutes ago.

The sky was painted in a purple hue as the sun prepared to rise on the eastern horizon. At the edge of the central region, where the Badin family had established their base camp, all the dwarves incapacitated by Aldrian and Xin Haotian were now awake.

Initially, confusion and disorientation clouded their minds as they found themselves lying on the ground, sensing that something was amiss but unable to pinpoint what it was.

Vandal, one of the guardians of the Badin family was among those who had awakened. He spread his senses, searching for any abnormalities. Something felt amiss, but he couldn't pinpoint what it was. He glanced at Mariz Badin, whose expression indicated deep thought.

"Do you feel it? I don't know what just happened or how we ended up lying on the ground, but I seriously can't fathom what I'm missing. It's like I've lost something, but I can't understand what it is," Vandal said.

"Yes, I feel it too. I don't know why, but something strange happened here. Didn't we just talk a while ago? Why are we suddenly lying on the ground? And it's not just us; everyone here is in the same state," Mariz replied.

"Also, I feel a sharp pain in my gut, and all these people seem to be hurting at the back of their heads. Do you think that's a clue?" he added.

They looked around at the dwarves, who seemed lost and bewildered about what had just happened. After a moment of confusion, the dwarves resumed their tasks, but it wasn't long before a new group arrived at the base camp. This group consisted of a dozen individuals, all of whom were above the Duke stage; four of them were at the Emperor stage.

The two Emperor stage members were notably taller than the others. They wore cloaks that concealed their bodies and their facial features. The dwarves quickly deduced that these two were humans, leaving them to wonder about their identities. One of the hooded men had a small bird perched on his shoulder.

Leading this new group was Duke Badin himself, his face solemn as if he had just received important news. Upon arriving at the base camp, he approached Valdan and asked, "How is it? How did the operation go?"

"Nothing significant, my lord. While we made progress and nearly crossed the bridge, the low divine armor I wore was on the verge of breaking. If I hadn't decided to retreat at that point, I would have been shredded to pieces. The power of the wind is so strong that I doubt the low divine armor can withstand it any longer," Valdan replied.

Duke Badin gritted his teeth at this news. "I've brought the Middle Heaven Armor here; use it and try again. We are running out of time. The king has already started to suspect something regarding Mardred's disappearance, and sooner or later, he will find his way here."

Valdan sighed at the reckless order from his lord but complied, donning the Middle Divine Grade armor. One of the hooded humans observed closely, his eyes shining at the sight of the armor.

"Before you go, has anyone or anything unusual appeared here? Is there something strange?" Duke Badin suddenly asked Mariz and Valdan.

The two exchanged glances before looking back at Duke Badin. "Actually, yes. We're not sure why, but it seems we just woke up lying on the ground. We felt something strange, like something was missing, but we can't pinpoint what it is."

"Do you see Duke Valiard here?" Duke Badin asked, his face solemn.

"Duke Valiard? No, we don't. Why would he be here? He has no interest in this place, right?"

Duke Badin pondered for a moment before turning to the hooded man. *"What do you think?"* he asked through voice transmission.

"It's some kind of memory-erasing technique. They have gaps in their memories, which is why they feel something is off but can't identify the problem. It's like searching for a problem that was never there because of those missing memories—they will never find it," the man replied, his voice matching the raspy tone from the communication artifact Duke Badin had used earlier.

"Are you telling me that Duke Valiard can use a memory-erasing technique?" Duke Badin narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"No, obviously not. To use this technique, you must have a strong comprehension of both the internal structure of the body and the mindscape. You also need substantial energy to erase specific memories. It requires seamless control; if something goes wrong, you could leave the victim mentally impaired. It's far more difficult than just reading memories, and from what I know, Duke Valiard lacks a strong understanding of either the internal body or mindscape," the hooded man explained.

"Then is there someone with him who could have helped? We even lost the tracer in this area," Duke Badin recalled Aldrian and his group. *"Could that unknown group be the ones assisting him?"*

"Most likely, yes. I must say, I'm quite surprised that Duke Valiard or someone from that group was able to detect and erase our tracer powder. Our spies inside Duke Valiard's mansion placed the tracker powder on his attire, which should have always stuck to him. Now, even my Red Wing Sparrows can't track it. It should have been impossible to remove with their abilities. I truly underestimated them."

"What are we going to do now? We don't know their plans or what they've done here. I have a bad feeling about this," Duke Badin replied.

"Relax, aren't we already here because we detected that Duke Valiard moved into this area? Whatever he does will be tantamount to suicide. Even if he somehow knows that his elder brother is here, it doesn't matter. From the footprints they left heading toward the central part of the mountain, they haven't come out yet. If they entered that area, with its dangerous environment, they won't survive. But if they somehow do, whatever they attempt is bound to fail. This entire area is under siege and has become our playground, and there's no way for them to escape from here."

"Are we really going to kill him if we find him?" Duke Badin asked.

"Of course, and you'll have to bear the responsibility of this action," the man said, a creepy smile spreading across his face as he looked at Duke Badin.

Duke Badin gritted his teeth, desperately wanting to kill this man, but he knew he needed his help. He snorted and turned to Vandal, who was waiting for Duke Badin's instructions.

"I've brought additional personnel to help you guard this mountain. We suspect that Duke Valiard is infiltrating this area with some unknown group, and it seems they've already knocked you out," he said.

Vandal's eyes widened. "What? How is that possible?"

"Whatever the case, you just need to strengthen security here. I'll handle the rest," Duke Badin replied tersely.

With all the arrangements in place, the area surrounding the central region of Dragon Back Mountain became bustling with members of the Badin family and the unknown group.

Aldrian could sense the many new arrivals within his domain. Their numbers were significant, making him wonder just how important the blueprint or Mardred was to these people. As he continued to observe, he discovered something intriguing, an important piece of evidence related to his investigation into the devils in the Forgeheart Kingdom.

"So the Badin family is in cahoots with the devils?" he thought.

Despite the devils hiding their energy and aura with some artifact, Aldrian could still detect their presence within his domain. Two of them, particularly close to Duke Badin, radiated a dangerous aura.

Since he was far from his domain, Aldrian couldn't see their information using his Eyes of the Heaven from his current position. In moments like this, he wished his domain covered all areas so he could read people's information from anywhere.

"We have a situation at the base camp we visited," Aldrian communicated. "It seems the Badins brought reinforcements, and some of them are devils."

