

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

#Chapter 451: Their Strange Instinct - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 451: Their Strange Instinct

Chapter 451: Their Strange Instinct

The great peng did not answer the phoenix immediately. He remained silent for a moment, continuing to watch the interaction between Angelica and the pope.

"I've been having strange visions too," the great peng finally said. "Whenever I clear my mind and cultivate—ever since I heard that guqin sound—they come to me. I don't know why, but all of them feel familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It's really strange."

The phoenix glanced at the great peng briefly before turning back toward Angelica.

"Same," she said, and silence fell between them again.

"Do you think we might have met Master in the past?" the great peng asked suddenly. "That guqin sound from that night felt especially familiar—like déjà vu. Do you think it came from Master?" he added.

"I don't know if we ever met Master in the past," the phoenix said, shaking her head. "But as far as I can remember, I stayed in that place full of darkness until Master summoned me."

"However, if we've never met Master, then this strange feeling must come from something else—something still unknown to us," she added.

They fell silent again. It was unusual for them to talk this much. Normally, they didn't speak often, but something about this moment stirred their thoughts.

Still, their conversation flowed smoothly, without wrong phrase. As emperor-stage beasts, their intelligence rivaled that of most humans—perhaps even surpassed it. Like high-ranking cultivators, they could process vast amounts of information at once.

While staying inside the church, they listened to everything spoken by the people around them, picking up new vocabulary and observing how humans conversed with one another. They were quick learners, easily grasping how to speak with proper words and structure.

After a few moments of silence, the great peng finally parted his lips.

"I think that something... comes from within ourselves."

The phoenix glanced at him.

"Why do you think that?"

"It's just a natural instinct I felt when facing Master and his energy," the great peng replied. "When I first met him, I didn't think much about who he was. But the moment I sensed his aura and that golden energy, something inside me told me I had to submit. It felt like going against him wasn't even an option."

The phoenix slightly raised her eyebrows. She recalled the moment she was summoned by Aldrian, how she had tried to rebel against him. But then he unleashed that golden energy and overwhelming aura, and her heart trembled. Her natural instinct screamed at her not to defy him.

If that golden energy and aura could shake her to the core—if even her instincts as an emperor-stage spiritual beast warned her not to oppose him—then that meant her master was someone nature itself had acknowledged. A being worthy of submission. A being protected by nature as if it were his guardian.

In other words, even if the circumstances had been different, even if there had been no master-servant bond through the summoning formation, she believed she still would have submitted to Aldrian. That reverence didn't come from a contract. It came from a deep, primordial instinct untouched by any binding technique.

"Makes sense. Then it's only natural for us to follow our master," the phoenix said.

"I agree," responded the great peng.

A few minutes later, Angelica finished her conversation with Pope Claudius. She had already covered herself with a robe to hide her tight training attire. Turning to the great peng and the phoenix, she smiled.

"Would you like to eat with me? I've never invited you before, so I thought this would be a good chance."

The great peng and the phoenix fell silent for a few seconds, as if considering it. Angelica waited patiently, she was already used to how little they spoke.

Finally, the phoenix gave a small nod, followed shortly by the great peng.

Seeing their agreement, Angelica smiled brightly. She had been prepared for them to refuse, so their acceptance made her genuinely happy.

After that, Angelica and the others left the training hall and made their way toward the main church building. Along the path, many people passed by them, and each one immediately bowed their heads in respect.

Once Angelica's group had walked by, murmurs began to spread among the nuns and other members of the church.

"Her Holiness is so beautiful... her golden eyes are truly mesmerizing."

"Right? Every time I see her face, I feel like I'm not worthy to stand before her. I'm afraid I might sully her presence."

"She's absolutely perfect. Her Holiness has truly been blessed by the heavens. After enduring so much, it's as if heaven is finally rewarding her."

Angelica's radiance had only grown since the day she began to walk and see for the first time in her life. With her stunning face and golden eyes, wherever she went, the members of the church instinctively lowered their heads the moment they saw her. They felt unworthy to gaze upon such perfection—some even feared it was blasphemous to look at her face for too long.

To this day, many still felt deeply moved whenever they saw her walking on her own, her eyes filled with light. They had witnessed how she lived all these years—unable to see, unable to walk—yet never once did she complain.

Though she was revered as the Saintess, admired by countless followers, her own life had been far from easy. She had healed countless others, yet could not heal herself. It was a cruel irony that brought sorrow to those who loved her.

How could someone so kind... so beautiful... be denied the ability to experience the world?

That was why, when people suddenly saw Angelica walking and seeing with her own eyes, they were utterly shocked. Many had long accepted that her condition was beyond healing. Yet now, she walked on her own legs and looked at the world with clear, golden eyes. It was nothing short of a miracle.

And naturally, their thoughts turned to Aldrian.

They couldn't help but believe he was the one responsible for this change. Once again, their faith in him deepened. Ever since his arrival, many good things had begun to happen.

Even though there was still the matter of the traitor within the church, the joyful atmosphere remained untouched.

With the Pope's assurance and Aldrian's presence, they believed the issue would soon be resolved.

"Your Holiness," Arthur said, bowing respectfully to both Angelica and Pope Claudius as they crossed paths.

"You've finished your training, Your Holiness?" he asked Angelica with a gentle smile. Unlike most, Arthur interacted with Angelica without nervousness. He had served as her close aide and protector for many years, and that familiarity made their exchanges feel more natural.

Still, even he had been deeply moved, holding back tears the first time he saw her walk and see. Knowing that it was Aldrian who had made it possible filled him with gratitude.

Angelica gave a small nod.

"Mm. I'm done," she said. Then, noticing him standing there, she added, "Sir Arthur, are you waiting to speak with Father? You seem like you're here for him."

Arthur nodded. "Yes, but it's not urgent. I just wanted to deliver a report to His Holiness." He then turned to the Pope.

"Your Holiness, I've received a report from our church branches in the capital cities of Finna and Tania. The emperors of the Vindas Empire and the Doria Empire have both expressed a desire to meet with you within the next week. They've already sent letters outlining their intention to visit, and they hope you'll accept their request. They mentioned it concerns a certain topic they consider quite important."

The Pope raised his eyebrows slightly. He hadn't expected the emperors of two rival empires to request an audience with him. What kind of matter could be so important that it would bring the rulers of two rival nations together and involve him as well?

The thought lingered, stirring his curiosity.

Still, he had no reason to refuse their visit. After a brief pause, he gave a small nod of agreement.

"Alright. I'll receive them next week. Just make the necessary preparations for their arrival," the Pope said.

"Understood, Your Holiness." Arthur nodded, but then seemed to recall something.

"Ah—one more thing. I've just received a report from our spies in the Atria Empire, in Varuga. Apparently, something major is about to unfold there, and it involves Young Master Aldrian. According to the report, he intends to directly confront the second prince in the capital. It seems this is in response to the gu outbreak that happened earlier this morning."

Both Pope Claudius and Angelica were stunned.

That escalated quickly.

However, they knew that if Aldrian had changed his approach after the outbreak, then he was truly pissed. Whatever happened must have seriously crossed the line—enough to push him into striking directly at the second prince.

In the Atria Empire, the situation had already grown tense as news spread that Aldrian was making his way to the capital. How could it not spread quickly, when he had stormed into Varuga—a town within the Donovan Grand Duchy, a noble territory known for supporting the second prince?

His bold declaration caused an uproar, forcing battles across the empire to halt. Even some troops from the second prince's faction had even begun pulling back from the front lines, preparing for any developments that might unfold in the capital.

This wasn't the time to keep fighting—not when a dangerous man was heading straight for the heart of the empire.

And that very man had arrived in Bermin City just minutes earlier. Now, he stood in midair, calmly floating as he observed the state of the city below. Many troops had gathered beneath him, weapons raised, but it was clear they were trembling in fear.

None of them could steady their aim. Despite their numbers, not one soldier dared to move recklessly under his gaze.

Chapter 452: Tense Situation

Aldrian swept his gaze over the city below and saw widespread destruction. The situation here was far worse than when he had first stepped into Caritas—there were signs of ruin everywhere, and the lingering death laws across the city made it clear that many lives had been lost.

When Aldrian entered the city, he didn't bother with a disguise or attempt to hide himself from the public eye. The moment he stepped out of the teleportation portal, some guards began to approach him due to his suspicious appearance. Since the city was under the strict control of the second prince's faction, every suspicious individual had to be thoroughly inspected.

However, before they could check him, news finally arrived that the mysterious swordsman was coming to the city. Judging by the timing and the description of the masked man, the entire force in Bermin was immediately placed on high alert and moved toward the teleportation station.

The strongest soldier here, a peak Duke-stage knight stood in front of his many troops, looking up at Aldrian from the ground. However, it was clear to everyone that he was afraid. His slightly pale complexion and rigid expression betrayed the fear and tension he tried to suppress.

Although the man was frightened, having already heard of Aldrian's reputation and strength, he still tried to put on a strong front. He had a duty to uphold. This city was under his jurisdiction, and he would fulfill his role, knowing that the faction trusted him to guard this place.

Before the civil war, he had served as a commander of one of the knight orders under a high-ranking noble family. When the conflict broke out, he demonstrated his prowess and accomplishments, which led to him being entrusted with the defense of this city. To him, this was a true honor—proof that his achievements and strength had been recognized, and that he was deemed worthy of such responsibility.

But as a human, he couldn't ignore his natural instinct to survive. When he received the report that the "monster" had come to his city, his first thought was to escape. However, the idea of running away like a coward and abandoning his duty left a bitter taste in his mouth. Gritting his teeth, he decided to face the "monster" and try to hold him here for as long as he could.

He knew that neither he nor the entire force stationed in this city would be enough to stop the mysterious swordsman—but he still tried.

"Don't move, and land slowly! If you try to leave this city, we'll do everything we can to stop you, even if I have to wager everything I have!" he shouted, his voice trembling.

He knew how ridiculous he sounded, and that his threat might seem like a joke in many eras—but he still made it.

Aldrian looked at the man and couldn't help but smile behind his mask.

