

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

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Chapter 241: Emperor Durand's Problem?

The three others in the room widened their eyes in surprise. However, Hector quickly frowned, not understanding the sudden statement.

"Sir Aldrian, what are you saying?" Hector asked before turning to his father. He narrowed his eyes, studying his father's reaction. Was his father unwell? Confused, he looked back at Aldrian.

"There's no—"

"Truly, you have sharp senses, young Aldrian," Emperor Durand said with a sigh.

Hector's eyes widened in shock as he looked at his father again.

"What are you saying, Father? Are you actually sick?!" he exclaimed.

Emperor Durand didn't answer Hector's question. Instead, he removed his disguised appearance. Hector's shock deepened as he finally saw the true face revealed.

"Your Majes—" the steward tried to stop him, but Emperor Durand silenced him with a raised hand.

The middle-aged emperor's visage transformed into that of a pale, frail old man. His face appeared sickly, with black spots marring parts of his skin—a stark contrast to the healthy appearance he had moments ago.

Aldrian frowned as he observed the emperor's true face. He couldn't understand how the emperor had ended up in such a condition. Cultivators at a high level, like the emperor stage, rarely fell ill unless under extraordinary circumstances. The diseases capable of afflicting an emperor-stage cultivator were extremely rare—and all of them were deadly.

Is Emperor Durand suffering from one of these deadly diseases? Or could it be something else entirely?

From Hector's behavior and reaction, it was apparent he had no idea his own father was in such a condition.

"Father, what's wrong with you?" Hector asked, his tone filled with shock.

Emperor Durand sighed as he looked at Aldrian. "To be honest, my body is deteriorating as we speak. It started over 16 years ago—the first sign that something was wrong with me. At that time, the energy in my dantian began to disperse little by little. I could still cultivate, but with each passing year, the rate of energy loss grew larger. Now, the energy I lose far exceeds what I can gather."

"The problem didn't stop there. I began to feel difficulty circulating my energy throughout my body, as if something were blocking my meridians. Yet, even after thorough examinations by myself and my trusted physician, we found no blockages. It's as though, at various points in my meridians, my energy becomes sluggish for no apparent reason. It's a truly bizarre situation, and to this day, we still don't understand how or why this is happening."

Emperor Durand gazed down at his tea.

"Because of all this, I haven't been able to maintain my body in peak condition. After all these years, there's been no improvement, and the situation has only worsened. Cultivating the surrounding heaven and earth energy has become increasingly difficult. With my inability to circulate energy effectively and the constant dispersal of energy from my dantian, my body can no longer sustain itself. It has started aging at an accelerated rate."

"It's gotten so much worse in recent years that sometimes I feel extreme pain in my abdomen and at certain points in my meridians. My cultivation foundation has even been affected, growing weaker and weaker."

He sighed again.

"But as emperor, I can't show any weakness to my subjects or even my family. I don't want to spread panic or cause chaos among the commoners or the nobles. There are many variables that require me to remain strong, so I've tried to maintain appearances, at least showing an aura of stability and that there's no problem with me. But I don't think it will hold for much longer, and unfortunately, it will happen at the worst possible time, with so many issues surrounding the devils."

Emperor Durand took a sip of his tea, but as he spoke of his condition, Aldrian and Hector both realized the potential consequences if the news of Emperor Durand's illness were to spread. There would be uncertainty among the commoners, panic would ensue, and some people, particularly nobles, would take advantage of the emperor's moment of weakness.

If people learned that the emperor was in such a weakened condition, they would momentarily forget about the devil's problem and instead focus on the issue of succession. Emperor Durand couldn't afford that, so he needed to hold on as long as

possible and expedite the appointment of the crown prince. Not long ago, he had announced that he would choose one of his sons as the crown prince, citing the uncertain times of the prophecy and the need for a backup plan.

Almost all the nobles had already taken their stances, except for those within the neutral faction. Though they had various reasons for remaining neutral, they shared one common attitude: wait and see. However, that could change if something were to happen in the future. Some of them might choose their successor.

"No wonder Father hastened his announcement about the succession race. This is a huge matter if it gets out right now. Then there are the problems we face with the devils, we still don't know the extent of their influence within the empire. But with Sir Aldrian's new information, I'm afraid the devils have already taken some important positions within the empire under their influence. The news of Father's sickness is the last thing I want to spread in a situation like this," Hector thought.

"But to think father also hid his body's condition from his own family, even his sons... He's certainly a very careful person. Maybe the only one who knows he's sick is Steward Edward."

Aldrian seem to ponder for a moment before speaking to Emperor Durand.

"Can I check your body's condition? Maybe I can try to do something about it. To be honest, after hearing Your Majesty's story, I'm intrigued and would like to examine your condition myself."

Emperor Durand only smiled at Aldrian.

"Are you perhaps a physician?"

"No, but if I can detect the problem within Your Majesty's body, maybe I can use my abilities to help ease the issue."

Emperor Durand nodded. If Aldrian were also a physician, he would truly be someone unparalleled, a jack of all trades, someone who excels in multiple professions, making each one a success. Aldrian was already a great sword cultivator and alchemist, feats that were nearly impossible to achieve together. If he were also a physician, he could only be called the one and only, there would be no one else like him in the future.

Thinking there was no harm in trying, he smiled and placed his hand on the table.

"You can check it, but even if you can't find anything, it's okay, young Aldrian. I've already gotten used to it. I've consulted with some of the greatest physicians on the continent, and their answers have always been the same."

Aldrian nodded and then touched Emperor Durand's pulse, using his senses to examine it. What he found inside the emperor's body were damaged meridians and dantian. The condition was so severe that in some parts of the meridian, they had already dried up, as energy had not flowed through those pathways for a long time.

However, he also found something beyond the damaged meridians and dantian—something that should not normally be in those parts of the body.

"What is this?"

Although subtle, he could sense something intangible in those areas. It was so tiny and faint that Aldrian would have missed it if not for his sharp senses. Despite its size, once Aldrian focused his attention on it, he sensed something sinister. He was stunned, because he could also sense some laws within it!

"I can feel Karma laws, Darkness laws, oh, is this one that's called a curse? Curse laws?" Aldrian thought. He remembered in one of his visions, there was more or less something like this.

Aldrian sensed many spots within the emperor's body where the curse resided. They seemed to block the flow of energy, siphoning it to strengthen the curse. The curse had already begun corroding Emperor Durand physically, damaging his meridian and dantian. Even if Emperor Durand consumed healing pills, the curse prevented any attempt at healing, blocking all efforts to restore his condition.

Aldrian then categorized it as a deadly curse due to its strength and complexity. This curse not only blocked any attempt by Emperor Durand to heal himself but seemed to actively resist any effort to remove it. Moreover, it appeared hidden from all senses, even from the emperor himself. The fact that neither the emperor nor anyone else who examined him had been able to identify it as a curse only highlighted the skill and high level of the caster behind it.

Emperor Durand should have come to the Heavenly Direction Church instead of a physician. They are more appropriate for destroying curses and more keen to such forces because of their holy energy. They might have been able to detect this curse much earlier.

After confirming that this was indeed a curse, another idea came to Aldrian's mind.

"This is also my chance to study the curse laws and comprehend them. A curse of this level is rare, so I can take advantage of it. I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Please bear with me for a moment as I examine this law."

Chapter 242: Dispelling the Curse

Taking advantage of the situation, Aldrian focused his senses on the curse. He comprehended every aspect of it: the laws inside it, how it worked, and how it was shaped. He sought to understand it fully. He didn't want to inject his energy into it, fearing that doing so might affect the curse itself. After all, his golden energy was the purest form of holy energy. If the curse were destroyed because of his energy, he would have to wait for another opportunity like this to arise.

Emperor Durand waited for Aldrian's assessment results. However, after a minute of waiting, Aldrian remained completely still, not moving at all. His eyes were still closed, and he appeared like a statue. Yet, Emperor Durand could feel Aldrian's senses focused on a particular part of his body, causing a stinging sensation at certain points along his meridian and dantian.

Only after another minute did Aldrian finally open his eyes, a smile spreading across his face. He had finally grasped how the curse worked and how to create it. With his understanding of the curse's intricacies, he also knew several ways to dispel it. Of course, he could simply use his golden energy, but his comprehension extended beyond that. He knew that the curse could also be dispelled using some of his comprehension of the laws, such as karma laws.

The curse was tightly connected to karma, one of Aldrian's specialties. Severing its karmic ties could weaken or even dispel the curse. Even more remarkably, he could track the curse's caster through it. This was one of the weaknesses of techniques that had karmic properties.

However, he had not reached that point yet. When he tried to track the karma, it blurred after a certain distance, leading him to conclude that the caster was either too far away or possessed something that concealed his karmic traces. For now, he had to be satisfied with this and decided to focus on dispelling the curse within Emperor Durand.

"Your Majesty, you are not afflicted with a disease, but cursed instead," Aldrian said with a calm expression.

Hearing Aldrian's assessment, the three others were stunned, but Emperor Durand frowned.

