

The Shining Star Above The Heaven

#Chapter 481: Keep Him Closer - Read The Shining Star Above The Heaven Chapter 481: Keep Him Closer

Chapter 481: Keep Him Closer

"Well, for a starter, my parents are Aldrey Flamecrest and Irene Rivas. Your majesty understand what that implies, right?" Aldrian said.

The others who heard Aldrian's words reacted as if they'd just been told something absurd. At first, their faces were blank, showing little emotion. But as reality began to sink in, their eyes widened in shock.

The emperor's mouth twitched slightly, even he found the revelation hard to believe.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Not a single word was spoken in jest. My father is Aldrey Flamecrest, and my mother is Irene Rivas of the Rivas family," Aldrian replied.

Prince Ferdinand and the two barons were far more expressive in their reactions, their faces almost identical. Eyes wide and mouths agape, they couldn't even make a sound. They were too stunned to figure out what kind of noise would even express their shock.

Emperor Raymond stared at Aldrian with a blank expression. In his mind, a single thought came—*How can this happen?* What Aldrian said didn't make any sense. Everyone knew the Flamecrest and Rivas families were rivals from different empires, and their relationship had never been close. No, they were like fire and water.

Forget about their successors becoming a pair of lovebirds. Even their family members still clashed along the borders of their territories when they weren't fighting devils. So how could this be?

"I'm sorry if my question offends you, Sir Aldrian, but... how?" Prince Ferdinand finally asked the question the emperor had been holding back. "As far as we know, the Flamecrest and Rivas families have never been on good terms."

Aldrian then began to explain his birth in a secret realm hidden within the Everlasting Silent Forest. He only spoke of the general events. He told them when it happened, how his parents became trapped inside, and how that eventually led to his birth. He also shared a little about his life inside the secret realm until the day he left it.

After hearing Aldrian's explanation, the mysteries and some questions surrounding him finally made sense. It was no wonder that no one had known anything about him until he appeared in Balin City. That had been his first time stepping out of the secret realm.

"Wait, doesn't that mean you're sixteen or seventeen this year?" Prince Ferdinand asked.

Aldrian responded with a nod.

Seeing his confirmation, Prince Ferdinand and the others felt their bodies weaken, and their chests tighten, as if their hearts had forgotten how to beat. He was still a teenager—yet he had already created a legend that had spread across the continent.

How could someone his age possess such cultivation and strength? How could he carry a face so full of maturity and wisdom, as if he had already lived through a lifetime?

How could he...?

How could...?

All this time, they had assumed Aldrian was someone hundreds of years old, his appearance preserved by powerful cultivation. But in truth, he was exactly what he looked like—young.

There were so many questions swirling in their minds that it felt as if their thoughts were on the verge of breaking. Aldrian's very existence was already beyond their comprehension. He had shattered the common sense and established knowledge that had been passed down since ancient times. A teenage cultivator with strength enough to rival the force of an entire empire?

Did he start cultivating from his mother's womb or something? Then they realized, even if he had been cultivating in his embryonic form, there was no way that alone could explain the power he now possessed.

No one spoke for several minutes. The others remained silent, each of them trying to come up with a reasonable explanation or any possibility at all that could justify how Aldrian's existence came to be.

And the result was...

No, it was impossible. There was no way Aldrian's existence could be explained by their knowledge and comprehension. He could be considered a singularity—a special existence that they doubted would ever be replicated.

However, something began to form in the emperor's mind. Doesn't that mean if Aldrian's origins were revealed across the continent, the ones who would benefit the

most would be the Dorian and Vindas empires? He could already imagine the chaos that would ensue once that happened. With Aldrian's talent and strength, these two families—or even these two empires—would likely claim him as their people.

Whoever was chosen by Aldrian would see their family and empire rise to unimaginable heights, their status soaring to the heavens in a single step.

Emperor Raymond suddenly pondered solemnly. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy at the thought that the union of two people from these rival empires had produced someone like Aldrian. Even if Aldrian chose only one of them, the other empire would still benefit as Aldrian carried the blood of their family.

The other territories would have no choice but to watch as these two empires reaped the most rewards.

As an emperor, his opportunistic instincts kicked in. His empire, at the very least, needed to establish a strong relationship with Aldrian, showing him to be inseparable from the Atria Empire. Initially, he had planned to offer Aldrian and his group a status that would make them honorary guests of the empire. Even if Aldrian did not care about the status, he still wanted to make sure his friends felt valued.

Many people spoke of Aldrian, but few truly understood the group that always traveled with him. By including his friends in his thoughts, the emperor hoped that they would feel more comfortable in the Atria empire in the future, which would also influence Aldrian's perception of the empire.

As Baron Rosalind had said, Aldrian valued relationships. If that were the case, then he would also value what Aldrian valued. Though what he could offer might not be much to Aldrian, the emperor trusted that Aldrian would recognize the imperial family's sincerity.

Perhaps, in turn, his group might speak favorably of the empire.

However, now that he understood Aldrian's origins, the emperor realized he needed to be more direct in his approach. He required something more straightforward to reach Aldrian.

Aldrian, sensing the turbulence of emotions from the people in the hall, broke the silence.

"So, given the circumstances, I hope that Your Majesty and everyone here can help me, just in case any bad rumors about my parents start circulating," he said.

He had already done everything he could to establish himself as a powerful cultivator with many achievements. He knew that, at this moment, his name alone carried significant weight in many people's minds. If his parents' identities were revealed, the negative opinions would likely be minimized.

However, he knew he couldn't control every individual's opinion across the continent, but he could prevent any negative opinions from those who might try to smear his parents' names by overshadowing them with the positive regard people had for him. At the very least, he didn't want any negativity to reach his parents.

Even if they tried to amplify their negative opinions, making sure as many people as possible heard them, those voices would be drowned out by the positive opinions and the support of his admirers.

Without hesitation, the emperor nodded his head in agreement.

"Of course, if anyone spreads bad rumors about your parents, I will take care of them. If necessary, I will issue an imperial decree to prevent such things from happening," Emperor Raymond said.

He knew that, for the nobles, having a child out of wedlock was considered a stain on their family name. It was not uncommon for nobles to banish their descendants for such an act, and in some cases, even execution had been a possibility, as there had been instances of this in the past.

Moreover, for famous families like the Flamecrest and Rivas families, the punishment would be severe. Aldrey and Irene would not be safe from the possibility of banishment or execution, as they were from opposing families, and Irene had given birth to Aldrian.

Normally, that would be the situation. However...

"Who would dare to touch them if they have this man as their son?" Emperor Raymond thought.

Aldrian, still smiling, gave a slight bow toward Emperor Raymond.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The emperor sighed inwardly. Although he wasn't sure of the best course of action to keep Aldrian close to the Atria Empire, at least he could give this much help.

"Your Majesty, after this, I will appear once more before the people of the capital and speak to them, so there will not be any lingering doubts about the traitors or the actions the imperial family will take in the future," Aldrian said.

The emperor nodded. "That would be appreciated, young Aldrian. I know that many people in the capital, and even throughout the empire, are still wondering why you have not appeared since entering the imperial palace. Earlier, I had intended to ask if you could make a public appearance and offer them encouragement. At this moment, I believe your words hold more power than mine."

Aldrian gave a nod, "I will remain in the empire for a little while before I leave. I believe I have already spent enough time here, and my objective has already been completed."

When they heard that Aldrian was already preparing to leave, everyone in the hall felt a quiet sense of loss settle in.

Chapter 482: Intruder?

"I see. I truly hope you can stay longer, but if you still have things to do, then I can only wish you the best on your journey," Emperor Raymond said.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Aldrian replied. "Then I will meet with the people now." He looked at Prince Ferdinand and the two barons.

"Until next time, Your Highness, Your Excellencies."

With that, Aldrian's figure vanished, leaving the emperor and the others behind.

Emperor Raymond sighed as he looked at the spot where Aldrian had just been.

"What a strange young man. Even though we finally know his origin, there's still something that doesn't sit right. Don't you think so?" he said.

He had not directed the question at anyone in particular, so the other three offered their opinions in turn.

"I agree, Your Majesty. Although he said his parents are Aldrey and Irene, I still feel there's a great secret hidden within him—a secret that might explain why someone like him exists," Baron Rosalind said.

"Yes, I feel the same. He appears simple, yet mysterious, which is strange. He doesn't seem to answer to anyone, yet he still acts with humility," Baroness Weimar added.

"He's like calm, clear water, but so deep we can't even see the bottom." Prince Ferdinand said.

Emperor Raymond nodded. Yet, there was something about facing Aldrian that stirred a feeling he had not experienced in a very long time. It could be called instinct or intuition, but to him, it felt as though he were standing before someone who held a higher authority than himself. Aldrian's presence seemed to belong to someone of far greater status and stature.

He could not help but feel the urge to kneel, as if he needed to prove his worth and loyalty.

The last time he had felt that way was when he stood before his father, the previous emperor.

He knew that this feeling and instinct were not without cause. Something within Aldrian had triggered it. If his father had carried the authority of the imperial crown and used it to inspire such reverence, then Aldrian possessed something much powerful. Perhaps it was his strength. Perhaps it was his charisma. Or perhaps it was simply the weight of his presence.

