

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

#Chapter 351: The Devil Lord's Next Step? - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 351: The Devil Lord's Next Step?

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The Devil Lord frowned but then let out a deep breath. Initially, he placed the anathema on the Pope because the latter was one of the most dangerous cultivators. The fact that the Pope has survived until now, even under the effects of the Devil Lord's anathema, is a testament to his strength.

After his plan in the Doria Empire collapsed, he realized that he needed to eliminate another leader to compensate for his failure there.

He chose the Pope as his target. The Church could be a major roadblock, and they needed to seize control of it to remove the obstacle. The Church's territory was only separated by the Vindas Empire and the Doria Empire, making it still quite close to them. Although the holy energy within the Church had already weakened due to *"their"* interference, holy energy was still holy energy—it was fundamentally opposed to their own and could greatly harm the devils.

However, if he targeted the Church and failed once again, they would lose their grasp on it, as his pawns within the Church would be purged. Because of this, he had no choice but to act personally this time to ensure success.

Yet, the factor that had continuously disrupted his plans had seemingly appeared out of nowhere and was now breaking his plan within the Church as well.

"Yes, it's confirmed. That man is not from this continent—or perhaps not even from this heaven. There is a strong possibility that he comes from beyond the First Heaven. There is no way someone from this continent could have broken the anathema using any known technique or method available here," the Devil Lord thought.

There was another possibility: the people of the Church might have found something from the Everlasting Silent Forest that could break the anathema. However, this was unlikely. Even if they had discovered something from that place, there was no way they could use it. That was because, to his knowledge, the anathema could only be broken by divine energy—or a force equal in strength to the anathema within the Pope.

The anathema inside the Pope was something he had received from his "God," so breaking it would require a power capable of overturning a divine curse. The Devil Lord

refused to believe that the mere ants of this continent could wield such a force. It was beyond their comprehension!

Unless the mysterious swordsman had done it himself.

From the moment the mysterious swordsman revealed his death energy and death laws, the Devil Lord had already begun to doubt his true identity. Also no matter how strong or cunning his underlings were, they all fell at that man's hands, deepening his suspicions even further.

He began to suspect that the swordsman was like him—someone with a unique existence, someone special. The incident with the Cerberus only strengthened this belief. At this point, he could no longer deny it—there was no way that mysterious swordsman was from this world. In fact, he was beginning to believe that the man might have come from the higher heavens.

But then, questions began to surface in his mind. If that man was not from this continent or even this heaven, then which faction did he belong to? His own faction had an agreement with the others to divide the heavens and avoid conflict, yet suddenly, an unknown man with no clear affiliation had appeared in this world.

He had already reported this matter to his "God" and sought guidance, but even his God did not know. That was something that had never happened before—nothing had ever been able to evade divine observation.

For the first time in his life, the Devil Lord found himself racking his brain over what step to take next regarding this man. He let out a deep breath once again.

"I must keep that man occupied with something else. The preparations to summon our God into this world are not yet complete, and the requirements have yet to be fulfilled. I need to divert his attention so he doesn't focus on the devils. Once the preparations are finished and our God descends, no matter how powerful he is or what kind of origin he has, that mysterious man will be crushed like an ant," the Devil Lord thought before grinning.

Once that happened, he would finally be free from this place and could return to where he truly belonged—his mission would be complete.

"Just wait a little longer."

With that, the Devil Lord closed his eyes once more, focusing on cultivation and healing his wounded soul. After all, he had been forced to sever his connection with the anathema inside the Pope.

Back to Aldrian—he noticed that the threads entangling the Pope had completely disappeared. Pope Claudius's body had already begun recuperating, and the golden energy surrounding him hastened the process.

Pope Claudius, sensing the release of whatever had been binding him, felt his body grow lighter and refreshed. The warmth of the golden energy was completely different from what it had been just moments ago. Before, it had carried an overwhelming presence, demanding obedience and authority. Now, it had returned to warm, refreshing, and brimming with healing properties.

After more than three minutes, Aldrian finally stopped injecting his golden energy and looked at the Pope with a smile.

"How do you feel, Your Holiness?" he asked.

Pope Claudius moved his arms and twisted his hands, testing his mobility. Then, he pushed aside the blanket and placed his feet on the floor. He paused for a moment as if feeling the ground beneath him before attempting to stand.

Aldrian instinctively wanted to help, but before he could, the Pope was already on his feet. He looked down at his legs, then took a step—then two, then three—before walking steadily across the room.

After confirming his condition, he stopped moving and began circulating his cultivation technique. The energy of heaven and earth responded instantly, gathering around him and flowing into his dantian without any resistance. A smile slowly spread across his face as he turned his gaze toward Aldrian. With his frail body, he walked toward Aldrian. Then, as soon as he stood before him, he suddenly bent forward in a deep bow. Aldrian wanted to stop him, but the Pope's voice halted him.

"Please, let me do at least this much, young Aldrian. If I don't express my gratitude in some way, I will never feel at ease, and it will continue to weigh on my heart," Pope Claudius said sincerely.

Aldrian, understanding the Pope's intent, could only sigh before shifting his gaze to Angelica, who also bowed her upper body from her wheelchair.

"Thank you, young master, for helping Father. I thought I was going to lose him... truly, thank you," she said, her voice trembling as tears finally spilled from her eyes.

Seeing this, Aldrian sighed again.

"Alright, alright, I accept your gratitude—so please, stop bowing before I start feeling arrogant," he said with a slight joking tone.

The Pope and Angelica stopped bowing and smiled. Angelica wiped her tears as she moved her wheelchair closer to Pope Claudius. The Pope smiled warmly at her before bending down and embracing her with deep affection.

"I'm sorry, child. You must have felt burdened all this time, having to handle everything while I was bedridden. I left you worrying about me," he said gently.

"No, Father, it was never a burden. I always believed that the prophesized one would save our church, and I did everything I could so that you wouldn't have to worry about anything once you recovered," Angelica answered.

They held each other in a heartfelt embrace for a few more seconds before finally letting go. The Pope then turned his gaze back to Aldrian.

"Because I have just been healed from the curse, I will need some time to restore my energy and return to my previous condition before I fell ill. However, thanks to young Aldrian's miraculous energy, my cultivation foundation has not only been restored but has also grown much stronger, making me more powerful than before," the Pope said.

"I feel like I could hunt devils by myself right now."

"Father," Angelica chided.

"Hahaha, I'm just saying! I truly feel powerful and refreshed." His aged face now radiated joy and vitality.

Aldrian could only smile as he watched the Pope's renewed spirit—it was a stark contrast to just fifteen minutes ago when he had seemed like a living corpse.

"I'm glad to see you in such high spirits, Your Holiness. Cardinal Carsius will surely be shocked to see you suddenly standing and as healthy as ever," Aldrian said with a smile.

At the mention of Cardinal Carsius, the Pope's eyes turned cold as he recalled that man.

"I had almost forgotten about him in my moment of happiness... but I won't let him slip away this time. Even if it endangers my position, I will personally see to it that he is caught," he declared, his peak Emperor-stage aura beginning to leak from his body.

"Wait, Your Holiness! You don't have to handle this yourself," Aldrian interjected. "Didn't you already entrust this matter to me? I will make sure to expose him, to tear away his innocent mask and reveal his true nature as a traitor." "Besides, recklessly acting without proof would only cause unnecessary trouble. Even now, I still can't understand how you were cursed without him having to do anything," he added.

The Pope pondered for a moment before nodding and looking at Aldrian.

"Alright, young Aldrian. I actually feel bad entrusting this task to you, especially after the great favor you've done for us that I doubt I can ever repay. But please, catch that bastard for me. I want to make him regret betraying the heavens by colluding with the devils. I will make him writhe like a worm under my feet. No, wait—not a worm. A worm is still too good for him. He's more like a germ, an insignificant germ without any—"

"Father!" Angelica shouted in embarrassment.

"Ahahaha! Alright, alright, I'm sorry."

Aldrian's eye twitched at the way he spoke. Is this the real Pope's personality? It was completely unexpected. Still, he smiled at the Pope.

"Leave it to me, Your Holiness. He won't escape from me and he will face his judgment."

Chapter 352: Cardinal Carsius's Plan

In another part of the church, there is a luxurious room designated for the archbishop to work or engage in private activities. Inside this room, a middle-aged man with blonde hair sits at his desk with a dignified posture. A white robe with a dark yellow sash draped over his left shoulder signifies his status as a cardinal of the church.

He is Cardinal Carsius Vilanix, a man with a great reputation within the church. Due to his frequent interactions with other members and his generosity in offering gifts, he is popular among the members, including high-ranking ones.

At this time, he was not alone in the room; two other men, dressed in the same robe and sash as him, accompanied him. They were also cardinals, but they primarily served as his supporters in his bid to lead the next pope.

One of them was a middle-aged man with brown hair, a small beard, and sharp eyes, sitting on a sofa not far from Cardinal Carsius's desk. The other one was also middle-aged, with black hair and a neatly separated mustache resting above his lips.

"How is it, Cardinal Darius? Is there any movement from the Paladin?" Cardinal Carsius asked the brown-haired man.

"No. According to my spy stationed near the Paladin Knights' barracks, there has been no movement, especially from Arthur. In my opinion, he seems to be in seclusion, likely preparing to break through to the Emperor stage. I haven't seen any sign of him for more than two weeks," Cardinal Darius said with a smile.

"Why do you seem so worried about Sir Arthur movement? He can't do much if the heavens appear to be on our side. With His Holiness suddenly falling ill, your path to becoming the next pope is practically unobstructed," said the black-haired cardinal.