Xin Haotian's eyes widened as he looked at Aldrian.

"The Badins are betrayers? Do you think they're connected to that mysterious artifact hiding the devils' presence?"

"I think so, too. So we need to return there after we're done here, we can't let the evidence escape." A smile crept onto Aldrian's face. He felt he could gain something significant from the unexpected appearance of the devils.

He glanced at Duke Valiard and Mardred, who were deeply engaged in conversation, reveling in their brotherly bond after fifteen years apart. However, Aldrian wasn't in a hurry now that he'd found this place. He could take his time to explore and check for anything useful. As for the Badins and the devils? For now, he would leave them be.

Chapter 145: His Own Path and His Own Destiny

The once-abandoned hall, long forgotten by time, had now become a temporary place to stay for Aldrian and his group. Despite a few cracks here and there, the structure still stood strong. Aldrian continued to inspect the symbol on the wall—the very symbol that had led him to this secret realm. The realm itself was vast, but from his observations, it seemed to serve only as a resting place for the sword, with little else of interest.

If that was the case, then this secret realm might be artificial, likely created by a high-level cultivator with mastery over space laws. Based on Aldrian's understanding, this was a cultivator's domain, one formed by a space element cultivator.

Starting from the Duke stage, cultivators can create their own domain, shaping the surrounding environment to suit their preferences and can giving them an advantage in battle. A Duke stage cultivator who cannot create a domain is not considered to have reached their full potential, as their power remains incomplete.

The first challenge many Dukes face in creating a domain is deciding what kind of domain they want to build and what properties they want to incorporate. Since a Duke can possess multiple elemental affinities, they must choose whether to create a domain based on their strongest laws or develop multiple domains.

The second challenge is the immense resources required. Creating a strong domain demands not only a high level of comprehension but also vast amounts of energy. To

achieve this, cultivators need resources that align with their preferred element, which can quickly deplete their wealth.

For all these reasons, not every Duke can wield a domain. Throughout his journey, Aldrian had encountered many opponents above the Duke stage, and some of them had domains.

Now, why does Aldrian suspect that this secret realm is the domain of a cultivator? A secret realm can form naturally due to spatial disturbances—similar to natural phenomena—or it can be created artificially. In the case of an artificially created secret realm, only cultivators who have comprehended space laws can achieve this. For these cultivators, the secret realm essentially becomes their domain, which is a unique trait of those with an affinity for space elements.

However, not all space element cultivators can create a secret realm. To do so, they must possess an exceptionally high level of comprehension and an immense amount of energy. Throughout the history of the Barisan continent, legendary cultivators have been known to create secret realms imbued with their own desired properties.

For example, a space element cultivator from the past created a secret realm in the Vindas Empire, but this realm was the realm of fire, containing profound insights into fire laws. This was because the cultivator's secondary affinity was fire, and he wished to build his own sanctuary using both elements.

Attempting to force the creation of a secret realm without the necessary comprehension or energy often leads to failure—or worse, disaster. Such an endeavor can trigger a spatial storm, capable of destroying vast areas and killing the cultivator who attempted to create the domain.

Even if a cultivator successfully forms a secret realm, the size and stability of each realm can vary. Some secret realms are expansive, while others are small. Some may last for millions of years, while others only endure for a few months.

What about secret realms that contain life, with their own self-sustaining world, blue skies, and the cycle of day and night? Most cultivators on the continent believe that such realms can only occur naturally.

But what if a space element cultivator's domain could possess these features? Inside the secret realm in this place, Aldrian observed a vast and beautiful green garden, with a gentle breeze blowing. The only thing that truly stood out was the sword platform.

Aldrian's expression turned solemn as he pondered the immense power and comprehension of the individual who had created this secret realm. How powerful must one be to construct a realm this vast, complete with its own life and a periodic cycle of day and night? Furthermore, this realm seemed ancient, intertwined with the formation that had turned Dragon Back Mountain into a forbidden zone. If he connected the dots,

it became clear that this place was a crucial intersecting point within the larger formation, and he could sense that the formation's eye was not far from here.

It made sense. If the entire Dragon Back Mountain had been made forbidden just to protect this place, then the effort behind it was monumental. This place seemed to serve one purpose: to wait for someone. Based on what the unknown figure and the sword had indicated, it appeared that someone was him.

But then, a sudden shiver ran through him. If he thought about it, all his actions thus far felt as though they had been guided, leading him down a path already prepared for him. It was as if he had been following an invisible road, one that led him into the unknown. For the first time, he felt a sense of loss as he stared at the symbol in front of him.

His experiences, his visions—they had shaped him into who he was now. But looking at it from another perspective, it was as if he had been walking according to his visions' will, with every convenience falling into place to ensure he never strayed from the intended path. In a way, he felt like a puppet.

"If everything I've done is according to someone else's will, does that mean all my actions have been predicted by that person or whatever force shaped this path?" he thought, his discomfort growing. *"Does that mean I've only been following their preordained road?"*

He didn't like this feeling—the feeling that some unknown entity was guiding him, having already determined the ending he would face. An ending he couldn't control.

"Is it the figures of the Dragon and the Phoenix? Is it the Heavenly Demon? Is it that unknown figure? Or is it someone else I don't yet know?" Aldrian felt a surge of frustration. Despite all he had encountered, he still felt too weak, unable to grasp the entire truth about himself or the mysteries surrounding him.

An overwhelming sense of uncertainty swept over him. His Dao heart wavered, and for a moment, he didn't know what to do. But then, in the midst of his anxiety, familiar words surfaced in his mind—lines he had memorized by heart.

I'm tied to the universe

I'm tied to nature

All of this is my own karma

Why I am different is also my destiny

My domain encompasses all things

There is nothing that can escape my view

There is nothing that can escape my sense

There is nothing that can escape my will

His thoughts spun around these words, and after a while, he let out a deep sigh, gradually relaxing his mind. He reflected on the meaning behind the lines. Perhaps they, too had been prepared for him, to explain his situation and point him toward the path.

But in the end, he knew that he had his own comprehension, his own interpretation, and his own mind, which still controlled his entire being—his decision-making, and how he chose to live.

"Yes, this road is my karma, a road I've chosen myself. All of this is karma I've created, not someone else. The mystery surrounding me is part of my destiny. Since I was born in this world, I have been different from others, unable to be measured by the usual standards. This is my destiny, and it's mine to walk." He thought.

