

From Outcast to Overlord The Unyielding Heir (Leander Ashcroft)

Chapter 521

A thunderous sound ripped through the night sky. Six Realms Primordial Energy, woven into a devastating column of light, plunged down at a sharp angle. It was easily a hundred feet thick.

The others only saw a flash—a vibrant, multi-colored streak whipping through the air, leaving a blinding afterimage in its wake.

Leander slammed his feet down, and the resulting shockwave exploded behind him. He rocketed upward to meet the colossal, multi-hued light beam, channeling pure Primordial Energy into his hands. His Nirvana Energy surged in that instant, blazing with a potent blue light.

Fwooosh!

The air shrieked as Leander's hands met the immense, concentrated force of Primordial Energy head-on.

The combined power of six triple-turn Half-Kings could crush a hundred-foot skyscraper or send a small mountain flying. Yet, when Leander stood against it, he only stumbled back a single step. The beam of raw power directly in front of him was instantly shattered and dispersed by the fierce blue light radiating from his hands.

"Honestly, I'm sick of the Arbitration Office's continuous harassment," he stated, his face utterly devoid of emotion after absorbing their joint attack.

He didn't wait.

His body became a missile, tearing into the void and charging straight toward the six who had attacked him.

Ever since his first encounter with the Arbitration Office, they had haunted him like a shadow, launching endless sieges and assassinations, appearing near him every few weeks. Initially, he had treated it with dismissive indifference,

but now, he was simply weary of the whole cycle. He had lost all interest in playing their game.

All he wanted now was to eliminate them-every last one.

Whoosh!

With a single gesture, his palm began to glow. His unique Nirvana Energy condensed into a blue energy hammer, which he swung fiercely from the side, targeting Moffat directly.

Moffat felt a sudden, sharp draft before him. His expression tightened, and he let out a guttural roar.

His clothes instantly ripped as his knotted muscles swelled. His six-foot-three frame ballooned several times over, transforming him into a twenty-foot giant. His muscles, hard as unyielding metal, shone with the unique gray-black luster of granite. This was the source of his nickname, "the Stonehide."

Moffat had always been a body-strengthening martial artist, foregoing traditional internal cultivation to focus on body-forging. Against all odds, he carved out a successful path, perfecting his physique until his flesh was as tough as steel and granite. His skin could automatically harden, easily shrugging off cannon fire and machine-gun rounds.

In the Sahar Wastes, he once took a direct hit from an anti-tank shell with no damage, a testament to his supreme confidence in his own body.

A massive giant had suddenly appeared before Leander, but he remained utterly unfazed, his expression cold. He only swung his arms wider.

Moffat swiped his colossal hand horizontally, just as the blue energy hammer in Leander's hand smashed into his palm.

Bang!

The impact unleashed a piercing roar that shook the heavens. Hundreds of feet away, the glass at the top of Yelem Church shattered, and cracks began to appear in the stone and brickwork.

An immense shockwave rippled out from Leander and Moffat's collision. Moffat's gargantuan body was flung backward, skidding over three hundred feet away.

A web of cracks now covered his forearm. Leander's energy hammer had nearly splintered his arm.

"Where in the hell did this guy get such terrifying strength?" Moffat muttered, his expression grave as he felt the injury to his arm.

Leander was about to press his attack when a phantom shadow flashed across the sky. A colossal serpent's tail swept in from the side, aiming for his back.

Thud!

The powerful tail carried a gale force capable of slicing steel, but when it hit Leander's back, it failed to move him even an inch.

Leander turned back coolly.

Watz, the Serpentseer, stood with his hands pressed together, while the massive mutant serpent beside him flicked its red tongue, its eyes gleaming with predatory

menace.

"Jeff, I'll take you on!" Watz hissed, licking his lips like a snake flicking its own tongue. He waved a hand.

The giant snake soared into the air, moving like a cloud-riding dragon, and lashed out with its tail again.

Leander tilted his head slightly, and the tail barely grazed his face. A cunning glint flashed in the serpent's eye. It suddenly opened its terrifying jaws and spewed a thick cloud of purple smoke.

This great serpent was a variant of the Westerian Hellspire species. It was naturally stronger than all other snakes possessed sapience, and could cultivate. Not only was its physical strength tremendous, but it also wielded a highly corrosive venom.

The poison it sprayed could instantly kill even an Infernal Crown Transcendent. The

tail whip had merely been a feint to draw Leander into dodging; the venomous spray was the true, hidden killing blow.

"A cheap parlor trick," Leander sneered, completely ignoring the purple mist spreading across the sky.

Instead of retreating, Leander charged forward, plunging straight into the center of the toxic cloud.

Watz was stunned. He hadn't

anticipated that Leander would be

immune to the potent venom, let alone charge into it. This poison was the heritage of an ancient variant serpent; its formula was so complex that even the most advanced research labs might fail to replicate Other Half-Kings treated it with extreme caution. How was Leander completely unscathed?

While he reeled in shock, Leander had already emerged from the mist. His hand shot out with the speed of lightning and seized the mutant serpent by its vital point, the heart-area of the snake.

Feeling its life force gripped, the giant serpent thrashed its tail and contorted its massive body through the sky, desperate to break free. But no matter how violently it struggled, Leander stood firm, his hand locked immovably on its heart-spot.

Watz snapped back to reality. He raised his serpent staff, calling upon all his Primordial Energy, which transformed into a stream of purplish-black light.

"Jeff, don't you dare!" he roared. The purplish-black light materialized into the shape of a colossal python and coiled around Leander.

"Why wouldn't I dare?"

Leander's face was cold. Ignoring the python of purplish-black energy wrapping around him, he clenched his fingers shut.

Crunch!

The mutant serpent's body was covered in thick, hard scales, capable of repelling bullets, yet in Leander's grip, they felt as brittle as bread. Its heart-area was instantly crushed, and its massive head fell away from the sky.

"B*stard!"

Watz, the Serpentseer, roared with bloodshot eyes, his rage boiling over.

He had found this mutant serpent in the Westerian Hellspire when it was just a hatchling. He had spent nearly a century nurturing and refining it, boosting its venom physical strength, and body integrity. All that effort had culminated in the creature he had just lost.

Leander had killed the mutant serpent in a single move, nullifying a hundred years

of Watz's painstaking effort.

Bloodlust flashed in Watz's eyes. He pressed two fingers together, chanting the most ancient of incantations.

The purplish-black python coiling around Leander's body tightened, burrowing into his skin like a bone-deep poison and sinking into Leander's very flesh.

This was his signature secret technique: Serpent Devour!

"Jeff, you killed my beloved pet. Today, I'll dissolve your flesh and blood, turning you

into the raw fuel for my venomous mist!"

Watz's maniacal laughter echoed through the sky. Leander stood motionless, as if rooted to the spot.

It was at this moment that Hadrian, the Stormkick, and Alaric, the Lonefist, finally made their move!

The purplish-black tendrils covering Leander's body vanished, sinking into his skin and muscle like something taking root. He froze instantly, suspended in mid-air, every muscle locked.

"You've been hit by my Serpent Devour. I don't care how strong you are or what tricks you have; you'll suffer unimaginable pain, unable to move, forced to feel your skin and flesh consumed without mercy! This is the price for killing my beloved pet!" Watz's face was a mask of fury. He swiveled his head to glare at Hadrian and Alaric. "What are you waiting for? Attack!"

Hadrian, known to some as "the Stormkick," was born with a leg shorter than the other—a congenital disability. Yet, through sheer, formidable will and incredible talent, he had transformed this weakness into his most devastating and unassailable strength.

Seeing Leander immobilized, Hadrian stomped his good foot. A massive, inverted footprint immediately appeared, seemingly pressing a hollow into the sky. Using the powerful rebound from the impact, he launched himself dozens of feet upward, arriving directly above Leander's head. A blood-red glint flashed across his shorter leg, and a colossal footprint manifested across the heavens.

"Jeff, the eight of us against just you it's certainly not a fair fight. But this isn't a friendly spar; this is your execution!"

Hadrian hailed from Astria, the same as Leander, but he showed no restraint now. Primordial Energy surged from him as he violently slammed his foot down.

Alaric, like Hadrian, had a physical handicap. However, his missing arm was not a birth defect; it had been severed by an enemy when he was twenty years old. Instead of sinking into despair, he channeled his pain into intense reflection. He sought a different path, traveling outside Astria to the Burgin Palace to study, returning with a frightening, unique set of skills.