"That is true, Cardinal Will, but we must still consider the voices of the other faction and the Saintess's decision. We can't simply force our way forward while ignoring proper procedure. I fear that my sudden rise might attract unnecessary trouble for me or even the church as a whole," Cardinal Carsius said in a firm tone.

"You don't have to sound so pessimistic. With the support we have, I believe that the other side, or even Her Holiness, will have no choice but to react and decide accordingly. After all, if they go against the trend, it won't be good for the unity of the church," Cardinal Darius said.

"Yes, I think so too. You need to be more optimistic—your path is already bright ahead," Cardinal Will added.

Cardinal Carsius sighed, closing his eyes as if deep in thought before slowly opening them again.

"Alright. Thank you for your support. I will definitely repay you in the future," he said to the other two.

"You better take care of us when you become the pope in the future. Hahaha," Cardinal Darius said jokingly.

"I will, I will."

After that, the two cardinals excused themselves from the room, leaving Cardinal Carsius alone. Once they were gone, his demeanor changed—he became more relaxed, no longer concerned with maintaining his wise appearance. His expression turned disdainful as he looked toward the door where the cardinals had just left.

"Idiots," he scoffed, his tone full of contempt. But then, a smirk formed on his lips.

"What a life. Before long, I will stand at the very peak of the church, wielding absolute control. To hell with how I obtain it—those devils will merely be stepping stones on my path to glory!" he thought.

"As for the Saintess... well, I'll use her as much as possible once I take the pope's seat. Her ability is truly useful for my plans."

He had already prepared something to ensure the Saintess would obey his commands, and he would use it when the time was right.

Cardinal Carsius was lost in his own world, indulging in his happiness, when he suddenly remembered something.

"That prophesized person... where is he right now? I heard that the other faction met with him a few years ago and even built a connection with him. He could become a problem if I don't address it."

This was the only lingering concern in his heart. That prophesized person was said to be the savior of the church. If he couldn't be controlled, it would be difficult for Carsius to seize complete power over the church.

For the church's higher-ups, the arrival of the prophesized messiah was the key to the continent's future and the church's survival. They wholeheartedly believed that this chosen one would save them and elevate the church to new heights.

Cardinal Carsius frowned as he thought about it more deeply. From his perspective, the prophesized person did not fully understand the current situation within the church. If he played his cards right, he could take advantage of this ignorance. By manipulating him and gaining his trust, Carsius could seize complete control of the church.

However, if he actually knew about the situation and chose to support the other faction and the pope—

"If he refuses to support me, then—" His eyes flickered wickedly. He would have to take a more extreme approach to force that person onto his side.

"By using him, I can also get rid of those devils who think they already have me in their grasp—killing two birds with one stone."

He smirked at his own plan, feeling a surge of pride in his so-called genius.

Rising from his seat, he walked toward the giant window that overlooked the scenery of the vast garden.

"The heavens are on my side, and I will be the one to lead the church to new heights—no one else."

Inside the pope's chamber, Aldrian was already seated on one side of the room, where a set of chairs and a table were arranged. He had just finished explaining his thoughts to the pope and Angelica—detailing what they could do to expose Cardinal Carsius and strip away his mask.

This wasn't a matter he could simply resolve by barging into Cardinal Carsius's room and forcing a confession with a slave seal or something like that.

If the other members of the church saw a sudden shift in Cardinal Carsius's behavior—especially during this delicate time when the pope had fallen ill and his successor had yet to be decided—they might assume it was a scheme orchestrated by the opposing faction. That misunderstanding could lead to detrimental situation to them.

What they needed was to take down Cardinal Carsius through normal and formal means—backed by strong, undeniable proof against him.

To achieve this, Aldrian had to make a formal entrance with the help of the Saintess. With the plan he had just shared with the pope and Angelica, he would ensure that there were no obstacles preventing his official arrival at the church. If Cardinal Carsius attempted to block his entry or hinder his meeting with the "sick" pope, he would face severe backlash instead.

"Your plan is truly brilliant. With this method, you'll be able to move freely within the church, and we can sack that bas—I mean, Carsius, without giving him a chance to defend himself," Pope Claudius said.

At this moment, his face already showed a healthy hue, no longer pale and weak. His body, too, had regained vitality, brimming with energy.

"To be honest, I still think that dealing with the problem immediately by having you suddenly appear inside the church would be more shocking and impactful. But I understand why you have to take this roundabout approach just to catch that traitor," the pope admitted. "Anyway, let's commence your plan as soon as possible. I can't wait to beat that—I mean, to properly punish Carsius and anyone who has been helping him."

Aldrian nodded before standing up.

"Well then, I will excuse myself, Your Holiness. I'll wait for Arthur to arrive—that will mark the beginning of our operation to catch the traitor," he said.

Hearing Aldrian, the pope nodded, while Angelica remained silent, seemingly dissatisfied about something. Aldrian, who understood her feelings, smiled at her.

"Angelica, we'll only be apart for a short while. Once I enter the church formally, we can talk as much as we want without anyone disturbing us."

Hearing that, Angelica's blind eyes seemed to brighten as she smiled and nodded.

The pope, observing their interaction, chuckled and turned his attention to Angelica. "Utututu, our Angelica has actually found a new conversation partner and is disappointed because he has to leave so soon. Don't worry, my dear, he—"

"Father!"

"Ahahaha." The pope burst into laughter, while Aldrian smiled warmly at their interaction. It was a welcome change from the gloomy atmosphere that had filled the room when he first entered.

"Then, see you later, Your Holiness."

"See you later, father."

In the next instant, Aldrian and Angelica suddenly vanished without a trace, leaving the pope shocked. As a peak Emperor-stage cultivator, he couldn't detect even the slightest sign of their departure! It was as if they had simply ceased to exist, an ability that left him in awe of Aldrian's mysterious methods.

"Truly an amazing young man!" he thought.

After a moment, he approached the cultivation mat at one side of the room and sat down. He needed to cultivate and replenish the energy he had lost while under the curse!

Chapter 353: The Formal Arrival of the Prophesized One

A few days later, the main church of the Heavenly Direction received information that they would soon welcome an esteemed guest. The Saintess herself had extended the invitation, hoping that this person could assist the church and heal the Pope.

For the lower-ranked church members who were unaware of the details, questions arose regarding the guest's identity because the news of the prophesized one circulated only among the higher-ups of the church, while the Pope's illness was strictly kept secret, known only to the archbishops and a select few knights.

However, the higher-ups were well aware of the guest's identity because the Saintess herself had informed them of his arrival. He was the prophesized Messiah, as foretold by the Saintess. Stories about the man from the prophecy had been told for the last few years.

That man was, in fact, the mysterious swordsman whose achievements had left many in awe. Because of his deeds, the higher-ups' faith in him continued to grow, making them more optimistic about the future. Many had already witnessed traces of his presence and his overwhelming power, strengthening their belief that he could truly solve the church's problem regarding the energy purity and the Pope's illness.

At this moment, inside Cardinal Carsius's room, his expression was anything but good. The sudden arrival of the prophesized man had unsettled him. He had not expected the Saintess to invite him so soon, and now, the man was already on his way to the church!

"Let's calm down for a second. Even if he does arrive, he can't heal the Pope—the Devil Lord himself said that the curse will never be broken unless the Pope dies. Yes, let's stay positive. If that person fails to heal the Pope, many will begin to doubt him and even lose trust in the Saintess. Although that would be unfortunate, it's still better than the Pope recovering and uncovering the truth behind it all," he thought.

He was already in too deep to escape from the situation. His dealings with the devils to secure his position as Pope had already raised suspicion from the Pope himself. Cardinal Carsius knew about this because spies from his faction had informed him of the Paladin Knights' suspicious movements.

At this point, it was too late for him to try blocking the incoming guest, as doing so would only draw more suspicion. None of the people within his faction knew his true nature, and if he openly opposed the arrival of the guest, they might even start to doubt him.

Right now, the only thing he could do was hope that the prophesized person would make a mistake—something that would cause the members of the church to look at him with doubt.

"Heaven has already chosen me as the one who will lead the church to greater heights. Yes, I have nothing to worry about. Heaven is on my side. No matter what they do, as long as I remain composed, all their efforts will be useless," he reassured himself.

Knock, knock.

"Your Eminence, the guest has arrived at the church's area. At this moment, all the higher-ups are already in the Garden of Eden to receive him," a voice resounded from outside.

Hearing this, Cardinal Carsius stood up, straightened his robe, and adjusted his appearance to look more proper.

"Alright, I will be there," he said. His face shifted into that of a wise and benevolent man, perfectly masking his true nature.

"I will succeed," he thought before opening the door and stepping out of the room.

The Garden of Eden in the main Heavenly Direction Church is a vast garden within the church complex, spanning approximately three square kilometers. It is filled with a variety of beautiful plants and natural decorations, designed to depict what they believe to be the Heavenly Garden in the higher realm.

It is said that the first Pope of the church was granted a vision from Heaven, revealing the beauty of the Heavenly Garden in the highest realm. Inspired by this vision, the Pope sought to replicate that divine place within the church complex.

This garden is not easily accessible to all church members. Its location at the very center of the church makes it a restricted area, with only those who have special permission allowed to enter. The surrounding area is home to archbishops and cardinals, further reinforcing its status as a highly guarded and exclusive site.

This is also why the Saintess chose this place to receive the prophesized one. Not only is it the most beautiful location within the church complex, but it is also far more private than welcoming the guest at the main entrance. A reception at the front doors would attract too much attention and cause unnecessary trouble.

