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At the same time, Terraen's face lit up with a brilliant smile. His small body erupted with a fierce, earthy yellow light-the pure, core power of this mountain spirit's essence.

Without hesitation, he poured all of his condensed earth energy-accumulated over countless years-into a thick, surging yellow torrent. It followed Cyran's blue pillar of light, merging with it as they both surged toward Dustin, buried beneath the ruins.

Two streams of power collided in him Cyran's life force with years of cultivation, and the fire of his soul, combined with Terraen's purest, most elemental earth energy as a mountain spirit. Together, they flooded Dustin without restraint, a torrent of raw, overwhelming power.

"No..." the demonized Malthor roared, a mix of fury and disbelief.

His dragon claw slammed down, but it tore through nothing but the fleeting illusions Cyran and Terraen had left behind. Their bodies were gone, having poured every last ounce of themselves into that final act.

All that remained were specks of teal-yellow light, drifting like fireflies and serving as a silent testament to their existence. They had given their lives for humanity, and their souls had returned to the world.

At that moment, the rubble that Dustin was buried under exploded outward. An indescribable, overwhelming presence erupted, as if an ancient, primordial sovereign had awoken from a long slumber.

Brilliant, seven-colored immortal radiance punched through the sky, blasting away the demonic energy and murderous intent that had choked the air. It instantly illuminated the Elysium Immortal Palace's ruin as if by daylight itself.

Dustin rose through the shimmering immortal light. He was still dressed in white, pristine and untouched by dust or blood. All his previous injuries had completely healed. The energy radiating off him ran deeper than any ocean and stretched wider than the night sky.

His eyes no longer carried the sharpness of a swordmaster. Instead, they radiated calm and authority, as if he were looking down on all beings, understanding the very essence of the world.

A faint current of chaotic energy swirled around him, as if every gesture could bend the cosmic laws and reshape the world itself. He felt the immense power coursing through him, far beyond what he had ever understood.

It was a gift from Cyran and Terraen, offered at the cost of their lives. Two forces of the exact origin, different in nature, fused perfectly into a single, overwhelming essence.

With that power surging through him, Dustin's long-stalled bottleneck had been broken through, and now he had stepped into a realm spoken of only in legend. He had finally reached the immortal realm.

Dustin's gaze settled on the demonized Malthor, who now looked uncertain, even afraid. Slowly, he raised his hand. He didn't use a sword, but just a sword finger. He pressed them gently downward toward Malthor.

"Seal him!"

The word left her lips, and the law obeyed. 2

A massive, rainbow-hued sigil appeared above the head of the corrupted Malthor. It was vast enough to blot out the sky and seemed woven directly from the cosmic law. Ignoring distance and space, it pressed down with unstoppable authority.

"I am the Supreme Demon Lord," Malthor roared defiantly. "How dare you..."

Demonic energy erupted around him, black dragon claws tearing at space itself, and crimson breath incinerating everything in their path. He struck at the sigil with every ounce of his power.

But the rainbow sigil, infused with the laws of humans and immortals and the will of two fallen guardians, made his resistance look meaningless.

His demonic energy touched the sigil and melted away like ice. Even his dragon claws shattered the moment they gripped it. His breath was absorbed, purified without mercy.

The rainbow sigil pressed down like a guillotine, unyielding, until it stamped itself across the forehead of the demonized Malthor.

He let out a bloodcurdling scream. His massive demonic body trembled, contracted, and twisted violently under the sigil's power.

Black dragon scales flaked away from his body, revealing rotting flesh beneath. A swelling on his forehead burst, sending foul blood trickling down.

Those fleshy wings on his back disintegrated piece by piece. The demonic energy that had been pouring off him in waves suddenly started venting like a ruptured tank, dissipating under the sigil's purification before it could spread.

With one final howl filled with endless rage and refusal to yield, Malthor's colossal form collapsed entirely. His body shrank back into human shape, charred from head to toe.

He gasped weakly as he slumped to the ground, crushed beneath the unrelenting pressure of the seven-colored sigils, rendering him immobile.

The chaotic, devouring dragon energy coursing through him gradually settled, dissipating under the sigils' purifying influence.

One strike was all it took when an immortal decided to seal the demon. On the shattered ruins of the Immortal Palace, Dustin stood alone, radiant with lingering immortal light. Malthor lay suppressed on the ground, broken and humiliated.

The seven-colored sigils rotated slowly above him, radiating overwhelming celestial power that pinned Malthor to the ruined palace floor.

The once-proud figure who devoured his fellow cultivators and transformed into a demonic dragon now looked like a prisoner nailed to a pillar of shame. He was charred black, gasping for breath, barely clinging to life.

Only the occasional twitch of his body and the strange, incomprehensible sounds from his throat reminded anyone that he was still alive, enduring the torments of rune purification and suppression.

The oppressive pressure of demonic energy and raging dragon essence that had filled the air gradually faded as Malthor was subdued.

The suffocating weight of his evil finally lifted, leaving behind nothing but the devastated ruins, the lingering smoke and dust, and the faint, solemn echo of a battle fought to the limit.

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The chaotic energy around Dustin slowly unraveled, and the seven-colored immortal glow dimmed until everything settled again. He felt a massive yet controllable surge of immortal energy inside him.

Instead of feeling triumphant, a heavy knot of emotion settled in his chest. The surge of power inside him carried a cost he couldn't ignore. Cyran and Terraen had sacrificed themselves, and all that remained of them was the silence they left behind.

Dustin's gaze swept across the spot where they had vanished. Only scattered motes of greenish-yellow sparks lingered in the air, flickering stubbornly like the last fireflies of summer. They seemed unwilling to fade, carrying a quiet hope that refused to die.

He lowered his head in silent respect, honoring their sacrifice, the protection they had offered, and the enduring spirit that would outlast the world itself.

"Mr. Xalvador and my young friend, rest in peace. The evil here has been purged," Dustin said quietly. His voice was calm, but carried a quiet resolve, as if his words were a promise that could not be broken.

Just then, he heard hurried footsteps and tear-choked shouting from the edge of the rubble. Supported by Judith, Grace stumbled forward and shouted, "Dustin!"

Her hair was a mess, her clothes streaked with dust and blood, and worry was written all over her face. She looked at him, and for a moment, she barely recognized him. His presence had grown deeper and sharper, carrying an almost otherworldly weight.

"Are... Are you alright?" she asked, her voice trembling. She couldn't stop herself from glancing at the subdued Malthor. Her gaze then drifted farther, toward the heart of the Vitalis Pool, where the sealing rift still glowed with an ominous energy.

Dustin turned to look at Grace. The cold detachment and authority in his eyes softened slightly, returning to a warmth closer to his usual. But there was still something different about him now, something untouchable, almost otherworldly.

"I'm fine. But Mr. Xalvador and that young friend who helped me suppress this demon They've already sacrificed themselves and passed on," he replied with a sigh.

Grace's body trembled. She had anticipated it, yet hearing it for herself still struck her. It filled her with an indescribable mix of sorrow and respect. She lowered her head in silent respect toward where the light had faded.

"These demons have been dealt with. Do you think the Dragonblood Fruit could be here?" she asked, hope flickering in her gaze.

Even after learning the truth about the elixir of immortality and witnessing the clash between immortals and demons, her determination to heal her father remained her greatest concern. Dustin sighed and turned his gaze toward the heart of the Vitalis Pool.

The sealed rift gaped like a bleeding wound. Threads of pure yet dangerous Void -Tyrant Dragon malevolent energy still seeped out and flowed into the rainbow-colored spring below.

The Dragonblood Fruit beside the spring had lost some of its luster without Malthor's power sustaining it. But the corrupting allure hidden within it remained unchanged.

"His Majesty's condition is a deep-rooted malady, one that has damaged his very life force. No ordinary medicine can cure it.

"The Dragonblood Fruit, and even the Vitalis Pool water contaminated by malevolent energy, contain the Void-Tyrant Dragon's destructive will. They are corrupt to their very essence.

"Taking them wouldn't save his life but would accelerate his death, or worse, transform him into a mindless dragon puppet that would bring catastrophe to the world."

He paused, then changed the subject.

"However... The Vitalis Pool's core spiritual liquid was originally the world's purest source of vitality. Even though it has been tainted by malevolent energy, its original essence is still there. With Malthor subdued, the malevolent energy here has lost its master and is gradually settling."

Dustin turned to Malthor, still restrained by the seven-colored sigils.

"Inside that demon, several types of dragon essence remained unrefined. Though its attributes are ferocious and destructive, fundamentally they still contain boundless life force."

Dustin raised his hand, letting his immortal essence swirl through his palm, reaching out to guide the natural laws around him.