"Curse? At one point, I also thought this was a curse, so I visited the main Heavenly Direction Church in their territory to check. At first, I wanted to see the saintess, but in the end, I had one of their archbishops, whom I've known for a long time, examine me. He said my body didn't have any curse, and because I trusted him, I dismissed the idea of it being a curse."

Aldrian looked confused.

"He already visited the main church and met their archbishop? No, something is not right. If the man who checked Emperor Durand was already at the archbishop level, he should have detected this curse. What is he—" Suddenly, Aldrian thought of something and smiled.

"Your Majesty, who is the archbishop you visited at that time?"

"He is Archbishop Carsius Vilanix. He's already famous for his abilities within the church, so I trusted his judgment at the time."

"Carsius, huh? I'll remember that name," Aldrian thought before speaking to Emperor Durand.

"I'm certain this is a curse, Your Majesty. It's a powerful and complex curse that's difficult to detect, but fortunately, I have a way to dispel it with my abilities."

The emperor and the steward widened their eyes. Could the problem plaguing Emperor Durand finally be solved? They had already done everything they could to address the emperor's condition, but now this young man claimed he could solve it?

"Are you sure, young Aldrian? Can you cure me?" Emperor Durand asked, trembling.

"Yes, Your Majesty. You just have to trust me, and I will dispel this curse. Although it is a powerful curse, I am confident in my ability to destroy it."

Emperor Durand quickly grabbed Aldrian's hand.

"If you can do it, young Aldrian, I will repay you with whatever you want. This is my word as the emperor of the Doria Empire. This situation has already tormented me, making me worry about the future of this empire. I hope you can heal me." He released his grip on Aldrian's hand and slightly bowed his head.

Hector widened his eyes, unable to believe that his father had bowed his head in desperation. He knew how proud his father was and never expected him to bow to anyone. This only emphasized how desperate the emperor had become.

Aldrian also felt this wasn't right and quickly stopped Emperor Durand from bowing any further.

"It's okay, Your Majesty. We can discuss other matters once I've dispelled the curse," Aldrian said, gesturing for Emperor Durand to stop. "For now, let me focus on dispelling it. Please prepare yourself, Your Majesty."

Emperor Durand solemnly nodded.

Aldrian then touched the emperor's hand again. This time, he concentrated on all the spots where the curse had manifested within the emperor's body. Once he had located them, he slowly injected his golden energy into the emperor's body. With precise control, he directed it toward the cursed spots.

Aldrian had to be careful, as some of the emperor's meridians were already damaged and dried out. He needed to stimulate and heal these areas first to allow his golden energy to flow more smoothly. Fortunately, his golden energy possessed healing properties, making the process easier. Little by little, the damaged meridians began to mend themselves.

The dried meridians also started showing signs of recovery. It was as if they were being nourished with vital energy after a long period of deprivation, gradually rejuvenating and regaining their vitality.

When the golden energy finally touched the curse, the curse began to fight back! Aldrian, who already understood its intricacies, had predicted this reaction. He could sense that the curse was "alive" and would resist anything it perceived as a threat.

However, how could this curse resist the golden energy that compelled all cultivators to submit? How could it stand against energy so pure that even the Heavenly Demon's demonic energy had to yield? The curse was powerless and was instantly purified by the golden energy.

Emperor Durand, who could feel the golden energy directly, was shocked to his core. At first, he was stunned by how the golden energy suppressed the remnants of energy within his dantian. Its sacred aura overwhelmed him, stirring an instinctive urge to submit. It didn't feel like something meant for a mortal vessel—it was as if this energy belonged to a divine being. Even contemplating its presence in his body felt like an act of blasphemy!

"What kind of energy is this?" Emperor Durand wondered, his mind reeling.

However, beyond the sacred and pious feeling, there was also a soothing warmth, as if he were enveloped in the embrace of nature itself. It felt like standing in the heart of spring, basking in the gentle warmth after the harsh cold of winter. He hadn't felt this relaxed or at peace in a long time. In fact, the sensation was so comforting that he found himself tempted to surrender to sleep, momentarily forgetting all his worries.

He didn't feel any discomfort; with each passing moment, he could only sense his body rejuvenating. He felt much stronger and more refreshed, with his damaged dantian and meridians showing signs of improvement like never before.

His outer appearance began to change as well. His pale skin regained its healthy tone, and the black spots faded away one by one. His aged face slowly transformed back into the youthful appearance of his middle years, resembling his earlier disguise. Even his

presence seemed to grow stronger, as though he was returning to the prime of his past self.

The steward and Hector were left speechless, staring in amazement at the emperor's transformation.

After a few minutes, Aldrian finally stopped and looked at Emperor Durand's changes with a smile.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Emperor Durand began to assess his body, then attempted to circulate his energy using his cultivation technique. He was stunned to discover that his energy flowed as smoothly as it once did—no, even more smoothly than before! His aura had grown stronger, causing the very air around him to tremble.

He also felt that his cultivation foundation had returned to being solid and even stronger than before! With this newfound vigor, he felt as though he could break through to the peak emperor stage! Of course, it was just a feeling, but he was confident in it. If the opportunity arose, he believed he could reach that peak level.

The steward's eyes began to water as he looked at the emperor. He was the only one who truly understood the emperor's struggles and how he had tried to hide them from everyone, even his own family. Despite all his weaknesses, the emperor had continued to maintain the stability of the empire, a task that must have been incredibly difficult while carrying such a façade.

Finally, that burden was lifted, and Emperor Durand could act without worrying about his body or his situation being discovered by others.

In an unknown place, a person in black robes meditated in a dark room. Suddenly, he felt a tremor in his soul, and blood spat from his mouth. His eyes lost focus as he felt his soul shake violently.

After a few moments of stabilizing himself, he frowned, realizing what had just occurred.

"Someone broke my curse!"

Chapter 243: The Web That Covered the Empire

There was nothing remarkable about this man, except for his long black-and-white hair flowing from beneath his robe. He wiped the blood from his mouth and frowned.

"The curse on the emperor Durand has been broken?"

He was certain there was no one on this continent capable of dispelling this curse except the devil lord. He had designed it so that, even if detected by an Emperor-stage cultivator wielding holy energy, it could not be undone. The uniqueness of this curse lay in its fusion with the concept of resilience. This resilient concept was then combined with his comprehension of karma laws, creating a "living" curse that could "defend" itself whenever someone tried to destroy it.

But his curse had just been broken—and not only broken, it had actually become a medium for a karmic attack from the person who dispelled it! The attack targeted his soul, but fortunately, he had already shielded it with a karmic barrier, minimizing the damage. Without it, his soul would have been severely injured.

The only possible explanation for this was that the person who broke his curse was highly skilled in karma laws and deeply understood the intricacies of the curse. He frowned at the thought, as it meant someone outside his expectations had joined Emperor Durand's side. He was certain there was no one on the emperor's side capable of even detecting this curse due to its unique nature.

The emperor could only travel to the Heavenly Direction Church, but someone there was already prepared to ensure he would not achieve his goal.

"This is truly troublesome. We've already lost contact with the Information Guild, and now the main plan in the Doria Empire is in jeopardy. If the emperor is fully cured, my lord plan here will fail," the man thought.

"I'll report this to my lord first. It seems that the drastic plan is our only chance. If even that fails to kill Emperor Durand, we'll have to abandon our initial plan for the Doria Empire and search for another alternative."

He then rose from his meditative position.

"I must also warn Wei Zhi to be cautious. We need to prepare for the worst-case scenario—that the emperor has already fully recovered and regained his power."

He walked out of his room, intent on reporting this new development.

Emperor Durand, still stunned by his recovery and overwhelmed by the fresh vitality coursing through him, turned his gaze to Aldrian. Rising to his feet, he immediately bowed at a perfect 90-degree angle. His movement was resolute and without hesitation. Aldrian wanted to stop him, but Emperor Durand seemed adamant.

"Allow me to express my gratitude, young Aldrian. At the very least, let me bow to you for what you have done, for it will ease my heart. Thank you, young Aldrian. You have saved me, and it can be said that you've safeguarded the stability of this empire. I

cannot thank you enough for this. I, Durand Doria, as emperor, will never go back on my word. If I promised to grant you anything upon curing me, then I will honor that promise."

Aldrian could only sigh but still smiled.

"Alright, your majesty, but please straighten yourself. I feel bad making your majesty keep bowing to me when I am nothing in front of your status."

"No way. What is the use of status if it can't save you from the schemes of others? This curse is an example of that. Even though young Aldrian doesn't have any status or title, your achievements alone are already worthy of being engraved in the history of the continent," Emperor Durand said.

"I agree, Sir Aldrian. You have already earned great merit for this empire, so there is no need to be so humble. As the steward of the emperor, I also give my thanks to you." The steward bowed his head to Aldrian.

"Alright, I accept your respect, and thank you, but please stop bowing to me like this," Aldrian said, touching his forehead as if tired of repeating himself. "It is also an honor for me to contribute to this empire. With your majesty's recovery, I no longer worry about the future of the empire. There is also something I wish to discuss with your majesty later."

Emperor Durand smiled and nodded. As time passed, the more he liked Aldrian's personality.

"If only I had a daughter," he lamented to himself.