At this moment, in the Garden of Eden, many people had already gathered. Their numbers reached the dozens, and each one radiated a holy aura and possessed formidable cultivation, with none below the King stage. They stood neatly in their designated positions, as if carefully preparing to receive the guest. At the center of it all was the Saintess, seated in her wheelchair, she was accompanied by a nun standing behind her.

A few moments later, a white-golden carriage entered the garden, escorted by Arthur on his double-horned horse, a common breed across the continent. All the church members present had been eagerly anticipating the arrival of the prophesized one, and excitement filled the air as they prepared to see him in person.

As the carriage came to a stop at the designated spot, the door opened, revealing a young man stepping out. He was strikingly handsome, dressed in noble attire that only enhanced his charm. His presence was so captivating that some of the nuns couldn't help but blush as they looked in his direction.

For the first time, the gathered crowd laid eyes on the prophesized man—the one destined to save them and bear the heavy fate of the continent. However, their awe also combined with shock upon realizing how young he was. Many had heard tales of his extraordinary abilities, but to see that the one who had accomplished such incredible feats was a young man seemingly no older than twenty was truly unexpected.

Yet, their surprise lasted only a moment. Almost instantly, an overwhelming instinct took hold of them—a deep, unexplainable urge to revere him, to bow before this extraordinary young man. He was the special one and can't be sullied with their blasphemy thought.

Aldrian, now the center of everyone's attention, could only smile wryly inwardly. He recalled how before arriving, Sylphia had insisted that he wear his best attire. She had personally chosen the noble outfit he now wore, and he had to admit—he liked it. Not just because it suited him, but because she had chosen it for him.

He walked closer to Angelica, and upon reaching her, he slightly bent his body in greeting.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Your Holiness. I have heard many things about you, and now that I see you in person, I can say it was well worth the anticipation," he said before straightening his posture.

"You exaggerate, young master," Angelica replied with a gentle smile. "But I must apologize—due to my condition, I am unable to receive you in a more proper manner."

"It is alright, Your Holiness. I understand," Aldrian responded sincerely.

"Before we proceed, allow me to introduce you to some of the prominent figures of the church. On this side is Cardinal Daniele Valentino. He is also an archbishop who oversees many church branches in the eastern regions."

"Nice to meet you, young master," Cardinal Daniele said, extending his hand for a handshake.

Aldrian responded with a smile and took his hand.

"Nice to meet you too."

"So this is Cardinal Carsius's main opponent for the position of pope," Aldrian thought.

Cardinal Daniele was a middle-aged man with blond hair and blue eyes. Despite his age, the handsome features of his youth remained, and he exuded a natural charisma that drew people to his side. He was the kind of man who didn't need to say much but people would naturally gravitate toward him, eager to speak with him.

"This is Cardinal Carsius Vilanix. He is also an archbishop who oversees many church branches in the Doria Empire region," Angelica said, gesturing toward her left.

"Ah, so this is the one they call Cardinal Carsius," Aldrian thought, though outwardly, he maintained a polite smile. The man before him was middle-aged, with blond hair similar to Cardinal Daniele's. However, his features carried an air of wise benevolence, his expression serene, and his smile truly soothing. He had the kind of presence that made him easy to overlook in a crowd—something that made Aldrian wonder.

"This is the man who has gained so much support to become the next pope?"

There was nothing about him that would raise suspicion. His face, his demeanor—everything exuded a trustworthy, virtuous image. No one would ever suspect that behind this mask was a man secretly aligned with the devils. No, even if he were to reveal the truth, few would believe it.

"Nice to meet you, young master. I hope you enjoy your stay here. We will gladly assist you if you need anything," Cardinal Carsius said while offering a handshake.

Everyone who heard his words had their own thoughts, but they all shared the same idea—Cardinal Carsius was trying to leave a good impression on Aldrian.

Aldrian was well aware of this, but he simply went along with it and took the cardinal's hand in a handshake.

"Nice to meet you too. I will surely enjoy my stay here. I'm already imagining many interesting things I will find," Aldrian said with a smile.

For some reason, looking at Aldrian's smile gave Cardinal Carsius a bad feeling.

Chapter 354: Deceiving Others

After being introduced to some of the archbishops, Aldrian was brought to the inner part of the church. As they walked toward one of the halls for a more proper welcome, Aldrian turned to Angelica and said,

"Your Holiness, I believe it would be best for me to examine His Holiness first so I can quickly assess his illness and determine a cure. His condition cannot afford to wait, after all. Perhaps I can even heal him immediately if his illness is one I am already familiar with."

Walking beside him, Angelica nodded in agreement.

"Alright, I will bring you to the Pope's chamber," she said.

A few high-ranking members of the church who followed them also overheard the conversation and felt relieved that the prophesied one would personally examine their leader immediately. However, one among them did not share their enthusiasm.

Cardinal Carsius watched the backs of Aldrian and Angelica, a subtle smile forming on his lips.

"What a foolish attempt. You can't heal that old man," he thought.

Suddenly, a voice transmission reached him—it was from Cardinal Darius.

"Cardinal Carsius, it looks like your path to the Pope's seat will have to wait for some time. With the appearance of the prophesied one, His Holiness's life may very well be saved."

"Yes, I'm glad it has come to this," Cardinal Carsius replied. *"Our church won't have to be divided, and His Holiness can continue to lead us for many more years. However,*

don't count your chickens before they hatch. We must still be prepared in case something happens."

"You do not believe that the prophesied one can heal His Holiness?"

Cardinal Darius asked, confused.

"Of course, I believe that the prophesied one can perform miracles, and perhaps he can heal His Holiness. But we still do not know the exact future, do we? I'm merely saying that we should leave a little room for doubt and be prepared in case the healing is unsuccessful. I just don't want us to be disappointed or place blame on the prophesied one or Her Holiness. After all, His Holiness's illness is quite unusual."

Although Cardinal Darius sensed something off about Cardinal Carsius's words, he could not refute them—because, in the end, they were true.

"You are right, but at least with the prophesied one's appearance, the chances are higher, so let's be optimistic," Cardinal Darius said before falling silent.

Cardinal Carsius, however, simply smiled. He could hardly wait to watch as the young man or the Saintess lost some credibility if they failed to heal the Pope's illness.

After walking for a few minutes, they finally arrived at the Pope's chamber, guarded by several knights. As the door to the chamber opened, they all saw the Pope still bedridden, a blanket covering him.

His complexion was pale, and although his eyes remained closed, he occasionally grunted and grimaced, as if even in his sleep, he was tormented by pain.

All those who witnessed it felt both pity and sorrow, silently praying to the heavens for the Pope's recovery.

"As you can see, he is—"

"Arrghh, my body! It's hot! It's painful!"

Before Angelica could finish her sentence, the Pope's agonized voice suddenly filled the room. He writhed on his bed, his eyes still closed, groaning as if he were enduring unbearable pain.

"Argh, it hurts... Urgh!" he moaned, even rolling onto his side, his blanket tangling around him.

Watching the scene unfold, Aldrian's eye twitched and utterly speechless. Meanwhile, Angelica covered her face with both hands as if overwhelmed with sorrow. From an

outsider's perspective, it seemed as though she was devastated by the Pope's worsening condition.

However, in reality, Angelica was actually feeling incredibly embarrassed hearing the Pope act like that.

Although she couldn't see the Pope directly, just hearing his deliberately pained voice and the commotion on the bed made her face flush with embarrassment. She could hardly believe that the Pope was actually putting on such an exaggerated act. Fortunately, none of the others found it suspicious—instead, they pitied him even more.

Cardinal Carsius inwardly grinned, as if victory was already within his grasp. The Pope's condition appeared much worse than it had been just a few days ago. With such a reaction, Carsius was convinced that the Pope wouldn't last more than a few days. He refused to believe that the young man could heal the Pope when he was already in such a dire state.

"Can all of you, Your Excellencies, leave the Pope and me alone? Oh, Her Holiness may stay to observe the diagnosis and healing process," Aldrian said with a smile, looking at the people who had followed them.

All the archbishops and cardinals, of course, saw no problem with this. A serene and quiet environment was best for the healing process, allowing Aldrian to concentrate. Additionally, the Saintess might be needed if Aldrian required assistance with her techniques.

Angelica glanced behind her at the nun pushing her wheelchair.

"Arin, you can return to your post. I will stay with the young master."

"As you wish, Your Holiness," Arin replied with a slight bow.

After that, Aldrian took over, pushing the wheelchair himself as they entered the room. The door closed behind them, sealing them inside. Once it was fully shut, Aldrian activated a formation to cover the room, ensuring their privacy.

With a sigh, he turned to the Pope.

"Your Holiness, we are safe. You can stop your act now."

The moment Aldrian spoke, the Pope abruptly stopped rolling and writhing in pain. Then, as if nothing had happened, he stood up from the bed.

"Ah, acting like that is still quite tiring, but my performance was convincing, wasn't it?" the Pope asked, his old face now regaining a healthy hue, with no trace of pain remaining.

"Yes, Your Holiness. The others even believe you won't survive much longer after seeing you like that," Aldrian replied with a slightly rigid smile.

Angelica's face was still a bit red from secondhand embarrassment after witnessing the Pope's exaggerated display. She let out a deep breath to calm herself.

"Alright, now that we've deceived everyone, things will be much easier from here on," Pope Claudius said. "And since you're already here, why don't we talk for a while as we wait? It would be more believable if the healing process takes some time, right? It would be ridiculous if I were suddenly back to full health after just a few seconds of healing."

"Sounds good, Your Holiness."

After that, they sat in the same seats they had used a few days ago. The Pope suddenly looked at Aldrian and Angelica with a smile.

"Young Aldrian, did you know that Angelica—"

"Father, can you not drag me into this?" Angelica interrupted.