"Hand of Judgment!"

He thrust his single arm forward, and a massive handprint, radiating a soft, pale, almost divine light, thundered down.

The footprint and the handprint merged into a single, overwhelming, sky-shattering attack, descending in crushing, layered waves-like a mountain range collapsing upon a lone man.

"Hmph, Jeff, today is definitely the day you die!"

Deo's eyes were cold and menacing. He curled his fingers slightly, his hand hardened with immense energy, turning each digit into a steel spike.

"Heavenpiercer!"

He gave a low cry, and five thick, swirling columns of wind shot out, aiming straight for Leander's chest.

"Thunder Keg!"

Gragas had been humiliated when Leander repelled him earlier. Anger still simmered in his heart, and he wasn't about to miss this godsend of an opportunity. He tossed his keg, and just as it was about to smash into Leander, he clenched his fist. The keg detonated, instantly dissolving into a raging fireball in the air.

The Hermit's gaze was sharp and unforgiving. His Ice Soul sword once again glowed with crystalline light. He sliced diagonally, generating a fierce sword beam that streaked toward Leander's lower abdomen.

Moffat's face was contorted in a ferocious snarl. The arm Leander had shattered earlier had already regrown. He clasped his hands together, forming them into a brutal hammer, and slammed it down in Leander's direction.

Except for Neil, every single person had committed to the attack.

"Skybreaker Hammer!"

Six attacks converged almost simultaneously upon Leander. Since he was still paralyzed by Watz's Serpent Devour, Leander seemed unable to move, forced to endure the full brunt of the six powerful strikes.

"How despicable!"

In the sky, Leander was completely engulfed by the torrent of attacks. Zara and Liana shrieked in outrage. They had long recognized Leander as a world-class hero, yet here he was, ambushed by eight opponents. If only their abilities weren't so inferior, they would have flown up to assist him instantly.

Now that Leander was completely swallowed by the combined onslaught, even they, despite their profound admiration, felt a chill of doubt. Even Maeve's face was drained of color.

"Did Leander lose?"

Nathan, Luke, and Evander stood frozen, their expressions grim and heavy.

Among the onlookers, only Celia remained outwardly calm.

She had signed a Soulbound Pact with Leander. If he were to die, the pact would immediately dissolve. Yet, she could still distinctly feel a trace of his spirit residing within her mind.

She stared up at the swirling chaos, a certainty dawning in her heart.

"I know you won't be defeated!"

Countless Yelem dignitaries watched the sky intently, hoping to see the final outcome of the battle. Denzel's gaze was fixed and unmoving; he desperately wished for Leander to be utterly crushed by the storm of attacks, never to rise again. He simply could not tolerate the existence of a young man who was more exceptional, more flawless, than himself.

The eight triple-turn Half-Kings stood their ground in the sky. Watz, looking at the carcass of his beloved snake, grew even colder.

"You dared kill my pet, Jeff. You deserve this death!"

Deo and the others exchanged glances, nodding in mutual satisfaction.

To the Arbitration Office, Leander had been a thorn in their side, an obstacle they had long been desperate to remove. Yet, every operation they mounted had been foiled by him, costing them the lives of fifteen Chief Arbitrators. Today, however, they had finally completed their grim feat.

"I believe we can now report back to the Supreme Arbiters," Deo said, hands clasped behind his back, a faint smile touching his lips.

The others fully agreed. Gragas even let out a sneering chuckle. "Some Iron Sovereign. Looks like he was all talk after all!"

Just as the words left his mouth, a cold voice spoke up from behind them.

"You are far too optimistic. If Jeff were truly that easy to deal with, the Arbitration Office wouldn't have failed so many times."

The speaker was Neil, the only one who hadn't attacked. He calmly rubbed the Ring of the Sage on his finger, his expression placid.

"What?"

Deo and the others froze. Leander had been crippled by Watz's Serpent Devour and then hit by the full power of six triple-turn Half-Kings. How could he possibly still be alive?

Whoosh!

While they were still reeling in shock, a blinding blue light erupted, illuminating the entire sky.

Within the brilliant blue glow, the clouds scattered, revealing a tall, slender, and absolutely upright figure: Leander.

His upper clothes were shredded, his sleeves reduced to tatters, yet there was not a single scratch on his entire body, nor a speck of blood.

He lifted his head to look directly at the eight of them, a cold, mocking smile playing on his lips.

"Is that all you had?"

Watz, Deo, Hadrian, and the others wore expressions of disbelief and profound shock.

Leander was completely unharmed? How could this be possible?

"You were hit by my Serpent Devour! How are you completely fine?" Watz couldn't comprehend it, staring at Leander without blinking.

"You thought that little trick could hurt me?" Leander scoffed dismissively.

A layer of crystalline light shimmered across his skin. One by one, the purplish-black streams of gas seeped out of him and dissolved harmlessly into the sky.

Watz's pupils contracted, and he involuntarily took a half-step back.

"You... You expelled the Serpent Devour yourself? Jeff, are you a freak?"

He had spent a hundred years meticulously cultivating Serpent Devour, refining it from the venom of his mutant serpent. It was designed to erode the spirit and devour the Essence Core and physical body. Once it latched on, it burrowed deep into the host. Even a true King Phase master would likely be unable to expel it.

But Leander had somehow rendered the Serpent Devour ineffective.

Aside from Watz, the others looked equally horrified, suddenly losing their voices. Leander's gaze swept over the group, and he shook his head lightly.

"My patience with you has run out."

The moment the words left his lips, he threw a single punch. Seven sonic booms ripped through the air with the strike, the force crossing the sound barrier, punching seven distinct voids into the sky.

Earthshaker!

The seven triple-turn Half-Kings barely had time to react before the punch force slammed into their chests.

All seven simultaneously spat out blood. The energy barriers they erected for defense were instantly pierced by the kinetic force. The devastating power invaded their bodies, thoroughly destroying their vitality.

Gragas, Hadrian, Alaric, and

Watz-the ones with slightly weaker cultivation instantly went limp, their eyes dimming, their vital signs extinguished. Deo, the Hermit, and Moffat the ones with the strongest defense-still clung to life, but they were critically wounded and utterly incapacitated.

With a single punch, four were slain, and three were crippled.

Clutching his chest, the Hermit felt his body rapidly aging. He managed a bitter smile. In this very moment he finally understood that the prey he had targeted was a primeval, ferocious demon the likes of which he had never encountered.

Leander's punch caused even the untouched Neil to narrow his eyes. Yet, there was

no great fear in his gaze; instead, a flicker of fighting spirit ignited within him.

Leander turned to face him now.

"The Arbitration Office sent eight men, but seven of them were essentially useless—

not worth mentioning. The one who truly interests me is you."

He stepped forward across the air, a malevolent, charming curve to his mouth.

"Since achieving my true power, spanning one year and seven months, today I have finally met a true King Phase master!"

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Leander's gaze was fixed on Neil in the sky, a wide, predatory grin splitting his face.

The surviving triple-turn Half-Kings gaped, their expressions cycling through disbelief, while below them, Celia's jaw dropped.

A true King Phase master? Could this seemingly calm, scholarly-looking young man actually be a true King Phase being?

Not only was Celia stunned, but even Deo and the other Chief Arbitrators of the Arbitration Office were thoroughly bewildered, utterly aghast.

Deo swiveled toward Neil, his pupils constricting.

"Neil, you actually took that final step?"

As far as he knew, their own cultivation levels were roughly equal—all of them triple-turn Half-Kings, just a hair's breadth from the King Phase. In all these years, they had never heard of any one of them successfully breaking through.

But judging by Leander's tone, it sounded as if Neil had already crossed that threshold.

The latest-generation Demon Hunter offered a serene smile and looked directly at Leander. "You are the Iron Sovereign for a reason. My cultivation is so restrained. Several Supreme Arbiters even went to the trouble of concealing part of it for me. Yet, you saw right through me with a single glance!"

The next moment, his voice turned overwhelmingly commanding.

"You are correct. I have entered the King Phase!"

As the words left his lips, the surrounding space seemed to collapse inward. Every inch of air became saturated with an invisible, crushing pressure. It was so intense that the severely wounded Half-Kings below could barely lift their heads. Above Neil, a channel ripped open in the sky, piercing straight to the heavens.

Roar!

