

# **The Shining Star Above The Heaven**

## **#Chapter 231: Conversation with Hector - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 231: Conversation with Hector**

*Chapter 231: Conversation with Hector*

Hector and Lorenzo's expressions froze as they stared at Aldrian with blank faces. Only after a few seconds did they come out of their reverie.

"What?" Hector asked in disbelief.

What the hell?! The young man in front of him was the one who unleashed that terrifying technique?! Hector looked at Aldrian again. He had thought the young man in front of him was extraordinary, but to think he was the one named Aldrian.

"I'm sorry for asking this, but could you provide something to prove that you are truly the person who unleashed that technique on the northwest battlefield—the one that created the long, deep chasm?" Hector said in a careful tone.

Without saying anything, Aldrian simply summoned a small wisp of golden energy at the tip of his finger and showed it to Hector and Lorenzo. From the energy, they sensed a sharp sword intent that seemed to pierce their skin. They were shocked that Aldrian could unleash such sword intent without even wielding a sword. This was undeniable proof that Aldrian's attainment in swordsmanship was already extraordinary.

There was no mistake!

The same sword intent and golden energy that radiated a powerful pressure identical to what they felt in the chasm on the battlefield. While the pure holy aura present at the battlefield was absent here, there was no mistaking that this energy and sword intent were the same.

Hector suddenly lowered his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Finally, I meet you, Aldrian—no, Sir Aldrian. You have truly opened my eyes with what you accomplished in this war. On behalf of the imperial family and the people of this empire, I thank you for your help," he said. Behind him, Lorenzo also bowed deeply.

They did not care that he was still young; his actions in the war alone were already worthy of respect and recognition, as they should be. After a few seconds, they lifted their heads and looked at Aldrian once more.

"I'm sorry if what we did seemed rude or caused you any inconvenience, but the imperial family only want to confirm the identity of the person creating such a sensation in the Rivas Grand Duchy. Your strength, which might already be considered among the greatest on the continent in this era, has caused some anxiety. We simply wish to know if that person can be our friend or ally," Hector said.

However, Aldrian knew that Hector wasn't explaining everything to him, so he decided to address it himself.

"If I were in your family's position, I would also want to confirm whether such a person could be a friend or not. After all, I wouldn't feel safe if a mysterious individual with immense strength appeared in my territory—even if he was helping resolve a war problem. I wouldn't know who he is or why he joined the war. Does he have some hidden purpose? Is he affiliated with another power? As the imperial family, it's your responsibility to ensure that this unknown factor is not a threat to the empire. So, I understand why you're looking for me," Aldrian said calmly.

Hearing Aldrian's explanation, Hector could only sigh as he bowed once again. The young man in front of him clearly understood what the imperial family was thinking, and it seemed he wasn't bothered by it.

"I apologize, but yes, His Majesty—my father—ordered me to investigate you. We want to assess you as a person and understand your purpose in this war, or whether there is any power backing you. We know nothing about you, yet your immense strength has caused some of the nobles, and even His Majesty, to feel uncertain about how to perceive you at this time," Hector said.

Aldrian nodded in understanding.

"So, Sir Aldrian, can you tell me who you really are? And may we know where you have been all this time? You possess a strength powerful enough to dominate anything, yet the only thing we know about you before you arrived in our empire is that you came from the Forgeheart Kingdom. However, it seems your trail ends there," Hector asked.

Aldrian realized that when Hector mentioned his trail ending in the Forgeheart Kingdom, it likely meant the Forgeheart royal family had intervened. They seemed to have helped conceal his traces within their kingdom. Aldrian felt a surge of gratitude toward King Douwin for his support in keeping his traces hidden.

"Who am I? I'm just a wandering cultivator seeking adventure, walking wherever my feet take me. I don't affiliate myself with any faction. As for the imperial family's concerns about my intentions, there's no need to worry. When I came to the war, it was for personal reasons—nothing complicated that would require the imperial family's attention," Aldrian answered.

Hearing Aldrian's answer, Hector stared into Aldrian's eyes. It had become a habit for him to look deeply into people's eyes when trying to discern if there was something hidden behind their words. However, he couldn't hold the gaze for long. He wasn't in his usual state, as Aldrian's blue eyes seemed to pierce right into his soul. Hector felt nervous, as if all his secrets were laid bare before those sharp blue eyes.

*"His background is the same as Miss Irene said, and he claims he came for personal reasons. Is it really because of Miss Irene?"* To be honest, Aldrian's answer wasn't entirely satisfying. There are many things that still don't click in Hector's mind, but he feared that pushing too hard might offend Aldrian.

Although there were still some things bothering him, at least for now, he had received an answer directly from Aldrian.

"Then, if I may ask, why are you here in the capital? Why choose the capital city? Is it true that you are connected to the alchemist who can concoct the six-stripe pills?"

"Why am I in the capital? I'll tell you later. We can take it slow for a better understanding. As for the alchemist who concocts the six-stripe pills, I'm the one who concocts them," Aldrian said, sipping his tea.

Hearing Aldrian's acceptance as if it were no big deal, Hector's heart shuddered. His eyes widened as he stared at Aldrian. He had already considered the possibility that Aldrian and the mysterious alchemist were the same person, but hearing it confirmed still made his heart tremble. How could one person be both a powerful swordmaster and an incredible alchemist at the same time?

Unless Aldrian was the ultimate genius with an incredibly high comprehension and flawless cultivation, Hector couldn't see how it would be possible for Aldrian to excel in both fields at the same time. A swordsman needed years to refine their technique, train their sword intent, and cultivate their sword will, leaving little time for anything else.

An alchemist needed many things, and they had to constantly concoct pills to increase their proficiency. To have the capability to concoct something like the six-stripe pills, Aldrian must have had extensive experience as an alchemist. With the time spent on concocting pills, there would be little time left for anything else.

*"Has this man never faced an obstacle in cultivation or comprehension? How is that possible?"* Hector thought.

Lorenzo also looked at Aldrian as if he were a monster.

*"What the—?! He was also that alchemist?!"* he thought.

After a few moments of digesting this information, Hector and Lorenzo sighed and looked at Aldrian in a new light, a light so bright it almost blinded them.

"Truly incredible, I can't describe it. You have powerful strength and are a talented alchemist. This is my first time meeting someone with such multi talent. Usually, when a cultivator has multiple talents and tries to pursue many things, they end up as a jack of all trades, master of none. If not, one of their talents will stand out, and the others will be left behind. It's normal because of the limitations in their comprehension, body, and time."

"But from what I saw, you are a powerful swordmaster who has already reached a high level of attainment in swordsmanship. You can create a sword intent without even using a sword, something that can only be done by those who have reached the phase of 'One with Sword,' where everything around you can be used as a sword. Even not all members of the greatest swordmasters of the continent reach this stage. In fact, most swordmasters never achieve it in their lifetime because of how difficult it is. You must have high comprehension and mastery of swordsmanship, and it absolutely requires a tremendous amount of time."

"And I think it's the same for your alchemy. Being able to concoct something like the six-stripes pills, which I know takes a long time, is truly impressive. I, Hector Doria, admire Sir Aldrian in the highest regard." He bowed his head again, his tone full of admiration.

Aldrian simply waved his hand.

"It's nothing, Your Highness. I just enjoy learning everything. Others can do it as well."

Hector truly admired Aldrian even more, as he remained humble despite his immense talent. Although Hector knew what Aldrian said was nearly impossible to achieve, he respected his attitude.

"Anyway, it's my turn, Your Highness. I'll tell you why I'm here in the capital, and it has something to do with the devils."

#### *Chapter 232: 'Bringing In' the Imperial Family*

Hector frowned when he heard the word 'devils.' It was one thing that always frustrated him—how they never ceased to disrupt the peace of the Doria Empire. His frustration had only grown recently, especially after discovering the high possibility of traitors within their ranks collaborating with the devils. This war had become a wake-up call, exposing hidden problems within the empire.

Aldrian's arrival here, coupled with matters involving the devils, had to be significant, and Hector expression turned serious.

Aldrian observed Hector and Lorenzo's reactions, carefully assessing their intent. Fortunately, they did not seem to harbor any feelings or intentions that might suggest collusion with the devils. Aldrian reminded himself that he could not always rely solely on his instincts or his understanding of karma laws—it would be arrogant to do so.

"Sir Aldrian, please tell me—if this is about the devils, I will gladly assist you. This aligns not only with the interests of the imperial family but, more importantly, with the well-being of the people of this empire," Hector said in an upright tone.

"To be honest, what I am about to tell you is something I hope you can convey to the imperial family. It concerns the future of this empire and the entire continent," Aldrian said, prompting a serious response from Hector.

"If what Sir Aldrian wishes to share is truly important, then I have no problem conveying it to His Majesty. As I said, I will do my best to assist you, Sir Aldrian," Hector replied.

"Alright, the reason I came to this city is to uproot the traitors within the Alchemist Association." Aldrian said.

Hector's eyes widened in shock.

"There are traitors in the Alchemist Association?" he exclaimed.

"And from my investigation, it's not just any random alchemist; it's the higher-ups of the association. I'm afraid this betrayal will cause a major commotion on the continent if it becomes known to the public," Aldrian said.

Hector and Lorenzo's expressions turned grim. If what Aldrian said was true, then the devils had penetrated too deeply inside the empire.

"First, I want to tell you about the devil infiltrators and how they've been able to infiltrate so many territories without detection," Aldrian continued.

