

An Understated Dominance [On-Going]

Chapter 2517

West Lucozia was in chaos, but the turmoil finally subsided after Cardinal Dragon Marshal was captured.

Officials who had close ties to him were investigated, and those found guilty faced swift justice—some were arrested, while others were executed.

Following this purge, more than 300 officials were dismissed. Most were imprisoned, while those guilty of severe crimes were put to death.

Under Austin's firm leadership, the government of West Lucozia underwent a drastic transformation.

The corruption, bribery, and backdoor dealings that had plagued the system for years were wiped out like a storm clearing the sky.

For the common people, the change was immediate and undeniable. When they visited government offices, they no longer encountered bureaucratic runarounds, bribery demands, or endless delays.

Long-neglected public matters were now being handled efficiently by newly appointed officials, and life in West Lucozia began improving in every aspect.

Rather than fearing this crackdown, the people welcomed it with open arms.

Corrupt officials had long been a source of suffering, and now that Austin had removed them, the people of West Lucozia were relieved and overjoyed.

Austin's reputation soared.

No one could have imagined that the once-irrelevant playboy, scorned by all, would rise to become a powerful and independent figure.

After staying in West Lucozia for three days, Dustin departed for Oakvale.

Austin had wanted to accompany him, but Dustin refused.

With Rufus still recovering from his injuries, Austin was responsible for his care and was now the only one overseeing the palace.

Dustin couldn't risk something happening in his absence, so he firmly discouraged Austin from leaving and set off alone.

As the future King of West Lucozia, Austin had responsibilities to uphold. Meanwhile, Dustin preferred the freedom of the open world.

Of course, if Austin ever found himself in trouble, Dustin would be there for him as his elder brother.

Before leaving, Dustin asked Austin about the political situation in the Forbidden City.

Specifically, he wanted to know which prince West Lucozia Palace would support for the throne.

After all, every faction was closely watching this matter.

Austin's answer was simple:

"Whoever you support, West Lucozia Palace will support."

Dustin was caught off guard. The weight of representing West Lucozia Palace in such a critical decision was not something he had expected.

He never wanted to be involved in the power struggles of the court, but between his ties to Natasha and his obligations to West Lucozia, staying neutral was no longer an option.

The future of Dragonmarsh depended on the next emperor.

A wise choice could bring prosperity, securing West Lucozia's safety and potentially elevating Natasha and the Ballard family to greater heights.

But a wrong move could spell disaster.

Dustin had to think carefully.

Upon arriving in Oakvale, Dustin immediately went to the Ballard family's estate and delivered Tobias's ashes to Simon, the Duke of Lachshire.

Simon broke down in tears, and the entire Ballard family was consumed with grief.

Though they had been worried ever since Tobias lost contact, they had clung to a sliver of hope—believing he had only been kidnapped and might still be alive.

But as they stared at his ashes, that last hope was crushed.

No one had expected that Tobias's journey to West Lucozia would cost him his life.

"It's all my fault... It's all my fault... I never should have let him leave Oakvale..."

Overcome with guilt, Simon wept bitterly, clutching Tobias's ashes—then suddenly collapsed.

Panic erupted in the household.

Dustin checked on him and confirmed that Simon had simply fainted from grief and exhaustion.

With Simon incapacitated, Kairo stepped forward to arrange Tobias's funeral.

According to tradition, the coffin would remain in the mourning hall for three days to allow people to pay their respects.

Throughout those days, visitors arrived in a steady stream.

As a third-rank military general, Tobias hadn't been the most powerful figure in Oakvale, but he was well-known and respected.

Moreover, due to Duke Simon's status, the funeral attracted many high-ranking guests.

Tobias's wife sat beside the coffin, her eyes swollen from crying, her body weak from grief.

Beside her were their two children, both barely in their twenties.

Each time a visitor came to pay their respects, lighting incense and bowing before the coffin, Tobias's wife and children knelt and bowed in return.

Then, amidst the heavy atmosphere of sorrow, a voice rang out from outside the mourning hall:

“The Prince has arrived!”

A moment later, a tall young man with an imposing presence strode in, accompanied by several officials.

Prince Tristan.

His sudden appearance silenced the room.

Mourning guests instinctively paused, turning to watch him.

Surprise, reverence, and speculation filled their eyes.

After all, a prince of such noble status rarely attended funerals, especially for a third-rank general.

His presence here was shocking.

Chapter 2518

“Greetings to His Royal Highness the Prince!”