Aldrian's mind began to clear. *"Even if somehow, there is a being who has decided the road I will walk, if their path aligns with the one I would choose for myself, then so be it. But if their road leads somewhere I don't wish to go, then I will simply break the road and carve out my own."*

With this realization, Aldrian's doubts faded. What he didn't realize was that the inner demon, which had been quietly sprouting within him, had vanished in an instant.

He had his own way, his own mind, and he was the one shaping his destiny. He would decide the road he would walk, forge his own ending, and uncover the mystery of his existence, revealing the 'truth' of himself.

Unbeknownst to him, his entire domain resonated with his determination. The very nature within it—trees, wind, water, and every single particle of energy tied to the laws—responded as if rejoicing, fully supporting their lord.

The wind stirred with newfound vigor, rustling the leaves in a symphony of life. The flow of elemental energy and laws became smoother, while the richness of heaven and earth energy grew even more abundant in certain areas.

Those who were cultivating at that moment felt the sudden shift in the movement of heaven and earth energy. Though they couldn't understand why, they weren't about to waste this opportunity. Many found themselves on the brink of breakthroughs in cultivation and comprehension. Even cultivators who had been stuck at the same realm for a long time reaped the benefits, breaking through barriers that had held them back.

It was a time of rejoicing, not only for the nature of his domain but for all the living beings within it. What Aldrian didn't yet realize was that his unwavering determination

had become the key to finding the answers he sought—the answers that would shape the road ahead.

Chapter 146: The Ominous Energy

If the sole purpose of this place—the secret realm—was for him to come to it, then he would gladly do so, but only if it aligned with his will. After all, as those words said, *There is nothing that can escape my will*. He would walk this path on his own terms, not anyone else's. And even if those words weren't meant for him, he would claim them as his own.

He recalled the figure's question before he arrived at the secret realm: *What of about your future?* Although it seemed trivial, the question held significant meaning for him. His future was his to shape. Even if a road had already been laid before him, he was the one who would decide whether to take it. The sword, too, had told him he was already shaping his own destiny.

Though his belief seemed paradoxical, it was the truth he had grasped through his introspection. He was certain of it.

Looking at the symbol again, he felt a surge of gratitude. Though he didn't know its true meaning, it had greatly opened his mind and given him enlightenment. After ensuring there was nothing more to uncover in the cave, he spoke to his group.

"I'll step outside for a moment; I want to check something," he said. The others nodded in understanding, and Aldrian left the hall. He was confident now that there were no traps or formations here—reaching this place with the strength of this continent was impossible.

This place could only be accessed by him—or by anything connected to him, like...

"The blueprint."

Though neither he nor Mardred fully understood how Mardred had managed to reach this place, Aldrian had pieced together a theory. When the blueprint transformed into light, it became that symbol in the box. It must have left a mark on Mardred's body, allowing an entity to take control of him and enabling him to bypass the natural formations of the Dragon Back Mountain.

Mardred had heard a voice before losing consciousness, one that had said, *"You will be one of the people to open the path for his return."*

That confirmed it—Mardred's sole role had been to lure Aldrian here. The key to all of this had been Aldrian's desire to uncover the mystery of the missing blacksmith and investigate whether the blacksmith had ties to the devils, or to the creation of the artifact that helped the devils, allowing them to infiltrate nations across the continent.

Now that the blueprint had served its purpose, and Mardred's role had come to an end, everything that followed would depend on Aldrian. Yet, he couldn't help but be amazed by the intricate chain of events that had led him here after Mardred's disappearance. His initial suspicion toward Mardred, due to the devil connection, had brought him to this point. Ironically, Mardred's vanishing had also thrown Duke Badin's and the devils' plans into disarray.

All of this has the same trigger: the phenomenon of the Dragon and Phoenix in the sky. He had no doubt to the fact that this phenomenon is connected to him, he is aware that it occurred on the same day he was born, and that it is intertwined with his existence. Although his parents only told him that he was different from others without explaining the details of his birth, all these signs are enough for him to connect the dots.

Aldrian was certain that whoever had built this place had meticulously calculated every condition, setting up Dragon Back Mountain as a forbidden zone that even Peak Emperor stage cultivators dared not approach.

"How powerful must someone be to plan all of this, ensuring I would walk this path?" he wondered. This person seemed capable of seeing the future and shaping it accordingly.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Aldrian glanced toward the entrance and stepped outside. Immediately, he activated his golden energy to shield himself from the fierce wind. The sheer strength of the wind was beyond anything he had ever encountered, far surpassing what even a Peak Emperor stage cultivator might endure. The wind had become so thick that it was visible, with streaks of white slashing through the air and cutting across the terrain with terrifying force.

Aldrian ignored all of it and looked upward toward the mountaintop; he still needed to climb to reach it. The sun was just appearing on the eastern horizon, making the path quite visible, even though the wind hindered his vision. Still, it was better than navigating in the dark of night.

He had thought that with the golden energy protecting him, he could fly now, and that was what he would try to do. He hadn't done it earlier with Xin Haotian and Duke Valiard because he didn't know what kind of obstacles they might face, so it was better to save his energy.

He first tried to float, and to his relief, it actually worked. Despite the chaotic flow of energy in the area, Aldrian managed to maintain control. Encouraged by this, he tested flying upwards. When he felt confident, he accelerated, swiftly ascending, following the contours of the high cliff toward the mountain's peak.

As he soared past the summit, a vast flat land spread out before him. In the center of it was a platform, standing solitary and striking. Aldrian flew toward it, and as he neared, his eyes locked onto a familiar sight—the same symbol that had greeted him in the cave.

He landed on the platform, inspecting both the structure and the symbol engraved upon it. The platform's design was identical to the one where the sword had been, and this place was also quite special because the flow of energy concentrated on this platform.

He knew exactly what that meant.

"This platform is the eye of the formation—the center of it all."

Each formation has an eye that serves as the central and most vital part, sustaining and connecting all points within the formation. Aldrian surmised that for a large-scale formation covering the entire mountain region, the eye must be positioned atop the land to connect all points more effectively.

With the formation's eye now under his influence, he realized he could control the Dragon Back Mountain phenomenon. But first, he needed to establish his domain here. He wouldn't let the opportunity slip by to claim this entire mountain as his domain.