Aldrian then told the first prince about the "pill" consumed by the devils and its effects. He explained that its creators were a combination of three different professions who came together to craft this pill.

When Aldrian finished explaining, Hector's expression grew dark, his anger rising. To think that someone from the Alchemist Association had betrayed them despite the special treatment the imperial family had granted them was beyond infuriating.

"Damn it, to think there are traitors in the Alchemist Association! And we didn't know they were operating right under our noses all this time!" Hector gritted his teeth. Then, with a sigh, he looked at Aldrian with gratitude.

"You are truly great, Sir Aldrian. Since the incident in Balin City in the Ivory Empire a few years ago, our empire has started to take note of the possibility that the devils have already infiltrated our territory through means we don't yet understand. The case in the demon territory, where the local lord was found to be in cahoots with the devils, raised our alarm, as it showed that our own local nobles could be influenced by them."

"When the events in the Forgeheart Kingdom became known to the world, and they had to execute their high-ranking nobles, it became the clearest sign that the devils could reach the inner circle of the nobles. The imperial family then began to strengthen the surveillance on the nobles. Although this raised some displeasure among them, we deemed it a necessary move. However, despite our efforts, we still have not found any signs of infiltrators or traitors within our ranks."

"Only in the midst of war did we confirm that there are indeed traitors among our ranks, as the devils seemed to know our troop movements and strategies. We have some factions under suspicion, but our investigation has yielded no results. Their operations are so silent that we haven't found even the smallest clue or proof. Yet, to think that the Alchemist Association has traitors... we were careless!" Hector said in frustration.

To be honest, the Alchemist Association is an organization that the imperial family hasn't watched too strictly. They hold a special status, and the family believed that the devils would have difficulty infiltrating such a place or exerting influence there due to the presence of the three grandmasters, or association masters. There was also no thought that the higher-ups of the association might betray the empire because of these figures. Besides the imperial family knew them personally, they were renowned for their uprightness, so it was assumed they would never tolerate the existence of devils near them.

"Your Highness, this time, I have someone on my list you need to be cautious of. My investigation has led me to him as the most suspicious person."

"Who is he?" Hector asked.

"The Alchemist Association Master, Master Dan."

Hearing the name, both Hector and Lorenzo were shocked.

"What?! Are you serious?! How could someone like that betray us? His movements haven't seemed suspicious all this time, and the imperial family has been in contact with him! I can't find anything that would suggest he betrayed us!" Hector exclaimed, his shocked expression turning serious again. "What makes you think he's a traitor, Sir Aldrian? I'm sorry, but I need a reasonable explanation. There's no way something like this can be reported without any basis."

Aldrian understood that this news was too shocking for them. The impact of this revelation would be immense. If the Master of the Alchemist Association were proven to be in cahoots with the devils, their existence would crumble overnight. Their long-standing reputation and history, built over millions of years, would come to an end in an instant.

Aldrian then explained his thoughts about the mansion and the speculation he had regarding the association master. Of course, he didn't mention how he had felt irked

when he saw the association master, as that couldn't be counted as proof. After hearing Aldrian's speculation, Hector rubbed his chin with a grim expression. The problem was, he couldn't refute any of Aldrian's points, which only made him angry at himself for not uncovering these things earlier.

Hector looked at Aldrian and said,

"Sir Aldrian, I will tell His Majesty about your speculation, but I can't predict what he will think or decide. I can only persuade him or offer my advice."

"Please do. At least you've found something with this. Maybe it will open the door to catching the rest of the moles within this empire," Aldrian replied.

"However, Sir Aldrian, this will be a grim situation for the empire. If the Alchemist Association's master is cooperating with the devils, it will lead to another chaos. So, if His Majesty decides to move forward with investigating the Alchemist Association, I hope we can clean up everything behind the curtain. I know you understand what I mean," Hector said.

Aldrian nodded in understanding.

"Alright Your Highness. Oh, and I hope this conversation doesn't get out to those nobles or reach anyone with connections to them. We still don't know how many of the devils' accomplices are out there," he said.

"Rest assured, Sir Aldrian, I will only tell His Majesty. Once I have his decision, I will share it with you, and then we can decide on our next course of action," Hector replied.

Hector stayed for another hour before he finally decided that it was enough for today. He had obtained what he was looking for and even received some valuable intel, so he was satisfied with the meeting. As he walked toward the Diamond Inn, Lorenzo sent a voice transmission to Hector.

*"Your Highness, that Aldrian is truly mysterious. I just can't shake the feeling that I'm dealing with someone of a higher status. Even his presence alone feels suffocating."*

*"I felt the same. I'm pretty sure he comes from a noble background. There's no way his demeanor and overall presence come from a normal origin. It's something I instinctively believe after interacting with him,"* Hector replied.

*"He also seems like a chill person. Even I can sense, despite my status as the first prince, that he doesn't seem to care much about me. But the good news is that our interests align, so we can work together,"* he added.

*"Anyway, we'll be quite busy if what Sir Aldrian said is also supported by Father. We'll have to make many moves in the next few days if that happens. We'd better move fast."*

After that, they walked toward a giant castle visible from afar—the place where his family resided.

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At noon, Aldrian walked along the bustling streets of the city, heading in a specific direction. After walking for a while, he stopped in front of a large building with a prominent sign above its gate:

### *Information Guild*

From his conversation with Hector, he had gained something that might lead him to the reason why the Lust Devil's movements were unknown during the war.

### *Chapter 233: One of the Traitors Found?*

From his conversation with Hector, Aldrian learned that some of the war intelligence had been provided by the Information Guild. Hector knew that this guild operated behind the scenes under the Rivas family, but its extensive network proved invaluable during times of war. Although the imperial family maintained its own intelligence group and network, the Information Guild's contributions were also highly beneficial.

During the war with the devils, this guild primarily provided information to the Rivas family. They maintained eyes and ears across every corner of the empire and monitored troop movements to track developments on the battlefield. The guild also had a specialized team designated for infiltration and reconnaissance in war zones. In conclusion, their role was crucial to both the Rivas family and the empire.

Their information had already saved many lives and helped the empire's troops plan their strategies. However, on the other hand, some of their information proved inaccurate, leading to losses among the troops. Many would argue that during the chaos of war, information cannot always be accurate, as situations can change rapidly.

However, for Aldrian and the imperial family, this was no coincidence. If it had happened two or three times, they might have attributed it to the devils' clever strategy. But during the war with the devils, there were numerous instances where the devils seemed to anticipate the empire's troop movements, particularly those from the Rivas family in the later phase of the war.

This was also why the Information Guild was on the imperial family's surveillance list.

For Aldrian, there was another concern: how the Lust Devil had managed to meet his mother in Ilyon without being detected by the guild's intelligence.

*"The possibilities are either they genuinely didn't know about the Lust Devil's movements, or they knew but chose to conceal it," Aldrian thought.*

Even if they truly didn't know the Lust Devil's movements, how could the Lust Devil have learned his mother's location—a position that should have been known only to the main Rivas family? The answer was clear: his mother's movements had somehow been leaked, and that information had reached the devils, specifically the Lust Devil.

To clarify everything, he visited the headquarters of the Information Guild. The headquarters was located in the capital city of the Doria Empire, strategically placed to avoid drawing attention to its ties with the Rivas family.

The building was much larger than the Information Guild headquarters in Rivas City. A steady stream of people entered and exited, creating the impression of an unending flow of activity.

Aldrian stepped inside and approached one of the vacant counters.

"Welcome to the Information Guild. How may I assist you?" the receptionist asked with a polite smile.

"I need to speak with the guild master. I have something urgent to discuss," Aldrian replied.

Hearing Aldrian, the receptionist raised an eyebrow, but then she wore an apologetic expression.

"My apologies, esteemed guest, but the guild master is not receiving any visitors today. Please make an appointment, and we can arrange—" Before she could finish, she saw Aldrian take out a badge from his pocket. The moment she saw it, her eyes widened, and she immediately bowed deeply.

*"I apologize if I disturbed you with the unnecessary appointment explanation, your excellency. I will inform him of your visit,"* she said before hurriedly running to the back room.

Aldrian then placed the badge back in his pocket, feeling thankful that Hector had given it to him.

### *The badge of the prince*

Usually, the person who carries the badge is either the prince himself or someone appointed by him as an envoy. The envoy's status is akin to an extension of the prince's hand; they are the ones who convey the "prince's voice." Hector had given this badge to Aldrian as a gesture of goodwill, hoping to make Aldrian's life in the empire more comfortable.

*"If you need anything while you are still within the Doria Empire, just show this badge, and you will face no obstacles. I believe it will greatly help you,"* Hector had said when giving him the badge.

After waiting for a few minutes, the receptionist finally returned to Aldrian and bowed once again.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, your excellency. Please, this way. The guild master is now waiting for you."

Afterward, Aldrian was led to the upper floor of the building, where there were fewer people.

Upon reaching the fifth floor, he saw double doors at the end of the corridor, where he assumed the guild master was. Beside the doors was a table, at which a woman sat, likely the guild master's secretary.

Before the door to the guild master's room was opened, Aldrian could sense a few presences inside.

*"Eight people, one who isn't hiding his presence. I think he's the guild master, and the others are concealing themselves,"* Aldrian thought.

When the secretary opened the door, Aldrian saw a middle-aged man sitting in his chair.

"Guild master, the esteemed guest has arrived," the secretary announced.

The guild master had already stood up from his chair and walked toward Aldrian with a polite smile.