Hundreds of feet below, windows exploded across numerous buildings. Several taller structures immediately buckled and collapsed. Yelem Church, in particular, was blasted in half as an eruption of absolutely pure Primordial Energy burst forth.

This Primordial Energy was fundamentally different from the unrefined, half-transformed Primordial Energy used by the triple-turn Half-Kings like Deo. This was the real deal, utterly pure—a complete qualitative leap.

Just a hint of leaking Primordial Energy was comparable to the full-force attack of Deo and his peers.

"Is this the true power of the King Phase?"

The Hermit stared at Neil. Over fifty years ago, he had been fortunate enough to see a King Phase master, but that man was ancient, his lifespan nearly spent, and his power had long faded. The current Neil, however, was in his prime, easily surpassing that elderly King Phase master. His Primordial Energy was condensed and vital, and his entire body radiated a potent life force that made the Hermit sigh in reluctant admiration.

This was the realm he had dreamed of, yet Neil, decades younger than them, had managed to step into the ranks of the world's former absolute rulers first.

"It's really the King Phase!"

Celia had never witnessed a true King Phase master. She had only heard rumors that the Netherweb had true King Phase beings, but she never imagined she would see one firsthand tonight.

She glanced at Neil, then turned back to Leander.

Faced with Neil's overwhelming eruption of Primordial Energy, Leander didn't back up an inch; his eyes were deep, calm, and undisturbed. This made her recall the moment she decided to pledge her loyalty to him.

Her thought at the time was simple: she wanted a backer who could rival the Netherweb. Today was the perfect time to test if Leander truly possessed that power.

If Leander could go head-to-head with and defeat a King Phase master, then her gamble on him would have paid off magnificently.

Leander, having killed four and severely wounded three of the seven Half-Kings with a single strike, didn't bother to pay the remaining trio any mind. To him, they were nothing but worthless curs.

He merely looked at Neil, a smile playing on his lips.

"From the moment I learned of the King Phase, I've wanted to test my strength against a true King Phase master. Unfortunately, I've never had the chance. Tonight,

I'm eager to see what makes a real King Phase master so different."

He stretched his neck, his fingers clenching and opening, sending loud, crackling sounds echoing through the night sky.

Facing a King Phase master only served to ignite his fighting spirit. He had also long wanted to see if there was any fundamental difference between the King Phase's Primordial Energy and his own Nirvana Energy.

He wasn't in a rush to attack, asking with a casual smile, "Before we begin, I'm curious. As a King Phase master, aren't you concerned about the constraints of the King Phase Accord by showing yourself in public?"

Neil's face was placid as a mirror. He raised a hand, drawing a ribbon of Primordial Energy that sliced the space in front of him.

He spoke with cool detachment, waving a dismissive hand. "The so-called King Phase Accord holds no power over me.

"The Accord only binds those King Phase masters who achieved their rank before the treaty was signed. I, however, only entered the King Phase after the King Phase Accord was ratified. I am a newly promoted King Phase master, and therefore am outside its jurisdiction."

"I see." Leander nodded thoughtfully. "In that case, let's get on with it. I said you all would die here tonight, and that applies equally to you, even as a King Phase master."

A cold sneer crossed Neil's lips, and a faint white light flickered in his eyes.

"Jeff, since you want a demonstration of true King Phase power, I will grant your wish tonight! I will make you understand the enormous gulf between the King Phase and everything else!"

As he finished speaking, he suddenly thrust out a hand and clenched it in the direction where Leander stood.

With that single clench, the space

within dozens of feet of Leander

was instantly seized, as if gripped by an invisible giant hand. Ribbons of condensed Primordial Energy pressed inward, completely sealing all of Leander's avenues of escape or retreat.

"Hmph!"

Leander sneered dismissively, simply raising his hand and drawing a line in the air before him.

Crack!

The surrounding spatial lock shattered under his gesture, the sound of breaking glass filling the air.

"Oh?"

A flicker of surprise crossed Neil's face, but it vanished quickly. He pressed his fingers together and thrust his palm forward. A surging wave of Primordial Energy exploded from his core, condensing into a palm print only a few feet in size.

This palm print was minuscule compared to the Hand of Judgment that Alaric had launched moments ago, yet this palm print, mere feet across, punched directly through space and slammed into Leander's chest like a missile.

Leander didn't even have time to react. A massive crash shook the air, and a ripple of energy shockwaves expanded in the sky. He was hit and sent tumbling backward, leaving a visible scorch mark in the void.

This was an attack

forged by the

unique Primordial Energy of a King Phase master. Ten or a hundred

overlapping Hands of Judgment

could have been instantly annihilated by this single blow. Such was the colossal, unbridgeable gap between Primordial Energy and simple innate vitality; the two were not even on the same plane of existence.

Leander retreated several dozen feet. He flipped his body mid-air, stomped his foot down violently, and erupted a burst of air current before finally stabilizing himself.

He looked down at his chest. A clear, five-fingered print marked his clothing. He was certain that any triple-turn Half-King taking that blow would have been instantly punched through the torso.

"Jeff, how does that feel?"

Neil, having gained the advantage, didn't press the attack, choosing instead to look at Leander with the smug satisfaction of a cat toying with a mouse. Leander's lips curved into a smile. He suddenly grabbed the front of his shirt and ripped it open, exposing his resilient torso with flawless skin—a sculpted body where every muscle was balanced and beautiful, concealing immense explosive power.

"This is what makes a fight truly interesting!"

His hair whipped in the wind, and then, a fierce, divine light suddenly flared in his

eyes.

In the sky, a ripple expanded, and an invisible, transparent longsword, practically unseen by the naked eye, suddenly materialized directly over Neil's head and

plunged straight down toward him.

"What?"

Neil gasped in astonishment, his smug expression instantly freezing.

"What?"

Neil's expression drastically changed. He felt a fierce gust of wind rushing toward him from above, a speed that matched his own palm strike moments ago.

He swiftly retreated, bursting backward, attempting to dodge the incoming attack. He could sense the draft slice past him, yet his eyes saw nothing.

The Hermit and the others watching from the sidelines were utterly confused and bewildered. They didn't know why Neil was backing away, but they too sensed that in the space ahead, some terrifying, unseen entity was traversing the void.

Leander's eyes maintained their divine luminescence. In the darkness, Neil felt a powerful, wind-like current shadowing him, always keeping within a three-foot distance. He continuously flashed and moved through the air, yet he couldn't shake it.

"Darn it!"

Finally, Neil stopped. Sensing the surging airflow right in front of him, he roared and unleashed his Primordial Energy, driving a punch forward.

His punch was fluid, flawless, and perfectly natural-a masterpiece of instinct. Primordial Energy and physical strength fused into one, and the space ahead was instantly battered inward. In the invisible void, something seemed to collide with the force of his fist, producing a deafening crash.

Bang!

With that blow, the surging draft instantly dissipated, but Neil himself was shoved back several yards by a tremendous force. His expression was now iron-gray.

"This is... spiritual strength?"

He stared intently at Leander, fixating on the divine light in his eyes, growing more astonished by the second.

Although his own knowledge of spiritual strength was limited, during his apprenticeship with his master in the Church, he had encountered many spiritual masters. These individuals possessed legendary reputations across Westeria, capable of killing people invisibly with a mere thought or tracking a target from hundreds of miles away-they were terrifying.

The path of spiritual strength was difficult at first but became easier later. Once a spiritual master achieved completion, they were comparable to a King Phase being, capable of attacking and defending with invisible force.

He had never fought a spiritual master, but the tactics Leander was using were clearly spiritual strength attacks. Nothing else could be so completely intangible and undetectable.

He was utterly stunned that Leander was, in fact, a spiritual master.

To achieve Leander's current mastery in martial arts alone was already an immense feat, yet Leander wasn't just excelling on one path; he had reached the summit of another, with both disciplines reinforcing each other. This fact filled Neil with profound jealousy.

This was a peerless prodigy, a monster cultivating both spiritual strength and martial arts. If Leander were allowed to fully mature, who could possibly oppose him? Perhaps even the Supreme Arbiters might find the outcome uncertain.

The more he considered this, the fiercer the murderous intent in his heart became. He was resolved: even if it cost him everything, even if he ended up gravely wounded, he would ensure Leander was permanently dealt with here and now.

"You're surprisingly perceptive!"

Leander stood with his hands behind his back, a faint smile playing on his lips. "I wonder how many times a true King Phase master like you can withstand the attack I just sent?"