As soon as his domain was established, his senses heightened, and the surroundings became crystal clear, free of any obstruction. The howling winds felt more docile, though they still carried strength. Aldrian could now sense the laws of nature here with greater accuracy, uncovering new facets of his environment. One particularly striking discovery was the ominous energy he had sensed before climbing the mountain.

He teleported to the location where the aura of death was strongest, now manifesting as ominous black energy in his view. This energy was intangible to others, it could be sensed but not fully comprehended, seeming too abstract for most to grasp. The dread emanating from it felt as if he were staring into the essence of death itself.

"What kind of laws are contained in this energy? It feels so ominous and dreadful—is it something that can even be comprehended?" Aldrian mused. Yet, his curiosity compelled him to delve deeper. He settled cross-legged in the rocky field, the site of past carnage, determined to feel and understand the energy that seemed otherworldly.

Though he initially coated his body in golden energy for protection, he soon decided to conserve his strength and retracted his golden energy. He wanted to focus entirely on comprehending this new energy. The moment he ceased his protective energy, the wind surged, as if trying to slice through him. But suddenly, the wind changed direction, forming a protective dome around him.

Controlling the eye of the formation, coupled with his authority within his domain, Aldrian could manipulate the phenomena around him, including the wind. Rather than causing him harm, it now shielded him.

With renewed focus, he turned his attention back to the black energy. A minute passed, then two. He remained still, his senses attuned to the ominous force. After five minutes, a shiver coursed through him as he grasped something profound from this energy.

"It's truly amazing, yet terrifying. It feels as if death itself stands before me—the energy capable of affecting living souls and all beings of nature."

Inside his mind, Aldrian recognized this energy as the very essence of pure death—an annihilation of life with no benefits for the living. This energy was chilling, capable of instilling a profound dread in anyone who beheld it. For the first time, he encountered a force so cold it felt as if it could extinguish the very spark of existence.

He then think of his past experiences, he had occasionally felt a glimpse of the black energy from the people he had killed within his domain, but that energy vanished instantly before he could comprehend it. He first sensed it during his first battle with the devils.

Here, he understood that this energy was so potent it had created an area filled with black energy, resulting from the amalgamation of countless deaths over a long period.

"The energy of death, which brings only death if it touches your soul— is this the death energy? Death laws?"

Chapter 147: Comprehending Death Laws

The laws that govern death and all that relates to it. The laws that transcend time and space because every living soul and every being with consciousness holds the potential for death in their life. They will ultimately face death if that is their end. Even the strongest cultivators cannot outrun death, it is always near. The question remains: when or how will one meet death?

Will it be death from old age? Death in battle? Or perhaps through entering the cycle of reincarnation by their own decision? There are myriad ways to experience death.

When Aldrian comprehended a small part of death energy, he felt a profound darkness. This darkness was different from that within his being's essence. The darkness in his essence resembled a vacuum, devoid of substance, while the darkness from the death energy was a chilling abyss. If one gazes too long into it, they risk being consumed by its depths.

Aldrian pondered that if a cultivator were to grasp even a fraction of this energy, they might spiral into madness if they don't have a solid mentality. This energy and its laws haunt those who comprehend them, their minds forever altered after brushing against this abyss.

Indeed, Aldrian felt the impact on his own mind as he delved into this energy. The death energy sought to consume him for daring to touch an area that mortals should not approach, for the laws of death belong to the divine. However, Aldrian remained undeterred. When the darkness attempted to envelop him, he released his golden energy to shield himself from the corrosive power that consumed his life.

He could feel the energy attempting to siphon his life essence, shortening his lifespan and drawing him closer to death. His mind was also affected by being pulled into the darkness, this was the first time Aldrian felt a formidable force trying to devour his entire being as he comprehended the laws. He remained steadfast, smiling with excitement at the prospect of understanding laws he had never touched before.

"Interesting. This death energy is really ferocious. Everything that touches this realm of death laws will be consumed by it, yet my golden energy still tames it. When this energy seeks to corrode my life essence and mind, it halts before my golden energy. Amazing." He was truly grateful for his golden energy, which had helped him in countless situations.

Though he could still hold his ground while comprehending the death laws without the protection of his golden energy, his golden energy made the effort much easier. As he delved deeper into the death laws, his body exuded a thick aura of death, and the black energy surrounding him reacted to his death aura, creating a swirling vortex of death energy so powerful that its oppressive darkness could be felt from afar.

The energy that should have been intangible became visible, manifesting as dark energy that spread outward, enveloping Aldrian.

Inside the cave, Xin Haotian, Duke Valiard, and Mardred were each engaged in their own activities. Xin Haotian was inspecting the hall, studying the walls and the unfamiliar symbols. Duke Valiard and Mardred were deep in conversation when suddenly, a chill ran down their spines.

They felt their souls tremble as this unsettling sensation crept into their beings. Xin Haotian glanced toward the path leading outside and dashed toward it. Throughout his adventurous life, filled with various experiences, he had never encountered such an ominous feeling, it made his soul tremble.

A sense of foreboding filled his heart, but he bore it and pushed himself to see what was happening outside. When he reached the barrier that separated the chaotic environment outside from the quiet interior, he was baffled by what he saw. Even amidst the chaotic winds that could kill him in an instant, he observed a vortex of black substance reaching toward the sky.

Though separated by the barrier, he could feel the dread of death itself looming before him—something he had never experienced before.

"What is that?!"

His soul had been trembling since earlier, but after he looked at the vortex of mass of black energy, he felt as though his soul was being drawn in by the vortex. Before long,

Duke Valiard and Mardred arrived at his side, and their reactions were more or less the same.

"What the fuck is that?" Mardred swore unconsciously as he stared at the swirling mass of death energy and aura.

"I've never felt anything like it. That amalgamation of energy is truly ominous and chilling. What kind of energy is that?" Duke Valiard said, his voice trembling as cold sweat dripped from their faces.

From their position, they could see the vortex of energy reaching the sky, affecting the clouds above.

All the living beings in the vicinity of Dragonback Mountain also looked in one direction as the giant swirl of black energy rose into the sky. Even from a distance, they could feel the dread emanating from that energy.

"What is that?" From Duke Badin's base camp, duke Badin asked, frowning as his heart tightened. He tried to calm himself down. He glanced at the two cloaked men and was stunned to see their expressions beneath the hoods. He had never seen such a look on their faces before, he had always thought they were in control and indifferent to everything.