"Ah, your excellency, welcome to the Information Guild. I apologize for not being prepared for your sudden visit, but please, have a seat. I will serve you to the best of my ability while you are here." He gestured toward the sofa where guests are received.

They then sat opposite each other, and the secretary served tea for both of them. After the secretary exited the room, Aldrian did not speak to the guild master but instead seemed to be assessing him.

*"Nervous, excessive anxiety... Even if he considers me an envoy from the prince, he shouldn't be this nervous. Truly suspicious,"* Aldrian thought.

The guild master, who had been looking at Aldrian's eyes as if he were being read, tried to control himself and coughed to mask his nervousness.

"Your excellency, may I see your badge? I was informed by my employees that an envoy from the first prince had come to this place, and I just want to make sure there has been no mistake. Please accept my apologies once again if this offends you," the guild master said.

Aldrian simply smiled without saying a word and showed the badge to the guild master. The guild master, upon seeing the badge, widened his eyes, recognizing it as real and genuine. However, this only made him more nervous. He tried to mask it with his usual polite expression, but his nervousness was clearly sensed by Aldrian.

Aldrian was truly amused by this. His suspicion grew stronger as he watched the guild master's behavior. He then decided to speak.

"Now, to explain why I'm here—it has something to do with a recent event in this empire, and I hope the Information Guild can cooperate with me so that my business here can be done more easily and quickly."

The guild master's heart skipped a beat. What recent event could require the prince to visit him? The war, or the mysterious alchemist? He tried his best to appear as calm as possible.

"Which event, your excellency?" the guild master asked.

"The war with the devils. I want to know how your information gathering worked when the war started. I'm here to investigate the possibility that an outside power gained knowledge from our intelligence network. I just want to ensure there is no place where the information could have leaked. If there's a possible step that allowed the information to leak, we can evaluate it for the future," Aldrian explained.

Then Aldrian sensed it: the guild master's heartbeat became more erratic. His intent seemed chaotic, and for a split second, Aldrian detected a killing intent before it disappeared. Aldrian's smile widened as he became almost certain that this guild master knew something.

"Apologies, your excellency, but is this investigation under the order of the his majesty, or is it just the first prince's order?"

Hearing the guild master's question, Aldrian finally threw out a bait he was sure the guild master would bite.

"No, I'm here personally, without the knowledge of his majesty, his highness, or any imperial family members. I'm here to help his highness investigate the problem of potential traitors within the empire. However, he will surely agree once he knows what I've done in the future. I am the one entrusted with his badge, so you don't need to worry," Aldrian said.

Hearing Aldrian's answer, the guild master's demeanor became more relaxed, and the nervousness from earlier eased. He looked at Aldrian with a sigh.

"Then, do you want to know how the entire operation works, or are you seeking only certain information, your excellency? Because not all of our information-gathering methods are the same."

"No, not all. I just need to know how you operate your information network within the Rivas family, especially when the Lust Devil came to the war and endangered the life of the Rivas family's successor, Irene Rivas," Aldrian said.

Hearing that name, the guild master's feelings became erratic again. Aldrian caught it and finally confirmed his suspicion.

*"Got you."*

#### *Chapter 234: Dropping the Façade*

"I just want to know how you gather information in the Rivas Grand Duchy. The appearance of the Lust Devil and his movements have actually shocked the Rivas family's troops. It's suspicious that this happened at the same time and place where Irene Rivas was located. It almost seems as if the Lust Devil knew exactly where to appear. At this specific moment, the information guild claimed there was no activity from any members of the Seven Deadly Sins in Ilyon Town," Aldrian explained.

"Please explain to me, Guild Master Pedro, how you provided that information to the Rivas family," Aldrian pressed with a smile. However, Guild Master Pedro couldn't shake the ominous feeling that smile gave him, as if something terrible was about to happen.

"Well, at that time, we could only detect the movements of the Wrath Devil in the Rivas Grand Duchy. It was thanks to our brave informants stationed at the border. Because of their sacrifices, we were able to track the Wrath Devil. All of that information was sent directly to headquarters using a long-distance artifact. The special department personnel received and handled the details. As for the Lust Devil, we really don't know about his movements—none of our men ever saw him," Guild Master Pedro explained.

Aldrian nodded, but inwardly, he sneered.

*"Half-truths mixed with lies. It seems true that he doesn't know the Lust Devil's movements, but it looks like he—or someone from the information guild—relayed Mother's location to the devils instead."*

"I see. Do you have someone from the Rivas family who serves as your contact? Someone who is always in communication with the information guild?" Aldrian asked.

"We have someone from the Rivas family who is always in communication with us because we've been working together for a long time."

"Is it always the same person?"

"Yes, it's always the same person."

"Lies," Aldrian thought. But from this, he realized that there was another traitor within the Rivas family, someone feeding information about his mother to the information guild. The traitor within the guild would then pass that information to the devils—most likely, the man standing right in front of him.

To be honest, he just wanted to see if he could find anything from the information guild's headquarters, even if no traitors were found here. Even a small clue would be invaluable, as it could lead to unraveling a much larger case. However, discovering that the guild master himself was involved was unexpected. Silently, he thanked Hector for the badge.

He realized that by carrying the badge of the First Prince, this man must have assumed he was an envoy from the First Prince. The information guild must be aware that the imperial family is investigating the traitor situation, and the guild master likely believed that the First Prince had caught wind of something here, which explained his nervousness.

With this conversation, it was confirmed that the guild master of the information guild was involved in this traitors problem.

*"I don't feel the same irritation I felt from Master Dan. Is it because his karma with the devils isn't as strong as Master Dan's?"* Aldrian thought.

He pushed that thought aside, deciding to end the charade. He fell silent for a moment, as if deep in thought. Seeing this, Guild Master Pedro, thinking Aldrian was lost in contemplation, refrained from disturbing him.

"Alright, Guild Master, thank you for your information and cooperation. But before we end this, I have one more question to ask," Aldrian finally said.

Hearing that they were almost done, Guild Master Pedro sighed in relief inwardly.

"Please, ask away, Your Excellency," he said with a bright smile.

"What are you trying to hide from me with that façade of yours? You gave me half-truths, thinking I wouldn't notice. What are you trying to do, hm? Do you think that because I'm here without the knowledge of the imperial family, you can easily deal with me and sweep everything under the rug if something goes wrong? How cute. Is it with

those hidden guards of yours, or your devilish compliance?" Aldrian said with calm expression.

Suddenly, without warning, various attacks were hurled toward Aldrian. Swords and arrows struck swiftly, but Aldrian did not move. He simply watched as the incoming attacks halted in midair, stopping before they could even touch him. It seemed as though the attacks had struck something solid, yet there was nothing in front of them.

### *Space Shield*

He hardened the space around him, creating an iron-like wall. This required a high level of comprehension and control over space, as manipulating it to the point where it became as solid as an object was no simple feat. This technique was more than enough to block the attacks of a few cultivators with low King-stage cultivation.

He had already established his domain before dropping his pretense. The attacks that should have been powerful enough to harm him now felt like nothing more than child's play. Then, with a simple shift of his will and control, the gravity around them grew heavier, causing the bodies of the ambushers to collapse under the weight, unable to withstand the intense gravitational force.

Due to the sudden change in gravity, none of them had time to adapt. Before they even realized what was happening, Aldrian had already attacked them with a slap to their foreheads. His footwork was so fast that he struck each target with only a split-second interval between them. Each slap carried his energy, directly attacking and shaking their souls, causing them to instantly lose consciousness.

Afterward, Aldrian sealed the cultivation of the seven ambushers and turned his gaze toward the guild master, who had already stepped back the moment these people attacked him.

The guild master, having steadied himself after the change in gravity, was horrified by the sheer power of this man. They had failed in their ambush! After hearing Aldrian's last question, he was certain that Aldrian already knew about his involvement and had been toying with him.

Could this be a sign that the imperial family was already aware and was now trying to catch him? No, it wasn't confirmed. It could be that this man had simply said he was here without anyone's knowledge, and only he knew about it.

Although he was a Middle King-stage cultivator, he didn't have the confidence to battle Aldrian. The most ridiculous part was that he had finally sensed this young man's cultivation—at the Peak Earl stage, which made no sense. How could someone at such a level block the combined attacks of seven low King-stage cultivators and subdue them so easily?

"I could gladly kill you all, but I haven't. You better treasure this chance, Guild Master Pedro. I don't like being tested on my patience. I'll ask you a few more questions, and don't even think about lying, because you won't like the consequences. Let's just say, you'll wish for death, or you'll regret being alive," Aldrian said, walking closer.

He truly wanted to torture and then kill the guild master because this problem was connected to his mother. The main reason he didn't kill these people was because they were under the Rivas family. If he killed them here without providing any proof to the Rivas family, it would only create confusion within both the family and the information guild.

They wouldn't take kindly to someone killing their subjects without prior notice or solid proof. So, he would give them what was rightfully theirs, the right to judge these men. This would also benefit him in the future when he finally showed himself to them.

Guild Master Pedro gritted his teeth, unable to see a way out. He wanted to use an escape talisman, but it seemed this man would reach him first, even before he could activate it. With a determined expression, he tried to unleash his most powerful technique, hoping to destroy the place and escape. However, he was stunned when Aldrian suddenly disappeared and reappeared right in front of his face.

His movements became sluggish due to the heavy gravity, causing him to react too late. A direct punch landed squarely on his gut. The golden energy wreaked havoc inside him, causing him to writhe in agony as he dropped to the ground. The golden energy, capable of being fatal to both body and soul if Aldrian willed it, inflicted a horrifying pain that combined the torment of body and soul.