He did not know what it was, but whatever it might be, Emperor Raymond believed one thing for certain: Aldrian was not someone meant to serve beneath another. He was the type of man who stood above, a leader by nature—someone destined to stand at the peak.

At that moment, Raymond sensed Aldrian's presence high above the city, floating in the sky.

"To the people of the Atria Empire,"

Aldrian's voice echoed across the city, causing everyone to stop in their tracks, shocked. They recognized the voice because they had heard it just yesterday. They looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. One by one, their gazes turned skyward, and there, they began to notice him—floating in mid-air, high in the sky.

When they saw Aldrian's figure, many expressions turned to one of admiration and even piety. To many, Aldrian had already become their guardian deity, which caused him to feel a strong surge of faith from them. From the mortal point of view, Aldrian had shown something beyond their understanding—a strength that had never before appeared.

He had come to end the war and restore peace to the empire by himself. It was no wonder that he had become the subject of worship for these people.

"The civil war caused by the greed of one man has ended. I know the war has left many of you mourning the loss of loved ones. I understand that some of them may have fallen by my hand, and you may hate me for it. For those whose loved ones were killed by me, I will not offer a thousand excuses to evade the fact that I took their lives. But I can speak on behalf of the dead who were lost in this civil war."

"Do you think any of this would have happened if it weren't for the greed of the second prince, Wilmar?"

"He is the one who led your loved ones to their deaths. He is someone who will feel no remorse, even as he sends his men to die. Your loved ones had no choice but to jump to their deaths. Worse still, he worked with the devils to achieve his purpose."

Many people gritted their teeth as they remembered how Wilmar had caused all that destruction and how they had been coerced into war.

"Because of that, there is no punishment more appropriate or more fitting than death—the painful kind, one that will make him regret everything he has caused."

"Yesterday, I executed Wilmar, Grand Duke Donovan, and Carlson Harris for their actions and their treacherous nature in working with the devils. They died excruciating deaths, regretting even the fact that they had lived—a death better left unseen by any of you."

When they remembered how Aldrian had made a human body vanish with terrifying dark energy, a chill ran down their spines. If Aldrian had the power to kill so swiftly, they had no doubt that he could make death slow and agonizing.

"However, with the death of those three, your job is not yet done. The devils still hide in the shadows within the empire, and I, along with the imperial family, are already working together to rid the empire of every devil. There are others who have worked with them as well, beyond just those three."

"You don't have to worry about a senseless purge, because we have already identified those who worked with the devils, with irrefutable proof."

"For my final words, I hope that this empire will rise again after what has happened to you all—to become a 'cleaner' and stronger empire than before. You are the survivors of a great event that will be written into the history of this empire, and you must take pride in that."

"Make this empire greater than before."

After that, Aldrian vanished, leaving many people gazing up at the sky with determined eyes. What Aldrian had said gave them a sense of relief and hope for the future of the empire. They were relieved that Wilmar and those who had conspired with him were dead. Though it was a shame they couldn't witness it firsthand, they chose to trust in Aldrian's words and believe in him.

Although many still questioned Aldrian's origin and other aspects of him that seemed mysterious and suspicious, his actions provided solid proof that he had helped the empire and its people avoid falling into the wrong hands. They had to swallow their doubts, realizing it was wrong to question someone who had already done so much for their empire.

After Aldrian's brief speech, the people resumed their activities. Those who had recorded his words with information crystals would spread his message across the empire.

Aldrian had already returned to his mansion—or more precisely, to the dungeon beneath it. He stood in the room where he had tortured Wilmar and the others. The room was now stained only with blood, as Aldrian had obliterated every body part of Wilmar, Grand Duke Donovan, and Carlson Harris.

But why had he come back here?

Just moments ago, he had sensed a slight disturbance in the energy of the room and the sudden appearance of unknown beings and foreign energy that should not exist on this continent. Unfortunately, before he could see them with his Eyes of the Heaven, the beings had vanished, leaving him no time to determine what kind of beings they were.

He also sensed a lingering aura of death and traces of death laws, which only raised more questions. Who were these individuals that dared to appear and infiltrate this place?

Then he remembered beings with this very description, ones he had seen in his visions.

"Beings from the underworld?" he thought.

He frowned, puzzled. Why would beings from the underworld appear here? And how could they even get here? There was a barrier—one that could not be crossed freely by beings of a different realm unless something extraordinary had occurred. So, what had happened?

After a moment of thought, he finally arrived at a possible answer.

"Was it because I killed Wilmar and the others by destroying their souls completely and severing their karma with the underworld and the entire world?" That was the only possibility that came to mind.

He knew the underworld could sense the disturbances, and he suspected that his actions had weakened the barrier between this place and the underworld. By severing their karma and erasing their souls entirely with death laws, he might have triggered the disturbance that allowed the underworld's beings to come and investigate.

However, despite all of this, he simply shrugged.

"Well, unfortunately, they're already gone. I really would've liked to talk to them if I had the chance. Maybe next time," he thought.

He wasn't sure why, but he felt no fear—even with beings from the underworld appearing in this world. Even if they were far stronger than him, he only saw it as a chance to ask questions, to gain information.

He then turned and walked out of the room, heading toward another room at the end of the corridor.

In an unknown place, shrouded in darkness and filled with an ominous atmosphere, two figures gasped for breath as if they had just narrowly escaped something.

After a few moments of silence, one of them finally spoke.

"Shit, that was close. I thought we were going to get found out."

Chapter 483: Brought the Traitor Back

The two figures are in a place shrouded in darkness. Their environment is thick with death laws. Sometimes, chaotic noises echo in the distance—like people screaming or the sudden burst of flames.

These two figures are men—one with black hair, the other with white. Their skin is pale, as if no blood flows through their flesh, but they have a young appearance. Their faces are handsome, though right now, their expressions show only relief, as if they have just escaped from something.

Behind the two figures is a kind of portal, and it is obvious they just came through it in a panic, gasping for air.

"Shit, that was close. I thought we were going to get found out," the one with black hair said.

"Yes, to think that the disturbance was caused by the 'absolute one'... We almost endangered the future," the other one replied.

When they stepped into the room where Aldrian had killed Wilmar and the others, they sensed a strong traces of death laws. But then, they felt something else. They sensed the existence of a strange and powerful energy surrounding them, which they instantly recognized as this energy, possessed by only one person.

They also realized that this meant they had already stepped into that person's domain, which could only mean that person was the cause of the disturbance.

"To think that he has already recovered that much power. If we consider the difference in time, doesn't that mean it's been 16 or 17 years in that place? To think he already has the ability to sever someone's karma with both the underworld and the world itself... his development is terrifying. There's no way those who claim to be geniuses across all heavens could compare to him. Well, it's not really surprising, considering he's a

singularity. I think it will be much sooner than expected when he makes his comeback," the man with black hair said again.

"I agree. With the return of the absolute one coming much sooner, we'll have hope to turn the situation around. 'His Majesty' already has quite the burden holding those bastards back from taking over the underworld. Each year, we lose control of more parts of it."

The man with black hair sighed. "Let's go. We'll report this to His Majesty first. At least there will be some good news for now."

Aldrian had already entered another room inside the dungeon. In this room, there was only one person. He was seated, chained to his chair, his cultivation sealed. His blonde hair was messy, as if he hadn't cleaned himself in a long time. Despite his disheveled appearance, the hatred in his eyes as he looked at Aldrian was fierce.

Aldrian observed the man with a calm expression before sitting down in the seat right in front of him, staring at him for a few seconds.

In front of him was Cardinal Carsius.

Aldrian had teleported him here yesterday, at the same time he brought Grand Duke Donovan and Carlson. Aldrian placed him in a separate room, as this person was meant for the pope to punish. He allowed him to hear the screams of pain from Wilmar and the others as they were tortured.

He already gathered much information from this traitor when he looked into this man's memories, so he no longer had much usefulness. What remained was sending him back to the church's main territory.

"You will regret this. You don't understand what you've done. I've done all I can to give us a chance to pass the prophecy's time with the lives of many intact. Did you know that?"

Hearing that, Aldrian snorted in contempt at the righteous tone Cardinal Carsius used.

"Don't give me that kind of bullshit. Even you don't believe what you just said. You only did all of that for yourself, for your own greed. For a chance at 'our' survival? Give me a break. You're willing to sacrifice many people. So, you better save your lies for yourself."

"The sacrifices are necessary to fool the devils. If we don't do something, we'll have no chance," Cardinal Carsius retorted.

"Another fool who thinks he can fool the devils," Aldrian said with mockery, which made Cardinal Carsius' expression turn ugly.

"The moment you decided to work with the devils out of fear of the uncertainty of the future and their power, you no longer have the right to talk about the goodness of the masses."

"I don't want to hear any of your stupid reasons or justifications. It's much better if you save yourself with silence and wait for your judgment. I will take you to the church right now."

"Wait!" Aldrian didn't waste a second. He and Cardinal Carsius instantly disappeared from the room and reappearing inside the area of the main church of the Heavenly Direction Church.

The guards and a few bishops nearby flinched in shock at the sudden appearance of the two. However, as trained guards, they quickly surrounded them, swords already unsheathed and directed toward them. For these two figures to appear here and bypass the church's formation meant that they were experts.