"Father, congratulations on your recovery. With this, the succession race can be postponed, as you can govern the empire for much longer," Hector said, bowing to him.

"No, the succession race will still proceed as I announced."

Hector was stunned, wondering what was going through his father's mind.

"As I said, the appointment of the crown prince is my backup plan in case something happens to me. I mentioned it not only for my condition but also as a plan B, should something truly happen to me, even if I remain healthy. It's better to address the succession issue now than to postpone it indefinitely. We are in a time when the prophecy keeps drawing closer, so I need to resolve the political matters of this empire as soon as possible, including the succession race," Emperor Durand said.

"Also, you must already know that you are the most worthy to take the throne. This is also my assessment. Your second brother is capable, but he doesn't seem to care much about the throne. He only focuses on his cultivation and alchemy. As for your third brother... aish, forget about him."

"You've already secured the support of Grand Duke Herlion, so now you only need the backing of either Grand Duke Lumeria or, if possible, Grand Duke Rivas to topple your third brother, who has already gained the support of Grand Duke Gouvard. I know that old fox only wants to create a puppet emperor by backing your third brother. So, I hope that you will be the one to take the throne in the future."

Hearing his father's reasoning, Hector felt truly frustrated. Truthfully, he believed that this succession race was too rushed. None of his brothers, including himself, had reached the emperor stage yet, so he felt that it was too soon. He also felt slightly lacking in himself.

But when he considered the bigger picture, he could see why his father wanted to resolve the succession race as soon as possible. It was better to bring the "chaos" earlier than to face internal turmoil when the time of the prophecy arrived.

Aldrian, who had also been listening to the father and son, nodded in understanding. What Emperor Durand said made sense, so he couldn't find the words to rebuke it. He also knew that Hector's third brother was the youngest son of Emperor Durand and his second wife, while Hector and Alderia shared the same blood, being the children of the emperor's main wife, the empress.

He had heard that the third brother was different from his two older siblings. He seemed untalented and weak, and also appeared timid. In conclusion, there were no leadership qualities in this youngest son. There was no hope, no potential. That's why the support of Grand Duke Gouvard for the third prince could easily be seen by others as an effort to create a puppet emperor who would obey the grand duke's will.

"By the way, Your Majesty, regarding the curse, as we know, a curse can only be cast on the target if the caster has a medium to deliver it. Aside from direct touch, something connected to the target can also serve as a medium, as the caster must also comprehend karma laws. I would like to know how this curse managed to enter Your Majesty's body. Did you interact with anyone or give or receive something from anyone before the symptoms of the curse began to appear?" Aldrian asked.

Emperor Durand then fell into thought, trying to recall events from those years before he first noticed the strange changes in his body.

"I have given rewards to some people before that time, but none of the items were personally connected to me. I also received items from many places—artifacts, artworks, and pills. Perhaps it came from one of them," Emperor Durand said, frowning.

"But the closest gift I received, if I remember correctly, was a pill—an enlightenment pill that I consumed three days before the symptoms appeared. This pill was concocted by the master of—" Emperor Durand paused, as something clicked in his mind. "Master Dan, the head of the Alchemist Association."

After saying that, both Hector and Aldrian were struck with realization. The emperor also understood Aldrian's assumption that the master of the Alchemist Association was in cahoots with the devils. If the curse had been placed inside the pill concocted by Master Dan, it would all make sense. The curse would have easily entered Emperor Durand's body undetected.

"At that time, the pill's effect was astounding, as expected from one of the grandmasters of the Alchemist Association. I never suspected Master Dan, so I never questioned any gift from him. But after hearing young Aldrian's assumption, I've started to think that perhaps I was too ignorant or naïve not to doubt him," Emperor Durand said.

"I feel ashamed of my inability to read people more deeply."

With this new information, Aldrian realized that the devils' plan within the Doria Empire was both intricate and well-constructed. The traitors and infiltrators were all interconnected, forming a web that spanned the entire empire. This made every piece of information, every movement, synchronize perfectly. For any family, including the imperial family, it would be nearly impossible to break free from this network.

However, this web had a significant weakness. Once one of the traitors or infiltrators was captured and forced to reveal their secrets, the entire operation could unravel. Every connection, every participant, would be exposed. This was exactly what Aldrian was doing—little by little, he was dismantling the web, causing it to collapse slowly but surely.

Chapter 244: Aldrian's Plan for the Future

"Maybe this isn't entirely about reading people, Your Majesty. The devils have their own methods to make their targets betray the empire. However, they seem to choose selectively, rather than bringing everyone in," Aldrian said.

Emperor Durand looked at Aldrian solemnly.

"Then, young Aldrian, from your perspective, what should we do about this situation? It seems the devil's advocates are everywhere, and I'm not sure whom I can trust in this empire. It's truly irritating that these devils can roam freely and corrupt so many of my people."

"If you want my opinion, Your Majesty, at this time, we only need to wait. I feel that something big will happen soon. I've already crippled some of their information networks with the cleanup of the Information Guild and the Rivas family. Now that your curse has been dispelled, I'm certain they've also sensed that, one by one, their plans are being disrupted. The only way for them to salvage the situation is through drastic measures, but we still don't know what kind of drastic measures the devils will take," Aldrian said.

"Yes, I agree with Sir Aldrian. With many of their eyes and ears uprooted from the empire, they will be blind in certain areas. Their plans have also been thwarted by Sir Aldrian, and they must be feeling quite anxious. This will likely force them to take drastic measures. We must prepare for whatever the devils have in mind," Hector said.

Emperor Durand nodded in agreement with Aldrian and Hector.

"Then I will strengthen our surveillance across the empire. With the problem of the Information Guild resolved, we can move more freely than before."

Aldrian sipped his tea before looking at Emperor Durand.

"Your Majesty, I also wish to discuss another matter. It is still connected to the devils, but this concerns something that could decide the future fate of the continent. It's regarding the prophecy of the Heavenly Direction Church," he said.

Hearing that this was connected to the prophecy, the faces of the other three grew more solemn. The prophecy, which many claimed foretold the end of the continent, spoke of darkness that would swallow them and suffering that would befall them. They believed it was related to the devils, as the darkness was strongly associated with them.

From Aldrian's way of speaking, it seemed clear that the devils were indeed connected to the prophecy. With his abilities, they already trusted that Aldrian knew something they did not.

Could the devils be planning to start another war?

"The prophecy of the Heavenly Direction Church... I must say, we need the power of the entire continent to unite," Aldrian said to them. "What we will face cannot be dealt with by the strength of individual empires or fragmented forces. We must stand as one."

"Is there another war looming over us?" Emperor Durand asked. "The war 3 million years ago truly caught us off guard. The devils are surely formidable, but if we prepare this time, I believe we can minimize our losses."

"Yes, preparation is important, but what we are about to face cannot be dealt with through preparation alone," Aldrian replied. "We must be proactive in preventing the devils from successfully executing their plans. I believe the recent war was merely a prelude to what is yet to come. The devils' power and behavior are far from ordinary."

"Young Aldrian, what exactly is it that you believe is coming, to make you feel this way?" Emperor Durand asked. "With your strength, I can confidently say that there is almost no one who can go toe-to-toe with you. Whatever comes in the future, I doubt the devils would want to mess with you."

Hector and the steward also looked at Aldrian, wondering what kind of information he had to make such a statement.

"First, I apologize, but if I were to show you what I know, I fear it might give rise to an inner demon instead, Your Majesty. However, I assure you that every word I speak is serious and true. I am not joking about this matter, for it concerns our fate in the future," Aldrian said solemnly.

"The point is, please trust me. This is the only thing I need from you right now."

Emperor Durand, Hector, and the steward were silent. Aldrian also looked at their faces, wanting to know what they were thinking. A second later, Emperor Durand nodded with a smile.

"Young Aldrian, whatever you say now, I already believe it. If I can't trust someone who has already saved my life and my empire, then it would be better to die here with the curse still inside me."

"Me too, Sir Aldrian. To me, you are someone with vast knowledge and more capable than any cultivator I know on this continent, so I believe you must have a solid reason for telling us this. If you need me to do something, I will gladly help," Hector said, while the steward simply nodded, indicating that he also agreed with them.

Aldrian smiled, sensing their determination and trust in him. He would now share the plan he had been thinking about since he came out of the Dragon Back Mountain area.

"I want to create a coalition force consisting of both orthodox and unorthodox factions. We will launch a preemptive strike against the devils in their territory," he said.

The three others widened their eyes, but then Emperor Durand frowned.

"Coalition force? That is easier said than done. Although the devils are our main enemy, each power has its own interests. To unite them, there must be a strong reason, not all of them will simply believe in you. Moreover, if Young Aldrian wants to strike the devils first, many will be reluctant to join if they are sent to another war. Some of them believe that a defensive position would be more advantageous in light of the prophecy," the emperor said.

"Yes, that doesn't even account for the fact that some of the powers also have their own issues with other factions, so uniting them will be quite challenging," Hector added.