This was the most effective method of torture for Aldrian, far more than bloodshed. He only inflicted external wounds if he desired it or if he wanted play with them.

After five seconds of excruciating pain, Guild Master Pedro finally felt it stop, but the aftereffects lingered. His head throbbed as though it might explode, and his insides felt shredded to pieces. It was as if he had narrowly escaped hell. Saliva dripped from his mouth, a testament to the unbearable pain he felt.

Aldrian didn't care. He took out an information crystal and began recording their voices and movements. Placing the crystal on the table, he directed it toward the guild master.

"That's the kind of pain you'll experience if you try anything funny. So, Guild Master Pedro, I hope you can give me an honest answer. You want all of this to pass quickly, right?" Aldrian smiled warmly. However, to Pedro, there was no warmth in that smile—only the chilling grin of a demon come to play with him.

### *Chapter 235: The Traitor inside the Rivas Family*

Outside the guild master's room, the secretary was still arranging papers for her work. While doing so, she wondered why the envoy from the first prince was there. However, she kept her thoughts to herself, knowing she had no right to question her superior's business. After 20 minutes, she saw the envoy emerge from the room. His handsome face made her cheeks flush as he glanced at her and offered a warm smile.

"The guild master will be busy for a while, so I hope you won't disturb him. Please feel free to take a rest for now, miss."

Hearing his soothing voice, she felt her heart calm instinctively and nodded without much thought.

"Alright, Your Excellency."

After that, Aldrian walked away from the guild master's room. As he made his way toward the exit of the guild, he pondered over the information he had gained during his "conversation" with the guild master of the Information Guild. His face was tense with a frown, reflecting his displeasure. The revelation of a mole in the Rivas family was troubling, especially since it seemed to involve someone his mother would least expect.

When Aldrian thought about how his mother would feel if she discovered the identity of the mole, he felt as though the pain were his own. Yet, it was better to address the problem now than to let it fester and risk greater harm to her in the future.

"First Finger, meet me in my room at my new place immediately," Aldrian sent a voice transmission.

Without hesitation, the First Finger responded, "Yes, Master."

Aldrian sighed deeply. Even if it would hurt his mother's feelings, it was something that had to be done.

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After Aldrian returned to his room inside the mansion, he waited for an hour before the First Finger finally appeared, kneeling before him.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, Master. I just returned from a surveillance mission in the northeast of the Doria Empire, in the Gouvard Grand Duchy," the First Finger said.

"At ease," Aldrian said. "I called you here because I need you to deliver this to the Rivas Grand Duchy. Hand it directly to Grand Duke Rivas."

Aldrian retrieved an information crystal and a letter attached to it from his storage ring.

"Also, deliver this to Irene Rivas, the young lady of the Rivas family," Aldrian said as he took out another letter and handed them to the First Finger. "Make sure to deliver it in secret. Don't let anyone know you were there. Ensure that each of them receives their message."

"Understood, Master," the First Finger replied before vanishing.

Aldrian paused for a moment, lost in thought, before leaving his room. He headed toward one of the benches in the garden, where someone was already seated, seemingly captivated by the serene beauty of the surroundings. Sensing his approach, she turned to him and greeted him with a warm smile.

"Enjoying the fresh air?" Aldrian asked as he sat down beside her.

She responded with a nod. "Just clearing my mind after a cultivation session, young master," Eleine replied.

After that, they fell into a comfortable silence, appreciating the beauty of the garden. Although the area was surrounded by hidden formations, Aldrian had already dealt with them, so he felt no concern.

After a few moments of quiet, Aldrian turned to Eleine and asked,

"Eleine, does Mother have another retainer besides you?" Aldrian asked.

Hearing his question, Eleine looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Actually, yes. Lady Irene has other retainers besides me. We were personally chosen by her when she wasn't well-known. At the time, we were just normal cultivators of the Rivas family, but Lady Irene magnanimously selected us as her retainers, raising our status. Ever since then, we have truly felt honored and grateful." Eleine said with a smile as she gazed at the sky. Her eyes seemed to reminisce about the past, when Irene had chosen her to be one of her retainers.

"Her name is Cecile. She's a cheerful person and loves to joke around with me or Lady Irene. Because of Lady Irene's status, she doesn't have many friends, but we, as her retainers, can be said to be among the few she truly considers friends although we are much younger than lady Irene. She often enjoys talking to us. In front of us, Lady Irene isn't the cold and aloof person she appears to be in front of others."

Aldrian, also gazing at the sky, imagined how his mother and her two retainers lived before his existence—how harmonious their relationship was, how they supported each other, and how his mother cared for them, just as they cared for her in return.

"Eleine, in your opinion, can Cecile change? I mean, could she develop harmful intentions toward Mother after all this time?" Aldrian asked.

Eleine frowned upon hearing this. The fact that Aldrian suddenly brought up the topic meant that he had either discovered something or was investigating something related to it.

"From the last time I saw her, before I was trapped in the Everlasting Silent Forest, there was something strange about her, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. We didn't have much time at that time, as we were separated—she stayed at the mansion while Lady Irene and I traveled to the Heavenly Direction Church's territory. Even so, I can't imagine her having any intention to harm Lady Irene. I know just how much she respects and adores Lady Irene, especially since she was chosen by her." Eleine said, her gaze fixed on Aldrian's profile.

"Tell me, young master, why are you suddenly asking me this question? Is something wrong with Lady Irene or Cecile?" she asked. She didn't know why, but she felt a tightness in her heart as Aldrian brought up this question.

After a few seconds of silence, Aldrian opened his mouth.

"After my investigation, I found some information about someone in the Rivas family..." Aldrian stopped, his gaze meeting Eleine's. He wasn't sure how she would react to the news, but he decided to continue.

"There is someone in the Rivas family who became a spy for the devils. Because of this, the Lust Devil was able to reach Mother's location at that time....and I've just found out who the spy is."

Eleine's frown deepened. "There's a spy in the Rivas family? Who is it—" She stopped mid-sentence as something clicked in her mind. Aldrian's sudden question about Irene's retainers, despite never having asked about them before, made her realize the connection. She then turned to Aldrian, her voice trembling.

"Did... did you say that Cecile betrayed Lady Irene?"

Aldrian didn't say anything further, but for Eleine, that was enough of an answer. Her body trembled, and she closed her mouth. She felt her chest tighten, making it hard to breathe. How could that be?! They had such a close relationship, and she couldn't imagine her friend—someone she had considered a sister—being the one to harm Irene.

They had always shared the same mind and determination when it came to Irene. How could her friend become a traitor?

"No way. There must be some mistake, young master. There's no way she would betray Lady Irene! No, there's no way! She's the one who truly adores Lady Irene. How could she betray—no, no way." Eleine's eyes began to water.

Aldrian looked at Eleine, his heart aching as he saw the tears welling in her eyes, and without thinking, he pulled her into a tight hug. Sniffling sounds of her crying echoed softly, and he could feel the wetness on his clothes. He could only imagine how painful it would be if someone he trusted betrayed him—it would hurt so deeply that he might go on a rampage. From the way Eleine spoke about Cecile, it was clear they were like family to each other. Aldrian felt guilty for asking her about this, but he knew he had to in order to learn more about the other retainer.

From the information Aldrian gathered from the Information Guild master, the guild has its usual official contacts within the Rivas family. However, there is another informant, one unknown to the Rivas family, who secretly relays information to the guild. This informant directs some of the information toward the devils.

The first problem in all of this was the Information Guild, which was already under the influence of the devils. They had been gathering information about his mother's retainers and taking advantage of it.

Aldrian sighed again, though he had lost count of how many times he had done so. His heart felt heavy. If Eleine broke down upon hearing this, what would happen when his mother finally learned the truth?

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Later that night, at the Rivas family's mansion, Grand Duke Rivas had just entered his study when he saw something outside the window. He frowned, and upon focusing his gaze, he recognized it as an information crystal. He scanned the room carefully, extending his senses to detect any anomalies, but found nothing out of the ordinary.

He decided to approach it and take it. He carefully inspected the crystal and the letter attached to it, wary of any possible traps. After deeming it safe, he opened the letter and began reading its contents. As he read, his expression shifted from a frown to one of shock. He then looked at the information crystal and immediately checked its contents. What he saw was the confession of the Information Guild Master during Aldrian's interrogation.

"After he finished looking at the crystal's contents, a visible bulge appeared on his forehead, and his face turned red with anger. He then took out a communication artifact from his pocket.

"Bring the Iron Fist order here."

### *Chapter 236: The Truth About Cecile's Condition*

Inside one of the main bedrooms of the Rivas family mansion, Irene sat on her cultivation mattress, meditating. A frown was visible on her face, and sweat dripped from her brow as she struggled to concentrate. An hour ago, she had suddenly received a letter from an unknown sender, and ever since reading its contents, she had been unable to stop thinking about it.

The letter stated that something significant would happen and that she needed to be strong, as it was related to her retainer within the mansion. Irene wanted to understand what was going on but didn't know who to ask. Her thoughts turned to her retainer, Cecile, since the letter specifically mentioned her. She wished to speak with Cecile but felt she might refuse to talk about it. Their relationship had grown distant a few days before Irene was trapped in the Everlasting Silent Forest over a decade ago.