The two men's eyes trembled as they exchanged voice transmissions, both clearly affected by the vortex of the black energy.

"What the fuck is that?! It's like the energy a necromancer uses, but even more terrifying! I feel like my soul would be sucked into it if I got any closer!"

The raspy-voiced man that spoke to Duke Badin asked while glancing at the cloaked figure beside him. However, he received only silence as the other man gazed at the swirling energy with a solemn expression. After a few moments, he finally replied.

"I don't know. Necromancers are masters of soul, they take advantage of dead bodies and trap the souls of their victims to obey their commands. They use binding techniques to anchor the soul to the corpse. While their technique does exude a similar feeling to this black energy, this one is on another level. Even my soul trembles just from looking at it," he explained.

The raspy-voiced man was stunned by the answer before he looked at the figure beside him. He was surprised, as he thought nothing on this continent could make this 'man' tremble. Yet here they were, both feeling their souls tremble just from witnessing the swirling energy.

"I have a bad feeling about this," the raspy voiced man thought to himself. *"Is it those people? What the hell are they doing there?"* He then looked at Duke Badin.

"We have to investigate this ourselves. Prepare your underlings, we're going in."

Duke Badin was taken aback but quickly responded, "We're going to enter the mountain with that kind of thing appearing? The usual phenomena are already impossible to cross without sacrifice, but you want us to enter with that ominous force?" He pointed at the swirling black energy.

"Do you want to solve your problem or not? We don't know what Duke Valiard's group is doing or if they've discovered something we're unaware of, but if they find Mardred and the blueprint, you're dead," the man said through voice transmission to Duke Badin. Duke Badin responded only with silence, gritting his teeth to hold back his urge to attack the man. He knew he needed him, but he also recognized that he couldn't defeat him—especially not with the two of them together.

"Let's go before—" Suddenly, the man halted his transmission and looked up at the sky, where the vortex of the black energy reached the clouds. The clouds darkened, and the black energy began to descend back to the ground. However, from their position, they felt a pressure they were all too familiar with—a pressure that signified the might of heavens.

"Heavenly Tribulation!" the man mumbled.

Back in Aldrian's position, he sat cross-legged, comprehending the laws of death. Inside his mind, he could imagine death, feel its essence, and understand what it truly was. All of this knowledge would allow him to create his own techniques using the death laws. The black energy that once tried to consume him was now under his control, and he could sense that with his golden energy, his death energy became purer and stronger.

When he opened his eyes, he felt a pressure that he had sensed not long ago, but now it was directed toward him. The sky had darkened, and strands of lightning appeared within the clouds.

Yet, as Aldrian looked at this ominous sight, a smile spread across his face. He felt no anxiety, not even a hint of it.

"It's good to see you again."

Chapter 148: Aldrian's First Heavenly Tribulation 1

The one who undergoing the heavenly tribulation—commonly known as the tribulation taker—bears the full brunt of its immense pressure from the tribulation, it is entirely different for those merely watching from afar so this is a new experience for Aldrian.

Heavenly tribulations can occur for various reasons: a baptism upon reaching the Emperor stage, for comprehending something beyond one's current level, or as punishment for the accumulation of bad karma.

The strength of a heavenly tribulation varies depending on the tribulation taker themselves. The stronger the cultivator, the stronger the tribulation. In cases where someone breaks a heavenly taboo, the tribulation will be tailored according to the gravity of the transgression.

In Aldrian's case, his comprehension of something beyond what should be possible at his current level triggered this tribulation. The heavens are testing whether he is truly worthy of wielding such power. The pressure Aldrian feels is immense, yet he continues to smile as he gazes up at the swirling clouds, which have begun to show signs of an imminent lightning strike.

Amidst all of this, Aldrian feels a familiar connection to the tribulation clouds. It's the same sensation he had when witnessing the Eternal Spirit's Heavenly Tribulation—a feeling that the heavens don't intend to harm him. It's as though he can sense the heavens' intent, though it's only a subtle feeling in his heart. Yet, doubt lingers within him, as he can feel the might of the heavenly tribulation steadily increasing.

Aldrian prepared for whatever the heavens might throw his way, he waits. But after a few moments, there is still no lightning strike from the clouds. The lightning continues to coil through the sky with terrifying power. Initially, the lightning carried the force of a Duke stage strike—something impossible for a High Earl cultivator to withstand, as it would be tantamount to a death sentence. But the power continued to grow, and soon it reached the level of a Grand Duke strike.

Aldrian raised his eyebrows, staring at the absurd magnitude of the energy before him. If every heavenly tribulation wielded this level of power, no tribulation taker would survive once it was over. And yet, it didn't stop there—the power surged even further, rising to the King stage. At this level, someone of Aldrian's cultivation would have died countless times over.

The tribulation clouds now blanketed the entire mountain region, extending far beyond, visible even from Badin City. Those who spotted the ominous black clouds in the distance felt a chill, awed by the raw power of nature. The sight of the heavenly tribulation clouds was always something to behold, leaving a lasting impression.

Aldrian wore a puzzled expression as the lightning still refused to strike, while the power continued to build, reaching the Emperor stage.

"Is the heaven trying to kill me for good?" he thought. He couldn't believe this was a typical occurrence—after all, he was only at the High Earl stage, if the heavens had no intent to harm him, then what was the meaning behind this overwhelming power?

The pressure around him had already become unbearable, but Aldrian managed to remain standing by using his golden energy and his control over gravity to alleviate the weight of the heavens' might. Though the lightning's strength continued to climb, his connection to the tribulation clouds persisted, growing even stronger.

The contradiction was baffling. On one hand, he felt the heavens had no desire to harm him, but on the other, the tribulation's power far exceeded what he should be facing at his level. It felt more like a punishment meant for a sinner.

"Is it because I comprehended the death laws?" Aldrian thought, before dismissing the idea. *"No, even if I did, it doesn't make sense for the heavens to unreasonably raise the lightning's strength to the peak of the Emperor stage while I'm still only at the High Earl stage."*

The situation made no sense to him. He needed to understand what the heavens were truly intending with this tribulation.

He had already begun circulating his energy, preparing his defensive technique for the inevitable moment the lightning would strike. But even after the tribulation clouds reached the peak of Emperor stage power, and had spread out to cover nearly 90,000 kilometers—nearing Badin City—the strike still had not come. The size of the clouds was already many times larger than what he had witnessed during the Eternal Spirit's heavenly tribulation.

