

From Outcast to Overlord The Unyielding Heir (Leander Ashcroft)

Chapter 531

The four enforcers of the Church showed no sign of wavering at Leander's words. None of them loosened their hold on Maeve. Their combined spiritual strength formed a compact prison around her, enclosing her completely every inch of her body, every joint, every breath was bound tight by invisible force.

From the far horizon, a dark silhouette cut across the sky. His expression was grim, his aura heavy-it was Faelan, the black-robed man who had earlier intercepted Leander's air blade to protect Neil.

When he saw the enforcers imprisoning Maeve, his gaze flickered briefly, but he said nothing. Turning to Leander, he spoke coldly, "I'll admit, Ashcroft-I don't agree with their methods. But unfortunately, this is how the Church's enforcers operate. Their only duty is to punish heretics. They care nothing for process or morality-only results.

"If you must blame someone, blame yourself for leaving them no room to compromise. Neil may have betrayed the Church, but he was the greatest genius our order has seen in centuries, and my proudest disciple. You killed him, so now you'll taste the same bitterness I feel."

With that, he gestured to the enforcers in a silent signal unique to the Church, then disappeared into the distant sky.

Leander's eyes darkened as he glared at the four elders, his malice almost tangible. "That woman has nothing to do with me," he said coldly. "If you kill her, it changes nothing. But I swear, if you harm her, none of you will leave here alive."

The eldest of the four enforcers let out a derisive laugh. "If she truly means nothing to you, Ashcroft, why do you care so much about her life?"

He turned to Maeve, his expression devoid of empathy. "I don't take pleasure in killing the innocent. But your misfortune is your connection to this heretic. If

you wish to live, then convince him to step into the array and save you himself."

Every word he spoke was deliberate. The spiritual formation they had woven was far stronger than ordinary arrays—ten times more potent. It could completely suppress even a grandmaster one realm above them, sealing their spiritual strength and rendering them powerless, before crushing them beneath the combined might of the four.

Capturing Maeve had been a calculated move—she was bait, the perfect snare to draw Leander into their trap and destroy him.

Maeve felt the crushing restraint around her, her very mind clenched tight as if an invisible hand gripped it. The spiritual agony twisted her features, yet she showed no fear. She bit back her cries and forced her eyes open, meeting Leander's gaze with a faint, peaceful smile.

"Blockhead, meeting you was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me.

"You know—you're like a guardian angel to me. When I was blind, when assassins from the Umbral Court hunted me down in Ravenridge—you always appeared when I was at my weakest, saving me every single time. In my heart, you've always been my one and only hero.

"When my parents and sister told me you were dead, do you know how many nights I cried? Do you know how many times you appeared in my dreams?"

Her eyes glistened with emotion. "Maybe I won't live past the next moment. But I don't want to hide my feelings anymore. The happiest time of my life was that month I spent blind and lost in the mountains—because every day, you were there beside me. Every day, I could call you 'blockhead.'"

Tears welled and rolled down her cheeks. "Blockhead, don't risk your life for me. Kill those despicable b*stards. Just remember—there was once a girl named Maeve Reyne who loved you, and will love you forever."

Her final words came out as a shout, full of trembling defiance. Then, with her heart laid bare, she closed her eyes and faced death without fear.

Leander's heart stirred slightly. He had always known about Maeve's feelings for him—he had simply

chosen to avoid them. But see in me

her now, standing at the edge of death and still thinking of till thinking only of his safety, refusing to let him risk himself even if it meant dying alone-it shook something deep within him.

"Hmmp!" The eldest of the four enforcers snorted coldly. He had expected Maeve to beg Leander to save her, but instead, she faced death with calm defiance, accepting her fate without fear. His eyes narrowed. Enough hesitation-his mind connected with the others. and together their spiritual strength surged. They intended to tear Maeve apart then and there.

At that very instant, Leander finally lifted his head, his voice firm and clear. "You foolish woman-what nonsense are you saying? No one dies in front of me. Have you forgotten? I'm your eyes!"

Maeve's eyes flew open, surprise and disbelief flashing across her face. In that moment, she remembered—the days when she had been blind and lost in the wilderness, when Leander had said the same words "I'm your eyes now."

She had thought he'd long forgotten, yet here he was, repeating them word for word. The realization brought tears of joy to her eyes.

"Blockhead..." she whispered softly, her voice trembling as tears spilled once more.

"You insolent heretic!" one of the enforcers sneered. "Her entire body is bound by all four of our spiritual strengths. With a single thought, we can crush her into dust. Even if your power surpasses ours, you can't save her."

At that, the four of them moved as one, their combined spiritual strength pulling in four directions-intent on ripping Maeve's body apart.

"Is that so?"

Leander's lips curved faintly, and in that split second, a burst of divine radiance flashed in his eyes.

His figure blurred—and in the blink of an eye, he was gone from where he stood, reappearing right in the center of the spiritual array. A wave of spiritual energy erupted from him, spreading outward to shield Maeve completely.

The enforcers' faces twisted in shock as their own spiritual power unraveled, violently torn apart by a force far stronger than theirs.

"What?!"

Their expressions turned to disbelief. Their spiritual web had tightly wrapped around Maeve's entire being; a mere thought would have been enough to crush her. Yet now, the entire array was shattering before their eyes.

It was impossible—no one below the Origin Breaking Realm should have been able to break their net

array, let alone overpower it

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brutally, But Leander had done it His raw spiritual strength ripped through theirs, expanding outward, forcing them back with irresistible might.

Within the collapsing formation, Leander looked straight into Maeve's eyes, and for

the first time, his expression softened. "I told you—no one can kill you while I'm still breathing."

Then he raised his head and fixed his gaze on the four enforcers surrounding them. His eyes turned icy, his voice cutting through the storm like a blade. "Today, above the skies of Yelem, I'll fight the world for you."

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Leander's eyes blazed with light, sharp and unyielding. But across from him, the four enforcers' expressions darkened completely, their voices low and

grim. "Heretic, I admit your spiritual strength surpasses ours. But unfortunately for you, you've already stepped into our spiritual formation."

A cold smirk curved one man's lips, his expression filled with malicious satisfaction. "You may be stronger than we are, but your power is still limited. As long as your spiritual strength hasn't reached the Origin Breaking Realm, you will never survive within our formation!"

"You think the likes of you can kill me?" Leander taunted, his voice laced with disdain. As he spoke, the spiritual strength shielding Maeve surged sharply, shattering the enforcers' pressure and sweeping her toward him.

"Trying to save her? Huh! Dream on!"

Though the four enforcers were briefly startled, they quickly regained composure. Their spiritual strength layered upon itself, almost tangible, rippling through the air as it crushed inward from all directions, compressing Leander's power toward the center.

In that instant, a faint gleam flashed through Leander's eyes, and beads of sweat rolled down his face. He wasn't only enduring the elder's spiritual pressure but also controlling his own power with precision so that not even the faintest wisp would harm Maeve. He had to make sure she remained safely within the protective field of

his energy.

Combined, the two tasks weighed on him like an entire mountain pressing down- one he couldn't let collapse or even crack the ground beneath it. The difficulty was unimaginable.

The four enforcers, however, had no such restraint. All they needed to do was attack relentlessly, forcing Leander's spiritual strength into a smaller and smaller space until even Maeve would have nowhere left to exist.

"Blockhead!" Seeing the sweat trickling down Leander's temple, Maeve's eyes narrowed in distress. She could tell how much strain he was under, and her heart clenched painfully. "Forget about me, blockhead! You'll wear yourself out like this!"

She couldn't bear to see him in such agony. Even if it meant her death, she would rather see Leander safe and unharmed.

"No need to worry about me." Despite the tension in his face, Leander managed a grin. "I told you—you won't die. Even if a God stands before me, I still won't let you die."

"Your spiritual strength is indeed extraordinary," One of the elders sneered coldly. "To shield her so completely under my suppression proves your mastery has surpassed ours. But sadly, you won't last long."

Leander lifted his gaze slightly. Sweat dripped down his chin, but the light in his eyes had calmed—steady and unshaken.

