

From Outcast to Overlord The Unyielding Heir (Leander Ashcroft)

Chapter 501

"Crap!" Leander had been keeping his head down in the back, pretty much invisible from where Maeve stood. She shouldn't have noticed him at all-until Nathan blurted that word out loud enough to turn every head, including hers.

"Ms. Maeve? You okay?" Denzel walked alongside her, only to see her come to a sudden halt. He shot her a puzzled look, wondering what made her freeze like that.

When he followed her eyes, he realized she wasn't reacting to him at all. She was locked onto something across the room, standing stiff like someone had hit the pause button.

"Ms. Maeve?" He called her again, but she didn't budge. She stood there like she'd turned to stone.

"What the..." He finally tracked her line of sight and spotted a young guy dressed so plainly he practically blended into the furniture. The guy was slouched on a couch with one leg thrown over the other.

Nothing about him screamed for attention-ordinary clothes, relaxed posture, nothing flashy. Yet for some reason, he had completely captured Maeve's focus, as if the rest of the room didn't exist.

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"Leander, are we actually going or what?" Nathan was completely oblivious to the weird mood settling over the place. He wandered toward Leander, rambling about the bonfire party, while only Celia and Aurora seemed to pick up that the air had suddenly turned strange.

Leander let out a silent sigh and shot him a look that basically said, "not now."

Nathan froze, totally lost on why he was getting glared at.

Before he could ask anything else, Maeve suddenly broke her stillness. She didn't spare Denzel-standing right beside her-so much as a glance. She simply stepped out and headed straight toward Leander like she'd made up her mind in an instant.

The moment she started walking, the entire hall seemed to shift. She wasn't just a celebrity-she was the kind of global star who could flip a room's energy just by breathing—and her presence alone pulled every pair of eyes in the room toward her.

By then, every tiny move she made had the whole crowd glued to her. She drifted forward with that effortless, floating kind of walk, heading in Leander's direction.

Livia and the other girls—who had only just squealed their way through getting her autograph—looked like they were about to explode from excitement when they realized she was actually walking their way. "No way... She's actually heading this direction. Are we hallucinating? Does she... know who we are?"

Before they could finish whispering theories, Maeve was already right in front of them. Her long gown swept across the floor as she stopped beside the window shutters, close enough to Leander that he only needed to lean forward a bit to touch her.

"Funny how life works, huh? Guess we were meant to run into each other." She flashed a soft smile-bright enough to light up a garden and her eyes were fixed solely on him.

When she spoke up, the girls around her finally snapped out of their excitement. Only then did they realize she hadn't approached because they'd gotten her attention—she had walked straight past them for Leander.

But that made zero sense.

Earlier, when they'd gone up to ask for her autograph, Leander hadn't even moved from his seat. He didn't say a word, nor show the slightest sign he knew her. So, why is an international superstar now acting like she knows me?

"If that idiot hadn't yelled, you wouldn't have even spotted me, right?" He didn't bother straightening up. Still sunk into the couch, he jerked his chin toward Nathan, his tone dry and uninterested.

Running into Maeve had been the last thing on his mind.

Nathan's perfectly timed shout just dragged him straight into it.

Her smile didn't carry even a trace of superstar distance. If anything, she looked disarmingly down-to-earth as she settled right beside him—close enough that their sleeves could've brushed. The whole move felt casual, almost playful.

"Well," she said with a light laugh, "sounds like the universe is throwing me a favor today." She inched even nearer, just enough to make the intention obvious.

People around them practically forgot how to breathe. This was the woman who built her entire public image on staying spotless—no gossip, no rumors, no intimate scenes, and she always kept a respectful buffer between herself and any male celebrity she worked with.

Yet here she was, practically nestled against some guy and he looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. The crowd couldn't have been more stunned if the ceiling had fallen in.

"Who even is this guy? A billionaire's kid? A prince or something? Why's Maeve acting like this around him?" People around them couldn't stop murmuring, trying to figure out what was going on. Leander's presence alone had thrown everyone's assumptions out the window.

Meanwhile, Nathan and the others who actually knew him were frozen in disbelief. It took them a good moment to process what they were seeing they never expected him to have this kind of connection with Maeve.

They glanced at one another, shock written all over their faces, and quietly gave him a nod of respect. If someone on Maeve's level—the kind of superstar everyone idolized—treated him with that kind of attention, then really... who wasn't somehow under his orbit?

While everyone else gawked in awe, Denzel's expression stayed completely neutral, though a subtle darkness crept into his gaze. His eyes locked onto Leander, and something sharp, almost lethal, simmered in his eyes.

Denzel wasn't some ordinary guy. He was the firstborn of Dechor's most influential family, the heir set to take control of the entire Benjamin family. His position was unmatched, comparable to the royal prince in Angeland, the heir of

Umbrya's shel

or even a top

Contender for Agytae's presidency. In short, he carried more prestige and authority than most could

imagine.

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In Dechor, he was effectively untouchable. No one could oppose him, no one could even think about standing in his way. Maeve had been the one he'd admired from afar for years. He owned every album, every movie she'd starred in, and he watched them almost nightly,

treating them like sacred treasures.

If it weren't for the recent unrest in Sahar Wastes keeping him grounded in Dechor,

plus his grandfather's unexpected return, he would have already flown out to whichever city she'd been in just to see her up close.

To him, she was untouchable-pure, regal, flawless-and only someone like him, the crown prince of Dechor, could even hope to be worthy of her. And yet here she was, laughing and leaning against a complete stranger, so close it made her seem almost intimate. Heat of envy surged through him, hot and undeniable.

He hung back for a few minutes, but Maeve didn't even hint at leaving Leander's side. If anything, she seemed more animated, her laughter and

chatter growing livelier by the second. Impatience gnawed at him until he finally decided to cut across the room.

"I'm visiting Yelem for a little downtime," she explained warmly, eager to share every recent milestone with Leander. "The company also had me film some outdoor scenes for the next music video!"

Before he could respond, a large hand shot out, stopping just short of his face. "Anyone who's a friend of Ms. Maeve is automatically a friend of mine. Pleasure to meet you—I'm Denzel Benjamin."

Denzel stood tall, over six feet, looking down like the world itself tilted in his favor. Every movement, every glance radiated the weight of someone born to command. "Denzel Benjamin?" Leander stayed silent, but Nathan and the others visibly stiffened. Their expressions shifted instantly.

Their trip to Dechor wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision—it had been meticulously planned. They'd researched the country inside and out, learning what was safe to approach and what could get them in serious trouble.

And the Churchill family? That was a name that carried weight—and fear. The kind

of force in Dechor comparable to Jesund's clans or the overseas societies: untouchable, untamed, and completely off-limits.

Even without Denzel bragging about his status, simply introducing himself was enough. In Dechor, anyone who dared carry that name demanded instant respect... and caution.

The atmosphere shifted instantly. Everyone could sense it—Denzel's intentions toward Maeve weren't innocent, and her easy closeness with Leander made it clear he hadn't come just to make small talk.

They knew Leander had strong connections back home with the Ashcroft family of Highcliffe, and people like Ethan and Daphne. But here in Yelem? That influence counted for nothing. Even the four major elite families of Highcliffe couldn't exert the same reach here.

While unease spread through the group, Leander remained unbothered. Still lounging with one leg crossed, he casually reached for an apple on the table. "I don't know you," he said coolly. "And I don't shake hands with strangers."

Leander's response hit like a cold splash of water, leaving Denzel momentarily frozen. Most people, when offered a handshake, at least give a polite nod-or fake it if necessary. Some kind of acknowledgment is expected.

Not Leander. He didn't follow the usual script—he made it clear he had zero interest in shaking hands. Denzel's hand hovered awkwardly in the air, caught mid-motion,

as he tried to process the outright rejection.

He didn't realize that this was just how Leander operated. Only when friends or trusted allies made introductions did Leander even bother with the tiniest gesture of courtesy. Everyone else? Considered invisible.

The first time he'd met Colin at Yvette's house, he'd given the exact same treatment —no smiles, no pleasantries, nothing. Total disregard for formalities.

At his level, only the top military commander of a nation—or the leader of a country —might earn a handshake. That was the kind of confidence and authority only a true top-tier figure carried.

The Benjamin family might dominate Dechor, commanding respect and fear, yet to him, their influence barely registered. Sure, if the family patriarch appeared in person, Leander might offer a token gesture. But a mere heir? Not worth so much as a glance.

Nathan and the others exchanged grim looks. Things had just gotten serious.