"Ahahaha, alright, alright, I was just joking." But then, the Pope's expression shifted to one of curiosity.

"Young Aldrian, ever since I met you, I've been really curious about your true identity and origin. The way you look now—is just a disguise, isn't it? And while it's not my place to ask why you choose to hide your true appearance, even here, I can't help but wonder. Your abilities and strength are absurdly beyond reason, and at such a young age... I truly wonder—what kind of family could have given birth to a genius among geniuses like you?"

Hearing the Pope's question, Aldrian fell silent, deep in thought.

To be honest, he didn't find it troublesome to reveal the truth to Pope Claudius and Angelica. At this point, his traces as the mysterious swordsman had already spread too widely, and the people of the continent had acknowledged his name among the strongest cultivators.

Both the Rivas and Flamecrest families had already met him. The only thing left was his own decision—whether he truly wanted them to know his real connection to them. His achievements had grown too significant to be ignored or denied, even by those who opposed him or his parents union.

With that in mind, he came to a decision—it was fine to tell the Pope and Angelica the truth. There was no loss in gaining additional support, after all.

"It's okay, Your Holiness. I will tell you about my family—it won't be much of a secret in the future anyway," Aldrian said.

The Pope and Angelica were stunned, but they quickly focused, eager to hear what Aldrian had to say next.

"Actually, my parents are Aldrey Flamecrest and Irene Rivas. So, I'm sure you understand why I must use a disguise everywhere."

Silence.

For a few seconds, the Pope, still smiling, felt as if he had misheard.

"Excuse me... who?"

"You heard me, Your Holiness."

"What?!" the Pope shouted. If Aldrian hadn't placed a formation to shield the room, his voice would have echoed outside, causing a major commotion.

Angelica's eyes widened in shock—this was truly an unexpected revelation.

"How is that possible? Aldrey and Irene were never known to be in a relationship—wait, forget about a relationship! Their families have been rivals for generations. There's no way their families would have allowed their successors to—wait—"

Suddenly, the Pope stopped, narrowing his eyes at Aldrian.

"Were you born in the Everlasting Silent Forest?"

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Chapter 355: The Calling

Aldrian was stunned by the unexpectedly specific question. He had just revealed who his parents were, yet the Pope immediately inquired about his place of birth—and he was correct.

"Yes, my mother gave birth to me in the Everlasting Silent Forest," Aldrian answered truthfully.

The Pope nodded and sighed.

"As I thought. That was the only time Aldrey and Irene went missing—and it happened in that forbidden zone. It seems they did something without their family's knowledge," the Pope said, looking at Aldrian. "Which, in the end, resulted in your birth."

He sighed again, leaning back in his chair.

"Truly, this is fate—a destiny arranged by the heavens. For you to be born on this continent at that precise time... all because of that accident."

Aldrian narrowed his eyes.

"What do you mean, Your Holiness? What incident?"

"Hmm? Have your parents never told you the reason they were trapped inside the Everlasting Silent Forest?" the Pope asked in wonder.

"What I know is that they were trapped inside the Everlasting Silent Forest because of the devils. My parents seemed to be escaping from them, which led to them being swallowed by a crack in a secret realm within the forest," Aldrian replied.

The Pope nodded.

"Correct. At that time, your parents were within this very territory when, all of a sudden, the devils launched a surprise attack."

Aldrian frowned. "A surprise attack? Inside the main Heavenly Direction Church territory?" he asked.

"Correct. At that time, I summoned many nobles and members of the imperial family from across the continent to gather at the main church. The purpose was to inform them about the prophecy and to make them aware of the difficult times ahead."

"The prophecy from the Saintess regarding the fate of the continent is not something that can be ignored. After all, everyone knew of the Saintess's abilities, so they took this gathering very seriously."

"However, it seems the devils took advantage of that moment, knowing that many prominent figures were gathered here. They launched an attack on some of the envoy families, specifically targeting the heirs of the big families."

"At that time, your parents personally came here as representative from their families... and you know what happened next."

Aldrian was stunned, but then he pieced the puzzle together on his own.

"I see... So because of the devils' surprise attack—something no one expected—my parents were forced to escape south to the Everlasting Silent Forest."

"Yes. Many believed that Aldrey and Irene had died inside the Everlasting Silent Forest. You know how dangerous that place is, don't you? Well... at least, that was the belief until the recent changes in the forest."

The Pope suddenly chuckled.

"Don't you think this is actually funny? Because of the devils' surprise attack back then, your parents ended up uniting and becoming one in the secret realm. They had the time to give birth to you and raise you."

"That's why it's truly fate that you were born at that exact moment—right as the prophecy draws near. If the devils hadn't launched their surprise attack back then, maybe the story would have been different. Maybe you would have been born much later... or perhaps, not at all."

"The heavens are truly helping us with your presence. I suppose the dragon and phoenix phenomenon back then was also a sign of your arrival in this world, as it coincided with the second prophecy—the one about the golden light illuminating the land, which was revealed to Angelica."

The Pope gazed at Aldrian, but this time, his joking demeanor faded, replaced by a warm expression.

"The heavens have not abandoned us... The heavens have not abandoned us."

For a long time, he had feared otherwise. Ever since the purity of holy energy began to decline due to an unknown factor, he wondered if the heavens were turning their backs on them. Added to the bleak future of the continent, his doubts had shaken his faith, causing his Dao heart to crack at one point.

This was not surprising for him to experience. Having lived for tens of thousands of years, he had always felt the slow decline of the power and purity of holy energy, as if the heavens were abandoning them. The dark prophecy only made it harder for him to keep his faith steady.

However, when the dragon and phoenix phenomenon occurred and Angelica's prophecy about the golden light was revealed, it reignited his faith—making it stronger than ever. He was truly grateful that the heavens had not forsaken them or left him to live in misery.

Aldrian smiled at the Pope.

"Yes, the heavens did not abandon you, and they never will," he said with sincerity, as if he personally knew the heavens themselves. He simply felt it—an unshakable certainty that the heavens had never turned their backs on their believers or those who placed their faith in them.

Suddenly, he felt a stronger calling from a certain part of the church. It was the same sensation he had experienced when he first arrived in Heavenly City.

The church grounds were vast, spanning over 10 square kilometers, and his domain did not extend to the area where the calling originated. Because of this, he had no way of knowing what was summoning him. But at this moment, his curiosity burned stronger than ever—he needed to see what was trying so hard to draw him in.

"Your Holiness, if I may ask, what is located more than seven kilometers from here in that direction? It seems to be underground," Aldrian suddenly asked while pointing north.

The Pope tilted his head in confusion.

"Seven kilometers in that direction and underground—" The Pope was stunned before his eyes widened in shock. "You—how do you know about that place?" he asked in astonishment.

"I can feel a calling from there, and it seems to be growing stronger as we speak," Aldrian replied.

The Pope was visibly shaken and turned to look at Angelica.

"Aldrian is talking about the First Pope's Altar of Faith. It seems the heavens are showing us another sign," he said.

Angelica's eyes widened before she quickly responded,

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go to the altar. If the heavens are showing another sign, we can't afford to delay."

The Pope nodded before shifting his gaze back to Aldrian.

"Let's end this act for now. I'll take you there after this."

Aldrian knew that he was referring to the act of deceiving others. Although the "healing process" hadn't lasted long, matters concerning the heavens had to take priority.

Outside the Pope's chamber, all the church members who had been following Aldrian were still waiting for him to emerge. Their expressions were filled with worry and curiosity—they wanted to see inside or check on the healing process, but they knew better than to disturb him.

BANG!

Suddenly, the double doors of the chamber slammed open, startling everyone. Moments later, the Pope stepped out with hurried steps, followed by the Saintess in her wheelchair with Aldrian pushing it. Seeing their leader walking so suddenly, looking completely healthy, shocked them to the core. Just earlier, he had seemed like a dying fish, but now, he appeared as strong as a healthy elder.

"Your Holiness! I'm glad—"

"Not now, gentlemen. I'm in a rush. I have to take the prophesized one somewhere. You are all dismissed! Go about your own duties—I am already well," the Pope said, cutting off one of the archbishops mid-sentence.

Everyone who had wanted to congratulate the Pope froze, their steps halting as they watched him, the Saintess, and Aldrian walk away. The sudden recovery of the Pope was undeniable proof that the treatment by the prophesized one had been successful.

Joy spread among them as they processed this miraculous event, and soon, gratitude filled their hearts. They began thanking the heavens and sharing their excitement with their peers.

However, there was one person who watched the Pope with a dark expression. The bulging vein on his forehead and his bloodshot eyes revealed his fury, but he held it in.

"How did he break the curse?! How is that possible?!" Cardinal Carsius screamed in his mind. *"Did the Devil Lord lie to me?"*

That was the only explanation that made sense. The Pope, who had been on the brink of death, now looked as if he had merely suffered a mild fever and recovered without issue.

Cardinal Carsius gritted his teeth, his body trembling as he clenched his fists. After watching the Pope disappear from sight, he turned and walked in the opposite direction.

"This won't do! I have to act before misfortune befalls me!"

With the Pope's recovery, his own position had once again become meaningless. Worse, his safety was now threatened by the pope's suspicion.

Not long after Carsius left, Cardinal Darius, still caught up in joyful conversation with other cardinals and archbishops, looked around, hoping to speak with cardinal Carsius.

"Where did he go?" he wondered.

The Pope then led Aldrian and Angelica outside the building. All the way from the chamber, he seemed unconcerned with anything around him, rushing past many people who gazed at him with pious reverence.

