

From Outcast to Overlord The Unyielding Heir (Leander Ashcroft)

Chapter 491

"If you keep those assassins from my throat, my life and death belong to you from this moment on."

Celia's posture held no hesitation. The woman known across the underworld for her beauty and lethality lowered herself before Leander with complete surrender. Disciple of the last King of Assassins, feared across continents, she pressed her forehead to the ground in a silent plea for mercy.

Anyone who saw her name on the International Assassin Leaderboard would have laughed at the thought of her bowing to anyone. None of them had the slightest idea of the nightmare closing in on her tonight.

Netherweb was no ordinary organization; it was a ruthless machine forged from cold blood and ancient rituals. To ensure only the strongest survive, every killer who pledged allegiance was bound by a single law-failure was death. There were no excuses, no exceptions, and no appeals.

Tonight, she arrived with Barrett to eliminate Leander. Barrett died, and she hesitated. She even revealed Netherweb's secrets. One mistake was considered a failure, but her actions were seen as treason.

Netherweb hunted defectors like hungry wolves. Its reach spread across borders. Hiding from it felt like hiding from a hurricane.

Celia carried too many scars. She refused to die under Netherweb's blade. Leander's victory over the Blood Demon had cracked open the tiniest ray of possibility.

If she wanted to survive, she needed a shield powerful enough to stand against the very organization she betrayed. Leander was the only one she could place her gamble on.

Most men would have stumbled over themselves under a plea like hers. Leander didn't flinch.

"Become my slave?" His fingers flicked dismissively. "I work alone. I don't need followers. You're alive because I allowed it. You can leave."

He turned away, though Celia lifted her head sharply.

"My loyalty isn't the only thing on the table," she pressed. "Everything I own can be yours. My body included."

Her voice trembled only once before she regained full control. "During a mission in the Sahar Wastes, I found a hidden vault abandoned by a Western Divine from centuries ago. If you protect me from Netherweb, I can lead you to it."

That word froze Leander mid-step.

"A Divine Vault?"

He pivoted slowly, interest clearly sparked. Even Jimmy and Christopher stiffened at her tone.

"What exactly is that?" Leander asked.

Celia inhaled, staying bowed on her knees. "Western cultivators call their highest realm 'divine,' a level above the King Phase. In the East, the same tier is what people call the immortal."

Leander's gaze sharpened. "Beyond the King Phase?"

The King Phase stood at a level where one person could tilt the fate of nations. Powerholders of that tier moved the world from behind the curtain, shaping events, directing outcomes, and influencing state affairs with a single decision.

Yet Celia spoke of something beyond them.

Leander reached the peak through relentless ascent, although this was the first time

he had heard the realms explained this plainly.

"So, actual immortals existed?" His voice dropped into curiosity.

"They did," she answered. "Three hundred years ago."

Christopher chimed in, "Records mention a prodigy from the East five hundred years back. He started from martial arts, cultivated his spirit, merged the two, and proved the immortal path two centuries later."

"He became the last immortal in recorded history. His fall three hundred years ago remains a mystery. People remember him as the Divine Emperor."

"Divine Emperor?" A faint smile tugged at Leander's lips. "So the treasures they left behind became Divine Vaults or Immortal Vaults."

Celia nodded. "That's right."

"The one I found sits near an oasis in the Sahar Wastes. I was on a mission to eliminate a mercenary leader. I stumbled on the vault by accident."

A shadow flickered across her expression. "I tried entering, but something invisible blocked me. Every technique bounced off it. I couldn't break through. I left it untouched."

"I'm certain the Divine Vault holds items even King Phase masters crave. I marked it

with a spiritual seal. No one else knows its location."

"If you promise to shield me from Netherweb, I'll take you there right now."

Leander stayed silent for a moment. His hand drifted to his jaw.

Even with his strength—few rivals left on Earth—he never viewed himself as immortal. Plenty of forces still posed a threat.

He could still be killed by King Phase masters, remnants of immortals or divines, or even modern weapons like nuclear warheads, high-energy lasers, and guided missiles.

Survival demanded constant growth.

His Devourer's Ninefold Path cultivated itself without rest, always pushing him forward. Yet, rare materials accelerated its pace. A Divine Vault? That could be priceless.

He didn't rush his answer. His eyes slid toward her. "Why put your trust in me?"

Still on her knees, Celia responded without hesitation, "You're the only one I've seen who can stand against a King Phase master, and so I believe you can resist Netherweb."

Leander let out a sharp laugh, the sound cutting through the night. "Fine. That honesty buys you protection. While you stay under my watch Netherweb won't lay a hand on you." t

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Relief flashed through Celia's bright eyes, although Leander didn't let her enjoy it.

"Since you're becoming mine, your life must rest in my control. Loyalty means nothing without a chain."

His voice grew cold. He raised his hand, and a fiery dragon curled upward, then condensed into a tiny ember hovering over his palm.

"This is a Dragonfire Seed. Swallow it. If you ever betray me, one thought turns you into ash."

He didn't underestimate her. Celia looked fragile on the surface, yet she ranked among the world's deadliest killers. Accepting her without restraint would be foolish.

Celia froze. She hadn't expected something this absolute. Swallowing it meant surrendering every ounce of freedom she had left.

Leander didn't blink. "I'm not forcing you. Walk away if you want."

A deep breath shook her, and her eyes filled with resolve. She opened her mouth, inhaled sharply, and pulled the Dragonfire Seed down her throat.

Warm sparks instantly ignite within her, spreading throughout her organs, seeping into her bones, and lingering at the edges of her mind.

Daily life remains the same, but a single thought from Leander could erase her entirely.

Leander nodded slightly. "Good. Your life belongs to me now. No one else has the right to kill you."

Celia rose into a graceful bow, voice soft. "Yes, Master Leander."

Jimmy and Christopher traded stunned looks, each one carrying the same thought: the third-ranked assassin in the world had just pledged her life to Leander?

Leander quickly moved on, his eyes scanning the city sprawling beneath the mountain with cold precision.

"The Blood Demon is gone. Highcliffe still hides plenty of vermin. Tonight, I'll send Netherweb a little message."

A deep breath steadied him as his

back straightened. A burst of spiritual energy surged outward, making the air crackle under its pressure. It spread across the world like an invisible tidal wave sweeping the land.

One breath traveled across more than three thousand miles.

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One thought, and his spiritual strength swept three thousand miles. This was Leander's spiritual strength at its peak.

He had once told Daphne that his divine sense could cover a ten-mile radius. That was modest.

Since breaking through to the Origin Realm, this was the first time he unleashed his spiritual strength at full force. Layer upon layer, vast as a rolling tide, it left no corner of Highcliffe hidden. Nothing escaped his perception.

He could see the whole city at a glance. Seal the sky and earth with a single thought.

Christopher, Jimmy, and Celia felt it. Leander's spiritual strength blazed like the cosmos. Their faces drained of color.

