

An Understated Dominance [On-Going]

Chapter 2521

“Brother, you’ve got it wrong,” Matthias said with a meaningful smile. “Even though I have Prince Mosey’s backing, I’m still far from guaranteed success. Nathaniel also has strong support, so beating him won’t be easy. But with your help, I’d have at least an 80% chance of winning.”

In Matthias’s eyes, Tristan’s value far outweighed that of the royal Ballard family.

If he could get Tristan on his side, his current 60% chance of success could jump to 80%.

The real question now was: Could Tristan put aside his pride and place his bet on him?

“Matthias, you know I’m not someone who cares much for fame or fortune,” Tristan replied after a moment of thought. “I don’t want to get involved in a power struggle. I hope you understand.”

Even though he knew his chances were slim, Tristan still couldn’t bring himself to give up. He was the eldest son and the rightful heir. Aside from his poor health, he had no real weaknesses.

He had carefully planned each step to get this far. There was no way he would just walk away now.

Even if he only had a few years left to live—even if he could only be emperor for one month—he would still fight for it.

“Brother, don’t take this the wrong way, but a man must know his limits,” Matthias said with a half-smile. “If you truly want to avoid this fight, then stay out of it completely. Enjoy your life as a carefree prince. No one will trouble you. But if you step into this mess, getting out won’t be so easy. I hope you’ll think carefully.”

He could tell Tristan still had ambition, but his power was weak. The odds of him winning were low.

Someone like that wasn’t much of a threat—but if he got in the way, he could become a serious problem.

That’s why Matthias made his warning clear from the start.

“You’re right, Matthias. I understand,” Tristan said with a slight nod and a calm smile.

But deep in his eyes, there was still a sharp glint, cold and hard to notice.

“That’s all I have to say for now,” Matthias said with a smile. “If you have time, come by my place. It’s been a while since we’ve had a drink together.”

“Next time, for sure,” Tristan replied, neither agreeing nor refusing.

“Alright then, I have other matters to attend to. I’ll take my leave.” Matthias clasped his hands in farewell and turned to go.

Tristan narrowed his eyes and stood there silently, his face darkening.

Among the four royal families, the Mosey family had already openly backed Matthias. The powerful Spanner family had chosen Nathaniel. The Fallon family, closely tied to the Moseys, was most likely also on Matthias’s side.

The only royal family that hadn’t picked a side was the Ballard family—and they were Tristan’s last hope.

Without royal backing, the minor noble families would never support his claim to the throne.

Which meant Tristan had to win the Ballard family over—no matter what.

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After the three princes had left, another important guest arrived at the Ballard family estate.

It was Princess Grace.

As always, Grace wore a veil, hiding her face. But her elegance and grace were unmistakable.

Unlike the three princes, who all had their own agendas, Grace had come simply to mourn Tobias.

That gesture brought some comfort to Simon.

It showed that not everyone in the royal family was cold and heartless. Grace was an exception.

The emperor himself had sighed more than once, saying that if Grace had been born a man, he wouldn’t have to worry about the throne.

With her intelligence and strength, Grace was more than capable of handling the burden of power.

Unfortunately, the throne was always passed from father to son—not father to daughter.

Tradition made it hard for officials to go against centuries of custom.

After paying her respects, Grace quietly left, not staying long enough to draw attention.

But just before leaving, she glanced at Dustin—as if she had something to say.

Not long after, Dustin received a text. It was from Grace.

It said simply: “If you need anything, meet me at the Sun and Moon Tower this evening.”

Dustin stayed at the mourning hall for a while longer, then left with an excuse once night fell.

He took a taxi straight to the Sun and Moon Tower.

About forty minutes later, he arrived at the meeting place.

The Sun and Moon Tower wasn’t well known in Oakvale. It was usually quiet, with few visitors.

Yet despite its low profile, the Tower made huge profits—it was a secret intelligence hub built by Grace.

Anyone in need of information could buy or sell it there.

They had everything, from political secrets to private scandals. The only downside? It was expensive.

Still, for those in power, the intel was worth every cent.

Because information from the Sun and Moon Tower could often mean the difference between life and death.

Chapter 2522

The Sun and Moon Tower has a strict rule: no walk-ins from strangers.

To do business there, you either have to be well-known or introduced by someone they trust—and even then, you need to book an appointment in advance.

There are exceptions, of course, but only in emergencies. In those cases, expect to pay extra.