Once they stepped outside, Pope Claudius looked up at the sky. With a mere act of will, his energy enveloped Aldrian and Angelica, shielding them as he propelled himself into the air, flying at great speed.

Aldrian and Angelica were lifted alongside him, safely carried by his energy, protected from the strong winds caused by their rapid ascent.

The flight lasted only a second before they descended, landing in front of another building situated in a secluded area, surrounded by a small forest area with towering trees. The building shared the same architectural style as the main church, but Aldrian sensed it, this place held the densest concentration of holy energy he had ever encountered.

And from within this building, the source of the calling was waiting.

Chapter 356: Welcome Back...

The building stands alone, with no living beings in its surroundings. However, Aldrian can sense several high-level formations placed around it. These formations are powerful enough to kill or trap even high Emperor-stage cultivators.

After they land, Pope Claudius spreads his energy, and all the formations seem to deactivate, recognizing the pope's presence.

"This is the first building constructed by the first pope, Marcus Decimus, before he built the main church of the Heavenly Direction Church. We call this place the Shrine of the Beginning. According to our records, the first pope built it in response to a divine revelation from the heavens," the pope said.

"Although we don't know what kind of divine revelation he received that led him to build this shrine, it is said that this place serves as a sign that the heavens are constantly watching over this land," he added.

Hearing the pope's explanation, a question arose in Aldrian's mind.

"Was the first pope from outside the continent?" Aldrian asked.

Pope Claudius was stunned upon hearing Aldrian's question and looked at him in astonishment.

"So, you already know that most of the powers on this continent come from outside?" he asked.

Aldrian nodded. From his knowledge and the stories he had heard from various sources during his journey, he knew that most of the powers that had shaped into the sovereign families of the empires and kingdoms on this continent originally came from beyond its borders.

Why had they gathered on this continent? To obtain something hidden deep within the Everlasting Silent Forest.

Xin Haotian had told him a few years ago that his family was indigenous to this continent and was one of the guardian families tasked with protecting something at the forest's center. Their duty stemmed from an ancient agreement with the dragon and phoenix from higher realm. But what exactly lay at the heart of the forest? Even Xin Haotian and his family did not know. That was why Xin Haotian wanted to bring Aldrian to his family—to help them uncover the mystery.

All the powerful forces on the continent had also set their sights on this mysterious "something." However, as time passed and they failed to overcome the forest's dangerous nature, their original purpose was gradually forgotten.

In the end, the empires and kingdoms formed around the Everlasting Silent Forest, establishing a status quo. They coexisted, building their civilizations on this continent while forgetting the very reason they had come here in the first place.

"As for the first pope, we do not know if he was originally from this continent or not. However, what we do know is that the Heavenly Direction Church was only established here, and we have no records of its existence outside this land. So, in comparison to other powers, we can consider ourselves a relatively new organization," Pope Claudius explained.

Hearing the answer, Aldrian sighed as he gazed at the Shrine of the Beginning.

"Was this also prepared for my return? Is heaven preparing for it as well?" he wondered.

"Let's go. There's no need to waste any more time," the pope said before walking toward the shrine's door and pushing it open.

As the door fully opened, Aldrian took in the sight of a massive white altar platform standing at the center of the shrine, surrounded by nine towering pillars that extended to the ceiling.

However, his eyes widened in shock, and his gaze trembled as he looked upward.

There, engraved at the center of the ceiling above the altar, was a symbol he knew all too well.

It was the image of a giant circle, radiating light over everything, positioned atop a yin-yang symbol. He had seen this symbol multiple times throughout his journey from the Ivory Empire, but to look it here, in this place, was completely unexpected.

Angelica, in front of him, sensed the change in Aldrian's mood and asked, "What's wrong, young master? Is something bothering you?"

Her voice pulled him from his shocked state, and he quickly calmed himself.

"Nothing. I'm just amazed that the calling I've been sensing is right in front of me—at that altar," Aldrian answered. He wasn't lying either, as he had finally laid eyes on the very thing that had been calling out to him—the altar or more specifically the symbol itself.

As they moved closer, the pope spoke. "Usually, only the pope or the saintess are allowed to enter this place. It is also the most sacred site for receiving revelations or enlightenment. The holy energy here is more concentrated than anywhere else, making it the most hallowed ground of the church."

Aldrian's gaze never left the altar and the symbol on the ceiling. He was truly curious as to why that symbol was here.

"Your Holiness, if I may ask, what is that symbol?" Aldrian said, pointing at it.

"Ah, that?" The pope glanced up. "To be honest, we don't truly know its meaning. It was something the first pope created after witnessing the divine revelation, but he never explained its significance. The only thing we know is that it is so sacred that only the first pope was able to engrave it here in this place."

"In the time of the first pope, many wanted to adopt it as the church's emblem, but he forbade it. He declared that it was a special symbol, one that could only be engraved or created once in this shrine. True to his words, every attempt to replicate it has failed—whenever someone tries, they feel an overwhelming force gripping their heart, as if it were a sign from the heavens to stop. Out of curiosity, I once attempted it myself, but the result was the same."

"In the end, our predecessors created a toned-down version of that symbol as the emblem of the Heavenly Direction Church. Well as you can see, the church's current symbol bears some resemblance to the original one here," the pope explained.

Once again, Aldrian felt that this place had been created for him to find. He believed that the reason no one else could recreate the symbol was that it carried the heavy burden of destiny—one that not everyone was worthy to bear. Only a chosen few could engrave it, and the first pope had been one of them.

They finally arrived at the edge of the altar platform, and the pope turned to Aldrian.

"I don't know what kind of calling you've received, but feel free to stay here and do what you need to do."

Aldrian nodded before stepping toward the center of the altar, under the eyes of the pope and Angelica.

Once he reached the center of the altar, Aldrian looked up at the ceiling, his gaze locking onto the symbol. A deep connection surged through him, he felt as though he had truly "returned"—as if he had found his real place, his true home.

Closing his eyes, he let himself become one with heaven and earth, immersing himself in self-cultivation. A powerful sensation washed over him—this place resonated with him in a way no other had before. It felt as though he had taken another step toward uncovering his true origin.

Unconsciously, his body began to radiate golden energy. The sacred aura spread outward, drawing in the surrounding holy energy from both within the shrine and its surroundings.

The pope and Angelica felt their hearts tremble as the golden energy surged over them. They had already experienced the purity and power of this energy before, but now, Aldrian was displaying it in its full radiance.

Without realizing it, his body slowly began to rise, floating above the altar as he remained completely immersed in his cultivation.

The pope's eyes widened as the symbol above suddenly began to shine, its radiant light illuminating Aldrian as if welcoming him. At that moment, both the pope and Angelica felt it—the shift in the holy energy surrounding them.

The tainted holy energy, long diluted by foreign energy, was now becoming purer, more powerful than ever before.

Their eyes trembled as they experienced this transformation firsthand. Without thinking, their bodies instinctively moved into a prostrated position before Aldrian. Even Angelica,

despite her condition, struggled to push herself from her wheelchair, attempting to bow before him.

"The heavens are descending upon us... the heavens are here," the pope murmured, his voice shaking as tears welled in his eyes.

At that moment, a sudden surge of holy energy swept through the entire church, leaving everyone in confusion. But when they looked toward the Shrine of the Beginning, their eyes widened in shock—a pillar of golden light had erupted from the shrine, stretching endlessly into the sky.

The instant they saw it, their bodies moved instinctively. Without understanding why, they fell to their knees, bowing toward the radiant pillar. Their hearts compelled them, an unshakable feeling surging within their souls.

For the first time in their lives, they felt a sense of absolute piety, as if they were standing before the heavens themselves.

Arthur, witnessing the phenomenon, also dropped to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground in reverence.

From within his chambers, Cardinal Carsius saw the golden light and immediately prostrated himself. A deep, overwhelming fear gripped his heart—an undeniable presence weighed upon him, as if an almighty being stood before him, knowing every deed he had ever committed.

He trembled, his thoughts in turmoil.

"What is this? What is happening?"

At that moment, the entire Heavenly City gazed in awe at the golden pillar of light piercing the sky. A tightness gripped their hearts, and without hesitation, they instinctively kowtowed toward its direction.

Even those who were not followers of the Heavenly Direction Church found themselves bowing before the golden light, unable to resist the overwhelming presence emanating from it.

Aldrian's group, witnessing the phenomenon, felt their hearts tremble. Xin Haotian and Baek Jimin were struck with a sudden sense of respect and reverence. Though they did not immediately kneel like the others, they instinctively knew—the presence within that golden pillar was Aldrian.

As for Sylphia, a gentle warmth washed over her, different from what the others felt. It was as if something—someone—was greeting her, though she couldn't quite understand who or what it was. A strange feeling, yet oddly comforting.

She simply smiled, gazing at the golden pillar with eyes full of love.

By this time, Aldrian's body had already risen four meters above the altar platform, suspended in the air as the light from the symbol above shone down upon him with brilliant intensity.

Within Aldrian's mindscape, he found himself in an entirely different space—a vast, endless expanse of pure white. There was nothing in sight, only an infinite white scenery.

This place felt eerily familiar. It reminded him of the space where he had once met with the Heavenly Demon.

Suddenly, a voice echoed through the emptiness. It was unlike any he had ever heard—not distinctly male or female.

"Welcome... back... the... Absolute... One..."

"Welcome... back... the... Absolute... Ruler..."

"Welcome... back... Your... Majesty."

Chapter 357: The Ones That Responsible?

At an unknown place, where only an endless white expanse stretched in every direction, an old man sat in deep meditation. However, his eyes slowly opened, and his expression frowned. He closed them again, trying to perceive something, but his frown only deepened.