Every martial artist in Highcliffe at Martial Sovereign rank or above sensed it instantly. In a heartbeat, the city stirred in alarm.

"Is this spiritual strength?"

Reginald was at home guiding Ethan when both froze.

Reginald's shock ran deep. He had never felt a spiritual strength so vast, so terrifying.

"With power like this, could it be the Shadow Division King?" he murmured, then shook his head.

The Shadow Division King, the original founder of the division, was a martial artist. His spiritual strength rose with cultivation, but it could never cover the city like this.

Ethan kept silent. Having just returned from Highcliffe University and learned Leander was back, he suspected this was his doing.

"Leander... Did you level up again?"

He glanced at himself, still pushing toward the Transcendent Realm, and let out a bitter laugh.

The shock extended beyond the elite families. Hidden assassins scattered across the city felt it too. Their skills varied widely, from the deadliest Slayer-tier to the Absolute-tier at the lower end. Leander's bounty was enormous, and everyone wanted to sneak into the capital for a shot at fortune.

Assassins live on reputation. One strike against Leander could elevate them to legendary status.

After Leander fought the Blood Demon at Swallow Hill, many had sensed the Blood Demon's aura collapse. Those lurking for an ambush had scattered like a receding tide.

Now, with his spiritual strength sweeping the city, tension gripped every hidden hand.

On Chillcall's club strip, crowds filled the streets. A young man in a baseball cap weaved through the people.

The moment Leander's spiritual strength pressed down, his face changed. He sprinted into a dark alley, vaulted a wall, and launched skyward.

On Maple Street North, a hunched old beggar woman limped along, bowl extended. Kind strangers dropped coins.

In the next instant, she blurred into motion, faster than any world-record sprinter, vanishing at the street's end. Bystanders gawked, stunned.

In a nightclub, a pale young man held two hostesses. The top hostess feigned a stumble, falling toward his chest. He twisted his face, shoved

Her

aside and barreled into a wall

like a tank.

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The half-meter-thick soundproof wall shattered. The man didn't slow, disappearing into the night. The women screamed, convinced they'd seen a ghost.

Scenes like this unfolded across Highcliffe. In moments, the city erupted in chaos.

At Swallow Hill, Leander hovered, his spiritual strength locking onto every foreign infiltrator.

"I figured ten would be enough. Didn't expect nearly a hundred. The Netherweb really is paying me special attention," he said with a faint smile, warmth absent.

"In that case, I'll return the favor."

He raised a palm. Dragonfire bloomed from nothing, forming a blazing dragon that tore across the clouds.

"Dragonfire Soulchaser-Spirit Strike."

The dragon shattered into a

thousand sparks, linking into flaming arrow-feathers. With a thought, they shot in all directions. The sky was streaked with nearly a hundred fiery trails, like a meteor storm.

On the streets, late-night revelers craned their necks. Couples pointed, assuming it

was a special fireworks display.

Each arrow flew like it had a lock. Faster than sound, piercing the night.

The baseball-capped man felt sudden heat. An arrow drilled through his chest, exploding him into a fiery bloom.

The sprinting beggar woman had an arrow drop from above, striking her through the crown. Flames erupted.

The nightclub runner barely cleared a hundred feet before an arrow caught him midair, detonating him.

This scene repeated across Highcliffe. Bright explosions painted the night sky. People cheered, unaware that each blast marked a life snuffed out.

Jimmy and Christopher stood horrified.

Leander didn't just blanket the city with his spiritual strength. He tagged nearly a hundred elite targets—martial artists, sorcerers, metahumans-and eliminated them instantly. Such a feat was beyond human—worthy of gods or demons. Even the leaders of the Shadow Division couldn't help but shiver.

Celia's eyes shone. She had never doubted her choice to rely on Leander. She

watched the hundred fiery blooms and felt their weight.

"Almost a hundred assassins gone. The Netherweb cannot absorb such losses. The old monsters hiding in the shadows won't stay idle."

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Night blanketed Highcliffe. Nearly a hundred fireworks erupted at once, turning the city into the center of gossip.

The instigator-Leander-after leaving his contact information with Celia, quietly returned to the dorm.

Something puzzled him—Nathan and the others were nowhere to be seen.

"Independence Day is coming, and there are no core classes. They probably went off to party," he said, shrugging.

He didn't dwell on it. A quick wash later, he flopped onto the top bunk.

The clash between him and the Netherweb barely shook the city. Except for a few who had brushed shoulders with Netherweb operatives, most residents had no idea what had happened.

At the Shadow Division base, Jimmy and Christopher still felt the aftershock. "Jimmy, seeing General Ashcroft makes me feel old," Christopher murmured. "Old? Facing him makes the last few decades feel wasted," Jimmy said. "In an instant, he wiped out nearly a hundred Netherweb assassins-thirteen Slayer-tier, including Barrett, thirty-two Earth-tier, and forty-three Absolute-tier. Even

with the Netherweb's massive roster, this loss is catastrophic. This time, he practically annihilated the Netherweb's mid-to-upper assassin cadre."

Christopher nodded. "A hundred eliminated in a single sweep. Lucky for the city, those dazzling flames reduced them to nothing. A hundred corpses appearing at once would have caused mass panic."

They fell silent, staring out the window.

Leander's battle had linked the martial world and the assassin world, striking the international assassin scene at its core.

Even the Blood Demon had died at his hand. Over a hundred Netherweb assassins were gone in a single night. No one in the world dared challenge him next.

News of the Highcliffe battle spread quickly. Jimmy ordered Shadow Division intel to circulate it worldwide.

The International Martial Network erupted. So did the Global Assassin Network.

'The Blood Demon is dead! Barrett is dead! Nearly a hundred top Netherweb assassins are dead!'

Messages flooded the forums. Martial artists and assassins alike trembled. Self-styled elites posted their shock.

'The Blood Demon is a century-old legend. He's even hunted King Phase. How could Jeff have killed him? This has to be fake,' wrote a Transcendent Realm master.

Even if Jeff did take down the Blood Demon one-on-one, how did he slaughter over a hundred Netherweb assassins in a single night? These assassins are ghosts—forget killing them, just finding them is nearly impossible. I can't believe it,' added a newly verified Martial Sovereign.

Others with influence voiced similar doubts. The Blood Demon had dominated the international assassin scene for decades. Because he was a hired assassin, he never appeared on the International Combat Units ranking. Otherwise, he could have easily claimed the top spot.

Few wanted to believe that his first appearance in twenty years would be his last.

While the forums debated, the shadowy owner of the International Martial Network -The Destroyer-appeared.

'Confirmed. Jeff single-handedly destroyed the Netherweb's assassination offensive. Even if not at King Phase, his strength is equivalent to it.'

Two sentences silenced the forum. The Destroyer's confirmation left no room for doubt.

Many clicked on the International Combat Units ranking. Jeff's name still stood alone at the top, radiant and unshakable.

"D*mn it!"

In a secret underground facility in the West, several men in black suits gathered. One hurled a glass bottle at the wall. Water splashed everywhere, but it could not douse the fire in his eyes

"Who can explain this? How did so many die at once?"