"You're truly admirable. Even though you don't have the power to stop me, you're still doing your duty and holding your position. That, at least, is a quality worth respecting," Aldrian said to the man.

"Fortunately, I have no intention of shedding blood here. I simply want you to tell me—where is the direction of the capital?" he added, sweeping his gaze across the other troops.

"Don't make any foolish moves. I'm still willing to tolerate your presence. Even though you've raised your weapons, I know none of you truly intend to fight. I just want to ask for directions, that's all." He turned his eyes back to the leader.

"But if you do something reckless—if you attack me—the next scene will be a bloody one. So, I suggest you make a wise decision."

His eyes locked onto the leader's, and the leader, as if drawn into the depths of Aldrian's blue eyes, found himself unable to look away. Those eyes appeared calm, but beneath that calmness, the leader knew this man could become cruel the moment he dared to oppose him.

"I... I..." He wanted to refuse Aldrian, to declare that he would never reveal anything and would rather fight to the death. But the words refused to come out.

The will to speak was there, but his instinct to survive was even stronger. After a long moment of inner struggle, he let out a sigh and slowly raised his hand, pointing in a direction.

"You can fly west. Depending on how fast you travel and how many breaks you take, it'll take more or less a month to reach Losaris. No matter the route, as long as you head west from here, you'll eventually see the capital. You can also follow the road that connects this city to Losaris, though you'll run into several guard posts along the way," he said.

He sighed inwardly. In the end, his instinct to survive was stronger, so he chose the safer path. If Aldrian was offering him a chance to live, he would take it.

Sensing that the man wasn't lying, Aldrian gave a small nod of appreciation.

"Alright," he said, then turned his gaze to the west before suddenly vanishing.

But even after several seconds had passed since Aldrian disappeared, all the soldiers below remained tense, their weapons still raised. They stood frozen, waiting, unsure if he might suddenly return.

Only after more than thirty seconds did they finally let out a collective sigh of relief, convinced that Aldrian was truly gone.

The leader collapsed to the ground, landing heavily as his legs gave out beneath him. It felt as though he had just stepped away from death's door. This was one of those rare moments when he genuinely felt lucky to be alive.

Reaching his level of cultivation had not been easy, he had faced countless obstacles and endured hardships. Blood and tears had marked every step of his journey, and now, in this moment, he felt as though he had passed yet another test of life.

"Truly terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. Even his presence alone makes me want to submit. He's nothing like Lord Boris or any other cultivator—this man doesn't need to do anything, and yet I felt like I could die at any moment,"

he thought.

He sighed, realizing this meant he now had a hand in the coming battle that would take place in the capital. He knew the masked swordsman intended to confront the second prince directly—that was why he wanted to go there. Even if all he did was point the way, he had still helped an enemy of the second prince reach the capital.

What would happen next, or what the future held for him, he didn't know. But at the very least, he was still alive for now.

"I just need to report it to the capital. As for what comes after... I don't know, and honestly, I don't care anymore." It was the least he could do, to warn them of the disaster that was coming.

Over the next few days, the atmosphere in the capital and nearby cities grew increasingly tense as news spread that the mysterious swordsman was already on his way. Reports had confirmed he was seen in Bermin just days ago before continuing toward the capital. In response, troops from the imperial family and several noble houses began gathering in the capital.

Some nobles even withdrew their forces from frontline battles against the rebels to redeploy them closer to the capital. However, with the teleportation stations in the capital and surrounding cities shut down, they were forced to travel by conventional means. As a result, a massive movement of troops swept across the empire, all heading in the same direction.

Even many people witnessed several flying fortresses soaring overhead, heading toward the capital. At first, there was only one, but more kept arriving, until there were five in total. The sight of such a massive military mobilization was truly something to behold, leaving many to wonder:

Was all of this really necessary just to deal with a single person? Wasn't it an exaggeration?

The people in the capital grew increasingly anxious about what the future might hold. They had already heard of the masked swordsman's fearsome reputation and strength, so they didn't doubt his power—but witnessing the sheer scale of the army prepared to meet him left a very different impression. The sight of powerful troops, artifacts, and flying fortresses made it clear, this was no ordinary battle.

Meanwhile, in the imperial palace, inside his private room, the second prince stood by the window, gazing out over the city with a calm expression. At this point, he had already planned everything in detail. He was determined that when the swordsman arrived, he would not leave the capital alive.

Yes—this time, he was confident he could kill him.

What many didn't know was that the massive army gathering in the capital served only as a distraction. The true method meant to kill Aldrian was hidden behind that overwhelming display. The second prince's mind was far calmer now, seeing a real chance that this operation would succeed.

With the support of Cardinal Carsius, he was confident in the plan's success.

Moreover, the second prince estimated that Aldrian would reach the capital in about three weeks—just enough time for his special artifact to be ready for use again.

With his own power and artifacts, combined with Cardinal Carsius and the support of the massive army, he didn't believe Aldrian could escape this situation. He would make sure Aldrian's legend ended here!

"Is it really necessary to gather all of that just to face one person? Won't the people think you're afraid of him, seeing nearly all the troops being pulled to the capital?" Cardinal Carsius asked from behind, seated on a sofa as he slowly swirled a glass of wine in his hand.

"We cannot underestimate that man," the second prince replied. "In order to make him lower his guard, we need to go this far and make it look like we are the weaker side. We must appear desperate, as if we had no choice but to gather forces from all across the empire. It is costly, yes, but I am willing to pay the price if it makes that arrogant bastard raise his chin a little higher—just before we crush him."

Chapter 453: Nearing the Capital

Cardinal Carsius did not mind what Prince Wilmar had done, and he agreed to follow the prince's plan. However, he still thought it was too excessive to gather an army of this size just to serve as a decoy. In his view, it would be far better to use the minimum resources necessary and strike Aldrian as quickly as possible using the Heaven's Punishment Spear and the Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary Staff.

He didn't believe Aldrian could survive against those two artifacts. And now that he himself had broken through to the peak emperor stage—the highest cultivation level one could achieve on the continent—he was confident the outcome would be swift.

"Anyway, are you sure he's someone even the Church reveres? The one prophesied by the Saintess herself?" Prince Wilmar suddenly asked.

Cardinal Carsius had already been informed of all major developments while he was in seclusion, and he had seen the sketch of Aldrian's face. The resemblance was close enough that he recognized Aldrian immediately and revealed the identity of the mysterious swordsman, along with his connection to the Church.

After hearing this, Prince Wilmar finally understood the true relationship Aldrian had with the Church. It was no wonder the mysterious swordsman had gone so far as to help the Church, even involving himself in the civil war—something completely unlike his usual behavior.

The swordsman's past was filled with battles against devils, and Prince Wilmar had never heard of him interfering in another empire's internal affairs—unless it involved the threat of devils.

However, even after clearing his doubts about Aldrian's connection to the Church, Prince Wilmar still felt a wave of fury—both at himself and at Cardinal Carsius. That is because—

Doesn't this mean that by accepting the cardinal as a refugee, he had inevitably invited that man into the empire? If he did not give the cardinal protection at all, doesn't that mean the man would have eventually left Atria on his own?

But it no longer mattered. The milk had already been spilled, and there was no use crying over it. All that remained now was damage control—starting with killing the mysterious swordsman.

"Well, if there's no one else with a face matching that sketch, then I'm pretty sure he's the one," Cardinal Carsius replied.

"Then from your perspective, do you think that if we kill that man, the Church will bear animosity toward us? Isn't he the prophesied one the Church has been waiting for? Although he's not a direct member, I'm quite sure that, with his status as the prophesied one, many in the Church already see him as one of their own and would readily follow him if he asked."

"Well, it will definitely draw the Church's animosity," Cardinal Carsius replied.

"Especially from the Pope and the Saintess. However, even if it does come to that, in the end, it all comes down to strength. I possess the Church's two most powerful artifacts, and I've broken through to the peak emperor stage. I can say with confidence that I will not lose to either the Pope or the Saintess."

"And with your forces backing me, there's no one on this continent who would dare to stand in our way."

Prince Wilmar sighed. He didn't have much of a choice either. If he wanted to live another day, he had to walk this path.

If killing the mysterious swordsman meant incurring the Church's animosity—then so be it. He could think about the next steps after the man was dead.

On the bright side, what Cardinal Carsius had said was true. Their combined strength should be more than enough to endure whatever might threaten them in the future.

He wasn't sure about the devils, but when it came to the other powers, whether orthodox or unorthodox, he was confident none of them would dare to challenge them recklessly.

Suddenly, he sensed an incoming call from his communication artifact. He activated it and listened as the voice on the other end delivered its message.

"Your Majesty, the mysterious swordsman's figure appeared for a split second near the B7 guard post."

He was stunned when he heard the report. The mysterious swordsman's speed was unbelievable!

With this development, he figured that man might arrive in less than two weeks—something truly baffling. Even someone at the high emperor stage would need more than three weeks to reach here from Bermin, even if they flew nonstop.

Did that man not rest even for a moment? This was ridiculous!

However, Prince Wilmar didn't panic. It was still within the timeframe for his plan to be carried out without issue. His special artifact would be ready for use again next week—so things were still on track.

He looked at the Cardinal.

"It looks like he'll arrive much sooner than I expected."

Cardinal Carsius simply shrugged, showing little concern.

"Well, the sooner he comes, the better. I can't wait to test my power against him. I also have my own grudge to settle—he's the one who ruined my plans within the Church. I need to unleash my fury on him."

"Suit yourself. I only hope you won't do anything outside of our agreement and ruin the plan. Today's mess is because of you, so the least you can do is follow through." Prince Wilmar said as he turned and walked toward the door, intent on leaving the room.

Cardinal Carsius scoffed inwardly. If not for the fact that they needed each other, he would have already taught the prince a lesson for that mocking tone.

Once the prince had disappeared from sight, Cardinal Carsius took a slow sip of his wine and stared at the glass in his hand. His eyes flashed, and a smile curled on his lips as he looked at his own reflection on the glass's surface.