As he spoke, the air currents in front of him swirled, and several more invisible, sword-like forces seemed to coalesce.


Neil's smile vanished, and he dared not be arrogant again. He now regarded Leander as a genuine threat.

Swoosh!

A sudden, sharp rush of air sounded in the void as the invisible sword energy Leander had condensed with his spiritual strength shot forward.

Neil could not see the attack and could only rely on changes in the airflow to sense its position. He flickered through the air moving at near-supersonic speed. Every time he reappeared, he threw a punch, and a muffled explosion would erupt in front of him.

He threw nine consecutive punches, and nine sharp blasts reverberated before him. With every punch landed, he was forced to retreat several yards. Each invisible sword force Leander controlled possessed an irresistible impact.



Invisible sword energy streaked across the sky, yet the Hermit and the others could see nothing, only Neil constantly flickering, retreating, and punching into empty space.

This bizarre spectacle caused

everyone to gasp. They could only imagine that if Leander had used

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this tactic against them earlier Hacking Neil's keen senses and the

powerful Primordial Energy, how could they have defended

themselves?

They would likely have been pierced through the chest by an invisible attack the

moment Leander formed the thought.

"It seems a King Phase master is nothing special!" Leander continued to condense spiritual strength attacks, mocking him coldly. "Right now, you're

only managing to parry. How can you talk about a duel How many more times can you block this?"

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As he spoke, he condensed four more invisible swords and shot them into the void.

Neil didn't reply. His body was constantly being forced back; every attack Leander sent shook his vital energy and blood. Even with his expertly forged Primordial Energy, it was difficult to withstand so many violent assaults.

Yet, even as he retreated, his gaze never left Leander. He kept a sliver of vital energy locked firmly onto Leander's position.

Finally, just as the next four invisible swords shot toward him, he suddenly used the reactive force of the previous attack to catapult himself backward.

His foot stomped down hard in the void, and an energy wave exploded. His entire being instantly surpassed the speed of sound, surging forward to meet the four invisible sword forces.

"Hmm?"

Leander's expression shifted slightly, greatly surprised. At that exact moment, Neil raised his hand, and a small, white object on his middle finger flew off.

The Ring of the Sage!

It was the first time Neil had truly utilized this legendary ring since becoming the Demon Hunter.

The Ring of the Sage suddenly erupted in white light, as if bathing the world in holy radiance.

Within the holy light, a visible barrier opened, enveloping him like a protective membrane.

His body charged relentlessly forward, and shielded by this holy light, he boldly collided with Leander's four invisible sword forces.

A colossal explosion, four sharp blasts, tore through the sky. Leander felt his four invisible swords shatter instantly.

But Neil himself, undeterred, hammered through the void like a cannonball. He was now hurtling toward Leander, though the holy light shield surrounding him seemed to have dimmed slightly.

Neil's body shot out, now only ten feet from Leander. When he saw his look of astonishment, a ruthless smirk played on his lips.

"Jeff, so what if you're a spiritual master? The drawback of a spiritual master is the need for long-distance casting. As long as you haven't stepped into the realm of a spiritual grandmaster, once I get close, you're finished!"

As he spoke, he had already closed the distance, now less than six inches from

Leander. He needed only to reach out to pierce Leander's body.

He lunged, showing no mercy. Primordial Energy surged from his palm, transforming his hand into a blade aimed directly at Leander's heart.

The very instant he struck, Leander suddenly grinned, and a long, fair hand clamped

onto his wrist.

In that moment, the violence suddenly ceased, and the look on Neil's face froze

solid.

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Neil formed a blade with his free hand, sheathing it in boundless Primordial Energy. He aimed it straight at Leander's heart, expecting the blow to cleave through the man like a steel knife through soft butter.

He had activated the Ring of the Sage for defense, weathering four invisible swords of pure spiritual strength generated by Leander. His sole intent was to close the distance.

A spiritual master, like any mage, relied on maintaining a certain range to keep themselves safe and invincible. But once someone breached that barrier, they exposed their greatest vulnerability.

Neil's hand-blade was poised to inflict a crippling, one-strike wound.

Yet, in the very moment he lunged, a long, pale hand materialized faster than he could move, clamping down hard on his wrist.

He raised his gaze slightly, meeting Leander's deep, measured eyes, and his expression froze.

In that instant, he sensed an extreme danger, a truly perilous fluctuation. Without a second thought, he twisted his arm, pumping his Primordial Energy to its limit, desperate to wrench free from Leander's grip.

The sheer force he exerted fractured the very air around them, yet Leander's hand remained like a steel vice locked onto his wrist, refusing to yield an inch.

"What in the devil?"

Astonishment flooded Neil.

His own strength was that of a King Phase master; his intensified Primordial Energy could crush and tear apart a battle tank. Why was it having absolutely no effect on Leander?

As panic and doubt surfaced, Leander suddenly flashed a wide smile. "I was using spiritual strength to generate invisible sword energy. If you had held your ground and countered with Primordial Energy, you might have lasted ten minutes or so. What a pity you were so foolish as to choose a close-quarters fight with me!

"You're right. Normally, you can amplify your advantage and secure a kill by getting close to a spiritual master. But you met me—you'll only be defeated faster by closing with me!"

...

The moment he uttered that final word, his palm seemed to conceal a miniature black hole, unleashing a ferocious, sucking pull.

Neil gasped, his expression contorted.

He felt his innate vitality flowing out of him like river water, converging on Leander's palm, then surging up Leander's arm in a counter-current, being rapidly absorbed and stolen.

How is this possible? What kind of ability is this? His heart pounded with dread and shock. No matter how he tried to contain it, his Primordial Energy continued to drain away relentlessly, completely outside his command.

As Leander siphoned the energy, the divine light in his eyes grew exponentially brighter. For the first time, Neil experienced a genuine, icy fear.

He didn't realize that back then, on Stormcairn River, Douglas Tarlyn had been subdued by the exact same method, his innate vitality almost completely stripped away.

It was a contingency Neil never imagined Leander possessed.

Leander activated the Devourer's Ninefold Path, transforming his core into a massive, whirling vortex that violently drew in and converted Neil's innate vitality for his own use. Neil's imposing aura began to dwindle at an alarming rate.

Furious and terrified by the swift depletion of his Primordial Energy, Neil tried repeatedly to tear himself free from Leander, but all his attempts proved futile. Finally, a fierce light flashed in his eyes. A ray of brilliance shot from his hand to illuminate the space above his head: the Ring of the Sage.

"Space Sever!" he shouted, a low, urgent cry.

The Ring of the Sage blazed with light, bathing the sky in a holy radiance. In that blinding flash, both Leander and Neil vanished.

"Hmm?"

The instant the holy light descended,

Leander's eyes narrowed. For a

fraction of a second, he lost all sense of his surroundings. His perception, his touch, his hearing, his vision-all were abruptly shut off. But in that crucial, momentary detachment from his environment, Neil violently shook his arm, employing the Boneshrink technique from the Arayana Arts to slip out of Leander's powerful control.

Leander snapped back to awareness immediately. Neil, unwilling to risk another close encounter, stamped his foot and opened a gap of nearly three hundred feet between them.

He clenched his fingers, a mocking smile curving his lips. "Are you really that afraid of me?"

Neil's eyes were steady and dark. He refused to be baited by Leander's taunt. He beckoned with his hand, and the light of the Ring of the Sage subsided, settling once more above his head.

"Jeff, I don't know what method you used just now, but you've missed the perfect chance to take me out! I won't make the same mistake

twice he growled scennet

He grasped the

air, and a holy beam descended from the Ring of the Sage, condensing into a ball of tight that

he held in his palm.

"Luminous Palmblade!"

Without hesitation, he gripped his hand, then shaped it into a blade, slashing horizontally.

The sword energy, wrapped in holy light, shot across the air. A streak of white light traversed the sky, extending for hundreds of feet, appearing to split the very heavens in two.

When he brought that strike down, the Hermit and the others were aghast, their eyes widened with dread.

This attack was easily ten times more terrifying than the maximum power the Hermit had exerted with his Ice Soul sword. The mere residual energy filling the sky was enough to instantly shred a steel-armored tank into worthless scrap.

"Hmph!"

Leander smiled, not dodging. He merely flickered the divine light in his eyes. In front of him, an invisible ripple of spiritual strength spread out, forming an intangible shield that separated the space right before his chest.