"If you think you can overpower me with spiritual strength, think again!" he declared icily, and in the next instant, an overwhelming surge of spiritual power burst from Maeve's body.

Pop!

The air cracked softly-like something being pierced through.

The elder's face twisted in shock. His spiritual field had been violently torn apart in that single moment. At the same time, Maeve was pulled free by Leander's power. The light in his eyes flared, and with a forceful step into the void, he shot forward like a bolt of lightning.

"Trying to escape the formation?" The elder let out a harsh snort. His spiritual strength condensed into a massive phantom hand that shot out from behind Maeve, reaching to seize her once again.

Leander reached Maeve a split second before the attack did. Stretching out one arm, he swept her into his embrace and struck out with his other hand.

Boom!

A streak of blue light tore across the sky as his palm print collided head-on with the massive hand of spiritual strength. The clash unleashed a violent gale that churned the air, scattering the clouds above.

The enormous hand shattered under Leander's strike, breaking into countless rippling waves of spiritual force that rolled backward. Leander was hurled several yards away by the recoil, landing steady on the air itself, but still trapped within the boundaries of the spiritual formation.

"You okay?" Leander looked down, his eyes deep and star-bright. Maeve lay cradled

in his arms, the world around her fading into insignificance. She nodded faintly, feeling safer than she ever had in her life.

The four enforcers' faces turned pitch dark. They had held every advantage, yet Leander had still managed to snatch Maeve from their grasp. That brief eruption of his spiritual power had shaken even them to the core.

"His sudden burst of strength was terrifying," one of them muttered, his tone edged with unease. "But power like that—he can't sustain it for long."

As the brilliance faded from Leander's eyes, the four exchanged a knowing glance. Their spiritual strength surged once more, locking firmly onto him.

"Heretic," one of them snarled, "no matter how you struggle today, both you and your woman will die!"

At that, they spread their hands wide. Waves of spiritual strength billowed outward, filling the heavens until half the sky was veiled in shimmering energy. A few birds that happened to fly through were instantly reduced to drifting clouds of blood mist. "You think the likes of you can kill me with such filthy tricks?" Leander's tone was calm, his eyes as still as a deep well. Yet in his arms, Maeve suddenly gasped, her breathing quick and shallow before weakening further. Her eyelids fluttered shut.

Only then did Leander realize they were suspended high in the air, where the air was thin, and Maeve, being an ordinary human, was already struggling to breathe.

"No matter what you say," one of the elders declared, "your execution is inevitable today!"

He flickered through the air, and his spiritual strength wove itself into a massive web, sealing the sky and reinforcing the formation's barrier. Another elder followed suit, his energy rising from below, enclosing the space completely.

"In the name of the Holy Light, purge the heretic from this world! May the fire of the Church burn eternal!"

The four elders stood at four

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corners, chanting the Church's ancient, indecipherable scripture. their voices fell in unison, they roared together, and the spiritual web twisted violently, reshaping into countless razor-sharp spikes, each one sharp enough to pierce straight through an armored tank.

"Holy Rite-Piercing Thorns!"

In the blink of an eye, a thousand spikes of pure spiritual power shot toward them.

Leander and Maeve were trapped in the midst of the onslaught. But he paid the incoming spikes no heed. Instead, he lowered his head suddenly—and kissed her.

"Mmph!"

Maeve's eyes snapped open through her daze just as Leander's lips pressed firmly against hers. A rush of cool, invigorating energy flowed from his mouth into hers, flooding her lungs with air and life. Her senses sharpened at once, her breathing evening out as strength returned to her body.

Only after passing her a breath of his Nirvana Energy did Leander release her. "What comes next might get bloody. Just close your eyes and wait till I've slaughtered every last one of those old Church dogs."

Maeve nodded obediently, closing her eyes. Her heart fluttered sweetly in her chest. Then the light in Leander's eyes flared once more, and in the next instant, an immense surge of power erupted around him—so bright it lit up half the night sky.

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Light flared from Leander's body, bursting forth with blinding brilliance that

illuminated the night sky. At the same moment, countless spikes of spiritual strength streaked toward him like a deadly storm.

The enforcers' eyes were cold and pitiless as they poured their own spiritual strength into the attack, sharpening each spike's penetration and destructive force. Under such a relentless onslaught, Leander not only had to fend off all four of them but also protect Maeve a mere mortal. It was an impossible task for anyone else.

A clear clang rang out from within the light, followed by a rapid, continuous cascade of metallic chimes that filled the air.

"Hm?"

The enforcers narrowed their eyes. Within the radiant glow, a sphere of light had taken shape—a perfectly rounded shield enclosing Leander and Maeve from all sides. Every spike of spiritual strength struck its surface, but none could pierce through. It was as if they were trapped inside a solid sphere of iron, impervious to the countless spears striking from every direction.

"To think he could manipulate spiritual strength to this extent—condensing it into such a resilient spiritual shield..." one of the enforcers muttered, half in awe. Even with their mastery, forming such a dense and stable barrier was extremely difficult. Yet Leander had summoned it in the blink of an eye.

"With power and talent like his, had he joined the Church, he would have become one of its greatest pillars. Unfortunately, he chose to walk the heretic's path—and now he stands as the Church's enemy."

A flicker of regret crossed their eyes—but only for an instant. The next heartbeat, their malice surged once again.

They knew all too well how dangerous a gifted and growing enemy could be. The Church had once suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Arbitration Office, all because of arrogance and complacency—because they had dismissed the threat before it had truly matured. By the time they realized their mistake, the Arbitration Office had spread its wings and forced the Church into retreat.

This time, they would not repeat that mistake. No matter how formidable Leander appeared, he would die here and now in Yelem.

The four men stepped forward in unison. Their combined spiritual strength rippled across the sky, twisting together into a massive, spinning drill—its tip gleaming with lethal precision as it drove straight into Leander's barrier.

"Break!"

The rotating spike rammed forward. Leander frowned slightly, feeling the violent shock reverberate through his spiritual field. The spinning did not stop; instead, it accelerated rapidly, gathering even greater destructive force.

"Holy Art-Spiral Drill!"

The spinning lance of energy whirled faster and faster, its penetrative power increasing exponentially. Cracks began to splinter across the surface of Leander's spiritual shield.

"Heretic," one of the enforcers called out with a sneer, "you truly are a master of spiritual strength. Your cultivation has reached the intermediate to advanced stage of the Origin Realm. Given enough time, you might even step into the Origin Breaking Realm and become a true grandmaster of the spirit.

"But unfortunately for you, you won't live to see that day. The four of us stand in the same realm—and today, we will see you dead!"

Their faces brimmed with pride and murderous resolve. Then, all at once, their eyes flashed with divine light as the spinning drill's speed climbed again.

"Break!" they roared together.

A thunderous shout tore through the heavens, followed by a sharp crack. Leander's barrier shattered like glass, exploding into countless fragments of shimmering light that scattered across the sky.

The spinning spike of spiritual strength shot forward like a drill, cutting through the air until it was mere inches from Maeve. One touch from it, and she would have been torn to shreds on the spot.

But in that instant, Leander yanked her back—and turned his own body to face the blow.

Screech!

A sound like metal grinding against metal rang out, sparks flaring from Leander's back. The spiraling spike halted in midair, its force abruptly arrested. Leander, still holding Maeve tightly in his arms, backward by the impact, skidding dozens of yards through the air before managing to stop himself.

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"Blockhead, you okay?" Maeve's face went pale with horror as she frantically ran her hands over him. She had seen it—he had taken the full force of that spiritual drill with his bare body to shield her. She knew how devastating the enforcers' attack was; for Leander to meet it head-on like that was nothing short of suicide.

Her fingers brushed over a torn hole in the back of his clothes, and her heart nearly stopped. Her eyes widened, tears welling as she choked on a sob.

"I'm fine."

Leander suddenly lifted his head and grinned at her. His expression was calm, his

tone unshaken, as though he hadn't suffered the slightest injury.

From afar, the enforcers stared in disbelief, their minds reeling.