The man was Holden Brown, current head of the Netherweb, responsible for online

operations and concealment. The others were his subordinates.

No one dared answer. His fury burned hotter. In the Netherweb's centuries-long

history, not even the War of the King Phase had caused such losses.

This time, it wasn't just the Blood Demon and Barrett. Nearly a hundred renowned heavy-hitters had fallen. It was an unprecedented blow.

Holden finally calmed, his eyes icy.

"Since the Netherweb's founding, every leader has sworn to kill Jeff."

He pulled out his phone.

"Prep the helicopter. I'm heading to Breyji."

Faces around him went pale.

A middle-aged subordinate gasped. "Mr. Brown, are you going to invite him out of seclusion?"

Holden's eyes flashed. "Even the Blood Demon couldn't handle Jeff. If we don't call him, there's no other option. He's our ace. Only he can wash away this shame." The room fell silent.

On the vast Breyji ice fields, a frozen lake stretched for miles. Amid the endless white, a tiny black dot- appeared-an old man in a straw ramcoat, sitting cross-legged, fishing

through the ice.

The rod was a rotten stick. A white line ran from its tip through half a meter of ice into the lake.

Closer inspection revealed it wasn't a line at all, but a thread of vital energy The old man condensed his vital energy into a filament- method mysterious and formidable.

Then came the drone of helicopter rotors. Holden, in a suit, descended via rope

ladder, landing before the old man.

He did not step closer, bowing deeply from a hundred feet away.

"Master Hermit, I've come to see you."

"Master Hermit, I've come to see you."

Holden bowed deeply, a full ninety degrees, his tone filled with utmost respect.

As head of the Netherweb, his cultivation wasn't exceptional, yet he commanded masters as bodyguards. Even the arrogant Blood Demon would have received only a nod in greeting on a normal day.

Facing the old man before him, he dared not show an ounce of disrespect.

This man was the Netherweb's top assassin-the strongest, most revered trump card. Number one on the International Assassin Leaderboard-the Hermit.

"Is that Holden?"

The Hermit's face was a map of wrinkles, eyes narrowed to slits. His voice was hoarse and frail, trembling like it could break at any moment. The hand holding his fishing rod shook slightly. One glance and anyone would think him a candle flickering toward its end.

"It's me, Master Hermit. Last time I saw you, I was eight. Fifty years have passed in a blink."

Holden straightened and smiled. Even in this icy wasteland, and despite being a Martial Sovereign with internal energy protecting him, he couldn't help but feel a chill.

He didn't mind. Sitting cross-legged in front of the Hermit.

"I'm old, my memory fails me. I remember telling your father that I'd repaid your family's debt in full. I had nothing more to do with the Netherweb. You came today- does your family intend to go back on that promise?"

The Hermit's raspy voice carried an unmatched, world-commanding authority. Holden, commander of the Netherweb and head of the prestigious Brown family, felt his heart tighten and tension spike at just a single word from the Hermit. He forced a bitter smile and waved his hands.

"Master Hermit, my family has no intention of reneging. I come on my own. This has nothing to do with them."

"Is that so?"

The Hermit lifted his eyes slightly, returning his focus to the fishing line.

"I've been fishing on this ice for fifty years. Haven't moved, haven't spoken. Your visit breaks my silence. For your father's and your family's sake, you have five minutes. Tell me why you're here."

Holden nodded immediately, his expression turning grave.

"Master Hermit, I've come to ask you to return to action."

The Hermit's eyes showed no reaction. A faint smile crossed his lips.

"Holden, you think that just because you command the Netherweb and have the Brown family behind you, I wouldn't dare kill you? Fifty years ago I quit the Netherweb. I won't make another move. You may leave."

Fifty years ago, after completing a nearly impossible hit assigned by the Netherweb, he retired to Breyji, devoting himself to martial arts. Killing no longer interested him. His only pursuit was power and the path to greatness.

"Please, Master Hermit, forgive my intrusion," Holden said, bowing so low his forehead nearly touched the ice.

"This visit is unavoidable. Two days ago, the Netherweb suffered the worst blow in its history. In one night, over a hundred Slayer-tier and Earth-tier assassins were lost."

The Hermit's eyes lifted slightly, surprise flickering across his gaze.

He had joined the Netherweb in its earliest days. He knew its strength and foundation. In the Netherweb's history, they had always crushed their targets without suffering great losses.

In a single night, over a hundred Slayer- and Earth-tier assassins were lost,

effectively wiping out nine-tenths of the Netherweb's upper-tier operatives. He was

surprised, but he still didn't respond.

Seeing that, Holden pressed on.

"The Blood Demon also fell that night."

At this, the calm Hermit finally showed emotion.

"Oh?"

The word dragged, shock evident.

"The Blood Demon is dead? How?"

The Hermit's eyes flared with sharp light.

"Fifty years ago, the Blood Demon had already reached the peak of Infernal Crown Transcendent. With his talent and demonic art, he

King's Triple Turn, a Half-King Unbeatable unless a King Phäße intervened: Who could kill him? Those old monsters? They dare defy the King Phase Accord?"

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Even he admitted that the Blood Demon was his junior. He was stronger only because he had fifty more years. In raw talent, the Hermit acknowledged the Blood Demon's growth over the decades.

Now the Blood Demon was dead. Even he was stunned.

"Master Hermit, it wasn't those King Phase veterans. The killer is a young martial artist who emerged in Astria over the past two years. His name is Jeff Ashcroft."

Holden's voice burned with anger. Leander was the first to humiliate the Netherweb in the assassin world. He had only recently taken leadership, and the offense stung him personally.

The Brown family had many heirs. He was just one of his father's nine sons. Through skill and family support, he assumed control.

Leander's rampage undermined him and could threaten his position. He had traveled to Breyjǫr to meet the Hermit, seeking the bluntest solution.

"Jeff Ashcroft?"

The Hermit shook his head lightly. "When I retired, the top martial artists of Astria did not include him."

"Of course not," Holden said, voice low. "He only rose in the past two years."

He laid out Leander's feats over the last two years, leaving nothing out. The Hermit's gaze brightened with each account. By the end, his cloudy eyes were wide open.

"What a monster-Iron Sovereign Jeff Ashcroft. He trampled both the Arbitration Office and the Netherweb. Killing the Blood Demon shows he's almost at King Phase. Maybe he's already there."

Excitement shone in the Hermit's eyes, decades of bloodthirsty hunger returning. Holden, ecstatic, asked carefully, "Master Hermit, will you return? Hunt Jeff and restore the Netherweb's honor?"

The Hermit smiled faintly, set down the rod, and rose.

Wrinkles unfolded, white hair darkened from the roots, spreading quickly. His shrunken limbs swelled, frame lengthened, teeth regrew. Within breaths, the frail old man transformed into a handsome, muscular middle-aged warrior, life force roaring.

Holden bowed again, forehead to the ice.