Cecile's gestures and the way she spoke to Irene felt distant, and this remained unchanged even today. She spent most of her time in her room, only coming out when assigned a task by Irene. Cecile rarely spoke to Irene now, and on the rare occasions Irene managed to talk to her, Cecile seemed reluctant to engage in conversation. Irene had already asked a few maids about what had happened with Cecile, but all their answers were the same—they didn't know.

Irene felt sad, but she couldn't force Cecile to speak if she didn't want to share anything. She didn't know what to do, and now, with the letter warning her about something that might happen to her, she couldn't calm her mind, no matter how hard she tried.

"This won't do. This isn't good for my heart. I'd better try asking her again," Irene decided, resolving to be more assertive with Cecile this time. With that, she ended her cultivation session and walked toward the door of her room. However, before she could step outside, she sensed several presences passing by her room. Confused, she opened the door and was stunned by the attire of the people walking past.

*"The Iron Fist Order."*

That was a group of cultivators from the Rivas family, who mobilized only when a serious crime occurred within the family, and they were the ones who enacted judgment. Seeing a dozen members of the Iron Fist Order walking purposefully toward an unknown destination, Irene couldn't help but wonder what had happened.

Then, she remembered the warning in the letter—that something would happen to Cecile. Her heart trembled at the possibility that Cecile might have committed a grave offense, one serious enough to prompt the Iron Fist Order to act.

She ran toward the group and blocked their path. The group was stunned that Irene had stopped them, but they slightly bowed their heads in respect.

"I am sorry, Lady Irene. Could you please step aside? We are carrying out a duty as ordered by the patriarch," said the leader of the group, an old man with a blonde beard.

"Where are you going right now?" Irene asked.

"We are on our way to apprehend the suspect involved in espionage against the family and ties to the devils, so please excuse us," the leader said, bowing once again before continuing on with the others.

Irene was stunned by the answer. Her body froze like a statue for a few seconds, her mind racing as she imagined countless scenarios. She gritted her teeth. Devils? Espionage? Without a second thought, she ran to pursue the Iron Fist Order. By the time she reached Cecile's room, she saw that they had already breached the door.

"Wait!" Irene shouted, rushing to enter the room where the members of the Iron Fist Order seemed stunned by what they were witnessing. Once Irene saw what had happened, she too was shocked. She closed her mouth in disbelief at the sight before her.

Cecile's body lay motionless on the bed, or more accurately, she seemed to be on the brink of death. Her life appeared to be hanging between life and death. Her eyes were lifeless, devoid of any spark, but there were still faint signs of life in her—her breath was so shallow that one might doubt she was still alive.

"Cecile!"

"Be careful, Lady Irene!" the group leader shouted, grabbing Irene to prevent her from approaching Cecile. His face frowned, wary of Cecile after seeing her condition. He wanted to assess what had happened to her first, but Irene struggled in his arms, determined to reach Cecile.

"Let go of me!" Irene demanded. The group leader could only sigh and release her, not wanting to hurt her, but he continued to watch her closely, standing guard beside her. He scanned the entire room for any anomalies while Irene dropped to her knees beside Cecile's bed. Her body trembled as she reached for Cecile's hand. There was a faint pulse, so weak that it felt as though Cecile was on the verge of death.

"What happened to you?" Irene's voice trembled, but there was no answer. Cecile seemed unable to hear anything. Irene's heart ached as she looked at Cecile's condition, and tears threatened to fall. She injected her energy into Cecile to check her body. But then Irene frowned as her energy was absorbed by something inside.

After ensuring there was no immediate threat in the room, the group leader walked to the other side of the bed, placing his hand on Cecile's other hand to check her condition. However, he was shocked by what he felt. Despite the strange phenomenon,

his peak King-stage cultivation allowed him to overpower whatever was inside Cecile's body. Once he had finished his examination, the group leader turned to look at Irene.

"My lady, she has been inflicted by gu!" The group leader said, his voice grave. Irene's eyes widened upon hearing it.

"Gu?! How can that be?"

Gu is a type of poison, shaped like insects or small creatures, that typically reside inside a host's body to survive. They serve various functions—some act as poison, others control the victim's body, or even cripple the host. Gu is harmful to the host, which is why it is often used by opponents to control their adversaries way of life. There are many types of gu insects, and the group leader sensed one in Cecile's brain. It appeared to be a small, worm-like creature, and judging by its appearance, it seemed to be a type of gu that controls its victim's body.

This type of gu is particularly dangerous because once you are infected by it, it not only drains your life force and energy but also takes control of your mind and body, following the will of the one who possesses the Mother Gu. The Mother Gu is controlled by someone, and the host must obey; if they resist, the gu will inflict excruciating pain on the host. Essentially, this type of gu turns the host into a puppet, controlled by the one who holds the Mother Gu.

Irene, hearing the group leader's explanation, could only be shocked, as she hadn't sensed anything like that herself. It was understandable, though, because this type of gu is not easily detected, especially if it is a high-level gu nurtured with powerful cultivator.

Suddenly, someone appeared beside Irene as her tears finally began to fall. She looked up at her father, who had silently stood beside her, frowning as he observed Cecile's condition. He then checked her body, injecting his energy into her. After a few moments, he sighed, shaking his head before turning to his daughter.

"I'm sorry, dear, but her condition..." Grand Duke Rivas sighed again. "It's beyond saving. Her life force has been drained to the point that it can't be restored. She's only hanging on because of the gu controlling her. Once we remove it, she will..."

Hearing her father's judgment, Irene's tears flowed even more. She looked at Cecile again, but this time, she noticed a faint movement from Cecile's lips. Irene was stunned, then leaned closer, straining to hear.

"Ki...kill me."

The moment those words left Cecile's lips, Irene looked into her eyes. They were deadpan, unfocused, not seeing Irene at all, yet her soft words indicated that there was still a flicker of consciousness inside her mind.

Grand Duke Rivas stood stunned. He couldn't tell how long Cecile had been like this, but from the symptoms, it seemed to have been for a long time, perhaps more than five years. The thought that Cecile's consciousness had remained intact all this time made him imagine the torment she must have endured, forced to obey someone's orders every day.

The most infuriating thing was that he hadn't known Cecile was under the influence of gu!

He couldn't shake the feeling that it was his fault for not discovering it sooner. There had been a time when he noticed Cecile's strange behavior, but he found nothing unusual about her body and let it slip by. If only he had checked her more thoroughly back then, clenching his fist in frustration.

Now, as he examined her body, he could feel how deeply the gu had merged with her brain, making it nearly impossible to separate the two.

The only way to end her misery was...

"Irene, can you step outside? You don't want to watch Cecile in more misery, do you?" Grand Duke Rivas said with a soft voice. However, Irene just kept looking at Cecile's face, and now her deadpan eyes seemed to want to cry, her mouth still mumbling about killing her.

After a few moments of silence, Irene then said to her father without looking at him, "Father, let me do it."

#### *Chapter 237: Rest Well My Friend*

Grand Duke Rivas hesitated. He truly didn't want his daughter to face such a cruel choice. To kill someone so dear to her because there was no other option would undoubtedly leave a hole in her heart. She would carry that guilt for a long time—perhaps even for the rest of her life—if she couldn't overcome it or make peace with herself. As her father, that was the last thing he wanted.

However, as a cultivator, Irene would inevitably face such choices in the future. He wanted her to make her own decisions, believing his role was to support her and ensure she didn't regret them afterward.

"Are you sure, my dear? If you want, I can do it. You don't have to force yourself," Grand Duke Rivas said.

"No, Father. Let me do this," Irene replied firmly, without looking at him. "Can you all leave me and Cecile alone for a while?"

Hearing his daughter's request, Grand Duke Rivas looked at the members of the Iron Fist Order and signaled them to leave. Once they were gone, he cast a final glance at Irene before quietly stepping out of the room himself.

Silence filled the room once it was just Irene and Cecile. Only after a few minutes did Irene lift her head and look at Cecile's face again. Her tears had stopped, but the sadness lingered.

"I don't know why, but I keep remembering the day I chose you and Eleine as my retainers," Irene said softly. "Back then, you two were among the most outstanding cultivators nurtured by our family. But I didn't overthink it—I simply felt it in my heart to choose you both, and I did. Thanks to that, you and Eleine became a part of my life."

"Do you remember the days when we were still so close?" Irene asked softly. "I used to talk to you about everything, joke around with you and Eleine, and wander everywhere together without worrying about complicated things. Those were some of the best moments of my life."

She reached out and gently touched Cecile's forehead.

"You never stopped praising me with your sweet words," she continued, her voice trembling slightly. "Your cheerful personality always brightened my day, making me smile every time I saw your happy face. Your dedication to your duties as my retainer was admirable. There was nothing lacking in you—you were perfect for me."

"I know how much you must have suffered—enduring for so long without being able to do anything, this is my fault too, for not paying more attention to you. Ever since I returned from the Everlasting Silent Forest, I thought you had changed. You kept your distance from me, and I hesitated, unsure of how to treat you. But now I realize it was my ignorance that caused it."

Irene's eyes began to water again as she leaned closer, her lips nearing Cecile's left ear.

"I'll tell you a secret," Irene whispered softly. "While I was trapped in the Everlasting Silent Forest, I found a family of my own. I have a husband and a son. My husband is Aldrey Flamecrest—yes, the one from the Flamecrest family, the same one I used to talk to you about in the past. And my son, Aldrian, is a powerful cultivator who has already left the entire continent in awe with his past achievements. He's the pride of both Aldrey and me." Irene whispered softly.

A faint, bittersweet smile crossed her lips. "Father and Mother don't know yet, but I hope to tell them someday. I believe it will all work out in the end."