Dechor was the Benjamin family's playground—their influence stretched to every corner of power, and even government offices often bent to their will. Their presence was inescapable.

And yet, Leander just snubbed the heir's outstretched hand in front of everyone. That was practically a declaration of defiance against the entire family. Those who knew the Benjamins—locals or outsiders—couldn't help but inhale sharply, exchanging glances that practically screamed, "This kid's asking for trouble."

"Doesn't he realize who he's dealing with? Ignoring Denzel's handshake like that!" someone murmured.

Another voice chimed in, "Wow... some people really have no sense. Denzel extends his hand, and he just flat-out refuses? Is he trying to pick a fight with the most powerful family in Dechor?"

"Completely brazen... utterly reckless." Whispers and headshakes rippled through the crowd. Nobody could believe the audacity they were witnessing.

Even if Leander were the scion of a royal dynasty or the son of the wealthiest man on Earth, in Dechor he'd still have to watch his step under the Benjamins' shadow. Even a dragon bows to the master of the territory.

And the Benjamins weren't just any local power-they were the true power entrenched in Dechor. Should they choose to retaliate, all the money and connections in the world wouldn't do a thing. Every step forward would feel like wading through quicksand.

Most people watching thought Leander was acting recklessly, almost absurdly. Even Nathan and the others shook their heads, thinking he'd let impulse get the better of him.

Only Celia, Maeve, and Aurora remained unmoved. With Leander's skill and influence, the Benjamins' reputation meant little. Strength was his currency-and with it, he could bulldoze anything, anywhere.

It took Denzel a moment to shake off the surprise. He slowly withdrew his hand, a glint of ice creeping into his eyes. "So... you're saying I'm not even on your level for a handshake?"

Leander took a casual bite of his apple, shrugging as if it were no big deal. "I don't really do handshakes with strangers. If you want to twist it that way, go ahead." He added lazily, "Maybe if your family's head were here, I'd toss a bit of respect his way. You? Not even close."

The remark hit like lightning, silencing the room. All eyes snapped toward him, disbelief written in every stare. They couldn't believe what they were hearing-he had to be out of his mind.

The patriarch of the Benjamin family was no ordinary figure he was a titan in Dechor, a man whose word could sway the lives of tens of thousands. He rubbed elbows with the city's elite, controlled the levers of power, and commanded respect wherever he went.

And yet Leander had the audacity to say that only the patriarch might earn a scrap of courtesy, while Denzel himself didn't even register? The sheer arrogance was off the charts.

No one believed a word he said. To the crowd, he was nothing more than a clueless Astrian putting on a show, clueless about the forces around him. Denzel's anger flipped into a bitter laugh. "I've met a lot of Astrians, but you by far the most reckless and foolish."

"You seriously think my father's the only one worthy of a handshake, and that I'm beneath you? Even the heads of Highcliffe's Four Major Families would give him respect. Where on earth do you get off speaking like this?"

His gaze drilled into Leander. "I want to know—just who the hell are you?" A mocking grin spread across his face he saw nothing in Leander that deserved even a second thought.

Even if Leander hailed from one of the four major families or was a prodigy on par with Ethan or Daphne, he had no right to act so boldly here.

"I'm just a student at Highcliffe University. Came to Yelem to see the sights. That's it. Got a problem with that?" Leander didn't even glance up, his voice calm, almost dismissive.

The reaction was instantaneous. The crowd erupted in snickers, disbelief written all over their faces. A mere college student standing up to the Benjamin heir in Dechor? To them, it was laughable—a spectacle of sheer audacity that left everyone shaking their heads.

"Ha!" Denzel burst into wild laughter, the kind that reeked of disdain.

When the sound finally died, he dipped his head, and his eyes sharpened into icy blades. "So, a college kid dares to mouth off to me here in Yelem? I have to hand it to you—bold doesn't even cover it.

"One word from me, and you and your friends could end up stranded in the desert, left for the vultures. One command, and every last one of you will be trapped in this

country with no exit, no excuses, no hope. Do you think I'm joking?"

At that moment, he couldn't care

less that Maeve was present. Leander's defiance was a direct insult equivalent to trampling on the Benjamin family's dominance and

as the heir, Denzel no longer held back. His polite mask vanished, revealing the ruthless predator beneath.

Nathan and the others went pale, faces drained of color, panic creeping in. Sahar Wastes was already treacherous. Dechor was one of the safer pockets—and that had been the only reason they dared to set foot here.

However, it was still foreign territory. The reality hit them hard—one word from Denzel, and they could be left to wander the desert, at the mercy of sun, sand, and vultures. Life or death would be entirely out of their hands. No one would come looking for them.

Even if Astria tried to demand

justice, it would amount to nothing. Denzel would remain

untouchable—and who could even prove he was behind it? In this strange, uncharted land, Nathan and his friends felt all confidence drain away. Every ounce of courage they'd carried evaporated into pure dread.

The onlookers leaned back, half-amused, half-expecting disaster. In Yelem, Denzel's word carried weight—no tourist from Astria could hope to challenge the Benjamin family. Everyone braced, expecting Leander to back down. But instead, he pushed off from his seat.

With a casual flick of his hand, the world seemed to blur for a heartbeat. Then a sharp crack split the hall. Before anyone could react, Denzel's body was sent flying like a missile, slamming into the flowerbed at the side with a thunderous crash.

Leander remained alone in the center, lowering his hand with deliberate calm. In an instant, the buzzing lobby of the Yelem Hotel went utterly silent. Nobody had seen it coming—he had acted first, swift and unhesitant, sending Denzel hurtling across the floor with one strike.

And this wasn't just some random guy—Denzel was the first in line to lead the most powerful family in Dechor. That single slap didn't merely land on him; it was a bold strike against the Benjamin family's prestige, a brazen challenge to their authority.

Even the richest tycoon or a powerful head of state might hesitate to do something this audacious. Yet here was Leander, a regular college student, daring the impossible. Maeve's two bodyguards caught the move for a heartbeat, eyes widening in surprise, but the moment passed almost immediately.

Amid the wreckage of the flowerbed, Denzel stumbled to his feet, blood dripping down his face. He couldn't wrap his head around it—Leander had actually hit him. In Dechor, no one ever dared touch him.

"You... you actually hit me?" His voice trembled with fury, eyes blazing with lethal intent.

"That's for threatening my friends and me." Leander's voice was icy, detached. "I'm not stopping at a hit. I could kill you. Believe it or not."

"Ha! Fine!" Denzel snarled, a wild, blood-soaked grin spreading across his face. His hand shot forward, inner vitality surging, ready to strike—but his movement froze the instant his phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled it out and scanned the message; his pupils constricted, surprise flashing across his face. Moments later, he forcibly suppressed the power coiling inside him and let his hand drop. He gave Leander a hard, icy stare. "Lucky for you today, Astrian—but don't think you've seen the last of me."

Wiping blood from his face, he spat the warning and stormed out the doors, leaving the entire lobby in stunned silence. Since when did the Benjamin heir ever show restraint like that?

Ordinarily, Denzel would have erupted in fury or summoned his family's influence to crush Leander on the spot. Yet, contrary to expectations, he only left behind a single ominous warning before striding out-utterly defying the Benjamin family's typical pattern of retaliation.

Once he vanished through the doors, Leander dropped back onto the couch as though the whole scene were nothing more than a passing breeze. Nathan and the others finally regained their senses and rushed over.

"Leander, did you actually just hit him?" Nathan's face was pale, disbelief lacing his voice. "That man is almost certainly tied to the Benjamin family, no doubt about it," he muttered, dread creeping into his tone. "If we've crossed someone like that, we won't survive a day in Dechor."

"We need to grab the next flight out-immediately," he urged. At the moment, it was the only strategy he could come up with. The Benjamin family's power was immense, but a rapid exit from Dechor would place them beyond reach.

Delay for even a moment, and revenge could strike. Four men, five women-how could we possibly hope to fend off the wrath of a family that ruled the city like a shadow over the sun?

"Don't sweat it," Leander said with a casual flick of his hand, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "A mere family like the Benjamins? Hardly worth giving a second thought. Just enjoy yourselves. Leave all the heavy stuff to me."

Rather than reassuring them, his calm nonchalance only made the group more on edge. Livia spoke up, her tone urgent. "Leander, you clearly don't realize the scope here. The Benjamins are legendary in Dechor-basically royalty in human form. They control everything. With a snap of their fingers, they could lock us up or abandon us in the desert without a second thought."

Though the others remained silent, tension marked every line of their faces. Even if Leander didn't care, they all knew the weight of the Benjamin name.

