

From Outcast to Overlord The Unyielding Heir (Leander Ashcroft)

Chapter 486

The man in his blood-red robe stood upon the air itself, each step suspended over the void. The robe drifted around him like a living stream of crimson, coiling and rippling as though it breathed.

Linton and the others were struck dumb. Especially those who had scoffed earlier when he spoke of "gods" crossing blows. Their worldview shattered on the spot.

In a world that worships science and logic above all, who could imagine someone standing in the sky and walking through clouds?

Yet here it was, undeniable and unfolding before their eyes.

The newcomer was none other than the second-ranked assassin in the world, the Blood Demon. His gaze swept down first, landing on Celia.

"Ripper," he drawled, "looks like you failed miserably."

Celia lowered her head, saying nothing. That alone was a signal of her silent admission.

In the assassin world, failure and being caught by your target meant inevitable death.

A streak of scarlet flashed across the Blood Demon's eyes. His voice turned cold enough to freeze bone.

"The day you entered the Netherweb, you should have understood that your life ceased to be your own.

"In the Netherweb, failure is forbidden. Once I finish this bounty, I'll deal with you myself."

His tone was calm, yet it carried the weight of a death sentence. Celia's blood chilled instantly, terror spilling across her features.

Then the Blood Demon turned to Leander. His gaze sharpened like drawn blades, and a ripple of invisible force plunged downward.

Leander lifted his eyes. Where their gazes collided, sparks seemed to crackle in the air.

"Jeff Ashcroft," the Blood Demon said in a quiet, even tone, "I've come to kill you." He said it the way someone might announce a casual visit, using a calm voice, but in his case, with murderous intention.

"Oh? Is that so?" Leander smiled faintly.

"You're an assassin. Assassins hide in the shadows. That's how you get a one-strike kill on me.

"You're here, appearing out in the open, attacking me face-to-face. You've already broken the cardinal rule. Now I'm truly curious, how did you kill a King Phase back then?"

"Haha!" The Blood Demon laughed madly, chin lifted, wild pride pouring out of him. "That King Phase? I killed him with stealth, in addition to my secret technique. I struck the instant his mind slipped.

"But with you? I don't need the trouble."

Scarlet light erupted in his eyes. A suffocating wave of pressure exploded outward.

"You're strong, yes. You killed Gadru, the former champion of the International Combat Units. You destroyed fifteen High Arbitrators alone. But you are still not a King Phase.

"And as long as you're not a King Phase, I have absolute confidence, one hundred percent, that I can crush you with overwhelming force.

"Below the King Phase, I am invincible."

He said a mere few simple sentences, yet his pride brimmed to the point of arrogance.

"Invincible below King Phase?" Leander murmured, lips curling into a dangerous smile. "You truly believe that?"

The Blood Demon didn't respond. Hands clasped behind his back, he lifted one arm and pointed north of Highcliffe.

"Come, Jeff. Let me see whether the one hailed as the strongest in all of the International Combat Units' history truly deserves the title.

"I'll be waiting for you on Swallow Hill."

The moment the final syllable fell, wind erupted beneath his feet. His figure burst

into a blazing streak of bloodlight and surged toward Swallow Hill.

Leander drained the last of his drink, then approached Liam and Shirley.

Liam stared at Leander's approach, throat locked, mind frozen.

When he'd learned Leander was the chairman of Jeff Enterprises, he had been

shaken, confused, and skeptical, but he could still process it.

But tonight shattered every framework he had ever believed in. He was no longer certain the world he'd lived in was even real.

Leander reached him, placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Liam, there's far too much in this world you haven't seen. And too much I've yet to

tell you.

"I have business tonight. I'll go ahead. After this, we'll drink and I'll tell you everything."

With that, his figure blurred—almost ghostlike—and shot upward from the balcony as a streak of blue light.

Liam and Shirley remained stunned into statues. Behind them, Linton collapsed onto the ground, legs giving way, a dark stain spreading across his trousers.