"It's coming from the First Heaven again... and this time, it's much stronger. I'm even starting to lose control over a small part of that place. What is going on?"

He couldn't comprehend the sudden disturbance, especially when he was so close to completing his goal. What the hell had happened? As someone of his status and strength, he couldn't simply go there whenever he pleased.

"If not for the law of causality..." he sighed. He desperately wanted to see for himself what was happening, but the "assimilation" process had come to a halt due to this unexpected development.

Suddenly, a shadow appeared in front of him. It took the form of a burly man, with menacing red eyes glaring at the old man.

"Did you break the agreement? Did you act without my knowledge?" the shadow's voice resounded, deep and terrifying, like a growling beast. Yet, the old man remained unfazed.

"What are you talking about? I would never do anything that would be detrimental to us. Don't you have your own 'apostle' in that place? Shouldn't you have more knowledge of the situation than I do? As per the agreement, I have only attempted to influence that part of Heaven—nothing more," the old man replied calmly.

"My apostle reported that an unknown variable has appeared. He seems to be special—just like him. I have already inquired with the others, and none of them know anything about it. You are the last one I asked, and you still have no idea?" The shadow's voice rose, laced with irritation.

"I am slowly losing control of that place, and I can't even read its fate anymore! I can no longer see the present, the future, or even the past. It's as if something is blocking my vision. Are you telling me that some kind of existence suddenly appeared and already has the ability to conceal itself from divine observation?" His voice boomed like thunder.

Despite the intensity, the old man remained calm and answered.

"I truly don't know, and my answer remains the same. If it's an unknown existence, then perhaps those rebellious bastards or even the Heavenly Demon are responsible for something beyond our awareness."

The shadow fell silent, he also lacked the answers as well and it was indeed a possibility.

"Isn't the Heavenly Demon under the watch of the four of 'us'? Do you really think he could do anything while being closely monitored by them?" the shadow asked.

"Who knows? He's full of tricks and powerful enough to pull off something unexpected without us realizing it. Anyway, that part of Heaven is mostly under your jurisdiction—I'm merely supporting it while managing my own. You'd better do your job properly, because this is just as important for us," the old man said.

The shadow stared at him in silence for a moment before vanishing, but not without leaving a final remark.

"You don't have to tell me that."

Left alone, the old man closed his eyes once more. Though his face remained calm, his mind was filled with confusion. Something felt terribly wrong.

"What a strange phenomenon... What did we miss? What really happened in that place?" he wondered, sensing that his control over the tiny fragment of the First Heaven was slipping further beyond his grasp.

At this moment, he could no longer affect that tiny part of the First Heaven—the only remaining fragment still undergoing the process of *assimilation*. Initially once complete, it would fall fully under his control.

That place was one of the few where the resistance rebels had escaped with their utmost effort. To *"them"*, it was nothing more than a futile struggle, yet it remained irritating. And because of the law of causality, they couldn't directly come to that part of the world.

But suddenly, he lost all control over the assimilation. He could no longer connect to that part of the world, sending a wave of alarm through him. It was as if—

"Someone has already seized that part of Heaven before I could fully assimilate it."

If his suspicion was correct, then they had to be cautious. The fact that someone could steal Heaven's domain without their knowledge suggested that this unknown figure might be far stronger than him.

"It looks like we need to gather and discuss this matter."

After all, at their level, anything beyond their understanding was bound to be significant—something that could drastically affect their plans.

He kept his eyes closed, maintaining his focus on that part of the world, hoping to understand what was happening in that fragment of Heaven.

Inside Aldrian's mindscape, he heard a broken voice. It felt strangely familiar, as if he had heard it before, yet at the same time, it was unfamiliar.

The sound felt familiar to him, as if he had spoken to this voice many times before. Yet, it was unfamiliar because this was the first time he had heard it with his own ears. Then, he recalled the feeling he had experienced during his heavenly tribulation at Dragon Back Mountain. At that moment, he had clearly sensed Heaven's intent, and now, this voice carried the same presence.

Aldrian glanced around—upward, downward—but the scenery remained unchanged. With no clear direction, so he simply spoke into the emptiness.

"Are you the personification of Heaven?" That was the only conclusion he could reach. Although it sounded crazy and outrageous, he didn't find it absurd. Strangely, it felt natural—almost ordinary.

"Answering... your... majesty... I am... Heaven."

Hearing this, Aldrian's heart trembled. Even though he had somewhat expected it, hearing it directly still shook him to the core. Heaven had a personification—and it could speak? What an astonishing revelation!

But then, something clicked in his mind. If even Heaven—an existence beyond the comprehension of any being in the universe, something worshiped and regarded as the ultimate ruler—was addressing *him* with such respect... then what did that make him?

What was his true origin?

"Do you know who I am? Do you know my origin?" He finally asked. If this was Heaven itself, then it would know the truth about him—about what he truly was, right?

"I... don't... know... your... majesty."

An unexpected answer. Aldrian felt his heart tighten with disappointment, as if he had slammed into a wall and had a bucket of cold water dumped over him.

If even Heaven itself did not know, then who would? Who had he been in the past? *What* was he? A sense of loss crept over him, but he forced himself to suppress it. He had thought he was finally about to uncover the truth, only to be met with yet another dead end.

"Your... majesty... is... the... only... one... who... knows... who... he... truly... is."

Sensing Aldrian's feeling, the Heaven spoke again, but its words only left him more confused.

"If I knew the answer myself, I wouldn't have to ask anyone or anything about me!" Aldrian thought in frustration. But then, he reminded himself that Heaven wouldn't say such words just to toy with him. An existence that had likely been there since the beginning of the universe wouldn't bother with meaningless jokes.

Aldrian sighed. Perhaps he would understand Heaven's meaning in time. *"One step at a time,"* he told himself. Maybe, in the end, he would find the truth.

"Your... majesty... time... is... up... can't... take... too... much... time."

Suddenly, the white scenery began to crumble, revealing the dark void behind it. Aldrian wanted to stay longer—he still felt like he hadn't gained any clear answers from this conversation.

However, he knew he couldn't stop it. A sudden wave of sadness welled up inside him as the scenery darkened, leaving him in the depths of emptiness.

But he wasn't entirely empty-handed. He had gained another piece of the puzzle—one that he could piece together in the future to uncover the full picture.

"I am someone whose origin even Heaven does not know... Someone only I know."

As the world around him faded into complete darkness, he looked ahead and then behind him—only to be stunned by the sight behind him. In this endless void, there was a lone source of light. A small island, isolated in the vast emptiness, and beneath the shade of a tree stood a solitary hut.

Aldrian, driven by curiosity, decided to walk toward the "island." The moment he stepped onto it, he halted, sensing the presence of someone inside the hut.

"Excuse me," he called out.

Silence.

There was no response, making him wonder if the person inside had heard him. He was about to call out again when the wooden door creaked open, revealing a figure standing within.

The moment Aldrian saw them, his eyes widened in shock—he knew this person.

"It's you?"

Chapter 358: The Conversation with the 'Figure'

"It's you!" Aldrian blurted out.

How could he not recognize that figure when he had already seen it multiple times? Although the figure was now wearing a different robe and his face remained blurry, Aldrian instantly knew it was *him*—the man who had repeatedly appeared throughout his journey.

However, this time, as Aldrian looked closer, he finally caught a distinct feature of the figure's face—clear, beautiful blue eyes, like the tranquil waters or the dark blue sky. The moment he saw those eyes, he felt as if he had been transported to the past—to an unknown time long ago. He gasped, trying to calm himself.

But then, Aldrian found himself already sitting on a mat in front of a small table beneath the tree. The figure sat across from him, gazing at him with curiosity, which made Aldrian feel somewhat uncomfortable.

"I suppose you have many questions, but I can't answer all of them. If you learn too soon, it will be meaningless," the figure said.

Aldrian remained silent for a moment before finally speaking.

"Then, I suppose you won't tell me about my origin or something like that?"

"That's right. That is one of them. Knowing now would make your journey pointless—you will have to uncover it yourself."

"Then let's not talk about me. Let's talk about you—who are you, really?" Aldrian asked, narrowing his eyes. "You seem close to me, and I also feel a sense of familiarity from you. Who were you in my past life?"

Although Aldrian couldn't see the figure's mouth, he had the distinct sense that the figure was smiling at him upon hearing the question.

"Would you like to take a guess?" the figure asked in a calm yet teasing tone.

"I don't think I can. My visions of the past are too random and too many. Sometimes, it feels like I've already lived many lives when those visions appear in my mind or dreams. And I doubt that's all of them—I still feel like there are many scenes yet to be shown to me," Aldrian replied.

"Alright, that's okay. As for who I truly am, you will know in the future. That's because it also concerns you. But for now, let's settle with a clue. I believe you're smart, and one day, you'll think, *'Ah, so that's what he meant!'*—something like that," the figure said with a smile.

"The clue is this: the past and future are connected. The past stays in the past, but it shapes the future. The future is yours to decide, while the past remains only as history. If you understand the true meaning of these words, you will know who I really am."

Aldrian frowned at these words. Although they sounded simple—something most people wouldn't find complex—he knew there was a deeper meaning behind them. The figure wasn't just stating the obvious; he was hinting at something far more profound.

"'The past is history, and the future is mine to decide.' That's an obvious statement—something even an ordinary man with no deep philosophical understanding would grasp. However, if he used it as a clue to his identity, that must mean he has some connection to me in the past," Aldrian thought to himself.

"Is there anything else that could serve as another clue?"

Then, Aldrian remembered something the figure had said after he finished forging the unnamed divine sword in Forgeheart Kingdom.