At this point, the entire city of Badin could see the approaching tribulation clouds, though the tribulation taker remained unseen. Yet, the sheer aura and power emanating from the clouds filled the people with fear. Reverence for the heavens was deeply ingrained in their hearts from birth, and this reverence remained strong, even for cultivators.

Despite the cultivator's goal of breaking through the limits of living beings and attaining immortality, none were free from the influence of the heavens.

"What kind of tribulation is this?"

"Is there a criminal trying to break through?"

Many wondered if, with such immense size and pressure, this tribulation was a heavenly punishment—a type of tribulation reserved for sinners. As heavenly

punishment, its sole purpose was to strike down cultivators burdened with immense bad karma. Typically, when cultivators with significant bad karma attempted to reach the Emperor stage, they would face this kind of tribulation, a punishment for their atrocities.

Those who received a heavenly punishment had no choice but to defend against strikes meant to kill the tribulation taker. Their fate hung in the balance, determined by how they defended themselves. Some relied on external aids, such as artifacts or formations, but these also influenced the tribulation. If the external help was too strong, the tribulation would adjust its strength accordingly.

In Badin City, all eyes were fixed on the sky as the clouds finally reached them. The tense, gloomy atmosphere weighed heavily on the people, and they were stunned when a small drop of water fell from the sky.

Many continued to gaze upwards, puzzled by the sudden rainfall. Could this be a normal storm, not a heavenly tribulation? The pressure and aura of the heavens, however, told them otherwise—this was indeed a tribulation.

As the rain grew heavier, confusion spread among the people. They had never heard of a heavenly tribulation that brought rain. The sight of it left everyone—both mortals and cultivators—wondering what this bizarre phenomenon meant.

Aldrian, his body protected by his defensive techniques, was equally perplexed. But amidst the confusion, he sensed something deeper, something that only he could feel. Something that blew his mind.

"The heavens...the heavens are sad?"

He really didn't understand how he could feel the sadness emanating from the heavens. Wasn't it said that the heavens were devoid of feelings, their nature impartial? If that were true, then what was this? It was as if his heart and mind were connected to the very essence of the heavens. What did this mean? Such a connection shouldn't be possible—

"Wait, it shouldn't be possible for others, but if it is for me." He recalled the lines he had memorized. *"I'm tied to the universe, and I'm tied to nature."*

He also remembered the Heavenly Demon's scripture, particularly one of its lines:

The way of the universe is the way of the heavens.

The way of nature is the way of the heavens.

Amidst the heavy rain, the strength of the lightning had already reached the very peak of the Emperor stage. Yet, Aldrian could sense the sadness of the heavens even more clearly. It was a strange feeling, as if his own heart were heavy with sadness. But he

steadied his heart and determination, looking up at the sky. A smile crossed his face as he shouted,

"Oh, mighty heavens! I don't know what kind of relationship we shared in the past, but allow me to experience the power of your heavenly might!"

As if in response to Aldrian's request, the lightning crackled with a booming thunder, swirling more fiercely within the clouds. They were at the point where their power was gradually leaving the Emperor stage and slowly approaching the next level.

"Oh, heavens, help me by giving me the strength I need to overcome all the obstacles I will face in the future. With this tribulation, I will gain more power to aid me."

If he could pass this trial, he would unlock the abilities of the death laws.

"You are always watching me! Then help me discover my strength, to unveil my true self! Even if it kills me, I want to see the end of my own path!"

BOOM! The loud thunder reverberated across the surrounding region.

"BRING IT ON!"

BOOM!!

Finally, the first strike came crashing down toward Aldrian.

Chapter 149: Aldrian's First Heavenly Tribulation 2

BOOM!

The first lightning strike descended instantly, a swirling mix of black and white that moved like a dragon yet resembled an arrowhead. Aldrian summoned the full power of his domain, unwilling to underestimate the force behind this heavenly strike. Even though he felt invincible within his domain, he knew the heavens were always watching him. They must be aware of his capabilities, and this lightning strike reflected that understanding.

As the lightning bolt approached, Aldrian quickly constructed a dome shield covering the entire area using the energy from the surrounding region to block the initial strike. He formed this natural defense at his fastest speed, bracing himself for the impact.

CRASH!

The lightning struck the shield dome, sending tremors through the surrounding mountains. Even his entire domain felt a slight shake. Although the lightning retained its

energy, it didn't penetrate the shield deeply, creating only a hole in the dome. Aldrian wore a solemn expression; there was no sign of relaxation on his face.

"This strike just now? I doubt even a peak emperor could casually block it."

He had utilized the full power of his domain, yet he still felt the tremors from the strike. While the intensity was minimal compared to his domain's overall strength, it was still excessive for the heavens to direct such a powerful lightning strike at him. They clearly knew how to play their part, sending him a challenge that acknowledged all of his abilities and potential.

This heavenly tribulation was no longer based on cultivation levels but rather on karma. The heavenly punishment is a type of tribulation rooted in karma, but those who prepare themselves still have a chance to survive the heavens' onslaught. In Aldrian's case, it's not heavenly punishment but his karma stemmed from the connection he had with the heavens.

The heavens obviously knew all of his extraordinary abilities and even his past, tailoring a tribulation that would be impossible for anyone else to endure. No one on this continent could withstand such an attack. Even if a cultivator possessed a divine-grade artifact, the heavens would respond with an even more powerful strike, capable of shattering the artifact and complicating the tribulation further. Divine-grade artifacts were forbidden during tribulations for this very reason.

This battle was one of individual ability; the only factor at play was a person's capability to endure the tribulation with their own strength.

As the clouds gathered for the second strike, having failed to penetrate Aldrian's dome shield defenses, a wild thought crossed his mind. Ever since he sensed that this heavenly lightning had an intent not to harm him, he had been filled with curiosity. Why did the heavens possess such intent yet strike him with a force that could kill him if he didn't have his domain ability? Now, as the tribulation taker, he had the opportunity to test something.

Of course, Aldrian wasn't foolish enough to just barge into the heavenly lightning strike, but he wanted to try touching the heavenly lightning after it had worn down from hitting his defensive dome. A smile spread across his face as the second strike, slightly more powerful than the first, finally came down.