The moment Leander erupted into blue light, Linton finally recognized the silhouette. It overlapped perfectly with one of the two "gods" he'd seen that night at the Celestial Pavilion.

Only now did he grasp it. The one fighting in the heavens that night had been Leander Ashcroft.

Boom!

At 11:30 p.m., Swallow Hill stood empty, desolate. Then a streak of bloodlight shredded the clouds and speared the summit.

A heartbeat later, a tail of blue light followed, like a meteor ripping through the night.

The lights dissipated. Only the two silhouettes remained, facing each other. Leander and the Blood Demon hovered at the cloudline, facing one another. An unseen collision of force between them churned the clouds into rolling waves.

"Jeff Ashcroft," the Blood Demon said with a bloodthirsty smile, "Swallow Hill's night scenery is worthy of your title as the mightiest alive pick fine spot here for your grave."

Power surged beneath his robe. Crimson radiance unfurled like a sea.

"Many have said that to me," Leander replied calmly. "All of them died. You won't be

an exception." His voice dropped—and without a breath of hesitation, he thrust out a

fist.

The strike tore through the cloud sea, opening a tunnel of spiraling mist several stories wide. The Blood Demon's pupils narrowed instantly.

But he didn't dodge. He raised his fist, bloodlight surging around his knuckles, and struck head-on.

Boom!

The collision ripped a storm across the mountain, vaporizing the summit of Swallow Hill section by section.

Neither budged. Their first exchange was perfectly even.

"Oh?" Leander's brows lifted slightly.

He hadn't used full strength, but ever since achieving Spirit Convergence, the Nirvana Energy in him had

transformed. It was now dense potent, and multiplied severalfold. A strike like that could have obliterated any Chief Arbitrator.

But the Blood Demon met it directly. He was the first man he had ever seen who could.

Leander studied him closely. The

crimson glow around the Blood

Demon had thickened into

near liquid currents, rising and falling like viscous blood. His aura flickered unpredictably, vast, grand,

transcending the mortal world.

At that moment, Leander understood that the Blood Demon's realm was far above

Infernal Crown Transcendent. He had stepped into an entirely different tier.

To someone at his level, even Infernal Crown Transcendents would be mere insects.

"King Phase?" Leander whispered.

The Blood Demon tilted his head back. Blood-essence roared around him, dyeing Swallow Hill peak a ghostly scarlet.

"You look surprised, Jeff."

A twisted grin curved his lips. "You said it yourself. Below the King Phase, I have no

rivals.

"That is because I am now a Half-King."

At that instant, he flexed his fingers. The world began to warp. A radius of a hundred

feet collapsed into a dome of bloodlight, forming a realm of its own. And Leander was sealed inside.

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Roar!

The instant the Blood Demon clenched his hand, the world around them twisted violently. Heaven and earth drained of color, collapsing into a domain of pure crimson that swallowed Leander whole.

As the Blood Demon's wild laughter echoed outward, scarlet energy sealed the space in every direction, like an entire world shaped between his fingers.

"Half-King?"

Trapped in the blood-soaked realm, Leander didn't move. He didn't even blink. Didn't even blink. He simply murmured the words softly, almost as though he was absent-minded.

"Yes," the Blood Demon said proudly. "A Half-King." He lifted his chin, voice dripping superiority.

"The Transcendent Realm suppresses the world through transcendent power. Your inner strength becomes innate vitality. At the peak of Infernal Crown Transcendent, to step further, your inner vitality must be compressed, refined, elevated, until it transforms into something purer, which is Primordial Energy."

"Reach that threshold, and you earn the title of King Phase."

A bead of blood-light danced at his fingertip as he lifted his hand.

"The conversion from innate vitality to Primordial Energy is no simple feat. Usually, for someone of the Infernal Crown Transcendent to transform, three successive refinements are required. These are called the King's Triple Turn."

"Those undergoing this process stand far beyond all ordinary Infernal Crown Transcendents. The gap is staggering. This stage is what the ancient Martial Practitioners called 'Half-King.'

"And I currently stand at the first turn of the King's Triple Turn. A single-turn Half- King.