Leander let their anxious warnings wash over him, and not a flicker of worry crossed his face. When they finally fell quiet, he simply said, in that unshakably steady tone of his, "Relax. They won't lay a finger on us. And if they're foolish enough to try, I'll deal with every last one of them myself."

A simple conclusion followed, almost spoken as a promise: "You're safe as long as I'm here."

His serenity didn't soothe anyone—if anything, it left the group even more deflated. But since this whole trip to Dechor had been his treat, abandoning him now felt ungrateful and cowardly. So they stayed, reluctantly anchoring themselves to the couches and hoping for the best.

Quiet prayers bloomed in their hearts: that Leander's connections, his rumored ties to the four great families, would actually hold weight in this foreign land. It was the only reassurance they had left.

With an easy stretch, Leander rose as if nothing in the world weighed on him. "Alright, everyone—do your own thing for the afternoon. I'm heading out for a walk. We'll regroup at dinner."

With that casual announcement, he

strode toward the lobby entrance. People instinctively shifted aside, parting like water around a rock no one wanted to accidentally obstruct the man who had, moments earlier, put Denzel on the floor without hesitation.

"Hold up—I'm coming with you!" Maeve shot up from her seat and hurried after him. After finally crossing paths with him again, she wasn't about to let him stroll out of her sight.

However, she barely managed two hurried steps before his gaze cut across her path like a warning line. "Don't tail me," he said, blunt as iron. "I'm not strolling around town with half a parade trailing behind."

The remark was tossed out casually, yet it shut the door on her completely. By the time the words faded, he was already outside, his figure swallowed by the sunlight. Only Celia slipped out after him, silent and steady.

Maeve froze, irritation flaring helplessly. Wanting to follow him

was one thing; being allowed to was another. After exchanging a few

quick words with Nathan and the others, she retreated to the elevator and rode it all the way to the top floor.

Inside the presidential suite, she let herself sink into the velvet-draped bed. Her pulse hammered against her ribs, wild and breathless—like a young woman nursing the dizzy rush of a first crush.

"Zara..... Liana..... I can't even describe how thrilled I am. Running into him out of nowhere? In this place? It feels unreal." She wasn't addressing friends, but the two women who shadowed her every step—her personal guardians.

With their sunglasses finally off, their faces came into full view: refined, striking, and impossibly alike. The pair were twin sisters, and each one could easily rival Maeve's beauty.

The elder sister, Zara Lynford, reclined lazily in a wooden chair, amusement flickering in her eyes. "So that's the man you've been daydreaming about nonstop?"

A rush of color crept up Maeve's cheeks. She jerked upright, flustered. "Zara, don't say things like that... I wasn't daydreaming about anyone."

Liana Lynford cracked a mischievous grin. "Come on, you still want to deny it? If he isn't your fantasy crush, then I don't know what is. The way you reacted? You practically looked ready to launch yourself at him."

Maeve's face warmed even further, the flush spreading to her ears. She didn't even try to defend herself this time. Instead, she rolled across the velvet mattress like an overexcited teenager and propped her chin on her hands. "Alright, you two, tell me honestly you saw him properly for the first time today. What was your impression?"

"And that moment he backhanded Denzel into the flowerbed—tell me that wasn't unbelievably impressive?"

Love always makes a woman crave validation from the people closest to her. Maeve was no exception. Leander wasn't just someone she liked; he was the one person who had completely rewritten her world. Naturally, she wanted the sisters' approval.

But the sisters merely exchanged a brief glance, a tiny, shared smile passing between them, and neither offered a word. Maeve froze, confused by their

sudden quiet. "Why are you two looking at each other like that? What's with the silence?" Her brow furrowed slightly as she pressed, "Do you two think he's too distant? That maybe I don't register at all in his mind?"

Zara lifted her cup of steaming tea, glancing at her with a faintly amused arch of her brow. "Maeve, are you really asking me to be completely honest?"

Maeve nodded, cheeks tinged with a faint flush. For a few moments, Zara let silence hang in the air, then a soft, knowing chuckle escaped her lips. "Honestly, Maeve..... what is it about him that's got you so captivated?"

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Zara's words hit Maeve like a splash of cold water, leaving her momentarily speechless. She furrowed her brow, unsure how to respond. "Zara..... what exactly are you trying to say?"

Zara shrugged casually. "Let me not sugarcoat it—I really can't see a single thing about him that's worth you falling for."

Maeve blinked, processing the remark. She didn't flare up; instead, she whispered, "You mean... you think he's not right for me?"

Zara's gaze was steady as she nodded. "To put it plainly, his arrogance is suffocating. And of everyone I've met, he's easily the most reckless and arrogant—completely unaware of his limits. I just can't convince myself that he deserves someone like you, and frankly... I don't see this going anywhere."

She lifted a delicate finger, her tone measured but pointed. "First, think about the chaos at the hotel entrance—so many reporters crowding around you. It was impossible for him not to notice. Yet he didn't acknowledge you at all. Had his friend not called out, you might still be staring past him without recognition."

"That alone proves one thing: he doesn't think of you. In fact... you might not even register on his radar." She raised another finger, emphasizing her next point. "Second, consider the incident just now. Denzel may be arrogant, yes, but at least he knows how to behave, knows where the line is."

"He came forward first to shake your dream guy's hand. And what does your dream guy do? Flat-out refuses him in front of everyone. That's not confidence—that's blatant disregard. To outsiders, they might interpret it as some unique charm or strong personality. But from where I'm standing? It's childish. Ridiculous. Like a toddler thinking he's running the world."

Maeve stayed silent, a gentle smile playing on her lips as she absorbed every word. Zara lifted a third finger, her expression sharp and unyielding. "Third, he's reckless to the point of foolishness."

"Before even understanding who he was dealing with, he made an enemy of the wrong person. And then he actually hit Denzel. Acting so brazenly, throwing caution to the wind, with no regard for consequences, it's nothing short of sheer audacity. It's the behavior of someone wild and headstrong, completely lacking foresight."

She paused, then held up a fourth finger, her tone sharper now, almost cutting through the air. "Fourth—he's arrogantly overconfident, blind to his own limits. Everyone around him could see the Benjamin family's dominance, and his friends even warned him of the consequences. But he threw caution aside, acting like the world would bend to him, as if he alone could control every outcome."

"Judging by how he attacked Denzel, he's likely a body strengthening martial artist of some skill—but he seriously overestimates himself. Thinking a few flashy moves render him untouchable? Ridiculous."

"In a country as vast and intimidating as Dechor, even the two of us wouldn't dare challenge the Benjamin family. And yet he, an outsider with minimal experience, moves like he owns the place. Where on earth does he get that audacity?"

As she spoke, she lifted her fifth finger, her expression tinged with exasperation. "And lastly, he's far too self-centered, doing whatever he pleases without a thought for anyone else. Notice the way he spoke to his friends just now before leaving. It wasn't a casual chat—it was more like issuing commands, as if the world revolved around him alone."

She exhaled slowly, shaking her head, a note of resignation in her sigh. "Maeve, I'm not criticizing your dream guy out of malice. The truth is... he's just left me completely underwhelmed."

Liana nodded in agreement beside her. "Maeve, we'll always support whoever you care about. But... maybe you should pause and really think this through."

She waved a hand as if listing possibilities. "While we've been around, dozens of heirs and scions from powerful families have tried to win your favor. Many were decent, upright, well-bred. Yet you turned every one of them away, keeping your distance. And for what? For this reckless, arrogant boy? Honestly, is he worth it?"

Maeve listened, a small, secret smile tugging at her lips. Her friends' critique didn't offend her; if anything, it made her smirk inwardly. She had mentioned Leander to them countless times, yet never revealed his true identity—and spoke little of his feats—so they had no real sense of the man behind the rumors.

She didn't hurry to justify herself. Instead, she let a sly, confident smile play on her lips. "I know you two are looking out for me, but I just... like him. Flaws and all, I like him anyway."

The twins exchanged a glance, silently shaking their heads, patting their foreheads in exasperation at Maeve's stubbornness.

Then her eyes lit up with curiosity. "Oh, by the way, Zara, Liana—you two come from the Southern Wyvern Blade, right? I've heard it's Astria's most secretive and elite unit. Only the cream of the crop makes it in. Can you tell me what it's like inside?" At that, both sisters' expressions stiffened with pride. Their usual casual air gave way to a quiet dignity. "You're curious about the Southern Wyvern Blade, huh?" Zara said, a trace of amusement in her voice. "Well, if you've got time, we might as well indulge you. Consider it a casual peek behind the curtain."