As soon as Tristan arrived at the door, Kairo quickly set aside his grief. Leading the entire Ballard family, he stepped forward and bowed in respect.

Before he could complete the gesture, Tristan raised a hand to stop him. “The dead are gone. There’s no need for formalities.”

He turned his gaze toward the portrait in the mourning hall and let out a quiet sigh. “General Tobias passed away too soon. It’s a great loss for Dragonmarsh. The departed are at peace, and the living must carry on. Please accept my condolences.”

Tears welled up in Kairo’s eyes as he cupped his hands and said, “Thank you for your kindness, Your Highness. This loss weighs heavily on me.”

Tristan gave a slight nod and looked around briefly before asking, “I heard the Duke of Lachshire collapsed from grief. How is he now?”

Kairo sighed. “He was overwhelmed with sorrow and anxiety, but he is stable now. He will need time to recover.”

“The Duke of Lachshire is a pillar of Dragonmarsh. It pains me to see him suffer such a blow,” Tristan said solemnly. “If he needs anything during his recovery, please let me know. I will do all I can to help.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Kairo bowed again.

He understood Tristan’s intentions immediately. Although Tristan was the eldest prince, he was the weakest among the contenders for the throne. If he wanted a real chance at ruling, he needed to secure strong allies—like the Ballard family. Their support would give him significant leverage in court.

Kairo was well aware of this, but he couldn’t openly acknowledge it. For now, all he could do was express his gratitude.

“The Second Prince has arrived!”

A voice called from outside, drawing everyone’s attention. Even Tristan turned to look.

A tall, sharp-eyed young man strode in with a commanding presence, flanked by several officials. His aura exuded strength and discipline, a clear mark of a seasoned warrior.

It was the second prince, Matthias.

“Greetings to His Royal Highness the Second Prince!” Kairo led the family in another respectful bow.

“No need for such formalities,” Matthias replied, raising his hand in acknowledgment. As he was about to speak, he caught sight of Tristan and momentarily frowned. However, his expression quickly returned to normal.

“Brother, I didn’t expect to see you here. What a surprise.” Matthias gave a half-smile.

“General Tobias gave his life for the nation. Naturally, I came to pay my respects,” Tristan replied evenly. “But you, Matthias, are always busy. It must have taken a lot for you to make time for this.”

“We both understand our responsibilities,” Matthias said, brushing aside the remark. He moved straight to the mourning hall, lit incense, and bowed deeply before the coffin. His actions were swift and purposeful, reflecting his decisive nature.

After paying his respects, Matthias turned to Kairo. “Mr. Ballard, how is the Duke of Lachshire’s condition?”

“His health is stable, but he needs rest,” Kairo replied.

"When a person passes, it's like a candle going out. I hope the Duke takes care of himself," Matthias said. "If your family needs anything, don't hesitate to reach out to me. I will do everything in my power to assist you."

The familiar words made Tristan frown slightly.

"Thank you, Second Prince," Kairo said, bowing again.

Like Tristan, Matthias was also seeking the Ballard family's support. With his military background and strong influence in the army, their backing would give him an advantage in the race for the throne.

"The prince has arrived!"

Another voice rang out, making the atmosphere tense.

Tristan and Matthias exchanged looks before turning toward the entrance.

Another competitor had arrived.

Under the watchful eyes of the mourners, Prince Nathaniel strode in, accompanied by several officials. His presence was striking—handsome, refined, and carrying an air of quiet confidence. His sharp gaze swept across the room.

"Greetings, Your Highness the Prince!"

Kairo composed himself and led his family in another formal greeting.

He hadn't expected all of Dragonmarsh's most powerful princes to gather here. Looking at the scene, he knew this funeral was bound to become something more than just a farewell for the departed.

"Mr. Ballard, I share in your sorrow," Nathaniel said with a heavy heart. "The Duke of Lachshire's dedication to the kingdom is well known, and now General Tobias has sacrificed himself for the country. The Ballard family has shown nothing but loyalty and valor. I will personally ensure that your contributions are acknowledged by my parents so that your family receives the recognition it deserves."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Kairo bowed yet again.

The three princes now stood together in the mourning hall. Outwardly, they had come to offer condolences, but beneath the surface, they were engaged in a silent battle for influence.

Kairo could only hope that their competition would not escalate to the point of disrupting the solemnity of the occasion.

In the corner of the mourning hall, Dustin quietly observed the unfolding scene. He shook his head to himself.

He had never wished to be involved in court politics, yet circumstances had drawn him in.