"Congratulations, Master Hermit—ascending to the King Phase!"

The Hermit's expression remained

cool. "I'm only at the peak of the King's Triple Turn, not yet a full King Phase Comparable to the the Blood Demon a Half-King. However, the gap between each turn of the King Phase is a canyon. Even ten Blood Démons together? I could crush them with one hand."

He lifted his chin to the sky. The ice trembled.

"I had vowed to abandon all missions and devote myself entirely to the martial path.

But today, for the name Jeff, I will break that oath."

Holden laughed inside. The Netherweb's strongest trump card had agreed.

That night, the Global Assassin Network's homepage lit up with a name long forgotten—the Hermit. The international assassin world erupted.

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The Global Assassin Network, like the International Martial Network, operates in the shadows of the world—a gray zone, a hidden web.

Martial artists and assassins are both powerful, but fundamentally different. That's why they run separate networks.

On the International Martial Network, the International Combat Units ranks the world's top fighters. On the Global Assassin Network, the International Assassin Leaderboard honors the deadliest assassins alive.

Every assassin dreams of making that list. The top five are absolute monsters. Even elite martial artists tend to stay clear.

Take Deadshot Barrett, ranked fourth. One Barrett heavy sniper could strike fear across nations. Even Infernal Crown Transcendent-level fighters treated him with respect.

Assassins specialize in killing. Compared to martial artists, they are colder, bloodier, and far deadlier.

Fifty years ago, the top two names on the International Assassin Leaderboard never changed the Hermit and the Blood Demon.

Both were legends. The Hermit disappeared from the world, vanishing entirely. The Blood Demon moved little, but occasionally left border towns bathed in blood-a reminder he was still alive.

The Blood Demon stayed active on the rankings, while the Hermit's name faded. Ten years ago, even his number-one spot was hidden.

Ten years is long enough for people to forget. Many new assassins had no idea he existed. Even old-school assassins who once treated him as a god had blurred memories. Tonight, a long-lost name lit up the board again.

Number one on the International Assassin Leaderboard-the Hermit, Dennis Allen. The King of Assassins had returned.

That night, the assassin world erupted. Countless seasoned assassins stared at his name as if it were divine. Everyone understood why the Hermit had reappeared.

The Blood Demon had been the leader of the assassin world for decades. Then he died in Astria. Over a hundred top assassins were lost in the same incident. It was a stain on the assassin world. Redemption required the number-one legend to act. That was the only option.

While assassins cheered, the international martial world buzzed. Martial artists and assassins alike wanted to see who would prevail.

Number one on the International Combat Units. Number one on the International Assassin Leaderboard. Both represented the pinnacle of power below King Phase.

If they ever clashed, it would shake the heavens and the earth.

This would be the most anticipated battle in fifty years. No matter the outcome, history would remember.

"The Hermit?"

Leander lounged under a tree at dusk, watching the sun sink. A faint smile tugged at his lips.

Celia knelt beside him in a flowing white dress, resembling a gentle handmaiden from an old tale.

She nodded, worry in her eyes. "Master Leander, what's your plan?"

"Plan?" Leander's expression didn't change. "The Hermit stayed hidden for fifty years. The Blood Demon dies, and he appears immediately. He's coming for me. No preparation needed. He will come to me."

Celia's eyes flickered as she spoke softly. "Master Leander, the Hermit made his name a century ago. Ten years after his debut, he defeated my master and claimed the title of King of Assassins.

"My master said—about a hundred years back, five King Phase teamed up to trap the Hermit. He slipped through every net. Fifty years ago, he assassinated a famous general in Agylae, amid an army, fifteen fighter jets, and over a hundred Gatling guns and survived.

"He has been hidden for fifty years. He has only grown stronger. You really won't prepare at all?"

Even if the Hermit hasn't reached the King Phase, he's right on the edge. Celia didn't want Leander to underestimate him.

"Escaped under fighter jets and a wall of heavy machine guns?"

Leander's lips curved. "Hearing that only makes me want to meet this century-old King of Assassins even more."

Seeing him so calm, Celia sighed and dropped the argument. Thinking of the man her own master feared like a demonic god, she took a deep breath.

Who would win this battle? Who would fall?

...

Highcliffe University, the next evening. Nathan and the others finally made it back to the dorm.

They lit up seeing Leander and dragged him to a restaurant outside campus, their girlfriends in tow.

It had been over a month. Nathan and Livia were closer than ever. Raina and Yulia were glued to Luke and Evander. Surprisingly, Aurora-the campus belle-came

too.

Since the bar incident, when Daphne and Ethan stood up for him against the Wave Alliance, Livia, Raina, and Yulia had completely changed. No side-eye, no sarcasm-just smiles, careful not to upset him.

Aurora wore a boho outfit, sweet and fresh, sitting beside him and chatting quietly. Her eyes barely left him. She may have been the only one who truly understood how terrifying he was.

She saw the battle at the Southern Shore firsthand. A month ago, he trampled the Riverstone

family seven generals and threet

provincial governors combined and it rocked Highcliffe, flipping her worldview again.

Among our generation-maybe the whole world-he's the strongest, isn't he?

Her heart raced. A man like him made her want to hold him close. Even being friends would change her life.

"Leander, seriously!"

Nathan clinked a shot of whiskey with Leander, teasing.

"We're in class, and you vanish every other day. Gone for a month at a time. If you didn't show up soon, I'd have used your bed for storage."

Leander rubbed his nose, slightly guilty. His roommates always had his back while he kept disappearing for seclusion.

Finally free, he said, "Yeah, that's on me. Independence Day's coming. Let's take a trip. I'll cover everything. Deal?"

Everyone cheered. Since meeting him, he had never initiated a group activity. First time he offered, excitement ran high.

Livia whispered to Nathan. His eyes lit up. He turned to Leander. "Leander, if you're treating, we pick the spot! I vote we go to Dechor. Livia and I have always wanted to see the Dead Sea."

Everyone's eyes shone-except Leander's. His gaze paused. A spark flickered.

"Dechor? Sahar Wastes?"

He recalled Sylvia mentioning the Divine Vault in the Sahar Wastes.

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Leander fell silent, lost in thought.

The secret vault of Western deities that Celia had mentioned was located in the Sahar Wastes. He had originally planned to visit it with her some time later, just to see what secrets it held.

What he did not expect was that Nathan would suddenly propose a trip to Dechor.

He had no objection to going to Dechor, but the Sahar Wastes had always been chaotic—warfare year-round, danger everywhere. Although Dechor was relatively safer, he could not guarantee that nothing unexpected would happen during this trip.

Especially now, with the King of Assassins lurking in the dark, watching him like a predator-coupled with the unrest in the Sahar Wastes he had no idea when the Hermit would make his move. He did not want Nathan and the others to be exposed to unnecessary risks.

Seeing Leander frown deeply, Nathan's expression immediately changed. He apologized in a hurry. "Leander, sorry... I was just saying it casually. I know the Sahar Wastes can be dangerous. Let's change the destination!"