From the rainbow sigils still holding Malthor down, a thin thread of light peeled away and slithered into his body like a cautious spirit-snake. It carefully drew out a restless, multicolored core of energy, the purified remnants of dragon core with most of its destructive intent neutralized.

At the same time, his other hand reached toward the Vitalis Pool. Invisible forces streamed into the water, filtering out the lingering, malevolent crimson energy and dissolving it completely.

From this process, he distilled a small handful of seven-colored spiritual liquid essence, shimmering with pure vitality and harmonious energy.

By using his own immortal essence as a furnace and his divine sense as flame, Dustin placed the dragon core and the seven-colored spiritual liquid in his palm. The two forces, different in nature but both teeming with life, began to fuse slowly under his control.

As the process continued, the seven-colored spiritual liquid tempered the dragon core's fury, while its own vitality grew stronger and more abundant, nourished by the dragon essence.

Moments later, a tablet roughly the size of a pigeon egg had formed in his palm. It was perfectly round, glowed with a gentle milky light, and faint cloud-like patterns were swirling across its surface.

The moment it formed, a refreshing, soul-cleansing fragrance spread from it. Its vitality wasn't as overwhelming as the Dragonblood Fruit's, but it was deeper and steadier, radiating a righteous, balanced energy.

"This tablet was crafted from purified dragon core and the Vitalis Pool's spiritual liquid, refined with my immortal essence," Dustin said, handing it out to Grace.

He went on, "I can't promise it will bring someone back from the dead, but it should restore his foundation and extend his life by ten years. That should be enough to ensure His Majesty survives this crisis and allows him to live out his remaining years in peace."

Grace's hands trembled as she took the tablet. She could feel the abundant yet balanced vitality flowing from it. Her eyes suddenly welled with tears.

She understood that this was the best outcome Dustin could provide without violating the natural order or touching the Void-Tyrant Dragon's forbidden power. To her, extending her father's life to another ten years was more than enough.

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The dead silence was broken by the sound of scuffling footsteps emerging from the edge of the rubble.

"Someone's coming!" Rhydian snapped to attention and let out a low warning. The surviving guards instantly closed ranks, forming a protective shield in front of Grace.

Dustin lifted his gaze slightly, his divine sense sweeping over the rubble. He relaxed almost immediately, as if he had been expecting them.

Through the haze of smoke and fallen columns, a group of figures moved cautiously. Leading them were Tristan, Matthias, and Nathaniel, who had been separated from them on the island for some time.

The soldiers trailing behind were noticeably fewer in number. Every one of them bore injuries, their clothes torn to rags, faces haggard with exhaustion.

Whatever they'd encountered on the way here had clearly been brutal. The three brothers looked disheveled. Their fine robes were torn, crowns sat crooked, and their faces were smeared with grime and blood.

Following the tremors from the earlier cataclysmic battle and the final eruption of the seven-colored immortal essence light, the group expected to find a rare treasure or the aftermath of a titanic clash. But what they never could have imagined was a scene of total, utter destruction.

As far as their eyes could see, everything was in ruins-palaces reduced to rubble, stone melted into molten streaks, the earth scorched black, and fissures gaping into unfathomable depths.

This was no longer a distant, immortal island. Instead, it looked like a land freshly ravaged by an apocalyptic disaster.

At the center of the ruin stood a solitary figure in white. Beneath him, a charred form was pinned by strange, seven-colored sigils, still radiating a faint but terrifying energy. The sight struck the three brothers to the core.

"What... What happened here?" Matthias asked, staring at the rubble before him in disbelief.

The sight of Malthor, pinned beneath the strange seven-colored sigils, made his heart pound. Even at the brink of death, the lingering pressure of his presence sent chills through Matthias.

Nathaniel's eyes swept over the wreckage attentively before settling on Dustin. Disbelief and intense scrutiny warred across his face.

He recognized the tattered dark battle robe on Malthor. Its style reminded him of the fearsome Thymaleon, but the lingering energy wave far exceeded anything Thymaleon had ever radiated. Still, Nathaniel couldn't believe Dustin was capable of such a feat.

Tristan appeared calm, but his fingers trembled slightly. The scene before him was too shocking to process. After all, the once-massive palace had been reduced to ruin.

"Mr. Rhys, has the danger here been eliminated?" he asked tentatively.

Dustin nodded slightly in response. He said calmly, “The demons here have been suppressed, and the turmoil has temporarily subsided.”

Such an offhand remark struck the three brothers like lightning. It hit them that Dustin was the one who single-handedly brought order to the palace and subdued this terrifying existence that was comparable to a demon.

Tristan, Matthias, and Nathaniel recalled how Dustin had intercepted Thymaleon’s golden light back in the canyon. They suddenly understood that what Dustin had displayed then was probably just the tip of the iceberg.

Grace stepped forward and quickly filled her three brothers in on what had happened, but left out many details.

She simply explained that Malthor and his group were rogue cultivators who had taken root in Elysium Isle. They intended to act against the natural order, and that Dustin, with the help of two other reclusive masters, had stopped them. Those two masters had unfortunately died in the battle.

Grace didn’t mention the Void-Tyrant Dragon, the core secrets of the seal, or the origins of the immortal essence tablet. She simply said Dustin had refined the spiritual herb to save their father.

But the word “spiritual herb” immediately caught the brothers’ attention. Their eyes flicked onto the milky-white tablet in her hand, from which a soft light and a soothing fragrance emanated.

To them, a tablet personally crafted by Dustin after a great battle between immortals and demons couldn’t be ordinary. Considering Dustin’s unfathomable strength, the three brothers couldn’t even begin to imagine what this tablet could do.

Tristan took a deep breath to suppress the turmoil in his chest. He tried to keep his tone calm.

“Mr. Rhys’s abilities are truly profound. You’re even skilled in alchemy? What exactly does this tablet do?”

Dustin glanced at him and replied indifferently, “This tablet is called the immortal essence tablet. It was forged from the residual spiritual energy of this place and the purified essence of the demons. It strengthens one’s vital essence and extends one’s lifespan.”

The moment those words left his mouth, all three brothers’ breathing quickened. If Valon sought immortality, it was only natural that the three brothers would want the same immortality and more time to secure their power.

A flash of undisguised fervor crossed Matthias' eyes. He couldn't help pressing further, "Extends lifespan? By how much?"

He'd faced death on countless battlefields without fear. But if he could live ten more years, he might conquer even greater territories.

Dustin's gaze swept across the three brothers, taking in the barely restrained greed and desire in their eyes, and he calmly replied, "Ten years.".

For men like them, living in the shadow of the throne and a thousand daggers in the dark, ten years was an eternity. There was more time to plot and more opportunities to seize power. It could be the difference between dying a prince and living long enough to become a king.

The ruins fell into strange silence. Only the faint, low hiss from the distant sealed fissure remained, along with the three brothers' heavy breathing.

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Nathaniel quickly masked his emotions. He stepped forward with a warm smile, keeping his posture low in deference.

"Mr. Rhys, you're truly a divine being. Not only can you subdue the demon, but you can also refine an elixir of immortality. Honestly, my brothers and I have been sick with worry over our father's health. We would give anything to take on his suffering.

"Could you prepare another batch and craft a few immortal essence tablets for us as well? Name your price and whatever medicinal ingredients you require. We will do everything in our power to provide for them."

Tristan and Matthias caught on immediately, echoing Nathaniel's words with equal earnestness. Their gazes locked on Dustin, full of hope.

Whether for the monumental merit of presenting the cure or the promise of ten extra years of life, the reward was enough to make any of them desperate. But Dustin slowly shook his head, his tone carrying a finality that brooked no argument.

He explained, "This tablet was crafted by chance. It drew the last remnants of essence and purified energy in this place, making it one of a kind.

"The method of refinement is not using ordinary alchemy either. It requires a specific immortal essence as a catalyst to harmonize the energy and purify malevolent energy.

“Now that the spiritual energy of this place has been depleted and the malevolent energy has dissipated, it is no longer possible to refine another. This tablet could only be crafted under these exact circumstances and cannot be deliberately recreated.”

His words doused the spark of hope the three brothers had just managed to kindle. Hearing that Dustin couldn’t make another one, that this wasn’t something anyone could force, hit them harder than they expected.

The eager smiles froze on all three faces. Disappointment flickered through their eyes, followed by frustration and bitterness they couldn’t quite cover up.

Tristan, Matthias, and Nathaniel couldn’t help stealing another glance at the immortal essence tablet in Grace’s hands.

Their looks were a complex mix of envy, jealousy, and a flicker of something darker they themselves might not have recognized. After all, the merit that could have granted their father ten more years of life had gone to their sister instead.

Tristan’s mind raced as he tried to figure out how to report this to Valon and maybe take some credit for himself.