Watching the three princes subtly maneuver for the throne, he couldn't help but worry for the future of Dragonmarsh. If the wrong ruler ascended, the nation would be plunged into chaos.

Chapter 2519

"Oh? I didn't expect my eldest and second brothers to be here as well."

As Nathaniel stepped into the mourning hall, prepared to pay his respects to the deceased, he noticed Tristan and Matthias standing there. He bowed politely. "Big Brother, Second Brother."

He had anticipated this situation before arriving, so he wasn't surprised in the slightest.

The eight powerful families and the four royal clans were all targets he sought to win over.

With the Ballard family still undecided on where their loyalties lay, he wouldn't miss the chance to make an impression.

"Brother, I heard you left Oakvale on official business. What brings you back so soon?" Tristan asked, his tone laced with meaning.

"My matters were of little importance. The moment I heard of General Tobias's heroic sacrifice, I rushed back immediately to personally see him off," Nathaniel replied smoothly.

His response not only defused Tristan's probing question but also gave him an opportunity to express his sincerity to the Ballard family.

"Brother, don't just stand there. Light a stick of incense for General Tobias," Matthias said casually.

"Of course."

Nathaniel gave a slight nod, then stepped forward, lit an incense stick, and gazed at the late general's portrait. His eyes reddened, his expression filled with sorrow.

"General Tobias, your passing is a profound loss for all of us—and for the nation itself.

Looking back, you led your troops into battle countless times, displaying extraordinary courage and unparalleled military talent. The stability of the capital, the safety of our people—your legacy is written into every moment of it.

Your bravery and unwavering dedication have inspired countless souls to serve this country. Today, as I stand before you, my heart is filled with deep admiration and sorrow. May you rest in peace. Your remarkable achievements will forever be remembered and recorded in history."

With that, Nathaniel raised the incense stick solemnly above his head and bowed deeply before the coffin.

His words moved many in attendance.

They hadn't expected the prince to be so heartfelt and devoted, and his grief-stricken demeanor was compelling.

Even though the Ballard family knew these were just well-crafted words, they couldn't help but be touched.

Regardless of his true intentions, Nathaniel's sincerity was on full display.

"My brother is quite the actor," Tristan muttered, frowning. "He's managed to outshine both of us with that performance."

In comparison, Tristan felt his own efforts fell short. As the eldest prince, he had attended, paid his respects, and offered condolences—lowering his status as a gesture of respect. He had done his part.

Yet Nathaniel had gone even further. His heavy, sorrowful tone, the near-tears in his eyes—if someone didn't know better, they might have thought he was mourning a parent.

Even if Nathaniel were to do it again, he likely couldn't replicate the effect so perfectly.

"Hmph! Just tricks and theatrics," Matthias sneered. "Everyone can see through his act. The Ballard family isn't foolish—they know exactly what's going on."

"Matthias," Tristan said thoughtfully, "there's a saying: 'Flattery never wears out.' Even if you know someone is just saying pretty words, if they say them well enough, people still enjoy hearing them. That's Nathaniel's brilliance."

Flattery alone wouldn't change the political landscape, but at crucial moments, it could certainly leave an impression.

If two people had equal capabilities, but one was eloquent while the other was indifferent, it was obvious who would win favor.

As Tristan and Matthias exchanged quiet words, Simon, dressed in mourning attire, slowly entered the hall, supported by Natasha.

The room instantly fell silent.

"Greetings, Duke of Lachshire!"

Everyone bowed in unison.

Even the eldest prince followed suit, paying his respects as a junior.

In court, they were royalty, but here, they were simply younger generations paying tribute.

“Thank you all for coming to honor my son,” Simon said, bowing slightly, his voice hoarse with grief.

“Duke of Lachshire, you are too kind,” Nathaniel stepped forward first, his expression still heavy with sorrow. “General Tobias devoted his life to the nation, risking everything for our safety. We should be here to honor him. If the Ballard family ever faces difficulties, I will do everything in my power to help.”

Tristan and Matthias exchanged glances before stepping forward to express similar sentiments.

They might maintain their airs in front of others, but before Simon, that wasn’t an option.

As a veteran in the political arena and a high-ranking duke, Simon’s influence far surpassed that of Kairo and the other nobles.

For these princes, whether they could one day claim the throne depended heavily on Simon’s stance.

“I will always remember Your Highness’s presence here today,” Simon said, sighing lightly. “However, the Ballard residence is quite busy now. I fear we may not be able to properly host Your Highness. I ask for your understanding.”