The Sword of Holy Light descended directly toward Leander's head. But half a foot

above his crown, it stopped abruptly, unable to cut any further. Waves of compressed air exploded harmlessly around Leander's head.

"What?" Neil's pupils contracted.

He had used the strength of his

Primordial Energy to channel the reserve Power of Holy Light within the Ring of the Sage, unleashing the Sword of Holy Light. His

ver

predecessor, the previous Demon Hunter and his own master had

used this very weapon to slay a King Phase expert from the Blood Clan.

Though his current cultivation level still fell short of his teacher's, it wasn't far off. Yet, this mighty sword couldn't even breach Leander's spiritual strength defense?

"So, this is the King Phase," Leander said, catching the Sword of Holy Light. He shook his head with a light chuckle, his previous curiosity about the King Phase instantly vanishing.

"The supposed King Phase seems to be nothing more than this. For someone like you, who has just barely stepped into the King Phase, attempting to kill me is utterly delusional. I'm done playing games. Today, I'm going to use my spiritual strength to execute a True King."

At Leander's words, Neil's attention immediately snapped to the space above his head. A cyclone suddenly solidified there, then reversed its spin, forming a crescent-shaped energy blade.

"I call this blade Origin. And I will use it to cut you down."

As Leander's voice faded, the crescent-shaped energy blade vanished into the

spatial fabric.

Neil's pupils drastically shrunk, and his body instantly froze solid.

From the perspective of the Hermit and the others, a semi-circular blade suddenly

tore its way out of the space, without any warning, as if appearing from thin air. It

sliced diagonally through Neil's chest.

A plume of blood sprayed into the air.

Neil's body was instantly cleaved in two.

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A sharp tear split the air as a mist of blood exploded across the sky. Neil, a true King Phase fighter, was cleaved clean in two by the air blade.

The sight left Deo, the Hermit, and Moffat completely stunned, their faces frozen in disbelief and horror.

"How... How is that possible?" Deo's eyes went wide as his mind struggled to grasp the reality before him. He couldn't understand how Leander managed to kill a real King Phase with just one strike.

Just how powerful is Ashcroft? To think even a King Phase means nothing to him!

"Master Leander won!" Celia's expression brightened. Even someone as composed as she was couldn't suppress the joy rising within her.

Maeve and Aurora stood speechless for a long while, unable to react, while the Lavette sisters were utterly awestruck by Leander's devastating strike.

With a soft hiss, the two halves of Neil's body dissolved into countless motes of light that drifted away on the wind. But from behind that fading brilliance, a battered figure staggered backward-it was Neil himself.

It turned out that the body that had been split earlier was but a phantom. Yet even so, blood ran freely down the corner of his lips, and his aura plummeted sharply.

"A clone?" Leander frowned slightly. He hadn't managed to kill Neil in one blow, and that surprised him. His gaze lifted to the Ring of the Sage hovering above Neil's head, and he finally understood. "So, that ring took the hit for you."

Neil wiped the blood from his mouth, his face dark with frustration. If not for the ring blocking that fatal strike, he'd already be a broken corpse by now. But even with its protection, Leander's air blade had wounded his very core.

He no longer had the strength to stand against Leander.

"That ring might've saved you once, but let's see if it can save you twice," Leander said, his eyes sweeping coldly across Deo, the Hermit, and Moffat. "This time, I'll send all four of you to your graves."

As his words fell, divine light blazed once more in his eyes, and another half-moon blade of air began to form above his head.

Origin Blade!

"Run! Now!" Deo bellowed, spitting out a mouthful of blood. His Primordial Energy surged violently as he burned that blood essence, exploding into his peak speed as he shot into the night sky.

The Hermit and Moffat didn't hesitate either. Already injured by Leander's earlier attacks, they had no intention of testing themselves against the Origin Blade—a weapon that even Neil couldn't withstand.

All three triple-turn Half-Kings stomped the ground and darted away in desperate flight. Neil himself unleashed the holy light power of the Ring of the Sage to its fullest, transforming into a beam of white light that streaked in the opposite direction. His core was damaged beyond repair; he had no chance left in a direct confrontation.

...

"Too late to run!"

With a faint hum, the Origin Blade vanished into the fabric of space. When it reappeared hundreds of feet away, a scream split the night, followed by a spray of blood.

Moffat was the first to fall. The blade pierced straight through his chest, bursting out in a crimson bloom before whirling onward.

The Hermit, his white robes fluttering, barely managed to glance back before the blade cleaved through his brow. The next instant, it was already streaking forward again.

Deo's body flashed through the night, his bloodline flaring as he twisted through the air. But the Origin Blade was even faster. It intercepted him mid-flight, slicing through the space before him—and through his neck.

His head flew upward, blood gushing skyward like a fountain—macabre and dazzling against the darkened heavens.

The Origin Blade tore through the sky, cutting down three Half-Kings in an instant without slowing in the slightest. Then it turned toward its final target—Neil Vordos.

Neil was shrouded in holy light, his entire body glowing as if wrapped in divine radiance. But when the Origin Blade came screaming toward him, that light

proved as fragile as paper-it split cleanly in two, and the blade was about to sever him

once more.

"No!"

The sheer terror of death forced Neil to unleash every ounce of strength he had left. With a roar, he surged forward his speed spiking beyond its limit as the holy light around him flared again. Yet the Origin Blade stayed close behind, barely a foot away, gliding through the air with unrelenting grace. It was only a matter of seconds before it would tear his body apart.

"Insolence!"

As the shadow of death drew closer, panic welled in Neil's chest. He could feel the blade's deadly aura creeping up his spine, yet there was nothing he could do he could only watch as it closed in inch by inch. And just as the blade was about to strike, a powerful gust erupted from the void to his side.

Boom!

A massive golden fist-nearly ten feet across-burst forth, radiating dazzling brilliance as it smashed sideways into the Origin Blade. The impact scattered the blade's energy in an instant. Its deadly glow broke apart and faded into the air.

Leander's gaze shifted slightly toward the void from which the attack had come. There, standing amidst the dim sky, was a cloaked figure in a wide-brimmed hat, draped in a long black robe, and he had saved Neil from certain death.

The oppressive weight of death lifted from Neil's shoulders, and he spun around in shock. When he saw the black-robed figure, his eyes widened in shock, and he bowed deeply. "Master, it's you!"

He had never imagined that the man who had isolated himself from the world for nearly a century would suddenly show up.

The black-robed figure was none other than his mentor-the previous Demon Hunter of the Church.

The man gave Neil a faint nod before turning his eyes toward Leander. There was a flicker of surprise in his gaze. "So young, and yet you've reached such heights— mastering both martial and spiritual power. Truly, a prodigy unlike any other."

The light around Leander dimmed as he studied the man before him, the corner of his lips curling into a faint, sardonic smile. "Another King Phase?"

That night alone, he had already faced two King Phase beings. And from what he sensed, this cloaked man's power far outstripped Neil's. His Origin Blade could hunt Neil down like a cornered dog, but this stranger had dispersed it with a single attack.

...

The fact that his strength was on an entirely different level had Leander quickly realizing that the black-robed figure was very likely one of the few surviving King Phase fighters from the great War of the King Phase a hundred years ago.

The man gazed at Leander for a long moment before turning to Neil. "When I brought you into the Church, I did so to shape you into the greatest Demon Hunter of your generation. But look at you now. You've become the Arbitration Office's lapdog—helping them stir chaos across the world.

"You've wielded the High Priest's gift, the Ring of the Sage, as if it were your personal weapon. Tell me, is this how you repay my teachings? Is this how you honor the Church's faith in you?"

His eyes blazed coldly with fury. "If not for that ring if not for the reputation of the Demon Hunters—I would never have stepped in to save you from that spiritual blade."

Shame washed over Neil's face. He dropped to his knees in midair, unable to speak a single word. "Master..."

"Silence! You've lost the right to call me that."

The man's voice thundered with restrained wrath as he reached out his hand. The Ring of the Sage, Neil's most prized treasure for over 60 years, tore itself free and

flew obediently into his master's palm.

Once that was done, the black-robed man turned his gaze back toward Leander. Jeff Ashcroft, even in seclusion, I've heard of your name.

hold no allegiance to the Arbitration

Office

or do beare for their affairs

But tonight, Fask you for a favor-spare this fallen disciple's life."