"State yourself or we will—" However, before one of the guards could finish, he finally recognized the two people. Aldrian and Cardinal Carsius were well-known figures within the main church, so there was no way he could mistake them for anyone else.

"Your eminence!" he finally said, hurriedly sheathing his sword, followed by the other guards. Aldrian simply smiled at the guard.

"Tell the pope that I'm back and have already caught the traitor," he said.

"Yes, your eminence." The guard ran toward the main building while Aldrian was led to a special room to wait. Aldrian dragged Cardinal Carsius by the chain on his hands, treating him like the prisoner he was.

After a few minutes of waiting, the door to the room opened. Seeing the figure that entered, Aldrian smiled.

"Be careful. You shouldn't run too much, you've only just been able to walk not long ago," he said to the beautiful woman with golden hair in front of him.

Angelica's beautiful face, slightly gasping for air from her run, did not lose its charm. Her expression brightened when her eyes landed on Aldrian.

"Aldrian, you're already back?" she said as she walked toward him and stood right in front of him.

"Well, I got what I wanted, so I must send it as soon as possible," he said, giving her a slight gesture toward Cardinal Carsius, who was sitting on the floor.

Angelica then looked toward Cardinal Carsius, slightly frowning, but she turned back to Aldrian.

"I see. I heard what you did in the Atria Empire, and you created quite a ruckus there. At this point, I think there's no one who doesn't know your face and name."

"Well, many things happened, so it couldn't be helped that the time came for me to be known like this," he said, but then he noticed another person entering. Aldrian smiled at the incoming figure.

"This child, don't get too excited and run, or you'll slip," Pope Claudius said to Angelica with a gentle expression as he stepped inside the room.

"Your holiness," Aldrian said, giving a slight bow toward the pope. Behind Pope Claudius, Arthur followed, also showing a respectful expression toward Aldrian.

Aldrian nodded in acknowledgment to Arthur.

Looking at Aldrian return and stand before him, Pope Claudius couldn't help but feel satisfied with Aldrian's achievement. He had truly brought a storm to the Atria Empire, and that storm had ended the civil war.

To be honest, he hadn't expected Aldrian to act so high-profile, considering how Aldrian had acted in the past. He knew something had triggered Aldrian to act that way when the incident of the gu outbreak happened, and he was curious, wanting to hear Aldrian's story in detail.

"Young Aldrian, how have you been?" Pope Claudius asked with a warm smile.

"I'm good, your holiness, like never before," Aldrian replied.

Pope Claudius nodded. "Well, I can see that you are much stronger. You're truly a miracle, young man, for you to already reach the middle duke stage when you just entered the duke stage not long ago." Aldrian simply smiled at the pope's compliment.

After making the entire Atria Empire his domain, he had another breakthrough to the middle duke stage, and even now, he was already quite close to breaking through to the high duke stage. His visit to the Atria Empire had truly given him tremendous benefits.

"After all that chaos, I'm really curious about your adventure there," Pope Claudius said, but then he looked at Cardinal Carsius, who was also gazing at him with cold eyes. However, Pope Claudius simply snorted and looked behind him, where Arthur was already standing by.

"Take him to the prison. I will come later," the pope said.

Arthur didn't hesitate and took Cardinal Carsius outside, leaving only the three of them inside before the door closed. Angelica then prepared the tea, which astonished Aldrian. He hadn't expected Angelica to serve tea herself, and it made him feel honored.

"Now, tell me, young Aldrian. I'm really curious about the details of your adventure. It must have been exciting, right?" Pope Claudius asked with a slight teasing tone.

"Well, it can be said like that."

After that, he began to tell his story about the Atria Empire, accompanied by the tea that Angelica had served herself.

Chapter 484: The Family's Succession Problem

For the next few hours, Aldrian spoke about his adventure in the Atria Empire with Pope Claudius and Angelica. His story was more than enough to entertain them, as many events had unfolded during his time in the empire.

They showed a range of expressions as they listened, and when Aldrian finally finished, they both let out a long sigh. They now understood why he had done everything he did, and they couldn't help but commend his decisiveness. To punish those who had harmed his family, Aldrian had not held back in displaying his might. It wasn't arrogance—it was exactly what should have been done.

Aldrian's strength wasn't something kept for deterrence— it was a power he used to serve his cause.

"Oh, and I'm returning these to you," Aldrian said as he took out the Heaven's Punishment Spear and the Heavenly Sovereign Sanctuary Staff.

Pope Claudius was stunned at first, then sighed in relief.

"I'm truly grateful, young Aldrian. I don't even know how to repay you."

"No need, Your Holiness. It's only right that I help you and the church. The traitor problem isn't yours alone. Even if I had no connection to the church, I would still help—this concerns the devils, after all."

Pope Claudius accepted the spear and the staff.

"These legacy artifacts are our trump cards. To think that traitor was able to steal and use them is deeply troubling. He must have used some method to force the divine-grade artifacts to obey him," he said.

Aldrian nodded. "Yes. He used a method he obtained from the devils. It involved a formation that deceives divine-grade artifacts, allowing someone other than their master to wield them."

"But I have already removed the effect. Your Holiness does not need to worry. The artifacts have returned to their original state and can be used without issue."

The pope nodded again, then seemed to remember something.

"Ah, yes. About a week ago, the two emperors from the Doria Empire and the Vindas Empire came to see me. We spoke about you."

Aldrian raised his eyebrows. The two emperors had gone to the pope to talk about him?

"Well, they are among the few who know about your true parentage," the pope said. "We spoke about the future—about the moment when your parents' identities become known across the continent, and how we should respond to it. The emperors are trying to find common ground. They know that if this matter is not handled properly, it could spark conflict between the Flamecrest and Rivas families."

"When that time comes, many will ask which family you intend to inherit. Your father and mother are each the successors of their respective houses. You will not be able to avoid the question."

"And it is not something you can simply say, 'I will not choose between them,' because right now, you are their only son. Their families will continue pressing you, or in this case, trying to persuade you."

The pope paused as he observed Aldrian's expression. He, too, was curious about how Aldrian planned to address this issue.

"Do you already have a plan for handling this?" he asked.

Aldrian took a sip of his tea and smiled at the pope.

"Of course I do," he replied.

"Then, have you made a decision—"

"However, I indeed will not choose between them," Aldrian interrupted.

Pope Claudius was stunned.

"But that will create more—"

"Your Holiness, there is a reason why my parents named me Aldrian Aster."

The pope then understood what Aldrian meant but shook his head.

"I understand what you're trying to imply, but it's not that simple, even if Aldrey and Irene do not want you to inherit their families, as I mentioned, their family members will still bother you. They won't share the same views as your parents. These are noble families that require prestige and brilliant descendants like you to continue their legacy."

"Yes, that's true," Aldrian replied. "But what can they really do if I refuse? Coerce me? If I choose only one of them, there will be hidden problems that will eventually erupt in the future. Negative emotions like envy and greed are not something I will underestimate, especially within noble families."

"I don't want to sound arrogant, but I know that whichever family I choose will undoubtedly benefit the most. If I choose only one of them, in the short term, there may be no problem. But it will create negative feelings in the family I do not choose, and those feelings will accumulate over time."

"In the far future, this could become dangerous and act as a hidden knife in the relationship between the two families. The future generations of the family I don't choose will carry hostile intentions toward the other family because of my decision."

The pope paused to think for a moment, then nodded in agreement. He hadn't considered that angle and couldn't help but be impressed by Aldrian's strategic thinking.

"So, you plan to create your own family?" he asked.

Aldrian nodded.

"That is the best decision I can think of. I won't have to choose between the two families, and there will be no grudge between them. If Father and Mother want successors for the Flamecrest and Rivas families in the future, they can give birth to younger siblings for me. I believe that's the most fair solution."

Angelica blushed, hearing Aldrian speak about his parents as if they could have children at any time. But Pope Claudius nodded in agreement, forgetting that he was speaking to the most powerful youngster on the continent, and one of the most formidable cultivators.

If Aldrian didn't want it, what could anyone else do?

The tricks that worked on others would have no effect on him. With his immense strength and reputation, there was no way the Flamecrest or Rivas families could coerce him into choosing one of them. Even if they tried to use his parents against him, it would only backfire.

"I see, that's a good decision," Pope Claudius said, taking a sip of his tea, followed by Aldrian.

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot to tell you. Emperor Herman wants to see you after this. He was nagging me that if you came to the church, I should let him know. He said he wants to take you somewhere," Pope Claudius explained.

Aldrian tilted his head. Emperor Herman wanted to take him somewhere?

"I already told him earlier. And speaking of him, he seems to be here already."

Aldrian was stunned but then looked outside using his Eyes of the Heaven. Just as the pope had said, he saw Emperor Herman, in disguise, making his way through the crowd.

Although the emperor was amidst the crowd and had tried to suppress his aura and cultivation, Aldrian could still sense his high Emperor-stage cultivation, which revealed his identity.

Emperor Herman wore an ordinary robe and used a transformation technique to disguise his face, making him unrecognizable. He approached the front of the church and headed toward the inner area without any issue, as it seemed the pope had already informed the guards to let him in.

Not long after, Emperor Herman arrived at the front of the room, escorted by the guards, and the pope allowed him inside.