Matthias considered what he would do if the tablet fell into his hands. Should he give it to Valon to cement his position as heir, or keep it for himself as backup? Nathaniel weighed other ways to get it from Grace or to find another opportunity.

The atmosphere grew tense and awkward. Though desire burned brightly in their hearts, none dared show the slightest hint of it in front of the unfathomable and powerful Dustin.

Nathaniel let out a dry laugh, breaking the silence first.

11 “I see... We were far too presumptuous,” he said. “Since the elixir of immortality is so rare, Grace is blessed to receive it. Being able to heal Father is a cause for great celebration.”

Tristan and Matthias forced strained smiles and murmured their agreement, though the smile didn’t reach their eyes.

Dustin noticed every flicker of expression but didn’t call them out. The intricate webs of mortal ambition and political gain meant nothing to him now. He glanced at the sky and sensed the flow of energy through the land beneath his feet.

“Our business here is done. Elysium Isle isn’t a place to linger. Though the seal is temporarily stable, its foundation has been damaged, and unforeseen events may occur. Everyone, prepare to leave the island,” he said calmly.

His words sent a chill through the group. If Dustin himself sensed danger lurking, then there was no mistaking that this place was still far from safe.

But just as Dustin was about to use his abilities to lead everyone away from Elysium Isle's core region, something unexpected happened. It wasn't coming from the subdued Malthor nor from the sealed rift.

Beneath the central spring of the immortal palace, where the seven-colored fountain once bubbled, the ground had collapsed into a bottomless void. Without warning, a black vortex began to spin within it.

It started no bigger than a millstone, but it spun at terrifying speed and expanded rapidly before their eyes. There was no spiritual energy, no malevolent energy. It was just an icy, empty nothingness that seemed to swallow every trace of light and heat.

Even more disturbing were countless chaotic, twisted roars and whispers, saturated with violence and hunger, emerging from deep within that expanding darkness. It was as if the vortex was connected to some prison of despair, packed with nightmare creatures.

A dark presence seeped from the vortex, far older, deeper, and more despairing than even the dragon blood malevolent energy. It spread as a primordial beast roused from a timeless slumber, filling the air with an ancient, oppressive evil.

"What... What is that?" Matthias cried, his voice shrill with terror as he pointed at the emerging black vortex.

Tristan and Nathaniel turned deathly white and instinctively stepped back. The energy wave emanating from it sent chills down their spines.

Even Dustin tightened his brow, his expression turning grave. He could clearly sense that the black vortex wasn't Malthor's power or the Void-Tyrant Dragon's, but something else. It could be a scar in the world's barriers, or a seal connecting to some unknown forbidden zone or prison.

But now, this seal had been weakened by successive cataclysms and energy shocks to the island's core, and was showing signs of failing.

The roars pouring from the vortex, saturated with infinite malice, warned that whatever was sealed beyond it was no benevolent force. The threat level might far exceed the Void-Tyrant Dragon itself.

"Move! Now!" Dustin shouted. He swept his sleeve, and a wave of an immense yet gentle stream of immortal essence enveloped everyone. In a flash of radiance, their figures blurred and streaked into light as they surged toward the outer edges of Elysium Isle.

Within moments, the enormous black vortex had stretched wide enough to engulf the entire ruined palace. Its depths throbbed with a dark, devouring hunger, as if ready to consume everything.

At the heart of the vortex, twisted, inhuman shapes battered against an invisible wall. Their screams cut through the air, growing sharper and closer with every passing second.

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Dustin's immortal essence light carried them a thousand miles in a blink. In less than half a day, they had crossed the endless sea and reached the central plains. He didn't linger along the coast but headed straight for the heart of Dragohmarsh, Oakvale.

Below the clouds, mountains and rivers rushed past, and towns and villages spread out like a chessboard.

The familiar warmth of the mortal world rushed toward them. It was a stark contrast to Elysium Isle, where paradise and demonic energy had collided into something uncanny. That place already felt like a world apart, as if it belonged to another life.

Grace clutched the box containing the immortal essence tablet so tightly her knuckles turned white. Her heart raced with the thrill of finally returning home, but worry for her father ran just as deep.

Dustin had said the tablet could extend Valon's life by ten years. But until she saw her father recover with her own eyes, the knot in her chest wouldn't loosen.

Tristan, Matthias, and Nathaniel were silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Their eyes kept drifting to the box in Grace's hands, and the expressions they wore were hard to read.

The merit they could receive from giving their father the medicine that could grant him ten more years had been so close, yet slipped through their fingers. It was a bitter feeling

And now Grace was returning with the elixir of immortality and immortal destiny. Her place in Valon's eyes would only rise. It would be an unpredictable shift in the succession struggle, leaving the three brothers on edge.

Inside the halls of Galene Palace in Aylka, the normally solemn place was shrouded in a thick, medicinal smell and a heavy, somber atmosphere.

Palace attendants held their breath and moved in silence. They were unable to hide their worry.

Valon, ruler of Dragonmarsh, had been bedridden for a long time. The Royal Medical Hall was helpless and could only barely keep him alive with the help of a few skilled doctors using acupuncture and secret medicines.

On the bed, his face was sallow, and his eyes were sunken deep. Each shallow, rapid breath looked as if a candle in the wind might flicker out at any moment.

Several elderly physicians with white hair and beards stood around the bed, frowning. They occasionally exchanged hushed words followed by shakes of their heads.

“Father!”

A cry shattered the deathly silence in the hall. Grace rushed inside, ignoring every rule of decorum. She lifted her skirts as she stumbled toward her father’s bedside. Seeing her father so emaciated and barely breathing, tears instantly streamed down her face.

Tristan, Matthias, and Nathaniel followed close behind. Seeing their father’s frail appearance, they also showed sorrowful expressions and dropped to their knees in formal greeting.

Valon fought to open his clouded eyes. When he saw his beloved daughter, a faint spark appeared in those dull eyes. His lips moved, but he couldn’t make a sound.

“Father, I found medicine to save you. You’re going to recover soon.” Grace choked on the words as she flipped open the jade box with trembling hands.

A refreshing, soothing scent wafted out at once. It swept through the hall, clearing out the stifling medicinal smell and lifting everyone’s spirits.

The elderly physicians, who had been frowning with worry, froze the moment they breathed it in. Their eyes widened and locked on the immortal essence tablet inside the box. The milky-white tablet glimmered with flowing light and carried a natural essence.

“This... What kind of tablet is this? How can it contain such abundant and pure vitality?” Wilbur Reese, the chief physician, exclaimed in astonishment.

Throughout his medical career, he had seen countless rare herbs and concocted countless miraculous elixirs, but he had never felt such pure and balanced life force. He could tell the tablet wasn’t from the mortal world.

“This is an immortal essence tablet. It can cure Father’s illness!” Grace replied.

She had no time for detailed explanations. After receiving Valon’s barely perceptible nod of consent, she carefully fed him the tablet.

It instantly melted in the mouth. Instead of a burning sensation, a soothing warmth spread through his aching body and restored strength to every tired muscle and bone.

Wherever it flowed, years of lingering chronic illness and drained energy began to recover, as if the body had finally been soaked by long-awaited rain.

Everyone in the hall held their breath. Their eyes were glued to Valon, lying on the bed.

They watched as his sallow complexion began to gain a rosy hue. His sunken eye sockets filled out, and his clouded gaze grew clear and bright. His ragged breaths evened out, gaining strength with each inhale.

Surprisingly, a few strands of his graying hair at the temples quietly turned black. The wrinkles on his skin were smoothed out, making him appear ten years younger.

In half an hour, Valon pushed himself up using the bed frame and slowly sat upright. Feeling the long-lost, surging'strength within his body and the renewed vitality, his face was filled with disbelieving joy.

"I feel... so much better. Better than I have in years."

Valon's voice was still a little hoarse, but it carried strength and authority. The weakness and frailty from before had vanished.

"Your Majesty is saved. It's a miracle."

Wilbur's tears streamed down his weathered face. He dropped to his knees along with the other physicians.

In their entire medical careers, they had never witnessed such a miracle. This was no longer medicine but practically divine intervention.

"Father!" Grace cried, overwhelmed with joy. At that moment, all her fears, the hardships, and sacrifices of the journey melted away into uncontainable relief and happiness.

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Valon slowly rose to his feet. He looked vigorous and spirited, with no trace of his earlier fragility.

"As expected of the immortal essence tablet. It's truly miraculous," he said with a smile, his gaze sweeping past Grace before settling on Dustin. He nodded slightly and added, "Dustin, thank you for your hard work."

He knew perfectly well that without Dustin's help, he would never have been able to retrieve the immortal essence tablet.