"In my eyes, every Infernal Crown Transcendent is a mere insect. Even a horde of peak Transcendents would die beneath my hand. That is why I am so certain of crushing you."

The blood orb on his fingertips burst, exploding into a drifting mist, thickening the realm into a heavy sea of scarlet.

"Although I'm just a Half-King," he said coldly, "my power is beyond your imagination. With a flick of my finger, I lock heaven and earth. With a thought, I decide life and death.

"Jeff Ashcroft, savor your final moments inside my blood coffin!"

From the outside, the viscous wall of blood closed fully, sealing Leander within a massive crimson coffin.

Below Swallow Hill, nighttime walkers paused, gazing at the sky where a streak of scarlet cut across the darkness. They marveled at the sight, unaware it was forged by the hand of a single man.

Two sharp currents sliced through the night. Christopher Gardner and Jimmy Wilder arrived in a mere second.

The moment they saw the blood-colored domain and the man hovering beside it, their expressions hardened.

"Second on the Assassin Leaderboard, a Heaven-tier killer of the Netherweb... Is that the Blood Demon?" Their voices overlapped.

When they'd learned the Netherweb had moved against Leander, they expected a top-tier killer to strike, but not so soon. And certainly not the Blood Demon himself.

"Astria's Shadow Division?" The Blood Demon's gaze lifted lazily, disinterest etched deeply on his face.

With his power, even if the two of them fought together, they wouldn't last a heartbeat.

"You came here to save Jeff Ashcroft?" His voice curled with mockery.

Inside the blood coffin, the blood energy would soon unravel into countless threads, devouring vitality, stripping flesh, draining blood, until only a withered skeleton remained. "Is General Ashcroft inside?" Christopher and Jimmy's faces darkened.

Jimmy roared in anger. "Blood Demon! You dare trespass into Astria and attempt to kill our Wyvern Blade General? Do you think Astria stands empty?"

The Blood Demon chuckled. "Just the two of you?"

Jimmy's face flushed at the stinging truth. This monster had reached the Infernal Crown Transcendent decades ago. He'd once hunted a true King Phase, too. All of

this information had been clearly stated by the Shadow Division's intel. Even together, they might not force him to exert half his strength.

Christopher's tone remained level, but his eyes cooled to steel.

"Blood Demon, this is Highcliffe. This is Astria.

"You may be powerful, but if you cross the line, someone from our Shadow Division will intervene. You know exactly what that means."

At those words, the Blood Demon's expression finally shifted. A faint shadow crossed his face. He lowered his voice. "You speak of the Shadow Division King?"

The Blood Demon had lived for more than a century. Rising to fame in the 1990s, he'd survived long enough to span two centuries. And in that time, he had come to know the hidden giants of the world by heart, even the old King Phases were no strangers to him.

As Astria's Shadow Division, the enforcement arm of Astria's martial world, it naturally housed figures capable of suppressing the entire realm. Foremost among them was the first Division Chief, the one the world hailed as the Shadow Division King.

Back during the legendary War of

the King Phase, he had been one of the deciding forces. Though ultimately pushed back by the Westera King Phase, he remained a true King Phase. And after more than a century, his cultivation could only have grown deeper, darker, and far more unfathomable.

Even as a Half-King, the Blood Demon knew he could not challenge a true King Phase.

If the Shadow Division King personally moved, he, the Blood Demon, would have no path to survival.

Christopher gave a cold nod. "Correct."

Christopher's cold confirmation hung in the air like frost. The night froze with it, with silence tightening until even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

After a long moment, the Blood Demon's expression eased back into its usual indifference.

"So what if he's the Shadow Division King?" he said, voice dripping with disdain.

"Even if he knows I'm in Highcliffe, would he dare strike?

"If he does, it means the Martial Practitioners of Astria openly defies the King Phase Accord. That is a price even he cannot afford.

"Trying to frighten me with the King? Ridiculous. Jeff Ashcroft's life belongs to me."

Christopher and Jimmy's faces shifted again, but no words came. The Blood Demon was right.

