

An Understated Dominance [On-Going]

Chapter 2536

Nathaniel walked up to the front of the treasury and knocked briskly on the heavy double doors. With a deep boom, the doors slowly creaked open.

Inside, a dazzling array of treasures came into view—jade pendants glowing with a mystical aura, bronze tripods engraved with ancient symbols, and glowing elixirs radiating strange light.

At the very center, under a bulletproof glass cover, sat a jade box.

Nathaniel stepped forward, entered a password, lifted the protective cover, and opened the jade box to reveal another strand of Dracan essence.

The Dracan essence resembled a gem the size of an egg, with a dragon-shaped current flowing continuously inside.

“What a treasure!”

Nathaniel placed the Dracan essence Dustin had given him beside it, unable to hide his excitement.

The power contained in the Dracan essence was said to change one’s fate and bring immense fortune. He had gone to great lengths to acquire the first strand—now, unexpectedly, he had a second. His luck truly seemed to be turning.

Once he collected three strands, he could activate a special formation to absorb their energy. When that happened, he’d become the luckiest man in all of Dragonmarsh.

Claiming the throne would be the next natural step.

After admiring the two Dracan essences for a moment, Nathaniel finally closed the jade box, sealed the protective cover, and stepped out of the treasury.

This secret chamber—and the treasury itself—had been meticulously built. Guards were stationed around the clock, and multiple hidden traps were set. Anyone trying to break in without authorization would die on the spot.

Before leaving, Nathaniel instructed the guards to remain on high alert and allow no mistakes.

Satisfied that everything was secure, he walked back to his residence with a light step, humming as he went.

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By midnight, the grand estate had fallen silent.

Except for a few patrol teams still moving through the palace grounds, most people had long since gone to bed.

At that moment, in a secluded courtyard, Dustin suddenly sat up in bed—his eyes clear and fully awake.

He reached under his robes and pulled out a delicate compass, then infused it with a thread of true energy.

The compass needle lit up, emitting a soft glow. After circling a few times, it settled and pointed steadily southwest.

Dustin turned the compass in different directions to test it—but the needle kept pointing southwest.

“It works,” he said to himself, eyes bright.

Grace was trapped inside the Dracan essences, and ordinary people wouldn’t be able to detect her. But this compass could help him pinpoint the exact location.

“It’s time.”

He glanced up at the sky, then quickly changed into dark nightwear, pulled on a mask, and left the room quietly.

Before leaving, he set up a detection barrier—if anyone entered while he was gone, he’d sense it immediately.

Like a shadow, Dustin moved silently through the estate—leaping over rooftops, vanishing into corners, and skimming past patrol routes.

Because he had studied the estate’s layout in advance, including all guard posts and secret paths, he navigated with ease, avoiding danger without drawing attention.

After a careful search, Dustin arrived at a remote courtyard.

The security here was tight. Guards were stationed at every entrance with no blind spots in sight. Sneaking into the secret chamber without alerting them was impossible.

There was only one option—neutralize the guards and go in.

Prepared for this, Dustin lit a stick of incense and placed it in a corner. As green smoke began to rise, he waved his hand, guiding the breeze and smoke toward the gate.

The two guards inhaled the strange scent. Before they could react, they slumped to the ground, unconscious.

“Impressive,” Dustin thought.

Grace had given him this incense, claiming it could knock people out with a single whiff. Clearly, she wasn’t exaggerating.

Moving silently, Dustin vaulted over the courtyard wall like a civet cat and took out several more guards using the same method.

The guards were strong, but they hadn’t expected an intrusion—making them easy targets. And compared to Dustin, a grandmaster, they stood no chance.

Once the area was secured, he took out the compass again and carefully adjusted his direction.

Eventually, it led him to the house where the secret room was hidden.

Holding his breath, Dustin listened for movement inside. Hearing nothing, he pushed the door open slowly and stepped in.

After taking just two steps, he felt the floor shift slightly under his feet with a faint click.

Suddenly, dozens of poisonous arrows shot from the walls.

With lightning speed, Dustin dodged them, moving like a blur, and countered by flicking his fingers—each strike knocking an arrow out of the air.

To someone of his skill, these traps were no threat.

“This room may look ordinary, but there’s definitely something hidden.”

Still holding the compass, Dustin walked the perimeter of the room several times before his eyes locked onto one particular wall.

He studied it carefully, eventually discovering a hidden mechanism. With a light twist of the mechanism—boom—the wall began to shift, revealing a stone staircase leading downward.

Dustin’s eyes lit up.

He’d found it.