"You're welcome, Your Majesty. Seeing you safe and sound means I've fulfilled my duty," Dustin replied calmly.

He went on, "This journey to Elysium Isle was perilous. Princess Grace went to great lengths to find this medicine and nearly lost her life in the process. Now that Your Majesty has recovered, you should recognize both her devotion and her accomplishments."

As a ruler, Valon understood exactly what Dustin was implying. When he looked at Grace again, his expression had softened with unmistakable approval.

His daughter was talented in both civil and martial affairs, and now she'd shown him devotion and courage. She'd even ventured across treacherous seas to bring back an elixir of immortality for him.

By comparison, his three sons were utterly useless. Valon had harbored reservations before, but seeing Dustin support Grace so openly had swept away every last doubt. The time had come to make a decision that would break with centuries of tradition.

At the base of the white marble stairs outside Galene Palace, Tristan, Matthías, and Nathaniel stood beneath the covered walkway. Their faces were a mosaic of conflicting emotions.

Valon's robust voice echoed from within the hall, along with the rich, medicinal scent that radiated vitality. At that instant, the three brothers knew that their father had fully recovered and was healthier than before.

Their feelings were complex, with a tangled mix of relief and dread. Their father's recovery should have been cause for celebration for both the nation and the family. Yet, the credit for this monumental achievement fell squarely on Grace's shoulders.

"Ten years... Father has at least another ten years to live..." Tristan's voice was low, tinged with a bitterness he barely tried to hide as he stared at the closed palace doors.

That meant the succession struggle they had hoped to settle quickly was now stretched into uncertainty. And Grace, bolstered by this monumental achievement, had instantly become their most formidable rival.

Matthias snorted coldly and clenched his fists. "It's just good luck and having a powerful ally. Without Dustin, how could she possibly have obtained that elixir of immortality?"

Nathaniel's eyes narrowed. His soft features betrayed nothing as he lowered his voice.

“Matthias, you’re wrong. Luck is part of one’s strength. Our sister has returned bearing the merit of saving Father’s life, and she has the backing of a terrestrial immortal cultivator like Dustin. Her momentum is building. If we continue fighting separately, we’ll lose everything.”

The meaning behind his words was clear. The air grew heavy with tension. All three were smart enough to understand the situation.

In a one-on-one fight, none of them were confident they could suppress Grace, who was currently at the height of her power and had powerful allies by her side.

After a long silence, Tristan said decisively, “Nathaniel is right. Grace is no longer the sister we could overlook. If we wish to remain contenders, we have no choice but to join forces temporarily.”

“Join forces?” Matthias asked with a frown. “How? And what happens after?”

A sharp gleam flashed in Nathaniel’s eyes as he explained, “First, we work together to remove our sister from the game. As long as we join forces, we can leverage the court bureaucracy and public opinion, find her missteps, and gradually marginalize her influence.”

He paused, then swept his gaze across his two brothers. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

“As for what comes after... Once the situation is settled, we can compete fairly on our own merits. What do you think? At least, it’s much better than standing here watching that throne slip further away from our reach.”

Tristan pondered for a moment before nodding firmly. “I agree. The immediate priority is stabilizing the situation. We cannot allow Grace to leverage this achievement to expand her influence further.”

Matthias was reluctant, but he knew this was their only option.

“Fine,” he growled. “We’ll do it your way. Let’s deal with her first.”

In the shadows of the Galene Palace, three hands came together in a brief, silent pact before quickly parting. An alliance forged in jealousy and ambition, targeted against their own sister, was born in the very heart of power.

Inside the hall, Valon’s heart swelled with pride for his daughter. Outside, conspiracy took root, and treacherous undercurrents began to flow.

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Chapter 2727

The hustle and bustle of Oakvale faded behind them. Dustin didn't leave immediately. On a night when the moon hung clear and bright, he appeared without warning in the courtyard of Grace's private residence outside the palace. A few dishes sat on the stone table beside a bottle of wine.

Dressing in a simple, elegant casual dress, she sat alone and drank under the moonlight. When she saw him, she didn't seem surprised. Instead, she smiled and gestured to the stone bench across from her, as if she'd known he'd come to say goodbye.

"Leaving already?" she asked casually, filling a glass for him. Dustin sat and took the glass, letting the smooth warmth of it settle in his hand, and nodded. "Yes. My business here is done," he replied.

Grace raised her glass and spoke earnestly. "I truly owe you my thanks. Without you, I wouldn't have even made it to Elysium Isle, let alone obtained the immortal essence tablet to save my father."

He clinked his glass lightly against hers, the crisp ring resounding in the air.

"There's no need for that between us. You guided me there, and I helped you get the elixir. We each got what we needed, so we're even."

His voice was calm, but carried the unique sincerity and casualness between friends.

Grace smiles softly. She understood Dustin well enough to know this wasn't a polite brush-off, but what he genuinely believed. She said no more and downed her glass in one go.

"What's your next plan?" she asked, her eyes filled with concern.

Dustin fell silent for a moment. His gaze seemed to travel across thousands of miles toward the distant west. He traced the rim of his glass with one finger and spoke calmly.

"I'll be going to West Lucozia. My old man's health isn't great, so I should check on him and bring him something."

He didn't specify what, and she didn't press. She already knew Rufus' condition wasn't that great. Without miraculous medicine to sustain him, he wouldn't last much longer.

"It's a long journey, so take care," Grace said, raising her glass again. "Send my regards to the Prince of West Lucozia."

"Will do," Dustin replied, downing the rest of his wine and standing up in one smooth motion. "I'm off."

There were no lengthy goodbyes. Just like when he'd arrived, his figure flickered briefly in the moonlight and vanished. She looked at the empty stone bench and smiled faintly.

After spending so much time together, that figure had unknowingly carved a place in her heart. It was a shame his heart already belonged to another.

After leaving Oakvale, Dustin didn't head to West Lucozia. He knew refining an immortal essence tablet wouldn't be easy. Years of chronic illness had drained Rufus' vital energy, so the tablet had to be of exceptional refinement quality.

Without the fortunate circumstances of Elysium Isle, he would need to rely on his own core energy to craft the tablet, and that would take some time.

Several days later, the training grounds of the West Lucozia castle were alive with activity. Banners whipped in the wind, and the sounds of clashing weapons echoed across the field. Even with Rufus bedridden, the West Lucozian cavalry's drills never slackened for a single day.

At the center, a tall, solidly built young officer in black training gear barked orders and guided soldiers through formation drills. His voice boomed like thunder, his movements sharp and efficient.

That was Dustin's younger brother, Austin.

Suddenly, Austin felt something and turned. At the edge of the training grounds stood a white-robed figure that hadn't been there a moment ago, watching him quietly.

"Dustin?" His surprise quickly gave way to joy. Ignoring the soldiers around him, he sprinted over in a few long strides.

"When did you get back? Why didn't you tell me?" he asked excitedly. Seeing his brother's more muscular frame, Dustin smiled faintly and clapped him on the shoulder.

"I've just arrived," he replied. "Looks like the training's been paying off, you've bulked up quite a bit."

"I spend every day at the barracks. How could I not get stronger?" Austin said with a smile.

But then he thought of something, and his expression sobered. He spoke in a low voice.

"Father's condition is getting worse by the day. I don't know how much longer he has. He keeps asking about you. Maybe you should go see him?"

“Don’t worry. I’ve already found a solution, “Dustin said, pulling out a box from inside his pocket and handing it over. “Take this. Have the old man swallow what’s inside. It’ll extend his life by ten years.”

“Extend his life by ten years?” Austin’s head snapped up. His eyes were filled with excitement and disbelief, his voice trembling slightly. “Dustin, are you serious?”

“I already had the King of Dragonmarsh test it. It absolutely works,” Dustin replied, dropping the astonishing claim without ceremony.

“You had His Majesty test a medicine for Father?” Austin said, raising an eyebrow. He knew only his brother would dare say something so outrageous.

“There’s no time to waste. Go now,” Dustin instructed. “And don’t tell him I gave it to you.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?” Austin asked.

Dustin hesitated, then shook his head. “No.

I’ll wait here for your news.” He still couldn’t bring himself to face the truth. Perhaps he didn’t know how to face his dying father, or perhaps he couldn’t bear to see the once-indomitable figure become so fragile.

Austin didn’t force him. He simply gave him a firm salute, turned, and bolted from the training grounds. Gathering his most trusted guards, he raced at breakneck speed towards his father’s secluded residence.

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Chapter 2728

The meditation chamber at Echowave Hall was unlike the strict, oppressive atmosphere of the castle. It was usually quiet and serene. But now, the master bedroom reeked of medicinal herbs and a heavy, somber atmosphere.