"If we're talking about that, then don't worry. I can persuade them, and I can say with confidence that gaining the support of the Ivory Empire, Demon Territory, Forgeheart Kingdom, and Heavenly Direction Church will be much easier. I have a special relationship with their sovereign families, so you don't have to worry about it. This is one problem I will take care of," Aldrian said.

Looking at Aldrian's confidence, they could only believe in him. But to think that Aldrian had connections to the sovereigns of these places—it was beyond their expectations. As they had already thought, Aldrian was someone who couldn't be measured. Just when they believed he was mysterious enough, he revealed yet another aspect that could astonish them.

They then discussed the prophecy and how the devils would likely act in the future. Aldrian explained his master plan for the future in more detail, which was met with a positive response from the emperor. By the end of their conversation, the emperor gave Aldrian his word that the imperial family would assist him in the future with his plan.

After an hour, Aldrian finally stood up and slightly bowed his head.

"I think this is enough, Your Majesty. I've already taken up quite a bit of your time," he said.

"No, Young Aldrian, I'm glad you're willing to spend time with me. Truly, I've gained much from you, and I feel ashamed that I can't offer you anything worthy of your achievements," Emperor Durand replied.

"Your Majesty, your support is more than enough for me. It has brought peace to my heart," Aldrian said with a smile.

A few moments later, Aldrian and Hector finally left the room. Only after they had gone did Emperor Durand speak to his steward.

"Truly an amazing young man. He is what we call a singularity. This is the first time I've felt it in front of someone. I believe his very existence is a blessing for our continent," the emperor said.

"Yes, Your Majesty, I feel the same way. He is amazing, but too mysterious. I wonder where he came from. It's as if he just appeared out of nowhere and caused a sensation everywhere," the steward said.

"Balin City is the starting point, but I agree. The fact that we never heard of him until the incident there is truly intriguing. He's still young, yet he's already accomplished amazing feats and miracles. What is his origin? Who are his parents? He said his parents left him when he was a child, but I still feel he's hiding something."

These questions continued to linger in their minds, but they refrained from pressing Aldrian with them, feeling it would be inappropriate. So, they stored the questions in their minds, waiting for the day when the answers might reveal themselves.

Aldrian and Hector were on their way to another location, where a carriage awaited to take Aldrian back to the tavern. However, on their way, they unexpectedly encountered someone. The man looked at them, frowning.

"Wait."

Chapter 245: Training to Maximize His Domain Ability 1

The man frowned as he looked at them, first at Hector and then at Aldrian. Aldrian, in turn, maintained a calm expression as he met the man's gaze.

"The second prince, Prince Alderia."

It seemed he wanted to meet with his father. Judging by the direction he was taking, he coincidentally passed by them. Alderia narrowed his eyes, intending to ask Hector something. However, he stopped when he received a voice transmission from Hector.

"Don't ask anything. I will tell you about this matter later, but for now, let me escort this man first."

"Your Highness, please excuse us. We are in the middle of something important, and it concerns His Majesty," Hector said, bowing slightly to Alderia.

Alderia was speechless as he watched his elder brother put on an act, but he chose not to stop him as Aldrian and Hector walked away. He was deeply confused about what had just happened, yet his curiosity was piqued as he stared at Aldrian's back. For his elder brother to personally escort someone, that person must be important. With that thought, Alderia turned and walked in the opposite direction, heading toward the location of his father.

While Aldrian and Hector walked, Hector sent a voice transmission to Aldrian.

"Sir Aldrian, my younger brother Alderia is trying to find you—or rather, to uncover the identity of the mysterious alchemist who concocted the six-stripe pills. He is quite passionate about learning alchemy and was amazed by your capabilities. If it's not too burdensome for you, when he eventually learns who you truly are, please don't be upset with him for his eagerness. He's the type who loves to learn, after all."

"Is that so? Then it's okay. I'll try to satisfy his curiosity and intent to learn. I understand how he feels because I'm also someone who loves learning new things," Aldrian replied.

*"You are amazing, Sir Aldrian. You already have outstanding talent, yet you still enjoy learning something new. I really admire you, *Sigh* If only my third brother..."*

Hearing Hector mention his third brother, the third prince, Aldrian asked him curiously.

"The third prince—what is he like? I've only heard that he's untalented and timid, and that everyone scorns him behind his back because of the stark contrast between him, you, and Prince Alderia. However, I never judge people based on hearsay; I prefer to see for myself. Is the third prince really that kind of person?"

"Yes, Sir Aldrian, that is true. There is no falsehood in those rumors, it's already an open secret," Hector replied. "He was born with a premature dantian, which severely slows his ability to absorb the energy of heaven and earth. Because of this, he struggles greatly in cultivation and relies heavily on pills to progress. This has given him an inferiority complex. Even though Father doesn't place much pressure on him, it still weighs heavily on him, making him timid and withdrawn."

"I see. No wonder Grand Duke Gouvard's decision to support him is seen as an attempt to create a puppet emperor. Then, with their persuasion, was the third prince also drawn into the succession struggle? Given the personality you described, I don't think he would willingly enter this race."

"Sigh, that's right. Also, his mother—the second wife of my father, my second mother—is actually the little sister of Grand Duke Gouvard, so my third brother is heavily influenced by them. There's a good chance he only entered this race because of their push."

Not long after, they finally arrived at the hidden chamber with the secret path that led outside the palace.

"I can only escort you this far, Sir Aldrian. Once you take this path and reach the outside, you will find yourself at one of the houses in the eastern district. You don't have to worry about anything because my men are already expecting your arrival and will take you back to the tavern," Hector explained, then gave a slight bow.

"Thank you for coming here. I hope you have a safe journey back. Until we meet again."

"The pleasure is mine, Your Highness. Thank you for inviting me here," Aldrian replied.

He then walked down a long underground alley wide enough for three people to stand side by side. After about 30 minutes, Aldrian finally saw a door. When he opened it, he stepped out of a wardrobe inside a room where someone was already waiting for him.

"Sir, His Highness has already given me his message. Please follow me to the carriage; it's already prepared in front of the house," he said.

Not long after, Aldrian was on his way to the tavern. His visit to the imperial palace had succeeded without any mishaps. He had also gained many benefits from the trip, which put him in a good mood. Now that his visit was over, it was time for him to enter

seclusion. With the imperial family tightening their surveillance, he doubted that the master of the Alchemist Association would try anything funny or even attempt to escape.

The sun had not yet risen when Aldrian left the imperial palace. Inside a dimly lit bedroom within the palace, a figure stood behind a window, gazing upward at the moon. The man had a youthful and attractive face, with features that resembled Emperor Durand's.

While he seemed to be enjoying the beauty of the moon, something suddenly appeared outside his window. It emerged from the shadows and took the shape of a shadowy hand, which grabbed a folded piece of paper. The young man then took the paper, unfolded it, and read its contents. As he read, a smile spread across his face, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. It was a cunning grin.

He burned the paper and took a long breath.

"Finally, this is about to end," he thought.

He looked at the moon again.

"Soon, soon," he murmured.

After his visit to the imperial palace, Aldrian entered his room to meditate. He sat cross-legged on his bed, concentrating to feel the extent of his entire domain. He intended to push himself to optimize his domain ability. His domain, which already encompassed the concepts of Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience, would be a waste if he did not fully maximize it.

He soon found a vast land, devoid of any living beings. This land, located in the southern part of the demon territory, seemed perfect for his test. For this first trial, he wanted to attempt unleashing an elemental technique. The concept was almost the same as his ability to create formations from afar, as long as it remained within his domain. He simply needed to shift from creating formations to elemental techniques.

However, unlike formations, where he only needed to place the points of the formation using his energy, or take advantage of the surrounding nature for a nature-based formation, unleashing an elemental technique required circulating the energy within his body and releasing it to form the technique. The question was, how could he unleash a technique in the demon territory while his body remained in the Doria Empire?

"Now, how do I do this? It's not like I can just imagine the land splitting, and then it splits itself, right?" Aldrian thought.

"If casting a technique requires circulating energy within body and unleashing it, how can I make a technique appear beyond my perception, beyond my senses?"

"Energy circulation... body... how do I do it?" Aldrian kept thinking, trying to shape a possible concept that would allow him to unleash a technique in the demon territory.

Suddenly, he paused, struck by a sudden realization.

"If casting a technique requires energy circulation within our body, then what if I consider my entire domain as my body?" As this idea dawned on him, Aldrian felt his mind clear, flooded with countless possibilities. Although it might sound ridiculous to others, using his domain as a substitute for his physical body was something he could accomplish.

He could feel it, and he was confident in his theory. Without hesitation, he tried to implement it. He focused on sensing more of his domain, striving to merge himself with it. He could feel the air, the energy, and all living beings, from the smallest to the largest. He could sense the flow of energy throughout his entire domain, and all the laws that governed it.

The number was immeasurable. He couldn't count it, nor could he sense every detail, but he could feel all of these presences.

A stinging pain pierced his mind, yet he didn't stop. He continued to expand his connection, striving to become one with his domain. His mind felt overloaded from the vast amount of scenery and information flooding through his entire domain, but with time, he began to sense it. Slowly, he felt himself becoming one with the domain, able to perceive the entire environment within it more clearly.