She stretched leisurely her posture

relaxed as she spoke with casual authority. "To be honest, Liana and I weren't full-fledged members of the Southern Wyvern Blade at the start. It wasn't until just a few months ago that we were officially inducted into the main roster.

"When we first entered the unit, our

abilities were laughably
weak-barely on par with
practitioners who had just begun

martial training. But in just four months, we've grown by leaps and bounds. Today, we can face off against Martial Masters without losing our ground. That's why we were entrusted with a special mission-to be assigned to your protection."

Maeve's eyes sparkled with curiosity. Since discovering that Leander occupied the very pinnacle of the martial world, her interest in cultivation and combat had grown exponentially. Tilting her head, she asked, "Four months? That's an incredible jump. How did your abilities improve so dramatically in such a short time?"

Zara stretched languidly, a playful glint in her eye as she winked at Maeve. "The reason for our rapid progress is a secret martial cultivation technique exclusive to members of the Southern Wyvern Blade.

"Its name is classified, so I can't tell

you, but what you should know is that it's incredibly potent-it can awaken hidden potential and push a person's abilities to their absolute peak. Not long ago, during the Wyvern Cup, our Southern Wyvern Blade claimed victory in one fell

swoop. That technique was a
decisive factor in our victory."

Maeve's breath caught in her throat. "That powerful? I've heard that the highest authority in both the Southern and Northern Wyvern Blades is the Chief Instructor. Is that technique something he personally taught you?"

The moment she mentioned "Chief," the twins' expressions shifted instantly. Their eyes sparkled with deep reverence, and the air around them seemed charged with

awe.

"That technique? Yes, it was passed down by our Chief Instructor. And speaking of him... his exploits could fill a thousand stories!" Zara's eyes sparkled as she spoke.

"Within the Southern Wyvern Blade, every single member treats him as if he were a living deity. Respect is absolute. No one dares question him, and no one could ever think to defy him. He's been at the helm of our unit for barely a month, yet the changes he brought are staggering.

"The fiercest prodigies, the stubborn veterans-everyone, without exception, now bows in complete admiration. Stories of splitting mountains with a single strike, epic duels across rivers... these are no longer myths. They've become the shared lore of our entire unit.

"General Leon even established a special rule for him: any future instructors who join the Southern Wyvern Blade must serve only as deputies. The Chief Instructor's authority remains absolute, unshakable—forever the ultimate commander of our force."

Liana rested her jade-like hand against her cheek, a wistful expression on her face. "It's such a shame... Zara and I joined the unit a week too late. We never got the chance to witness his legendary presence with our own eyes."

"Unbelievable..." Maeve's eyes gleamed, her mind racing. Inwardly, she wondered how this venerated Chief Instructor-worshipped by the twins-compared to Leander. Who truly held the edge in strength and skill?

Perched on the edge of the velvet bed, she leaned forward. "Do you know his name?"

The twins nodded in unison. Zara's expression turned serious. "We heard... the Chief Instructor's name is Leander Ashcroft."

Maeve's heart skipped a beat. "Leander?" she whispered, staring in stunned silence. How could the Chief Instructor possibly share a name with him?

Liana's voice carried a note of awe as she added, "He's not merely the Chief Instructor of our Southern Wyvern Blade. Across the martial world—and even internationally—he's a legend. And, if I remember correctly, he goes by another name as well-Jeff Ashcroft."

The twins chatted as if recounting the exploits of a deity, entirely absorbed in their admiration. But Maeve's expression had already shifted, her face flickering with surprise and disbelief. "Jeff Ashcroft?" she muttered under her breath.

A flash of realization crossed her mind. That was the very same Leander she had come to know, the one by her side all this time. Her heart gave a small, amused thump as the pieces finally clicked together, the revelation painting her face with a mix of incredulity and delight.

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Leander? Jeff? The moment the siblings casually dropped the name of the Southern Wyvern Blade's Chief Instructor, Maeve almost laughed out loud. That was him. Of course it was Leander.

She was taken aback for a moment-never in her wildest thoughts had she imagined that the man she knew so well carried such a staggering identity-leading the legendary Southern Wyvern Blade, and accomplishing feats that seemed almost mythic.

And yet, as she watched the sisters' eyes shimmer with reverence and longing while speaking of the Chief Instructor, the memory of their earlier, scathing critique of Leander made her lips curl into a mischievous smile. The irony of it all was delicious.

"Jeff... he's really that formidable?" Her tone was casual, but her curiosity was deliberate, waiting to gauge the twins' reaction.

Zara didn't hesitate. "Formidable? That doesn't even begin to cover it. He's not just strong-he's a living legend, a god of the martial world. No one even comes close! Back in the Southern Wyvern Blade, he stood before every member and deputy, over 328 feet away, and with one palm shattered a copper cauldron weighing over a thousand pounds.

"And at Hawksridge Summit in Ravenridge, he alone obliterated a Martial Sovereign who had dominated Astria for fifty years, alongside a legendary swordsman who had crossed the seas from Jesund.

"Over the Stormcairn River, he duelled the Tarlyn Guild Patriarch midair-tossing the river into chaos-and finally cut the old master down on the water

itself! Even across the Southern Ocean, he faced eleven Transcendents single-handedly— every last one of them fell. The War God Sanctum? Completely annihilated."

Listening to her reel off one unbelievable exploit after another, Maeve felt her mind grind to a halt. Even though she already knew who Leander truly was, hearing his achievements laid out like this made her feel as if she were learning about a completely different being—something carved out of myth rather than flesh.

In just a handful of months, his strength hadn't merely grown-it had mutated into something monstrous, something that no longer fit within the limits of ordinary human power. He'd become a creature of pure legend.

Maeve had once comforted herself. She had spent months climbing her own mountain, rising to the pinnacle of international fame an icon adored worldwide. She thought that she could at least narrow the distance between them. Now she realized she wasn't even on the same continent. That gap was an abyss.

"One month ago," Zara continued, her voice filled with fervor, "he seized the top spot on the International Combat Units. Not just first place he became the strongest individual ever recorded since the list was created.

"And just days ago, in the capital, he annihilated an entire squad of Netherweb assassins by himself. Over a hundred killers died that night, including the infamous 'Blood Demon.' The world still hasn't recovered from the shock."

She exhaled in awe, shaking her head slowly. "To call him powerful is pointless now. Our Chief Instructor exists on a plane we can't even reach. He's stepped into a realm where language simply fails."

Zara spoke with an unmistakable awe, every syllable shimmering with admiration. Her eyes glittered as if she were watching those legendary events unfold right in front of her rather than hearing them recounted.

Beside her, Liana's gaze sparkled as she added, "Maeve, you've never stepped into the martial world, so it's almost impossible to picture the scale of the man we're talking about."

She gestured lightly, as though trying to capture the enormity of it. "There's a reason the Southern Wyvern Blade follows him without a murmur of resistance. And only he has the kind of presence that would compel General Leon-the one who controls military command across four entire states-would personally rewrite protocol just to extend exclusive privileges to him."

Her voice softened into reverence. "To us, he's more than a commander. He's the Warlord who lifted Astria to the peak of the martial world. Because he exists, every major power on the global stage watches Astria before they dare make a move."

Maeve snapped out of her astonishment at last, and when she caught sight of the sisters looking as if they were moments away from building a shrine, amusement rippled through her chest.

The pair remained blissfully unaware of the smile tugging at her mouth. Instead, Liana launched into a wistful groan. "You know what still annoys me?" she said. "Zara and I showed up just a little too late."

"If fate had nudged us toward the Southern Wyvern Blade a single week earlier," she continued, "we wouldn't have missed his rise in full blaze-or that thunderous clash on the Stormcairn River that the whole world keeps retelling like a legend."

Maeve bit back her laughter, her tone dipping into playful mystery. "Liana, Zara, why sound so defeated? For all you know, the chance you're moping about might still come around. Or-who can say you might've already crossed paths with him without realizing it."

The sisters dismissed the idea at once, hands flicking in sync. "Maeve, you make it sound far too easy," Zara said with a helpless little laugh.

"People like him don't simply appear because someone wishes for it," Liana followed. "For most, catching even a glimpse of him is nearly impossible."

She shook her head, the disappointment clear. "When he walked away from the Southern Wyvern Blade, he gave no promise of returning. At this point, unless someone reaches the altitude he commands, meeting him is little more than fantasy."

Their spirits dipped as the words settled. Maeve didn't push further. Composing herself, she reached for the juice pitcher and quietly filled her glass.