As soon as the emperor laid his eyes on Aldrian, his gaze lit up as if he had saw a brilliant gem. Once the guards left, Emperor Herman shifted his appearance back to his original face.

Aldrian smiled and stood up to greet the emperor.

"Your Majesty, it's good to see you again. However, it's truly surprising that you came here in this way. Did you really come alone from the Vindas Empire?"

Emperor Herman smiled.

"Well, it was much faster this way. If I had followed the proper protocol, I would've arrived here tomorrow at the earliest, and that would be a waste of time," he said, approaching Aldrian.

"How have you been, young Aldrian?"

"I'm good, Your Majesty. Better than ever."

"Good, good." The emperor said, placing a hand on Aldrian's shoulder as if he were family, clearly proud of him.

Emperor Herman then turned to the pope and Angelica, slightly lowering his head in a sign of respect. After all, the pope held a high status, and he was both older and stronger than him. As for Angelica, she held the same status as the pope.

"My apologies, Your Holiness. It was rude of me not to greet you first, but I was simply too happy to meet young Aldrian again," he said.

Pope Claudius nodded with a smile.

"Not a problem. I understand your eagerness, especially since you have business with Aldrian."

After that, the emperor took a seat and looked at Aldrian.

"By the way, young Aldrian, you didn't tell me you were the child of Aldrey and Irene. Because of that, I nearly got fooled by that bastard Durand. *Sigh*. I apologize for my foul language, Your Holiness."

Aldrian was stunned. He didn't know what had happened between the two emperors, but he still felt sorry and wore an apologetic expression.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. At that time, I couldn't find the right moment to tell you about my origins. If it caused you any discomfort, I will make it up to you," he said.

But the emperor simply waved his hand.

"No, you don't have to do anything. I was just expressing my frustration, nothing more. You've already done so much for me and the Vindas Empire, and I still haven't properly rewarded you for it. I'm the one who should feel ashamed," he said before taking a sip of the tea that had been served before his arrival.

"So, Your Majesty, I heard from His Holiness that you wanted to take me somewhere. May I know where you plan to take me?" Aldrian asked.

Chapter 485: Back to Vindas Empire

Emperor Herman smiled at Aldrian.

"You'll see later. Well then, how about I take you there after this? Do you have any business left here?" he asked.

"No, I'm already done here," Aldrian replied.

"If you don't, then let's go. It's better to leave now than later. I'd also feel more at ease if I could bring you there sooner."

Aldrian then looked at Pope Claudius.

"My apologies, but it looks like I have to leave earlier than expected, Your Holiness. If I have time in the future, I'll visit again," he said.

Then he looked at Angelica, who was already showing a rather sad expression, knowing he had to leave again. His expression softened as he saw her like that.

"Angelica, don't be sad. I'll visit again in the future. It's not like we won't see each other for a long time."

Angelica sighed.

"I know. It's just... I can't help but feel sad. You just got here, and now you're leaving again," she said.

"I'm sorry. But next time I come, I'll make sure to spend more time here."

Pope Claudius looked at Angelica and Aldrian, then asked her gently,

"Do you want to go outside with young Aldrian?"

Hearing the Pope's question, Aldrian and Angelica were stunned. Even Emperor Herman raised his eyebrows.

However, before Angelica could show her happiness, the Pope's next words made her pause.

"If you can master every technique I've taught you since you were able to walk, then you may go outside with young Aldrian the next time he visits. If you master them, I'll feel more assured when you're out there."

Angelica remained silent. She would be lying if she said she wasn't disappointed, but she understood the Pope's concern. She sighed inwardly—at the very least, she had found a new reason to push herself. She would do her best to master everything, so she would never be a burden to Aldrian.

"Alright," she said softly after a small sigh.

Pope Claudius turned to Aldrian with an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry, young Aldrian, but could you give this child of mine a chance to go outside with you in the future? I know this is a selfish request."

"No, Your Holiness. It's my honor and pleasure to take Angelica with me," Aldrian said. "In fact, the only thing that held me back from asking her to follow my group outside was your permission. I understand what you're worried about, and I didn't want to put you in a difficult position."

He then looked at Angelica.

"I hope you can reach your target and come see the wider world with me. I'll be waiting, Angelica."

Angelica nodded with determination, her expression firm.

"Yes. I'll do my best and won't disappoint you."

Pope Claudius could only shed tears inwardly. His Angelica had already begun to forget about him and now saw Aldrian as her source of motivation. Why had she said she didn't want to disappoint Aldrian? What about him? Where was her love for him?

But even with those thoughts, his gaze softened. He watched her change before his eyes. She had become far more expressive since meeting Aldrian and ever since she had learned to walk and see the world for the first time. It was a striking contrast to the past, when she had been like a beautiful bird kept in a cage.

She had potential, yet her condition and status had forced her to remain inside the church. It felt as though fate had been cruel, deciding that she would live like that until the end.

However, Aldrian changed all of that. Now, she could do what others could do. For him, as her father figure and the one who truly loved her, this was a sign that the bird was ready to leave the cage. She would now spread her wings to explore the wide world without worry, free from the burden of her condition and status.

What he could do was continue to guide her and, in the end, watch her become free. Even though she was a saintess, he would not let that status keep her confined here. She would be a free saintess, one who explored the world.

With Aldrian by her side, he felt more assured that she would be safe. In fact, he believed there was no place safer for her than with Aldrian at this time.

"Alright then, it's time to go," Aldrian said as he and Emperor Herman stood up. After exchanging a few parting words, Aldrian stepped outside the room. But then, he noticed two figures standing beside the door, looking toward him. They were a man and a woman, and once they saw Aldrian, they immediately bowed.

"Master," they said simultaneously.

They were the Golden Phoenix and the Great Peng in their human forms.

Aldrian nodded.

"It looks like you've done well here. There's nothing wrong while you've been here, right?"

"No, Master," they replied.

"Keep behaving well and stay here. I'll be leaving again."

Hearing that Aldrian was leaving once more, they felt a twinge of sadness, something Aldrian could clearly sense. He then spoke to them.

"I will bring you out when the time is right, so be good and wait here until then."

"Yes, Master."

Emperor Herman looked at the two figures with a solemn expression. This was the first time he had encountered them, and his instincts immediately tingled, warning him that these two were far stronger than him in a direct confrontation. He wondered who they were, especially since they called Aldrian "Master." But Aldrian had already walked past them.

He glanced at them for a moment before continuing on, following Aldrian.

Aldrian and Emperor Herman then walked out of the church, escorted by the Pope and Angelica. However, they exited through a different gate, one reserved for important guests entering or leaving the church. Aldrian had also donned a robe to cover his body and face. Given his fame, he would undoubtedly attract attention if he walked through the public areas without disguise.

"Why don't you just change your face to another one? Isn't that much easier?" the Emperor asked, using voice transmission.

"Well, that is true, but then it would become a never-ending cycle if I had to change my face every time I go out. I don't know, I just don't like that style. Changing faces so often makes me feel like I'm not confident in myself."

"I feel that if it's not really urgent, then I only need this one disguise. In fact, I only use the transformation technique to hide my features so people can't guess my parents. If it weren't for that, I would show the world my real face," Aldrian replied.

Aldrian knew that this reason might seem ridiculous and arrogant, but it was how he truly felt deep inside. If he had to be honest, one of the technique he disliked was the

transformation technique, as it forced him to hide his face—a face that had become a symbol of his parents' unity and pride.

He also thought that maybe all of those feelings came from his inner self as the emperor in his past life, which was deeply embedded inside him and had instilled in him high pride and confidence.

As the person with the title '*The Great Emperor of All Heavens*,' he thought that his preferences from the past had been carried over into this life, shaping his mindset and character.

Emperor Herman smiled at Aldrian's answer, thinking that Aldrian truly had high confidence, even arrogance, but he found it rather appealing. Aldrian had the strength to back up that confidence. Without it, he would be nothing more than a fool, swimming in a sea of idealism destined to drown to death because he was too rigid to adapt.

Aldrian and Emperor Herman then used the teleportation station to travel to Finna, the capital city of the Vindas Empire. After they arrived in Finna, the emperor led Aldrian in the opposite direction of the imperial palace, which could be seen from the teleportation station in the city.

They flew toward the northern direction, quickly moving beyond the city walls. A few city guardians and imperial knights, some at the king and even emperor stage, initially intended to stop this unauthorized flight by an unknown emperor-level cultivator. However, once they realized it was their emperor, they fell silent and allowed them to pass.

Emperor Herman and Aldrian continued flying until they reached a mountainous range, about 400 kilometers from the capital. Emperor Herman landed beside a high cliff, followed by Aldrian.

However, once Aldrian landed, he sensed strong flows of faith moving towards the inside of the mountain. The thick power of faith seemed to be coming from everywhere, and he instantly knew that this was the place where the Vindas Empire's entire faith gathered.

Aldrian was truly astonished. All this time, he had always found that the place where the entire faith of the empire gathered was within the imperial palace area, where their secret vault was hidden. But this place was far from the imperial palace or the capital city, which made Aldrian curious about what the emperor wanted to show him.

Emperor Herman then touched the cliff wall and injected his energy. A yellow light shone from the hidden formation, followed by a mechanical sound before a secret passage opened in front of them.

"Follow me, don't fall too far behind," the emperor said, looking at Aldrian with a smile.