When Dustin arrived at the entrance, two security guards stopped him. After confirming his identity, they let him through.

Inside, a sweet-looking hostess greeted him and led him through the main hall and into the backyard. They walked past a serene garden and pond before stopping in front of a secluded private room.

“This is the boss’s private reception room. Please go in, Mr. Rhys,” the hostess said with a polite smile.

“The boss isn’t here yet?” Dustin asked, a little surprised.

“She had something urgent to handle, but she’ll be here shortly. Please relax and make yourself comfortable, Mr. Rhys,” she replied with the same warm smile.

“Alright,” Dustin nodded, then stepped inside.

The room was spacious and designed in an antique style, radiating a quiet elegance. A faint floral scent filled the air, refreshing and calming.

A tray of fruit and snacks sat neatly on the table, and the tea was already warm.

As he looked around, Dustin’s eyes landed on a bookcase against the wall. It was filled with rare and valuable classics covering a wide range of subjects.

He scanned the titles, eventually picking up a collection of stories about legendary figures and began to read.

As the title suggested, the book chronicled heroic individuals from ancient times to the modern era—men and women who ruled empires, stood undefeated in battle, or changed the course of history.

One tale described a swordsman who defended a city alone against an army of a hundred thousand. Another told of an immortal who moved mountains and rivers to suppress monsters and stop floods. There was even a story of a beggar who laughed three times, stepped into heaven’s gates, and ascended to the skies.

Each story was more unbelievable than the last, yet all were considered legends.

As Dustin flipped through to the modern section, one name stood out—Arion Foyer, the Heavenly Master of Sacred Wyrms Summit.

The demon-slaying incident that happened decades ago had shocked the martial world. The top three demon sects were wiped out overnight and were never heard from again.

After that, Arion rose to the top of the rankings, holding the number one spot ever since—unmatched and unchallenged.

The book detailed his background too.

Before the demon-slaying event, Arion was famous for his carefree attitude. He was known to wander aimlessly, sleep in late, and rarely practiced martial arts seriously.

But everything changed when his master was killed by the Demon Sect.

Without saying a word, Arion took up his sword—and single-handedly annihilated every last one of them.

Dustin sat in a chair, engrossed in the book. These near-mythical tales stirred something deep inside him.

Maybe one day, he thought, his name would appear in a book like this.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

A soft voice interrupted his thoughts. Grace entered the room, her face partially covered with a veil.

She glanced briefly at the book in Dustin’s hands, then silently took a seat across from him and poured two cups of tea.

“I just got here too,” Dustin said, putting the book back and smiling. “So, what’s this urgent matter? What do you want to tell me?”

“I received some important intel related to your safety. And to verify it, I had to pay a high price,” Grace said, her tone serious.

Dustin raised an eyebrow. “Let me guess—you’re going to charge me again, aren’t you?”

“Of course! And double the usual rate this time,” she said without hesitation.

“Really? After everything we’ve been through? We’re friends! Isn’t it a bit much to charge me like this?” Dustin looked exasperated.

“Friendship is friendship, and business is business. Outside this place, maybe we can talk about favors—but here in the Sun and Moon Tower, it’s strictly business.” Grace’s smile was playful but firm.

Dustin sighed dramatically. “So that’s why you asked me to meet here? You’re ruthless!”

“That’s just how business works.” Grace shrugged. “But since we’re friends, I’ll give you a discount.”

“Even with a discount, I can’t pay right now,” Dustin admitted.

“No problem. Just owe me and pay when you can,” she said breezily.

Dustin rolled his eyes. “Didn’t realize you were such a money-hungry boss.”

“I’ve got a business to run. Without profit, how can I keep it going? Besides, this is a small thing for someone like you.” She smiled sweetly, her eyes curving like crescent moons.

“Fine, fine. I’ll owe you. Now tell me—what’s the news?”

Grace’s smile faded, replaced by a solemn look.

“What you did in West Lucozia recently caught the attention of the higher-ups in the Pantheon of Gods,” she said. “They see your potential as a threat and have decided to eliminate it completely. They’ve already dispatched two God Kings, and as we speak, they’re nearly in Oakvale.”

Chapter 2523

“God Kings? Two of them?”

Dustin frowned the moment he heard it.

His fight with Poseidon during the West Lucozia battle had already proven just how powerful a God King from the Pantheon could be.

It had taken everything he had to barely defeat one. If two God Kings showed up at once, there’d be no way he could win. Survival alone would be a challenge.