He could feel the flow of energy more clearly, and he could feel himself become the domain, with the domain being him. He stayed in this state until he felt something within his body, within his domain.

"This."

Chapter 246: Training to Maximize His Domain Ability 2

He felt himself merging with the domain, sensing its flow of energy as if it were the flow within his own body. It felt strange, but he knew he had succeeded in making the domain an extension of himself. Although the flow of energy in nature was different from that of his body, he could sense that the energy within his domain followed a certain system.

The energy was not chaotic but neatly arranged, as if governed by certain laws that directed its flow. Aldrian knew he could control the energy within his domain, but he had never understood its intricacies. He only knew that he could manipulate the energy according to his will. However, it now seemed to be far more complex than he had realized.

Suddenly, another theory surfaced in his mind: what if he had always had this kind of connection with his domain? What if his domain could actually be considered a part of his "body," which explained why he could control the energy within it so effortlessly and comprehend everything so easily? What if the domain was not merely an ability but truly an extension of his body since long ago?

Thinking this way made his mind tremble; he truly didn't know how to process it. If his domain encompassed the entire continent, did that mean his body was the same as the continent? What if his domain extended across the entire world and beyond? What if his domain spanned...

The universe?

He stopped his thoughts and calmed his mind, trying not to be distracted by things that were not yet important. For now, he would focus on this more "simple" ability. After sensing the energy throughout his entire domain, he directed his focus toward the vast land within the demon territory, where his test would take place.

He could feel the flow of energy in that place, and within his mind, he tried to shape it to create a simple technique using one of the elements he had comprehended—earth. He aimed to split the land. While splitting the land directly in front of him would be easy, this time, he needed to design his own flow of energy, treating both nature and domain as his body, in order to split the land within the demon territory.

There was no dantian, no meridians, but nature had its own system, which he could now sense within his domain.

His mind worked hard to shape the energy flow, making the "command" to split the land successfully take form. Now at the low marquess stage, his control over energy and his mind was much smoother and sharper than before. He experimented with a few ideas in his mind, and after a few minutes, he finally found one that he believed could succeed.

"Alright, let's do this."

He then tried to direct the flow of energy in the area, guiding it in the direction he had in mind. The energy was much easier to control within his domain, but he knew that his breakthrough to a higher stage had also enhanced his control over energy.

After a few moments, he finally finished channeling the energy through the area as he had envisioned, and the land began to tremble. Aldrian focused his senses on the

place, hoping he had succeeded. The land trembled for a minute before it finally split, creating a shallow gorge!

Aldrian was stunned for a moment, but then a grin spread across his face—he had succeeded! Although the scale was pathetic, something even a viscount stage cultivator could achieve with ease, he was satisfied with the result. This was only the beginning, he could improve it with a stronger version.

After successfully doing it, Aldrian also realized a few things about what he had done in the past. In fact, he had tried something similar, though it was a different kind of technique. This was when he had been in Balin City, attempting to spy on the devils at the Golden Swan Commerce branch. His Eyes of the Heaven could see anything, especially within his domain, allowing him to observe anywhere, but it couldn't eavesdrop on the conversations of people.

At that time, he had created a technique to eavesdrop on the devils inside the Golden Swan branch, and it had succeeded. It was a much simpler technique, without the complex flow of energy, but his thinking back then hadn't been as complex as it was now, when he considered his domain as an extension of his body. He had simply felt that he could do it.

Now, with his realization of the divine properties within his domain, he sought to create a more complex technique. His mind began working again, crafting a new flow of energy that would create a more powerful split.

Tremble! Tremble!

The vast land in the southern demon territory suddenly showed numerous splits on its surface. If someone were to pass through this area right now, they would witness a scene that could be described as a natural disaster, yet not quite. It resembled a natural disaster because the ground trembled as if an earthquake had struck, splitting the earth without any apparent cause. However, it wasn't entirely like a natural disaster, as the continuous appearance of the splits seemed unnatural.

The positions and appearances of the splits were not something caused by a natural disaster; instead, they seemed as though someone had created them. After the land had split in numerous places, with depths ranging from shallow to as deep as 100 meters, the phenomenon ceased.

However, a few minutes later, a small fireball suddenly took shape in mid-air above the land. A few seconds later, the fireball dropped to the ground, igniting a small spark on the surface.

A few moments later, a larger fireball took shape, about the size of a small house. It made the same motion as the previous one, dropping to the ground, but this time, the effect was much bigger as the fire spread. Shortly after, a fireball the size of a small

mansion appeared, followed by one the size of a large mansion, and then, in the next moment, one as large as a castle.

The scene was truly eerie, with the sudden appearance of these fireballs and no one in sight. While the earth element could be attributed to a natural disaster, the fireballs were not something that could form naturally. According to the common knowledge of cultivators, such fire was undoubtedly the result of someone's technique.

After the fireballs show, the land fell silent for a few minutes, with only the cracking sound of fire burning the surface. Then, suddenly, a single drop of water fell from the sky. It was just one at first, but then the number increased, and soon it became a full rain. However, there were no clouds in the sky, making the scene all the more bizarre.

The rain put out any fire that was burning, and then it suddenly stopped. A few moments later, a gust of wind appeared from nowhere, growing stronger by the second. Before long, the wind formed a small tornado, one that wouldn't even threaten a Baron-stage cultivator. However, the tornado continued to grow in size, eventually reaching nearly to the sky, to the point where even a Duke-stage cultivator would need to avoid the area to take cover.

In the Doria Empire, Aldrian grinned like crazy, reveling in the feeling. Once he grasped the basics of it, he felt as though he had become addicted. He tested it with all the basic elements, and to his delight, all of them worked!

He felt as though he could control everything within his domain. The exhilaration of knowing he could do anything inside it was overwhelming, so much so that the word "God" briefly crossed his mind. However, he quickly suppressed his joy and tried to calm his mind and heart. He knew it was still too early and arrogant to think of himself as a god. There was still much to explore and expand within his domain, and he needed to uncover more possibilities.

He continued with his experiments when suddenly a sharp headache hit him, and his head felt heavy. Struggling to stabilize himself, he leaned against his hand to keep from slumping. He touched his forehead, feeling the intensity of the pain. A few moments later, as the headache subsided, he bitterly smiled.

"It looks like I've gone too far."

Creating so many techniques from such a distance while controlling the energy simultaneously took a heavy toll on his mind. Without realizing it, his mind had become overloaded, burdened with multiple tasks at once, pushing him to the brink of collapse.

"I think I need to stop for now," he thought before slumping backward. He immediately felt the softness of his bed, and with that, sleep overtook him, allowing him to rest his weary mind and body after training.

A few hours later, a group of cultivators approached the area where Aldrian had conducted his test. The moment they set eyes on the scene, they were stunned by the unusual landscape. The ground was split open in numerous places, scorch marks marred the earth, and the wet ground suggested it had just endured a heavy rainfall. There were also traces left by a massive tornado.

What happened here? Did some cultivators battle in this place?

Chapter 247: Meeting the Second Prince

A pair of eyes slowly opened under the light slipping through the window of the room. As Aldrian opened his eyes, he straightened his upper body and looked around.

"The sun is already quite high."

He had such a restful sleep that he lost track of time, a sign of how exhausted he had been from training his domain abilities. Scratching his head, he stood up and stretched his body. Feeling refreshed after a good sleep, he decided to check his own information. It had been a long time since he last looked at it.

Aldrian Aster

Domain : Secret realm, Ivory empire, Demon Territory of Barisan continent, Forgeheart Kingdom

Age : 15 years

Cultivation : Low Marquess

Current energy : 720.127 (+3.6 /15m)

Energy needed for the next stage : 870.001

Everything was going well. His cultivation was progressing rapidly, that breakthrough due to the enlightenment was unexpected, but it was certainly welcome. After checking his information, he extended his senses throughout the mansion to ensure there were no problems. However, he was stunned by the presence of someone inside the mansion.

He sat in the guest room and appeared to be in conversation with Sylphia.

"He's here?" Aldrian thought.

Inside the guest room, there were a few people present. Sylphia sat on the sofa, sipping her tea, while a young man across from her appeared to be enjoying his tea as well. Behind him stood another man, a guardian in knight's armor beneath a white robe. They were engaged in casual conversation to pass the time.

The young man had already been briefed that he would meet an elf here. Although he knew she was in disguise, her mannerisms and the way she carried herself made him think she must be a high-ranking noble. He even recalled an elf with a similar demeanor to hers.

He wondered why an elf of such status was part of Aldrian's group. Suddenly, the door to the guest room opened, revealing Aldrian. The man and his guardian were stunned by his appearance, prompting the man to stand.

Aldrian with his calm expression, glanced at the man and gave him a slight smile.

"This is truly surprising—to have the second prince visit my humble place. Forgive me for being late; I was just taking a rest," he said to the man.

The man was none other than Alderia Doria, the second prince of the Doria Empire.

After hearing from Hector about what transpired during Aldrian's meeting with Emperor Durand, he had rushed to Aldrian's residence as soon as the sun rose higher. Having already inquired about Aldrian's location, he was determined not to miss this chance to meet the person who had caused a sensation everywhere.