The lightning was still blocked by the energy shield, and his entire domain felt a tremor once more. People residing within his domain—from the secret realm in the Everlasting Silent Forest to the Ivory Empire and Demon territory—experienced a slight quake that felt like an earthquake. Most were confused about the source of the disturbance, unable to detect its origin, and simply dismissed it as a normal quake.

Only high-level cultivators could sense that something was amiss with the tremor, especially those with earth element affinities. They felt the ground tremble but struggled to pinpoint its source, leaving them perplexed. They couldn't detect any plate movement causing the ground to shake, nor any energy disturbance around them, adding to their confusion.

The second lightning strike broke through the outer layer of the shield dome, its power now reduced to that of a peak king stage attack. Aldrian teleported in front of the lightning, his entire body coated in golden energy to protect himself not only from the lightning itself but also from its intense heat. Even from a distance, he could feel the heat radiating off the lightning.

Before the lightning disappeared, he moved swiftly and touched a strand of it. The moment his skin made contact, he felt his entire body electrified; every fiber of his being, even his soul, trembled heavily. Yet a smile remained on his face, as if he had lost his mind in the thrill of the moment.

At that moment, Aldrian felt a deeper connection to the heavens. Suddenly, in a fleeting instant, he experienced *déjà vu*. A vision flashed before him, showing himself in the same position, but this time he wasn't just touching the lightning—he was allowing it to bathe his hand, as if he were playing with it.

He wanted to mimic what he had seen in that fleeting vision, but hesitation crept in. Even this brief touch had caused his entire body and soul to tremble, and a dizziness clouded his mind.

The second strike concluded, and the third strike was nearly ready. Aldrian steeled himself, determined to repeat his previous action. The third strike descended, slightly more powerful than the last. He couldn't determine the exact realm of this lightning, but he knew that even a high emperor stage cultivator would not survive such a strike; it could easily cripple a peak emperor.

Despite the danger, he bravely reached out to touch the lightning once more. This time, he was more daring, inserting one of his index fingers into the swirling currents. His hand, protected by the golden energy, struggled to contain the lightning's power. He felt his skin beginning to burn, yet he held on, driven by a desire to experience the heavenly lightning that instilled fear in so many.

He then caught another glimpse of a vision, finding himself seated cross-legged in the midst of the black clouds, as if meditating amidst the lightning. He didn't know what kind of clouds they were, but he assumed they were part of the heavenly tribulation. When the third strike finished, he noticed a slight burn on the skin of his index finger. Instead of feeling deterred, his determination only grew; he believed this experience could provide new clues about his past.

He could also comprehend this lightning, which was advantageous as it would enhance his understanding of lightning laws. Until now, he had primarily focused on his space and gravity laws, rarely employing his other laws.

His past encounter with the assassins from the Thunderous Shadow Pavilion had given him some experience with lightning laws, but now, with the chance to deepen his comprehension, he wouldn't let this opportunity slip away. After all, this was heavenly lightning—one of the instruments the heavens used to punish or baptize all beings.

The fourth strike descended like a slithering dragon, crashing into the defensive dome. With this strike, he was already halfway through the heavenly tribulation. Aldrian repeated his earlier action, reaching out once more.

The rain fell heavier with each strike, but his connection with the heavens grew stronger, allowing him to feel the true power contained within the stormy clouds.

The power that he cannot fully fathom yet because of how tremendous that power is, something that he has not reached yet. He could also sense the heavens' intent more clearly, He could feel more of their sadness—something that still baffled him. However, he was not in a position to ask, "Why do you feel sad?" That would be crazy.

Now, he waited for the fifth strike, which he sensed was on an entirely different level. This strike could potentially kill even a peak emperor stage. Yet, despite the overwhelming pressure, Aldrian remained confident in his domain power, fully committing to his defensive stance.

At Duke Badin's basecamp, all the dwarves and any other living beings had already evacuated more than 1,000 kilometers away. Even though they were still under the dark sky, it was much better than being near ground zero of the lightning strike. The rain was pouring heavily, but they didn't care about it anymore.

Duke Badin's face was already pale with fright due to the pressure they could still feel—something he had never experienced in any heavenly tribulation he had ever witnessed. As for the two cloaked men, although the people here couldn't see their faces, they could sense their fear, which was genuine, reflecting how these two men felt right now.

"Is that truly a heavenly tribulation? Or a heavenly punishment? I've never witnessed or felt such horrifying size and power from a heavenly tribulation!" the raspy-voiced man pondered, wondering who could trigger such overwhelming heavenly might, seemingly intent on annihilating everything beneath it.

Chapter 150: Aldrian's First Heavenly Tribulation 3

In Dalahan City, King Douwin sat on his throne when a royal guard rushed in, immediately kneeling before him.

"Your Majesty, we have a situation. Something has appeared on the horizon," the royal guard reported.

King Douwin with puzzled expression, stood up and walked outside the royal palace. He looked southwest and was stunned to see black clouds, even though still far away yet already filling the entire horizon, turning it into a dark line. The king turned to the royal guard and asked,

"Has there been any report from that direction? That doesn't look like ordinary bad weather."

"Yes, Your Majesty. We've tried to contact our men in the city of Badin, but they said they are unsure whether it's heavenly tribulation clouds or just a normal thunderstorm."

"They don't know? How is that possible?"

"They mentioned heavy rain accompanied by the pressure of a heavenly tribulation, so they're uncertain what kind of storm it is."

The king felt confused. With that kind of description, he couldn't be sure either. But from here, he could see the black clouds slowly approaching the capital. If this was indeed a heavenly tribulation, he couldn't imagine the power of the lightning that would strike with clouds that scale. To cover the area from Badin City to the capital meant it was already spanning a quarter of the Forgeheart Kingdom.

Some people in the city began noticing the black clouds on the horizon, which were becoming more visible. Most assumed they were just typical overcast clouds and paid them no mind. However, the high-ranking cultivators of the city were not so dismissive. Dalahan City had become a gathering point for many powerhouses from across the continent, and they were already taking note of the approaching clouds.

Many cultivators sensed that something was wrong when they detected the flow of energy being drawn toward that direction. For cultivators at the King and Emperor stages, their heightened senses were attuned to even the most minuscule fluctuations in energy. When the energy around them began moving in a single direction, even at a slow pace, it was clear this was no ordinary occurrence.

At that moment, a group from the Flamecrest family was relaxing in their inn. The group consisted of cultivators, all of whom were above the Low Earl stage, with the strongest among them at the Low King stage. Aldrey Flamecrest, their leader, sat at a table inside his room, reading a book. Beside him, a balcony provided a view of the outside.