They knew their Spiral Drill technique had struck him dead-on.

Yet somehow, Leander stood there, completely unharmed. His tattered robes hung open where the strike had landed, revealing unbroken skin beneath—only a faint white mark traced across his back, shallow as a scar of light.

"This heretic's body... how can it be so strong?" one of them muttered in stunned

awe.

Their gazes flickered with shock.

"He's reached the pinnacle of martial arts—his physical body alone is terrifyingly resilient. And now, even his spiritual strength rivals the greatest of

masters. No wonder he was able to kill Neil, the one who bore the Ring of the Sage!"

Holding Maeve protectively, Leander turned to face them. His eyes swept across the four figures, sharp and calculating. "Four Origin Realm masters," he said evenly. "Truly troublesome opponents."

Though these enforcers were not martial artists, their cultivation of spiritual strength had reached the level of the Origin Realm—what the East called psyche masters, and the West revered as spiritual masters.

A spiritual master of the Origin Realm could unleash countless invisible attacks with a single thought formless, soundless, and deadly. Each strike carried immense penetrating power. Even if a fighter of equal realm managed to block the assault, the spiritual force within it would continue to batter his consciousness. After enough cycles, even the strongest will would begin to crack, leaving the fighter's mind broken and defenseless.

With their impeccable coordination, the four enforcers were a force to be feared. Even Neil, with all his power and the Ring of the Sage, would have fallen to them in under 15 minutes. Such was the terror of the spiritual masters.

And now, Leander faced four of them alone, all while protecting a defenseless Maeve in his arms.

Yet despite the overwhelming danger, he felt no fear. Even against four masters of the spirit, he stood unwavering. For when it came to spiritual strength, Leander knew—within the Origin Realm, there was no one who could rival him. "Heretic," one of the enforcers growled, his voice low and contemptuous, "your spiritual strength may be great enough to defend yourself against the four of us—but with that woman to protect, you're already doomed.

"The essence of spiritual cultivation lies in abandoning emotion. As long as you hold on to affection, it becomes your fatal weakness. Now accept your judgment!"

At that, the four acted in perfect unison. Their combined spiritual power surged once more, forming a colossal spiraling spike that shot forth with

terrifying speed. This time, its rotation was faster, sharper-so powerful that the very air twisted into a roaring, horizontal tornado of spiritual force.

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A spiraling tornado erupted, tearing across the night sky. Leander held Maeve in his arms, standing his ground without the slightest movement. He neither dodged nor defended. Maeve's beautiful eyes widened in astonishment as the swirling vortex rushed toward them.

The monstrous cyclone reached them in an instant. The howling gale carried a destructive, lethal aura, its power palpable. Just as it was about to touch Leander, he let out a soft, almost amused chuckle.

"Condense!"

The single, airy word hung in the air, and the massive, incoming spiral tornado instantly froze, utterly still.

"What?"

The four Enforcers wore expressions of utter disbelief, their movements halting mid- stride.

"Dissipate!"

Leander uttered a second word. The colossal, horizontally spinning tornado immediately exploded, dissolving into nothingness.

"How is this possible?"

The four Enforcers' eyes were wide, their pupils trembling with shock.

In that brief moment, they realized they had completely lost control of their spiritual strength. The spiral tornado, forged by the combined spiritual power of all four of them, felt as if some external force had violently interfered, severing their connection to their own energy.

They stared at Leander, their faces still contorted in fright.

"What did you just do?"

Leander casually held Maeve with one arm, his gaze serene.

"All four of you have entered the Origin Realm, and your coordination is seamless. For a typical Origin Realm spiritual master, you would indeed be insurmountable. If the fight had dragged on, you surely would have killed them. Even my current level of spiritual strength cultivation is merely on par with yours."

His lips suddenly curled, a look of contempt flashing across his face.

"But unfortunately, your understanding of spiritual strength is profoundly lacking!" Leander stood proudly in the air, shaking his head gently at the four Enforcers.

"The spiritual strength you emit comes from within yourselves. My spiritual strength, however, is drawn from the natural world, born of all creation—endless, unbroken, without beginning or end. I can even forcefully convert the spiritual strength you emit and use it for myself."

Hearing this, the four Enforcers looked horrified.

"That's impossible! We've cultivated spiritual strength for nearly a century and have never heard of drawing it from the natural world. You're talking nonsense!"

"You heretic, what methods did you use?"

Leander offered no explanation, merely speaking with a detached tone. "In this world, simply living longer does not mean you understand everything more clearly. You four may be over a hundred years old, but in my eyes, your grasp of spiritual strength is barely better than that of a newborn child."

The divine light returned to his eyes. Above his head, fine threads of spiritual strength began to condense like silk, eventually forming a single, radiant, golden-yellow miniature blade.

This blade was unquestionably more refined and purer than the spiritual energy blade Leander had previously created. It exuded a thick, palpable aura of destruction that caused the surrounding space to ripple slightly.

"Today, I will show you what a true spiritual master is!"

The instant the golden blade appeared, the four Enforcers were terror-stricken, each instinctively stumbling backward at full pace.

"A divine sense materialized into a blade?"

They cried out, their attention completely fixed on the shimmering, golden-yellow weapon.

Though the golden blade was only about ten feet long, its light was dazzling, and it was condensed to the absolute extreme. It was infinitely more substantial than the overwhelming, indiscriminate attacks they had just launched.

Even though all four of them had entered the Origin Realm, they could not condense spiritual strength to such a degree. Yet, Leander had formed the blade with a single thought, and it was terrifyingly solid.

"This golden blade was created by drawing fifty percent of my spiritual strength when I first entered the Origin Realm. A single thought can sever the soul, and divine power becomes the edge. I call it Soulblade!

"I haven't had cause to use it since I reached the Origin Realm. Today, I'll baptize it with the blood of you four! Neil, the Church's Demon Hunter, has already gone to hell. The four of you may join him."

As Leander's quiet words faded, the brilliant golden blade shot forward, cleaving through the night air.

The four Enforcers' faces twisted in panic. They layered their spiritual strength, forming hundreds of thick, solid barriers in front of them, solely to block this one attack.

But the golden blade sliced through the layers of protection as easily as a knife through soft butter. Moving faster than the four men could react, the single strike cut through everything and pierced them.

The four Enforcers, spiritual masters who had reached the Origin Realm, were instantly cleaved in two, vertically bisected.

Four bodies plummeted from the sky, their life force completely extinguished.

Moments earlier, the four spiritual masters had arrived with thunderous might, trapping Leander. Now, they were instantly annihilated, their very consciousness severed by Leander's blade.

Below them, Celia and her group watched the scene, dumbfounded, unable to fully process what they had witnessed. The entire sky was empty, save for Leander, who stood tall and proud with Maeve in his arms, like a war god.

The bell tower of the Yelem Church, damaged and broken from

Leander's battle with the eight Chief

Arbitrators, remained stubbornly

upright When the time reached

midnight the ancient bell still chimed, its resonant, old-world

sound pulsing across the grounds, seemingly celebrating Leander's victory.

"He actually won!"

Celia's beautiful eyes shook, her heart thrumming rapidly.

Her decision to entrust her freedom and her life to Leander had been a gamble, and

she had often questioned whether it was right or wrong.

But today, she had no more doubts. The master she had chosen was indeed a

prodigious genius, a world-class talent.

Facing seven Half-Kings, one true

King Phase master, and four

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spiritual masters, Leander had been victorious all the way through, sweeping aside every single opponent. Such combat strength was surely comparable to the King Phase masters of a century ago.

In this world, with the King Phase masters of the past century remaining in seclusion, who else could possibly be Leander's enemy?

Zara and Liana's eyes were fixed. They were utterly speechless, seeing only the

figure of Leander gracefully descending.

Nathan, Luke, and Evander, Leander's three roommates, stood rigid, swallowing hard, unable to react for a long time.

"It's over," Leander stated calmly as he floated down with Maeve.

"Huh?"