"Once all of this is over, I'll return to the Church and kill that old fart... and that woman too. Let the Church crumble from within. If I can't have it, then it's better to destroy it."

With that thought, he took another sip of wine.

In the vast stretch of forest, Aldrian moved relentlessly toward the capital, using teleportation without pause. His figure would appear for a split second in one place, only to vanish and reappear in another, repeating this cycle continuously.

Thanks to his fast energy recovery, he didn't need much time to rest, allowing him to approach the capital at an incredible pace.

Now and then, he sensed distant guard posts stationed along the roads leading to the capital, but he paid them no mind as he passed. He knew some of them would catch a glimpse of his figure and likely report it to the capital, but he didn't care.

Sometimes, he came across large army movements, and from them, he gathered information that troops from across the empire were already marching toward the capital in preparation for the coming battle against the mysterious swordsman.

Sometimes, he also encountered bandits attempting to rob caravans. They were taking advantage of the chaos, as the noble troops had lowered their guard in certain areas. This was largely due to the fact that many forces had been gathered toward the capital.

Aldrian didn't waste time. He used illusion laws to eliminate the bandits in an instant and continued on his way without looking back, leaving the caravan owners and their escorts confused, staring at the lifeless bodies of their attackers, unsure of what had just happened.

After a few more days of teleporting, he finally saw long city walls in the distance. He wondered if this was the capital.

He also spotted a massive military camp set up outside the city, and not far from it, a flying fortress had landed.

He activated his stealth technique, turning himself invisible as he moved closer to the city. Soon, he was floating high above it, hovering silently in the sky.

Looking down, he saw the bustling activity of the people below. After witnessing so many cities and towns ravaged by destruction throughout the empire, it was almost strange to see one still intact, still grand and full of life.

The city was larger and grander than any other he had visited in the empire, even surpassing Caritas and Weilmarr.

There were no signs of battle, and the people's activity was thriving, making him feel as though he had stepped into a different empire altogether. He expanded his senses, aiming to gather as much information as possible about the area.

After a few seconds, he retracted them, now certain of where he was.

This was one of the satellite cities near the capital. The capital itself was still about a week's travel from here. This place, Padina City, was under the direct authority of the imperial family, which explained the peace and order he saw. It was one of the few places that had fallen into Second Prince's hands during the initial phase of the civil war—without a single battle.

Despite the city being isolated due to the Second Prince's order to deactivate the teleportation station, the people's daily activities didn't seem to be affected much, at least for now.

Aldrian then deactivated his stealth technique, revealing himself in the sky. A moment later, his voice echoed far and wide, loud enough to be heard not only throughout the city but also across the massive army camp outside its walls.

"Attention, army of the Second Prince's faction!"

Chapter 454: Deterrence Force

The people were shocked by the sudden voice and instinctively searched for its source. One by one, they looked up and saw a figure floating in the sky. The moment they recognized who it was, a collective gasp spread through the crowd. The figure had become a hot topic throughout the empire ever since his involvement in the civil war.

Moreover, it was said that he was heading to the capital to confront the second prince directly—a move that had caused the prince's entire force to halt their operations and regroup in the capital. To some, he had already become an idol, admired for his extraordinary strength and achievements that one could only hope to replicate.

"As you know, I'm on my way to the second prince because he's crossed a line I won't ignore," Aldrian said. "You'll hear what he did in the Weimar Barony soon enough. I've had a score to settle with him since the day I arrived in this empire, and this time, I intend to end it."

Troops were already closing in on Aldrian from all directions. This was a large city that located near the capital, and due to the current circumstances, the military concentration here was immense. He could already sense many powerful individuals among them, ranging from the King Stage all the way to the Emperor Stage making their way toward him.

Civilians began fleeing the area in a panic as soldiers poured into the district where Aldrian hovered. They knew that if a battle broke out, they'd be caught in the crossfire and their lives could be lost in an instant.

A few moments later, Aldrian was already surrounded—three Emperor Stage cultivators, over a dozen at the King Stage, and thousands of others at various cultivation stages on the ground. The city district below was packed with soldiers, all of them seemingly prepared to fight at any moment. Various artifacts had already been drawn, their powerful auras spreading across the area.

Aldrian could see that these troops were far more battle-hardened and disciplined than those in Bermin. The look in their eyes said they were ready for combat at any second. Yet despite their resolve, he could still sense the nervousness buried deep within their hearts—the fear they tried so hard to suppress.

He observed it all with a calm expression and continued to speak.

"My problem is with him. I have no desire for an unnecessary bloodbath, so I'll give you a choice," Aldrian said calmly. "Don't follow the second prince's orders to head to the capital. Stay in this city until I'm done with him, and you'll keep your lives."

Hearing Aldrian's words, the troops were stunned. Many even began to consider that it might be the wiser decision. But just then, the strongest among them, an old man clad in knightly armor, with cultivation at the middle Emperor Stage shouted out to the others.

"Don't falter!" the old man roared. "He'll kill us all after he kills His Majesty! It's better to fight him to the death than wait like lambs for the slaughter. All units, prepare to attack!"

His voice reignited the wavering resolve of the troops. Those who had hesitated about what to do or which choice to make now steeled themselves, holding their positions firmly.

In the distance, the massive flying fortress that had previously landed outside the city began to rise again, slowly making its way toward Aldrian's location.

Aldrian looked calmly at the white-bearded old man, sensing his unwavering determination—the kind of resolve that would let him sacrifice his life to fight until the very end. That kind of loyalty was something Aldrian respected. But right now, he needed them to lay down their weapons. He needed them to surrender without shedding blood.

It was something he had decided a few days back.

"Don't waste your lives. You know that—"

"If he moves, attack with everything you've got!" the old man shouted, cutting Aldrian off mid-sentence in an effort to keep his troops' morale from faltering.

Aldrian let out a quiet sigh, his calm gaze still fixed on the old man.

"Well, it looks like I'll have to stain my hands with a little blood this time," he said calmly.

In the next instant, Aldrian unleashed his full aura. The air shifted—his presence became overwhelming. He had already created his domain here, and now, the power of that domain surged through him.

The sudden surge of aura and pressure could be felt by everyone in the city, leaving them shocked and instinctively trembling under its might. But Aldrian didn't stop there, he began releasing death energy from his body.

In that moment, he no longer looked like a man—he looked like death incarnate. The aura of death seeped into the surroundings and crept toward the nearby troops, chilling them to the bone.

At last, the massive army that had seemed ready to fight him with everything they had began to show signs of collapse. Terror overtook their faces as they sensed death looming over them. Even their leader, the old man, stared at Aldrian with a look of horror.

It felt as though their very souls were being pulled from their bodies, drawn toward that strange, ominous black energy surrounding him.

Their reaction was not surprising; none of them had ever sensed or comprehended the death laws. For anyone encountering it for the first time, the experience was harrowing and overwhelming.

The energy was so terrible and ominous that it shook them to their core. For low-rank cultivators below the Baron Stage, even a brief exposure could be overwhelming. If they became too consumed by their own fear, their sanity could collapse entirely.

The death energy continued to grow became denser, darker, like a black flame trying to burn through the void itself. But this energy did not burn. It corroded. It consumed the "life" of everything it touched. Even the fabric of space seemed to ripple and distort, on the verge of collapse, as the death energy gnawed at its very layers.

The aura surged higher, expanding upward as if trying to spread death into the sky itself, casting its ominous shadow over many soldiers below.

From the perspective of the troops, it was as if they had been pulled into an illusion, one where death itself stood before them. They felt the chill of the darkness, and the moment their bodies touch that black energy, they believed they would die instantly. Not

just die, but vanish into true death, one from which there was no reincarnation, only eternal entrapment in the darkness and vanish from existence.

"Arrghh!"

"Save me!"

"Have mercy!"

Panic erupted. Soldiers began to scream, collapse, or curl up on the ground, unwilling to continue the battle. Some lost control entirely, fleeing in the opposite direction as their formation crumbled into chaos.

Aldrian then stretched out his hand toward the old man, spreading his palm open. In an instant, the old man's body was pulled forward by an invisible force, as if some unseen hand had gripped him.

Panic surged through him. His body was being drawn toward Aldrian, sucked in by a power he couldn't resist. He tried to fly in the opposite direction, pouring energy into his escape, but it was useless.

He kept drawing closer to Aldrian's palm, already coated in death energy, waiting, as if it *eager* to touch him.

Aldrian was using his gravitation laws, turning his palm into the center of a powerful pull that targeted his chosen focus. With the support of his domain's power, he could even draw in someone as strong as an Emperor Stage cultivator.

But an Emperor Stage was still an Emperor Stage, the strongest level of cultivation on the continent. The old man was able to resist, at least partially, struggling against the pull. Yet despite his efforts, he was steadily being dragged toward Aldrian's waiting palm.

All of the Emperor and King Stage cultivators under his command hesitated to attack Aldrian. Being the closest to him and with their high cultivation and deeper comprehension, they could feel the power of the death laws more intensely than anyone else. They felt deterred by its ominousness and the strange properties that surrounded the black energy.

"Commander, just surrender! We can't fight him!"

"Commander, let's stay here!"

"Commander!"

Voices of desperation and persuasion rang in the old man's ears, shaking his resolve. He stared at Aldrian's palm, still cloaked in that sinister death energy, while his body continued to be drawn toward it.

After a few seconds of heavy silence, he finally made his decision.

"All right! All right! We won't move to the capital! Please, spare us!" the old man shouted.

The moment the words left his mouth, the overwhelming pressure vanished. He could move again, and without hesitation, he flew backward, putting distance between himself and Aldrian. The old man was gasping for air, sweat pouring down his face.

The death energy had dissipated completely, no trace of it remained.

The pressure is gone and atmosphere returned to normal, calm and quiet, as if everything that had just happened had been nothing more than an illusion. However everyone present knew what they had felt and seen was real.

Aldrian suddenly released his aura once more but this time, it wasn't like before. Instead of the oppressive pressure of an overwhelming force, they felt warmth, gentle and comforting. A soft golden glow radiated from him as he bathed the troops in his energy.