After a long pause, Zara finally
shook off her daze and turned to

here

Maeve, a playful smile lighting her face "Alright Maeve enough about Chief he's practically untouchable. Let's focus on your dream guy instead. You really mean to stay devoted to him, cutting yourself off from everyone else?"

Maeve's nod was firm and unwavering. Zara let out an exasperated sigh, running a hand over her forehead. "Maeve, you're not even willing to consider anyone else? Honestly, there are countless men far more deserving of your attention. Why confine yourself to someone who barely thinks of you?"

"Sometimes, opening yourself to possibilities is what makes the horizon feel endless. Your fixation is narrowing the world you see."

Maeve merely curved her lips in a knowing smile, offering no reply. After all—Jeff Ashcroft, the unconquered Iron Sovereign, the undisputed number one on the International Combat Units list... honestly, who could possibly outshine him?

Seeing her quiet confidence, the sisters realized their attempts at persuasion were hopeless and gave up.

Liana slipped off her combat boots, letting her slender, flawless feet rest on the floor, and asked with curiosity, "By the way, Maeve, we never got around to asking- what's the name of the man who has your heart?"

Maeve swung her legs and rolled lazily across the velvet bed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Him? Funny enough, he shares the same name as your revered Chief Instructor. His name's Leander Ashcroft."

"Leander Ashcroft?" The sisters stiffened, their expressions instantly puzzling. "Wait... he's named Leander too?"

Maeve simply nodded, and their bewilderment only grew. "Seriously? The same exact name as our Chief? What a bizarre coincidence... the world really does love surprises."

Within the Southern Wyvern Blade, Leander was already the stuff of legend. Every recruit was taught his title and reputation, but no image, no age—strict rules forbade

it. As the organization's lifelong Chief Instructor, his personal information was classified to the extreme.

Even seasoned members weren't

allowed to reveal them. That was why the sisters never considered the possibility—they simply couldn't make the connection it was almost, laughable running into a brash, overconfident young man at a hotel and imagining he could be the very force that shakes the world.

Maeve watched the twins remain oblivious, and she let them be. A sly sense of anticipation flickered in her chest. If Liana and Zara ever realized that the Chief Instructor they revered was the very same Leander they had just dismissed, the look on their faces would be priceless.

In the eastern district of Yelem, a colossal building in a western style towered above the streets, imposing and solemn like a cathedral carved from stone. Denzel, bloodied and fierce, moved with the grace and speed of a stalking leopard. He raced through the streets and vaulted over the towering walls. He reached the third floor directly, entering an expansive hall.

There, at the far end, a middle-aged man wearing a white cap stood with his hands folded behind his back, emanating quiet, unshakable authority.

"Dad!" Denzel summoned his innate vitality, and the blood coating his face vanished into steam. His wounds knit together at an astonishing pace, closing fully as he stepped up to stand beside the middle-aged figure.

The man's eyes lingered on the healing scars for a moment, yet he remained silent.

He raised a finger, directing it toward the distant horizon, where the tallest cathedral

in Yelem pierced the skyline several miles away. His voice was sharp, carrying authority and weight.

"Your great-great-grandfather has returned."

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The middle-aged man was dressed in refined luxury as he looked down over the surrounding streets, as though the entire city of Yelem lay bowing at his feet.

He was none other than the current leader of the Benjamin family, the undisputed top authority of Dechor, Potter Benjamin.

"I'm back!"

Potter raised a finger and pointed toward the tallest church several feet away.

It was the highest building in the whole of Yelem. Every day, its bells rang out by the hour, and people worshipped the holy place.

As soon as Potter spoke, Denzel's expression changed drastically.

"Is he really back?" he murmured softly, his gaze shifting again and again.

It had been fifty years since his great-great-grandfather left the Benjamin family. Back then, Denzel hadn't even been born.

In the past, the Benjamin family had only been ranked among the top powerful families of Dechor.

But more than a hundred years ago, it was Potter's appearance that had lifted the Benjamins to a status above all others, forcing even the old noble families of Dechor to bow their heads.

From then on, they were honored as the number one family throughout Yelem.

His great-great-grandfather was, without question, the most brilliant and extraordinary figure in the several-hundred-year history of the Benjamin family.

Denzel had grown up hearing countless stories about him. He knew those tales so well that he could almost recite them word-for-word.

Yet, in over twenty years of life, he had never once seen the man in person. He only knew that his great-great-grandfather was a legend among the world of assassins, better known as Benjamin, the Hermit.

Potter clasped his hands behind his back, his gaze deep as an abyss.

"It's great to be back." Potter seemed relieved.

Over the past ten years, the Benjamin family maintained their position as the number one family in Dechor.

However, new rising families had been appearing like mushrooms after the rain.

These fresh powers had formed an alliance, and they were already showing signs of being able to stand against the Benjamins.

The Benjamin family was still strong, but they could no longer completely crush these new forces. The two sides had fallen into a deadlock.

To break this stalemate, they needed a heavyweight figure to tip the scales.

Potter was undoubtedly the best choice, but he had vanished from the world for fifty years.

Even the most powerful networks had failed to track him down, so how could the Benjamin family have found him?

At such a critical moment for the Benjamins, no one expected the Hermit to actually return to Yelem.

Denzel finally returned to his senses. He clenched his fists tightly, looking stone- cold.

"This is wonderful. Now that you have returned, the Austens, Farquads, and Cadellis won't be able to cause trouble anymore!"

Potter gave a slight nod, a flash of cold light passing through his eyes.

"For the past few years, they've been secretly strengthening themselves, planning to unite and tear our family down from the throne. Did they really think we didn't know? If I hadn't been lacking absolute certainty of victory, I would have wiped them out long ago!"

A faint aura leaked from his body, and several thin cracks appeared in the air in front of him.

"A few days ago, my name reappeared on the Global Assassin Network, and those families were already shaken up by it. Yesterday, they even sent people here to show goodwill.

"Tomorrow night, I've arranged a high-profile banquet and invited the heads of all the top families to attend. You're already an adult, and the Benjamin family will belong to you in the future. It's time for me to step back and let you take the lead. "You will be in charge of tomorrow's banquet. Make a show of power in front of these major families of Yelem and make them understand who the true number one family of Dechor really is."

Denzel's mind was all over the place. Of course, he understood what this meant.

In the history of the Benjamin family, the youngest family head had only taken control at the age of thirty-five. Yet, he was only twenty-six, and Potter was already preparing to hand power to him.

He knew very well that as long as he

displayed absolute authority and a kingly presence at the banquet tomorrow night, the real power of the Benjamin family would soon be placed in his hands. He would become the youngest family head in Benjamin history.

"Yes."

He bowed slightly and gave Potter a respectful salute.

Only then did Potter support him upright and ask, "What's with the injury on your face?"

Denzel's eyes flickered as he explained the conflict that had just happened with Leander at the Yelem Hotel.

"To dare lay hands on someone from the Benjamin family in Dechor... That takes some nerve."

Potter's expression remained cold and blank. He merely waved his hand.

"Remember, before tomorrow

night's banquet begins, do not cause any more trouble. Focus all your energy on preparing for it! After the banquet, once we've achieved our goal, that Astrian must die without a burial. Make him understand the price of offending the Benjamin family's authority. Do you

understand?"

A murderous look bloomed in Denzel's eyes. This was exactly what he had been hoping for.

On the afternoon streets of Yelem, the crowd wasn't especially thick. Leander walked through the flow of people with one hand in his pocket, while Celia followed closely behind him.

"Master Leander, when do you plan on heading into the desert?" Celia asked curiously.

Leander's expression did not change.

He gave a faint smile and said,

"There's no rush for the treasure in the desert. Since it was left behind by a Westerner, there are only a handful of people in this world who can truly enter it. Right now, I'm probably the only one who even knows where it is."

He then added, "As for Yelem, I'll stay and play along with them for a few more days. Once we send them off, we'll head to the desert. Besides, another opponent has arrived here. The wager I made with him before isn't over yet."

"An old rival?" Celia's gaze shifted slightly. "Is the Hermit in Yelem?"

Leander slowly nodded. Yelem was large, but it was nothing compared to Highcliffe.

Within the range of his spiritual sense, he had already detected a trace of the Hermit's presence. Even though it was only a faint hint, it was enough to confirm that the Hermit was here.

"Where is he now?" Celia frowned and pressed further.

At that moment, they happened to walk up to the gates of an abandoned classical manor. Leander stopped right in his tracks.

"He's right here."