As she finished, she lifted her head again, her gaze steady despite the emotions swirling within her.

"I'm glad I chose you that day. I'm grateful you became part of my life, but you mustn't feel any guilt toward me. The ones at fault are those who put you in this condition, and they will pay for what they've done to you."

Her hand on Cecile's forehead grew colder, a faint white hue emanating from her palm. Tears welled in Irene's eyes again, threatening to fall.

Just then, she heard faint sounds coming from Cecile's lips. Realizing she was trying to say something, Irene leaned closer, bringing her ear near Cecile's mouth.

"I'm... sorry... my... lady... I'm... glad... you... lived... well," Cecile whispered, her voice weak, as a single tear slipped from her lifeless eyes.

Irene gazed at Cecile's face, unable to hold back her own tears.

"I will. Thank you for everything. Rest well my friend. I hope you find happiness in your next life," Irene said through her tears, her voice trembling as she smiled despite the sorrow. For the first time, she saw Cecile's lips attempt to form a faint smile.

Irene then used her ice energy, channeling it into her palm to freeze Cecile's entire brain. Her profound mastery of ice laws not only froze the brain but also the soul, shattering it instantly. Irene could sense the Gu attempting to fight back, but it was powerless against her overwhelming ice energy. In an instant, the Gu was frozen to death.

Irene tried to use the gentlest method possible to ensure Cecile's death was painless. Once she was done, she closed Cecile's eyes. She could no longer detect any signs of life from one of her dearest friends. Yet, Cecile's face wore a smile, one full of peace—as though she had fallen into a deep sleep after a long, tiring journey.

Irene lowered her head, tears streaming down her face. After a few seconds, she could no longer hold back her grief.

"Haaa!"

Irene cried, letting out the sadness she had been holding back since entering the room. Her sobs echoed loudly, reaching the ears of her parents, who stood outside the door. Grand Duke Rivas felt his heart break hearing the cries of his daughter—cries he hadn't heard since she was a child.

Elene, who had just arrived after hearing what had happened, reached for the door, wanting to go to her daughter. But Grand Duke Rivas gently stopped her. He understood that Irene needed space, time to be alone with her grief.

After a few minutes, the door finally opened, and Irene walked out of the room. Everyone could see her red eyes, stained with tears. She seemed devoid of spirit, as if

drained by the weight of her grief. But when her gaze met her father and mother, she tried to smile at them, though it was a forced smile.

"Father, mother, I'm sorry for worrying you, but I'm okay now. Please excuse me, I'll return to my room," Irene said, her voice soft. She turned and walked away, her back carrying a lonely, gloomy aura.

Grand Duke Rivas wanted to say something to comfort his daughter, but in that moment, he remembered something.

*"Wait... I received a report that someone with the Rivas family's direct bloodline retainer token was in Rivas City at that time. If I think about it, the only person it could be is Eleine, Irene's other retainer. She was actually in Rivas City! She then moved to Vicanti for the war and they said she wanted to meet Irene with her unknown group. The person I sensed in Ilyon must have been her! There's no mistake—she's already out of the Everlasting Silent Forest."* he thought.

Although there were still some questions lingering in his mind like why hadn't Eleine returned to the Rivas mansion after escaping the Everlasting Silent Forest? Why was she in Vicanti and Ilyon without meeting anyone from the Rivas family? Why had she been avoiding him at that time? Moreover, it seemed she had traveled with an unknown group accompanying her.

He didn't fully understand, as he didn't have enough information, but at least he knew that Eleine was still alive and nearby. He wanted to tell Irene, but it didn't seem like the right time. He would wait for her to calm down before sharing this "good news."

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The next day, Aldrian had just finished his morning meditation session when he received a voice transmission.

*"Master, we've received news that the espionage issue within the Rivas family has been taken care of. Last night, the retainer of Miss Irene died,"* the voice of the First Finger resonated.

*"It seems the devils had been using a kind of control gu on the retainer, turning her into their puppet for a long time,"* he added.

Aldrian raised his eyebrows. This was the first time he had encountered a gu case. He had read a little about gu during his journey, so he didn't know much about it. He knew that gu was harmful to those inflicted by it. This particular controlling gu was one type that could control a person's actions, forcing them to obey someone's orders. It was no wonder that Cecile had changed.

It seemed like he needed to study more about gu. This was new knowledge for him and would be useful in the future.

*"Good work. Now, return to your post," Aldrian said.*

*"Yes, master,"* the First Finger replied before cutting off the communication.

Aldrian sighed, then stood up and walked out of the room, heading toward Eleine's quarters. He knocked on the door, and after a moment, Eleine opened it. Aldrian could see the lingering sadness in her eyes from the news of the previous day. Seeing this, Aldrian also felt a pang of sorrow, but he still relayed the news from the Rivas mansion. As expected, Eleine instantly cried, but she was also relieved that the situation was not as they had originally assumed.

Eleine was relieved that Cecile wasn't a traitor by choice. She was a victim and wasn't entirely to blame for her actions.

Aldrian wanted to stay with Eleine to comfort her, but then he sensed someone approaching the mansion. When he finally saw the person, he recognized him immediately.

*"Lorenzo, the knight of the First Prince,"*

*Chapter 238: Enlightenment*

Lorenzo approached the mansion without using any techniques, he simply walked toward the door. Aldrian knew that this visit must have something to do with the conversation he and Hector had that night. As Lorenzo carefully prepared to step inside the mansion, he received a voice transmission.

*"Meet me in the guest room."*

Lorenzo paused for a moment before walking inside, heading toward the same guest room he had last visited with the first prince. Upon entering the room, he found Aldrian already waiting for him.

*"Truly, what an extraordinary person. That feeling has come again,"* Lorenzo thought.

He then slightly bowed his head.

"I apologize for coming here unannounced, but this will not take long, as I am only here to convey a message from His Highness, Sir Aldrian," he said.

Aldrian nodded. "Is it regarding what we talked about?"

"Yes, and because of that, His Majesty wishes to see you tonight—secretly."

Aldrian now looked confused. *His Majesty, the Emperor?* Why would he want to meet him—and secretly, at that? Still, this was a chance to speak with the man who stood at the pinnacle of the pyramid. There were countless possibilities that could arise from such a conversation.

"Alright, so I just have to sneak into the palace?"

"Oh no, Sir Aldrian," Lorenzo said with a slight smile. "You only need to come to the designated location. We will guide you to His Majesty. There's no need for you to trouble yourself with such bothersome tasks."

Aldrian nodded but sensed that Lorenzo still had something on his mind. The man seemed a little reluctant to speak.

"What is it that you want to ask?" Aldrian asked.

Lorenzo sighed before finally asking, "I'm sorry, but this is a question the First Prince wanted me to ask. Did Sir Aldrian do something to the Information Guild yesterday?"

"Yes, I did," Aldrian replied calmly. "It was the best course of action I could think of at the time."

Hearing Aldrian's blunt answer, Lorenzo was momentarily stunned, though he had expected such a response. He then said,

"Last night, the Iron Fist Order of the Rivas family raided the headquarters of the Information Guild. They dragged several individuals, including the guild master, to the Rivas family's mansion. Although both the Information Guild and the Rivas family tried to keep the incident under wraps, our intelligence network managed to uncover their movements."

"All of this happened after His Highness's conversation with you, Sir Aldrian. So he thought that you might have done something to prompt the Iron Fist Order's involvement."

"I intended to mess with the Information Guild headquarters for personal reasons, but in doing so, I unintentionally uncovered that the guild master was actually in bed with the devils. I simply pulled some strings and let the Rivas family clean up their own trash." Aldrian said

"Truly amazing, Sir Aldrian. We are ashamed of our lack of ability, while you've already achieved results not long after our first meeting. With your help, we've managed to eliminate some of the devils' eyes and ears within the empire."

"It's nothing," Aldrian said, waving his hand dismissively. "Anyway, I have a question."

"Please, ask away, Sir Aldrian."

"Do you know anything about the devils who use *Gu* as their technique?" Aldrian asked.

Lorenzo thought for a moment before answering.

"There are some devils who use *Gu* as their technique, but if we're talking about a famous one, there is a devil who is an expert in it. That would be one of the Seven Devils of Annihilation, Wei Zhi. He's renowned for his mastery of poison and *Gu* techniques. It's even said that his poisons rival those of the Tang family in the demon territory."

"Do you know where this Wei Zhi is located?"

"We can't pinpoint his location because he spends most of his time inside the Devil territory. Even during the war, we never heard of his involvement, so we believe he has refrained from making any moves so far." Lorenzo paused. "I'm sorry, Sir Aldrian, may I ask why you're inquiring about him? Do you want us to search for this man?"

"No, you don't have to. I only wanted to know because it's related to the Rivas family." Aldrian then explained to Lorenzo about the *Gu* within the Rivas family, though he didn't reveal Cecile's identity. Hearing Aldrian's explanation, Lorenzo frowned as he pondered something.

"If that is a *Gu*, it depends on the one who possesses the mother *Gu*. If it's someone like Wei Zhi, then he must have been within the Rivas Grand Duchy all this time. To control the *Gu*, there is a maximum distance at which the *Gu* in the host can sense the mother *Gu*. I don't know the exact location, but it must be within a range of 15,000 kilometers. That's quite a large area, and it would be impossible to search for him blindly."

"That is, of course, assuming he hasn't left the Rivas Grand Duchy after the *Gu* within the Rivas family was destroyed. There are many possibilities for his location, but we lack the necessary information." Lorenzo shook his head.