"There is no one worthy of wielding that sword besides him and me. Even the Origin Sword, which served as the blueprint for that artifact, respects me and seems to recognize me."

However, for Aldrian, that still wasn't enough. The figure's connection to him in the past might have been deep enough to make the sword react that way—but it wasn't conclusive proof of who he really was.

There was one more possibility about the figure's identity that crossed Aldrian's mind—one that seemed outrageous. His heart trembled at the thought, but without enough proof, he refused to jump to conclusions too soon.

"Forget it. I'll just be wasting my time if I keep dwelling on this," Aldrian thought with sigh as he looked at the figure's blurry face—or rather, at his eyes.

"Are you the one who planned all of this? I mean, everything that has happened to me, everything left behind on the continent—the places, the artifacts. Was all of that your doing?"

"Not really," the figure replied. "That was the combined effort of many people, even the heavens themselves. I'm just someone from the past, from even before all of this happened. I had no real influence over their plans or this chain of events. I merely observe *you*—until you uncover the truth."

Aldrian frowned at the subtle meaning behind the figure's words.

"Are you saying... you were already dead?"

"Hmm, you could say that," the figure replied. "But I also exist in another form. You'll understand what I mean in the future."

Aldrian's heart trembled. If this person had passed away long before any of these events unfolded, then—

"Do those people, or even the heavens, know that we're meeting and speaking right now?"

"No, they don't. Not even the heavens, like I told you, I only observe *you* specifically. I simply took advantage of their plans, slipping between the events so I could speak with you like this or when you manage to comprehend certain things." The figure said.

Aldrian's eyes widened in shock. Just how powerful was the figure in front of him? He was someone from the past, yet he could pull off a trick that even the heavens failed to notice like speaking to him effortlessly, as if it were nothing.

Aldrian sighed, suddenly feeling at a loss for how to deal with this mysterious figure.

"Then why are you observing me? What exactly are you watching?" Aldrian asked.

"Good question. Why *you*? Because you are special to me. What am I observing? Your growth, your journey—everything. I want to see for myself how this all ends. I want to know if my decision was the right one, if my hypothesis is correct."

The answer still felt ambiguous, but Aldrian chose not to press further. He had another question in mind. For now, he would absorb as much information as possible from this figure and think about its meaning later—once he returned to reality.

"I'm actually quite curious about the symbol—the one that always seems connected to you. What does it truly mean? The large circle that illuminates everything beneath it, including the yin and yang symbol below." Aldrian asked.

"Were you the one who created that symbol?" he added.

"Yes, I am the one who made it," the figure replied. "That symbol is called the symbol of the Absolute Ruler. As for its meaning, the symbol represents power and authority. You have already comprehended a part of it and even wield some of its power."

Aldrian pondered the figure's answer.

"If I've already comprehended part of it, then it must be something I possess... something I already have some control over."

"Is it my domain power?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"That is one of them."

"The golden energy?"

"That is one of them."

Aldrian narrowed his eyes further. It seemed he still had much to learn about his own power or maybe, his power is actually from this—

"Anyway, it's really nice to have an actual conversation with you, rather than the usual one-sided communication. And it's all thanks to you—because you connected yourself directly to the heaven in that part of the world before it was entirely lost. I have the

strongest karma with the heavens, which is why we're able to have this little talk." the figure said.

"After watching your journey up to this point, I must say I'm quite satisfied with what I've seen. And now, in this final life, the truth is for you to find. For me, this is the moment of truth—whether my decision was the right one. Will you succeed in your journey? I will continue watching you. But be warned—who you become in the future, based on your choices, will determine the final outcome of everything. And that outcome... will affect me as well."

Aldrian looked into the figure's blue eyes—eyes that seemed to know everything, carrying deep secrets and boundless wisdom. Yet at this moment, they gazed at him with tenderness, filled with compassion.

"Alright, I've already taken up much of your time. It's time to go," the figure said as the light on the island began to dim with quick speed.

"Wait! Will I meet you again in the future?" Aldrian suddenly shouted.

"That will depend on you, Aldrian," the figure replied before everything was swallowed by darkness.

In the distance, a lone star appeared, but it was much closer than the last time he had arrived here. He exhaled softly, realizing that he had returned to his own being's essence.

"Who is he really?" he wondered before deciding to cultivate within the void.

Chapter 359: The Time He Passed

The seasons changed without waiting for anyone, yet Aldrian remained in the Shrine of the Beginning. Time passed unnoticed by him, and he seemed unaware of how long he had been there. His body still stood, though he no longer floated as he had when he first began cultivating in this place.

Angelica and Pope Claudius had long since stopped prostrating before Aldrian. Now, they simply gazed at him in wonder.

"What could he be seeing within himself? It has already been more than a year, yet he hasn't moved at all," Pope Claudius said to Angelica, who stood beside him.

"I don't know," Angelica replied, her eyes fixed on Aldrian's figure. "But thanks to the young master, our church has experienced an unprecedented rise in both holy energy and purity. Today's church is unlike anything before—I almost feel like it's surreal. He truly is the prophesied one who will change our church forever."

After a brief silence, Angelica asked,

"Father, what about the traitor? Has he been found?"

Pope Claudius's face darkened at the mention of the topic.

"That bas—that traitor is still nowhere to be found. Like a slippery rat, we managed to track some of his traces, but we lost him entirely at the teleportation station near the border of the Vindas Empire. I should have captured him back then—if I had, we wouldn't be dealing with this mess now," he said through gritted teeth.

A year ago, not long after the golden pillar of light shone over the entire Heavenly City, all beings had prostrated before it—except for a few. However, once the pillar disappeared and people began questioning what had happened, they rushed to the source of the light. It was then that the pope noticed someone missing from the church's ranks—Cardinal Carsius.

After Pope Claudius explained the golden pillar's appearance to the church members and calmed them down, he finally sensed that something was wrong. When he looked for Cardinal Carsius, the man had already disappeared. Worse still, he had taken several high-grade artifacts from the secret vault, fueling the pope's rage.

Enraged, Pope Claudius ordered a search for Cardinal Carsius, causing an uproar among the higher-ups of the church. He then publicly announced the cardinal's suspicious activities, declaring that Carsius was suspected of having ties to the devils.

Many voices, especially from Cardinal Carsius's faction, rose in his defense. However, with the support of the Saintess, Pope Claudius swiftly suppressed their protests. Moreover, the prophesied one—their destined savior—was said to have stood by the pope's decision, knowing the cardinal's true nature and vowing to see him captured.

Left with no other options and unable to refute the accusations of the pope and the Saintess, the higher-ups of the church from the Cardinal Carsius's faction ultimately chose to support the decision and launched a search for Cardinal Carsius. As they investigated him, many began to uncover suspicious traces—evidence suggesting that he had been communicating with outsiders. This only strengthened the belief that Cardinal Carsius had secretly been in contact with the devils all along.

To this day, Cardinal Carsius has vanished without a trace, taking several of the church's artifacts with him. He has become the most wanted man in the church across the continent, and the church has spread word of his crimes to the other major powers—shocking them all. Yet, despite the growing discussions and speculation, Pope Claudius remains unconcerned with public opinion. His only goal is to capture the traitor.

"Truly, the time of prophecy draws near. We have faced many great events in recent years, and with what happened in the Atria Empire, it is clear—we are on the verge of chaos era," Pope Claudius said.

Angelica remained silent, feeling the same as Pope Claudius.

Suddenly, they sensed a shift in the surrounding energy, all of it converging toward a single point. In that instant, Aldrian's body exuded a brilliant golden energy before it quickly faded away. The sudden surge of power from him left both Pope Claudius and Angelica utterly shocked—what they had just felt was beyond belief.

Slowly, Aldrian opened his eyes, a golden hue flickering within them for a brief moment before disappearing. He had no idea how much time had passed, having been completely immersed in his cultivation. However, after his encounter with the heavens and the mysterious "figure," his mind felt clearer than ever. Though he still couldn't uncover the full truth of his origins, he had gained information that might aid him in the future.

Looking down at his own palm, he clenched and unclenched his fist several times. He felt stronger—far stronger than before. But more than that, he sensed something new, something he had never been able to perceive prior to cultivating here. A mysterious energy had gathered inside his body, continuously flowing into him without stopping, without any effort on his part.

At last, after so long, he decided to check his own status. But the moment he saw the screen, he was truly shocked by what he found.

Aldrian Aster

Domain : The secret realm, The Ivory empire, The Demon Territory of Barisan continent, The Forgeheart kingdom, The Doria empire, Heavenly Direction Church Territory

Age

: 16 years

Cultivation : Low Duke

Current energy : 1,420,121 (+6.5 /10m)

Energy needed for the next stage : 1,570,001

His cultivation stage and speed had advanced so significantly that he was stunned by his own progress. However, as he thought about it, it made sense—after all, he just connected to the heavens and even talked to their personification, a reality that still felt surreal to him. He felt as though he could completely control the forces of heaven within his domain, but he knew he would need time to maximize the potential of his power.

After his encounter with the "figure," he understood that he still had a long way to go. He needed to grow stronger, and fast, if he wanted to uncover more about his origins and the secrets hidden within him.

"Young Master."

Angelica's voice pulled Aldrian from his thoughts. He turned to his side and saw her and Pope Claudius staring at him as if he were a god. He then smiled at them.

"I'm sorry, but it seems I unknowingly cultivated much longer than I anticipated," he said. "By the way, how long have I been cultivating?"

"You have been cultivating for a year and four months, young master," Angelica answered, causing Aldrian's eyes to widen.