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Another King Phase stood before him, yet Leander's expression remained calm and

detached. His eyes glinted faintly as he shook his head. "Spare him? Not a chance."

His voice was cool and decisive. "If you want to keep him alive, show me if you're strong enough to do it."

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"If you want to keep him alive, show me if you're strong enough to do it."

Leander's expression remained indifferent, eyes burning with a steady divine glow as a spiritual blade once again formed above his head.

The newly arrived Demon Hunter's eyes widened in response, his tone grave. "Jeff Ashcroft, you are a warrior of Astria. Back when I served the Church as a Demon Hunter, I had dealings with your nation's Dragon Emperor. I have always held Astrian fighters in high regard.

"I came here tonight only to retrieve my wayward disciple and return him to the Church of the Holy Light for judgment. There is no enmity between us must we really shed blood over this?"

His hands stayed hidden in his sleeves, showing no intention of fighting. "Besides, by appearing before you, I have already broken the King Phase Accord. If I were to cross blades with you, that would mean openly defying it. That accord was signed long ago by the King Phase powerhouses of both East and West. It represents the highest law of the martial world.

"I have no wish to tear it apart. So please, take one step back. Let me take this traitor with me. I can assure you once he returns to the Church of the Holy Light, the punishment awaiting him will be far worse than death itself."

The Church of the Holy Light was what remained after the old Church had fallen—its hidden core, formed by the most powerful surviving masters of that ancient order. The "judgment" he spoke of was indeed the Church's supreme punishment for traitors: a ritual of holy fire that burned the soul itself.

Almost every turncoat from the old Church had perished in that inferno, suffering a torment a hundred times worse than death. But that punishment would never be for Neil.

Neil had once been the Church's most gifted prodigy, handpicked by this very mentor, and the chosen bearer of the Ring of the Sage. A talent like his was far too valuable to discard.

The black-robed master had come not to condemn him—but to bring him back, to have him purified by the High Priest's holy light, and reforged as the backbone of a new generation.

His talk of judgment was merely a ploy to avoid direct conflict with Leander. He believed his words would be enough—that Leander would let the matter go and allow Neil to leave. But Leander's gaze remained as icy as before. "No."

He raised a hand, pointing straight at Neil. "I don't need your so-called trial. When I take his head, that will be judgment enough."

The black-robed elder's eyes narrowed, his tone darkening. "Jeff Ashcroft, I have already made myself clear. He is a traitor of the Church, and according

to our sacred law, he must face the judgment of the Church of the Holy Light. Why must you insist on meddling in this?"

He gave a low, cold snort, his voice gaining an edge of threat. "I once shared a strong bond with your Dragon Emperor, and I respect you as Astria's rising power. For the sake of the King Phase Accord, I've no wish to raise my hand against you. But don't mistake that for fear."

Leander's lips curved into a faint, mocking smile. "Is that so? The King Phase Accord, your so-called Church trials—just excuses, all of them. You've already violated the accord simply by standing here. Why pretend otherwise? As for your talk of judgment, it's nothing but a stalling tactic to buy him time. Did you really think I wouldn't see through you?"

As his last word fell, the spiritual blade above him vanished into the void—and in the blink of an eye, it reappeared before Neil, slicing downward toward his head.

A piercing hum split the air as the spiritual blade trembled in the void, producing a sharp sonic boom. Neil's expression shifted drastically, but before the strike could land, a burst of holy light swept across the sky, colliding head-on with the incoming air blade.

A violent shockwave erupted, rippling outward in every direction. Neil was thrown back more than 30 feet, while the air blade shattered in midair, scattering into fragments of fading energy.

In the next instant, the black-robed man appeared before Neil, his presence like a shadow between him and death. His gaze darkened as he spoke, voice heavy with power. "Don't think that just because you've mastered both martial and spiritual power, you can do whatever you please, Ashcroft!

"When I served as a Demon Hunter, I killed more spiritual masters like you than I can count—certainly no fewer than ten I've shown you respect as a younger generation, but if you insist on pushing this further if stop sparing your Dragon Emperor's face and teach you what true King Phase power looked like a century ago!"

Leander's expression remained cold and unreadable. He took a single step forward, and above his head, three spiritual blades formed one after another

humming with killing intent. They came here to hunt me down. I already told them tonight, every last one of them dies. Anyone who stands in my way... dies."

In the next heartbeat, the four spiritual blades shot forth in unison, vanishing into the void. Leander himself stepped off the air, his figure bursting forward like lightning.

All that could be seen was a streak of blue light piercing through the clouds before it hurtled straight toward Neil. In the same instant, the four spiritual blades reappeared around him, converging from every direction to cut him to pieces.

Neil's face drained of color as the suffocating pressure of death descended upon him. The black-robed man gave a sharp, cold snort, and his cloak suddenly tore free from his body.

The cloak seemed almost alive as it wrapped itself tightly around Neil. The four air blades struck it one after another, exploding into shards of light in midair. Neil staggered back from the impact, blood spilling from his lips, but he remained alive—barely touched.

That black robe wasn't ordinary at all—it was an exceptional defensive artifact, capable of withstanding even Leander's spiritual blades.

As the black cloak fell away, the crowd finally caught a glimpse of the mysterious man's true face—a classic Western visage with blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and a proud, high-bridged nose. Between his brows was a faint mark of a sacred sword, radiating an aura of holy mystery.

Seeing the blue light surging toward him, the man's eyes narrowed. He didn't retreat. Instead, he met it head-on, his gaze ice-cold. "Since you insist on fighting,

so be it. I'll show you what a true Demon Hunter is really capable of."

As his words echoed through the night, he raised his hand. The Ring of the Sage—Neil's ring—shot from the air and landed in his palm, glowing with radiant holy light. In the next instant, he clenched his fist and threw a punch forward.

A massive fist mark, over thirty feet wide, formed in the air, blazing with pure holy light. Its overwhelming power blew the surrounding clouds apart as it collided with Leander's onrushing form.

Neil's eyes widened in awe and shame. He had possessed the Ring of the Sage for nearly 70 years and could only wield half of its true strength. Yet with a single move, his mentor had drawn out twice that power effortlessly.

The holy light fist came crashing down. Leander didn't dodge. He met it head-on, shoulder-first, slamming into it with unstoppable force.

Boom!

A thunderous explosion split the heavens. The blue light shattered in an instant, and Leander's body was hurled backward several steps, skidding across the air before regaining balance. The black robed man, by contrast, stood utterly still, cloaked in shimmering holy

light-like a celestial being untouched by mortal power.

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Up in the sky, Leander clashed head-on with the black-robed man, only to be struck back and forced several steps away. The sight made everyone below go pale.

Moments ago, Leander had single-handedly overwhelmed eight opponents, nearly wiping them out. Everyone thought victory was already in his grasp. Maeve had even been ready to cheer-but the sudden appearance of this Western stranger dragged them all harshly back to reality.

With just one casual move, the man had forced Leander backward. His strength was terrifying; even if those eight had joined forces again, they probably couldn't have withstood a single one of his blows.

It was clear that this black-robed man intended to protect Neil. That meant he stood directly against Leander. But could Leander really defeat someone like him? The same question surfaced in everyone's mind.

"How interesting." Leander rolled his shoulders, blood surging with battle heat as a faint grin touched his lips.

Though he hadn't yet activated the Devourer Form, his physical body was already among the strongest in the world. For this man to knock him back so easily with one strike, he truly lived up to the title of a King Phase warrior from a hundred years ago. The thought only deepened Leander's curiosity about those ancient rulers who once dominated the world.

The black-robed Westerner stood tall in his black robes, wind whipping through the fabric. Hovering above his head was the Ring of the Sage. His tone was calm and faintly arrogant. "You've felt that punch. There's no need for us to continue. May I take him and leave now?"

He spoke with the self-assurance of one who had lived through history itself—someone who knew the hidden truths of the world and understood just how vast the gap was between the ancient Kings and those who had only recently ascended.

Though his cultivation wasn't far above Neil's, he could crush Neil with ease. That was the unbridgeable gulf between the Kings of the past and the Kings of this era—the very essence of their power came from different sources. He hadn't said as much aloud, but he was certain that that single punch had been enough to make Leander understand.

"I told you, no one's stopping me from killing him today." Leander smirked, blue light blazing around him like burning fire. "Devourer Form-Activate!"

The blue light flowed across his body like liquid flame, and his skin began to gleam with a crystalline radiance.