Celia hadn't even had time to react to his words when everything suddenly went

dark. The light around them faded at a visible speed, as if it were being swallowed

whole.

It was 4 p.m. with the sun still high in the sky, yet in an instant, the world was drowned in darkness. The surroundings turned into chaos, enclosing the two of them in a frozen, shadowed space.

It was as though they had stepped into an entirely different world, cold and pitch black on all sides.

Even though Celia was an Infernal Crown Transcendent, she still couldn't see anything in the darkness.

She couldn't even make out Leander's figure anymore, and all she could hear was

his voice.

Celia was unable to identify what sort of magic this was and how it could change the surroundings and temperature so abruptly.

While she was in shock, a warm and powerful hand suddenly took hold of her

delicate fingers, instantly calming her.

Leander's voice pierced through the darkness, loud and clear. "You're finally here!"

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In this absolute darkness, even an Infernal Crown Transcendent couldn't sense or see anything at all.

Celia felt as though she had been dropped into pure chaos. If Leander had not been holding her hand tightly, her mind might have collapsed on the spot.

"You're finally here!"

Leander's voice was cold and calm as he held onto Celia, giving her a small sense of comfort.

"After a few hours apart, we meet again, Jeff!" The Hermit's familiar voice came from the darkness, sounding neither sad nor joyful.

"So this is how you planned to hunt me down?" Leander replied. "You might as well just show yourself. The two of us can fight above the skies of Yelem."

Leander stood still, not taking a single step. His full focus was already poured into the endless darkness around them.

Potter burst into wild laughter, yet it was impossible to tell where the sound was coming from.

"Jeff, this is one of the two domains I formed in the third turn of the King's Triple Turn-the Shrouded Domain. This is the first time I've ever used it on anyone!"

"A domain?" Leander murmured curiously.

Just moments ago, he and Celia had been walking down a bright street in broad daylight. But in an instant, everything around them turned pitch-black, and they could not even see their own hands before their eyes.

This was the first time he had ever experienced something like this.

It was nothing like the Bloodsea Prison the Blood Demon had formed at the peak of Swallow Hill. That power had shown clear signs and a forming process.

This darkness, however, appeared far too suddenly without any warning.

In the brief moment of his spiritual perception, it had already swallowed them whole. "Jeff, you can't see me now, but I can see the shock on your face! Even though you've defeated the Blood Demon, you are still too young. Your understanding of the King Phase is far too shallow! Today, I will show you what it truly means to be one!" Potter's voice echoed again through the void. "A King Phase uses their own body as a vessel to draw in the energy of heaven and earth, turn it into their own power, and connect with the forces of the world. With a single gesture, they can seal off a space. With a single thought, they can form a domain!

"Compared to a Transcendent, a King Phase's understanding and control over the power of heaven and earth is like that of an adult compared to a helpless infant. They are not on the same level at all!

He continued, "As everyone knows, to transition from an Infernal Crown Transcendent to a King Phase, one must undergo the King's Triple Turn and transform innate vitality into true essence. But not everyone who completes the three turns can become a King Phase! To truly enter this phase, one must experience a spiritual ascension and awaken a domain that belongs to oneself!

"Every King Phase has their own unique domain, collectively known as the King's Domain. Only after forming a domain does a King Phase gain true divine power. Inside their own domain, they can act as they please and control everything!"

There was a hint of pride in Potter's voice. He'd created the Shrouded Domain after meditating for forty years on the frozen Arctic plains.

Inside this domain, he was the absolute ruler.

Now that the domain had formed and the third turn was complete, he was, in truth, already qualified to step into the King Phase.

The only thing he was missing was a final opportunity.

"A domain?" Leander's lips parted slightly, a hint of curiosity in his voice. "So in order

to become a King Phase, one first has to create a domain of their own?"

"That's right!" Potter replied sharply.

"Right now, I'm only half a step away from the King Phase. The Shrouded Domain is the less perfect of the two domains I've achieved, but trapping you in it is still effortless! You can't even sense which direction I'm in anymore. How do you expect to fight me? Jeff, our wager has already been decided. I've won!"

Celia's heart sank.

The Blood Demon had once been the most brutal, most terrifying world-class powerhouse she had ever seen. Yet, even he had never made her feel the kind of fear she felt right now.

At last, she understood what a King Phase truly was. Just this mysterious and unfathomable domain alone was far beyond her comprehension.

With a flick of his hand, he could create an entire world of his own, acting as its creator. Such presence was enough to dominate everything.

Unless one was also at the King Phase, how could anyone possibly match him?

Just then, Leander suddenly released her hand, cutting off any contact between them.

"Master Leander?"

She couldn't see his face, which made her even more anxious, but Leander's voice rang out clearly.

"Potter, do you really think that pulling me into your domain means you've already won? In my eyes, this so-called King's Domain is nothing more than a slightly clever trick."

As his words fell, Celia felt a violent gust of energy explode in front of her, and a point of blue light flared within the darkness.

No matter how pure and thick the darkness was, it could not suppress that glow.

Whoosh!

The sound of air being torn apart echoed out as the blue light slashed through, cleaving the darkness in two.

At the same time, Leander's figure became clear again. He hurled a punch straight ahead into the dark void.

Boom!

The force of his punch surged like a raging dragon, roaring and twisting through the air, faintly forming the shape of a dragon itself.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three explosions rang out in succession. Violent tremors rippled through the air as the punch landed, and from the path it traveled came a startled exclamation from Potter.

"Did you actually locate me?"

All Celia could see was a mass of blackness colliding head-on with the blue light. After a single exchange, that mass of darkness was forced rapidly backward.

"Do you really think that by using the power of space to shift yourself within the domain, I wouldn't be able to find you? My abilities are far beyond what you can imagine!"

Leander's voice was laced with contempt as he threw another punch through the void.

In the endless darkness, every strike

he delivered seemed to precisely lock onto Potter's position. A mass of black fog, whirled and flickered

wildly

within the Shrouded Domain

retreating without pause.

"What the heck?"

No matter where the black fog tried to hide, Leander captured its location and struck

it head-on.

Finally, when Leander unleashed his tenth punch, the black mist completely dissolved, vanishing into the boundless darkness.

"Jeff, you truly live up to your reputation as the one who defeated the Blood Demon.

You truly are the greatest warrior in history, as announced on the International Combat Units!"

Leander did not strike again. Instead, Potter's voice echoed, growing more and more distant in the darkness.

"That's enough for today. Our little game has only just begun!"

By the time the voice faded into the distance, the surrounding darkness had already begun to recede at a visible speed. Daylight returned, and Leander and Celia found themselves once more standing in front of the abandoned manor.

"Is he gone, Master Leander?" Celia asked in confusion, as if waking from a dream.

By all logic, Potter's appearance should have meant a decisive battle against Leander. Yet, he had only cast his domain before fleeing, something she could not understand.

"Interesting. The King of Assassins, huh?" Leander curved his lips into a smile before replying, "To the Hermit, killing was once his profession, but it is also a form of entertainment. He doesn't just enjoy the moment the target dies. What he truly savors is the process before that the way his prey is forced to endure the immense pressure of death, like a cat toying with a mouse."

Murderous intent had already gathered in Leander's eyes.

"The next time he shows himself, I'll make sure he's dead."

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At the very top of the grand cathedral in Yelem, a figure streaked through the sky and landed upon the clock tower like a great roc spreading its wings. It was Potter.

His black trench coat whipped wildly in the wind. With his hands clasped behind his back and a handsome, composed expression on his face, he gazed down at the city that had once trembled at his very name.

Back then, Yelem had been home to countless powerful forces and warring great clans. But in the end, he had risen above them all, becoming a true legend and leading the Benjamin family to the very top.

After a moment, he raised his right arm. At the bend of his forearm, a distinct fist imprint remained, still glowing faintly with blue light. His entire arm was trembling slightly.

"What terrifying power. How did Jeff cultivate such godlike, demonic strength?"

He had taken nine of Leander's punches head-on. The tenth, he had not dared to meet directly, instead using its force to retreat. Even so, his blood and energy were now churning violently within him.

That final strike, in particular-even though he had borrowed its momentum to pull back-still clung to his arm like a parasitic curse, numbing it completely.

"Every punch he throws carries the might of mountains and raging seas. Vast, majestic, and innately righteous... That power alone is enough to match those

hidden old monsters. It's no wonder that both the Arbitration and the Netherweb broke down in his hands. They truly had it coming."

For the first time, a trace of caution flickered in his eyes.

He stood only half a step away from the true King Phase, with one foot over its threshold. He had even created his own domain.