"What? It's already been that long?" He had not expected so much time to have passed. His conversation with the heavens and the "figure" had completely immersed him in cultivation, pushing him to grow stronger at an accelerated pace. This was, without a doubt, the longest cultivation session of his life.

"Yes, young master. And while you were cultivating, several events took place," she said.

Aldrian nodded and looked up at the ceiling, where the symbol of the Absolute Ruler was displayed. His connection to it had grown significantly stronger, and he could sense that in the future, if another symbol of the Absolute Ruler existed elsewhere, he would be able to feel its call from even greater distances. Even now, he could sense a growing pull from the Everlasting Silent Forest—but he suppressed it.

It was unavoidable. The Heavenly Direction Church's main territory bordered that forbidden forest to the south, making him closer to the source of the call than he had ever been in the past.

Turning his gaze toward Angelica and Pope Claudius, he spoke.

"Alright, I'm done here. Thank you for allowing me to stay," he said gratefully.

"It's no trouble at all, young Aldrian—or should I call you *Your Eminence*?" Pope Claudius said with a small smile. "You have already given the church far more than we could have ever asked for. Your stay here is not something to complain about."

"No, don't call me that. It feels strange and uncomfortable. Just call me like you always have," Aldrian said.

"Alright then," the pope replied with a smile.

Aldrian then stepped down from the altar and approached Angelica, positioning himself behind her wheelchair.

"Ah, no, young master, I can—"

"Young Aldrian, I can—"

"It's okay, I insist," Aldrian said with a gentle smile, cutting them off.

Both Angelica and Pope Claudius fell silent. Angelica blushed, hesitating for a moment before finally nodding. After witnessing Aldrian's transformation, she felt unworthy—how could someone like him push her wheelchair? And yet, despite everything, he still remained the same person at heart.

Seeing Angelica nod, Aldrian gave a satisfied nod in return before pushing her wheelchair forward, with the pope walking beside them. Pope Claudius glanced at the two and could only smile warmly. Since Aldrian had arrived at the church, Angelica seemed more "busy"—more active. She was also more expressive and noticeably happier.

He was glad. He had always felt pity for this child, who had endured a cruel fate since she was young. Though those hardships were in the past, he still wished for her to interact more with others and show her happiness freely.

Ever since she became the Saintess, she had few friends to talk to. Her status kept her distant from others, making her more reserved with her emotions. It saddened him, and he had done his best to entertain her whenever he could. But he knew that what she truly needed was someone closer to her age—someone who could be her friend.

"Ah, since we're together, why don't we talk about what happened while I was cultivating?" Aldrian asked. "What events did I miss?"

Chapter 360: The Situation While He Is in Seclusion

"For events that occurred while you were cultivating. First, regarding our church, that traitor Carsius has gone missing. Worse, he took several high-grade artifacts from our secret vault," Pope Claudius said with irritated voice, causing Aldrian to raise his eyebrows. It seemed Cardinal Carsius had boldly abandoned everything and fled on his own, essentially revealing his true nature to others.

"But the event that has truly shocked many and was completely unexpected is the situation in the Atria Empire."

"The Atria Empire?"

"Yes. It appears that one of the princes launched a coup. As of now, the Atria Empire is still embroiled in a civil war. The coup succeeded in dethroning the emperor and seizing the capital, but some nobles have risen in rebellion, leading to the ongoing conflict."

Aldrian truly did not expect this. He frowned, feeling a sudden wave of irritation. With the prophesied time approaching, there were still those blinded by greed and power, so much so that they would plunge an empire into chaos. At a time when unity was needed most, they instead wasted their resources fighting for control.

However, as he thought more deeply, he realized he didn't truly understand the situation in the Atria Empire. He had no way of knowing who was in the right or wrong. Suppressing his initial judgment, he decided to investigate further.

"Your Holiness, excuse me, but I need to hear the details in a more private setting," Aldrian said.

Before anyone could react, they all vanished and in an instant, they reappeared inside the Pope's chamber. Pope Claudius was stunned—this was the first time he had ever been forcibly teleported. He hadn't been able to resist or even react; one moment, he was outside, and the next, he was here without doing anything at all.

The Pope could only sigh before explaining the situation in the Atria Empire to Aldrian.

Four months after Aldrian entered seclusion, the second prince of the Atria Empire had suddenly launched a coup. With the backing of several high-ranking noble families, his faction swiftly seized the capital before any opposing forces could react.

The coup had been a complete surprise. No faction within the empire had anticipated such a bold and radical move from the second prince. Even more concerning was the emperor's lack of response, raising doubts about his condition.

Naturally, the other factions led by the first prince and the neutral nobles rose up in defiance. However, the second prince had gained support from two of the Grand Dukes and a significant portion of the Imperial Knight Order. With such formidable backing, his forces not only repelled those opposing him from the capital but also launched an offensive against their territories.

Although the resistance forces had managed to hold on by forming an alliance, the situation was steadily leaning in favor of the second prince's faction. The resistance continued to be pushed back, and some noble families had already surrendered to the second prince.

In other words, it was only a matter of time before the resistance completely fell, allowing the second prince to take full control of the Atria Empire.

After hearing the details, Aldrian frowned, his thoughts turning to Elena, whose noble family was part of the empire. He didn't know which faction her family belonged to, but he she had once invited him to visit them, wanting to show him a treasure, a scarf that seemed to originate from a higher realm.

He also wanted to uncover the scarf's origin and whether it had any connection to his past.

"Because this is an internal matter of the Atria Empire, and no one from there has requested assistance, outside powers cannot interfere. Moreover, many factions from outside of the Atria empire prefer to stay out of the civil war, choosing to conserve their strength in these uncertain times."

Aldrian nodded. The situation in the Atria Empire was bad, but he still had time to determine which side was truly in the right. For now, while he was in this territory, he decided to prioritize helping the church track down the traitorous Cardinal Carsius. His newly power was urging him to take action, and he was eager to test it.

"I see. So, the missing Cardinal Carsius and a coup," Aldrian muttered to himself.

"It looks like I still have time," he thought.

"Your Holiness, for now, I will assist the church in finding that traitor. Can you show me the details of the investigation—specifically where it reached a dead end and where you lost his trail?" Aldrian asked.

Pope Claudius nodded. "Of course. I will also order the paladins to support you—no, even without my command, I have no doubt they will wholeheartedly follow you. Your status among the church members is far higher than mine at this point, after all." He smiled.

Aldrian confused by the Pope's words. Seeing his expression, Pope Claudius simply waved his hand dismissively.

"You'll understand once you see the church members."

Aldrian was truly curious, so he decided to leave and meet with Arthur. However, just as he reached for the door, he paused for a moment. Turning back, his gaze fell on Angelica.

Without a word, he walked behind her wheelchair and gently pushed it toward the door. Angelica was stunned by the unexpected action, while the Pope, initially confused, soon smiled warmly as he watched Aldrian push the wheelchair outside.

Angelica, too, showed a small smile as she let him take her along without protest. She didn't say anything and simply allowed Aldrian to do as he pleased.

Aldrian, on the other hand, could sense her emotions. Though she kept it hidden deep in her heart, he could feel the regret she held—the unspoken sadness that he had to leave again before they could spend more time together. Wanting to lift her spirits, he decided to bring her along with him. He didn't dwell on the inconvenience of her crippled legs; he simply did what felt right.

The knights guarding the hallway outside the chamber were shocked by the sudden appearance of the Saintess, followed closely by Aldrian and the Pope. Their eyes widened—not only because they hadn't seen anyone enter the chamber, but also because of the presence of the prophesied one, the very figure who had changed their church and restored the purity of holy energy.

His mere presence commanded reverence, and without hesitation, the knights bowed as low as they could. Their devotion ran deep, their actions displaying unwavering piety. To them, Aldrian was not just a powerful figure—he was a divine being.

At that moment, Aldrian finally understood what the Pope had meant. He could feel the knights' emotions clearly. They did not merely see him as a saintly figure, to them, he was the direct hand of the heavens, far beyond even the Pope or the Saintess.

The events of a year ago were still fresh in their minds, solidifying their belief that Aldrian was truly the chosen one. Even looking at him felt like a privilege they were unworthy of.

Every time Aldrian encountered a member of the church, they would instantly bow—or even prostrate—before him. Those who had never seen his face before would instinctively lower themselves, not just because he was accompanied by the Saintess and the Pope, but because his very presence and aura were overwhelming. It was as if they were compelled to show reverence.

Before long, Aldrian arrived at the residence of the Paladin Knights. As soon as Arthur saw the three figures approaching, his eyes widened in shock.

"Attention!" Arthur shouted.

Immediately, the knights halted their activities and stood at attention.

"At ease," the Pope said, prompting them to relax slightly. "I am here to inform you that the prophesied one will personally assist us in capturing the traitor. I hope that you will support him in any way possible."

The paladins turned their eyes toward Aldrian, both curious and reverent. Some had seen him more than a year ago, while others were witnessing him for the first time.

Those who had never met him before felt the need to etch his image into their memories—the one that caused phenomenon more than a year ago, the figure of the one foretold by prophecy.

Aldrian stepped forward and looked at the Paladins.

"From this moment on, I will lead a small team of Paladins to track down the traitor. I ask for your cooperation to make this task easier, and I hope we can work well together."

"Yes, Your Eminence!" the knights shouted in unison.

"I have already been informed by His Holiness that the traitor has obtained several high-grade artifacts. This makes him dangerous, but I will ensure that none of you face harm because of them. You are the church's most valuable forces, and I will not allow that traitor to endanger the church or its members."

Aldrian swept his gaze across the knights, pausing briefly when his eyes met Arthur's before continuing.

"Alright. We depart tonight. Be ready for the mission!"