Then, without a word, Aldrian vanished.

Many of the troops began to stir, as if waking from a nightmare. The warmth of the golden energy still lingered, gently pulling them back to their senses. Those who had seemed to lose their minds now appeared calmer, regaining fragments of their sanity. They looked around in a daze and confused.

"Wise decision. But there will be no next time." Aldrian's voice echoed one last time before fading into silence.

The commander let out a sigh, relieved that his life was still intact after the ordeal. Yet as he looked toward the direction of the capital, confusion settled in his mind. What he had just experienced was truly terrifying, but it left him with questions.

"Why did he do all that? Why spare us... as if he was toying with us? What is he trying to achieve?"

Chapter 455: He is Here

Aldrian had already teleported west and continued moving without pause. Many people in Padina began to question his generosity—why had he spared the lives of the troops who tried to block his path? From their perspective, those soldiers were clearly his enemies. It would've been reasonable for him to kill them without hesitation.

However, even though they showed no intention of surrendering, he merely deterred them, using his overwhelming strength not to kill, but to prevent them from advancing toward the capital. It was as if his magnanimity was so vast that he would forgive people who weren't his true targets, even when they stood against him.

This made many people wonder—what kind of person was this mysterious swordsman? Was he naïve? Or did he have a deeper reason for acting the way he did?

True to some of their guesses, Aldrian spared those who tried to block his path because he had his own reason. He even went so far as to display his overwhelming strength not to kill them, but to make them surrender.

After returning from the Rosalind Barony, he had taken time to reflect on his actions within the empire. Since that day, he had chosen to restrain himself, deciding not to slaughter large groups so easily. It was a decision made not only for the sake of others, but for his own good as well.

When he thought about his future actions in this empire, he knew that, under normal circumstances, he would have to shed a great deal of blood. The second prince's faction was filled with enemies, and he had already envisioned the battles that awaited him. If he were to step into the capital to confront the second prince directly, it would undoubtedly turn into a massive bloodbath.

True to that, he got information that the capital had already become a gathering point for a huge army under the second prince's command.

The number of troops in the capital could easily reach hundreds of thousands if they were all gathered. That massive force consisted of the second prince's main army, bolstered by the noble families who supported him. Aldrian knew that once he approached the capital, he would have to face this entire army alone.

And that didn't even include the other resources at their disposal—artifacts, or something like flying fortresses, which would surely serve as support for the troops. If things reached the worst, he would have no choice but to kill every last one of them and destroy everything in his path.

And that, in truth, would be the right thing to do.

However, if he did all that bloodshed, then the aftermath would be something outside of his control, and it could be detrimental in the future. Why did he think the future could be affected if he just killed and killed?

The answer was the prophesied time.

That huge number of soldiers and resources was something needed for the future, when the prophesied time came. He did not know what kind of thing would happen

during that time, but if a great war like the one from three million years ago erupted again, then he would need all the manpower of the continent he could get.

If he just killed hundreds of thousands of people and destroyed all of those resources, then the Atria Empire would basically have no firepower left to defend itself when the time came. Even if he succeeded in killing the second prince, the empire wouldn't have enough strength to face the prophesied time, because the civil war would have already shredded their military might.

Each noble house already expended all of its power because of this war.

Aldrian didn't want that to happen. It was already enough that he had killed nearly a hundred thousand people since stepping into the Atria Empire. Any more loss would do more harm than good.

He decided to take a different approach with these bastards who were simply following orders from their superiors. He would force them to surrender on their own. He would make them bend the knee and lose the will to fight him, so that he wouldn't have to kill them.

To achieve that, he had to show them his power right before their eyes, a power that would bring despair, a power that would crush all hope. A power that would make them see themselves as nothing more than ants trying to shake a giant tree.

That was what he had done so far, and that was exactly what he would do in the capital. His focus was on the second prince and Grand Duke Donovan, and if that traitor was in the capital too, then all the better.

However, if there were still some stubborn people who kept bothering him even after he showed them his "kindness," then he would have no choice. He would still need to make an example out of those who refused to back down.

Aldrian continued his journey toward the capital without much trouble. Unlike his journey from Bermin to Padina, he didn't encounter any bandits or anything that caught his interest. It all made sense, since he was already near the capital, and only crazy people would be looking for trouble in this area.

Besides, with the massive force gathering in the capital, anyone with bad intentions would have to keep a low profile in this part of the empire.

Two days later, the situation in the capital was already at the highest state of alert. The city barrier had been activated, and hundreds of thousands of troops were positioned on the eastern side of the city. Six flying fortresses hovered in the sky above, ready to provide support for the ground forces.

All civilian activity had come to a halt, as the people waited for the arrival of the mysterious swordsman.

Many stayed inside their homes, ready to take shelter if the battle reached the city. But others stood by their windows, watching and wondering about the outcome of the battle that could decide the future of the empire.

The imperial family had been pushing their propaganda, trying to frame Aldrian as a tyrant who would kill without mercy and claiming he would likely slaughter everyone in the city if he won the battle. They had done everything they could to tarnish his image, hoping to turn public opinion against him and keep the people from even thinking about supporting him.

However, how could the second prince possibly control the opinions of everyone? Aldrian's reputation had already been established since his battle with the Hydra in Balin city, and his achievements only continued to pile up.

Many saw the imperial family's attempts as futile. To them, Aldrian had become an idol, a hero. He shone too brightly for the imperial family to dim his light with slander.

Many questions began to surface in the minds of the people. If Aldrian succeeded in this battle, then what would happen to the Atria Empire? In the end, Aldrian's image remained strong in the eyes of the people, and the imperial family's propaganda became little more than a joke.

While commoners pondered their future in the empire after the battle, the second prince and his forces had already reached peak readiness. They were simply waiting for Aldrian to arrive.

At this moment, Prince Wilmar stood atop the eastern city walls. He wore low divine-grade armor, an artifact taken from the imperial vault. Clad in that suit and draped in a red cape over his shoulders, he looked gallant.

A low divine-grade sword, also an artifact of the imperial family, hung at his waist, further enhancing his commanding presence.

Standing beside him were Grand Duke Donovan and a robed figure who concealed all of his features. The figure was, in fact, Cardinal Carsius. He had the Heaven's Punishment Spear strapped to his back, wrapped in cloth to hide its shape, although its overwhelming aura still leaked through. Many of the troops glanced at the mysterious figure, wondering who he was, as they could clearly sense the powerful presence he radiated.

There were other strong presences as well. In total, eight emperor-stage cultivators and nearly a hundred king-stage cultivators were gathered in this part of the city. Hundreds

of thousands of troops stood in orderly formations outside of the city walls, with flying fortresses hovering above behind them, ready to fire their lightning cannons if needed.

Prince Wilmar kept his eyes fixed on the east. He had been waiting for Aldrian to arrive, confident in his calculations that this would be the day.

After hearing that Aldrian had reached Padina two days ago, he was certain that, with his incredible speed, today would be the day he appeared at the capital.

He had ordered the troops into formation hours ago, determined not to make any mistakes, even if his timing ended up being slightly off. It was better to be prepared too early than to be caught off guard.

Sweat trickled down the foreheads of many soldiers. They had been standing in position for hours, fully equipped, all while tension filled the air. How could they not feel nervous, knowing they were about to face the man many already called a one-man army?

Many commanders still thought that all this preparation was an exaggeration, too excessive just to face a single man. But others saw it differently. To them, it was proof that the second prince truly regarded Aldrian as a serious threat—someone worthy of this level of readiness.

And if the second prince believed the mysterious swordsman deserved such treatment, then just how powerful was that man?

Even if the enemy were a peak emperor-stage cultivator, it was unlikely that such a massive response would be prepared.

After a few more minutes of waiting, Cardinal Carsius suddenly turned his gaze in a specific direction.

"He is here," he said.

Upon hearing him, many emperor-stage cultivators focused their senses toward the east. True to what Cardinal Carsius had said, they detected a lone figure flying in their direction—not too fast, yet not too slow either.

It was as if he deliberately wanted to be seen, showing himself openly without the slightest concern about being noticed or detected.

Before long, a lone masked figure arrived, stopping in the sky directly in front of the massive army, where all could clearly see him. He hovered in the air, his gaze fixed on the sea of soldiers before him.

At that moment, he looked like a lone ant standing before a crashing wave.

Yet many knew that this man was someone who could even split the sea.

Chapter 456: First Attack

Aldrian, who had just arrived, looked calmly at the sea of soldiers. He hovered five kilometers away from the troop formation and couldn't help but feel "honored" by such a grand reception—this was the largest army formation he had ever seen in his life.

His gaze then shifted to the top of the city walls, where he finally spotted someone clad in low divine-grade armor.

That figure stood behind the city's protective barrier, with many powerful individuals gathered behind him.

He had blond hair and a handsome, youthful face. Since Aldrian had already glimpsed the memories of certain people in the past, he immediately recognized the man upon seeing him face to face. The information from his Eyes of Heaven also confirmed it—it was indeed the second prince, Wilmar Losaris.

When he turned his gaze to the people standing beside the prince, a grin formed behind his mask.

Grand Duke Donovan. That traitor, Cardinal Carsius. All of them had gathered in one place, which was perfect.

He wouldn't need to hunt them down individually, it made his work that much easier.

And then, he finally laid eyes on a man he had never seen in person, yet this man shared a hostile history with him. This man had once tried to have him killed by hiring assassins from the Thunderous Shadow Pavilion.

He is Carlson Harris, the head of the Golden Swan Commerce.

Aldrian closed his eyes, as if the massive army before him was of no concern at all.

There was still silence between both sides, even after Aldrian arrived, as if they were waiting for the other to speak first.

The soldiers felt more tense than ever after seeing Aldrian's figure hovering five kilometers away. They could only wait to see what would happen next, especially since their commanders also showed no intention of starting the conversation.

Many people in the city who were able to see beyond the walls had already taken out their information crystals, which were also capable of recording. This was a major event, one far too significant to go unrecorded.

After all, this moment could decide the fate of the Atria Empire.