Alderia, who was finally face-to-face with the person responsible for so many great achievements, could only stand speechless. For a moment, he forgot to respond to Aldrian's greeting. He had already been told that Aldrian was still young, though no one knew his exact age. Even so, they had mentioned that Aldrian appeared to be much younger than him.

"He looks like he's still in his teens!" Alderia thought.

"Your Highness," his guardian knight said, snapping him out of his reverie.

"Ah, yes," Alderia responded, regaining his composure. "I should be the one apologizing for arriving unannounced. I also apologize for showing you such an unsightly side of myself. I hope Sir Aldrian can forgive me."

"It's okay, Your Highness. I'm already used to it, so you don't have to feel bad," Aldrian said, walking beside Sylphia before sitting next to her. Only after that did Alderia sit again, though he continued to look at Aldrian curiously. Inwardly, he was truly shocked.

"I feel this sudden nervousness when I look into his eyes. Even his presence alone demands attention, without him doing anything!"

"So, Your Highness, I believe you have a reason for visiting this place despite your busy schedule. May I know what it is?" Aldrian asked him.

"Ah, Sir Aldrian, actually, I came here for personal reasons. I wanted to meet the person who can concoct the Six Stripes Pills. To be honest, I also enjoy alchemy. I'm currently an 8-star rank alchemist, and I wish to gain some insight from the one who can create a legend. I'd like to learn a thing or two about alchemy from you, Sir Aldrian," Alderia replied.

Aldrian nodded. Just as Hector had told him, Alderia seemed more passionate about cultivation and alchemy.

"To be honest, Your Highness, I can't really teach you much because I've only been doing alchemy for a short time myself. I don't feel like I'm worthy to teach you in this regard. However, if you still want to learn something from me, I will try my best with my abilities," Aldrian said.

"Thank you, Sir Aldrian. Even just watching you concoct pills is enough for me," Alderia smiled, then fell silent as he pondered something.

"Sir Aldrian, is it true that the master of the Alchemist Association is a traitor to the empire?" Alderia asked.

Aldrian glanced at Alderia. He sensed a trace of sadness in the prince's voice when he asked this question. It seemed that Hector had already told Alderia about the entire problem.

"I'm afraid it's most likely true, Your Highness. All the evidence I've gathered almost confirms that he was indeed in cahoots with the devils. I suppose Prince Hector already told you about this, but I will explain my perspective and the evidence I have as to why the master of the Alchemist Association, Master Dan, is most likely a traitor," Aldrian said.

He then explained what he had discovered about Master Dan, and what he told Alderia was the same as what he had told Hector that night.

Hearing Aldrian's confirmation and explanation, Alderia felt a tightness in his chest. His body grew cold, but there was a burning sensation inside his heart. He wanted to believe this was still just an assumption, but his elder brother and father seemed to

share the same belief as Aldrian. Hearing that someone so close to him could actually be a traitor made him both sad and angry.

The feeling of betrayal in his heart was overwhelming, and he felt an urge to rush to Master Dan and confront him personally.

"Don't, Your Highness. Please refrain from meeting with Master Dan and exposing that you or anyone else is already suspicious of him. Although I don't know what kind of relationship you have with him, for the sake of uprooting the devils' operations in the empire, you must remain composed, even if you face Master Dan in front of you," Aldrian said.

Alderia was stunned, feeling that Aldrian could read his thoughts. He then let out a long breath to calm himself before sighing.

"Master Dan has been my teacher, teaching me alchemy for a long time. So hearing that he is most likely in cahoots with the devils is truly shocking, but also disappointing. I feel betrayed," Alderia said before drinking his tea until it was empty and standing up.

"I think I've already taken up too much of your time, Sir Aldrian. As for learning alchemy, I'll come to you at a more convenient time in the future," he said, giving a slight bow.

"You too, Miss Sylphia. Thank you for accompanying me; it's a pleasure to talk to you about so many things," he said to Sylphia.

"You can visit me anytime while I'm here, Your Highness. I'll still be staying in the empire for some time," Aldrian said. He knew that Alderia's emotions were in turmoil and decided to end the meeting quickly, wanting to cool his head. He only hoped that Prince Alderia wouldn't do something reckless.

After that, Prince Alderia and his guardian left the mansion and walked away. Once they were gone, Sylphia, who was standing next to Aldrian and looking outside at where Alderia had gone, spoke up.

"I think he's already suspicious of my identity."

Aldrian looked at Sylphia and smiled.

"What makes you think that?"

"He asked me if I'm connected to the Evergreen Imperial Family. I don't know what about me made him think that, though. I thought I had hidden it well enough," Sylphia said, wondering.

"Maybe because he's a prince and has already communicated with your family. He might sense that you're somehow familiar. Did you meet him many times in the past?" Aldrian asked, smiling.

"Yes, I met him in the past, but we weren't that close, so don't misunderstand and think we were really close," she said, staring at Aldrian. However, Aldrian only gave a confused expression.

"Is that so? Why would I misunderstand? Do you want me to misunderstand you? Should I say something?" Aldrian asked, following up with a grin.

Sylphia's face flushed as she saw Aldrian's playful grin.

"Aldrian, you scoundrel!" she shouted, walking away from him. Seeing Sylphia's reaction, Aldrian couldn't help but laugh. Moments like these were truly enjoyable to him.

However, suddenly, he felt a tug on his soul, and he instantly knew what it was before a voice transmission reached his mind.

"There is a development from the Lucard family."

Chapter 248: The Drastic Move of the Devils?

The voice Aldrian hadn't heard for days resounded in his mind, bringing a smile to his face.

"Danius, my friend, it's good to hear your voice. To think you called me first—have you finally realized how genuine my feelings for this friendship are?" Aldrian said.

A vein bulged on Danius's forehead as he felt an overwhelming urge to strangle Aldrian to death. However, pain began creeping into his soul, forcing him to abandon the thought. In truth, he wanted to withhold the information he had for Aldrian, hoping to exploit a loophole in their agreement.

If he didn't report anything, he wouldn't be a spy acting against his family. Even if he had some information, he could simply ignore it without passing it on to Aldrian, and everything would be fine, right?

Wrong!

As soon as he formed this intent, the pain in his soul intensified. The excruciating agony nearly caused him to faint, forcing him to give up and decide to report it. He didn't understand how this slave seal worked, but it seemed capable of detecting even the slightest intent or thought, leaving him utterly miserable. Whether he liked it or not, he had no choice but to report anything of significance to Aldrian.

"Yes, Brother Aldrian, I realize it now. Anyway, there's been a development in my family," Danius said. "I just discovered that my father seems to be preparing something significant with some other families in Grand Duke Gouvard's faction. It looks like they're mobilizing some of their resources to the capital, including spies and soldiers. They're doing it covertly to ensure their movements go unnoticed by other families."

Hearing Danius's report, Aldrian fell into thought.

"Mobilizing their resources? Now, this is interesting... Could it be a coincidence that this happened right after last night's event?" he wondered to himself.

Aldrian then asked Danius,

"When did your family or the other families start moving?"

"Earlier today, before sunrise, I accidentally overheard that my father received contact from Grand Duke Gouvard. He was asked to prepare resources for the capital, and earlier today, they began moving. Even some of my shadow guardians were taken for support."

With this, Aldrian confirmed that the movement of Grand Duke Gouvard was indeed connected to the emperor's curse being lifted. The sequence of events was too coincidental to be just a mere accident.

However, he frowned at what they might be planning. The fact that they were mobilizing their resources to the capital was not a good sign—it meant they were preparing for something significant. To the outside world, Emperor Durand still appeared fit and healthy. No one knew about his curse except his steward, a fact Aldrian had confirmed last night. The steward was also deeply loyal to the emperor, something Aldrian could sense in him. He doubted the steward would reveal the emperor's condition to anyone.

For them to move their resources despite knowing that the emperor was still healthy only raised his suspicion that Grand Duke Gouvard had an information source somewhere.

Then, there was only one explanation: the curse caster, or anyone related to the devils, must have informed Grand Duke Gouvard to prepare for their next move. Aldrian thought it would be the drastic move he had predicted, and he began considering what they might be planning.

They must know that the emperor's curse has already been lifted and that he will soon return to his former state. Despite this, they were still mobilizing their resources to the capital. If the imperial family learned of this, it would raise alarms, as such a movement was unusual and could be misunderstood by them.

There must be something that gave them the confidence to move their resources to the capital, despite knowing the emperor would be fine. Something that assured them their plan would succeed. Did Grand Duke Gouvard intend to overthrow the emperor?

"Did the devils already surround the capital and plan to attack it by surprise? No, they wouldn't move rashly or recklessly. If Grand Duke Gouvard were found to be cooperating with the devils, he would be shunned by the people of the empire. He would not gain their support, and the other nobles could take advantage of that to bring down his faction. In the end, he would fall. So, this time, I think the devils are only playing a supporting role," he thought.

"Drastic measures, movement to the capital, the emperor's condition." No matter how much he thought about it, the only reason they would dare to move to the capital was because they were confident that the emperor wouldn't act against them, even if he knew what they had done. The only way to ensure that right now was...