By all logic, no one could've rivaled him in his own domain, unless the person was an even stronger King Phase.

He could tell Leander had not reached the King Phase, yet the boy was able to perceive his domain and lock onto his exact position.

Every punch was thrown as if he had seen through it in advance. It was shocking.

But shock aside, even if Leander could break his Shrouded Domain, he was not overly concerned. Today, he had only used half of his true strength.

"I'll remember today's clash, Jeff! You're a rare prodigy from Astria, but you shouldn't have come to Yelem. And you definitely shouldn't have made an enemy of the Netherweb! This ancient holy city will be the burial ground of your unbeaten empire!"

Murderous intent surged in his eyes. The stronger Leander appeared, the stronger his own killing intent became.

He took a deep breath, as if recalling something. His gaze turned firm and icy.

"Tomorrow night's banquet will be the final deadline for our decisive battle. I have no time left!"

He let out a low sigh. His aura condensed further, merging almost perfectly with the surrounding environment.

On top of this cathedral, not a single person noticed his presence.

Buzz!

Just as Potter was minding his own business, his gaze suddenly shifted toward the distant horizon. In the same instant, he threw a punch.

The blow tore through the air like a compressed projectile, opening a visible passage in the atmosphere. At the end of that corridor, a flawless, jade-like hand emerged from nowhere and blocked the attack completely.

A ripple of energy spread through the sky, so subtle that the people below, passing through the streets, never sensed a thing.

From within the clouds, a figure gradually took shape.

It was a cultured, refined middle-aged man. His aura was strikingly similar to Potter's. Upon closer inspection, even his features bore a faint resemblance.

"It's you?" Potter's eyes narrowed slightly, a sharp gleam flashing through them. His tone was cold. Clearly, this was someone he did not welcome.

The man said with a gentle smile, "It's been a long time, Potter. You've finally come out of hiding again."

The middle-aged man remained concealed within the clouds. No one below could see him except for Potter.

Rising to his feet atop the clock tower, he let out a cold snort through his nose. "I'd almost forgotten about having a brother like you."

Though his tone was icy, he did not deny the man's words. This middle-aged man was Deo Benjamin, his half-brother. They shared the same father.

Even among the descendants of the Benjamin family, very few knew of this history. It was a secret buried for over a century.

In a deep voice, he asked, "Why are you here, Deo? One hundred and five years ago, you left the Benjamin family and swore never to set foot here again. Have you forgotten your oath?"

Dia did not seem to mind the Hermit's attitude, and he smiled.

"Potter, there's no need to get worked up. Coming here means I've violated my oath, but compared to that, your life is far more important."

"I'm here to extend your life."

"To extend my life?" Potter's pupils shrank, as if his deepest secret had been laid bare. A look of shock crossed his face.

Only after a long moment did he recover, letting out a low sigh.

"So there truly are very few things in this world that can escape the Arbitration Office's eyes."

As he spoke, he rolled up his right sleeve. Around his wrist, a faint black line could

be seen, and within it lay an extremely dense aura of death. Once it erupted, his vitality would be completely extinguished.

With one hand behind his back, Deo's voice remained calm.

"Potter, you are the legend of the Benjamin family. Your talent and aptitude are unrivaled in this era. However, you still haven't stepped into the King Phase. At your current age you've already reached the the end of your natural lifespan. Judging by the death line on your wrist, you have three days left to live."

Potter offered no rebuttal. No one understood his body better than he did.

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When Holden invited him to emerge, he had regrown dark hair and restored his physique as though rejuvenated.

However, it was a final burst before the flame went out-a last flicker of life.

His lifespan was nearly exhausted. If he could not break into the King Phase soon, death was inevitable.

That was precisely why he had gone after Leander so urgently!

Only by using Leander as a stepping stone to reach the King Phase could he prolong his life once more.

Ignoring Potter's expression, Deo suddenly reached into his robes and drew out a test tube. Inside it, dark green liquid slowly swirled, with the occasional bubble rising to the surface.

"This is a Lifespan Serum recently developed by the Arbitration Office's top scientists. Once you ingest it, it can extend your lifespan by one year."

Potter's expression changed drastically. "A Lifespan Serum?"

Though he had no idea what it truly was, the fact that it could grant him another year

of life was, to him, nothing short of divine providence.

Dia slowly nodded and continued, "Potter, this serum will reactivate your body's

cells. While extending your lifespan, it will also increase your strength to a certain degree.

"It has no side effects or after-effects. The only drawback is

that each person may only use it once in their lifetime and a second dose will have no effect at all. Ram giving this to you under the orders of the Supreme Arbiter."

Though deeply tempted, Potter did

not accept it at once. Instead, he asked in a low voice, "The Arbitration Office has never done anything without benefit. If you're handing this over to me, what is your condition?"

Deo gave a faint smile, not denying it. "Very simple. All we need is for you to cooperate with us and go all out to kill Jeff Ashcroft. This time, we cannot afford to

fail."

As his words fell, six more figures appeared behind him.

Once again, a killing scheme aimed at Leander was silently taking shape.

Six figures appeared in the sky behind Deo. They stood hidden in the clouds with their feet planted in midair.

Dennis felt six waves of pressure hit him simultaneously. Each one was as strong as Deo. Even someone like him felt a heavy weight press against his chest.

The first figure was impossible to read. No one could tell their age or gender. They held a wooden barrel that was a little shorter than a person. The smell of wine drifted from it. Their tongue was much longer than usual. With a light curl of that tongue, the wine inside the barrel lifted on its own and flowed into their mouth. The strangest part was that the wine level inside the barrel never went down, no matter how much they drank.

The second figure was a man in his late forties. A clear bronze glow showed through his skin. The color of his body shifted with the light. Sometimes it looked pale. Sometimes it looked gray. Standing in the clouds, he almost blended into the mist. He looked like a human chameleon because his body shifted with whatever was around him.

The third figure was an old man in a patterned robe. He stood on the head of a massive mutant snake. The snake breathed out clouds of poisonous gas. Several crows flew past and dropped dead from the sky. The snake's eyes gave off a cold glow that made the heart tighten. It looked like it could swallow someone whole at any moment. Yet under the old man's feet, the beast stayed calm and obedient like a pet.

The fourth figure was a middle-aged man with an ordinary face. He looked like someone you could lose in any crowd. No one would notice him with a second look. The only strange thing was that his left arm was gone at the shoulder. His long sleeve fluttered in the wind. He looked like a one-armed man.

The fifth figure had hair that stood straight up like fire. His eyes were wide and full of killing intent. Both of his arms were fine. One of his legs looked wrong. A gust of wind lifted his pant leg, revealing a short, twisted right leg. He had been born with uneven legs.

Dennis looked over them as their names left his lips one by one.

"Gragas, the Barrelborn. Moffat, the Stonehide. Watz, the Serpentseer. Alaric, the Lonefist. Hadrian, the Stormkick."

Every one of them was a legendary figure. Each one was as strong as he was. Each one had shaken the world in the past. Some were famous. Some were infamous. Even the youngest of them had risen to fame more than sixty years ago.

Gragas licked his red-stained lips and smiled.

"King of Assassins, long time no see."

The others gave Dennis a short nod.

Dennis' eyes tightened. A trace of emotion crossed his face.

"No wonder Netherweb is so strong. But when it comes to the top power of this world, the Arbitration Office still stands above all. I truly see it today."

He let out a low laugh.

"If even people like you work under the Arbitration Office, what can't they do in this world?"

He knew that Deo had left the Churchill family a hundred years ago and joined the Arbitration Office without hesitation. Deo was now one of the twenty-four Chief Arbitrators and ranked in the top ten. The people with him clearly held the same rank. Every one of them was a high-ranking Chief Arbitrator.

Moffat spoke in a flat voice.

"Hermit, the strength of the Arbitration Office is far beyond what you imagine. It isn't something a small assassin group like Netherweb can compare to. After this is over, you can think about joining us and becoming one of us."

Dennis didn't answer.

His gaze moved past the group and settled on the figure standing at the back.

It was a handsome young Western man dressed like a priest. He stood close to six feet tall and carried a strong presence. That wasn't what caught Dennis'

attention. His eyes were fixed on the ring on the man's hand. It gave off a faint sense of danger that felt strangely familiar.

"Ring of the Sage?"

After a moment, Dennis' eyes narrowed. For the first time, his face turned serious.

Even when he faced Gragas and the others together, he had stayed calm. This ring made it impossible for him to keep the same composure.

A hidden legend rose in his mind. It was a legend tied to the Western Church.