Aldrian also pondered deeply, but he found it difficult to make progress without a specific clue. The maximum distance alone wasn't enough; it was still far too vast for him to search each place one by one. Aldrian sighed inwardly at the problem.

*"If only the entire Rivas Grand Duchy were my domain,"* Aldrian thought, but he quickly paused his train of thought. Even if the entire Rivas Grand Duchy were his domain, he would still need time to search for Wei Zhi. Although he could sit in his room and use his Eyes of the Heaven to overlook his entire domain, he still couldn't process too much information at once. His mind would become overloaded, feeling as though it might explode if he tried to analyze the information of tens of millions of people simultaneously.

Time was not on his side, as he had no idea what Wei Zhi was thinking. It wasn't like when he was in the Ivory Empire, where he killed devil infiltrators as a way to spend his free time. He would teleport to various places and review the information of a certain number of people. At this time, he could only process a million pieces of information simultaneously.

If he wanted to be more effective and direct, he needed to grow stronger—strong enough to know every living being within his domain, to know everything that happened inside it. To know everything.

*"To become Omniscient," Aldrian thought. Suddenly, the words that always lingered in his mind repeated again.*

*There is nothing that can escape my view*

*There is nothing that can escape my sense*

*There is nothing that can escape my will*

He felt something inside him change, and he knew what it was. Closing his eyes, his heart became more resolute, and his mind much clearer. It felt as though he had reached enlightenment.

*"If I think about it, my domain grants me a kind of divine ability: Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient."*

*"My power within the domain is multiplied many fold to the point where no one can defeat me. This power encompasses all kinds of laws, making it Omnipotent."*

*"I can move freely within my domain, no matter how far the distance, which is one form of Omnipresence."*

*"My Eyes of the Heaven within my domain can see everything, uncovering the secrets of people and all things. This is a form of Omniscience."*

He knew that it sounded arrogant, but he believed that it was the truth. Even though he didn't know if absolute Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience were possible, his domain was a small manifestation of those three abilities. Suddenly, his mind was drawn to his own being's essence. Having grown used to it, he looked at the lone star, and as he expected it, the distance seemed much closer.

*"It seems that, in seeking the power of Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience, I also embrace myself,"* he thought. He closed his eyes and focused on his surroundings to meditate. This was the best place for him to do so, where there was nothing, yet everything, at the same time.

Aldrian's true body exuded a golden aura and energy. Lorenzo, seeing it directly, felt as though he were standing before a divine being and instinctively kowtowed to Aldrian. He didn't know why, but his body and instincts compelled him to do so. His soul and energy automatically urged him to lower himself as much as possible before it, unwilling to even think of disrespecting it.

After four hours, the golden energy and aura finally receded as Aldrian opened his eyes. He sighed and looked around, only to be stunned by the sight of Lorenzo still kowtowing before him.

"What are you doing?"

Lorenzo, still stunned upon hearing Aldrian's voice, slowly lifted his head. He hadn't realized how much time had passed, his mind consumed by only one thought...

### *Worship*

He had moved purely by instinct, his body and soul guiding him unconsciously. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he stood up. However, the way he looked at Aldrian had changed. Now, he saw Aldrian not as a mere man, but as a higher being, almost like a god. That was the conclusion he had drawn from the experience he had just undergone.

### *Chapter 239: Entering the Imperial Palace*

"Did he not realize what he had just done?" Lorenzo thought as he bowed his head.

"I apologize, Sir Aldrian, for my behavior. I acted impulsively, driven by your brilliance. Nevertheless, congratulations on your breakthrough to the next stage," he said to Aldrian. As for what he had just experienced, he did not want to know, nor did he dare to ask. He felt it was too presumptuous of him. The lingering feeling of awe made him believe he was not even worthy of asking anything from Aldrian.

Aldrian looked at Lorenzo, who seemed reluctant to discuss what had just happened. He, too, had no desire to bring it up, so he decided to let it be. However, inwardly, he was more stunned by his sudden breakthrough. He had now entered the new stage—the Low Marquess stage! A newfound surge of power coursed through his body and even his mind, a sensation unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

He felt that he could accomplish much more, both within and beyond his domain. New inspirations had already begun to take shape in his refreshed mind after this breakthrough. This filled him with happiness but also left him wondering—how had a moment of self-comprehension enabled him to break through to the next stage? Based on the amount of energy he had accumulated before, he would have needed at least eight more months to reach the Marquess stage.

This was new to him because, until now, he had believed that only by expanding his domain could he accelerate the speed of his cultivation.

"Sir Aldrian, regarding Wei Zhi..." Lorenzo's voice broke Aldrian's train of thought, prompting him to respond.

"Forget it. As you said, the information we have about his location is lacking. Until we find some clue about his whereabouts, it's better for you to preserve your manpower for more urgent matters. However, I won't sit idly—I have my own methods to search for him, as long as he's still within this empire," Aldrian said.

He also couldn't simply ask the Thunderous Shadow Pavilion to search for someone in an area as vast as that, especially not when their manpower was already allocated to other tasks, such as surveilling other regions of the Doria Empire.

Lorenzo nodded. He also felt that way because the imperial family had already dedicated so much manpower to monitor various nobles and groups for potential threats to the empire. All of this contributed to the imperial family's intelligence network, which provided them with up-to-date information. If they sent some of their people to search for Wei Zhi, it would create gaps in other areas.

"Then, I must excuse myself. My job here is done. As for tonight, Sir Aldrian, you just need to come to the tavern beside Roger's Blacksmith in the central district. If the host asks, simply tell him, 'I want the highest-level drink you have, one that will take me to the majestic palace.' Our people will then escort you to the designated place," Lorenzo said.

"We will be waiting for your arrival, Sir Aldrian." Lorenzo bowed his head, turned around, and walked out of the guest room.

After Lorenzo left, Aldrian remained in the room, still deep in thought about what had just occurred.

The unexpected gain he had just received from the conversation was immense. At least now, he was more resolute about what he wanted to achieve with his power of domain. His domain was a force with tremendous potential, and all of it had taken the shape of the triad of divine abilities: Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent. All of these had become integral parts of his domain.

*"After the meeting with the emperor, I will need to seriously focus on maximizing the abilities of my domain. Maybe I'll enter seclusion for a while to train,"* he thought.

After thinking for a while, he stood up and returned to his room. Now, he just needed to wait for the night to come for his meeting with the emperor.

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In an unknown place, a man in casual attire walked down the busy street. He appeared like any other ordinary person, so the people paid him no mind. He then entered one of the houses. The house was silent, without a single sound. The noise from the outside couldn't enter, nor could any sound escape, as he had already set up a sound barrier.

He then walked toward one of the rooms and entered. Inside, he moved to one side of the wall and injected his energy into it, activating a hidden mechanism that opened a secret door. On the other side of the door was a chamber. Anyone entering this chamber would first notice a strange smell, a mix of blood and something more sinister. After that, they would see many jugs neatly arranged.

However, the man ignored it all, as if he was already accustomed to the surroundings. He walked toward the center of the chamber, where another man sat on a cultivation mattress. The seated man had white hair, pale skin, and black spots scattered across his body. He was in the middle of meditation, his eyes closed, seemingly unaware of the other man's arrival. The standing man stopped and spoke to the pale-skinned man.

"Our assets inside the Information Guild have already been compromised. The Rivas family has caught wind of it and is moving quickly, dispatching the Iron Fist Order. The security is now so tight that I've only just managed to get this information."

The pale-skinned man opened his eyes and sighed, his sigh carrying an air of boredom.

"Truly surprising. How did the Rivas family manage to sniff out our assets inside the Information Guild, and even my puppet within the Rivas family? We've practically lost half of our eyes and ears in this empire," he said.

"But whatever. They're so foolish to only now realize that one of their main family members has been inflicted with my gu and controlled for over 17 years."

"That's why our lord decided to take drastic measures this time. He's ordered us to eliminate the 'head of the dragon' tonight and plunge the empire into chaos for a while. We need to make that person the next ruler, so when the time of the prophecy comes, it will be easier for all of us," the other man said.

Hearing what they must do, the pale-skinned man grinned. Suddenly, small creatures began slithering under the surface of his skin, visible to the eye. The sight was grotesque, as his body seemed to contain many of these creatures within.

The man then stood up and walked toward one of the jugs, picking it up.

"Finally, I can test my new poison. This one can even kill someone at the emperor stage, let alone that weakened old man!" His grin grew more sinister, and the creatures inside his body moved faster. It was as if these creatures could sense their master's emotions and mood.

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Later that night, Aldrian walked toward the location Lorenzo had told him. The tavern Lorenzo mentioned was in the central district, an area where many high-status individuals resided. It was not far from his mansion.

Once he entered the tavern and sat at a small table, a man approached him with a warm smile.

"Welcome to Paradise's Taste. May I take your order?"

"Ah, yes. I want the highest-level drink you have, one that will take me to the majestic palace," Aldrian replied.

Hearing Aldrian's reply, the man continued smiling and bowed toward him.

"I apologize, customer. To taste our highest-level drink, you must come to our VVIP room. This drink is special and available only to those who visit the VVIP room. Please follow me if you'd still like to try it," the man said.

He then led the way, with Aldrian following him behind the main building, where a carriage was already waiting. However, this was not a luxurious carriage, but one typically used for transporting supplies or logistics.

The man bowed once again to Aldrian.