More than a century ago, during the

War of the King Phase, the great powers had forged the King Phase Accord, a covenant no King Phase had dared violate since. And the Shadow Division King, one of the original signatories, would never be the first to cross that line?

If he truly took action now, the Eastern King Phase would be the one to break the

pact. The Westeria King Phase would descend in unison. The world would plunge back into chaos.

That was a weight even the Shadow Division King could not carry.

As the blood coffin shrank,

tightening around its prey, panic crept across both their faces. Leander Ashcroft was Astria's greatest treasure, its national pillar. They couldn't bear to watch him be devoured alive by the Blood Demon. Yet, before a Half-King's sealed domain, they were utterly powerless.

Just then, a strange tremor pulsed from within the blood coffin. All three snapped

their heads toward it. On the surface of the crimson coffin, a pale, long-fingered hand pushed outward, then drew sharply to the side.

Rip!

The blood coffin tore open midair, fracturing like shattering glass, dissolving piece by

piece.

Through the collapsing shards, Leander stepped out, black hair whipping in the

rising wind, eyes calm and absolute. His voice rang across the mountaintop, cold, and unshaken.

"So this is a Half-King? That's it?"

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"So, this is a Half-King? That's it?"

Leander stepped out of the collapsing blood coffin. Within the crimson domain, thin scarlet threads lashed at him from every direction, trying desperately to reel him back in and bind him.

But each of his steps landed with iron weight. No matter how those threads tightened or knotted, they couldn't slow him, not even for a heartbeat.

"How is this possible?"

While Christopher and Jimmy were alight with relief, the Blood Demon's face twisted in disbelief.

He was Half-King. Although he didn't yet possess the power of a true King Phase, he was capable of sealing space with a gesture, shaping an entire domain of his own within a hundred-foot radius. Here, within this blood-soaked world, he was supposed to be the god, capable of ruling everything.

The blood coffin was shut, and Leander was trapped in it. Even if it were another Half-King, he should have suffered agony beyond imagination, if not outright death. In his estimation, he had a seventy-percent chance of killing Leander outright.

Yet Ashcroft had shattered the coffin as though brushing dust off his sleeve, and walked through those devouring blood threads as if they weren't even there.

What kind of cultivation is this man in?

"Don't tell me... you have already reached the King Phase?" The Blood Demon's pupils shrank violently.

"I haven't." Leander's tone was calm, almost casual. The next instant, his gaze sharpened like a blade drawn from its scabbard.

"But if we're speaking purely of strength, you're nowhere near qualified to compare yourself to me.

"You want to kill me? You're nowhere close to doing that."

A streak of light tore across the air, and Leander's figure vanished in an instant.

Up in the sky, the Blood Demon's pupils condensed. He sensed the shift in airflow a fraction of a second later. His instincts roared. With a sweep of his hand, the blood world surged upward. Above him, two pillars of blood condensed into existence, crashing down in front of him like fortress gates.

Thud!

A fist materialized out of nothing and smashed into the pillars of blood. One pillar caved inward with a deep crater.

The Blood Demon staggered back as both pillars shattered into dust.

"Your life is mine now." Leander's gaze was stone cold. He didn't pause after his first punch. He stamped down, detonating the air behind him, and shot forward again, trailing a clean white arc.

The Blood Demon had no time to even shout. He retreated in panic as the blood sea rolled overhead. Two massive bloody palms clapped inward from both sides, trying to crush Leander between them.

Leander didn't even bother to dodge. He rammed straight into the palms head-on with nothing but his body. He felt no more than a breeze, and strode straight through them.

"What?" The Blood Demon's face drained of color. He flung his arms wide, and every shred of blood-essence in the sky surged into his right arm, coating it in a wicked, pulsing crimson glow.

With a roar, he hurled a punch powerful enough to split the clouds. The night above Swallow Hill turned scarlet as corrosive blood-essence surged forward. It was not just raw power, but also a corrosive force so vicious it seemed to rot the very wind it touched.