Chapter 486: Avandi Imperial Family's Legacy Artifact

Aldrian entered the secret passage, following Emperor Herman. As they walked deeper into the mountain, Aldrian finally sensed a strong energy source emanating from its depths. The energy was not unfamiliar to him—it was divine energy.

He began to understand where the emperor was leading him. Anything capable of producing divine energy was considered a rare treasure in this land, and each one became a legacy artifact.

The path they walked was quite spacious, wide enough for four people to walk side by side with illumination crystals lit both sides of the corridor.

After walking for ten minutes, they finally arrived at a spacious chamber resembling a hall. In the center of the hall stood a platform surrounded by pond of golden water—something Aldrian immediately recognized as a manifestation of dense divine energy, condensed into liquid form.

The setting reminded him of a place in the Doria Imperial Palace, where their legacy artifact, the Heavenly Guardian Armor, was kept.

However, instead of armor, the platform here held a longsword displayed on a small stone table. It was a beautifully crafted golden-black sword, and it radiated an aura of high divine grade. Aldrian also noticed a crystal of divinity embedded in the sword's handguard, which immediately revealed the source of the dense divine energy in the hall.

He then turned to read the information about the sword, and something caught his attention.

Heavenly Dragon Sword

Description: The Avandi Imperial Family's legacy artifact. This sword was forged by the best blacksmiths master of the Vindas Empire during the era of the empire's first emperor. It took over ten years to forge the sword to completion.

Made from a scale of the first dragon to ever exist, combined with a crystal of divinity, the sword grants a tremendous boost in attack's power to its wielder. Each strike from the wielder delivers an attack 25% stronger than a normal blow.

It is an exceptionally durable weapon, with only a few things in the entire heavens capable of breaking it.

Level: High Divine Grade

Aldrian slightly frowned. The sword is made from the scale of the first dragon to ever exist? Long Shentian? He wanted to ask, but Emperor Herman beat him to it.

"This is our most precious artifact, our legacy artifact, crafted by the best blacksmith of our empire at that time, it took ten years to forge. It is said that the sword was made from the scale of a dragon that the first emperor had to fight a group of dragons to obtain."

"This sword has become the symbol of the imperial family and the Vindas Empire. It has protected the empire and the imperial family's existence several times throughout history." The emperor spoke with pride in his tone.

"Fought a group of dragons? Do you know the details of that event, Your Majesty? How could the ancestor of the empire have gotten a scale from a dragon?" Aldrian asked, still observing the sword.

He knew there was more to the story than just the first emperor fighting a group of dragons. There was no way someone like Long Shentian could be defeated, let alone have one of his scales taken. Even if he were injured, Aldrian didn't believe anyone in this place—or even in this heaven—could easily take his scale.

"You know the history of the powers on this continent, right? The ones that say we are actually from outside the continent, before we were trapped here?" the emperor asked, to which Aldrian responded with a nod.

"According to our records, not long after our ancestor arrived, chaos broke out on this continent. Many artifacts and treasures scattered around, sparking competition and conflict between various parties. At that time, the dragons were also one of the parties that came to this land. The records don't provide many details, but it is said that the first emperor and his party fought a group of dragons before he obtained the scale."

Aldrian slightly frowned. The answer still didn't satisfy him; something was missing, and it just didn't click. He had heard and read about the past age, when dragons still had a presence on this continent, alive and thriving. It was said that the dragons, too, came from outside the continent and arrived at the same time as the other parties.

Aldrian doubted that these dragons were associated with Long Shentian, as Long Shentian himself was not someone who could be fought by the likes of the ancestor of the Vindas Empire. If the first emperor of the Vindas Empire had met Long Shentian and fought him, Long Shentian would have easily killed him, and the history of the continent would have been drastically different.

However, the record from the imperial family stated that the first emperor fought with a group of dragons. How could he reconcile these conflicting details? There were a few possibilities.

First, the record could be false, created merely to glorify the first emperor's past.

Second, the record could be true, and the first emperor did indeed fight a group of dragons—but he never encountered Long Shentian, yet somehow managed to obtain his scale.

Aldrian then began to consider possible scenarios when suddenly a memory from one of his visions came to him. He recalled looking at the memories from the point of view of the Heavenly Scarf of Divine Phoenix. In that vision, he heard Long Shentian mention that he and Feng Xuanyin had to give their belongings to the people of this land because of the prophecy regarding his return.

Aldrian guessed that perhaps the dragon's scale was something the first emperor and the group of dragons had to fight over, a contest to decide who would claim ownership of it.

If Long Shentian had decided on a specific group to receive his scale, there would have been no fight. With his strength alone, his words and decisions would be absolute, and challenging the ownership of a scale already designated for someone would be seen as mocking his authority.

Aldrian doubted that Long Shentian would allow any weakling from this place to ridicule him or oppose his decision. That was why he thought the scale might have been open to anyone strong enough to claim it, but they had to fight for it. The first emperor of the Vindas Empire must have been the one to succeed.

Emperor Herman, noticing Aldrian's deep thoughts and occasional frown, couldn't help but ask,

"Is there any problem, young Aldrian?"

Hearing the emperor's question, Aldrian looked at him, smiled, and shook his head.

"No, not at all, Your Majesty. After looking at this place, I suddenly remembered a place with a similar atmosphere, so I couldn't help but wonder if there's any connection between them," he answered.

Emperor Herman nodded but then thought that Aldrian must be referring to the Doria Imperial Family's secret place where they store their legacy artifacts. Although he had never entered the Doria Imperial Family's secret place, the old man of the Doria Empire had told him that Aldrian had been brought to their secret place and had cultivated there.

He was stunned when he heard it and thought that Emperor Durand had really gone all out to make Aldrian feel comfortable, so he would choose to stay with his mother's family. There was no precedent for an outsider, even one with noble status, being allowed into that place, so Aldrian's permission to be there—and even cultivate—was a clear sign of Emperor Durand's sincerity.

After hearing this, of course, Emperor Herman did not want to lose out and decided to do the same. If that old man could do it, then so could he.

"Your Majesty, may I move closer to the platform?" Aldrian asked.

"Of course you can. In fact, this is exactly why I brought you here. I will let you cultivate in this place—where the concentration of heaven and earth energy is the densest in the entire empire. You won't find anywhere else like it. Here, you can double the speed of your cultivation, so I hope you take full advantage of it," the emperor said with a smile.

Aldrian smiled in response. Of course, he wouldn't let this opportunity slip. He could turn the entire Vindas Empire into his domain. Once this was done, most of the Barisan Continent would already be covered by it. The only places he had yet to cover were the Buddhist sect territory, the Everlasting Silent Forest, and, of course, the devil territory.

"Alright, thank you, Your Majesty," Aldrian said before approaching the pond and gazing at the sword for a moment.

A sword forged from the scale of the first dragon in existence—he doubted even the first emperor of the Vindas Empire truly understood its value. This sword was also a sign, the people who had awaited his return for so long had left traces like this everywhere, silently showing that they were still waiting for him.

They had not hesitated to scatter their traces across the continent, just so he could remember them again—something that moved him deeply.

He stood beside the pond and closed his eyes. It was time to make the entire Vindas Empire his domain.

Chapter 487: The Strangeness of the Secret Place

Once Aldrian successfully built his domain, another surge of power flowed through him. His cultivation rose again, and he finally broke through to the High Duke stage—but it didn't stop there. Since he had already been close to breaking through before he arrived, the creation of the empire's domain gave him a high starting point.

After reaching the High Duke stage, his cultivation continued to rise. The energy within him kept growing, nearing the threshold of the Peak Duke stage. A few seconds later, he finally reached it, and it kept rising still, before finally slowed down at the midpoint of the Peak Duke stage.

Emperor Herman, watching everything unfold, felt like he was seeing something out of a fantasy. Someone breaking through stages as easily as breathing made him start to question Aldrian's existence.

By now, he was convinced that Aldrian was not human in the way others were. He might appear human, but Herman believed he was something entirely different—some other kind of being with a cultivation constitution far beyond his knowledge.

There was no way a true human could do something like this without harming their body. A sudden rise in energy would tear the meridians or even destroy the dantian if it was not stabilized properly after a breakthrough.

The cultivation foundation of someone who focuses on speed tends to be fragile. It can collapse if they force their cultivation to endure too much strain.

For example, unleashing a complex technique that demands a large amount of energy and a high cultivation stage can backfire. If their foundation cannot withstand the burden of the technique, their cultivation may collapse, causing them to drop in level or even become crippled entirely.

Another example is when someone attempts to break through to a higher stage, such as the Duke stage. They often struggle due to the weakness of their foundation. Even if they succeed, they might only be able to exert power equivalent to the peak of the Marquess stage.

The strength behind each attack from a cultivator with a weak foundation is far less than the same attack performed by someone with a stable foundation at the same level.

This does not even take into account the cultivator's comprehension, which is important in supporting the cultivation process, or other factors that must be considered before attempting a breakthrough.

In short, breaking through, especially at levels like the Duke stage and above, is not a simple or easy matter.

That was common knowledge in the cultivation world—something most cultivators with high aspirations tried to avoid. Only foolish and reckless individuals would sacrifice their foundation just to reach a higher level more quickly.