"Yeah. I mean, the sea is mysterious and all-a world wonder-but we don't have to go there. Places like Highcrest, Bladewick, or Jesund are all great. Why don't we pick one of those instead?"

The others nodded in agreement, but anyone could still see the disappointment in

their eyes.

Leander returned from his thoughts, and when he noticed their expressions, he suddenly smiled.

"No need. We'll go to Dechor."

Everyone turned around instantly, surprised and delighted. Leander continued, "That's settled. We'll depart one day before National Day. Prepare your clothes and whatever necessities you need. We're going to enjoy ourselves this time-don't try to save money for my sake."

"Haha, now that's what I like to hear!"

Nathan, Luke, and Evander laughed heartily, each with an arm around his girlfriend.

Aurora's beautiful eyes softened. She was already calculating how she could use this trip to get closer to Leander.

She had even steeled herself mentally-if it meant offering her untouched purity of twenty years, she was willing. She had to secure this man.

When he returned to the dorm that night, Leander called Daphne to ask whether she wanted to join them.

Daphne hesitated for a long time, but eventually declined reluctantly. She had just broken through to the Martial Sovereign Realm and needed time to stabilize her realm, laying the groundwork for stepping into the Transcendent Realm in the future. She could not afford distractions now.

Leander understood well. Though gentle and graceful on the surface, Daphne's competitive spirit was in no way inferior to his. She naturally refused to fall behind others in martial cultivation.

After a brief conversation, he hung up.

After sending a message to Celia, he finally lay down to rest.

The next day at 1 p.m., Leander was shaken awake by his three excited roommates.

He didn't even bring a single change of clothes before heading out with them.

Livia and the other four girls were already waiting at the airport. When the four boys arrived, the girls—each beautiful in a different way—were standing outside, craning their necks expectantly.

Among them, Aurora was the most stunning. Her long, silky hair fell over her shoulders; her sunglasses were pushed up to her forehead; her summer outfit highlighted every perfect curve of her figure.

Many men turned their heads to look. Aurora, however, remained cold and aloof.

The only one she was waiting for was Leander.

When she saw him arrive, she smiled softly. She had just opened her mouth to speak when Leander suddenly said to Luke and the others, "Hold on. Someone else is coming."

Aurora's heart jumped. Before she could react, a graceful figure approached quickly from ahead—beautiful enough to rival her, perhaps even surpassing her.

"Master Leander."

Celia, wearing an elegant long dress, bowed respectfully to Leander.

Leander nodded casually and patted Nathan's shoulder. "Everyone's here. Let's go."

The group followed him in confusion.

Aurora, however, stood frozen for a long moment, as if struck by lightning.

...

On the plane, because of the seating arrangement, Leander sat with Nathan. Nathan nudged him with his elbow, his face full of envy. "Leander, seriously?"

How do you do it? Every beautiful woman somehow ends up connected to you."

"Having the most beautiful girl on campus wasn't enough-now you bring another goddess on this trip? With that face, that figure? Even Aurora loses to her. Aren't you afraid she will find out and freak out?"

Leander smiled calmly and delivered a sentence that nearly made Nathan choke to death. "She agreed."

Nathan's eyes rolled up. Powerless, he could only raise a trembling thumbs-up at Leander.

Aurora and Cèlia happened to sit in

the same row. Several times, Aurora stole glances at Celia, only to find that the woman's aura and demeanor were in no way inferior to her own-and perhaps even colder, more noble.

After holding back for a long time, she couldn't contain her curiosity.

"Hi... may I ask, what's your relationship with Leander?"

"I'm his servant."

Celia didn't even look at her, replying coldly.

"Servant?"

Aurora frowned. Instantly, strange role-playing scenarios popped into her mind.

"Could it be that he likes... that kind of thrill?"

She began wondering if she should show up in a bunny costume or a nurse outfit to catch Leander's interest.

While she was lost in wild fantasies, the plane announced its imminent departure. Just as the flight attendant was about to close the cabin door, a figure suddenly appeared at the entrance, startling everyone.

A handsome, elegant middle-aged man.

The moment he stepped in, the women on board couldn't help glancing at him.

He looked thirty-five or thirty-six-the peak of a man's charm. Tall, well-built, refined

in a perfectly tailored suit. Even Aurora found her eyes lingering on him.

He walked leisurely to the only vacant seat on the plane. Only then did the flight attendants recover and close the door.

Twenty minutes later, the plane took off. As the altitude rose, the clouds drifted past

the windows.

Leander sat beside the aisle. Across from him sat an elegant

middle-aged woman who kept giving

him flirtatious looks, Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the

refined man who boarded last suddenly stood before her

"Madam, I got airsick. May I switch to your middle seat?"

He smiled with gentlemanly charm, and the woman seemed bewitched. Without

hesitation, she stood up and swapped seats with him.

The man adjusted his collar and sat down gracefully-now separated from Leander

only by the aisle.

At the same time, Leander lowered the magazine in his hands. Their movements were eerily synchronised.

For half an hour, neither man moved.

Only when the plane leveled out at several thousand meters did the middle-aged

man finally speak.

"Young man, it's our first meeting. How about a little game?"

Leander smiled. "Why not?"

The man nodded, a hint of admiration flickering in his eyes.

"If it's a game, then naturally-there must be stakes." His next sentence made the expressions, of all nearby passengers twist in horror. "Let's bet on the lives of the 392 passengers and eight crew members on this plane."

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"Let's bet on the lives of the 392 passengers and eight crew members on this plane."

The refined man appeared cultured and gentle, but his words sent shockwaves through the cabin.

An elderly couple behind him immediately stood up, shrinking back in terror, staring at him as if he were a terrorist.

The passengers nearby were visibly panicked. Only Celia's eyes turned sharp, glued to the man.

A burly man beside him—muscular and fierce—heard those words and roared,

"What the hell are you? Betting with our lives? Believe it or not, I'll toss you out of this d*mn plane!"

He reached out to grab the man's collar.

He was a retired soldier. Even if the man were a terrorist, he feared nothing.

But just as his hand was about to grab, his body suddenly trembled as if invisible chains seized him. He collapsed heavily into his seat, unable to move.

The middle-aged man didn't even glance at him. His smile remained as he faced Leander.

"Well?"

Nathan and the others were stunned into silence, chills running down their spines.

This man smiled faintly, but in their perception, he felt like a dormant dragon or tiger—an apex predator cloaked in elegance.

Who is he? And why seek out Leander?

"Interesting."

Leander's smile deepened, his expression finally turning serious for the first time.

In all his experiences, this was the first time he felt forced into a passive position.

The man first proposed a bet without stating the condition, making Leander accept blindly. Only then did he reveal that lives were at stake.

Leander was forced into a dilemma-refusing would brand him a coward, but agreeing would mean gambling with innocent lives.

Leander had no choice but to accept the bet. But if he lost, every life on this plane would be lost because of him.