Rufus, who once commanded fear across the land, now lay frail and wasted on the bed. Gray strands of hair clung to his forehead. His face was a dull, sickly gray, and his eyes were sunken deep. Each shallow breath made it feel like the spark of his life could vanish at any moment.

Eloise sat at the bedside, carefully wiping his withered hands with a warm towel. Her eyes were puffy and red, with streaks of tears still fresh on her cheeks.

Several gray-haired royal physicians stood nearby, shaking their heads and sighing in helpless resignation. Rufus' condition had worsened beyond saving, and no medicine could pull him back from the brink.

"Father! Mother!" Austin barged into the room without bothering with the dust on his clothes or any formalities.

"Austin? What are you..." Eloise said, surprised and heartbroken at the sight of her son. He didn't explain, then rushed to the bedside and snapped open the box. " Mother, give this tablet to Father now."

The instant the box opened, the air was filled with a refreshing, soothing scent that brimmed with vitality. The oppressive, suffocating heaviness of the room lifted, and everyone felt a spark of renewed energy

"This... What is this?" Eloise and the elderly physicians stared in shock. None had ever encountered a tablet radiating such a rich life force.

"This is an immortal essence tablet. It can save Father's life. There's no time to waste. Give it to him now," Austin urged.

Seeing the grave determination on her son's face, Eloise bit her lip and made her decision. She carefully lifted her husband's nearly weightless head and placed the milky-white tablet between his chapped lips.

It instantly melted in the mouth, transforming into an incredibly warm current without needing to be swallowed.

Like the first thawing stream of early spring, it coursed along his dried-out circulatory pathways, seeping into his weathered internal organs, and revived the essence that had been on the verge of exhaustion.

Everyone held their breath and fixed their gaze on Rufus. At first, there was no significant change. But after a few heartbeats, a miracle began to unfold.

Rufus's ashen complexion started gaining a healthy flush at a visible rate, as if rain had soaked through parched earth.

His sunken eye sockets slowly regained shape, filling out as if someone were pressing them back into place. His breathing, which had been so weak it nearly stopped, began growing deeper, steadier, and stronger. Even his chest rose and fell with a firm, natural rhythm.

Even more astonishing, the frail skeleton beneath his skin began to regain life. His shrunken muscles slowly filled out, and the blue veins under his skin pulsed with renewed strength.

Deep inside, a surge of energy, only seen in a man at his prime, began to awaken. In less than half an hour, Rufus's closed eyelids trembled several times under everyone's disbelieving gazes before snapping open.

They were the eyes of a man who had once commanded respect across the land, sharp and piercing like an eagle's. Though initially clouded with confusion, clarity and commanding presence quickly returned to them.

He flexed his arm instinctively, feeling the long-lost strength within and the vigorous vitality that seemed to have returned him to his peak.

"I... I'm alive?" Rufus looked down at his own body, disbelief written across his face.

"Your Highness!"

"Father!"

Eloise and Austin couldn't contain themselves. Tears streamed down their faces as they rushed to his bedside, overwhelmed with relief.

She threw her arms around her husband, sobbing uncontrollably.

The attendants and physicians around them dropped to their knees, excitedly shouting, "Your Highness has recovered. This is truly a miracle."

"Austin, tell me. Where did this tablet come from?" Rufus asked curiously. He'd been sure he was at death's door, but one tablet gave him a new lease on life.

"This... I-It was a gift from a reclusive master," Austin stammered. "The master heard of your lifelong dedication to the people and the country, and sent this immortal essence tablet as a gift for you."

"A reclusive master?" Rufus scrutinized his son, his eyes narrowing. "Austin, you haven't changed one bit. You always get nervous when lying to me. Tell me the truth. Who actually gave it to you? This is a life-saving grace, so I must properly repay him."

"Fine. I won't hide it from you anymore," Austin admitted. He couldn't take the pressure from his Father's relentless gaze anymore and came clean. "Dustin sent this tablet from thousands of miles away. But he told me not to tell you."

"Logan?" Rufus froze for a moment, then burst into hearty laughter. "That stubborn brat. So he hasn't forgotten me after all. That's more like it."

Surprise and relief washed over him at the same time. He hadn't thought Dustin could actually find the elixir of immortality, and yet here he was, finally letting go of past grudges. The only regret was that his son still wouldn't show his face.

Rufus thought perhaps Dustin was too stubborn to set aside his pride. But there was time. His body thrummed with new life, and chances to make things right would come.

Dustin stood atop the highest watchtower at the castle with his hands clasped behind his back. The night wind stirred his robes. With his cultivation level, despite the distance, everything in that distant chamber was as clear as if he stood right there.

He heard his father's robust laughter. Seeing the once-again straight and powerful posture, the relieved expression on his face that seemed to take ten years off his age, even as he grumbled about Dustin being a brat.

The knot within him finally loosened. The next moment, his form shifted slightly. He merged into the cool night breeze and vanished silently from the tower's peak, alerting no one.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2729

After leaving the West Lucozian castle, Dustin returned to Oakvale. The trip to Elysium Isle hadn't been for nothing. Cyran and Terraen had passed on their lifetime of cultivation, life essence, and their soul flames.

Dustin had also inherited fragments of Cyran's memories. It turned out that beyond the martial arts, immortal cultivators also existed in this world. But people like them were so withdrawn from the mortal world that most people would never meet one in their lifetime.

Malthor from Elysium Isle was an immortal cultivator. However, he had strayed onto the wrong path and was essentially called a demonic cultivator. When martial artists spoke of reaching the terrestrial immortal realm, immortal cultivators called it peak core formation.

Dustin had already reached that level. He was just one step away from breaking through to form his nascent soul. The process wasn't exactly difficult, but it wasn't simple either.

He could already sense that the threshold to nascent soul was becoming clearer in some intangible way. But this step couldn't be crossed by sheer accumulation of spiritual power alone.

He needed to "return to mortality" in order to break through his mental state. Only when his soul was complete and free of regret could he truly advance to the nascent soul.

After returning to Oakvale, Dustin moved back into the villa he'd stayed in before. The place wasn't rich in spiritual energy, but was surrounded by the ordinary atmosphere of the mortal world.

But that was exactly what he needed. A quiet place where the noise of the world could wash over him, helping him temper his state of mind.

The villa looked the same as he'd left it, though the garden had grown a bit wild without anyone to care for it. He closed the door behind him and shut out all worldly disturbances.

Instead of sitting down to cultivate, he let everything go. He emptied his mind and slipped into a simple, almost mundane routine-reading, drinking tea, sweeping the courtyard, watching the sun rise and set, as well as listening to the wind and rain.

Dustin stopped using even a trace of divine sense. He even stopped drawing in the ambient spiritual energy and deliberately forgot about his earth-shaking divine abilities.

Seven days slipped by in the blink of an eye. On the morning of the seventh day, sunlight filtered through the window and fell across him as he sat quietly on the meditation mat. The vast spiritual presence that had surrounded him, perfectly harmonious and restrained, quietly receded like a tide.

It wasn't just suppressed but truly vanished. As Dustin slowly opened his eyes, the profound depths that once saw through illusion and truth were nowhere to be found.

His gaze was clear, ordinary even, carrying a faint confusion that belonged to someone who'd just stepped back into the world.

When he stood and stretched, his joints felt heavy, and his body felt tired. All the sensations he hadn't felt in years-hunger, thirst, the cool bite of early morning air-returned in sharp detail.

"Return to mortality... So this is what it means?" Dustin murmured, a smile of acceptance crossing his lips.

He could clearly sense that his core had been shrouded in a layer of chaotic, hazy mist. His sea of consciousness was completely silent, and he could no longer extend his divine sense to probe his surroundings at will.

Right now, whether physically or spiritually, he was no different from an ordinary person. His indestructible body, immunity to all poisons, and everything had completely disappeared. 1

Dustin understood perfectly that this was the "mortal seal" stage that preceded breaking through to the nascent soul. He needed to walk the mortal world again and experience the full weight of human emotions-joy and sorrow, life and death.

Only when the right opportunity arrived could he shatter his core to form his nascent soul and return to his peak. During this period, he absolutely couldn't forcibly break the seal to use his true essence. Otherwise, his foundation would be damaged, and all his efforts would be wasted.

"After all this running around, it's time to live a normal life for a while," Dustin said with a smile, pushing open the villa's main door.

The sunlight was glaring, and he instinctively raised a hand to shield his eyes. The thought of that bright, warm-hearted woman with her radiant smile, a wave of warmth and intense longing surged through his chest.

"Natasha..." he muttered. Dustin's first instinct was to step onto the wind and fly straight to her. The thought barely formed before he stopped and let out a short, self-mocking laugh. After all, he was just an ordinary man now.