"To kill emperor Durand."

Aldrian frowned. To kill Emperor Durand—easier said than done, especially now that the emperor knew the devils were targeting him through the traitors in the empire. To kill him, the devils would have to use another method. They needed a way to catch the emperor by surprise, a way that wouldn't raise his suspicion.

Aldrian kept thinking, but he still couldn't find any opening through which the devils could kill Emperor Durand. Assassination? If they failed, it would only make things harder next time, and they would expose themselves. A deadly curse? Emperor Durand would not fall for the same trick again. Poisoning? How could they deliver the poison to the emperor when he was on high alert after the curse incident?

The only thing that could catch the emperor off guard was a surprise attack by someone he trusted—someone he never expected would stab him in the back. His wives? His sons? Aldrian didn't know much about the emperor's wives, but the first and second princes didn't seem to have any ill intent toward their father.

"Is it the third prince?"

He didn't rule out the possibility. After thinking it over, he decided to visit the Alchemist Association. Perhaps he would find some clues there. As he had said, the devils' web in this empire was so deeply woven that if something was happening, others connected to the devils must know something or be involved in some way.

After making his decision, he walked out in the direction of the Alchemist Association. It was almost midday, and after getting enough rest, he was now fired up to unravel the conspiracy.

Upon arriving at the Alchemist Association, he headed to the upper floor, intending to meet Master Dan or one of the other three grandmasters. As he reached the top floor, he saw someone he recognized.

"Carlo," Aldrian greeted, spotting one of Grandmaster Marco's students.

"Grandmaster Aldrian? What brings you here? Is there anything I can help with?" Carlo asked.

"Ah, yes. I want to meet with Master Dan. I need to ask him about alchemy. Is he in his room?" Aldrian replied.

"I'm sorry, Grandmaster, but Master Dan left early this morning and hasn't returned yet."

"You don't know where he went?"

"No, but maybe my master knows, or perhaps Grandmasters Aberin or Maria might know. They're all in their chambers right now," Carlo said.

"Alright, thank you for letting me know. I'll speak with your master." Aldrian nodded and then walked toward Grandmaster Marco's room, which was located beside his concocting room. As soon as he entered, he was greeted by Grandmaster Marco himself.

"Aldrian, it's good to see you here. What brings you by?"

"Of course, I just wanted to visit, Grandmaster. I was hoping to have a conversation with you to deepen my knowledge," Aldrian said.

"How humble of you to seek to deepen your knowledge from me, despite your own abilities," Grandmaster Marco replied with a smile.

"Of course, you are much older and wiser than me, after all," Aldrian responded with a smile. "By the way, do you happen to know where Master Dan went?"

"Master Dan? Earlier this morning, he left without informing anyone, so I really don't know where he went," Grandmaster Marco explained.

Hearing this, Aldrian inwardly sighed in disappointment.

"Last night, he also left the association for a moment before returning, and this morning, he left again. Maybe it's connected. I don't know if it's just me, but I feel like he's been more mysterious recently, as if his activities aren't really known to me."

Aldrian pondered for a moment; the information he had was still not enough. He stayed with Grandmaster Marco for about an hour before leaving. If Grandmaster Marco didn't

know, then he would ask the others. However, after speaking with the other two grandmasters, the answer he received remained the same.

In the end, he found nothing and left the Alchemist Association in disappointment. He decided to contact Hector to warn him about the movement of Grand Duke Gouvard's faction. However, before he could make contact, he paused, his gaze drawn to a certain direction. Something had caught his attention, something that stirred the sadistic side of him.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Chapter 249: Hidden Tunnels

Aldrian grinned when he noticed something intriguing—or rather, when he spotted a group of people walking amidst the bustling road. He neither knew them nor had he ever seen any of them before, yet he was familiar with the sensation he felt whenever he was near them. A quick glance at their information confirmed his suspicion.

"The devils. What are they doing here?"

Although he wondered about them, he was glad to have found something that might bring him clues. This group of eight devils possessed quite high cultivation, with all of them at the Marquess stage and the strongest at the peak of that level.

With a relaxed posture, he followed the devils. His presence was perfectly concealed, blending seamlessly with the crowd, making it impossible for the devils to detect him or grow suspicious. He continued tailing them until they arrived at a house in the eastern district. The house appeared unremarkable, identical to those around it. The group entered, but the last devil paused briefly, scanning the surroundings before stepping inside and closing the door.

Knowing their destination, Aldrian decided to approach a food vendor standing not far from the house.

"Excuse me, may I ask a question? Who owns that house?" Aldrian asked, pointing toward the house while discreetly offering a mid-level energy stone with his other hand.

The food vendor's eyes lit up with delight at the sight of the energy stone. He eagerly accepted it before answering Aldrian.

"That house was purchased by a group of vagabond cultivators, if I recall correctly, about 17 years ago. I don't know much about them personally since they seem to keep to themselves and rarely interact with the locals," the food vendor replied.

"They also appear to host people from various places. I assume they're all part of the same group. To me, they're scary individuals with high-level cultivation, so you should be careful if you go near them," he added.

"Alright, thank you for your answer," Aldrian said before turning and walking toward the house.

The food vendor wondered who Aldrian was as he watched him walk toward the house without hesitation.

While approaching the house, Aldrian was lost in thought.

"Seventeen years ago... that's the same time the emperor began showing signs of being cursed. So, these devils have been staying here since then?"

He stood before the house's door, scanning it with his senses. Finding no hidden formations, he opened the door and stepped inside.

As he entered, he noticed a man already inside. The man seemed like an ordinary resident, casually sweeping the floor. Yet Aldrian instantly recognized the truth—this man was a devil, with cultivation at the peak of the Marquess stage.

This man was different from the group that had just entered the house, leading Aldrian to conclude that he had been inside much earlier.

The man, noticing Aldrian enter alone, wore a puzzled expression.

"Is there another group arriving? Why wasn't I informed? And why is he alone?" he wondered to himself.

"Who—" Before he could finish his question, a sharp pain shot through his abdomen. Aldrian had appeared before him in an instant, striking his dantian with a punch that shattered it completely.

The man, still reeling from the sudden attack, could only watch helplessly as Aldrian placed a hand on his forehead, delving into his memories. Powerless to resist, he succumbed to the darkness after Aldrian finished reading his thoughts.

Aldrian wasted no time, killing him instantly by destroying his soul after extracting the information he needed.

Aldrian then walked toward one of the rooms. The interior of the house was nothing special—just a typical layout that could be found in any house across the empire. He moved with a calm expression and a relaxed posture, his hands resting behind his back.

As he passed through several rooms, he didn't find anyone. He spread his senses throughout the house, but still found no one. After reading the memories of the devil he had killed earlier, Aldrian now understood why.

He walked toward one of the bedrooms and approached a side wall, gently touching it. It seemed he was trying to sense something. When he found it, he pressed it with his hand, and suddenly, a hidden passage opened beside it.

The devils had actually entered this passage, which led underground. Without hesitation, Aldrian stepped inside and walked along the path. The secret passage was wide enough for three people to walk side by side, and he sensed no traps or formations along the way. He couldn't decide if the devils were confident there would be no intruder like him or if they were simply too lazy to set any traps or formations.

The underground tunnel extended for quite a distance, making Aldrian wonder just how vast this tunnel network was. Even after spreading his senses to the maximum, he couldn't cover the entire system.

After walking for a few minutes, he finally came upon the first room along the side of the tunnel. He had masked his presence so well that even an Emperor stage cultivator would have difficulty detecting him here. Coupled with his recent breakthrough to the Marquess stage, his control over energy and comprehension had also improved, allowing him to conceal his presence even more effectively.

When Aldrian arrived in front of the room and peeked inside, he saw it was filled with many devils. He counted tens of them, all busy arranging various artifacts—swords, spears, shields, and armor. Aldrian raised an eyebrow. The number of artifacts was enough to equip a battalion of knights.

"Let's go, let's go! We have to hurry and move these packages to points B1 and B2. We can't afford to be late for tonight's event," said one of the devils. This devil, with cultivation at the Duke stage, appeared to be the leader of the room.

After the leader shouted, many of the devils moved faster, arranging the artifacts into wooden boxes and carrying them to the other exit of the room. There were two exits: the first one, where Aldrian had peeked inside, and the second, located in the opposite direction. After observing for a moment, Aldrian decided he had seen enough and decided to ask the devils directly what they planned to do tonight.

Aldrian walked in leisurely, drawing the attention of the devils inside. The leader frowned as he looked at Aldrian, unable to recall if another group of devils was helping them, and he had never seen Aldrian's face before. However, he was stunned when, suddenly, all of his men slumped to the ground. They trembled for a moment before collapsing, their faces contorted with horror. They were dead.

"What—" Suddenly, Aldrian appeared in front of him and gripped his neck with lightning speed. The leader couldn't react in time, and when he tried to retaliate, Aldrian's punch instantly shattered his dantian, causing his cultivation to begin dissipating. He vomited a mouthful of blood and was immediately overwhelmed by a sudden weakness spreading through his body.