Back then, the Church ruled the world. Even the Arbitration Office

could only stand on equal footing with it. At that time, monsters roamed freely. Vampires and

ve

werewolves hid among humans and

fed on them in secret.

In the eyes of the Church, these creatures had to be wiped out. To clear them away,

the Church created a special role. They were called Demon Hunters.

Every Demon Hunter was a top-tier expert chosen by the Church. They had terrifying power and commanded the force of holy light.

The symbol of a Demon Hunter was a ring blessed by the High Priest. It was known as the Ring of the Sage.

That was why Dennis felt actual shock.

The young man with the ring didn't reply. He held a Bible and read with focus. It

looked like he didn't hear Dennis at all.

Deo smiled.

"Dennis. The man behind us is the twenty-third-generation Demon Hunter Neil. He doesn't belong to

He belongs to the

the Church. This time he's our

Arbitration Office

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main force for hunting Jeff

After a long pause, the shock in Dennis' eyes faded. He let out a helpless breath.

"With your lineup, do you even need me?"

Deo kept smiling. A cold light passed through his eyes.

"Dennis, just like I said earlier, this time we want absolute certainty. We won't allow Jeff to escape again.

"We can defeat him. That much is sure. What we can't do is stop him from running. That's why we need you. You will draw him into the formation we already set. "Once he enters it, he has no way out.

"Of course, you could try to kill him with your own strength. In my eyes, that chance is too small."

Dennis looked at the dark green liquid in Deo's hand. He didn't argue. His voice stayed low.

"Where do I lure him to?"

Deo gave a strange smile. He pointed down and tossed the test tube over.

Dennis looked down at the grand Yelem Church far below. He made up his mind.

"Deal."

As soon as he spoke, he crushed the test tube in his hand. The dark green liquid turned into thin streams and flowed into his mouth.

The moment it went down his

throat,

a wild surge of power spread from his chest and rushed through his limbs. It soaked into every part of his body. A pink ripple passed over his skin. It spread outward for a moment. Then it pulled back into him. A small pink flare flickered inside his pupils. His already terrifying presence exploded and turned violent. It was more than twice as strong as before.

He lifted his head.

"Jeff. This time, only a god coming down can save you."

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Dennis sat cross-legged, absorbing the strong surge of life energy from the Lifespan Serum. Wave after wave of energy moved through his body. The deathly air around his wrist faded little by little until it was gone.

Six top fighters from the Arbitration Office stood in the sky. They narrowed their eyes as they looked down at the Yelem Church.

"This time, we finally get to see if Jeff is really as unbeatable as people say. To be honest, if the king had not approved this plan himself, I would have already wanted to fight Jeff one-on-one."

Moffat, the Stonehide, looked confident. He showed no genuine respect for Leander. He acted only because of the order from above.

"This is the number one mission of the Arbitration Office. No one is allowed to show up early and ruin everything. Jeff must die in Yelem!"

Gragas held back his killing intent and took another drink of wine.

"We're not trash like Greed's group. Fifteen of them still couldn't kill Jeff. This time, the six of us are making our first move in fifty years just for him alone. Even if he had three heads and six arms, he'd still die."

Watz, the Serpentseer, let out a cold laugh. They were determined to win this fight. The massive snake under his feet sensed its master's excitement and flicked its tongue.

"That so-called Iron Sovereign is just a rising rookie. He's nothing but a reckless kid. In this world, no one is worth our attention unless they're a true King Phase fighter."

Hadrian, the Stormkick, looked savage. He was an Astrian man who had been born overseas and had been disabled since birth. He carried deep insecurity in his heart. The Arbitration Office had given him power beyond measure. Because of that, he instinctively rejected Astrian fighters. In his eyes, every Astrian fighter was an enemy.

Everyone released killing intent. Only Neil, who held a Bible in his hand, stayed calm. After listening to the others, he closed the Bible. His deep voice spread out in a steady tone.

"Our plan to hunt Jeff is almost complete. Only one key piece is missing. How do we draw Jeff here? Every top fighter today is brave and smart. I want to know what method you plan to use to bring him here, Hermit."

He rarely spoke. When he did, he went straight to the point.

The others also looked toward Dennis, who was still refining the energy with his eyes closed. Even though he had agreed to handle it, agreeing and doing it were not the same thing. They all had the same question.

How will Leander be drawn here?

The pink glow around Dennis slowly faded. He opened his eyes.

"Anything I promise, I will do. I'll handle this myself. I've only met Jeff twice, but I already understand his personality. He's arrogant to the core. He looks down on everyone. Even if he knows there is a trap ahead, he will never take one step back. That's his strength, but it's also his fatal flaw. Tomorrow night, I can guarantee that Jeff will appear here."

He stood up and stared at the distant sky. His voice sounded firm.

"But there is one thing I need to make clear. Before I face Jeff head-on, none of you may show yourselves. I don't want anyone to interfere with my fight. This is a personal wager between me and him."

The others nodded.

Neil, the current Demon Hunter, gave him a warm, approving look. His respect for Dennis rose another notch.

"The King of Assassins really lives up to his name. We've seen your confidence. Tomorrow night, everything will be settled. Let's go."

As soon as he finished speaking, he turned into a beam of white light and vanished into the distance.

The others left one after another. Before leaving, Deo gave Dennis a steady look. "Dennis, I wish you victory."

The seven Chief Arbitrators all departed. Dennis felt the strong life force moving through his body. He felt thrilled to the extreme.

All seven Chief Arbitrators had shown up to set a formation and ambush Leander. That alone made him believe that choosing Leander had been the right call. The fact that seven Chief Arbitrators, all as strong as he was, were willing to join forces to surround and kill one man proved that Leander's strength was far beyond what he first thought. Facing a top fighter like this raised his own chance of stepping into the King Phase without him even realizing it.

At the Yelem Hotel, Leander was having dinner in the restaurant with Nathan and the others.

Leander ate with ease and comfort. Nathan and his group looked gloomy.

Earlier that day, Leander had clashed with Denzel. Even now, they worried that Denzel might show up with a group to get revenge. They were in a foreign place with no support. If Denzel used the Benjamin family's power, they would be like lambs waiting to be slaughtered.

"What's wrong? The food here is fresh and tasty. Why are you all eating so little?"

Leander smiled as he noticed their unease.

The girls didn't know how to talk to him. Only Nathan forced himself to speak.

"Leander, you really aren't worried at all? If Denzel brings people for revenge, what do we do?"

Leander looked relaxed. He ate a piece of watermelon.

"So you're still worried about what happened this afternoon. I already told you. He doesn't have the guts. Even if he did come, he wouldn't have the strength to do anything."

They had seen Leander's confidence once before in Highcliffe. That had been when he faced the Wave Alliance. This was not Highcliffe, and his confidence didn't ease their fear. Nathan had already started planning to speak with him alone after dinner.

While they were eating, a stunning figure walked into the restaurant with two female bodyguards. Everyone's eyes lit up.

"Maeve!"

Livia and the others shouted in surprise. Only a superstar could make them forget their worries for a moment.

Maeve gave them a polite smile. She sat down next to Leander without any hesitation. She took a piece fruit from his plate. Several paparazzi who were hiding in the hotel raised their cameras to capture a sweet moment between them. Their vision suddenly went

dark. They collapsed onto their

tables without warning.

This was Leander's doing. He didn't want to be linked to Maeve in any way. After handling it, he turned back with the same cold look.

"If you want to eat, take it yourself. You're making it look like we're close."

Maeve didn't care. She scooped a bite of rice from his bowl with a cheerful and innocent look.

"Aren't we close?"

She leaned against his arm. Her voice sounded soft and a little sweet, as if she were acting spoiled.

"Blockhead, the Benjamin family is holding a high-society banquet tomorrow night. The company says I have to attend. I'm scared. Can you go with me?"

As soon as she said that, the Lynford sisters behind her frowned. They looked unhappy. She was scared, so she wanted a pretty boy to go with her. That made them wonder what their role was as bodyguards.

Leander had no interest in any

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banquet. He was about to refuse. At that moment, his expression shifted. A small, hidden gust of force slipped through the gap in the window blinds. It flew straight toward Leander. He caught it between two fingers. A small note appeared in his

hand. No one noticed anything strange. Even the Lynford sisters, who practiced a special breathing method, sensed nothing.

Leander opened the note. On it was a line of crooked Astrian writing.

'Tomorrow, 9 p.m. at the Yelem Church. I'll be waiting for you. We'll decide who's stronger, and we'll settle life and death.'