Shaking his head, he walked to the roadside and flagged down a taxi.

"Take me to Dash Corporation," he said. Inside the CEO's office at Dash Corporation, Natasha sat behind her large desk reviewing documents. She wore a sharp white suit that outlined her curves.

Bright sunlight streamed through the floor -to-ceiling windows, casting a soft halo around her refined profile. But between her eyebrows lingered a trace of persistent exhaustion and longing.

It had been months, and Dustin had disappeared without a word. She knew he was capable of handling anything and that he was off dealing with something important. But worry and frustration had only grown in her heart with each passing day.

Just then, someone knocked at the door. "Come in," Natasha said coldly without looking up. Her secretary entered, looking somewhat troubled.

"Ms. Harmon, Mr. Chandler is here again. He's holding a huge bouquet of roses and insists on seeing you."

Natasha frowned instantly, with unconcealed disgust flashing in her beautiful eyes.

"Tell him I'm in a meeting and I'm busy. And tell him to stop coming!" she snapped.

"But he..." The secretary was clearly intimidated by Gilbert Chandler's background. "Do as I say!" Natasha barked, her tone leaving no room for argument.

"Yes, Ms. Harmon." The secretary didn't dare say more and quickly retreated. Soon, a commotion erupted outside her office.

“Meeting? What meeting? Natasha, I know you’re in there. My feelings for you are genuine. Why do you keep shutting me out?

The voice gradually faded as security escorted Gilbert away. Natasha rubbed her temples irritably, feeling utterly drained. She realized that these pests just wouldn’t go away, no matter how hard she tried to get rid of them.

She stood and walked to the window, gazing down at the endless stream of traffic below.

“Where are you, dear?” she sighed softly. ”

If you don’t come back soon, these pests are going to drive me crazy.”

Just then, the office door was gently pushed open again.

“I said I’m not seeing anyone! Are you deaf?” Natasha snapped, turning around.

Her pent-up anger was ready to erupt. But when she saw the figure standing in the doorway, all her anger, irritation, and exhaustion froze in an instant. It soon melted away like snow in the sun.

Sunlight streamed in behind him, outlining his tall frame and familiar silhouette. He was dressed in simple casual clothes, his face bearing the marks of his travels, and wearing the tender smile she had been yearning for day and night.

Who else could it be but Dustin?

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2730

Natasha stood frozen, staring at Dustin with her lips slightly parted. She looked like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Tears blurred her vision almost instantly.

“Is it you, Dear?” she asked, her voice shaking with disbelief. “I’m home, Natasha.” He smiled and opened his arms. Before he could blink, she was already rushing toward him.

Natasha threw herself into Dustin’s embrace without hesitation. Her arms locked around his waist like she was trying to merge their bodies into one.

“You jerk! So you do remember the way home.”

Without his cultivation, the impact nearly knocked him off his feet. Fortunately, his footwork training allowed him to steady himself, though just barely. He couldn’t help thinking about how weak he had become after becoming a mortal.

He wrapped his arms tightly around her, feeling her tremble and sob in his embrace. Guilt and affection washed over him.

“I’m sorry for making you worry about me, “he whispered.

Natasha buried her face in his chest, breathing in his familiar scent as if she couldn’t get enough. Her small fists beat against his chest without mercy, though to Dustin it felt like nothing. Still, she kept hitting him to release months of pent-up frustration and longing.

“Where the hell have you been these past few months? You just disappeared without a word. Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been? I couldn’t even sleep at night. You heartless jerk.”

She pounded on his chest as she cried, her tears soaking through his shirt. Dustin let her get it all out, holding her tighter and gently patting her back.

“Okay. It’s my fault. I had to repay a favor and take care of some things that needed handling. I promise I won’t disappear like that again without telling you,” he said with a smile.

Natasha lifted her tear-streaked face, looking at him with glistening eyes.

“Really? Do you mean it?”

“I swear…”

Dustin was about to raise his hand when a slender finger pressed against his lips.

Natasha’s tears turned to laughter, her eyes sparkling with joy and mischief. “Who asked you to swear? Just remember what you said.”

Before he could respond, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him. Dustin froze for a moment, then smiled and closed his eyes. He kissed her back, matching the longing and love she poured into it.

The mood in the office shifted, becoming warm and intimate. The sunlight filtering through the windows seemed gentler somehow. The two were immersed in a passionate kiss after their long separation, holding each other close and reluctant to part.

Just then, the office door slammed open with a violent kick. Gilbert, the young heir from Oakvale who’d been turned away moments ago, had returned. His face was twisted with rage and jealousy.

The security guards had stopped him earlier, but that had only made him angrier. Using his family’s influence, he’d forced his way inside.

The moment he entered, he saw the aloof angel he'd been pursuing for months locked in an embrace with some stranger. The sight hit him like a punch to the gut.

"Natasha! Who the fuck is this punk?"

Gilbert pointed at Dustin, his voice sharp and twisted with fury. He slammed the expensive bouquet of roses onto the floor, sending petals flying in every direction.

"You think you can steal a woman I've set my sights on? Do you have a fucking death wish?" His glare fixed on Dustin like he wanted to tear him apart with his bare hands.

The warm moment from earlier was instantly shattered. Natasha pulled away from the kiss and turned to face Gilbert, "Gilbert Chandler! Get the hell out of here."

Seeing Natasha standing protectively in front of him, Dustin was touched. He'd always been the one protecting others. Now that he'd become mortal again, he was experiencing what it felt like to be protected by the person he loved.

Dustin gently patted Natasha's shoulder, signaling her to stay calm. Then he stepped forward and looked at Gilbert.

"I'm her husband," he said indifferently. " As for whether I'm tired of living, you're welcome to find out."

He couldn't use his cultivation anymore, but he could still handle a few ordinary people with his combat skills.

Besides, Gilbert looked physically weak and unsteady on his feet. His body was worn down from excessive drinking and indulgence, making him weaker than the average person. Dustin didn't see him as a threat at all.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2731

Dustin had declared himself Natasha's husband, and Gilbert noticed that she didn't contradict him. She gazed at Dustin with a softness he had never witnessed before. Rage surged through him, making his entire body tremble.

"You fucking want to die?" Gilbert roared and swung his fist, all pretense of civility abandoned. "Don't you dare!" she snapped, her expression turning icy.

"Natasha, what's so great about this little boy toy? How am I any worse than him? I've been nothing but devoted to you," Gilbert said, his expression turning sour.

“Cut the crap and get out,” she said impatiently.

“You...” Gilbert choked on his words, then redirected his fury toward Dustin. “You got the guts to fight me one-on-one? Or are you just going to hide behind a woman like a coward?”

“One-on-one?” Dustin’s lips curved into a faint smile. He found this amusing

“What’s wrong? Scared?” Gilbert sneered. ”

If you don’t have the balls to fight, then get on your knees and apologize. Admit you’re a coward, and maybe I’ll let you off easy.”

Dustin nodded with a smile. “You’re right. I am scared.”

“Huh?” Gilbert froze, looking even more contemptuous.

Before he could say anything sarcastic, Dustin continued in an unhurried tone, I’m afraid I might accidentally kill you.”

“You son of a bitch!” Gilbert exploded. Rage consumed whatever reason he had left. Without another word, his fist shot straight toward Dustin’s face.

When the punch was inches from his nose, Dustin reacted. He didn’t do any flashy technique and simply raised his right hand in what seemed like a casual motion, but it was lightning fast.

A sharp, resounding slap landed squarely on Gilbert’s face. The sound echoed through the entire office.

Gilbert felt an irresistible force hit him.

Half his face went numb, his ears buzzed, and sparks burst across his vision while he staggered and spun halfway around. A moment later, he dropped to the floor with a heavy thud and went out cold.

The office fell silent.

Security guards and the secretary who’d just rushed in stood gaping at the scene. The slap itself wasn’t what shocked them, but it was the man on the receiving end.

Gilbert was a direct descendant of the ancient Chandler family. Striking someone of his status and background was tantamount to courting death. However, Natasha didn’t see it that way. Instead, she felt nothing but satisfaction.

With Dustin's background and capabilities, putting Gilbert in his place meant nothing. As long as he didn't kill Gilbert, there wouldn't be a problem.

Several seconds passed before Gilbert's body twitched. He jolted awake from his momentary blackout. The searing pain on his face and the taste of blood in his mouth brought the humiliation flooding back.

He screamed, "I'm gonna kill you!"

The humiliation and agony pushed him over the edge. He scrambled up from the floor, eyes bloodshot, and pulled a knife from behind his back. With a roar, he lunged at Dustin, aiming for his abdomen.

"Watch out!" Natasha shouted.

Dustin's gaze turned cold. He had only meant to teach Gilbert a lesson, but the man actually dared to strike with a knife and aimed straight for his vital spot. That was clearly a murder attempt.