Maeve snapped out of her trance, shyly slipping out of Leander's embrace, though she secretly lingered on the feeling of being held tightly in his arms moments before. Leander glanced at her, the usual coldness in his brows slightly diminished. Then he turned his attention to Denzel, who lay severely wounded.

"You tried to kill me multiple times. Today, I'll send you on your way."

His eyes were devoid of emotion or pity. He simply pointed a finger. A breath of wind pierced Denzel's brow, shattering his skull.

Potter Benjamin, the current head of the Benjamin family, rushed quickly out of the crowd. He showed no grief over his son's death. Instead, he turned toward Leander and immediately prostrated himself, bowing fully.

"I implore you, Sovereign Ashcroft, to spare the Benjamin family. From this day forward, the Benjamin family will serve you, Sovereign Ashcroft, with absolute loyalty, never harboring any dissent."

He wasn't foolish. Even his

grandfather, the Hermit, had been

decisively killed by Leander. The combined forces of the Arbitration

Office and the Church were no match for him. How could a mere Ember Transcendent like himself dare to remain Leander's enemy?

Aurora watched the prostrate Potter, her beautiful eyes shining with an intense light, feeling almost breathless.

During the Warring States Era, there were powerful generals whose names terrified entire nations. But they were products of wartime, heroes born of circumstance.

Now, Leander, alone, had crushed the Benjamin family—a family that virtually represented half of Dechor.

This was the true meaning of one man against a nation.

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As Potter knelt and bowed, the gesture spoke volumes: the entire Benjamin family was now prostrate at Leander's feet. The expressions of the allied families, those long at odds with the Benjamins, changed dramatically. They looked upon Leander as if he were a living god.

Almost in unison, these individuals rose to their feet. Though they didn't utter a word, every one of them fixed their gaze on Leander, their faces etched with profound reverence and respect.

They had come to the Benjamin family's banquet that night fully prepared for a decisive, do-or-die clash. But now, Leander, single-handedly, had shattered the powerful backing of the Benjamin family, even striking down the heir, Denzel, with a single touch.

To them, Leander was nothing less than their greatest benefactor. How could they not honor him?

Leander, however, offered no reaction to Potter's submission, remaining completely silent. The Benjamin family was, in his eyes, merely an ant

colony—perhaps slightly stronger than others, but ultimately insignificant. He felt no need for their loyalty.

He walked slowly back to his previous seat, picked up a slice of mango from the fruit platter, and began to eat it as if nothing extraordinary had just occurred.

Maeve glided gracefully, her steps bringing her to Leander's side. She leaned against him and took his arm. This time, Leander didn't outright resist, though he did frown faintly.

Meanwhile, Zara and Liana, finally snapping out of their shock, stammered a question to Leander, "Are... Are you really our Chief Instructor?"

Though the answer was evident in their hearts, they couldn't help but ask for confirmation. The scene tonight had simply been too overwhelmingly shocking. Even as members of the Wyvern Blade, they had never witnessed such a confrontation between the world's absolute top-tier combatants, and Leander was the ultimate, transcendent power who stood victorious at the end.

"So, you finally figured out who I am?"

Leander took the shirt Celia handed him and slipped it on. He then glanced sideways at the two sisters, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Oh!"

Zara and Liana were instantly speechless. Liana, in particular, felt mortified. She had previously marched up to Leander, threatened him, and told him to stay away from Maeve, or she would deal with him. Thinking about it now, she wished the ground would swallow her whole.

Leander's casual movements were capable of destroying towns and toppling buildings; she was utterly insignificant compared to him.

Worse yet, she had proudly boasted to Leander that she was a member of the Southern Wyvern Blade, even instructing him to go look up what being a member of the Southern Wyvern Blade meant. Yet, Leander was the very man celebrated as the most powerful legend within their own Southern Wyvern Blade. She was utterly humiliated.

The two sisters remained silent. Leander finished his mango before speaking again, his voice flat. "It seems the caliber of the new recruits in the Southern Wyvern Blade isn't what it used to be. Hasn't Larry been training you properly?"

Beads of sweat began to prickle on the faces of Zara and Liana. They felt an overwhelming tension. Leander, in their eyes, was like a crushing mountain of gravity. Larry was the Southern Wyvern Blade's Deputy Instructor and still managed its operations. Leander, addressing him by his first name, showed he knew the organization inside and out.

"We apologize, Chief. We were blind to the truth!"

The two sisters finally lowered their heads in a bow of deep respect to Leander.

"Attention!"

Leander didn't accept their apology. He barked the command, and the two women instantly snapped their feet together, standing ramrod straight in a perfect military posture, utterly mute before him.

"In the Southern Wyvern Blade, what is the penalty for insulting a superior officer and threatening the Chief Instructor?"

Leander's eyes were cold, devoid of emotion, causing both women's faces to seize up. Despite the anxiety churning in their stomachs, they forced themselves to answer, "Insulting a superior, according to Southern Wyvern Blade law, merits being stripped of rank and expelled from the Southern Wyvern Blade!"

With every word they spoke, their hearts bled a little. The Southern Wyvern Blade was the highest honor in the military and they had only been selected because of their talent and willingness to endure hardship. Now, a single word from Leander could strip them of everything, dissolving their very identity as members of the Southern Wyvern Blade.

"So, you are aware of the rules," Leander said with a faint, contemptuous smile. He scanned the two women, watching as sweat trickled down their heads. They were terrified that Leander would utter the word that would cast them into the abyss.

But then, Leander abruptly changed his tone and waved his hand.

"Considering you are new to the Southern Wyvern Blade, still young, and lacking experience in handling the world, I'll let this go. If it happens again, pack your bags and get out of the squad!"

Both women felt a pang of indignation. They were roughly the same age as Leander, yet he called them young and inexperienced. Still, hearing that he wouldn't punish them was a massive relief. They snapped to a perfect salute.

"Yes, Chief!"

Only members of the Southern Wyvern Blade could truly grasp Leander's significance to the organization. He was a deity, a legend. Leander's words were absolute law-no one would dare violate them, not even Darrow himself.

Leander had finished chastising the two overconfident young women and ignored them, turning his attention to Nathan and the others across the room.

"I told you I would show you the meaning of true power today. Do you understand now why Rodrick was so terrified of me? And why I have the confidence to disregard the Benjamin family?"

Nathan, Evander, and Luke seemed to wake from a dream, nodding robotically. They had questioned what kind of power Leander was talking about, one that could crush all wealth and influence. Now, they had no questions left.

The power to decide life and death with one hand, a force that swept away everything in its path-how could money or political authority possibly compete with that?

No matter a person's immense power or boundless wealth, Leander needed only one hand to dictate their life, kill them, or sweep everything before him.

This was true power-the power to disregard everything the world held dear.

Livia and her friends stared at Leander, unable to look away for a long time. Every single one of them felt a flicker of regret. If only they had known Leander was this powerful, they never would have prioritized Nathan and the others; they would have eagerly chased Leander instead.

But now, they could only suppress that regret, focusing on their roles as proper girlfriends. They were acutely aware that with Leander's power, his influence was boundless. Since Nathan, Luke, and Evander were so well-acquainted with him, a single word from Leander would ensure their brilliant futures.

The banquet ultimately concluded with Leander single-handedly crushing the two

top organizations the Arbitration Office and the Church. News of the events in Yelem began to spread across Dechor at a breathtaking pace. Unbeknownst to Leander, in an underground intelligence base in Novaterra, several intelligence agency directors were seated, their eyes growing colder as they looked at a photograph projected onto a large screen.

One of them, wearing a military cap, fixed his eyes, showcasing the dominance and shrewdness of a high-ranking officer. After a moment of contemplation, he spoke.

"Reliable intelligence reports that Jeff has appeared in the Sahar Wastes. Notify Blazewing Talon to closely monitor Jeff's movements. If necessary, use force to suppress him. Life or death is irrelevant."

The others acknowledged the order with nods. The man in the military cap's eyes glittered with a dangerous sharpness as he murmured softly.