“That’s right,” Grace said gravely. “Zeus and Hera have both entered the country. They’re even stronger than Poseidon. If they catch you off guard, you’ll be in serious danger.”

She knew Dustin was strong—exceptional, even—but he was still too young.

And Zeus and Hera weren’t just strong; they were world-class powerhouses. Going up against them would be like trying to climb to heaven with bare hands.

The Pantheon had likely sent two God Kings because they sensed just how terrifying Dustin’s potential was.

If he had a few more years to grow, he’d be unstoppable. By then, even the Pantheon wouldn’t be able to contain him.

“Yeah... that’s a real problem.”

Dustin rested his chin on one hand, deep in thought.

Two gods stronger than Poseidon—he wasn’t ready for that.

“I have two suggestions,” Grace said suddenly. “Want to hear them?”

“Oh?” Dustin raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“First, lay low for now. Find a place to hide.”

If Zeus and Hera couldn't find him, they couldn't hurt him.

"Easier said than done," Dustin replied. "Even if I hide, the Pantheon's reach is massive. With their intelligence network, it's only a matter of time before they track me down."

He wasn't wrong. The Pantheon had eyes everywhere. Hiding alone wouldn't cut it.

"You're right. But if you hide at Sacred Wyrms Summit, things are different," Grace said with a slight smile. "Even if they know where you are, they won't dare to come near."

With someone like Arion Foyer—an earth-bound immortal—guarding the place, the Pantheon wouldn't dare make a move.

Last time they crossed paths with Sacred Wyrms Summit, they paid a heavy price. The newly promoted God King Bailey and several elite powerhouses from around the world had all died at Arion's hands.

That battle alone made the Pantheon label Sacred Wyrms Summit as a no-go zone.

If Dustin went there, even Zeus and Hera wouldn't risk it.

"You're right—it would be safe. But I can't hide forever." Dustin shook his head. "I won't live the rest of my life like a turtle in its shell."

"Sacred Wyrms Summit is blessed by dragon veins. With your talent, you'll reach peak form in just three to five years. After that, you won't need to fear the Pantheon," Grace said.

"Any other options?" Dustin asked. He wasn't ready to commit to hiding, not unless he had no other choice.

Besides, even if he could disappear, his friends and loved ones couldn't. If Zeus and Hera couldn't find him, they might target the people he cared about. That would be even worse.

"The second option is riskier... and it involves the Dracan Essences."

Grace had clearly expected this hesitation, and didn't try to push him toward hiding. Instead, she got straight to the point.

"I told you before—Dracan Essences are tied to the destiny of Dragonmarsh. When gathered, they stabilize the nation. But they also help warriors cultivate. If you absorb five strands of Dracan Essences, your strength will skyrocket. You might even reach the Continental God Realm."

"Absorb the Dracan Essences?" Dustin frowned. He had heard about that before, but still had concerns.

Would doing that hurt the country? Would the people of Dragonmarsh suffer?

He wasn't a saint, but he'd never harm innocent people.

"You don't need to worry," Grace said, as if reading his mind. "The Dracan Essences aren't depleted when you absorb them. Dragonmarsh won't suffer. In fact, it's the opposite—they'll actually become stronger through you. The essences will raise your power and increase your luck. As long as you stay alive, the country's destiny will remain intact."

"So what you're saying is... I'd be carrying the entire country's fate on my back?" Dustin asked, his face serious.

"You could put it that way," Grace nodded.

"That's a huge responsibility." He frowned again.

He wasn't sure he could bear that kind of weight.

"If it were anyone else, I wouldn't recommend it," Grace said. "But I trust your character. Giving you the country's fate is the best choice—for you, for me, and for Dragonmarsh."

Grace was a disciple of the Imperial Observatory, trained in reading fate and energy.

In her eyes, Dustin was someone with great fortune. His every decision would influence the rise or fall of Dragonmarsh.

Infusing the country's destiny into Dustin wasn't just a desperate gamble—it was a win-win.

Not only would he gain the strength to protect the land, but the country itself would benefit by growing stronger through him.

It was a bold move. But for Dustin—and for Dragonmarsh—it might be the only way forward.

Chapter 2524

"Let me think about it..."

Grace's words sent Dustin into deep thought.

Carrying the destiny of an entire nation was no small matter. First, you had to be strong enough to handle it. Second, you had to be aware of the immense responsibility it brought.