Suddenly, he noticed a disturbance—murmurs from the crowd outside. He walked over to the balcony and saw people staring southwest. Aldrey also looked in that direction, baffled by the sight. The black clouds spanned the entire horizon, and they seemed to be moving slowly toward the city.

He kept staring at the approaching black clouds, his gaze trembling, but his eyes wavered for a different reason—his heart tightened, as though something was pulling him. He felt an inexplicable urge to go to that place, though he didn't know why.

"What's happening to me?" he thought.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a noble family with a crest of a water dragon soaring above the waves was enjoying themselves at a luxury restaurant, drinking and eating. However, their attention shifted toward the black clouds on the horizon. Leading the group was a beautiful woman with long black hair.

Her blue eyes as clear as still water, reflected her concern as a frown crossed her flawless face when she noticed the clouds. Like Aldrey, she felt her heart tighten and an urge to run toward the black clouds' direction. She shook her head, trying to dispel the feeling, but it was strong. Taking a deep breath, she adjusted her energy circulation to calm her mind.

"What's happening to me?" she wondered.

"Lady Irene, what is that?" one of her female guards asked.

"I'm not sure. It looks like normal thunderstorm clouds, but their movement is strange," Irene replied.

Yes, she was Aldrian's mother, Irene Rivas. She and her group had arrived in the city only a few hours earlier and were now relaxing at the restaurant. When her father decided to send a delegation to the Forgeheart Kingdom to acquire a sword, she volunteered to lead the group, just like many others. But Irene had another reason for coming here—she wanted to leave the Rivas Grand Duchy, not just to search for Aldrey, but also to slip into the secret realm of the Everlasting Silent Forest and watch over Aldrian.

Irene had already promised Aldrian that she would return to him, and even take him outside if the situation allowed. However, she still couldn't create the right circumstances to bring him with her. The status quo with the Flamecrest family remained unchanged. Once, she had broached the subject of reconciliation with the Flamecrest family to her father, but as expected, her father had erupted at the idea of the Rivas family having an amicable relationship with the Flamecrest family.

Yet, despite his anger, her father, who couldn't stay mad at Irene, eventually said that reconciliation was possible—but only if it came from the Flamecrest family first. They

would need to come to the Rivas Grand Duchy to formally declare their desire for peace. Hearing this, Irene could only sigh, knowing how difficult it would be for the Flamecrest family to take such an initiative.

Still, she had a path forward. If reconciliation were to happen, it would be up to her and Aldrey to convince their respective families. That's why she was here—to meet Aldrey, knowing he would come to the city. She hoped to discuss their future and the future of their families. She had already learned where the Flamecrest family was staying and planned to meet with Aldrey when the time was right.

Meanwhile, Xin Haotian, Eleine, Sylphia, and Baek Ji-Min had already stepped out of their inn, looking toward the southwestern horizon. The three ladies exchanged glances before Sylphia sent a voice transmission.

"What is that? Are those storm clouds, or is it a Heavenly Tribulation?"

"From the strange movement of the clouds, that looks like a Heavenly Tribulation, but I have a strange feeling about it," Baek Ji-Min replied as they watched the clouds continue to close in on their location.

"That is quite an unusual Heavenly Tribulation. I feel the same way about it," Sylphia added.

"By the way, do any of you know which direction Aldrian went?" Eleine asked suddenly.

"Why are you asking that out of nowhere?—wait, do you think this could be caused by Aldrian?" Baek Ji-Min asked.

Without realizing it, they had already started associating every strange event they couldn't understand with Aldrian. Their suspicions weren't baseless. Every time Aldrian did something, it was always grand and far-reaching, affecting many things around him. Take for example, when Aldrian comprehended the Heavenly Demon's Scripture, or when he forged a middle Divine-grade artifact—both actions had a wide-reaching impact.

Every single thing Aldrian did garnered attention, and this phenomenon fit the pattern perfectly. It was not out of the realm of possibility that Aldrian was behind this Heavenly Tribulation as well.

At the central area of Dragon Back Mountain, the fifth strike of heavenly lightning descended with immense power, sending shockwaves of pressure that could be felt up to 500 kilometers away. Aldrian, still holding on, relied on his dome shield of energy. Though the heavenly lightning could not penetrate the shield, the damage it inflicted with each strike continued to accumulate.

Fortunately, the shield's repair speed was impressive, quickly mending any broken parts before the next strike could land. Aldrian remained focused, continuing to comprehend the heavenly lightning, bringing himself closer to the heavens.

The clouds prepared to unleash the sixth strike, yet Aldrian stood in the midst of the heavy rain with a smile on his face. He didn't know why, but he felt grateful to the heavens for this tribulation. Through it, he had begun to understand a small part of his past connection to the heavens. In his vision he enjoyed interacting with the heavens so much that he had learned how to meditate even within the tribulation clouds, relying solely on his body without any external support.

It was something he couldn't have imagined, as he didn't know what kind of power he would need to endure in order to meditate or cultivate in the middle of the tribulation clouds. Just the pressure and power alone sent chills through him, and only thanks to his domain ability, he had managed to hold on until now.

The sixth strike came down with even greater power, nearly shattering and penetrating the dome shield, but it still failed to touch even a single hem of Aldrian. As the sixth strike faded, the clouds seemed to halt their movements. The lightning strands that once crackled between the clouds were now still, leaving only dark, ominous skies. Even the rain subsided, and Aldrian noticed that the heavenly tribulation had paused all its activity.

Confusion filled him, yet at the same time, he felt the intent of the heavens more clearly, as though he could communicate with it directly.

"So, the last strike will be your special way of greeting me, huh?" Aldrian thought, still smiling. He looked up at the sky and shouted,

"Alright, heavens, show me your greeting!"

In response to his words, black and red lightning suddenly began to slither through the clouds, electrifying the entire sky with their chaotic movements. The pressure and aura of the heavens thickened in the air, so intense that even the people in Dalahan City—who were far from the tribulation clouds—could feel it. Many people that saw this had already prostrated toward the direction of the tribulation, begging for mercy from the heavens, believing that the end of the world was upon them.

As for Aldrian, who stood at the very center of this colossal storm, his smile never wavered. He knew that this final strike would be the most powerful blow he had ever faced in his life!