"The world has been in the age of modern weapons for decades. We absolutely cannot let one Jeff drag the world back into an era dominated by martial power and King Phase masters. This time, he must sleep forever in the Sahar Wastes."

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Two days had passed since Leander's decisive battle at the Yelem Church. The sheer, overwhelming fever that had consumed both the Assassin's World and the general underground networks had finally, completely subsided. Now, only a profound silence remained.

The martial world and the Assassin's World—the two colossal pillars of the global underground—had seemingly lost their color and were utterly devoid of sound.

Everyone knew the outcome: the clash between the number one on the Assassin Leaderboard and the number one in the International Combat Units had ended with the latter's resounding victory. The Hermit, a name that had stood as a legend for nearly a century, was now history. Leander, the greatest figure in the history of the International Combat Units, was still writing his own unstoppable legend.

On the International Martial Network forum, deep and meticulous discussions raged over the true extent of Leander's power. Countless martial artists voiced their opinions, igniting fierce debates and verbal conflicts.

But in the end, the master behind the International Martial Network, The Destroyer, suddenly appeared and rendered the final judgment.

'Regardless of whether you are a martial artist or an assassin, Jeff has already climbed to an unprecedented peak. If the King Phase masters of a century ago do not appear, Jeff is invincible!'

The Destroyer had once declared Leander invincible in the world, provided no current King Phase masters emerged, after Leander annihilated fifteen Chief Arbitrators. Now, he had made a subtle yet crucial change: he replaced "current King Phase masters" with "the King Phase masters of a century ago." This minor difference in wording represented an entirely different realm of mastery.

Everyone understood: Leander had ascended to an unimaginable level. His cultivation was now sufficient to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the King Phase beings who had dominated the world a hundred years prior.

Leander was the living standard, the absolute benchmark for every martial artist and every assassin. There was no higher peak left to conquer!

...

Following the battle at Yelem, Leander returned to the Yelem Hotel. Celia was constantly by his side, attending to him with imported fruits and fine cuisine, ensuring he lived a life of imperial comfort.

During his stay, prominent families from Yelem constantly came to pay their respects, showering him with valuable gifts. His accommodations were immediately upgraded from a standard luxury suite to the presidential suite. Every influential family in Yelem practically groveled, working tirelessly to curry his favor.

Nathan and the others, having grasped the terrifying extent of Leander's capability, finally dropped their guard and their anxieties. They spent their days touring Yelem's scenic spots. Thanks to their connection with Leander, they were granted unimpeded access everywhere they went. They enjoyed private car services, dedicated tour guides, and had all their meals and expenses covered, giving them an experience of unparalleled comfort.

The more favors they received, the more acutely they realized Leander's profound influence over these prominent families. He was like a deity, towering over everything, commanding the reverence of all.

In the garden of the Yelem Hotel, Leander reclined on a lounge chair, swaying gently.

Celia, wearing a simple, elegant, plain dress, peeled an imported fruit and placed it directly into his mouth.

Leander chewed slowly, his eyes utterly calm.

"So, any major movements from the International Martial Network or the Global Assassin Network?" he asked softly.

Celia took a tissue to wipe his mouth before replying, "Nothing yet. Since you killed the Hermit, the International Martial Network has effectively declared you a deity, placing you on the same level as the King Phase beings of a century ago.

"As for the Assassin's World, countless assassins are grieving for the Hermit, but not a single post has called for revenge. It's clear that this one battle completely crushed the Assassin's World. Even the bounty posted by the Arbitration Office has been officially withdrawn."

"Is that so?" Leander gave a faint nod, a hint of a smile touching his lips.

"They withdrew the bounty because they recognized that no assassin left in the world could ever pose a threat to me. That bounty was nothing more than useless paper," he mused. "I killed six more Chief Arbitrators in this encounter. Out of the original twenty-four, only three remain unaccounted for. I suspect these three are stronger than Neil, and there's a possibility one of them might even be a King Phase master from a century ago."

Celia agreed with a nod. "Global legacy organizations like the Arbitration Office and the Church possess incalculable depths of power and hidden strength. They managed to survive the War of the King Phase intact, which speaks volumes about their might."

Her beautiful eyes paused, a shadow of concern clouding her expression.

"What worries me is your current position. You were already at odds with the Arbitration Office and Netherweb. Now, this latest battle has put you in direct conflict with the Church. Essentially the three most powerful forces in the world are now standing against you."

Leander merely offered a relaxed smile at her words.

"I never pay mind to such things. No matter how many stand against me, a single swing of my sword will shatter them all," he declared coolly. "Besides organizations like the Arbitration Office, the Church and Netherweb have been unchallenged in this world for far too long. It's high time for a change."

Celia was

convinced. She set down the fruit platter. "Indeed. The world's structure eventually requires

someone to break it. Just as the net

King Phase masters once ruled the world and were later conquered by ironclad ships and cannons-and the advent of atomic weapons

completely ended their age of

dominance-perhaps a new era is

about to dawn."

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Leander finished the last slice of apple, stood up, and stretched his arms above his head.

"Some things are meant to change. The catalyst for that change might be a person,

a major nation, or a dominant force. And perhaps, I am the one playing that role

now."

He lifted his gaze, staring at the blazing sun above, his eyes impossibly deep. "Our business here is nearly concluded. Throughout Yelem, and even across Dechor, no one dares to threaten Nathan and the others anymore. You may now take me to the Sandsong Oasis. I am very keen to witness the treasure of the Westerman divinity myself."

Celia bowed respectfully, nodding with utmost seriousness.

"Yes."

Their journey into the Sahar Wastes was finally moving toward its most critical phase.

...

Inside the presidential suite, Maeve was sprawled on the velvet bed, chatting relentlessly with Zara and Liana.

Ever since Leander's true identity was revealed, Zara and Liana had become intensely curious about how Maeve and Leander met, peppering her with questions like two inquisitive children whenever they had the chance.

To pay them back for the times they had mocked Leander, Maeve was deliberately playing coy, refusing to give details on the crucial parts of the story.

"You wicked girl! Stop holding out on us! Hurry up and tell us how you and the Chief Instructor actually met!" Liana cried, shaking Maeve's arm insistently.

Maeve didn't answer right away, just batted her eyes. "I'm not telling. Didn't you two call him reckless and arrogant before, saying he didn't know his place? Now that you're desperate, I'm going to make you squirm."

She lifted her eyebrows smugly, immensely enjoying the sight of the two girls' exasperated faces.

Just as Zara and Liana were about to pester Maeve to continue, a piercing, high-pitched alert suddenly blared from a device on both of their hips.

Their eyes locked instantly, and their expressions turned to one of profound shock.

"This is..."

"The Wyvern Blade's emergency signal?"

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"The Wyvern Blade's emergency signal?"

A warning chime erupted from the small communicators clipped to their waists, causing Zara and Liana's faces to pale instantly. They quickly pulled out the devices—special communication units mandatory for every member of the Southern Wyvern Blade. Utilizing cutting-edge scientific technology, these units relayed signals directly via satellite, making them impervious to standard disruptions.

Ordinarily, these communicators were silent. A chime meant only one thing: a member of the Wyvern Blade was issuing an urgent call for help—a distress signal.

"How can this be?"

The sisters exchanged a look, their expressions shifting to disbelief and profound shock. The Southern Wyvern Blade was one of Astria's most elite strike forces; every member was a master operator, capable of overshadowing the world's most formidable special forces. They were, quite simply, mobile killing machines.

What kind of crisis could possibly force a Southern Wyvern Blade member to call for an emergency rescue?

After only a moment's hesitation, Zara accepted the communication. A string of encrypted characters-the Wyvern Blade's specialized code, with each symbol carrying a different meaning-flashed across the device's interface.

As the two women deciphered the message, their expressions grew even heavier.

"This is impossible."

They stood up, momentarily lost in thought. Maeve, standing nearby, looked at them with confusion. "Zara, Liana, what's happened?"

Liana's expression was grave as she spoke in a low voice. "It's members of the Southern Wyvern Blade. They were in the Sahar Wastes on a mission to rescue fellow citizens, but they were ambushed by unidentified armed forces. Now, all ten of them are trapped in a border town near Ivoria within the Sahar Wastes, and they're calling for immediate extraction."