Once a country's fate rests in your hands, it's no longer just about personal freedom—you carry a burden that can't be ignored.

Before, Dustin could act freely, without concern for consequences. But now, everything had changed. The moment he took on the weight of national destiny, his path became one of duty, not choice.

Of course, his options were limited.

He could either hide away in the Sacred Wyrms Summit under the protection of the old Taoist priest—or take the risk and directly absorb the national essence to break through.

Given the choice, he would rather take the risk.

“I’m willing to try your method,” Dustin said at last, “but I’m still missing one strand of Dracan essence. To go through with it, I need that last piece.”

Only when all five sources of dragon energy were united could the full national destiny be activated.

“You’re right,” Grace nodded. “As for the final strand, I’ve had people investigate thoroughly. We’ve confirmed that it’s in my brother Nathaniel’s possession. But we haven’t been able to locate exactly where he’s hiding it.”

Even with Grace’s vast intelligence network, infiltrating the royal family completely was impossible. Gathering information like this came with enormous risk.

Investigating royal blood was a dangerous line to cross. One leak could trigger a disaster.

“Nathaniel?” Dustin narrowed his eyes slightly. “That does make things more complicated.”

Nathaniel was both brilliant and ruthless, a rare blend of intellect and strength. His noble status and massive influence only made him more dangerous. Getting the Dracan essence from him wouldn’t be easy.

“I actually have a plan,” Grace said suddenly, “but it’s risky. I’ll need your help.”

“Oh? What kind of plan?” Dustin raised an eyebrow.

“Nathaniel is greedy. One strand of Dracan essence won’t satisfy him. If he wants to ascend the throne, he’ll need at least one strand to push his fortune to its peak. We can use that against him.”

Grace gave a knowing smile.

“Use it how?” Dustin asked, confused.

“He wants Dracan essence, right? Then let’s give him some,” Grace explained. “We’ll offer him the one we have to lure out the one he’s hiding. Then we take both in one sweep.”

Her words were bold, almost shocking.

Dustin nodded slowly. “It’s a clever plan—but as you said, risky.”

She was essentially proposing to bait a wolf with its favorite food.

If it worked, it would be brilliant. But if it failed, the consequences could be devastating.

“For the sake of the Dracan essence and the country’s future, the risk is worth it,” Grace said confidently. “If you follow the plan, I’m at least 70% sure we’ll succeed.”

“Oh? And what exactly do you need from me?” Dustin asked.

“It’s simple,” Grace replied. “I need you to pretend to surrender—pretend to offer a stream of Dracan essence to Nathaniel. It’ll earn his trust. But we’ll plant a special mark in that essence, so you can track and retrieve it later. If luck is on our side, you might even be able to steal his as well.”

Dracan essence had to be stored in special containers. That meant Nathaniel would likely place both streams together.

So once Dustin retrieved their original strand, he might get a shot at Nathaniel’s as well.

In short—it was baiting a trap.

Whether or not it worked would depend on both luck and skill.

After all, Nathaniel’s mansion was tightly guarded. Even if Dustin found the treasure vault, getting in and back out would be another challenge altogether.

“I understand,” Dustin said with a nod. “When do we begin?”

“The two great gods of the Pantheon have entered the country and will arrive in Oakvale soon. Time is tight. You need to act tomorrow,” Grace urged.

The sooner the Dracan essence was recovered, the greater Dustin’s advantage.

“Alright. Tomorrow it is,” he agreed.

“I’ll leak some intel—just enough to let Nathaniel know you have a stream of Dracan essence,” Grace added. “That way, he’ll come to you. It’ll seem more natural.”

Then her tone grew serious.

“But be careful. Nathaniel is incredibly suspicious. It won’t be easy to win his trust. Once you’re in his mansion, stay alert and don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“Thanks for the warning. I know what I’m doing.” Dustin smiled.

He had visited Nathaniel’s mansion once before, so the layout wasn’t unfamiliar.

Besides, he wasn't going in to fight. Just to steal.

But that raised the real question—how could he pull off the heist without raising suspicion?

That... was something worth thinking about.

He had to find a way to get in, get what he needed, and get out—without leaving a trace.

Chapter 2525

The next morning, in a luxurious mansion—

Nathaniel was in his study, flipping through a book, when a spy hurried in and reported quietly, "Your Highness, a new dragon source aura has been discovered."

"Oh?"