But what about Aldrian? From the emperor's observation, it was clear that Aldrian's cultivation foundation remained solid despite the speed of his breakthroughs.

The last time Aldrian had been in the Vindas Empire, he was still at the Marquess stage. Then, more than a year later, news came that he had already reached the Duke stage while causing chaos in the Atria Empire.

Now, he had broken through again—this time to the Peak Duke stage. The emperor could even sense that Aldrian was already halfway toward another breakthrough, to the Grand Duke stage.

Aldrian also possesses incredible strength, allowing him to battle across levels—something only cultivators with both genius and a solid foundation can achieve. Many noble descendants are considered geniuses and can cross levels in battle, so that's not too surprising for most.

Aldrian being able to cross battles wouldn't be too amazing... that is, if he could only cross a level or two of minor stages.

In Aldrian's case, he was able to fight against someone at the Emperor stage while he was still at the Marquess stage in the past. That's already beyond the realm of what common sense can explain. It can't simply be attributed to genius or anything of the sort.

Anyone who can battle an Emperor-stage cultivator while still at the Marquess stage has transcended the knowledge and comprehension built over countless generations.

Looking at Aldrian's figure now, Emperor Herman felt an urge to prostrate towards him. Aldrian exuded an aura much stronger than ever before after reaching the Peak Duke stage, and his presence had become more and more like that of a true monarch, radiating a regal aura. Even if he simply stood there, doing nothing, it was clear to anyone that Aldrian was no ordinary person.

Once the surge in his cultivation stopped, Aldrian exhaled a mouthful of air and opened his eyes. His aura receded and returned to his body. He looked at his hands, clenching them a few times to feel the new power inside him.

A satisfied smile appeared on his face, and after a moment he looked at the sword. There was no trigger for a vision or anything of that sort, so he thought he was done here, as there was nothing left that interested him.

Aldrian turned his body to look at Emperor Herman.

"Thank you for the chance to cultivate here, Your Majesty. I truly appreciate it," he said with gratitude, giving a slight bow towards the emperor. The gesture made Herman flinch slightly, snapping him out of his trance. He looked at Aldrian for a moment before unconsciously releasing a sigh.

"You are truly an anomaly," he said. "I really can't understand you. To be honest, I'm slightly scared by your absurdity. This is the first time I've encountered someone like you, so I apologize."

Aldrian smiled at the emperor.

"Well, what can I say? I didn't choose to be this way—I've been different since the day I was born. All I can do is take advantage of my unique condition and use it to contribute to society."

Emperor Herman smiled at Aldrian. He was truly down to earth, not pompous like some cultivators who, after gaining a little strength, immediately became showy and arrogant, caring little for others. He found himself liking Aldrian more and more.

"Right, Your Majesty, I've been wondering about this place. Why is the secret location for storing the imperial family's legacy artifacts here? Normally, wouldn't the secret vault or storage place for such items be within the imperial palace area? Isn't that safer and easier to access than a place so far away from the palace?"

Emperor Herman nodded.

"Right, Your question is understandable. This place was built during the era of the first emperor. As for why this location was chosen? Well, it's because the first emperor himself ordered it."

"At one time, the first emperor reached the state of enlightenment while cultivating after he got the scale of the dragon. What kind of enlightenment? The records don't go into detail. However, since that time, the emperor ordered that this place be used as the secret location for storing the legacy artifact. He also gave strict orders that the storage place should never be moved."

He paused for a moment, then continued. "We keep this place here because of the first emperor's order, but the true reason why he chose this place remains a mystery. We've never dared to move it because the first emperor warned, and it's written in the records, that if the secret location were ever moved, it would bring chaos and disaster. And so, it remains here to this day."

Aldrian frowned upon hearing that. The place of enlightenment? After that, the first emperor chose this spot to store the legacy artifact? Aldrian felt there had to be more to it. The first emperor must have experienced something during that enlightenment for him to suddenly choose this place and leave behind such a warning.

Something big—something Aldrian had missed when he stepped into this place.

He spread his senses across the entire secret area, extending even to the mountain itself, but still found nothing unusual. Everything seemed normal, which only deepened his confusion.

What made the emperor give such a warning? Why this place? What had he missed?

Aldrian turned his gaze toward the Heavenly Dragon Sword, then looked at Emperor Herman.

"Your Majesty, may I touch the sword? I want to make sure of something," he said.

The emperor raised his eyebrows but still nodded.

"Of course you can, but be careful. As is commonly known, divine-grade artifacts already have their own consciousness. This is our family's legacy artifact, so it might try to reject you, or even harm you."

"If the sword shows any sign of rejection, release your hand immediately."

Aldrian nodded. "Alright."

He floated toward the platform and landed in front of the sword. Without hesitation, he reached out and touched the blade, which was forged from Long Shentian's scale. The sword trembled, but before it could react further, Aldrian released his golden energy and enveloped the sword in it.

The sword stopped trembling, and Aldrian could even sense the feeling coming from it—it happily accepted his golden energy. However, after a few seconds, he withdrew his hand from the blade, a confused expression forming on his face.

"There's no reaction."

No hidden will of a dragon. Nothing special at all. It felt like a "normal" divine-grade artifact.

He then tried to use the thread of origin to look into the past, but what he saw were scattered fragments of visions with no clear connection to what he wanted to find. After thinking for a few moments, he finally found a possible reason.

"The dragon scale that already became the sword is mixed with other materials. If I want to focus on the dragon scale alone, I'll have to separate each of the materials," Aldrian thought with a sigh.

His comprehension of the thread of origin was still insufficient for dealing with mixed objects.

"Forget it. Maybe I'll uncover the mystery behind this place in the future." With that, he turned back to the emperor's side.

Chapter 488: The Execution

When Aldrian returned to his side, Emperor Herman was once again amazed. The sword did not reject Aldrian and allowed him to touch it. He knew how difficult it was to even lay a hand on that legacy artifact. Even Claude, to this day, still hadn't earned the sword's recognition.

"All is good. We're good to go," Aldrian said.

"Alright," Emperor Herman replied, and they walked toward the exit.

As they walked, the emperor sighed inwardly. He hadn't expected it to be this simple, or to take so little time. He thought Aldrian would cultivate here for days—maybe weeks, even months—so he had already prepared the place for a long stay.

But no. Aldrian had just stood there for less than a minute and—ta da—he broke through twice and seemed to have already stabilized his cultivation.

Whatever Aldrian's body constitution or cultivation technique was, it was truly beyond comprehension. The emperor couldn't help but wonder where Aldrian had gotten such a technique. There was no way the Flamecrest or Rivas family had anything like that. If they did, someone like Aldrian would've appeared long ago.

After they emerged from the secret passage and stepped outside, the emperor looked at Aldrian.

"Young Aldrian, let's go to the imperial palace. I want to hear more about what you did in the Atria Empire. All I've heard so far is that you caused quite an uproar there, and I'd like to hear the story from you."

Aldrian smiled.

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'd love to tell you my story, but I hope you won't be bored. I don't think it will be all that entertaining."

"I doubt that," the emperor replied with smile, and they flew back toward the capital.

Aldrian glanced at the mountain range behind him for a moment before continuing the flight. He still hadn't solved the mystery of that place.

After returning to the capital and arriving at the imperial palace, Emperor Herman brought Aldrian to his private study. Prince Claude, who had heard about his father's return, came to visit as well. He was the only one who knew that the emperor had gone out alone. There was no way Emperor Herman would leave the palace without informing at least one person.

This was also a safeguard, in case something happened to him while he was away. It prevented panic and ensured there was someone ready to take over imperial duties if needed.

Claude also knew that his father had gone to meet Aldrian and intended to bring him to the family's secret place to let him cultivate there. His father had already told him about it, and Claude understood the reason behind the decision.

It was because of the ongoing competition with the Doria Empire. He had witnessed firsthand how intense the argument had been between his father and Emperor Durand regarding Aldrian. Naturally, Emperor Herman did not want to lose to Durand.

When Claude saw Aldrian, he was momentarily stunned. However, he quickly greeted him with a smile and joined the emperor to listen to Aldrian's stories about what had happened in the Atria Empire.

While Aldrian was telling his stories, he also checked one of the rooms. There was someone whose condition he wanted to see for himself.

Princess Loraine was under house arrest, and she had received additional punishment for working with the devils. In her bedroom, he finally saw her. and as he had expected, her condition was not good.

She sat on her bed, staring at nothing. Her body was thin, and her face had grown pale. She had lost all of her cultivation, and the beauty that once defined her youthful face had faded, as if she had aged several years in a short time. Her hair was slightly disheveled, and her expression resembled that of a corpse. Though she was breathing, to him, she looked more like a dead person. There was no spirit in her, no will—just a blank, empty gaze.

She had already lost her reputation and the trust of her own family. Even the people of the empire who did not know the truth about her, her name had been stained after the truth about the Durand family was revealed.

She had also lost the one she loved—the lust devil—and had ended up dancing in the palm of Aldrian's hand, clinging to the belief that he was still alive.

There was nothing left for her to live for.

Aldrian had no doubt she would have chosen to end her life if she could. But in her current state, he doubted she was capable of doing so. He suspected she had already tried a few times in the past, only to be stopped by the emperor.