He condensed power through blood, drawing in all the ambient energy of heaven and earth within the domain, certain that a single punch would be enough to blast Leander back.

Leander still didn't bother to lift an extra dinger. He simply met him with a punch of his own.

Boom!

A thunderous blast ripped through the sky. A blood-red silhouette shot backward, skidding through the air and carving gouges in the sky. The Blood Demon's arm shook violently, its gathered blood essence blown apart.

"How is this possible?" He was shaken to his very core. That strike had carried the full weight of his Bloodsea Prison, his condensed blood essence, and the

accumulated essence of heaven and earth within his domain.

By right, that punch should have been enough to reduce ten Infernal Crown Transcendents to pulp. Yet when his fist met Leander's, the man's strength felt endless, crushing and unstoppable.

Leander didn't slow down. He blurred forward, each strike, whether a fist or a kick, hammering down with brutal simplicity. No flourishes. No techniques. Just raw, overwhelming power. Swallow Hill shuddered beneath every blow.

As for the Blood Demon, no matter how he drew upon his Bloodsea Prison or pulled in the essence of heaven and earth, found himself battered backward, dodging wildly and staggering helplessly, unable to form even a single proper counterattack.

All around Swallow Hill, residents looked up at the sky where blue and crimson clashed. Awe and terror shone in their eyes.

Christopher and Jimmy finally allowed themselves to breathe. Far away, Celia, having just arrived, stopped dead in her tracks. The sight of the Blood Demon being pummeled helplessly stunned her.

The Blood Demon, wielding the full might of his Bloodsea Prison, looked like some god-level being. His power was unfathomable, enough to make the world's elites shudder. Even she felt her heart quake. Yet this ery grandmaster, was being pummeled by Leander without the faintest ability to strike back, reduced to dodging and blocking. How could she not be shaken to her core?

"So this is the man who topped the International Combat Rankings in the entirety of

recorded history?" Her eyes flickered with disbelief and something deeper.

Up ahead, the battle surged into its fiercest moment yet.

Bang!

With a dull thud, the Blood Demon was knocked back again, tumbling several dozen meters. A line of blood traced down the corner of his mouth.

Leander kept advancing, each strike heavier than the last. Even with the Blood Demon channeling all the energy he could muster from the essence of heaven and earth and his Bloodsea Prison, he was rattled until his organs churned and his blood surged painfully.

How is Jeff Ashcroft this strong? He hasn't reached King Phase. How can he wield this kind of power?

The Blood Demon roared inside, bitter and baffled.

He had been forced off a cliff in his youth by his enemies. But instead of dying, he survived the fall and stumbled into a cavern beneath a cliff, where he discovered the legacy of a peerless warrior, that of the Blood Demon Patriarch, from three centuries ago. He inherited his vicious cultivation technique.

He had spent fifty long years training, tempering his body until it bordered on madness, sharpening his will against pain, and slaughtering countless lives to build his Bloodsea Prison. With that technique, he wiped out every last enemy, and rose to be the world-renowned assassin feared

everywhere, the Blood Demon.

During that same fifty years, riding on the strength of his Bloodsea Prison, he ambushed and slew a contemporary King Phase,

devouring the man's flesh.

From then on, cultivation took another leap, stepping into the Half-King realm. From then on, he believed that as long as a true King Phase didn't personally appear, no one under the heavens could challenge him.

Now that he was in Astria, he was confident that raw power would be enough to crush Leander. Yet here he was, being crushed. Nothing turned out the way he thought things would.

Leander's terrifying power had already surpassed anything he could comprehend.

He simply couldn't imagine that anyone, aside from a King Phase, could completely overpower him.

"Jeff Ashcroft, you've forced me into this!"

Even cornered, he didn't panic, which was expected of one of the deadliest assassins alive.

With a sharp shout, he flung himself back, widening the distance between them. Bloodlight erupted from his eyes, shooting twin beams into the sky and striking the blood sea above.

The moment the red beams touched it, the Bloodsea Prison convulsed. Then, as if yanked by an invisible chain, it collapsed inward, surging back into the Blood Demon's body.