In that case, Dustin had no reason to hold back. As the knife thrust toward him, he sidestepped. His movement was barely visible as he slipped away from the strike. At the same time, his right hand shot out and clamped onto Gilbert's wrist in a crushing grip.

The sound of bone snapping echoed through the room.

"My hand!" Gilbert let out a bloodcurdling scream. The knife clattered to the floor as his wrist bent at an unnatural angle. Dustin had snapped it cleanly. Without a word, he kicked Gilbert's abdomen.

Gilbert flew backward, slammed into the office wall, then slid down to the floor. He curled into a ball, tears and snot streaming down his face as he gasped for air. The pain was too much for him that he couldn't even scream.

"Get out," Dustin said flatly. Gilbert stared at Dustin, a mix of terror and hatred in his eyes. His face had gone pale, and sweat poured down his temples while he struggled to speak through clenched teeth.

"Just... Just you wait! Natasha, and you, boy toy. You'd better watch your backs. I swear I'll make you pay for this. My family ... will never let this slide."

With that, he pushed himself up with his uninjured hand and scrambled out of the office, stumbling as he went. He didn't even bother to pick up the knife he'd dropped on the floor.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2732

Outside Dash Corporation building, a luxury sedan sat parked at the curb. The driver saw Gilbert stumble out, clutching his broken wrist, his face pale with agony. He quickly got out of the vehicle. “Mr. Chandler, what happened to you?”

“Shut the hell up!” Gilbert shouted. “Don’t ask stupid questions. Just get me to a hospital. It hurts like hell.”

He kicked the driver and climbed into the back seat. The driver didn’t dare say another word. He started the engine and sped toward the nearest hospital.

Gilbert winced and grimaced from the pain. He stared at his broken wrist while rage bubbled inside him. He pulled out his phone and fumbled with his working fingers to dial a number.

The call was quickly answered, and a calm but slightly annoyed male voice came from the other end.

“Gil? What is it? I’m in a meeting.”

“Frederick, someone hit me. My... My wrist is broken,” Gilbert cried, his voice cracked with pain and rage.

“What?” His elder brother, Frederick Chandler, raised his voice. “Someone dared to touch a member of our family on our turf? Who was it?”

“It was that bitch Natasha’s little boy toy. He’s at Dash Corporation right now,” Gilbert’s face contorted with rage as he ranted. “You have to help me get revenge, Frederick. I want him dead. No, I want him to suffer worse than death. And that bitch, too, I’ll make her-”

“That’s enough!” Frederick cut him off sharply. “Go to the hospital to treat your injuries first. I heard you, so leave it to me. Natasha... hmph, looks like her family thinks they can disrespect us. Don’t worry. I’ll handle this for you.”

The assurance eased some of Gilbert’s panic, but the hatred burning in his eyes remained.

The security team had already cleaned up the scene inside the CEO’s office, removing the bloodstains and the scattered roses.

Natasha dismissed the secretary and guards with a wave, then told them to close the door. She walked over to Dustin and asked, “Are you okay?”

Dustin smiled and shook his head. “He’s just a pest. Don’t worry about it.”

“Gilbert belongs to the Chandler family, one of the ancient houses in Oakvale,” Natasha said. “He’s only a wastrel, a distant relative, but the Chandlers have a reputation for defending their own kind.

She added, “His elder brother, Frederick, has made a name for himself in their generation. He’s ruthless, and I doubt he’ll overlook what happened today.”

“The Chandler family?” Dustin raised an eyebrow before shrugging it off with a smile. “We’ll deal with whatever comes our way. But what about you? Has that pest been bothering you this whole time?”

Seeing that he wasn’t the least bit worried about the Chandler family, Natasha relaxed. Of course, Dustin was capable and fearless. Why would an unimportant member of an ancient family worry him?

“You’re right. He’s so annoying. If it weren’t for my grandfather’s connection to their family, I would’ve had him thrown out ages ago,” she said with a pout.

“If he dares to come again, I’ll beat him every time I see him,” Dustin said calmly, but the message was clear.

Natasha was touched by his words and linked her arm through his. “Okay. Let’s not talk about these annoying things. You just got back, so today you’re going to keep me company while I shop.”

She used the direct line and told her secretary to cancel everything on her schedule for the day. Then she pulled him along eagerly for their long-overdue date.

Their first stop was the most exclusive shopping center downtown.

Natasha looked at Dustin’s slightly worn casual outfit. He still looked good in them, but it bothered her to see him dressed like that.

“Come on. Let’s get you some new clothes. You deserve to wear only the best.”

Before he could object, she dragged him into an upscale men’s clothing store. The staff sized up Natasha in seconds. Her elegant demeanor and expensive designer wardrobe told them everything they needed to know, and they greeted her with eager attention.

Natasha personally selected items for Dustin-dress shirts, suits, slacks, and overcoats. She had him try nearly every piece from the current season’s collection.

He had never cared much about fashion, but he let her have her way. When he emerged from the fitting room in a well-tailored dark suit, it was like watching someone transform. The suit highlighted his tall frame, broad shoulders tapering to a lean waist, and long legs.

Although his cultivation was restrained, there was something calm and aloof about him, born of weathering life's hardships and seeing through its complexities. It merged unexpectedly well with the sophisticated polish the suit gave him, creating an unusual appeal.

"Sir, you look handsome in this outfit." Even the sales assistant, who saw handsome men daily, couldn't help but stare admiringly.

Natasha gazed at the transformed Dustin with undisguised delight, pride, and satisfaction written across her face. She stepped close to adjust his collar, examining him from different angles before nodding in approval.

"See? I really do have the best eye for these things."

The sales assistants glanced between the strikingly beautiful Natasha and Dustin, and whatever fleeting thoughts they'd entertained quickly vanished. They felt that only someone as beautiful as Natasha could match a handsome man like him.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2733

After buying clothes for Dustin, Natasha still wanted to shop more. She led him into the boutique next door to pick out a few handbags from the latest collection for herself.

While she was browsing, a young man spotted her and his eyes lit up. He wore a flashy shirt and gold chains as he made his way over.

"Hey, pretty. You've got great taste. This bag just arrived. It's a limited edition and would suit you perfectly."

Zayden Riche smiled as he spoke, his eyes roaming over Natasha while completely ignoring Dustin beside her.

She didn't even look up and continued examining the bag in her hands. Zayden didn't give up, flashing what he thought was a charming smile. "How about we become friends? Pick whatever you like today. I'll pay for it."

He shot Dustin a smug glance, as if showing off his wealth.

Natasha frowned in annoyance. "Get lost."

The smile froze on Zayden's face. He had status in this part of town, and no woman had ever dismissed him so bluntly.

His face turned grim, and he threatened, ” Don’t be so hostile, pretty. Do you know who I am? You think you can talk to me like that?”

Dustin moved forward and stood between them, shielding Natasha. He looked at Zayden with mild amusement.

“Really? So who are you? Why don’t you tell us?”

Now that Dustin had responded, Zayden became even more arrogant. He lifted his chin and looked down at them.

“Listen carefully. My father is the chairman of Grandview Properties. If you know what’s good for you, get lost.

Otherwise, one word from me and you’ll disappear without a trace.’

At the mention of that company name, Dustin and Natasha exchanged a glance. Both caught the helplessness in each other’s eyes.

These entitled rich brats really were everywhere, buzzing around like flies that wouldn’t leave, no matter how many times they swatted at them.

“What’s with all the noise?”

A cool, pleasant female voice came from the store entrance. Everyone turned to see a woman walking in. She wore a pastel purple dress and had stunning features with an elegant, aloof air.

Her beauty rivaled Natasha’s, though their styles couldn’t be more different. One was warm and passionate, while the other was as cold as ice.

When Zayden spotted her, all his swagger drained away instantly. His expression shifted to an ingratiating smile as he scurried toward her.

“Dahlia, what are you doing here? There’s nothing serious going on here, I just ran into some jerk...”

Natasha, standing behind Dustin, frowned the moment she spotted the woman. She muttered quietly, “What rotten luck. How could we run into each other here?”

Dustin glanced at Dahlia. Something flickered across his face at the unexpected encounter. The world was smaller than he thought.

Whatever surprise he’d felt settled back down into nothing. Truth be told, his ex-wife meant about as much to him now as any stranger would.

Everything they'd been through together, the good times and the mess that followed, had worn away over the years until there wasn't anything left. Standing here now, Dahlia might as well have been anyone else shopping in the mall.

"Why is he here?"

Dahlia's gaze swept past Zayden and landed on Dustin, and she froze in place.

In a city of millions, they had somehow ended up in the same luxury store at the same time, even after they had cut off all contact between them.