With just a few sentences, the man seized every advantage, boxing Leander in completely.

Among all opponents Leander had faced, this man's mental prowess and cultivation were unquestionably among the highest.

Leander did not answer immediately.

The man was in no hurry either. He simply sat there calmly, waiting.

The plane was silent. The flight attendants, who should have intervened, sat motionless as if asleep. No one moved. Every passenger stared at Leander and the

man.

After a dozen breaths, Leander finally spoke.

"You want to bet? Then these four hundred lives aren't enough. Let's add another stake."

He lifted a finger and pointed at the middle-aged man, smiling mockingly.

"Add your life. How about it?"

The passengers nearby were completely bewildered. It felt as if they had been plunged into a surreal martial-arts world.

The middle-aged man suddenly burst out laughing.

"Haha! Good. Very good!"

He looked at Leander with clear admiration.

"No wonder Blood Demon tasted his first defeat at your hands. The world's top-

ranked fighter in history-you truly live up to the title."

Unfastening his seatbelt, he slowly stood up.

"The bet is void. From this moment, our game begins."

The man's voice grew cold.

"The wager-your life and mine. And the game-whether I can successfully hunt you."

Confidence radiated from him, his smile unnervingly calm.

As he spoke, a ripple of energy shimmered around him. His entire body began turning transparent.

At that moment, everyone on the plane-except Leander and Celia—suddenly slumped over, consciousness extinguished by an unseen force.

Within seconds, the man vanished completely-fully transparent, disappearing from sight. Only his voice echoed through the cabin.

"Jeff, the assassin world and the martial world must one day decide who stands above whom. Don't disappoint me."

With that, the man known as the Hermit faded into nothingness.

Celia finally cried out, "Master Leander, was that-?!"

Leander nodded lightly. "The Hermit. Benjamin Allen."

I thought our encounter would come much later. Who would have expected the King

of Assassins to appear on this flight to Dechor?

"A hunting game, huh?"

He tapped his chin, almost amused.

...

The plane continued toward Dechor. Half an hour later, the passengers and crew slowly woke up.

They blinked in confusion, having lost all memory of what had happened. Even the middle-aged man's presence had vanished from their minds.

"Leander..... did I fall asleep?" Nathan rubbed his temples, dizzy, remembering nothing.

"What an impressive Hermit."

Leander smiled faintly. In that brief moment, the Hermit had released his spiritual power, manipulating everyone's minds erasing their memories, and even rewriting the cabin's surveillance footage as if he had never existed.

His spiritual cultivation was formidable. His transparency technique had been so

refined that even Leander had not fully sensed his departure.

All of this only made Leander more eager for their next encounter. This opponent was worth taking seriously.

...

At the Shadow Division Base, Jimmy, Christopher, and several senior leaders gathered around newly arrived intel and engaged in intense discussion.

"Everyone... what do you think?"

Jimmy sat with fingers interlocked, his expression grave.

Leander was now officially classified as a world-level heinous criminal by Agylae's core intelligence agency, placing him among the most dangerous individuals alive.

In the agency's report, Leander was described as someone possessing a threat level equal to that of Blood Demon and the Hermit-monsters capable of mass destruction.

Others might not understand the implication, but these veteran Shadow Division commanders certainly did.

It meant Leander had been placed on the Agylae's list of top-priority threats. If the Agylae ever found an opportunity, they would strike him with the most ruthless force imaginable.

"It's too late for us to worry. We can only wait for negotiations between our higher-ups and theirs. As for Jeff, we'll warn him. Beyond that...

there's nothing we can do.

An older officer spoke first, and the others nodded.

Christopher was about to speak when a new message popped up on his phone-his

expression changed instantly.

"Jimmy!" He shot to his feet. "Forty minutes ago, Ye Jiang boarded a flight to Dechor!"

"Dechor?" Jimmy frowned for a moment-then his face drained of color.

"That's in the Sahar Wastes!"

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The Sahar Wastes were, without question, the most chaotic region in the world.

Wars raged year-round, and aside from the major powers carving up their spheres of influence, countless mercenaries and armed factions were entrenched throughout the land.

What worried Jimmy the most was the involvement of the Agylae, whose influence was pulling the strings behind the scenes. If Leander's presence in the Sahar Wastes were to be exposed, wouldn't that give them a perfectly legitimate reason to take action?

In that region, even Astria would find itself powerless to intervene. And if the Agylae learned that Leander had appeared in the Sahar Wastes, they could easily find a pretext to launch an indiscriminate strike on a particular area and eliminate Leander in the process.

After all, in the turmoil of the Sahar Wastes, such things were commonplace. If Leander was killed, even if Astria pursued accountability, the Agylae could simply claim it had been collateral damage amid active conflict—thus instantly dissolving any international pressure.

Hearing this, the rest of the Shadow Division members' expressions changed drastically.

"Jeff is out of his mind!"

"He knows perfectly well how sensitive this period is, yet he still dares to go to such

a chaotic region like the Sahar Wastes? Does he really think the major powers can't touch him?"

"Exactly! Does he really think that just because he climbed to the top of the

International Combat Units and killed the Blood Demon and others, he's invincible now? With his level of cultivation, facing modern weapons is nothing but suicide. He has no idea how insignificant he is!"

Listening to the criticism directed at Leander, neither Jimmy nor Christopher spoke in his defense. This time, even they felt that Leander was being far too reckless.

Charging into the Sahar Wastes—if the Agylae made a covert move, it would be impossible to guard against. A single misstep could spark a small-scale war.

But Leander was likely already in Dechor, enjoying foreign scenery. It seemed too late for anything now.

At this moment, all they could do was pray that Leander wouldn't cause too large a commotion over there, lest he attract the attention of the Agylae or other nations.

At the international airport of Dechor, Leander stepped off the plane in a simple shirt and sweatpants. Celia followed obediently behind him, attentive at every step.

Behind them, Nathan and the others walked in pairs, while Aurora—despite being a stunning beauty—was left trailing alone like an abandoned singleton.

Leander walked ahead, glancing at the Dechorians in their varied clothing styles with mild amusement. It was his first time visiting this Sahar Wastes country.

"Just like the travel guides said-Dechorians really are incredibly hospitable!" Nathan spoke with excitement.

A moment ago, he had used broken translation software to communicate with an airport worker. The staff member was very professional, patiently introducing famous Dechor attractions and important notes, and warmly welcoming them.

"Yeah, looks like coming here was the right choice!"

Luke and Evander exchanged looks and nodded in agreement.

Just then, Livia and her two friends suddenly gasped.

"Isn't that Maeve over there?"

Everyone followed their gaze. At one of the exits, a group of people held up signs

and cheered excitedly as if they were welcoming a major celebrity.

On their signs, the name "Maeve" was written in awkward-looking Chinese characters.

At the front of the crowd, surrounded by admirers, a girl in cool summer attire and sunglasses strode forward with elegance and grace.

She gently waved and smiled, prompting the welcoming crowd to erupt in even greater excitement as they called her name.