His entire form swelled. A solid, armor-like sheen of red coated his skin. A cold, oppressive aura spread across the mountaintop. Even the moon overhead dimmed, bathed in an eerie crimson glow.

"Jeff Ashcroft, I'll admit, forcing me this far is an achievement.

"My cultivation comes from the grandmaster, the Blood Demon Patriarch himself. I

refuse to believe I'll lose to you!"

With a deafening roar, his hands folded together, palms pressing forward at Leander.

"Blood Fusion Technique, Bloodsea Prison!"

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"Blood Fusion Technique-Bloodsea Prison!"

The Blood Demon formed a hand seal. Scarlet droplets sprayed from his palms, transforming into a mist that filled the air.

Leander narrowed his eyes. The tiny crimson specks reacted like they had been ignited by a catalyst. In an instant, they swelled into a torrential downpour, encasing him at the center. Thicker and more sinister than the blood coffin the Blood Demon had just formed, the air reeked of iron and decay.

The liquid surged from all directions, merging into a massive sphere of blood that sealed him like a cage. Christopher and Jimmy could only watch as his silhouette seemed to dissolve inside the crimson mass.

Boom!

A massive fist imprint bulged on the blood sphere-Leander striking from within, attempting to shatter it. The mark lasted only a moment before melting back into the writhing blood.

"Jeff, this Blood Fusion Technique was created by the Blood Demon Patriarch himself. It was made to trap martial artists like you. No matter your strength,

you cannot escape this Bloodsea Prison. Enjoy the corrosion of flesh and the boiling of blood!"

The Blood Demon laughed, unhinged and wild, his voice roaring across the skies.

When he first obtained the manual, he had drowned himself in revenge, then spiraled into a frenzy of killing.

To master this technique, he once wiped out an entire Rusmya village overnight, a massacre that triggered an international manhunt.

He escaped unscathed, draining the villagers' blood to cultivate his Bloodsea Prison. For decades, he nourished it with his own innate vitality. Each droplet carried corrosion and decay. Anyone trapped inside would weaken and break down.

This was a level beyond the Dragonbound Array Leander had faced in the Aorinth Peaks.

More fist imprints struck the sphere, then fell silent. Eventually, the blood sphere congealed, floating eerily in midair.

"General Ashcroft!"

Christopher and Jimmy shouted, hearts pounding.

Leander had risen rapidly in recent years. Yet the Blood Demon had been a world- renowned killer for decades, ranked second on the Assassin Leaderboard and having hunted true King Phase experts.

In their eyes, Leander still had a way to go.

The Bloodsea Prison was terrifying. A bird brushing a single droplet had turned instantly to bone. Now Leander was trapped inside, with death closing in on all sides.

The Blood Demon formed another seal, turning to the two, eyes blazing.

"Watch closely. Your so-called strongest of Astria will melt in my Blood Fusion Technique! The Iron Sovereign's legend ends with me!"

Before Christopher and Jimmy could react, the blood sphere exploded, spraying a storm of crimson everywhere.

A wave of fire erupted from within, sweeping across the sky, consuming every droplet and turning it to steam.

The world shifted instantly as heat surged violently.

"What?"

Terror gripped the Blood Demon. Leander hovered midair, wreathed in flames. Fire coiled around his palms and surged up his arms. A fire dragon curled beneath his feet. He looked like a god of flame descending.

"This Bloodsea Prison is vicious, devouring essence, flesh, even primordial energy. Too bad it can't withstand fire."

A crooked, dangerous smile tugged at Leander's lips.

"You're out of tricks. My turn."

His palm swung down.

Flames erupted, forming countless pillars that lanced from every direction toward the Blood Demon.

"Fire Judgment-Heart-Piercing Arrows!"

The flaming pillars converged like a thousand arrows, striking from all sides. From afar, it looked like a giant spiked urchin, with the Blood Demon at the center.

His eyes widened in panic. The fiery barrage closed in, and fear seized him completely.

He pushed his speed to the limit, twisting through the fire arrows, shadows trailing behind.