Standing dozens of feet apart, he swung his fist.

Trinity Strike Technique, Act One-Soulbreaker!

The blue fistprint pulsed with dreamlike ripples, lighting up the night sky. It spanned nearly sixty feet across as it tore through the air.

"Stubborn fool!" the black-robed man growled. No longer holding back, he summoned holy light that surged around him before condensing along his arm. Then he too struck forward with a punch.

The two forces collided in midair, and shockwaves burst outward from both sides. Ripples of visible energy shattered the clouds above, scattering them across the night sky.

Blue and white light wrestled in the heavens—one moment the blue pressed down, the next the white pushed back. Neither yielded an inch, the entire sky turning into a dazzling swirl of those two colors.

Bam!

A deafening crack rang out as both powers exploded, scattering into countless motes of light. Leander and the black-robed man reappeared, standing firm—neither had moved an inch.

"Hm?" The black-robed man gave a low sound of surprise. Clearly, he hadn't expected that.

Previously, the man had easily knocked Leander back with a single punch. But this time, Leander met him blow for blow. His fists roared like surging waves, relentless and crushing, pressing the black-robed man with mounting force.

For the first time, the ancient King Phase fighter felt genuine pressure—a faint but undeniable sense of threat from someone outside his league.

Neil's expression froze in disbelief. He had thought Leander's earlier display—when he condensed his spiritual strength into an air

blade was already his peak power. But how he realized Leander hadn't even been fighting seriously. The thought was staggering. This man hadn't reached the King Phase, yet his strength had been pushed to such terrifying heights. What kind of monster was he?

How can he possibly match my power without stepping into the King Phase? Could he be the reincarnation of some celestial being? the black-robed man thought, his gaze fixed on the blue aura burning around Leander.

Within that light, he sensed something he had never felt before—a force so pure, so refined, that it made his own energy seem crude by comparison. Their realms were worlds apart, yet the density and purity of Leander's power far exceeded his own.

It was like comparing a ton of cotton to a pebble—one vast but soft, the other small but indestructible. He had no doubt that if Leander's cultivation matched his own, Leander could crush him effortlessly.

Even so, his face remained calm.

the king

Astonishment did not equal fear. Power was power-but as long as Leander hadn't ascended to nded Phase, there was no chance he could lose. Besides, he hadn't come here to fight to the death. His goal was simply to get Neil out alive.

With that thought, his lips moved ever so slightly, his voice transmitted directly into Neil's mind. "Neil, I'll hold him off. Go now! Head to Vordos Castle in Angleland Royal Park. Wait for me there. This is the Church's final offer to you!"

Only Neil could hear him. The moment the message reached his ears, Neil reacted at once. Holy light surged around his body as he turned to flee.

"Hmph." Leander's low chuckle cut through the air before Neil could even take off. "Trying to stall me so he can run?"

He didn't move to chase, merely lifted a finger and shook it lightly. "No man I intend to kill escapes from me."

Even as he spoke, Neil had already fled almost a mile away, his figure reduced to a tiny white dot in the distance, growing smaller by the second.

The black-robed man smiled faintly, unfazed. "You're truly one of Astria's rare prodigies, Ashcroft. A century ago, you would've been the Church's number one kill target But times have changed. There's no need 's no need for hostility between us. Consider Neil's escape today a favor owed by the Church. In the future, when facing the Arbitration Office, perhaps you and the Church could be allies."

Neil's presence had all but vanished from sight. The black-robed man didn't believe

for a moment that Leander had any means of stopping him now—especially with himself standing here as a shield.

"You really think he can get away?" Leander's tone was mild, almost amused. He looked at the man and shook his head with a small smile. "From the moment my spiritual blade touched him, he was already dead."

The black-robed man's pupils contracted, suspicion flashing in his eyes. "What did you say?"

Leander didn't answer but only commanded plainly, "Burn the soul."

Instantly, that faint white dot at the edge of the sky suddenly halted and then turned crimson, flickering and blurred.

The crowd below didn't understand what was happening—but the black-robed Westerner did. His eyes widened violently as he saw Neil's body erupt into roaring flames, burning from within until he became a blazing sphere of fire.

The man's expression froze, horror etched across his face.

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"Ahhhh!"

A scream tore across the distant sky as fierce flames erupted, painting the horizon red. The voice was shrill and gut-wrenching, echoing through the clouds.

The crowd could faintly recognize that the voice belonged to Neil, who had fled far into the distance only moments ago. But what left them all bewildered was how someone already thousands of feet away-nearly at the edge of the horizon-could suddenly burst into flames on his own.

The black-robed man spun toward the burning light in the distance. Seeing the inferno blaze across the horizon, his expression darkened, fury boiling in his eyes. But beneath that anger was confusion-what had Leander done, and how could he ignite Neil's body from such an impossible distance?

Aurora's eyes widened in disbelief. She had once witnessed Leander unleash the Dragonfire Soulchaser above the Southern Shore, where he shot down two Transcendent Realm powerhouses from the World Power Rankings.

But back then, Leander had gathered flames into a longbow and loosed it with his own hands. Today, he hadn't even moved-no bow, no flame, no sound. And yet, he had killed as if by thought alone. The realization left her stunned.

"Ashcroft," the black-robed man demanded, his tone shaking with both rage and dread, "what kind of technique did you use?"

Leander smiled faintly. "Technique? The moment my spiritual blade touched him, he was already dead."

It was his most lethal spiritual strike-once a person's mind was marked by his spiritual strength, there was no escape unless they possessed greater mental power or overwhelming strength to counter him.

Anyone touched by that mark could be obliterated with a single thought, no matter how far they fled. The mark would ignite from within, turning their very soul into fire until nothing remained.

Neil might have reached the King Phase, but he was newly ascended-far from the level of the ancient Kings. Worse yet, he wasn't even a practitioner of spiritual strength. His mental defenses were weak. So after Leander had seriously injured him, it took only a single thought to reduce him to ashes.

"D*mn you!" the black-robed man roared as he sensed Neil's life force vanish completely. His fury burned so hot it nearly burst from his eyes. "Do you realize what you've done? Killing a Demon Hunter of the Church-do you know the crime you've committed, Ashcroft?"

He still couldn't fathom how Leander had done it, but that kind of godlike power filled him with a deep unease.

"Crime?" Leander's tone was almost mocking, a smirk tugging at his lips. "The Church is a relic of the last century, and you still have the nerve to bring it up?"

He stepped closer, his gaze cold and sharp. "If your Church is truly powerful, why haven't your people stood up to the Arbitration Office? Why were you

suppressed, forced into hiding, your High Priest dethroned? Even your so-called Demon Hunters were reduced to running dogs, serving under the very organization that crushed you.

"You want to lecture me about the Church? You've come to the wrong man. I don't even flinch at the Arbitration Office-what makes you think your fallen Church is worth my time?"

Each word cut like a blade, stabbing straight into the stranger's heart because Leander was right. Once, they had ruled beside the divine, but the day the High Priest was forced to bow before the 16 Supreme Arbiters was the darkest, most humiliating day in their history.

And though the Church of the Holy Light still endured in secret, they no longer dared to challenge the all-powerful Arbitration Office. They could only act from the shadows, clinging to what influence they had left.

Now, with Leander's words, that last fragile veil had been ripped away-exposing the old wound beneath, still raw and bleeding.

"You've got some nerve, Ashcroft!" the black-robed man thundered. "First, you make enemies with the Arbitration Office, and now you treat the Church as if it's nothing! You should know-killing one of our Demon Hunters means declaring war on the entire Church!

"Every rank within the Church will unite in judgment against you! From this moment on, you are a heretic in the eyes of the Holy Light. Wherever its radiance shines, there will be no place for you to exist!"

He fixed his gaze on Leander, the malice in his eyes sharpening to a tangible edge.

Leander merely scoffed. "Enough talk. If you're truly here to judge me, then do it. Your disciple's dead-you should be coming for revenge. Or has a King Phase fighter from a century ago learned to do nothing but flap his gums?"

His tone was calm, indifferent, almost mocking. A faint smile played at the corner of his lips as divine light gathered in his eyes.

"Hmph!" The black-robed man's animosity flared so strongly it felt almost solid. His aura surged, the pressure around him rising like a tide. But after a

long moment, his breathing steadied, and the fire in his eyes began to fade away.