Prince Wilmar kept his eyes locked on Aldrian, and he couldn't help but feel a surge of fury, finally, he was seeing him face to face.

The man who had repeatedly ruined his plans. The one who had shaken his position in this civil war and kept it from ever stabilizing.

He is the man who kept pushing his dream of controlling the empire and expanding its reach further and further away.

Wilmar gritted his teeth, unable to hold back any longer, and shouted at Aldrian.

"Aldrian! Surrender yourself and accept your death! You've stepped into this place, don't even dream of leaving here alive!"

Many people were stunned upon hearing the name of the mysterious swordsman for the first time. This moment, right here and now, marked the beginning of Aldrian's name spreading across the continent.

It was a true name, belonging to the man who had shaken the continent in the past, who stirred it in the present, and who would continue to shape its future.

Aldrian opened his eyes, and in that instant, his presence changed completely. He allowed his aura to seep out from his body as he looked directly at the second prince.

He was not surprised that Wilmar knew his real name. Cardinal Carsius had most likely already told him. However, that did not matter. His name was bound to be known sooner or later.

This moment simply became the starting point.

Although he released only a small amount of aura from his body, even the space around him seemed to distort slightly, growing wobbly under the pressure. The second prince felt as if he were being stared down by someone of far higher status, causing him to flinch instinctively.

"To all troops in this city, especially those standing before me!"

Aldrian's booming voice echoed across the vast city, carrying all the way to the horizon. He ignored the second prince's earlier declaration and continued speaking.

"I'll give you a choice. Put down your weapons and let me punish the second prince and everyone who supported him in harming the people of this empire. His actions during this war have been devastating and harmful to the future of the nation."

"All I want is him, along with a few of those standing behind him. That is all."

"There is no need for the rest of you to lose your lives for his sake."

"You already know that I keep my word. Your comrades in Bermin and Padina are proof of that. They chose not to block my path, and I let them live."

The troops below felt their hearts tremble, genuinely tempted to follow Aldrian's command. But before any of them could move, another voice boomed from the city walls.

"Do not be swayed by his words! Anyone who surrenders or even lowers their weapon will have their family executed!"

Prince Wilmar's voice thundered with fury.

What Aldrian said also fueled his anger. The troops in those cities had made no effort to stop Aldrian and had simply let him pass. Even one of the large brigades that was stationed in Padina, which was equipped with a flying fortress and was originally meant to reinforce the capital, had refused to come.

To Wilmar, those soldiers were already traitors. And once this was all over, he fully intended to punish every last one of them who had defied his orders.

The soldiers who had been tempted to surrender felt their hearts turn cold. One by one, they buried their hesitation and silenced any thoughts of giving up. They chose instead to steel their resolve and face Aldrian head-on.

Even if they died, at least their families would live and not be executed by the second prince's order. And perhaps—just perhaps—they still had a chance against Aldrian with the power of this massive army behind them.

The second prince turned his gaze to Aldrian, then shouted with fury in his voice.

"Aldrian, no matter what you say, it's futile! First wave—attack him now!"

At his command, pressure surged from the six flying fortresses as the lightning cannons lit up.

Moments later, the deafening sound of thunder rolled across the sky, followed by blinding beams of lightning shooting through the air.

From behind the frontline, countless cannons also fired toward Aldrian. Their numbers were easily in the hundreds.

Boom!

All of the bombardment was directed at a single person, and the sheer power behind it was enough to annihilate even a peak Emperor-stage warrior.

But Aldrian was already prepared. His aura flared, sweeping across the huge army like a wave.

With a swift of his will, he opened a massive rift in space, a dark, gaping maw that swallowed every incoming attack.

However, he noticed the force behind the combined assault was strong enough to throw the void itself into chaos, stirring a violent spatial storm.

Rumble!

Without hesitation, Aldrian opened another spatial crack a kilometer above him, this one directed toward the sky to safely release the destructive attack.

Rumble!

The rumble of lightning echoed everywhere as the redirected attack tore through the sky in another direction. However, the new spatial crack also brought with it a raging storm. The sky turned chaotic as clouds were sucked into the rift, swirling like water spiraling down a drain.

The spatial storm created a powerful suction that dragged everything toward the void. Everything in front of the spatial maw was destroyed, and even the frontline troops, stationed five kilometers away, began to feel its pull as they were slowly dragged toward the crack in front of Aldrian.

"Hold on! Use your techniques to resist the pull or you'll be dragged into the void!" each battalion commander shouted, rallying their men to hold their ground.

Boom! Rumble!

The lightning cannon attack finally stopped as the flying fortresses began recharging their cannons. However, the spatial crack continued to expand, and the storm grew even more violent. The suction force started to spread across a wider area, and even Aldrian could feel his body being pulled toward the spatial rift.

This was one of the shortcomings of his spatial redirection technique, a method he often used to deflect incoming attacks from enemies. The spatial storm was unpredictable. Sometimes it appeared from the smallest crack, while other times, even a massive rift caused nothing.

Even with his deep comprehension of spatial laws, Aldrian had not fully grasped how to control this phenomenon—at least not yet. He had found a way to trigger the spatial

storm, but he could not yet control it. It was a double-edged sword, one powerful enough to hurt even himself.

Aldrian decided to close the spatial crack to stop the spatial storm. As the rift gradually shrank, he noticed another wave of attacks coming—this time from normal cannons aimed directly at him.

While still focusing on closing the spatial crack, he simultaneously formed a spatial barrier to shield himself from the incoming projectiles.

Boom! Boom!

Dozens of explosions erupted right in front of him as the shells detonated mid-air. The blasts carried enough force to heavily injure even a peak King-stage warrior, but Aldrian remained calm. His gaze never wavered, and the spatial barrier surrounding him did not even tremble under the intense barrage.

Seeing that Aldrian did not even have a scratch after enduring such a massive barrage, many people gasped in shock. For the first time, they realized with their own eyes that Aldrian was truly a monster in human form. They had never witnessed anything like it.

A combined assault from six lightning cannons and hundreds of standard cannons should have torn anyone apart—yet not even his clothes appeared scorched or damaged.

Ridiculous!

Suddenly, black energy began to surge from Aldrian. At first, it resembled a small flame tinged with a dark hue. However, it grew larger and larger until it formed a swirling vortex that rose toward the sky, like a tornado. The sky began to change as well, and black clouds started to form above, churning as if a thunderstorm was about to descend.

The massive army felt the horror radiating from the black energy. All they could do was stare in stunned silence, their expressions frozen with shock as a chill touched their very souls.

Even Prince Wilmar and the other high-ranking figures also felt the terror emanating from the black energy. They stared solemnly at the dark energy as sweat rolling down their foreheads.

What the hell is that?!

Chapter 457: Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary Staff in Action

Aldrian did not hold back as he released his death energy to the fullest. This was the first time he had unleashed such energy in this way, and it was truly terrifying.

Now that he had reached the duke stage, his death energy had become much stronger, amplifying its effects even further.

Due to the concentration of death energy and death laws, the sky was also affected. Dark clouds gathered as if a thunderstorm were about to strike.

The heavens responded to the intense presence of primordial laws, reacting as they had been programmed to since ancient times. The heavens followed a set of rules that automatically activated under certain conditions.

Aldrian could sense it through his connection with the heavens—they were simply following their natural course. Since he had already overcome the heavenly tribulation when he successfully comprehended the death laws, the heavens did not send another tribulation.

The dark clouds above were merely a sign from the heavens, indicating that the concentration of death laws had reached such a level that it was affecting the atmosphere and threw the surrounding energies of heaven and earth into chaos.

The death energy consumed all other energies, killing everything it touched. Even space itself began to corrode under its influence.

Rumble! Rumble!

A thunderclap resounded across the sky as the dark clouds continued to expand. They had already reached the city, and still, they kept spreading.

Prince Wilmar and the others, witnessing the death energy for the first time, felt their souls turn cold. It was as if their very spirits wanted to leave their bodies, drawn toward the black tornado. In his eyes, the reflection of the tornado seemed to be consuming him, inching closer with every second.

All of them experienced the same kind of illusion. However, as high-ranking cultivators at the King and Emperor stages, they were able to pull themselves out of the death energy's influence and steady their minds.

"All of you, don't focus on that energy! Don't let your illusions consume you, or you'll go mad!" Grand Duke Donovan shouted, his voice booming across the massive army.

The troops snapped out of their trance-like state, trying to steady themselves, but it was futile. The fear still lingered in their hearts.

It was not something they could easily dispel. It was a primordial fear—one woven into the essence of every living being. The death laws triggered that fear, no matter how hard they tried to suppress it.

The Second Prince gritted his teeth as he watched the scene unfold, then turned toward Cardinal Carsius.

"Do it. Even though it's earlier than planned," he said firmly.

He had never expected Aldrian to possess such a terrifying energy, far more sinister than anything he had ever felt. If this continued, it would severely affect the entire army, making it impossible to issue commands properly.

Cardinal Carsius solemnly nodded as he took a staff from his storage ring. In an instant, a middle divine grade aura radiated from it. Those nearby turned toward him and saw that he had already drawn the Heavenly Sovereign Staff. He raised it high into the sky, then thrust it into the ground before him.

Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary: The Holy Territory

Wung!

A strange sound echoed as a yellow-hued bubble suddenly expanded from the staff, spreading outward and covering a radius of fifty kilometers. It was even larger than Aldrian's domain, which now spanned forty-five kilometers.

Everyone within the sanctuary felt warmth seep into their souls. Their minds cleared, their thoughts sharpened, and the fear that had gripped them just moments ago quickly faded. At last, they could think straight—free from the suffocating dread.

Aldrian, who was also within the bubble, raised his eyebrows. He immediately recognized it as a type of domain, specifically an artificial one created by a divine-grade artifact. His expression shifted to one of curiosity, as he was intrigued by what kind of effect this domain would have on the people inside.

What he sensed from the artifact was warmth and a holy presence, an energy that directly opposed negative forces such as death energy.