Chapter 2537

Dustin stared at the stone steps descending into darkness. Taking a steadying breath, he began his cautious descent.

The secret passage stretched far longer than he'd anticipated, dimly illuminated by an unknown light source somewhere ahead. After what felt like several minutes of downward progress, the tunnel gradually leveled out, its walls widening as he moved deeper into the mountain's heart.

No traps sprang to life. No hidden mechanisms activated. The only sound was his own measured footsteps echoing off the ancient stone.

The passage finally terminated at an ornate archway that opened into a vast, circular chamber. Dustin's breath caught as torchlight revealed the room's contents – row upon row of treasures glittering in the flickering light. Magical weapons rested in specially designed stands, their blades humming with contained power. Shelves groaned under the weight of rare martial arts manuals and alchemical treatises. Glass cases displayed vials of precious elixirs that shimmered with otherworldly luminescence.

Yet despite this staggering wealth, one item remained conspicuously absent. Dustin's sharp eyes swept the chamber twice before finally settling on the far wall, where an imposing door of polished steel dominated the space. Intricate runes covered its surface in precise, concentric patterns.

His compass left no doubt – the needle pointed unwaveringly at this sealed portal. "The Essences must be behind there," he murmured, pocketing the device as he approached the mysterious door.

Close examination revealed subtle clues – six specific runes showed significantly more wear than their counterparts, their surfaces bearing the faint but unmistakable marks of frequent contact. The password. The key to unlocking this final barrier.

His first attempt triggered an immediate response. A sharp metallic click preceded the hiss of dozens of poisoned needles erupting from hidden slots across the door's surface. Dustin's reflexes saved him – he launched himself upward, his fingers finding purchase on the chamber's ceiling as the deadly barrage embedded itself in the stone where he'd stood moments before.

"Impressive security,"

he acknowledged, dropping lightly back to the floor.

The second failure proved even more dangerous. Instead of physical projectiles, a viscous green liquid sprayed from the door's surface. Where the venom touched stone, the rock bubbled and dissolved, the acid eating downward until it met some hidden steel barrier nearly a meter below. Dustin didn't need to imagine what that substance would do to human flesh.

Nathaniel's defenses were as brutal as they were ingenious. Only someone with Dustin's extraordinary cultivation could hope to survive repeated attempts.

Each new combination brought fresh horrors – clouds of choking poison, swarms of razor-winged insects, sudden pits opening in the floor. The chamber itself seemed determined to kill him, yet his preternatural reflexes kept him one step ahead of disaster.

But time was his true enemy now. The guards he'd incapacitated would begin reviving soon. If he hadn't secured the Essences by then...

Breaking the door down remained an option, but the resulting noise would bring Nathaniel running. That was a confrontation he couldn't afford – not yet.

Sweat trickled down his temple as attempt after attempt failed. Then – on what felt like the hundredth try – the satisfying clunk of releasing mechanisms echoed through the chamber. The massive door groaned open.

"Finally!"

The word burst from Dustin's lips in a relieved exhale.

The vault beyond took his breath away. Priceless artifacts filled the space, but his gaze locked immediately on the centerpiece – two exquisite jade boxes resting under bulletproof glass at the room's heart. A single strike shattered the protective barrier. The containers opened with satisfying clicks, revealing their priceless contents.

"The Dracan Essences."

He allowed himself a rare smile as he secured both boxes in his pack. After all this effort, success was finally his.

The triumphant moment shattered as the vault door slammed shut behind him with earth-shaking finality. Crimson mist began pouring from vents in the walls as an earsplitting alarm wailed through the complex.

Dustin's triumphant expression darkened into a scowl. He'd underestimated Nathaniel's paranoia. Again.

Elsewhere in the Compound

Nathaniel's eyes flew open at the alarm's shriek. Before conscious thought registered, he was already moving – bare feet hitting cold stone, silk sleeping robes flapping behind him as he burst into the corridor.

"Intruder alert!" His voice carried through the complex with practiced command. "All guards to the treasury! Now!"

The specific alarm pattern left no room for doubt – someone had breached his innermost sanctum. While the outer chamber's treasures were valuable, the vault contained items that were truly irreplaceable. Every second of delay could mean the loss of something priceless.

As guards scrambled to respond, Nathaniel's mind raced. How had anyone penetrated his defenses? Who would dare? The questions could wait. First, he needed to catch this thief before they escaped with his most prized possessions.

Chapter 2538

"Hurry up! Move faster!"

Nathaniel was visibly anxious, repeatedly urging the guards forward.