Leander turned slightly. Even from a few hundred meters away, he recognized Maeve instantly.

After several months apart, the desolation and sorrow she once carried had completely vanished. Instead, she now looked vibrant and youthful glowing with the radiance of someone truly enjoying life.

"It really is Maeve! Wow—she just attended the Cannes Film Festival, right? She won the Best Song Award with Aqua Waltz,' the theme song of My Empress! She's now officially an international A-list diva!"

"What is she doing here?"

Livia and her two friends were huge fans of Maeve. Seeing their idol just a few hundred meters away, they didn't care about anything else—they took off running toward her.

Luke and Evander also enjoyed celebrity-chasing and eagerly followed. Only Leander, Nathan, and the others remained where they were.

Nathan looked at Leander. "Leander, I've downloaded almost all of Maeve's songs. Since we've run into her in Dechor, shouldn't we go check things out?"

Leander smiled and waved. "You guys go. I'll wait for you at the airport entrance."

He had no intention of going. To him, Maeve was merely a passerby in his life—they weren't even truly friends.

Back in Ravenridge, the two had agreed on a three-year pact, neither would seek out the other, and everything would be left to fate.

Barely a few months had passed—he didn't want his appearance to stir up her emotions.

However, he did spare a second

glance at the two female

bodyguards beside her. Their cultivation wasn't high—around the

Martian Master level but their method of training surprised Leander.

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They were practicing none other than the Devourer's Flow—the technique Leander

had passed down to the Southern Wyvern Blade.

Leander didn't look for long. After a brief glance, he continued walking toward the terminal hall with Celia.

Maeve responded warmly to her fans, even signing autographs for a few lucky ones, prompting the crowd to erupt again.

By chance, she turned her head—and caught sight of a familiar back, the silhouette

of a man walking away with a girl beside him.

Her expression froze. "That back... why does it look so much like him?"

Her heart trembled, but before she could confirm, Leander and Celia had

disappeared beyond the exit.

A moment later, Maeve smiled faintly as she turned back.

"I must be missing him too much..."

They had only been apart for a few months, yet it felt like years to her.

Ever since she learned that he was still alive, all her sorrow and grief had melted away, replaced only by her longing for their reunion.

Despite missing him intensely, she never once tried to contact him. She knew that after three years had passed, he would be forced to keep their promise.

"Hmph! Trying to use three years to make my feelings fade? You seriously underestimate me, you big dummy!"

Seeing a back that looked like Leander's made her think of his cool, aloof demeanor

again, and she couldn't help but smile.

She knew why he had proposed the three-year pact.

After bidding farewell to her fans, she clenched her fist lightly.

"Dummy... just wait. When I stand before you again after three years, you'll never

be able to leave me behind!"

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Outside the airport hall, Leander stood tall, a plain baseball cap pulled low over his head. Dressed in casual sportswear, he looked like a laid-back hip-hop boy.

Celia, in a cool summer outfit, stood gracefully beside him. While everyone else ran off to chase Maeve, only the two of them walked out first.

"Master Leander, the Hermit could be waiting anywhere to assassinate you. Shouldn't you keep some distance from your friends?"

Remembering the Hermit's sudden appearance on the plane today, Celia asked.

"No need."

Leander smiled and shook his head. "Meeting the Hermit once was enough to understand him. His cultivation is stronger than the Blood Demon's. At his level, he is not interested in killing; he wants a worthy opponent.

"He wants to prove himself against an equal. And I'm the opponent he's chosen."

Leander lifted his gaze toward the blazing sun.

"He's on the verge of the King Phase and needs me for that breakthrough. Only I am his target—no one else is in danger."

Celia looked at Leander, stunned by the overwhelming confidence on his face.

This man truly was the strongest she had ever seen. In talent, intelligence, and willpower, everything about him far surpassed ordinary men.

Again, she felt grateful for choosing to follow him. Only by staying close could she witness every step he took on his path.

After a moment, she spoke again.

"So, Master Leander, you mean the Hermit isn't hunting you for revenge, but trying to use you to reach the King Phase?"

Leander nodded slightly, hands in his pockets.

"Not entirely. He wants to use me to ascend and make Netherweb famous. He is their top assassin, a Heaven-Rank operative. If he kills me, there is no better way for Netherweb to make the world tremble.

"And since I'm ranked first on the International Combat Units, if the Hermit kills me, it would mean that for the next twenty years, the assassin world would overshadow the martial world."

Once again, Celia was shaken. She had thought about the meaning behind Leander and the Hermit's battle, but never this far-reaching.

Just as she was about to ask further, Aurora walked out.

"Leander, do you know Maeve?"

Wearing denim shorts that showed off her fair legs, she deliberately stood closer to him as she asked casually.

"Sort of."

Leander replied lightly, nothing more. The distance in his attitude made Aurora's chest tighten with frustration.

Throughout the trip, she had tried countless topics to chat with him, but his responses remained calm and detached—always keeping a polite distance.

She gritted her teeth silently.

After waiting at the entrance for ten minutes, Nathan and the others finally returned. Livia, Yulia, and the other two women each held a CD like a precious treasure.

"Leander, this trip was totally worth it!"

Nathan was thrilled.

"We only wanted to see Maeve up close, but she was giving out free copies of her new CD! We each got one, and she even signed them!"

Livia nodded excitedly. "Yeah! She's an international superstar now, but still so

humble and friendly. She even smiled at me!"

Seeing how happy they were, Leander smiled.

"Since you've got your autographs, let me take you to the hotel. I've already booked the rooms. The cars over there should be for us."

"Let's go."

Everyone turned to see three luxury vans parked across the street, the hotel's shuttle.

"That's Yelem Hotel's car! I've always wanted to stay there. Leander, you really know how to plan!"

Luke's eyes lit up and he rushed over with his girlfriend.

Leander spoke briefly with the driver in the local language, and the driver immediately opened the doors respectfully.

On the ride, Nathan asked curiously, "Leander, you speak the language here?"

"Just picked it up recently," Leander

said with a smile. At his level, he only

needed to hear a language a few

times. His brain would automatically

analyze and internalize it. Withi

minutes, he could master even

highly irregular languages

At Yelem Hotel, everyone was placed in luxurious suites, on par with presidential suites. Aside from Aurora and Celia, who knew. Leander's true background, Nathan and the others thought he had spent a ridiculous amount and felt somewhat guilty.

After a large meal in the hotel restaurant, they planned their evening activities and

headed out, only to find the entrance completely blocked.

Once again, Maeve appeared before them, surrounded by her two female bodyguards, giving interviews to reporters.

Traffic was jammed outside the entrance, camera shutters clicking everywhere.

"No way... Maeve is staying at the Yelem Hotel, too?"

Livia trembled with excitement.

Getting Maeve's autograph earlier already felt like unbelievable luck, but now, staying at the same hotel meant countless more chances to see her.

Celia, who initially had little interest in Maeve, now looked on with curiosity.