The holy domain was powerful enough that he could feel his death energy being suppressed. This genuinely surprised him. It was the first time he had ever felt his death laws affected in such a way. Until now, nothing and no one had ever managed to suppress his death energy, but this holy domain was capable of doing exactly that.

Aldrian then looked at the staff embedded in the ground in front of Cardinal Carsius and read its information.

Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary Staff

Description: One of the legacy artifacts of the Heavenly Direction Church. It was created by the first king of the Forgeheart Kingdom, along with other dwarves, in collaboration with the first pope and the early cardinals of the church.

This staff received a direct blessing from the heavens and contains an immense amount of holy energy. The holy energy within it is also considered to be among the purest ever recorded.

The staff has the ability to generate a fifty-kilometer-wide domain that functions as a holy territory. Within this domain, the artifact's master can choose to strengthen or weaken anything, depending on their will. The most powerful effects are directed specifically against any form of negative energy.

Level: Middle Divine Grade

Reading the information, Aldrian was truly amazed by its history. It was no wonder the artifact was so powerful, given that it was the result of a joint effort between the church and the dwarves. With a direct blessing from the heavens, it had become the ultimate artifact for combating beings like devils.

"You really helped them fight me, huh?" Aldrian tried to communicate with the heavens. His tone was slightly joking, yet to his surprise, the heavens responded with unexpected seriousness.

Their intent came down upon him like a tidal wave, urgently trying to explain themselves so he would not misunderstand. Aldrian was baffled. For the first time, he felt the heavens themselves were worried, concerned enough to clarify their actions.

They even told him that, if necessary, they could withdraw their blessing from the legacy artifact.

"Alright, I'm joking. You don't have to pull out the blessing, It would significantly weaken the artifact, and the church still needs it back. I just found it funny that your blessing is being used against me." Aldrian replied.

As soon as he said that, the heavens seemed to calm down, and their intent faded. Aldrian smiled to himself and decided to retract his death energy.

"You abomination! As I thought, you're using sinister energy that reeks of darkness and death. You must have killed countless innocent people to gain that kind of power!" Prince Wilmar shouted.

"You must have used a forbidden technique to become this powerful! Even if we fall here, we'll make sure to bring you down with us. We can't let the entire continent continue being fooled by your false heroic image!" he continued.

Even at this moment, Prince Wilmar continued trying to tarnish Aldrian's name. However, this time, many of the people in the city who witnessed the death energy for the first time began to feel that such power was not something a human should wield. The sinister aura left a deep impression on them, causing some to question how Aldrian had managed to comprehend something like that.

Aldrian simply smiled at the prince's attempt. Then, he raised his hand to his mask and slowly removed it, confidently revealing his disguised face. His smiling gaze met Prince Wilmar's directly, and it made the prince feel unsettled. An ominous feeling suddenly rose in his chest.

The people here also saw his face clearly for the first time, and it could be said that the sketch circulating was not too far off. Many of them began to wonder why Aldrian had chosen to take off his mask.

"That's quite the slander and rich coming from someone who has been working with devils all these years. Don't you feel even a shred of shame for betraying the entire continent and siding with those who only bring destruction?" Aldrian's voice echoed clearly across the city.

Many who heard it was stunned. They had never expected such a twist. What in the world? The prince worked with devils? Even the troops could not hide their shock at this accusation.

Prince Wilmar froze for a moment, but quickly shouted back at Aldrian.

"Ha! You dare to slander me after I exposed your wicked nature? That's not going to work!" he barked. "Group Two, attack him!"

At his command, dozens of king-stage cultivators shot into the air from the troops formation, flying at high speed toward Aldrian as they unleashed their techniques.

Inwardly, Prince Wilmar was in a state of panic. Aldrian seemed to know about his connection with the devils, how was that possible? Only a handful of people were aware of it, and he could count them on one hand. He doubted any of them would have told Aldrian, as doing so would endanger themselves as well. So how did he find out?

Wilmar gritted his teeth. He had to silence Aldrian before he said more. He would not give him another chance to speak.

The combined attack from the dozens of king-stage cultivators surged forward, their power reaching the level of a low emperor-stage strike. They unleashed a coordinated lightning technique, one they had clearly trained together many times.

Their strikes moved in perfect harmony, forming a single lightning attack. The lightning itself seemed to grow even stronger within the Holy Territory, enhanced by the holy properties.

Aldrian simply smiled at the incoming attacks. The combined strikes of lightning halted before they could reach him since they were effortlessly stopped by his spatial barrier. His domain power that poured into the barrier was more than enough to withstand an emperor-stage assault.

Their coordinated attack failed to even crack it.

"You like playing with lightning, huh? Then let me give you some lightning," Aldrian said calmly.

Rumble!

Chapter 458: Against the Traitor

Rumble! Rumble!

Suddenly, heavenly lightning erupted from Aldrian. The dozens of king-stage cultivators who had attacked him were stunned, their expressions quickly turning to shock. Aldrian stretched out his palm in their direction, and from it, countless strands of heavenly lightning shot forward.

Their scalps tingled as they sensed the overwhelming power within the lightning, strong enough to fatally injure them. They tried to dodge, but the lightning appeared to have its own will, chasing after each target individually. The king-stage cultivators were indeed quick and agile, but not quick enough to truly evade the speed of the heavenly lightning.

Rumble! Bzzt!

"Argghh!"

When the heavenly lightning struck their bodies, they were instantly electrocuted for several seconds, leaving them covered in burnt wounds. The injuries were severe, with the burns spreading across their bodies, charring them like charcoal, yet they were still breathing. One by one, they lost consciousness and fell to the ground like dying flies, their souls directly shaken by the power of the heavenly lightning.

Fortunately, the fall wasn't from too great a height, so their lives were spared. Their king-stage physiques were just strong enough to withstand the impact.

Seeing dozens of king-stage cultivators easily subdued by Aldrian, many onlookers felt a chill run down their spines. The king stage, once regarded as one of the strongest realms on the continent, looked like child's play in that man's eyes.

"Fire!" Prince Wilmar suddenly shouted, and lightning cannons and standard cannons began firing one after another. Aldrian glanced at the incoming barrage and calmly raised another spatial barrier. But then, from behind him, several figures appeared, emerging from nowhere as if they had been waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Aldrian barely looked at them before activating a spatial lock. To their shock, their bodies froze in place, completely immobilized.

Boom! Boom!

The lightning cannons and other artillery finally struck Aldrian's spatial barrier, causing a massive explosion. The lightning cannons continued to fire, relentlessly trying to break through. Aldrian maintained the spatial barrier's stability while simultaneously keeping the sudden assassins frozen in place with his spatial lock.

But then, another figure shot up from beneath him, moving with such incredible speed it looked as if he had teleported.

Aldrian didn't have time to form another spatial barrier or lock this new attacker in place, so he teleported away to create distance. As a result, the spatial lock and barrier were both released. The assassins regained their mobility, but at that moment, the lightning cannons, still firing their beams, redirected and struck in their direction instead.

The figure, who was also in the path of the lightning beam, moved swiftly and managed to evade it. The same couldn't be said for the assassins, they were instantly obliterated by the beam.

Rumble!

Thunder echoed through the air as the lightning beam shot across the horizon before finally stopping, the cannons return to their recharge phase.

Aldrian watched everything unfold with a calm expression, then turned his gaze toward the figure who had suddenly appeared beneath him as if by teleportation.

That figure was none other than Cardinal Carsius, who had attempted to strike him with a high divine-grade spear artifact. It seemed the cardinal had used a teleportation artifact to position himself directly below him, planning to attack while he was preoccupied with blocking the cannonfire and dealing with the assassins.

Cardinal Carsius grinned and dashed forward at full speed, unleashing the might of a peak emperor-stage cultivator. Aldrian also smiled, this man had almost got him.

He could sense how dangerous that spear strike had been. If he had been even a moment late, he could have been split in two. The spear radiated tremendous power, and in the hands of a peak emperor-stage cultivator like Cardinal Carsius, it was a deadly combination. His strength was also clearly boosted by the domain of the Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary, making him stronger than ever.

Aldrian teleported again to evade the cardinal's next strike, but Carsius's senses had become sharp enough to follow him instantly. He moved straight toward Aldrian's new location, continuing the assault. Aldrian kept teleporting from place to place, but the cardinal relentlessly chased after him, attacking without pause.

"Hahaha! Is evading like a rat all you can do?" Cardinal Carsius taunted as he continued his relentless assault. But Aldrian kept dodging each of the spear's strikes through precise teleportation.

Every attack missed by only the slightest margin, as if Aldrian could predict and react with perfect control. He had no time to channel his energy or unleash any techniques, so his only option was to rely entirely on his domain's teleportation abilities.

From a distance, it appeared as though Aldrian was being pushed back by the cardinal's fierce offensive. All he could do was evade.

"Uwoo!"

"Keep attacking! Don't back down!"

"Don't stop!"

The morale of the troops soared as they watched the scene unfold. Cheers erupted across the battlefield—they believed they were finally gaining the upper hand. For the first time, it looked like Aldrian might actually be within reach of defeat.

However, Prince Wilmar and the other high level cultivators watching the battle remained on high alert, especially Wilmar himself. He knew better than to relax. Despite how things looked, he couldn't afford to let Aldrian speak any further about the devils.

He had chosen to send Cardinal Carsius earlier because the cardinal was the best suited to keep Aldrian occupied. But even that wasn't enough. Aldrian had to be utterly crushed before he could say another word.

"First Legion, attack!" he shouted.

At his command, one hundred thousand troops stationed at the frontlines surged forward. Their spirits were already high from watching the battle unfold, and the holy territory of the Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary staff gave them an extra boost. They advanced in a tight, disciplined formation.

Each of their steps rang out with the sharp, metallic clang of iron striking iron, an intimidating sound in itself. And how could it not be? One hundred thousand troops moving in unison was a spectacle to behold. The ground trembled slightly beneath their synchronized march.

The army was divided into brigades of five thousand men, each forming a battle formation capable of unleashing a combined technique that exceeded the limits of their individual cultivation power.