At that moment, he couldn't help but curse the size of his mansion—it was too large, and he couldn't reach the scene quickly enough.

"Ding! What's going on?!"

Just then, Mateo and Emmett arrived with their elite troops, responding swiftly to the alarm.

Most of them hadn't even had time to put on their uniforms—they came shirtless and rushed, their urgency clear.

After all, this was the first time a palace-wide alarm had ever been triggered.

"A thief has broken into the estate!" Nathaniel barked. "Lock down all entrances and exits—don't let them escape!"

"Seal off the entire city!" Mateo shouted as he led a large group into action.

It takes years to raise an army, but only moments to deploy one. And today was their moment to act.

"Follow me!" Nathaniel called, charging forward with a team of guards at his side.

But before they could get far, a sudden boom echoed from the direction of the secret chamber ahead.

The shockwave shook the entire mansion like an earthquake.

Moments later, a courtyard about a hundred meters ahead collapsed completely!

Dirt and stone caved in, burying the secret chamber beneath a pile of rubble and leaving only ruins in its place.

A thick cloud of dust billowed into the air, rising like a screen of smoke.

Seeing this, Nathaniel froze in place. His eyes widened in disbelief, and his face twisted in shock.

He never imagined things would turn out like this.

He had assumed it was just a theft—that someone had broken into the chamber to steal treasures. As serious as that might be, he thought the damage would be manageable.

But now, staring at the wreckage, his heart sank.

This wasn't just a loss. This was the destruction of more than ten years of careful accumulation.

Now buried under rubble, most of the treasures were likely ruined. The loss was beyond calculation.

It felt like someone had slashed his heart—twice.

“Animal! You animal!!!” Nathaniel roared, his entire body trembling with rage.

“My Lord, what do we do now?” the guards behind him asked, exchanging uneasy glances.

They had come to protect the treasures and catch a thief. Now the treasures were buried, the thief was gone, and all they could do was stand there in shock.

“Dig! Dig out the treasures now!” Nathaniel shouted.

It was one thing to lose ordinary valuables—but the Dracan essences could not be replaced. Losing those would be disastrous.

“Get more people! Dig them out!” he ordered.

The guards didn't dare waste a second. They quickly rallied more men and started excavating the ruins.

Just then, Mateo and Emmett returned, drawn by the sound of the explosion.

When they saw the destruction ahead, they paused, stunned, then quickly grasped the seriousness of the situation.

This wasn't just a theft—it was a major disaster.

The palace had been peaceful, with no signs of trouble. Then suddenly, chaos erupted without warning. The only explanation was that someone from the inside was involved.

Nathaniel was notoriously suspicious. A full investigation was sure to follow.

And if he had any doubts about them, he wouldn't hesitate to toss them into a river to feed the fish.

At that moment, Nathaniel seemed to realize something. His face turned dark, and he shouted, “Mateo! Emmett! You two, follow me!”

Without waiting for a response, Nathaniel spun around and headed straight for Dustin’s quarters.

Mateo and Emmett exchanged a quick glance and followed without protest, bringing their guards with them.

They all knew what was happening—Nathaniel suspected Mr. Rhys.

After all, everything had been calm in the mansion before Dustin’s arrival. But now, after just one night, disaster had struck. It was only natural to suspect him.

“Dustin... this better not be your doing,” Nathaniel muttered through clenched teeth, his eyes sharp with fury as he stormed toward the villa.

Lights were still on in the villa when they arrived.

Without a word, Nathaniel kicked the gate open and burst in with his men.

Hearing the commotion, Dustin emerged from the house in casual clothes. He looked at Nathaniel, clearly puzzled.

“My Lord, what’s going on? Why are you so worked up?”

“Let me ask you—where were you just now?” Nathaniel demanded coldly.

“I’ve been in my room the whole time. I haven’t gone anywhere. What happened?” Dustin replied, feigning ignorance.

In truth, Dustin had recently been trapped and had no choice but to force his way out, causing the collapse of the courtyard and the secret chamber. The explosion was so loud it had alerted the entire mansion.

But at this point, there was nothing he could do to hide it.

“You’re sure you haven’t left this room?” Nathaniel stared at him suspiciously.

If Dustin really was involved in the destruction, there should’ve been some trace left behind. It would’ve been nearly impossible to clean up perfectly in such a short time.

“I’m sure,” Dustin said calmly, not flinching.

“Someone—search the room!” Nathaniel signaled his men.

Dustin's clothes were spotless, offering no clues. But if he was the thief, he must've hidden the stolen goods somewhere. A thorough search would reveal the truth.