At first, the barrage was sparse, but as he approached the center, the space to dodge vanished entirely.

A fire lance pierced him, drilling through chest and back. Then another. And another.

His body froze as dozens of fire pillars struck, leaving burning points across his hands, feet, face every inch.

Leander closed his hand. The flames vanished as if they had never existed.

Hands clasped behind his back, eyes cold, he spoke calmly.

"The Bloodsea Prison you

cultivated-how many lives did you

grind into it? From the moment

you

began forging it, you should have.

know this day would come."

Crooked paths crumble under true strength."

At his words, the Blood Demon's body exploded into brilliant flame.

Christopher and Jimmy froze, stunned.

The Blood Demon had swept in with a world-devouring Bloodsea Prison, his aura fierce and overwhelming. Yet he died beneath Leander's hand so cleanly that not even ashes remained

A super-assassin who had terrified nations now gone.

"So this is the power of the number one on the International Combat Units list in all history?"

Celia, hundreds of feet away, swallowed hard.

Leander topping the list had always felt like an abstract idea-something distant, atmost symbolic. Seeing him unleash his power in person erased that

diptange in an instant. The reality of it hit like a tidal wave, overwhelming and undeniable.

The Blood Demon's brutality was infamous. Yet before Leander, he was like a child.

Not a scratch, not a dent. The gap in power was staggering.

She couldn't help but realize that if even a half-King monster like the Blood Demon

had been crushed effortlessly, Leander's power must have reached an unimaginable level.

"Maybe only a true King Phase could match him."

Celia shook her head with a bitter smile. She felt smarter and safer that Barrett acted first. Had she rushed in, she would already be dead.

Christopher and Jimmy finally regained their composure. They exchanged a look, drawing a sharp breath.

They understood what the Blood Demon's death meant—the martial and assassin world would be reshaped forever.

Leander ignored all of it. Hovering in the sky, he stared at the dying flames ahead. A flicker of light crossed his eyes.

"Spirit Avatar?"

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The moment the Blood Demon blew apart, Leander caught a flick of spiritual pressure sliding through the air. It reminded him of the time Fergus dropped dead and the Supreme Arbiter pushed a Spirit Avatar across the sky to check in. This one hit harder—older, colder, and heavy enough to bend the night around it.

Sparks scattered over the ridge like dying embers. A blood-red pinprick flickered in the center of the smoke. It pulsed twice, stretched, and morphed into a thin, hazy silhouette.

A middle-aged man stepped out of the mist like a nightmare with a pulse. His whole body dripped with a blood-colored haze, eyes burning with a kind of authority that crushed everything around him. The mountain felt smaller with him standing there.

Christopher, Jimmy, and Celia looked like their souls got yanked out. None of them moved.

Leander locked his stare on the phantom. It wasn't flesh or even a clean projection. The thing resembled a spiritual broadcast powerful enough to flatten an army. The Blood Demon suddenly felt like a bad joke in comparison.

The phantom pinned Leander with a glare. "You're the one who tore apart my blood disciple?"

Leander kept his posture, and his eyes settled back to a calm state. "Yeah. That was me."

The man's voice rolled through the hill like thunder. "Impressive nerve. My blood disciple, wiped out by some kid who doesn't know his place."

The Blood Demon Art he created worked like a dirty deal. Every cultivator grew stronger fast, although a slice of their power always funneled back to him. The Blood Demon had been the only one he planted into the everyday world, and years of collected Bloodsea energy had fed directly into his cultivation.

He had counted on the Blood Demon to carve out a foothold for him in the human world. Losing that investment stripped years off his plans. Creating another blood disciple would take decades, maybe longer. The setback slammed into him like a steel bat to the ribs. No wonder rage poured out of him.

"So what? Even if your real body stood right here, the result wouldn't change." Leander stayed calm, almost bored. The man across from him carried power heavy enough to make the air tighten, his spirit dense enough to shape a full projection. The pressure didn't stir a trace of fear in him.