Aldrian, still evading the cardinal's rapid spear attacks, sensed the approaching army. It seemed the second prince was truly determined to keep him from speaking any further.

Yet a faint smile appeared on Aldrian's face.

That smile made Cardinal Carsius's grin falter and he felt confused. Why was Aldrian smiling?

He suddenly saw Aldrian teleport again, but this time, he was nowhere to be seen. Cardinal Carsius couldn't sense him nearby either. He extended his senses to the maximum and finally detected Aldrian, far above, high in the sky—so high that he was now outside the holy territory.

Aldrian hovered silently in the sky, where the dark clouds seemed to part for him, revealing the vast scenery below. He looked down at the massive army and the capital city, which now appeared like mere toys in his eyes.

A creeping sense of danger suddenly gripped Cardinal Carsius. He sensed the emergence of a middle divine-grade artifact as Aldrian pulled something from his spatial ring.

It was a sword.

He instantly knew this was bad news. Only now did he realize, Aldrian hadn't used his sword at all until now. He had been fighting solely with his elemental comprehension, something unusual for a sword cultivator. That was why, for a moment, it had slipped his mind... Aldrian was the *Mysterious Swordsman*.

Some of the high-ranking cultivators on the ground came to the same chilling realization. In their fleeting sense of having the upper hand, they had forgotten the most dangerous truth.

How could they forget that Aldrian was a swordsman, the one known for cutting down entire mountains and devastating vast stretches of land with a sword technique?

Now that Aldrian had drawn his sword, it could only mean one thing.

He was ready to unleash his terrifying sword techniques.

"This is bad!" Sensing that Aldrian had drawn a divine-grade sword, Cardinal Carsius repositioned himself in mid-air, raising his spear like a javelin. His body tensed, muscles bulging as he poured every ounce of power into his next move.

Heaven's Judgment: Splitting Apocalypse.

"HAA!"

With a roar, he hurled the Heaven's Punishment Spear toward Aldrian. The force behind the throw was immense. Winds howled violently in its wake, surging upward toward the sky. As the spear tore through the air, the space along its path began to collapse, ripped apart by the sheer power of the strike.

The spear cut through the fabric of space itself, leaving behind a trail of chaotic void and spatial storms.

The spear traveled at a speed nearly impossible to follow with the naked eye. Cardinal Carsius kept his gaze fixed upward, watching for the impact, until a sudden wave of dread washed over him.

Goosebumps rose along his skin as a blinding golden light burst forth from Aldrian's direction, shining brilliantly, and it was headed straight for the spear... and for him.

He could feel it. The terrifying power behind that golden light—it was deadly for him!

"Shit!"

From the ground below, countless eyes widened in shock. At first, they saw a golden light piercing through the dark clouds. But then a chill ran down their spines as they watched a massive golden light pillar instantly descend from the heavens, roaring toward the earth.

Rumble!

Chapter 459: The Deep Impact of Aldrian's Strength

A moment before the golden light appeared, all the swords in the capital city, and even in nearby cities like Padina—trembled and floated into the air, all of them pointing toward the sky where Aldrian stood.

The overwhelming sword will could be sensed even in the surrounding cities, a clear display of the immense power radiating from Aldrian just before he unleashed the *Pillar of Heaven's Judgment*.

When the blinding pillar of golden light descended from the heavens, it struck the *Heaven's Punishment Spear* directly. A dazzling light burst forth, followed by powerful winds from the impact.

The collision also produced a booming, rumbling sound as space itself collapsed, forming a massive void in the sky. That void gave rise to a spatial storm so intense it began pulling everything within a five-kilometer radius into the rift. As the crack in space widened, the city began to feel its effects.

However, thanks to the city's barrier, the impact was minimized. And because the clash happened high in the sky, the effects on the city were further reduced.

Cardinal Carsius was momentarily confident in his spear-throwing technique, but that confidence was short-lived. He soon sensed the spear being pushed back after holding the golden pillar for only a few seconds, then sent flying four kilometers to the northeast.

Without hesitation, Cardinal Carsius used his movement technique to escape, his flying speed increasing several times over. The golden pillar, having pushed aside its obstacle, instantly struck the ground, creating a violent tremor. Had he not escaped just now, he would have been instantly obliterated because the light pillar held enough power to kill him outright.

How could it not, when Aldrian poured the power of the three major territories' domains into this strike? He had to take the *Heaven's Punishment Spear* seriously, because in Cardinal Carsius's hands, its power had already surpassed the peak emperor stage.

If he hadn't blocked that spear throw seriously, it would've been far too late for regrets. That attack carried enough force to kill him a thousand times over.

Without hesitation, he empowered the *Pillar of Heaven's Judgment* using the combined strength of the three great domains, even at the risk of devastating the land below.

Aldrian then moved, swinging *Eternal Spirit*

upward and carving a massive slash mark along the path of the pillar, stretching all the way to the horizon. The golden pillar rose into the sky, following the arc of Aldrian's sword.

As he swung upward, the clouds split apart along the entire length of the pillar, creating a breathtaking spectacle for those watching below.

Rumble!

The sound of the collapsing ground echoed into the distance, accompanied by waves of dirt and dust rising into the air. The area surrounding the slash mark was filled with giant cracks in the earth, making it look as though a great natural disaster had just occurred.

Because of the size of the pillar and the power it contained, the slash mark became a deep and wide chasm spanning over 25,000 kilometers. The chasm lay dangerously close to the frontline troops, terrifying many of them to their core, they had narrowly escaped being obliterated by the golden light.

However, a few unfortunate souls weren't as lucky. Some king-stage cultivators that still unconscious from Aldrian's heavenly lightning strike earlier , were caught in the blast and completely annihilated.

This was the strongest *Pillar of Heaven's Judgment* Aldrian had ever unleashed. It was a fusion of his three main domain powers, amplified by his current duke-stage cultivation. The result was far more devastating than when he fought the Lust Devil back then when the chasm he created was only ten thousand kilometers long.

There was only silence after Aldrian executed the *Pillar of Heaven's Judgment*. Many still felt cold in their feet, shaken after witnessing the sheer scale of destruction. Many believed the technique had already reached the divine grade.

There had already been rumors that Aldrian had comprehended a divine-grade technique, but since they had never seen it directly, they still held doubts.

But after this overwhelming display of power, many of them began to believe. Also, it could mean one thing—Aldrian was the first person in a long time to comprehend a divine-grade technique.

Prince Wilmar stared at the devastation caused by Aldrian's strike, unable to keep his thoughts from racing.

What kind of monster is that man? Is he even stronger than a peak emperor-stage cultivator? How can someone at the duke stage wield such power? Could he be hiding his true cultivation technique?

How is that possible? There's no way he could keep hiding his cultivation after unleashing a technique like that.

To use something of that scale, he would've had to concentrate all of his energy flow into a single, overwhelming force—completely abandoning any other techniques aside from that sword strike.

Even if he used some kind of artifact to conceal his true cultivation, there should've been a momentary gap, some slip, some fluctuation, because the chaotic energy of

heaven and earth swirling around his body from that powerful sword strike would have exposed his real level.

But if, after all of that, his cultivation still appears to be at the duke stage... doesn't that mean he really is still at the duke stage?

Doesn't that mean the old rumors were right all along—that he was only at the marquess stage, or even lower, when he began carving out his legend?

His mind went blank. Aldrian was a being who shattered every understanding of cultivation and power scaling that had been established since ancient times.

If someone like him—still at the duke stage or even lower—could defeat an emperor-stage cultivator, then what meaning did cultivation levels even hold in his eyes?

What was the point of cultivation if he could overcome the strongest cultivators here with a lower realm?

Prince Wilmar wasn't the only one thinking this way. Many others shared the same thought.

They couldn't help but feel that the heavens were unjust—for allowing someone like Aldrian to exist.

The people still looked up at the sky, staring at the chaotic spatial storm raging within the massive spatial cracks torn open by the clash between the *Heaven's Punishment Spear* and Aldrian sword's attack.

But then, they noticed the spatial cracks began to mend themselves at an unnatural pace, as if someone was controlling the flow of space itself. In moments, the rifts fully healed.

Not long after, they saw Aldrian slowly descending from the sky. The dark clouds had already dispersed, swept away by the violent impact of the two techniques and the raging spatial storm that followed.

He came to a stop about a kilometer above the ground, directly over the massive army.

Prince Wilmar wanted to issue a command, to attack, to retaliate, but the words caught in his throat the moment he recalled Aldrian's strength.

All the soldiers, even Cardinal Carsius stared at him without continuing their attack. However, the cardinal had already recalled the spear that had been thrown several kilometers away back into his grasp.

Aldrian remained silent, his gaze sweeping across the vast army below. His eyes lingered on Cardinal Carsius, Prince Wilmar, and Grand Duke Donovan. Then, he stretched out his left hand while gripping *Eternal Spirit* tightly in his right.

Suddenly, something appeared in his grasp.

The people were stunned to see that Aldrian was holding someone, or more precisely, he was gripping a person by the leg, leaving them hanging upside down. Confusion spread through the army, many wondering who it could be.

But a few recognized the person immediately—especially Grand Duke Donovan.

The tattered attire, bruises, and bloodstains on his body did nothing to stop the grand duke from recognizing him, for the man in Aldrian's grasp was Karl Donovan, the grand elder of the Donovan family.

He had already known that Aldrian had kidnapped Karl, but Karl's fate had remained uncertain.

The last time he checked Karl's life sign was right after receiving news of the kidnapping. At that time, it seemed Aldrian was keeping him alive. Afterward, the grand duke assumed that Karl had been abandoned somewhere, left to die.

But now it was clear—Aldrian had kept him all this time.

Grand Duke Donovan looked at Aldrian with little expression. Normally, he should have been furious just like Prince Wilmar since he was one of the parties who had suffered the most because of Aldrian's actions.

After Aldrian's declaration, many had begun to question both his and the Donovan family's integrity. The accusation that he had orchestrated a gu outbreak in the Weilmar Barony to harm innocents for the second prince's faction gain was something the public found especially abhorrent.