"Spare me the provocations,

Ashcroft. You know as well as I do that my very appearance here already violates the King Phase Accord. If I were to strike at you now it would mean the Church openly tearing that accord apart. The Church of the Holy Light will not be the first to break the peace—not before the Arbitration Office does."

He cast one last glance at Leander, then slowly raised his palm. A faint, holy glow shimmered there, forming into a radiant Western sigil.

"I won't fight you," he said coldly, "but that doesn't mean the Church of the Holy Light won't. You've slain a Demon Hunter—your sin is unforgivable. Whatever judgment they pass upon you will be the consequence of your own actions."

With that, he crushed the glowing sigil in his hand.

Leander's brows lifted slightly as he watched. He recognized the method. He'd seen something similar at the Aorinth Peaks when he'd slain several Chief Arbiters—everyone except Greed. Before his death, Greed had shattered a jade talisman just like this one. Moments later, 15. Chief Arbiters had descended through space itself to besiege him.

It seemed this glowing sigil served a similar purpose—some sort of divine communication link, capable of summoning reinforcements or opening a spatial passage for powerful beings to descend.

Voom...

Ripples spread outward from where the sigil had shattered, sweeping across the sky above Yelem. Clouds scattered as the night cleared, moonlight flooding the heavens.

Then, around the black-robed man, four points in space began to twist. From each distortion, a portal opened—each just large enough for one person to step through.

Four figures emerged almost simultaneously, their presence shaking the air itself. They were old men, each robed in garments etched with sacred runes each radiating the aura of a Western master. Their power wasn't as overwhelming as the black-robed man's, but it carried a strange, layered resonance—subtle, vast, and unfathomable.

Leander's eyes narrowed in surprise at their appearance. He hadn't expected to encounter spiritual cultivators here, much less ones of this caliber. Their energy was refined, potent—none of them weak.

"Four spiritual masters... all at the Origin Realm?" he murmured under his breath.

The black-robed man smiled faintly at his reaction and gestured toward the newcomers. "Just as the Arbitration Office has its assembly order, the Church has its own too."

"These four are not Kings, but their mastery of spiritual strength rivals that of the realm. Together, they've executed countless heretics who dared defy the Church's will. Your execution will be carried out by them."

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Four robed figures emerged slowly from the glow of the holy light, their silhouettes becoming clear as they stepped forward. Each one of them carried an unshakable calm, their expressions utterly composed. When the black-robed man spoke, they merely lowered their eyes slightly, betraying no emotion.

"Faelan, you summoned us here with a sigil—what for?" one of the elders asked.

The black-robed man, now revealed as Faelan, raised a finger toward Leander and said coldly, "He killed Neil—one of our Church's Demon Hunters. Because of the King Phase Accord, I cannot act against him myself. You will deliver his judgment in my stead."

At his words, the four figures stirred, their spiritual senses flaring as they turned toward Leander. For the first time, they truly noticed the divine glow in his eyes and regarded him seriously.

"So, you're a spiritual grandmaster as well," one of them said. "Shame that you're facing us today. Your spiritual strength may be formidable, but compared to the flawless harmony between the four of us, you're far behind.

"We-the Holy Four-will judge you according to the ways of the Church. Of course, you may choose to surrender and return with us. Do that, and you'll be spared the trial. You may even become our next Demon Hunter."

Leander burst into laughter, loud and scornful. "The Church is no different from the Arbitration Office—just another pack of self-righteous hypocrites hiding behind the veil of holiness."

His gaze darkened, the malice in his eyes spreading like wildfire. "If you want to judge me, show me how strong you are. Go ahead-make your move."

With a low shout, Leander's spiritual strength split into four air blades that shot toward the elders. Meanwhile, Faelan had already vanished into the void, speeding straight toward the spot where Neil's soul had burned away.

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A sharp hiss sliced through the night as the four air blades streaked forward. The elders' eyes flickered with surprise at Leander's power, but none of them panicked.

Though their physical cultivation was limited, their mastery of spiritual strength rivaled that of King Phase experts. Two of them joined forces, shaping their own spiritual strength into wind blades that clashed head-on with Leander's attack.

A tremor rippled through the void as waves of spiritual energy exploded outward. All four elders staggered back, their expressions tightening in astonishment.

"To think that Astria would produce a spiritual powerhouse like you outside the disciples of Clarity Palace," one elder remarked, eyes gleaming with awe. But before Leander could respond, the man's expression hardened, and he dove

downward. His spiritual strength condensed into a massive, tangible hand that swept toward the crowd below.

Sensing danger, Leander immediately tried to intercept him, but the other three elders had anticipated it. Their combined spiritual power surged like a storm, layering wave upon wave until it sealed off his path entirely.

Leander's spiritual strength solidified into an iron wall, holding back their joint strike. But in that split second, the elder who had attacked below had already succeeded.

Among the crowd, Celia possessed the highest cultivation, yet even she didn't react in time. A scream pierced the night as Maeve—dressed in an evening gown—was suddenly yanked upward by an unseen force, her body lifted into the air.

"Ah!" Maeve's cry echoed as she flailed helplessly, her face pale with terror, while her arms reached toward the ground that was slipping away beneath her.

The sudden turn of events left everyone frozen in shock. What had started as a battle between Leander and the black-robed figures had somehow dragged Maeve into its path.

"Hmph!" Celia let out a sharp, angry snort. She knew Maeve shared a bond with Leander, however faint, and she couldn't just stand by.

But the moment she took a step forward, a wall of spiritual strength slammed down before her. She threw a punch, but her fist struck an invisible barrier, and the backlash sent her staggering backward. In that instant, the elder had already seized Maeve.

Clutching his captive, the elder exchanged a brief glance with the other three. As though by prior agreement, they turned and sped off toward the horizon, carrying Maeve with them.

"Heretic," the elder who held Maeve called coldly over his shoulder, "if you want to save her, come and get her!"

Leander's expression turned icy. "So, that's the Church's way now? Using such despicable tactics?"

In all his battles, Leander had always faced the world's top experts—men who, for all their power, still disdained striking at innocents. That arrogance had made him drop his guard. But these four elders were masters of spiritual strength, their understanding of human emotion and mental perception far deeper than most.

When Leander's earlier strike had forced them all back, they had already realized they couldn't defeat him by strength alone.

From above, they had spread a thread of spiritual perception across the crowd. It took only an instant for them to sense Maeve's feelings toward Leander and to recognize the connection between them. That was all the leverage they needed. They would use her as bait.

As enforcers of the Church, they had never cared whether their methods were noble or vile. Their only creed was to punish heretics—no matter the cost.

As the four streaked forward through the sky, Maeve's terrified screams echoed beneath the clouds. Leander's eyes grew dark, the animosity in them colder than ever before. He slammed a foot into the air, and the thunderous crack that followed propelled him forward at twice their speed.

The space before him rippled like a thread vibrating in the void. He stopped abruptly and drove a punch forward.

A deep, muffled boom exploded in front of him. He took a step back as bursts of light flared across the air. His gaze sharpened on the swirling black mist ahead, where Maeve hung helplessly in the elder's grasp. The other three turned sharply at that exact moment.

Their movements were perfectly synchronized, like a single entity sharing one will. Four sets of glowing hand seals took form, each palm releasing a beam of holy light. The beams intertwined in pairs, linking together into a four-sided spiritual formation that trapped Maeve within its center.

Maeve was an ordinary woman—she had never encountered anything like this. Suspended in midair, she looked helplessly toward the approaching Leander, her eyes wide with fear. In this moment, he was the only hope she had left.

Leander focused his senses. He

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could feel that the formation was woven entirely from the four men's spiritual strength-each strand a razor-thin thread that brushed against Maeve's mind. A single thought from them could shred her consciousness, leaving her an empty shelf. One flicker of intent, and they could tear her apart where she hung.

His expression darkened further. "If you claim to represent the Church and wish to judge me, then come at me. There's no need to drag innocents into it. This woman has nothing to do with our fight. Let her go, and we'll settle this here and now- above Yelem Church."

The elder who had captured Maeve gave a disdainful snort, his eyes glowing with sanctity. "You rushed here the moment we took her-that alone proves how much she means to you. You killed one of our Demon Hunters so now you'll understand what it's like to lose someone important. If you want to save her, step into the array yourself."

As his words faded, the threads of spiritual strength spread out like a web, wrapping Maeve completely. Every inch of her skin, every joint in her body, was ensnared and bound tight by the glowing strands.