After assessing the princess's condition, Aldrian retracted his Eyes of the Heaven and returned his focus to his story. Emperor Herman and Claude listened intently as Aldrian spoke, and they discussed many things for the next few hours, until the sun began to set. Only then did Aldrian excuse himself.

Aldrian politely declined the invitation to stay for some time before finally heading back to his mansion in Caritas. He feared that if he stayed in Vindas, something might happen that would keep him there, causing him to miss his promise to Baek Jimin.

On the next day, when the sun had already risen above the eastern horizon, news spread from the church that the traitor Cardinal Carsius had been brought to the main church and would soon receive his punishment.

Many were not surprised, as most already knew that Aldrian had fought Cardinal Carsius in the capital city of the Atria Empire.

The battle had been too large to hide the cardinal's features. His divine-grade spear, his techniques, and the holy energy he wielded had given away his identity as the traitor the church had been searching for, confirming that the second prince of the Atria Empire had indeed been harboring the traitor.

The execution was scheduled to take place when the sun was as high as a two-meter stick, to be witnessed by the people of Heavenly City. A platform had already been constructed in the city's plaza, allowing those who wished to watch to do so without overcrowding.

When the time for the execution finally came, Cardinal Carsius was brought to the platform under the escort of the church's knights. Pope Claudius and Arthur were also present, while Angelica watched the event from the main building of the church.

Many of the people who saw Cardinal Carsius hurled insults at him, and some even attempted to assault him, but the escorts swiftly prevented it. Cardinal Carsius showed no reaction, his face expressionless.

Once the cardinal was atop the platform, positioned on the wooden block for his execution, Pope Claudius stepped forward and addressed the crowd in a firm tone.

"To all who witness this, this event is a reminder, a warning to those who would consider working with the devils for their own gain. Those who align with the devils spread destruction. No matter how much you try to hide your actions from the eyes of the people, the heavens always know what you have done, and what you will do. You will get what you deserve."

"This traitor is an example of how karma returns to those who betray us by working with the devils. He has already caused immense harm to the people of the continent, bringing death and destruction."

"This time, we will end his worthless life and set an example. Your fate will be the same as his if you follow in his footsteps and do not repent."

Pope Claudius then glanced at Cardinal Carsius, who met his gaze, his expression now filled with anger.

"You will all regret this," the cardinal spat. "You have no idea what's coming, and when that time comes, you will tremble, and you will die pathetic deaths! And that man—he

will die the most horrible death!" His voice was filled with grudge, directed at Pope Claudius and all those who were witnessing the scene.

Pope Claudius did not react. He merely nodded at the executioner before stepping back. Giving the executioner space, he lifted his axe.

Swish! Thud!

As the executioner's axe swung down, Cardinal Carsius's head rolled off the platform, blood spilling from his severed neck. His expression, even in death, still bore an expression of fury.

The crowd cheered as they saw the cardinal's head roll, their hatred of him palpable. They had once believed him to be a good man, but now they knew he was a traitor, working with the devils. They felt deeply betrayed, never expecting that someone who had been considered one of the candidates for the pope's successor could commit such acts.

They felt foolish and couldn't help but shudder at the thought of the church falling into the hands of someone like him. Didn't that mean they had allowed a man who worked with the devils to become the leader of one of the most powerful organizations without even knowing it?

They couldn't imagine how they would have been manipulated and played by Cardinal Carsius, if that had happened.

While the situation in the Heavenly City was quite festive due to the traitor's execution, the one who had captured him didn't really care about it, as he and Baek Jimin were already far away from the main church's territory.

Aldrian and Baek Jimin had already returned to the demon territory because she wanted to take him somewhere in the territory, and he simply accompanied her wherever she wished to go. Both of them wore robes common to the demon territory.

At this moment, they were walking along the side of a high hill, surrounded by breathtaking scenery that stretched as far as the eye could see. They continued walking until they reached the top of the hill, where they she stopped.

"Here," Baek Jimin said with a smile.

Chapter 489: When You Truly Say Those Three Words

Aldrian and Baek Jimin had already removed their disguises, revealing their true faces by the time they arrived. They were in the southern part of the Thorny Flower Garden territory, where a wide valley stretched out with breathtaking scenery.

The hills were covered in many kinds of flowers and other vegetation, turning the valley floor into a green expanse filled with a fragrant scent.

At the base of the valley, a beautiful, clear river flowed toward the horizon, with flowers blooming along both banks.

Aldrian and Baek Jimin were standing at the top of one of the hills, which was the highest point in the valley. From there, they could see the scenery spread out before them, far and wide.

Aldrian really enjoyed this kind of scenery. Who wouldn't appreciate something so beautiful? He was someone who cherished the beauty of nature, especially when it came with a peaceful atmosphere like this. Moments like this were the times when he could finally set down the weight on his shoulders and allow himself to relax.

"This region is called the Valley of the Promise. It's a well-known place within the Thorny Flower Garden," Baek Jimin said with a smile. "It's said that in ancient times, this valley was where two powerful cultivators—a man and a woman—made a promise to reach the peak of cultivation together as lovers. People say their vow was blessed by the heavens themselves, and ever since then, this place has held a special meaning."

"From that moment, this valley became famous, and it grew into a place where people would declare their promises to each other. Many say that the promises declared here are bound to be fulfilled in the end," Baek Jimin said, turning her body to look at Aldrian.

"This is the place where my father and mother said they made their promise to each other before they married — a promise that united them despite the many challenges they faced at the time." Her voice softened as she reminisced about the story her mother had told her when she was a child.

"Father was just a wandering cultivator, a genius with the great talent and have a fateful encounter that allowed him to unlock his full potential."

"Mother was the successor of the Thorny Flower Garden, so their statuses were worlds apart. They faced many rejections from the sect, and many saw my father as weak — like a toad trying to eat the meat of a swan. But my mother and father never gave up. In the end, my father proved himself and married my mother."

Aldrian finally understood the significance of this place and couldn't help but feel touched by her parents' story. More or less, her parents' challenges were similar to his own. Though her parents faced a difference in status, his parents had to contend with families that were opposed to each other.

He then saw her walking toward him slowly. Her snowy white hair fluttered in the wind, adding to her beauty, which mesmerized Aldrian. Her red eyes kept locking with his blue ones.

"I've been confused by my feelings for a long time, at first, I thought my feelings were simply an interest in you because of your unique being's essence, something that stands apart from others, something even I don't fully understand or know how to interpret."

"However, as time passed, I began to feel confused and started to think that my feelings were no longer limited to just an interest in your being's essence. Along our journey, I kept thinking about what I truly felt every time I met with you. When I saw your interactions with Sylphia, I felt something inside my heart that I had never felt before."

"When I thought about it over and over again, I finally realized that my feelings for you weren't just limited to admiration for you as a person or my interest in your being's essence. It's much more than that, and deeper."

"Without realizing it, I had already slowly sunk into a feeling I never knew would come to me so soon." Baek Jimin was now standing right in front of Aldrian, her gaze still locked with his.

"Until recent weeks, I finally realized what kind of feeling I had already sunk into. That was the moment I accepted it — that I had already sunk quite deep. That's why, when Sylphia gave her subtle hint about her stance on me and you, I didn't waste the opportunity and instantly seized the chance to get closer to you, to make you understand how I feel. And at this moment—"

Her eyes became more determined, with no doubt in them, and Aldrian could see it clearly.

"I can confidently say that I have truly fallen in love with you, Aldrian."

Although Aldrian already knew what she wanted to say, his heart still skipped a beat hearing it directly from Baek Jimin. He felt that, at this moment, her face was more beautiful than ever. Since the time he learned that Baek Jimin was romantically interested in him, he had prepared himself to handle the situation carefully. He didn't want to ruin their relationship because of his failure to properly take care of Baek Jimin's feelings.

Thankfully, Sylphia was supporting him, which made everything easier. After thinking that there would be no problem if he took the safer route — the harem route — he began to learn how to love Baek Jimin, too. He started to open his heart to her and tried to appreciate everything she did, even the smallest things, like walking or simply enjoying her presence.

Though he couldn't develop his love for Baek Jimin overnight, at least a small spark had already ignited in his heart for her. His heart had already placed her in a special spot, and although it was still small, he knew that it would grow as time passed.

Aldrian's eyes softened as he gazed into her red eyes.

"Jimin—"

"I know that your feelings for me, beyond our friendship, are still not strong, and I understand that. But I can wait. I can wait until you can say those three words to me. I will make sure your heart opens wider and wider for me, and that I secure a big place in your heart." Baek Jimin said with full confidence, though her face turned slightly red, as if holding back the embarrassment of saying something so bold.

Aldrian smiled as he watched Baek Jimin act like that.

"You'll make me open my heart wider, huh? What will you do to make that happen, hm?" Aldrian asked in a teasing tone, intending to joke with her. But he was shocked when, suddenly, Baek Jimin "attacked" him.

She pressed her lips against his for a second before pulling away.

"With this," she said, her expression shy.

Aldrian truly couldn't react, as he could only blink a few times, staring at Baek Jimin's face. He hadn't expected her to boldly kiss him—he had only meant to tease her, nothing more. He could still feel the sensation of the kiss and the fragrance of her face, which had been so close to his.