Nathaniel raised his eyebrows, closed the book, and asked, "Where is it?"

"According to our intel, Dustin Rhys has it."

"Dustin Rhys?" Nathaniel narrowed his eyes slightly, surprised.

He had spent a great deal trying to win Dustin over in the past, but there had been no response.

Later, he heard that both Tristan and Matthias had attempted the same thing.

The only consolation was that Dustin hadn't taken anyone's side yet. It looked like he was still waiting for the best offer, which meant there was still a chance.

Now that Dustin possessed a Dracan essence, he was even more valuable—and worth pursuing.

Even setting aside the West Lucozia Palace, Dustin's status as a martial arts grandmaster alone made him a powerful ally.

If they could recruit him, it would be like adding wings to a tiger.

"Where is Dustin now?" Nathaniel asked.

"Our investigation shows he's staying at Jingtian Hotel," the confidant replied.

"Go there immediately and make sure to invite him back," Nathaniel ordered.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Just as the confidant was about to leave, Nathaniel called out, "One more thing—make sure to ask him. Be respectful."

"I understand." The confidant bowed and left.

At noon, a luxury car pulled up to the mansion's entrance.

Dustin stepped out and was led inside by Nathaniel's personal guards.

The mansion was understated yet elegant, with tight security. On the surface, everything looked normal—but it was clearly full of secrets.

As Dustin walked in, he discreetly scanned his surroundings, memorizing every detail.

Grace had already provided him with the architectural layout of Nathaniel's mansion, but he wanted to double-check in person.

So far, the layout matched the blueprints.

The only concern was the number of hidden guards Nathaniel had placed throughout the estate.

As Dustin stepped inside, he sensed more than a dozen eyes watching him.

It was clear—there was no moving freely in this mansion without a guide.

And with Nathaniel's resources, there were surely experts stationed here. Any slip-up could blow his cover.

With these thoughts in mind, Dustin followed the guards, passed through a rock garden, and arrived at the reception room.

Nathaniel was already waiting at the door. The moment he saw Dustin, he walked out with a beaming smile.

"Brother Rhys! It's been too long—I've missed you!"

"Hurry, hurry—please come in!"

Nathaniel greeted him warmly, took Dustin's hand, and led him into the room. He had him sit right beside him and called out, "Someone bring tea!"

Soon, a few elegant maids entered with tea and refreshments.

"Brother Rhys, this tea is a rare treasure I've collected. Please try it." Nathaniel gestured for him to drink.

Dustin nodded, lifted the teacup, took a sip, and commented, "It's sweet at first, with a lingering aroma and long aftertaste. Excellent tea."

"Hahaha! Brother Rhys, you have great taste!" Nathaniel laughed and gave him a thumbs-up. "I always serve this when I have honored guests. If you like it, I'll send you some to take home."

"Your Highness, I appreciate your generosity—I won't refuse," Dustin replied with a smile.

Now that he was here, he had to accept something—just enough to avoid raising suspicion.

"We're all brothers here. No need to be so formal. If you ever need anything, just say the word—I've got your back," Nathaniel said cheerfully.

"Thank you, Your Highness." Dustin gave a polite bow, then cut to the chase. "But I doubt you called me here just for a chat. If there's something you want to say, please go ahead."

"Hahaha... Nothing escapes you," Nathaniel chuckled, then got to the point. "Brother Rhys, I heard you have a Dracan essence. Is that true?"

"Oh? Where did Your Highness hear that?" Dustin replied casually, without giving a direct answer.

He knew better than to confirm it outright. Nathaniel was a cautious man. Being too direct would only make him more suspicious.

"To be honest, I've been searching for Dracan essences for some time now, and I've spent a lot of money doing it. I keep close tabs on any related news—nothing escapes my ears," Nathaniel said with a smile.

"I see..." Dustin nodded thoughtfully.

In reality, he was amused. After spending so much money, Nathaniel was still outclassed by Grace's intelligence network.

Clearly, his information channels had major gaps.

"Brother Rhys, I understand your caution. But don't worry—I won't let your efforts go unrewarded. If you're willing to hand the Dracan essence over to me, I'll make sure you're well compensated." Nathaniel's tone was sincere, but his eyes glinted with calculation.

To him, Dustin's hesitation was just a negotiation tactic—he was waiting for a better offer.

Nathaniel wasn't worried. He had wealth, power, and beauty at his disposal. Whatever Dustin wanted—he could provide it.