They were in the midst of a civil war, but even so, the mass killing of innocents didn't sit well with the public.

Aldrian, looked at the grand duke with a faint, knowing smile, as if he understood exactly why the man remained so composed.

"Many of you may not know this man, but I do, and a few of you do as well," Aldrian said, his voice echoing clearly across the area. He gave Karl's leg a slight shake, as if to emphasize the broken, pitiful state of the grand elder.

"He is Karl Donovan, grand elder of the Donovan family."

"He, along with Grand Duke Donovan and with the second prince's approval, launched a massive attack on innocent civilians in the Weimar Barony using gu. That outbreak took the lives of thousands and nearly claimed someone very dear to me."

"Now, why am I telling you this?"

Suddenly, a surge of deathly energy erupted from Karl's body, engulfing him entirely in a black, ominous black hue energy.

Karl, who had been unconscious until now, was jolted awake by the searing pain tearing through his body and soul. The death energy corroded every part of his being. He writhed in Aldrian's grasp, desperately trying to escape, but he couldn't.

"Argh! Argh! Mercy—please! Forgive me! Argh! No!"

Within seconds, his body was reduced to nothing, consumed entirely by the death energy.

It was a terrifying sight for all who witnessed it.

Prince Wilmar, watching from a distance, felt a chill grip his heart. He immediately sent a voice transmission to Cardinal Carsius.

"Do it now! Use your most powerful technique—I'll use my special artifact. We don't have time. If we wait any longer, we'll end up just like him!"

Chapter 460: Refreshing Feeling

The cardinal, who was still eyeing Aldrian warily, was slightly stunned by the voice transmission from Prince Wilmar but not surprised. He must have been anxious about Aldrian bringing up the matter of the devils, and to be honest, it disturbed him too. If the second prince were to fall, he would fall with him.

He finally realized that facing Aldrian, even with the boost from the legacy artifacts, was not easy.

He had to admit, Aldrian was a monster in his own right. Even after unleashing that devastating sword attack, Aldrian showed no signs of fatigue or weakness. In contrast, he was already breathing heavily after using just one of his spear techniques.

Heaven's Judgment: Splitting Apocalypse was a spear technique that required tremendous energy and physical strength, so it was no surprise that he looked slightly fatigued after using it. Even then, he had been boosted by the holy territory granted by the Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary Staff.

However, Aldrian's sword technique that powerful enough to reshape the landscape should have demanded just as much energy, if not more, to cause that level of destruction. And yet, what the cardinal sensed from Aldrian was a stable condition, as if what he had just done was nothing out of the ordinary. No exhaustion. No weakness.

"Alright," Cardinal Carsius replied.

He then closed his eyes as if focusing, deliberately ignoring Aldrian, who continued speaking while gazing down at the crowd below.

"This is an example. This is a warning. This is a promise," Aldrian declared. "This will be the fate of anyone who crosses my line—anyone who has brought destruction to the people, anyone who dares to work with devils!"

He turned his gaze toward Grand Duke Donovan and the second prince.

"You've done something that should never have been done. Worse, you've aligned yourself with devils. I'll make sure you experience pain so unbearable that you'll beg for death. You'll wish I had killed you."

Suddenly, dark clouds began to gather above Aldrian's domain. A deep thunderclap echoed across the sky, leaving the crowd stunned.

"You'll beg me to erase your very existence—to wish you had never been born."

Unconsciously, Aldrian released a wave of killing intent. The chaos in the sky deepened, the clouds swirling violently as streaks of lightning cracked through the darkness.

A similar phenomenon spread across Aldrian's entire domain, drawing the attention of everyone within as the sky darkened and the weather shifted abruptly.

"I will crush you. Even in death, I'll make sure you never reincarnate. You'll be erased from existence entirely!" Aldrian shouted, his voice cold and thunderous, echoing through the heavens just as a massive thunderclap split the sky.

This was the first time he had ever shown such rage—his fury laid bare for all to see. It was a wrath he had buried deep in his heart since the moment he found Eleine on the brink of death.

When he first saw her, lying bedridden in such a pitiful state, a surge of nervousness rushed through him. But he forced himself to act normal, masking the tension building inside.

After his examination, he realized that if he had arrived even half an hour later, he would have already lost her.

This was the first time he had almost lost someone dear to him because of someone else's machinations. It was different from the time the lust devil tried to take his mother—in Eleine's case, the enemy's intent was to kill.

Just imagining her dying within his own domain, a place where he should have the most control, filled him with rage.

He was furious—at himself, and at these bastards. His lack of preventive measures had allowed the second prince and Grand Duke Donovan's plan to slip into his domain.

He still had a long way to go. He wasn't omniscient enough to anticipate every scheme. He was still too weak.

Suddenly, he sensed that the flying fortresses were preparing to fire their lightning cannons once again.

Inside one of the fortresses, the atmosphere was tense and silent. Everyone was scared out of their wits after witnessing a power so far beyond their reach. None of them wanted to provoke that monster in human skin any further—they just wanted to retreat and return to base.

However, the second prince's orders were absolute. Despite everything they had just seen, he was still determined to kill Aldrian. The crew had been instructed to keep the lightning cannons aimed at Aldrian and to fire as soon as they were ready—without waiting for the prince's direct command.

They thought the prince had gone crazy—insisting on attacking Aldrian even after witnessing such overwhelming power. To them, the lightning cannons felt pointless, a futile provocation that would only enrage Aldrian further.

But they couldn't disobey. Fear of the prince's punishment bound them just as tightly as fear of Aldrian's wrath.

Aldrian, still in a foul mood after releasing the fury he had buried, cast a glance toward the flying fortresses.

Before the cannons could fire, the six fortresses began to rise, slowly and unnaturally, lifting higher into the sky without any input from the crews inside.

The massive bodies of the flying fortresses began to rise slowly, and the lightning cannons that had been aimed at Aldrian wavered—now pointing wildly in different directions.

Inside, panic erupted among the crew as the fortresses slipped from their control.

"What's happening?! Why the hell isn't the fortress stable?!" the captain shouted, trying to steady himself.

"We don't know, sir! We've suddenly lost control of the entire system!" one of the crew members replied, his voice strained.

Aldrian was using gravity laws on the flying fortresses. Fortunately, all six were still within his domain. By altering the gravity around them and making it unnaturally light, he forced the fortresses to rise uncontrollably into the sky.

Rumble!

The lightning cannons finally fired—but instead of striking Aldrian, the blasts shot upward, splitting the dark clouds as they tore across the sky's horizon. Lightning surged for several seconds, but Aldrian ignored it entirely, his focus fixed on Cardinal Carsius, who now appeared to be preparing something far more dangerous.

His senses screamed a warning. The power radiating from the Heaven's Punishment Spear was immense, and the blinding light gathering at its tip illuminated the area around it.

He decided to strike first before the cardinal could launch his attack. As he prepared to teleport to Carsius's side, he suddenly sensed someone appear near him, as if they had teleported. Without even turning, he knew exactly who it was.

Prince Wilmar had stepped out in person, shocking many onlookers below.

Prince Wilmar appeared to be holding something in his hand, and he pointed it directly at Aldrian. It was an artifact shaped like an emblem, marked with strange symbols carved into its palm-sized surface. The moment it was aimed at Aldrian, the emblem began to glow with an ominous red light.

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Aldrian's hand immediately shot forward, choking the second prince before he could do anything further. He grabbed the wrist holding the emblem and quickly redirected it away.

But then he noticed the prince was grinning.

"Too late," Prince Wilmar said.

Suddenly, Aldrian felt a constriction in both his soul and dantian. It was as if something had blocked the flow of energy within his body, while an invisible force chained his soul, wrapping it in a suffocating darkness. His mind trembled under the weight of the strange sensation, and for a moment, his grip on the prince faltered.

That single lapse was enough for prince Wilmar slipped free and quickly put distance between them.

Prince Wilmar expression turned ecstatic—he had successfully activated the artifact on Aldrian.

"Goodbye!" he shouted, then shot into the sky at high speed, fleeing toward the city in an attempt to escape the coming impact.

Aldrian tried to pursue him, but his thoughts were clouded by invasive negativity. A pounding headache surged through his skull as unsettling illusions flooded his mind, making it impossible to focus. His dantian was in disarray, and when he tried to circulate his energy, it only churned in chaos.

"A curse," Aldrian thought.

A second after everything unfolded, Cardinal Carsius suddenly launched himself into the air and thrust his spear upward toward Aldrian. The blinding light radiating from the spear's tip carried an immense force, far surpassing the power of a peak emperor-stage attack.

Carsius had poured most of his strength into this single strike—a final blow meant to bring Aldrian down.

Heaven's Judgement: Punishment

Although many felt that this technique was still much weaker than what Aldrian had just unleashed, its power was enough to send shivers down their spines. This strike was far stronger than the earlier spear throw, and they believed it could easily wipe out an army of tens of thousands.

Aldrian, still struggling to steady himself, saw the incoming attack. For a brief moment, it felt as if death stood right before him. With the curse disrupting his body, he couldn't block or evade. Everything was happening too quickly.

He knew this was one of the most dangerous moments of his life, just like when he had faced the heavenly tribulation that had nearly killed him.

And yet, strangely, he didn't feel fear.

It was not like when he had faced *that "thing"* during his encounter with the Heavenly Demon, back then, he had felt genuine fear.

He felt something strangely refreshing—something that reminded him he was alive. In moments like this, he became aware that death could come for him at any time. In

moments like this, he felt something that affirmed he was a living being, capable of many emotions. He was human.

Boom!

Suddenly, Aldrian's aura surged and spread across the entire city. The heavens and earth trembled, and the dark clouds were pushed back by the force of the aura.

Cardinal Carsius, already close to Aldrian, felt his heart tighten as he faced the overwhelming aura pressing down on him like a mountain.

Aldrian looked up at the sky and closed his eyes, as if he did not care about the incoming strike that could kill him.

"This is nothing for a being who controls the cosmos," he murmured.

For the first time in a long while, he channeled the full power of his domain into himself.