"What?" Maeve's eyes widened slightly in alarm.

She knew instinctively how formidable the Southern Wyvern Blade was-the nation's sharpest fighting edge. Their missions almost always boasted a hundred-percent success rate. For them to be driven to the point of needing emergency backup meant the situation was far more severe than anyone could imagine.

"What are you planning to do?" Maeve asked the sisters.

Zara knitted her beautiful brows, deep in troubled thought. "Ten people are trapped. Besides the three civilians, the other seven are our most elite personnel. That includes our Southern Wyvern Blade's captain."

She sighed, a frustrated note in her voice. "If all seven of them, working together, have been forced to a standstill, it means the enemy's military strength is extraordinary. We can't possibly make a difference by going there."

Liana looked at her sister's tightly locked brows, anxiety plain on her face, but she couldn't think of a solution either. "And the distress signal from a Wyvern

Blade member can only be recognized by other members. We're the closest ones to the Sahar Wastes. Any other member attempting to reach them from Astria will need at least half a day. By then, they might not be able to hold out."

"Wait!"

Suddenly, Liana looked up, turning to Zara, a flash of insight in her eyes.

"Zara, the Chief Instructor is right here! We need to ask him for help! With his power, rescuing a few people would be utterly effortless for him."

Zara's eyes widened with surprise and joy as the realization hit her, too.

"You're right! Why didn't I think of that? The Chief Instructor is here!"

The two immediately agreed, then simultaneously looked at Maeve.

"Eve, let's go! You come with us to find the Chief Instructor!"

Maeve, still slightly dazed by the sudden turn of events, was nevertheless ushered out of the room by the two determined sisters.

In the estate of the Yelem Hotel, Leander stretched, preparing to head out for a walk with Celia, when Zara and Liana, dragging Maeve along, rushed in, looking frantic.

Leander settled back in his chair, having just heard the entire situation described by Zara and Liana.

"So, you're telling me Torre, Vane,

Boomer, Brute, and Skyler went to the Sahar Wastes to rescue an

their

Astrian medical expert and isply.

family, Leander summarized "But during the mission, they were intercepted by a unit of unidentified armed forces and are now trapped in a border town near Ivoria?"

"Yes!"

Zara pleaded with Leander. "Chief, please, you have to help them! You trained them all; they look up to you as their lifelong role model. You're the only one who can save them now."

Liana clasped her hands together in a gentle bow, her eyes brimming with a desperate plea.

Leander remained still, resting his chin on his hand, slightly perplexed. He knew Torre, Vane, and Skyler's capabilities intimately and understood exactly what they were capable of.

While the Sahar Wastes was a war-torn region with a volatile situation, rescuing three Astrian citizens would be a simple matter for Torre and his team. Any single one of them could handle such a task, let alone seven working together.

Their combined force was enough to crush a hundred-man squad of a second-tier mercenary group; their fighting strength was equivalent to a reinforced military platoon. Stopping them should be extremely difficult let alone surrounding and trapping them.

For all seven of them to be cornered in an Ivoria border town meant the opposing armed force's equipment and resources must be terrifyingly sophisticated, perhaps on par with the guard detachments of a minor nation.

This was the point Leander couldn't grasp. A military force of this magnitude simply wouldn't go to such extreme lengths over seven Southern Wyvern Blade members and three Astrian civilians. It defied all logic.

"Chief!"

Leander was still contemplating the matter, but Zara and Liana, fearing he was refusing to go, grew frantic. Their knees bent, and they started to sink, preparing to kneel before him.

The instant they dropped, an invisible force held their bodies up, preventing them from completing the motion.

"Don't try that with me." Leander's eyes were like stars, his expression cool. "They're my soldiers. Since they're in trouble, of course I'll save them."

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He stood up and addressed Zara and Liana. " leaving immediately. Both of you; contact the Southern Wyvern Blade training base right away fell, karry to get in touch with General Leon and dispatch an armed helicopter to the Sahar Wastes for extraction. Let them know that I will guarantee the safety of Torre and everyone else until then."

"Yes!" Zara and Liana beamed with relief and nodded emphatically.

"While I'm away, make sure you protect Nathan, Evander, and the others." Leander looked toward Celia, giving his instruction, and was about to bolt out the door when

Zara suddenly spoke up.

"Chief, what's your plan?"

Leander turned back, his expression calm and assured.

"My plan? I'm going to smash straight through their lines."

With that, his voice trailed off as he became a flash of blue light, rocketing skyward

and streaking into the distance.

"Smash straight through?"

The two sisters froze, then their faces went pale with alarm. That meant Leander intended to take on an entire armed military force head-on.

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In the sprawling underground palace deep beneath the surface of Westeria, the scene remained disturbingly familiar.

Sixteen thrones floated in the air, none of them empty. Each seat was occupied by a figure representing the ultimate authority of the Arbitration Office: the sixteen Supreme Arbiters.

One of the Supreme Arbiters broke the heavy silence. "It's unbelievable," he began, "that a minor figure like Jeff could grow to this extent. Not even Neil, whose cultivation reached the King Phase, was a match for him! It appears we miscalculated. Had we simply eliminated Jeff before he rose to prominence, the East would undoubtedly be facing a major loss right now. But now, he is no longer the insignificant fighter we could crush with a wave of our hand."

His voice held a hint of exasperation and deep regret. He was clearly vexed by their strategic error.

Previously, when they spoke of Leander—even after he had killed the Son of Judgment and inflicted massive losses on the Arbitration Office—they treated it as a casual inconvenience.

But Leander's victory over Neil had elevated him to a completely different echelon in their eyes. This was the chasm separating a King Phase master from everyone else.

Another Supreme Arbiter chimed in. "Neil was once a rebel from the Church who willingly defected to the Arbitration Office. We witnessed his entire ascent. He was the first new King Phase master the Office had seen in a century, with boundless potential... yet he died at Jeff's hands! I have a terrible feeling that Jeff is destined to become a nemesis to our Arbitration Office."

The Supreme Arbiter seated farthest to the side spoke next, a sigh in his tone. "A century ago, Astria produced a Dragon Emperor, and it was his presence that halted the Western nations' unification of the East. Now, a hundred years later, Astria has produced another Jeff. Astria is truly blessed by fate."

He let out a deep sigh, then slightly raised his hand. A powerful wave of Primordial Energy warped the space before him, an unspoken desire to hold the entire world captive in his grasp.

The others remained silent. Just then, the massive doors of the dark palace swung open, and three figures strode in, stopping directly before the sixteen thrones.

They did not kneel before the Supreme Arbiters, as others within the Office were required to do. They merely nodded briefly, standing tall and proud.

The central figure of the three had eyes that flickered and glowed in the darkness, seemingly infused with electricity. He looked up at the Supreme Arbiters and spoke in a deep voice. "Jeff has reached this point. Do the sixteen of you have any directives?"

His words carried a faint, challenging tone, betraying extreme self-confidence. He showed no fear of the Supreme Arbiters and spoke his mind plainly.

None of the sixteen were angered. From the center of the dark assembly, the most prominent Supreme Arbiter asked, "In your opinion, what should we do now? Are you suggesting that one of you intends to personally confront Jeff?"

The man with the lightning-filled eyes replied immediately, his voice resonating, "Of course! Neil was a newly ascended King Phase master of the post-King Phase Accord era, and Jeff defeated him. This indicates that only the King Phase masters of the previous century can truly stop him.

"If we don't act, no one left in the Arbitration Office can pose any threat to Jeff. If we allow him to continue growing, he will eventually dominate the Assassin's World, the martial world, and even the entire underground worlds of the East and Westeria. If he raises his banner then, a great many powerful figures will answer his call and rally to him. Once he is fully established, killing him will become exponentially harder! Are you truly willing to wait for that day?"

His gaze fixed on the sixteen Supreme Arbiters, his eyes gleaming with purpose.