"Hold on!"

As Mateo and Emmett stepped forward, Dustin raised his hand to stop them.

With a cold expression, he said, "My Lord, what is the meaning of this? If I'm not welcome here, I can leave right now. But humiliating me like this? That's going too far."

Chapter 2539

Dustin's face darkened, and his tone turned sharp.

Letting Nathaniel search his room without protest just felt wrong.

"Brother Rhys, there are thieves in the mansion. The entire place is on lockdown. For your safety, we need to search your quarters," Nathaniel said grimly.

He strongly suspected Dustin, but without solid evidence, he couldn't make an outright accusation. Still, if Dustin resisted too much, Nathaniel wouldn't hold back.

"Thieves?" Dustin raised an eyebrow. "Really? You think the shaking earlier was connected to that?"

"We'll discuss the details later. Right now, we have to check this area before the thief escapes," Nathaniel snapped, signaling Mateo and Emmett to move.

The two exchanged a glance, said nothing, and led a team into the inner rooms.

Nathaniel gave Dustin a long, searching look, then followed them inside.

The lights inside the house flickered softly. It was tidy and spacious.

In the warm glow sat a woman in red.

Her black hair was pinned high with a red-gold hairpin, delicate pearls swaying gently and casting tiny shadows on her temple. Her eyebrows were elegantly arched, her eyes slightly upturned like rippling spring water—more dazzling than the coral in her hair.

Her skin was pale as jade, lips naturally red. When she smiled, she looked like a crimson plum blossom blooming in the snow, and even the dimples at the corners of her eyes had a touch of playful charm.

"Wynter? What are you doing here?"

Nathaniel frowned in surprise when he saw her.

“Your Highness,” Wynter said calmly, setting down a chess piece. She stood up, gave a graceful bow, and explained, “I was playing chess with Mr. Rhys and got a bit distracted. I didn’t notice what was going on outside.”

Her voice was soft and relaxed, with a trace of languid ease.

Nathaniel glanced at the chessboard on the table. The black and white pieces were scattered in the middle of an intense game.

He looked back at Wynter, suspicion flickering in his eyes. “So you two were just playing chess this whole time?”

Wynter nodded, expression steady. “I haven’t left this room even once.”

Nathaniel said nothing, turning to Dustin, who had just entered. The doubt in his eyes didn’t fade.

“Mateo, Emmett—search every corner inside and out. Make sure no one’s hiding nearby,” Nathaniel ordered.

“Yes, sir!” they replied, then spread out with their men to search the entire courtyard.

They combed through everything—but found nothing. Not even the smallest clue.

“My Lord,” Dustin said casually, “if thieves have broken into the mansion, would you like my help?”

“No need, Brother Rhys. I can handle it myself,” Nathaniel grunted and left in frustration.

He still suspected Dustin, but with no evidence, he could only swallow the suspicion for now. That said, he wasn’t ruling anything out. This could still be part of a bigger scheme.

As soon as he left the courtyard, Nathaniel gave new orders. “Mateo, Emmett! Mobilize everyone. Search the entire mansion from top to bottom. I don’t care if you have to dig three feet into the ground—find that thief!”

“Yes, sir!” they responded, then left with their troops.

Nathaniel had already locked down the entire compound. There was no way the thief could’ve escaped so quickly. If they were still hiding, they’d be found sooner or later.

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After the sound of footsteps faded, Dustin quietly shut the door. He turned to Wynter, a curious look in his eyes.

“Why did you help me?”

When he'd escaped from the secret room and returned, he'd found someone waiting in his room—her.

At first, he thought he'd been exposed. But something didn't add up.

Wynter hadn't said a word about what he'd done. Instead, she helped him—hiding his nightgown and mask inside a secret compartment of the chessboard.

Before he could ask why, Nathaniel barged in with his men.

And Wynter? She played her part flawlessly, like they were just two friends playing a quiet game of chess.

But Dustin still didn't get it. She was clearly close to Nathaniel. Why risk covering for him?

"Mr. Rhys," Wynter said, smiling as she returned to her seat, "don't overthink it. Helping you is also helping myself."

She took a slow sip of tea, then added, "In Nathaniel's mansion, I may look like a guest, but in truth, I'm just a puppet under his control. I know how this ends if I keep following him—and it won't be good. I want out."

She paused, her voice low and honest.

"I know you're not who you appear to be. Helping you today is my way of betting on a better future. I'm tired of being manipulated. I want freedom. And right now... you're the only one who can give me that."