As if she realized what she had done, Baek Jimin lowered her head and turned her body away. She wanted to hide, but at the same time, she felt the need to hold on and not run away. She would need to be shameless to melt Aldrian's heart as quickly as possible. After a few moments of silence, she looked at Aldrian again.

Although her face was still slightly red with embarrassment, she held his gaze.

"In the future, I want us to come back here and make our promise, when you truly say those three words to me with the most sincerity, I want you to say it here and make a promise with me."

Aldrian finally smiled again after the shock he had just experienced. This woman was truly bold and confident when it came to her romantic approach, but perhaps her character was like this by nature? He had almost forgotten that she was still a demon cultivator. She could be more forceful and direct in her approach than any other cultivator. Once she fell in love sincerely, she could become more "brutal" and open with her feelings. He made a mental note of it for the future.

"As you wish, milady," Aldrian said.

Baek Jimin's face grew even redder, but she pushed through her embarrassment. She grabbed his hand and dragged him down the hill.

"Let's go somewhere else. There are many places I want to enjoy with you. I will make sure this day is engraved in your memory," she said, and Aldrian let her pull him along.

After that, they enjoyed many places within the Thorny Flower Garden territory. Aldrian and Sylphia used their disguises again, but for Aldrian, he finally chose a different face to hide his more well-known disguise that had become famous across the continent. He didn't mind using another disguise; he didn't want to be disturbed while he was with Baek Jimin, enjoying their time together.

This was why they were able to enjoy their moment without any interruptions. The Thorny Flower Garden territory was vast, offering many places to visit and explore.

Without realizing how much time had passed, they noticed that the sun was nearly setting in the western horizon. Aldrian and Baek Jimin were on the top floor of a restaurant in one of the cities, enjoying the sunset.

As they savored the view, Baek Jimin suddenly blurted out,

"I miss my mother."

Chapter 490: Her Mother's Situation

Aldrian looked at Baek Jimin.

"Do you want to visit your mother?" he asked.

Baek Jimin sighed.

"To be honest, I do want to see her. After what you said about her back then, I started rethinking how she treated me and what she might have been thinking. I want to help ease her burden, if I can. I don't want to become her weakness."

She paused, then added in a frustrated tone,

"However, I don't know how she'll react. She's truly a stubborn person and rarely speaks to me or anyone else. I'm afraid she'll get angry if I return while she takes care of her business. I don't want to become a burden to her, so I don't know what to do."

Aldrian smiled at her.

"Well, let's visit her then. It's much better than doing nothing and regretting it later. If your mother is facing a problem, try to help her and show her that you're not a burden."

You don't have to worry, because I'm with you. You can also rest assured that I'll help you if needed," he said.

Baek Jimin thought for a moment before nodding.

"Alright. Let's visit her."

Not long after that, they left the restaurant. Aldrian immediately brought Baek Jimin toward the area of the Thorny Flower Garden Sect. He teleported them not far from the sect's gate—the same one he had used the last time he visited.

He looked at the sect for a moment. It had been two years since he last visited this place. For a cultivator, that was not considered a long time, but to him, it felt as though many years had passed. Back then, he had come here as a cultivator at the Earl stage. Now, he had already reached the peak of the Duke stage. With everything he had gone through along the way, it was no surprise it felt like years had gone by.

Two women standing guard at the gate were stunned by the sudden appearance of two silhouettes not far from them. The sky had already darkened, and the sun had completely set, so they did not immediately recognize the features of the two figures. Their senses sharpened, and their wariness grew as they realized one of the two was a Duke stage cultivator—someone powerful enough to serve as an outer elder of the sect.

But they froze when they finally recognized one of the figures. It was a woman with white hair.

"Young miss?" one of them said as she finally saw Baek Jimin's face clearly.

Baek Jimin's expression had already turned calm and unreadable, completely different from how she normally looked when she was with Aldrian or his group.

"I'm back. I want to visit my mother. How is she?" Baek Jimin asked.

But then both she and Aldrian noticed something strange in the guards' expressions. They looked anxious and avoided meeting Baek Jimin's eyes. However, their unfocused gazes eventually landed on the figure standing behind her. The moment they recognized Aldrian, they froze again—and then their faces turned pale. Aldrian had already shifted into the appearance that everyone recognized, so the guards immediately knew who he was.

"What is wrong?" Baek Jimin asked. Seeing their reactions, she quickly thought something must have happened to her mother.

"What happened to Mother?" Her tone rose slightly.

The guards flinched. One of them suddenly dropped to her knees and prostrated before Baek Jimin.

"My apologies, young miss. We do not know what happened to her."

Hearing the guard's answer, an overwhelming sense of unease gripped Baek Jimin. What had happened to her mother?

"Explain to me. What happened to her?" Baek Jimin asked, her voice now slightly shaky.

"Sect Master, she... she went missing."

Baek Jimin was stunned, but she didn't lash out, allowing the guard to continue.

"Not long after you left the sect, the Sect Master launched a purge targeting many of the higher-ups. We don't know the full details, but from the rumors we've heard, it seems that many of the sect's elders had connections with the devils. One night, the sect was thrown into chaos as the Sect Master killed many elders, ranging from Duke to King stage."

"The sect became a battleground. Some of the elders at Emperor stage even fought her. We don't know the details of the battle, because we were too afraid to get involved or even watch—anyone who got too close could have been killed by their crossfire, so we hid in the distance. But after that night, we never saw the Sect Master again. Grand Elder Kwon Mira declared herself the new Sect Master, asserting her authority and punishing anyone who questioned it."

"Everyone was forbidden from speaking about Sect Master Baek. Anyone still loyal to her faced punishment. Many have already been severely punished—or even killed—since Grand Elder Kwon Mira took the seat as Sect Master."

"I'm sorry, young miss. We couldn't do anything when all of that happened," the guard said, bowing deeply, her companion following suit.

Hearing the story, Baek Jimin's expression turned cold. Without hesitation, she strode toward the gate, ignoring the guards. A few others on patrol finally noticed her. They flinched, seeming to try and flee in the opposite direction, but Aldrian cast an illusion over them, causing them to fall unconscious instantly.

Baek Jimin halted her steps as she saw Aldrian approach the group of unconscious guards. He seemed to be checking something on them. Aldrian touched each guard's forehead, delving into their memories. Once he was done, he looked at Baek Jimin.

"It seems these women are loyal to that woman, Kwon Mira. No wonder they tried to run," Aldrian said. "They also don't know your mother's true situation."

He then activated his Eyes of the Heaven to search for Kwon Mira inside the sect. He scanned every corner, even the most hidden areas—but she was nowhere to be found. He frowned and looked at Baek Jimin.

"Kwon Mira isn't in the sect."

Baek Jimin frowned and looked toward the two guards, who had likely heard Aldrian's words. Their expressions shifted to shock, and one of them quickly spoke up.

"We don't know, young miss. We truly believed Grand Elder Kwon was still inside the sect, in seclusion. We had no idea she might've left—we don't know anything about her movements."

"They're not lying,"

Aldrian said to Baek Jimin through voice transmission.

Baek Jimin gritted her teeth and immediately pushed open the gate, stepping into the sect without hesitation. Aldrian followed silently behind her. The two guards could only stand there, watching their backs disappear into the inner grounds. Though they let out a quiet sigh of relief, the tension in their chests didn't ease. With Aldrian's appearance, they knew another storm was coming.

Some within the sect knew that Baek Jimin had left with a group of orthodox cultivators. When Aldrian's name began to spread across the continent and his face appeared in information crystals, those who had seen him that day recognized him instantly. He was the same man who had left with Baek Jimin.

Now, seeing him arrive beside her again made it clear that their bond was far deeper than anyone had originally believed—for him to personally accompany her back here.

While the guards silently thought about them, Aldrian and Baek Jimin kept walking toward the sect master's building. They didn't care about courtesy or formalities, letting anyone watch them as they moved through the sect grounds.

Eventually, the commotion drew the attention of the elders. Some of them appeared and recognized Baek Jimin's return. However, when they saw Aldrian, their faces turned pale.

Even so, no one stopped them. The elders simply allowed them to keep walking toward the sect master's building.

At last, the building came into view, sitting at the edge of the cliff. In front of it stretched a vast, open space like a training ground.

As Aldrian and Baek Jimin stepped onto it, they were already surrounded from a distance. Elders stood in various positions, and many disciples watched them with different expressions.

Most of the elders displayed fear and anxiety, while the disciples showed a mix of anxiety and fear, though some wore expressions of hope. Three women emerged from the sect master's building, their eyes filled with fury as they looked toward Baek Jimin.

Baek Jimin swept her gaze over the elders and then toward the women who had just emerged from the sect master's building.

"Where is Grand Elder Kwon?" she shouted. Her voice rang out clearly across the training ground, loud enough for everyone to hear.

One of the women who had emerged finally spoke.

"Baek Jimin, you finally came back."

Baek Jimin glared at the woman, her expression turning fierce.

"Kwon Hana, where is your mother?! What happened to my mother?!" she demanded, her cultivation at the middle Earl stage beginning to leak out, spreading across the training ground.

The woman named Kwon Hana bit her lips and glanced at Aldrian, who silently stood behind Baek Jimin. Her heart raced with anxiety and fear as she looked at him, but she hardened her resolve.

"It's all or nothing," she thought.

"Activate now!" she shouted.