The figure before him was only a Spirit Avatar. His heartbeat wouldn't jump even if the man's true body appeared in the flesh.

A grin cut across the man's face like a blade. "Run your mouth while you can. I'll return to the human world soon enough. Your essence blood will feed my spirit."

Leander lifted his hand, palm hovering over the Spirit Avatar. "Feel free. I'll be waiting. The name you're looking for is Jeff Ashcroft."

His fingers tightened. The projection splintered, scattering into floating shards of light.

A final echo rumbled across Swallow Hill before silence sealed the scene.

Leander didn't shift his expression. His mind looped around the man's last words.

Return to the human world?

Someone with a presence like that had to sit in the King Phase or higher. Even the Supreme Arbiter's Spirit Avatar inside Fergus felt like a candle next to a floodlight. A monster of that tier could hold down an entire country. So why is he talking like he isn't even on the same planet as the rest of us?

Human world... what does that even mean? Where exactly is he sitting right now?

Christopher and Jimmy finally drifted over, still trembling.

"General Ashcroft... what exactly was that thing?" Jimmy's voice cracked.

They stood atop the Transcendent

Realm, fully aware of what spiritual cultivators could achieve. Having grown up hearing stories of Spirit Avatars traversing vast distances and spirits moving through the world like ghostly signals, they were never truly prepared to witness one materialize right before their eyes.

The sight hit them. The Blood Demon Patriarch's immense power shook their nerves, leaving their fear to settle deeply within.

Leander didn't answer. He simply waved a hand. "Doesn't matter. When he shows up for real, we'll know."

Jimmy forced a breath back into his lungs. "General Ashcroft... after this, the entire assassin network is going to think twice before touching you. The Blood Demon fell tonight. Most killers will back out the second they hear your name."

"Most." Leander turned toward them. "What about the Hermit-top of the International Assassin Leaderboard?"

Both men froze as the wind cut through them.

Christopher eventually found his voice.

"The Hermit conquered the assassin world a century ago. After the King Phase Accord passed, he vanished-no sightings, no rumors, nothing for almost a hundred years.

"The Transcendent Realm maxes out at two hundred years. He was already over a hundred when he made his name. He's probably gone by now. Maybe even buried."

Leander offered a slight nod, although his thoughts whispered something else.

Transcendent Realm masters

usually lived for two centuries. Life stretched even further once

someone broke into the King Phase. Their innate vitality shifted into Primordial Energy, their bodies refined by the essence of heaven and earth, their spirits free by pure aura. Living an extra hundred years barely counted as remarkable at that stage.

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The Blood Demon held the second rank on the list, his cultivation already brushing Half-King. The Hermit occupied the top spot. Based on Leander's estimation, the Hermit had moved far past Half-King and stepped fully into a true King Phase.

Leander felt a certainty in his gut. He's still alive.

Someone like that doesn't die quietly. The moment I stir the pond, the ancient monsters start swimming up. Figures.

Celia walked toward him, steps slow and sure. She lowered her hands in respect. "Congratulations on the win, Sovereign Ashcroft."

She straightened, eyes steady. "The Blood Demon's done, although you should hear this. Netherweb shelters not only Heaven-tier killers like him and the Hermit. It keeps King Phase monsters tucked in the dark."

Leander didn't blink.

Of course they did. Netherweb held the crown of the assassin world for centuries, matching the Arbitration Office blow for blow. No one kept that position without a King Phase master watching from the shadows.

He studied Celia's face. "You already earned your life with the intel you gave me. Why warn me again?"

Her expression didn't waver. "Because I want something in return—protection. If Netherweb sends cleaners after me, I need you to stop them."

Failure inside Netherweb always led to death. No rank offered protection, not even for someone at Celia's Slayer-tier.

Leander let out a dry chuckle. "You're lucky I didn't drop you tonight. Now you want me guarding you like some personal enforcer? You truly believe I'd sign off on that?"

Celia dropped to her knees midair, spine straight and unshaking. "I'm not asking for a guard. I'm offering myself. If you keep those assassins from my throat, my life and death belong to you from this moment on."