The central Supreme Arbiter paused, considering the argument, then spoke again. "Vanfleet, you are one of the founding elders of the Arbitration Office. Do not forget your place! Watch your tone!"

This time, the Supreme Arbiter's voice carried a distinct coldness, causing the expression of the man with the electric eyes to shift.

"I apologize, Your Highness."

After a moment's contemplation, he bowed slightly to the sixteen. "I did not intend to offend, but in the last year and a half, Jeff has accomplished far too

much. If we allow this to continue, our position as the unchallenged power in the world's underground will eventually be shaken by him. As an elder of the Arbitration Office, I simply refuse to see a mere Astrian upstart stand above us."

His voice was passionate, surging with genuine emotion. He and the others had founded the Arbitration Office, guiding it through countless glorious eras: fanning the flames of the First and Second World Wars; suppressing the Eastern King Phase masters during the War of the King Phase; forcing the Church into submission and causing the High Priest's abdication afterward; and ultimately, in this era of modern weaponry, hiding behind the scenes to control and oversee the world.

This was the mighty Arbitration Office they had built with their own hands! He could not bear to see all this glory and honor trampled by a young man from Astria.

"Vanfleet, focus on your own duties. The matter of Jeff has not reached the point where your intervention is required. You may leave."

The central Supreme Arbiter offered little further reply, simply waving his hand dismissively, his manner detached.

"But-"

Vanfleet was unwilling to concede and prepared to argue, but the two men beside him suddenly stepped forward, placing a hand on each of his shoulders.

"Vanfleet, the Supreme Arbiters have their own plan for Jeff. Let's go."

The two men behind him held the same esteemed rank as Vanfleet, being fellow founding elders of the Arbitration Office. Hearing them speak, Vanfleet had no choice but to extinguish his resentment and follow them out.

Outside the dark palace, the three men walked through the long corridor. Vanfleet remained emotionally agitated.

"Why did you stop me just now?" he demanded, looking at the other two with a hint of reproach.

"Vanfleet, you entered the King Phase a century ago, yet your temper has not changed at all," the man in the moon-white robe said with a slight, knowing smile, shaking his head. "I know you desperately want to execute Jeff yourself, but don't forget the King Phase Accord is still in effect."

Vanfleet scoffed, clearly disdainful. "That ridiculous King Phase Accord! The Arbitration Office was the main proponent of signing it back then. If your power is great enough, you can smash through any restricting rule. If the Supreme Arbiters wish it, they can abolish it at any moment!"

The other two did not contradict him, apparently agreeing with the sentiment, but the robed man continued, "The King Phase Accord holds little real binding power focus, Certainly But this is still the age of modern weapons. Openly revoking the King Phase Accord would only draw the attention of the world's major powers."

He walked on with his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes profound and sharp.

"As for Jeff, you need not worry yourself sick. The King Phase masters ruled the world until a single nuclear weapon changed the era forever, causing us to retreat for half a century Jeff is the one bringing the world back into the Age of Martial Arts. Do you truly believe the current major world powers will allow him to continue?"

He cracked a subtle smile, full of implication "The world order is no longer defined by the King Phase masters, but by these major powers. They will never permit anyone to overturn the existing state of affairs. Jeff has already been marked by the great nations. He is about to face something ten times more terrifying than the King Phase masters of a century ago."

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Vanfleet's expression froze at these words. He fell silent, a dawning comprehension

in his eyes.

...

At the Mornwick's military district, Darrow was sitting in his office, having just taken a

call from Larry.

After understanding the situation, Darrow did not immediately order the deployment of gunships. Instead, he fell into the same deep contemplation as Leander.

A few seconds later, he suddenly shot up from his seat, his face contorted in shock.

"A disaster! The encirclement of Torre and his team was not their true objective! Torre and the others are just bait—they are trying to draw in General Ashcroft!" He realized instantly that this was a death trap designed specifically for Leander!

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"Darn it!"

Darrow, the Captain General who had commanded the Southern Military Command for over a decade, slammed his cup down on the table, the sharp crack echoing in the room.

Having held such a high position for years, he dealt regularly with major officials and foreign generals, and he understood the world's power dynamics perhaps better than anyone. The Sahar Wastes region was chaotic, yes, but even at its worst, it was utterly implausible that a fully-equipped, heavily-armed military force would suddenly decide to surround and eliminate a squad of the Southern Wyvern Blade.

The mission Torre and his team were on was no different from their usual assignments—in fact, its difficulty was lower than most. Yet, it had somehow attracted the attention of a massive armed force. That was a serious violation of the established order.

Furthermore, his latest intelligence indicated that while Torre's team was trapped by a large enemy force with modern weaponry in a border town near Ivoria, the enemy wasn't pressing the attack. They seemed to be waiting for something.

At this moment, Leander, who was also somewhere within the Sahar Wastes, was the only logical answer.

His eyes narrowed. He immediately instructed Larry to use the satellite phone to contact Zara and Liana, ordering them to warn Leander not to move rashly.

Barely ten minutes later, he received Larry's report and erupted in fury.

"What? General Ashcroft has already left?"

His expression froze, turning utterly grim.

"It seems they genuinely intend to target General Ashcroft!"

Yet, no matter how frustrated or unwilling he was, he was powerless. The Sahar Wastes were too far away. Even as Astria's Captain General, his reach could not extend there. All he could do was silently pray that his grim suspicions were entirely wrong.

...

On the Ivoria border in the Sahar Wastes lay a small town, abandoned for over six months.

Inside a dilapidated stone building, a physically powerful man carefully pressed against the wall. He had just used a stone to smash a reconnaissance drone flying overhead. This was Torre, the captain of the Southern Wyvern Blade. His body bore several minor wounds, caused by shrapnel and flying debris.

He moved cautiously along the wall, creeping toward the town's periphery, finally reaching the outer barrier. He glanced sideways and saw, arrayed just outside the town, lines of armored vehicles, including numerous heavy tanks mounting large cannons. Hordes of armed personnel, gripping rifles and rocket launchers, stood in formation, their cold eyes glinting with lethal intent. They were clearly disciplined, battle-hardened soldiers.

Torre had barely exposed his head for that quick look when one soldier instantly locked onto his position. The soldier snatched up a shoulder-fired rocket launcher and launched it directly at the wall where Torre was concealed.

The fierce friction between the rocket and the air screamed through the sky. Torre saw a dark shape hurtling toward him. With no time to think, he dove to the side, leaping behind another section of the wall. The spot he had been hiding behind was demolished, vaporized by the rocket's impact.

"D*mn it!"

Torre's ears were ringing. He dared not stay put. Gritting his teeth, he sprang up again and rushed deeper into the town, unwilling to risk getting close to the perimeter again.

"Target has retreated inside. Should we pursue?"

Beside an armored vehicle, a soldier holding a machine gun reported to a middle-aged man who looked like the commander.

"No need to pursue. Let him run."

The commander, wearing a military green overcoat, leaned against the armored vehicle and lit a cigar. He tipped his head slightly, a cold light flickering in his eyes.

"The people hiding in that town are merely small fry. Our orders are only to seal this town off and ensure no one escapes. Our true target is not them.

"This town is completely surrounded by three thousands of our men, sixty armored vehicles, thirty-five heavy tanks, and twenty rocket-equipped armored vehicles. Even if the people inside were powerful, they couldn't break out.

"The main quarry hasn't arrived yet. Until then, all we need is patience."

The surrounding soldiers nodded in unison.

"Yes, sir!"

...

Inside the town, Torre moved like the wind, darting through the ruined houses, finally reaching a guest house that was remarkably well-preserved.

He vaulted the perimeter wall and rushed inside. Nine people were huddled together, and upon hearing the commotion, they all tensed up and looked his way. Seeing it was Torre, they relaxed slightly, though their expressions remained drawn.

"Captain, what's the situation outside?"

A sharp-featured woman, Vane, the Southern Wyvern Blade's expert assassin, spoke up. The others—Skyler, Brute, Boomer, a physician in a white coat, and a young man and woman—were all present.

When Vane asked, everyone looked to Torre, hoping for some good news.