"Listen, I can give you a painless death if you tell me what you guys are planning," Aldrian said with a smile. However, his words, which contrasted with his expression, made him seem like a psychopath. In reality, Aldrian was toying with him, knowing full well that there was no way this devil would reveal their secrets or plans due to the seal placed within their mind and soul. The moment they started to divulge any information, the seal would kill them—without needing the interrogator's hand.

The leader only smiled and tried to spit in Aldrian's face, but before he could, Aldrian had already injected his golden energy into his body and began his usual method of torture.

"Wrong choice."

Aldrian then read his memories. As usual, he found the devil lord's sense within this Duke-stage mind, which he immediately destroyed, giving the devil lord no chance to manifest or even detect his presence.

After a few minutes, Aldrian finished reading the leader's memories, and his expression turned solemn. The situation had turned out for the worst, confirming one of his suspicions.

"They're planning to supply these artifacts to Grand Duke Gouvard's faction, which has already infiltrated this place. There are more rooms like this scattered throughout the tunnel system," he thought.

"These devils seem to play a logistical role, delivering the artifacts to the designated locations. I can confidently say that one of my suspicions is true: Grand Duke Gouvard's faction is indeed plotting to overthrow the throne through violence. And with the devils' support behind the scenes, their efforts will be much easier."

After that, Aldrian killed the leader without even glancing at him and exited the room. The leader didn't have much detailed information, as he seemed to only be responsible for that particular room. The devils appeared to be very strict about their operation, sharing little information with each other beyond their designated duties.

Aldrian, with his swift movements, decided to take matters into his own hands. He resolved to explore and uncover the tunnel system, or even destroy it, to prevent their plans from succeeding. The event tonight couldn't be allowed to happen, otherwise, a civil war would be inevitable!

Chapter 250: Found Them

After moving for another ten seconds, Aldrian discovered another room, this one filled with powder—more precisely, explosive powder. While the explosive powder might not pose much threat to high-level cultivators, it remained deadly for mortals and low-level cultivators below the Baron stage.

Because of how dangerous this powder can be for the masses, all sovereigns on the continent heavily regulate explosive powder. If it were to fall into the wrong hands, it could lead to chaos.

Aldrian frowned at this. He couldn't understand where they had obtained the explosive powder or how they had managed to gather such a large quantity—and this was only from one room. He knew it was bad news. If this powder were placed in crowded areas, it could cause significant harm. Not only could it be used for killing, but it could also destroy or weaken structures. However, its impact would be minimal against fortified structures with defensive formations.

However, it's a different matter if this explosive powder is placed beneath a structure's foundation. No matter how strong the structure, it will collapse. The quantity he saw here could spark another war and claim countless victims.

Aldrian walked into the room, and, as before, the devils were confused by the sudden appearance of a newcomer. As for Aldrian, he simply did what he was supposed to do: eliminate the devils. If anyone had watched him enter the room, they wouldn't have heard a sound until Aldrian walked out again. By the time they looked inside, the devils would already be dead.

Aldrian kept repeating this process, but he was genuinely shocked by how vast and complex the underground tunnels were. Calling them "tunnels" felt like an understatement—they were more akin to an underground base. To think that no one aboveground had detected the activity happening beneath them.

"No... perhaps some do know but choose to ignore it because of their cooperation with the devils."

He stopped pondering. Now was not the time for thoughts—only action. He needed to kill, kill, and kill.

In one room of the underground base, a table stood surrounded by a few chairs. At the moment, five people were seated around it. All of them wore black robes that concealed their features, but their impressive cultivation levels were unmistakable: three were at the King stage, and two had reached the Emperor stage.

"Can we really trust you this time? What if this plan also fails and exposes our cooperation? I'll be dead before that old man meets his end," said one of the men.

"I've already given that 'thing' to him inside the imperial palace. If this fails, they'll trace it back to me," he added.

"You sure are noisy. You're the one who agreed to our cooperation, yet now you're whining about the consequences," one of the men said with a sneering tone.

"You—" The man wanted to refute, but he couldn't. He gritted his teeth and chose to remain silent.

"Hehehe, I created that poison myself, and it's the most potent poison I've ever made. If the emperor drinks it, he'll be absolutely dead by tonight—there's no way around it. The only problem is, can that man deliver it to the emperor?" the pale-skinned man said, small creatures wriggling beneath his skin, visible to others.

"He better be able to, or all this preparation will be for nothing. Lord Envy has already prepared for this moment, and I don't want to face his wrath because of a failed operation," said the last man.

All of them fell silent. The Lord Envy he was talking about was someone they'd better not meet at all. None of them wanted to become his next target.

A few moments later, one of them suddenly frowned.

"Do you feel that?" the pale-skinned man asked.

"Feel what?"

"There's a disturbance in the air. The surrounding air seems fresher with each passing minute."

"Aren't you glad? More fresh air in this detestable place!" said the man beside him jokingly.

"No, this rate of freshness isn't normal. What do you think is causing the air to feel so tight, despite the circulation here?"

"The existence of many people."

"That's right. There are too many people breathing in this underground base, and with limited air circulation from the outside, the only possible explanation for the sudden increase in air freshness is a rapid reduction in the number of people here."

The others fell silent, but soon all of them sensed something was wrong. They sniffed the air, catching a smell that shouldn't be there, despite the distance.

"The smell of blood!"

Not waiting too long, one of them moved to check outside. However, before he could open the door, they heard footsteps approaching from the other side. The steps paused briefly before continuing forward. The atmosphere grew tense and silent as they sensed the person stopping directly in front of the door, standing motionless.

The man who intended to check outside glanced at the others, signaling them to prepare for an attack. A sense of foreboding gripped them, and their instincts flared with danger. They readied themselves to strike the moment the person entered the room. Finally, the door began to move, and as soon as they saw half of the figure's body, they launched their attack without hesitation.

Rumble!

The door exploded into smithereens, and the surrounding wall collapsed, creating a massive hole. They stared into the smoke and rubble, trying to sense if the intruder was still alive. However, they couldn't detect any signs of life amidst the debris and assumed their combined attack had worked.

"To think we worried for nothing. With our combined attack just now, there's no way that person could have survived," said the pale-skinned man confidently.

"That's right," a voice suddenly interrupted. "To think I'd find all of you here. Rest assured, none of you will survive."

All of them were stunned by the unfamiliar voice. They turned around and saw a young man standing beside one of the robed figures, the one furthest from the door. Despite being an Emperor-stage cultivator, the robed man hadn't sensed the sudden appearance of this stranger near him. Without hesitation, he unleashed his fire technique to create some distance, and the others wasted no time, launching their own attacks at the intruder.

However, the young man simply stood there, unmoving. Just as their attacks were about to reach him, a spatial crack appeared and swallowed them whole. At the same moment, high above the capital, a similar crack opened in the sky, spewing forth a torrent of elemental attacks into the firmament.

"What is that?"

"Is someone fighting?"

The people below were startled by the sudden rumbling in the sky, their gazes instinctively drawn upward. The city guardians also sensed the unexpected disturbance and immediately moved toward the area. The spatial crack was noticeable even from the imperial palace, and Emperor Durand, sensing it, furrowed his brow as he looked in the direction of the anomaly.

"Space laws?" he thought.

Beneath the city, Aldrian redirected the attacks to the sky, where his domain was already established. Spanning seamlessly up to 400 kilometers above the ground and unrestricted by any obstacles, his domain allowed him to safely divert the attacks. He deliberately avoided releasing them underground, aware that doing so could collapse the underground base.

"To think you're here. I expected it would take some time to find you, Alchemist Association Master, Master Dan, and Grand Duke Gouvard. Well, this makes my job easier."

Two of the emperor-stage individuals here were actually Master Dan and Grand Duke Gouvard! As for the other three, they were devils, and one of them was the very person Aldrian wanted to find most.

"And what a surprise that Wei Zhi, one of the Seven Devils of Annihilation, is here. I'm truly grateful for you all gathering here," Aldrian said with a warm smile. He spoke as though he were expressing gratitude for his favorite dinner laid out before him. However, beneath his joking demeanor, a deep rage brewed inside him, especially toward Wei Zhi. This was the man who, although indirectly, had caused his mother to suffer.

"Aldrian, why are you here? Don't you have something else to do? This is not something you should be interfering with," Master Dan said.

"So, he's the one who concocted the Six Stripes Pills? What's he doing here instead of playing with his cauldron?" Grand Duke Gouvard remarked. He was an elderly man with a brown beard and white hair. His middle Emperor-stage cultivation radiated pressure towards Aldrian, but he stood tall, unaffected in the slightest.

Suddenly, a man appeared behind Aldrian, holding a dagger. His movements were like shadows themselves—there was no sound, no disturbance, nothing at all. He blended seamlessly with the room's shadows. However, Aldrian merely tilted his head to dodge the dagger and reached to grab the attacker's wrist. But the man didn't allow it. In an instant, he melted back into the shadows, reappearing at a distance.

"Distraction? Not so easy, gentlemen. My mood has suddenly plummeted seeing that all the people I wanted to find are here. So, you'd better prepare yourselves," Aldrian said with a smile.