His words were polite, but their meaning was clear—at this moment, the Ballard family wanted no part in political struggles.

For now, discussions of alliances would have to wait.

Chapter 2520

The three princes weren’t fools—they could hear the meaning behind the words.

Their visit today wasn’t just about paying respects. It was a chance to express condolences and win over the Ballard family. If they succeeded, that would be ideal. If not, showing goodwill was still worthwhile.

Most importantly, as long as the Ballard family didn’t take sides or become their enemy, there was still hope. There was no need to rush.

“Duke of Lachshire, you’re too kind. We’ve always admired General Tobias’s loyalty and courage, and we simply came to pay our respects. That’s all,” Tristan said first.

“Yes, Duke of Lachshire, your family must be overwhelmed right now. You’re getting older and should focus on your health. The three of us won’t take up any more of your time,” Matthias added, cupping his fists respectfully as he made a move to leave.

“List—” Nathaniel began to speak, but Tristan cut him off.

“Alright, Nathaniel. The Duke is tired. We shouldn’t cause any more trouble. Let’s go.”

Hmph! Like he ever lets anyone else talk. Once Nathaniel opens his mouth, he goes on and on like he could talk the dead back to life. If they let him stay any longer, who knows what tricks he’d pull to cozy up to the Ballard family?

If he managed to win them over, it’d be game over.

Tristan quickly said, “Nathaniel, Matthias needs to talk to you. Let’s step outside.”

Matthias didn’t wait. He grabbed Nathaniel’s shoulder and dragged him out of the hall.

Nathaniel had prepared a whole speech, but now he had no choice but to swallow it.

“Duke of Lachshire, please accept our condolences. We’ll take our leave now,” Tristan said, nodding politely before following Matthias out of the mourning hall.

At that moment, both Tristan and Matthias shared one goal—shut Nathaniel up and avoid causing a scene.

Matthias kept his arm around Nathaniel as they walked out the front gate of the Ballard residence.

Matthias was smiling; Nathaniel looked furious.

“Second Brother, what was that about?!”

As soon as they were outside, Nathaniel shook off Matthias’s hand. His voice was sharp. “If you wanted to leave, fine—but why drag me out too?”

“Nathaniel, the Ballard family is in mourning. You badgering them will only make them look down on you. I’m trying to help you,” Matthias said with a strained smile.

“Hmph! Who knows what you’re really up to?” Nathaniel scoffed.

“Nathaniel, did you hear what the Duke said? His son just died—he’s in no condition to talk politics. Why force the issue?” Tristan said calmly.

“You’re not wrong, Brother,” Nathaniel shot back, “but how is your reason for coming here any different from mine?”

They were all just foxes paying a New Year’s visit to a chicken—none of them had pure intentions. None of them had the right to criticize anyone else.

“I just don’t want you to go too far,” Tristan said.

“And I won’t bother worrying about whether you have. Goodbye.”

Nathaniel didn’t want to argue anymore. He flicked his sleeves and stormed off.

With their father’s health deteriorating, the crown prince would soon be named. The battle between the three princes was now out in the open.

One step forward could mean power and control. One misstep could lead to ruin.

At this stage, none of them could afford to hold back.

“Matthias, out of the three of us, it seems Father favors Nathaniel the most,” Tristan said, watching Nathaniel walk away.

“True. He’s always been Father’s favorite,” Matthias replied.

“If—just if—Nathaniel becomes emperor, what do you think will happen to us?”

Matthias narrowed his eyes. “Nathaniel is cunning and holds grudges. If he takes the throne, things won’t end well for either of us.”

Tristan sighed. “Yes. He’s not someone who forgives easily.”

As brothers and rivals, they knew Nathaniel’s nature well.

On the surface, he was warm and courteous. But deep down, he was petty and ruthless. Anyone who crossed him ended up miserable.

“Brother, you know I value loyalty. I always repay kindness tenfold,” Matthias said, then shifted the conversation. “Instead of letting Nathaniel take the throne and put us at risk, why not help me ascend instead? If I become emperor, I’ll never forget your support.”

Tristan’s eyes flickered, then he smiled. “Matthias, you already have strong backing from Prince Mosey’s Mansion. Do you really need my help too?”

Matthias might be slightly better than Nathaniel in character—but only slightly.

The truth was, they were all dangerous. All capable of destroying their enemies without mercy.

None of them truly believed each other’s promises.

After all, who didn’t want to sit at the top?

They’d spent their lives lying low, waiting for this moment. And now, to hand it over to someone else? That was something none of them were willing to accept.