"I apologize, sir. We have to use this carriage to avoid raising any suspicion or attention. It's used as a supply carriage meant to deliver necessities to the imperial family. Please just wait inside the carriage, and don't worry about anything else. Once you arrive at the imperial palace, someone will be waiting for you."

Aldrian nodded and, without hesitation, entered the carriage before it was covered with a blank white tarpaulin. Inside, Aldrian could only wait, unable to see outside due to the tarpaulin, but he could still sense his surroundings, so it didn't matter much.

After the carriage had been moving for more than 30 minutes, it stopped, and Aldrian heard the imperial guards checking the outside of the carriage. However, one of the guards seemed intent on checking the inside as well.

"What are you doing?!" the driver shouted.

"We still have to check it thoroughly," the imperial guard replied.

"Are you crazy?! As I told you, this carriage contains necessities for His Majesty, and it needs to be delivered as soon as possible without anyone touching it! Do you want to take responsibility if something happens to the supplies? What if something goes

wrong? If you want to die, don't drag me into it, because if anything happens, you and I will be the first to fall!"

The imperial guard's sweat began to bead, and only then did he abandon his intention.

"I'm sorry, you're clear to go," the imperial guard said.

After that, the carriage continued on its way and finally came to a stop after a few minutes.

"Sir, we have arrived," the driver's voice resonated.

Aldrian then stepped out of the carriage and raised his eyebrows upon seeing someone already standing near it. He had never seen this man before, but he instantly recognized that the face was just a disguise. Because Aldrian knew at once that this man was none other than the First Prince himself!

#### *Chapter 240: Meeting With the Emperor*

Disguised as someone else, the first prince bowed to Aldrian.

"Welcome to the imperial palace, Sir. Please, this way. I will escort you to His Majesty," Hector said to Aldrian. "Please wear this, Sir. It will cover your face so no one sees your appearance." Hector then handed Aldrian a white robe that covered his head.

Aldrian nodded before putting it on and following Hector into the interior of the imperial palace.

*"You don't have to greet me personally or act so submissive,"* Aldrian said to Hector through a voice transmission.

*"It can't be helped. It's better to stay on guard, right? I just don't want anyone to notice anything strange or involve too many people in this, so I have to rely on only a few of my trusted people,"* Hector replied.

*"Anyway, my father is already waiting for you in his room. It seems he's eager to meet you after I told him about our conversation. I apologize for making you come to the palace."*

*"That is alright, Your Highness. I also wish to speak with His Majesty. After this meeting, the imperial family will have a better understanding of the current situation and the challenges ahead,"* Aldrian replied.

*"By the way, I already heard from Lorenzo—thank you for catching the traitors within the information guild. You handled it beautifully, using the Rivas family's own hands. We've*

*been keeping the information guild under watch to detect anything suspicious, but in the end, you were the one who uncovered the traitors,"* Hector said.

*"It's just a coincidence,"* Aldrian said with a shrug, which made Hector smile. What Aldrian had accomplished was no small feat, as it significantly eased their burden.

*"Regarding Wei Zhi, one of the Seven Devils of Annihilation, I can assign some of my men to search for his traces. Now that the traitors in the information guild have been dealt with, we can redirect some of our manpower to investigate him,"* Hector offered.

*"If it's not too much trouble, Your Highness. But even if you don't find anything, I have my own methods to track that man,"* Aldrian replied.

Hector nodded. They walked through several hallways of the imperial palace, passing numerous imperial guards and maids. Some glanced curiously at Aldrian and Hector, seemingly wanting to question them. However, Hector simply displayed a badge—one belonging to the emperor's steward. With that, their journey to the designated room went smoothly and without trouble.

After walking for nearly 15 minutes, they arrived in front of the room. The area was deserted—no one passed through here, not even imperial guards.

*Knock, knock.*

Hector knocked on the door before announcing, "Your Majesty, he is here."

After Hector's announcement, the door opened, allowing Aldrian to look inside. The room was spacious and luxurious, lined with countless bookshelves filled with what must have been hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of books. It was a treasure trove of knowledge, a paradise for someone like him who loved to learn new things.

As much as he wished to delve into the books, his attention didn't linger on them for long. Seated at a reading table was someone deeply engrossed in a book.

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**Durand Doria**

**Age:** 89,670 years

**Race:** Human

**Cultivation:** High Emperor

**Cultivation Technique:** The Harmony of Heaven and Earth Scripture

**Attack Techniques:** 7 Sword Moves of Heaven Cleaving Technique, Earth Guardian Knight, Heaven Shattering Palm, Heaven Splitting the Reality, Decompression.

**Defense Technique:** Armor of Heaven and Earth

**Movement Technique:** 3 Phases of Illusion Step

**Supporting Technique:** Heavenly Knight Battle Form

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This man's cultivation was the highest Aldrian had encountered in the empire, but he frowned as he sensed something unusual about the man's body.

*"Why does his body reek of the aura of death?"* Aldrian wondered.

Though the man's cultivation was at the high Emperor stage, his aura felt strangely weak. Aldrian also noticed that the man was using a disguise to conceal his true face.

There was also a steward nearby, his cultivation at the low Emperor stage. He stood motionless, like a statue, with a white cloth draped over one of his hands. Aldrian was surprised to realize that the white cloth was actually a divine-grade artifact.

Aldrian returned his focus to the man reading at the table. The man seemed engrossed in his book, completely detached from his surroundings. Only when Hector and Aldrian drew near did he finally stop reading and glance up at them. However, the moment his gaze landed on Aldrian, his eyebrows shot up, as if he had seen something astonishing.

"Father, this is Sir Aldrian, the one I told you about," Hector said, bowing his head slightly. Aldrian followed suit, though there were still some questions in his mind; he decided to keep them to himself for now.

"Truly incredible. Even I cannot sense this young man's cultivation after he's come this close. He seems like a mortal with no cultivation at all. Is this what they call being one with nature?" Emperor Durand said, still standing as he walked toward Aldrian, his face filled with curiosity.

"I'm sorry, young Aldrian, but I'm truly surprised. Seeing is believing. I'm a person full of skepticism until proof is presented to me. When I first heard of your achievements and how young you are, it was hard to believe. But after seeing you in person, I must admit, you are truly extraordinary. This is the first time I've felt this way about someone," Emperor Durand said.

"It's nothing, Your Majesty. I still have much to learn. My achievements are insignificant compared to what this empire has experienced over the years. I've merely added a little to the history of this empire," Aldrian replied.

"You don't have to be so humble. This war is unlike any other, and the devils' intentions remain unknown. Given how you breached their fortress in Sazim, we now have an entry point that can be used in the future if we decide to strike the devils and lighten the burden on the Rivas Grand Duchy," Emperor Durand said, offering a handshake, which Aldrian returned.

"Welcome. I apologize for receiving you in such a roundabout manner; it's because there are certain factors that make it better for our meeting to remain unknown to others," Emperor Durand said apologetically.

"Is it about the spies, Your Majesty?" Aldrian asked.

"That is one of the reasons. Anyway, please have a seat; it's not good to keep standing after walking so far," Emperor Durand said. They both took a seat on the comfortable sofa not far from the reading table. The steward, who had been standing like a statue, finally moved to prepare drinks and snacks.

"So, young Aldrian, may I ask you a few questions?" Emperor Durand asked.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Aldrian replied.

Emperor Durand nodded. "Then, I want to ask something that has been on my mind for a long time. Are you the same person as the mysterious swordsman? The one who created a sensation after the incident in Balin City, and most recently in the Forgeheart Kingdom? Are you the one who unleashed that slash technique?"

The steward had finished preparing the tea and snacks. As he placed everything on the table in front of them, Aldrian responded to Emperor Durand's question.

"Yes, that's me." His answer, given without hesitation, stunned everyone in the room for a moment. The emperor let out a sigh, while Hector and the steward felt their hearts tremble. Hector also had doubts about Aldrian being the same as the mysterious swordsman, but the technique he saw on the battlefield had a different aura—one imbued with a holy presence—that left him confused.

He had already seen all the traces of the mysterious swordsman and his technique, and the conclusion he reached was that the technique focused purely on destruction or the annihilation of the enemy, not purification. With the holy aura surrounding it, Hector had initially thought that the person who unleashed this technique must be someone else.

To think that the person who could unleash a technique with the intent of pure annihilation was the same person standing before him...

"You are truly amazing, young Aldrian. The first time I saw your technique was during the incident in Balin City. At that time, I wanted to invite you to learn from you, to gain one or two insights. To think that the one who unleashed that technique is a young

man... truly, the young will surpass the old. If I could, I would bestow a status or title upon you in front of the masses."

"Thank you for your compliment and your offer, your majesty, but if you wish to bestow something upon me in front of many people, I must refuse for now. It is better for me to remain out of the public's attention," Aldrian answered.

"I thought as much," Emperor Durand nodded. "Especially at this time, with the problem of spies and devil infiltrators. You would become one of their primary targets, and that would lead to a troublesome situation."

After that, Emperor Durand drank the tea served by the steward, followed by Aldrian.

"This is good tea," Aldrian said after drinking it.

"I'm glad you like it. This tea is specially cultivated by my family in the Southern Empire."

"As expected, this must not be ordinary tea, to think that it is actually cultivated by the imperial family."

After a few moments of enjoying the tea, Aldrian looked at Emperor Durand.

"Your majesty, may I ask a question?" Aldrian inquired.

"Please, ask, young Aldrian."

"Are you perhaps in poor health? My apologies if I sound presumptuous, but to me, it seems as though you are on the brink of death."