Chapter 2540

"I see..."

Dustin listened silently, eyes fixed on the chessboard, then gave a small nod. "You helped me tonight, so I owe you one. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to come to me."

He had always been the kind of person who repaid kindness with kindness.

Wynter hadn't just stayed quiet—she covered for him. That kind of favor couldn't go unanswered.

"Mr. Rhys, you're a man of loyalty and principle. I truly admire that." Wynter smiled, her tone warm, with a hint of charm.

"But I have to ask—why did you approach me? Did you already suspect something?"

"Everyone who joins Nathaniel is chasing power, fame, or profit. But you stood out right away, Mr. Rhys."

Wynter smiled again.
“You entered the mansion and offered up the Dracan essences, but you didn’t ask for power, fame—or even women. That told me you had other goals. Of course, it was just a hunch. Tonight was actually intentional. I came to learn chess from you, but you weren’t in the courtyard. It wasn’t until I heard the commotion that I understood what you were really doing.”

“Miss Wynter, you’re sharp. I see you in a whole new light now,” Dustin said, nodding.

At first, he thought she was just a pretty face. Clearly, he’d underestimated her.

“Compared to you, Mr. Rhys, it’s nothing. But still, you should be careful. Nathaniel won’t let this slide so easily,” she warned.

“As long as there’s no proof, he can’t touch me,” Dustin replied calmly.

Given his strength, even if Nathaniel wanted to turn on him, he’d have to think twice.

Besides, would someone really burn a bridge over a suspicion with no evidence?

“As long as you’re aware, that’s all that matters. It’s getting late—I’ll take my leave now.”
Wynter smiled.

She bowed slightly, then turned and walked away.

The sky gradually brightened, and the morning sun rose slowly.

At that moment, Nathaniel stood in the middle of the courtyard, staring at the empty hallway, his brow tightly furrowed.

Behind him, Mateo and Emmett were reporting.

“Your Highness, we’ve brought in horses and searched the mansion three times. We even checked the pond—but we didn’t find anyone.”

“Is it possible the thief already escaped?”

Mateo wiped the sweat from his forehead, his voice cautious.

The moment he spoke, Nathaniel spun around, eyes flashing coldly.
“No! Before the secret room was destroyed, I ordered the entire mansion sealed off. Even if the thief had wings, they couldn’t have flown out!”

He gripped the jade pendant at his waist—a gift from the emperor. Now it felt like a piece of burning iron in his hand.

Mateo saw this and quickly bowed.
“You’re absolutely right, Your Highness. The thief must still be hiding somewhere. I’ll search again right away!”

He immediately gathered the exhausted guards and headed toward a remote storage shed.

Even though he knew continuing the search was probably pointless—if the thief could sneak in, he could sneak out just as easily—he didn't dare argue. Nathaniel was furious, and all Mateo could do now was obey.

Nathaniel glanced at the rising sun, then walked toward the secret chamber, his face clouded with anger.

He knew they wouldn't catch the thief any time soon. What worried him more was how much of the treasure had been lost.

Especially the ones in the vault. If anything was stolen or damaged, it would hit him where it hurt most.

When he arrived at the ruined secret room, a team of people was still hard at work.

Afraid of damaging any valuables, they were digging carefully with shovels, removing the dirt slowly and by hand.

After more than a hundred paces and an entire night of exhausting labor, the outline of the chamber's ceiling had finally started to appear.

It would take at least half a day more to fully excavate the room.

Nathaniel stood off to the side, staring at the deepening pit. His fists were clenched so tightly his nails dug into his palms.

Minute by minute, time passed—until finally, at noon, the entrance to the secret room was revealed.

"Your Highness! We found it!" someone shouted.

Nathaniel took a deep breath, then stepped inside without hesitation, ignoring the risk of collapse.

A wave of damp, dusty air hit him. He raised a torch and looked around, his face darkening with each step.

The treasures that had once been neatly arranged were now scattered and broken.

Without a second glance, he rushed toward the treasury.

The steel vault door had been bent and twisted, and part of the room had collapsed. A massive hole gaped in the ceiling, as if something had smashed its way through.

Without a thought for the dirt or debris, Nathaniel forced his way in through the damaged steel door.

But the moment he saw what was inside, his vision went black—and he nearly collapsed.

The jade box holding the Dracan essences was open. The two essences were gone.

More than half of the rare treasures were either missing or destroyed.

“No... no, this can’t be happening...”

“My treasure... my treasure!”

Overwhelmed by the loss, Nathaniel cried out and collapsed to the ground—unconscious.