

THE FALL OF THE DIVINE

6

First Encounter with the Mentor

The grand hall of the Church of Dawn radiated an air of solemnity and grandeur. Massive stone pillars held up the vaulted ceiling, and morning light gently streamed through the stained glass windows, casting a kaleidoscope of colors upon the marble floor, creating an atmosphere both majestic and mysterious. The cold breath of ancient stone seemed to fill the air.

Lucian stood at the center of the hall, alongside nine other newly contracted initiates, exchanging glances. A mixture of unease and anticipation rippled through the group. Since signing their contracts with the mysterious emissaries, their lives had irrevocably changed.

At the far end of the hall, an elder stood tall upon a raised platform. Clad in golden robes, his imposing figure and the sheer aura of power that surrounded him stirred a deep sense of awe within Lucian. By his side stood three other individuals, two men and one woman, all exuding an extraordinary presence.

"Welcome, new initiates. I am Eldric, the president of the Church of Dawn," the elder's deep, powerful voice echoed through every corner of the hall.

"Today, you have taken your first step towards becoming Awakened-tier cultivators of divine power. However, you are still far from that goal. As of now, you are the lowest-tier contractees, and only through continuous cultivation can you truly awaken your divine abilities."

"The moment you signed the contract with the emissaries, a divine seed was planted within your sea of consciousness. This seed, though as small as a needle tip, contains the potential for godly power. You must absorb spiritual

energy to nourish it, cultivating it until it grows. Only when it reaches the size of a sesame seed will you be qualified to truly enter the Awakened tier of cultivation, the first step on your path to godhood," Eldric's gaze swept across the room as he continued.

Lucian held his breath, hanging on to every word the elder spoke. He now understood why he had felt a faint twinge at his brow when he signed the contract. Something had indeed rooted itself in his mind—this "divine seed." But soon, Lucian clenched his fists, his brow furrowing. Freya still lay in deep sleep, her life slowly slipping away day by day. His heart filled with helplessness and anxiety. If he took too long to save her, would Freya have already aged, or worse... passed away? How much time did he really have left?

The other initiates were murmuring amongst themselves, some deep in thought, trying to sense the divine seed within them.

Eldric seemed to wait patiently for them to come to grips with the new reality, saying nothing more until the murmurings died down. Only then did he continue, "Cultivation is divided into five major tiers: Awakened, Ascendant, King, Sovereign, and Supreme. Each major tier is further divided into early, middle, and late stages. At the Awakened and Ascendant tiers, you will cultivate spiritual energy alone. It is only when you reach the King tier that the spiritual energy within you will fully transform into golden divine power. Each tier has its own unique methods of cultivation and use of power. Advancement is extremely difficult, with each breakthrough requiring hundreds, sometimes thousands or even tens of thousands of years of accumulation. I, for instance, only stepped into the early King tier just over two hundred years ago. As for the Sovereign and Supreme tiers, those realms are beyond your current comprehension. Even the grand elder of our church has never met a Sovereign-tier deity, and Supreme-tier beings exist only in legend."

A trace of longing flashed across Eldric's face as he finished speaking.

"The Church of Dawn is but one part of the Divine Court," he resumed, his expression returning to its stern and awe-inspiring demeanor. "The Divine Court is the force that maintains order across the entire universe, and our church helps uphold the balance and peace of this world. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of churches like ours scattered throughout the realm of divine cultivation. Some are hidden within ancient forests, some deep beneath the oceans, others on the peaks of remote mountains. As for the location of the Divine Court itself... not even I know," Eldric's gaze was calm but solemn.

Lucian listened intently, overwhelmed by a sense of reverence and awe. The difficulty of breaking through each tier was staggering! The lifespan of an Awakened-tier cultivator was two hundred years, while an Ascendant-tier could live for up to two thousand years. A King-tier cultivator, however, could live for twenty thousand years. Eldric had already lived for twelve thousand years, yet he was still only at the early stages of the King tier. If even beings like Eldric and the grand elder had never encountered a Sovereign-tier deity, let alone a Supreme-tier one, how incomprehensibly powerful must they be? And the Divine Court... it was an existence far beyond reach.

After a brief pause, Eldric continued, "That's all I have to say. Next, you will be divided into three groups and assigned to different mentors. Some things your mentors will teach you, and others you will learn on your own as time goes on. Finally, remember, your mentors will only show you the way to begin. Your progress, the speed of your cultivation, and how far you can go—all of that depends entirely on you. Cultivation is like rowing against the current. Only those with the strongest will can survive this long journey. Each tier of cultivation is a transformation."

Eldric paused, sweeping his gaze across the ten initiates. His voice lowered, its weight heavy as a hammer, "You will face countless challenges, challenges so great... many of you will fall along the way."

A nervous tension crept up on Lucian. The hall had fallen utterly silent, so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

After a moment, Eldric glanced at the list in his hand and announced, "Lucian, Emma, and Darin, you three will form a group and train under Mentor Karl."

Lucian turned to look at Emma, a slender young woman with striking presence, around twenty years old. Her shoulder-length chestnut hair was slightly wavy. Her delicate features carried a hint of determination, and there was an almost imperceptible calm and depth in her eyes. He remembered standing next to her when they had passed the trial and were guided by Emissary Zyros to choose which cultivation organization to join. Now, once again, she was by his side, and they had been assigned to the same mentor. It felt like fate. Emma met his gaze, smiling softly in acknowledgment.

Darin, on the other hand, was a rugged and powerful-looking young man, likely around twenty-five or twenty-six, with short black hair. He was staring intently at Eldric.

At that moment, a man standing next to Eldric stepped forward—it must be Mentor Karl. He moved with calm and measured steps, appearing to be a composed and enigmatic figure in his forties. Though his frame was medium and slightly lean, there was an undeniable sense of restrained power about him. His dark brown hair was cut short, and his sharp gray-blue eyes seemed always to be deep in thought, as though he could see right through a person's soul.

Karl gave Lucian, Emma, and Darin a brief, assessing glance before speaking in a concise, authoritative tone, "Follow me." His words carried an undeniable

sense of command. Without further explanation, Lucian immediately felt as though he was under Karl's complete control. Karl turned and strode toward the exit of the grand hall. Lucian, Emma, and Darin exchanged looks before quickly following. Meanwhile, the division of the remaining initiates continued inside.

As they stepped out of the grand hall, Lucian looked up at the sky, a frown furrowing his brow as anxiety surged once again. With every beat of his heart, he could feel time slipping through his fingers, as though Freya's life was being drained by some invisible force. He dared not imagine if, by the time he had gained enough power, it would already be... too late.

"I must find a chance to ask Mentor Karl later. Maybe he has a way!" Pushing aside the flood of troubling thoughts, Lucian hurried to keep up with Karl as they made their way toward the rear of the temple...