Rumor had it that at many public events, wealthy young heirs openly confessed to Maeve but she always remained distant, untouched by the

decadence of the entertainment

world. That purity was rare.

Recently, Maeve had released a new album titled 'Return to You', a piece Celia had looped many times. Its poetic imagery drew her in and stirred curiosity about the

star.

As everyone focused on Maeve, Leander looked elsewhere-toward a young man

in a suit standing beside a Bentley at the far edge of the crowd.

The young man was handsome, clearly a local of Yelem, with an exotic charm. He

was dressed head-to-toe in Enatria handmade attire his entire outfit worth nearly a million.

But that wasn't what drew Leander's attention.

What mattered was the faint energy emanating from him.

It was an aura Leander knew very well-one identical to the Hermit he had met on

the plane.

"Is it him?"

Leander's eyes sharpened instantly.

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Leander stared at the young man for a long moment. The young man's gaze never

left Maeve—he stood holding a bouquet of bright red roses, looking at her with deep affection, and hardly reacted to Leander at all.

"Hm? It's not him?"

When Leander noticed the young man's aura, he thought it might be the Hermit in disguise. The next moment, he realized it was not.

While the two auras were somewhat similar, the Hermit's was much more restrained and powerful. By contrast, the young man's aura felt immature—there was no comparison.

Leander withdrew his gaze, but a stronger doubt emerged in his mind.

This young man isn't the Hermit, so why does he have an aura so similar to his?

Thinking of this, Leander silently released his spiritual sense. It spread outward like an invisible net, enveloping the young man without him noticing a thing.

Leander probed every inch of the youth's body from head to toe, and the young man remained completely unaware. When the scan was finished, and Leander recalled his spiritual sense, the answer was clear.

The young man's bloodline carries traces remarkably similar to the Hermit's, which means he is very likely a descendant of the Hermit.

"To think that even in a Sahar Wastes city like Yelem, there are descendants of the Hermit. Looks like this trip to the Sahar Wastes won't be boring after all."

He let out a faint laugh and casually found a seat. Everyone else's attention had already been drawn back to Maeve's interview.

Maeve's appearance had caused a huge sensation in Yelem. She was not only famous in Astria-she had recently starred in several major Dollywood films and even performed their theme songs. Her international influence had already placed her among top-tier celebrities.

Maeve looked like a goddess of light. Under the sun, she appeared even more dazzling and ethereal.

At some point, she had changed clothes-she now wore a simple long dress that nearly reached the ground, paired with crystal heels. Standing at 175 centimeters, she radiated a noble elegance that made people afraid to stare for too long.

In terms of beauty and presence alone, she was unquestionably flawless.

She stood on the steps of the Yelem Hotel, continuously waving to the crowd with a warm smile that never faded.

Both Astrians and the locals alike waved their arms wildly, chanting her name over and over.

The entire city of Yelem was in an uproar because of Maeve's arrival.

"Ms. Maeve, in your newly released album *Return to You*, there's a lyric that goes 'To meet you at the most beautiful age—you brought me into a whole new world.' Does that line carry any special meaning?"

A reporter from a well-known TV station squeezed forward and raised his microphone.

"Special meaning?" Maeve smiled gently. "Nothing special. I simply wrote down my own experiences and emotions."

The reporters continued with a few harmless questions. Then, finally, one of them abruptly asked, "Ms. Maeve, this world tour is already at its seventh stop. For the next stop, where would you most like it to be?"

Maeve paused for a moment, then smiled sweetly and answered without hesitation.

"I hope my next stop will be Ravenridge in Umbral Court, Astria—because that place holds a special meaning for me."

But no matter how the reporters pressed her for details, she refused to elaborate. She only hinted at it and moved on.

While answering questions, her thoughts drifted back to that night—the night when Leander appeared like a god descending from the heavens, dominating everything in his path.

Even now, though thousands of miles apart, his face appeared vividly in her mind. That night, when the Umbral Court descended upon her, she had thought she was doomed. But Leander had suddenly appeared, shattering every lethal strike aimed at her. It became the most unforgettable night of her recent years.

Months had passed since that night in Ravenridge, yet every moment of it remained vivid. She remembered every detail of their reunion with perfect clarity.

That experience had sparked a burst of inspiration—upon returning home, she immediately created a new album and named it 'Return to You'.

The reporters clearly had no intention of letting her go so easily and continued throwing tricky

questions. At first, Maeve set

and handled them gracefully eventually the questions crossed into her personal life, and displeasure flickered across her

face. Still, she had no way to escape.

Just then, a voice came from the back of the crowd.

"Excuse me, everyone—Ms. Maeve just got off the plane and is exhausted from travel. Today's interview ends here."

The voice wasn't loud, but it carried a commanding authority that left no room for refusal. Everyone turned to look.

A young man in a tailored suit walked over with a bouquet. Wherever he passed, the crowd automatically stepped aside.

These reporters, who were usually hard to handle, were about to protest-until they saw who it was. Their expressions changed instantly.

"Mr. Benjamin!"

Several reporters in the front row bowed deeply to him.

Denzel ignored everyone else. His eyes contained only Maeve. He walked up to her

and bowed like a gentleman.

"Ms. Maeve, a pleasure to meet you."

He spoke fluent, crisp Chinese.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am

Denzel Benjamin, heir to the

Benjamin family of Yelem. I've

always been a devoted admirer

gaet

Ms. Maeve's work. When I heard you

were arriving today, I came specially

to greet you. I hope my presence

isn't too presumptuous."

"Denzel Benjamin?" Maeve's expression shifted slightly, and she gave him a polite smile.

"Mr. Benjamin, your reputation precedes you. Thank you for your kindness." Maeve didn't care much for Denzel personally, but she knew the Benjamin family's influence couldn't be ignored.

The Benjamin family had ruled Yelem for over two centuries. They were known as the city's most powerful clan. Even across Dechor, their status matched royal families in places like the Umbrya.

Arriving in Yelem meant entering the Benjamin family's territory. As heir, Denzel was like a crown prince here.

Denzel's eyes lit up with joy at her response.

"I didn't expect Ms. Maeve to even know who I am. I'm truly honored. This Yelem Hotel belongs to my family. I have already prepared the presidential suite for Ms. Maeve. Please—this way. It is my greatest honor to host you."

Although Maeve felt little interest in him, she noticed the reporters still crowding the entrance. With no better option, she nodded and followed Denzel into the hotel.

The two walked side by side, with Maeve's two female security guards behind them. In an instant, the hotel lobby's attention centered on only the two of them.

Leander was seated on a couch at the side of the lobby with Celia. He lowered his head slightly, not wanting Maeve to spot him. But at that moment, Nathan—who was at the front desk asking about sightseeing routes suddenly shouted:

"Leander! They said there's a bonfire party out in the desert tonight! Should we go?"

His loud voice made several people turn toward Leander and Maeve was among them.

The moment her gaze swept over and met his, Leander's heart instantly tightened.

"Crap."