"It's bad."

Torre's expression was incredibly heavy. Though deeply reluctant, he could only shake his head with regret.

"They show no signs of pulling back. In fact, their numbers seem to have doubled, and they've added heavy tanks. It looks like they intend to keep us completely boxed in here."

Boomer, the most hot-tempered of the group, immediately shot up. He slammed his fist against the adjacent wall, punching a hole clear through it.

"This is insane! can't stand being trapped! Rather than waiting to be choked to death, we should go out there and fight them head-on! I'll die trying to tear open a gap for you so you can escort Professor Rainer and his children to safety!"

He started toward the door, intending to charge out, but Skyler grabbed him firmly.

"Boomer, don't be reckless!"

Skyler held his shoulder and spoke in a low voice. "Right now, they are only surrounding us. They haven't made a move. That means we are still safe for the time being."

Boomer instantly calmed down, and everyone turned to the most seasoned man among them, their captain, Torre.

"Captain, what do we do now?"

Torre was silent for a moment. He truly didn't have an answer.

Their mission to escort Jonathan Rainer and his children out of the Sahar Wastes was supposed to be routine. Instead, a squad of highly-trained armed personne had materialized, immediately opening fire and relentlessly driving them

toward the Ivoria border. Out of options, they were forced to hide in this abandoned town.

Torre narrowed his eyes, deep in thought.

"To be honest, I don't have a good plan right now."

A wave of despair washed over the others. Usually, Torre was the most resourceful,

level-headed, and capable of analyzing the situation and finding a way out. But today, even Torre was stumped.

Vane's delicate face showed a trace of weariness. She sighed suddenly.

"If only we had the Chief Instructor's skills. With even a third of his ability, we could definitely escape this alive."

As she lamented, the young woman next to her suddenly spoke, her face alight with

hope.

"Who is this Chief Instructor you all talk about? Can he come and save us?"

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The young woman's face was delicate and sweet, even prettier than Vane's, and she would undoubtedly have been considered a campus beauty back home at any university.

Her gaze was fixed on Vane, bright with hope and expectation.

When she mentioned the words "Chief Instructor," Boomer, Brute, Skyler, and Torre all reacted instantly, their expressions shifting to one of profound respect.

Boomer, known for his volatile temper, spoke up first.

"Ms. Rainer, we're not pulling your leg our Chief Instructor is practically a deity! His skills and capabilities are beyond anything you can imagine. If he were here, he could definitely get us out of this mess alive!"

Brute chimed in with firm agreement. "He's right. With the Chief Instructor's power, this situation would be nothing but a cakewalk for him!"

Though Leander had left the Southern Wyvern Blade nearly three months ago, the veteran members of the unit still held him in divine regard. He was their peerless standard, the benchmark they held in their hearts.

Whenever Leander's name came up, they spoke with utmost reverence. Any disrespectful word heard from a clueless newcomer about him would earn the rookie a harsh and unforgettable dressing-down.

"He's that amazing? Well, where is he? Can't you contact him and tell him to hurry up and save us?" the young woman asked, her expression innocent and earnest, appealing to Torre and the others.

"Well..."

Torre was immediately struck dumb. Leander's whereabouts were always a mystery. After the battle at Stormcairn River, he had left the Southern Wyvern Blade and hadn't contacted any member of the unit. They had absolutely no way of tracking him down.

Furthermore, Leander had only served as the Southern Wyvern Blade's Chief Instructor for a single month. In his eyes, the unit probably hadn't registered as a serious commitment, much less worth a rescue mission across a thousand miles.

In truth, even if they could reach Leander, by the time he arrived from Astria, they would likely be reduced to ash by the armed militants surrounding them.

"Tch!"

The young woman was about to press the matter further when the young man beside her let out a cold, cynical laugh.

"Gisela, quit being so naive, alright? Forget this 'Chief Instructor' nonsense; don't listen to their wild tales!"

The man's voice dripped with mockery. "They're all Southern Wyvern Blade members, the elite of the military, yet they're helpless against these gunmen, only able to drag our family into this godforsaken dust-up.

"How powerful could their so-called Chief Instructor really be? Can he fight tanks, armored vehicles, and rocket launchers? That's pure fantasy!"

The young man had the air of a scholar, clearly highly educated, and his words carried an inherent arrogance, as if he believed himself naturally superior.

At his words, the expressions of Torre and the others darkened. Boomer's eyes became stormy, simmering with rage, and he snapped directly at the young man. "Watch your tone! Our Chief Instructor is a genuine powerhouse, and you won't slander him freely here!"

The young man didn't seem intimidated by Boomer at all. He sneered, "What, can't handle the truth? Did I hit a nerve?"

He stood up, looking directly at the soldiers, and challenged them.

"You were ordered to escort my family-the three of us-out of the Sahar Wastes. But look at us now! We haven't even left the Sahar Wastes, and we're cornered in this dump by unknown gunmen, running low on food and water! You keep rambling about being the Southern Wyvern Blade, Astria's best soldiers... You're nothing but a bunch of braggarts!"

Boomer was silenced by the young man's furious retort. Unable to formulate a reply, he could only grind his teeth in frustration and slump against the wall.

Skyler, who had remained silent

through the whole exchange, stepped forward to defuse the tension Hold on, everyone. Let' keep our voices down. We're all ing the same boat now; we need to stick together. If we start fighting amongst ourselves, our situation will get much worse than it already is."

The young man merely waved a dismissive hand, unconvinced, and stood to the side, clearly unwilling to associate with Torre and the others.

The young woman looked at Vane, who subtly shook her head. Gisela realized the severity of the situation, and her eyes filled with disappointment.

In the end, nothing had changed. She quietly sat down nearby, though a tiny spark

of hope still flickered in her heart, waiting for the Chief Instructor that Vane and the others spoke of to suddenly appear and lead them out of danger.

Silence fell heavily upon the room. After a long while, Skyler abruptly broke it.

"Don't you guys think something is strange?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and continued, "This group of militants appeared out of nowhere, and while they've been keeping us pinned down, the truth is we've only suffered minor injuries at most. There have been no serious casualties.

"The abandoned town we're hiding in isn't huge. With the kind of weapons they have, if they wanted to wipe us out, they could just launch a saturation bombardment. We'd be blown to pieces.

"But they haven't made a decisive move yet. They've just been sitting on the perimeter. I get the distinct feeling they're deliberately waiting for something."

Torre and the others had been so focused on the pressure of the immediate danger and frantically trying to find a way out that they hadn't considered the larger picture. Now that Skyler brought it up, they all suddenly realized his point.

"You're right, thought it was odd too," Brute muttered, his voice grim. "Our movement was going

smoothly, we were almost at then et

Sahar Wastes border. But then that armed unit seemed to know exactly where we were cute escap

route, and chased us right into this dead end.

"I didn't notice it before, but listening to Skyler now, it seems like there is something off. It's almost as if they were doing this on purpose, forcing us to retreat right to this spot. Could they really have some hidden motive?"

Torre and the others furrowed their brows, deep in thought. The young scholar, however, let out another cold laugh nearby.

"Is the enemy's motive really what you should be worrying about right now? The priority is figuring out how to get out of here and escape this siege! What good is your knowledge of the stars and the earth going to do you otherwise?"

Vane and the others froze, their collective dissatisfaction growing toward the learned yet

self-important young man. Torre's eyes were dark and he was about to fire back when a high-pitched, piercing sonic boom suddenly tore across the sky.

The seven Southern Wyvern Blade members instantly went on high alert, leaping

out the door to assess the surrounding situation.

The moment they stepped outside, a powerful gale slammed into their faces.

They all looked up, and in the next second, their expressions froze solid.

Jonathan was fast asleep from exhaustion, while the young man and woman noticed the unusual behavior of the seven soldiers. Curious, they too walked out and gazed up at the heavens.

That single glance rooted the two civilians to the spot.

They saw an arresting blue light, like a comet plunging toward Earth, streaking down

directly from high altitude.

A figure was faintly visible within the brilliant, blinding blue glow.