Even someone as rational and composed as she was couldn't deny the sense that fate had played a hand in this. She had to admit that maybe it really was destiny. Her face revealed a tangle of emotions-shock, confusion, and something she refused to name

Dustin's features were familiar yet somehow more mature and distant. Her old memories came rushing back. Their broken marriage, the way she had walked away so harshly, and the damage she had caused made remorse hit her hard.

Dahlia wanted to approach him and apologize for what she'd done, but the words were stuck in her throat no matter how hard she tried.

She was now one of the prominent leaders of the Mosey family, someone countless people admired and looked up to. Her position, her status, and her reputation were like invisible chains that held her impulses in check.

The feeling only intensified when she noticed Natasha standing beside Dustin. A bitter ache she couldn't quite name spread slowly through her chest.

"Still not over him?" Natasha grumbled, narrowing her eyes.

As a woman deeply in love with Dustin, Natasha was highly alert to any gaze that lingered on him for more than three seconds. This was especially true when that gaze came from his ex-wife, someone she already had bad blood with.

Watching Dahlia stare at Dustin with an unreadable expression set off every alarm in her head. Natasha stepped forward and positioned herself slightly in front of him, making it clear who he belonged to.

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"What a coincidence, Ms. Nicholson."

Natasha's tone was cool and distant. " Though staring at my husband like that seems a bit inappropriate, don't you think?

"Husband?" Dahlia snapped out of her daze and composed herself, her face returning to its usual calm detachment.

She smiled faintly with a hint of skepticism. "Ms. Harmon, if I recall correctly, you're not married. Where did this husband come from?"

Natasha had expected this question. She immediately wrapped her arm around Dustin's and pressed her body intimately against him. Tilting her face up toward her, she declared, "He is my husband. We're getting our marriage license tomorrow."

The announcement caught Dahlia off guard, creating a ripple of unease beneath her composed exterior.

Her smile stiffened just slightly as her eyes moved back to Dustin, and something unreadable flickered across her face. She took a moment before responding, keeping her voice neutral.

"Well then, congratulations to you both."

"Thank you, Ms. Nicholson." Natasha's face lit up with a victorious smile, tinged with smugness. "We'll definitely send you a wedding invitation. You have to come."

Those words punched Dahlia in the gut. She frowned, feeling frustrated but unable to retort. For once, she found herself at a loss for words.

Zayden, who'd been ignored this whole time, cautiously approached Dahlia and asked, "Do you know these two?"

She glanced at him and replied indifferently, "They're my old acquaintances. Why?"

When he heard that and noticed her irritated look, warning bells started ringing in his mind. He might be spoiled, but he wasn't a fool.

Dahlia now wielded serious influence in the Mosey family. His own father had to grovel to stay in her good graces. Anyone she referred to as "old acquaintances" in that particular tone must be important people he couldn't afford to cross.

Zayden thanked his lucky stars he hadn't escalated things earlier. Plastering on an obsequious smile, he turned to Dustin and Natasha.

"I've made a terrible mistake," he said. "I didn't recognize my own people. I was blind just now and offended you both. I'm so sorry. I'll leave right away and won't interrupt your reunion."

Natasha waved him off impatiently. “Get lost. Don’t get in the way.”

“Yes. Of course.”

He felt like he’d been granted a pardon, smiling obsequiously as he quickly made his escape. Once he was gone, tension hung in the air between the three of them. Dahlia took a deep breath and looked at Dustin. She seemed to have made up her mind about something.

“Dustin, do you have time? How about we have a meal together? There are some things I’d like to talk about,” she said.

Dustin frowned, ready to turn her down. However, Natasha beat him to it with a bright smile. “Sounds great. We couldn’t possibly refuse a personal invitation from Ms. Nicholson.”

He looked at Natasha, visibly puzzled. This wasn’t like her at all. He’d fully expected her to pull him in the opposite direction the second Dahlia appeared.

Natasha caught his questioning look and gave his arm a deliberate squeeze. She knew exactly what she was doing. Better to deal with Dahlia head-on than wonder what she might try behind the scenes. She would use this opportunity to establish her boundaries once and for all.

She also wanted to get under Dahlia’s skin. She wanted to show Dahlia how successful Dustin had become and how blind and stupid her decision to divorce him had been.

This meal would be the perfect opportunity to make her point. A few minutes later, the three stepped into a barbecue restaurant in the mall.

Two stunning women, each with a completely different style, walked in with Dustin, whose striking looks and presence made him impossible to ignore.

Nearly everyone in the restaurant turned to look at them. They drew attention like magnets as they made their way through the restaurants. After a waitress led them to their table, murmurs rippled through the surrounding diners.

“Holy crap! Check out those two stunning beauties at that table.”

“Damn! One’s got that cool, sophisticated vibe, and the other’s like a total knockout. Who is that guy?”

“Most guys would kill to be with one woman like that, and this dude’s sitting with both of them. How is that fair?”

“I’m dying of jealousy. Did he save the world or something?” “Look at the way he carries himself. Bet he’s some trust fund kid playing normal for a day.”

“I don’t think so. He looks pretty normal to me. I mean, sure, he’s good-looking and has that presence- God, the more I talk, the more bitter I sound.”

“Man, having two women like that? Most guys couldn’t handle it. You can tell there’s something complicated going on between them.”

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The diners kept their chatter to a whisper, but Dustin’s sharp hearing still caught every word. He didn’t let it bother him.

Natasha, however, seemed to enjoy the attention. The envious glances from the other women only made her feel more pleased with herself. She kept serving him food or refilling his water with deliberate affection.

Dahlia sat across from them with her usual aloofness, acting as if the whispers didn’t exist. But when she glanced at the pair, her expression faltered for a moment.

Just then, a young server approached, carrying a sizzling-hot platter of barbecue. He must have been distracted by the two stunning ladies and accidentally tripped.

“Oh no!” he yelped, stumbling. The sizzling platter lurched in his grip, tipping toward Dahlia and Natasha at the edge of the table. Both women’s faces turned pale.

Dustin, who’d been sitting quietly until now, reacted instantly. He lunged forward, grabbed the server with one hand, and caught the platter with the other.

With controlled strength, he steadied the server on his feet and firmly secured the hot platter. Only a few drops of oil splashed onto the tablecloth. No one was hurt.

Everything happened in a flash. By the time everyone processed what had occurred, the crisis was averted.

Natasha exhaled in relief and patted her chest, glaring at the shaken server who kept apologizing.

Dahlia couldn’t take her eyes off Dustin. The speed at which he’d moved and the control he’d shown made her heart skip a beat.

A thought she'd been trying to suppress broke free and spread like wildfire through her mind. He'd been sitting near her side of the table. Seeing him react that quickly, she wondered if he still cared about her.

Dahlia lowered her gaze, her lashes trembling. The composure she'd worked so hard to maintain crumbled after his sudden heroic action.

She started telling herself what she wanted to believe, searching his indifferent behavior for any hint that she still mattered to him.

The server apologized repeatedly before the manager pulled him aside. After the brief incident, they resumed their meal.

Meat sizzled on the cast-iron serving platter, filling the air with rich, smoky aromas. But the tension at the table ran hotter than the skillet itself.

Natasha picked up her fork first and selected a slice of the most tender, premium marbled beef from the platter. Instead of eating it herself, she dipped it in sauce and held it up to Dustin's mouth.

"Dear, try this," she said. "Their signature beef is so tender."

Her smile lit up her whole face, and her eyes shone with affection. Her voice was so sugary it could rot teeth. And she made sure Dahlia heard the affectionate nickname she called Dustin.

He recognized the act for what it was and felt a bit awkward about it. But he wasn't going to embarrass Natasha in public, especially not in front of Dahlia.

He opened his mouth, accepted the beef, chewed it, and nodded.

"Yeah, it's good."

"See? I told you," she replied, beaming like she'd received the highest praise. She quickly spooned more sauce onto his plate and added, "I know you like extra sauce. Have as much as you want."

Natasha spent the whole meal fussing over Dustin, barely eating anything herself. She kept piling meat and ribs onto his plate, and every few minutes she'd dab at his mouth with a napkin, even when there was nothing there. Every move she made radiated affection and possessiveness.

Dustin let her fuss over him and occasionally served her favourite vegetables. Each time, she'd beam at him with pure adoration. The warmth and understanding between them was almost palpable.

Dahlia observed them from across the table. Her grip on her fork tightened until her knuckles turned white. The premium beef on her plate sat untouched. To her, everything tasted like cardboard.

She used to be the one sitting next to him, receiving that kind of attention. Their marriage had fallen apart, and she knew it was partly her fault. 1

But watching another woman casually take what could have been hers twisted something deep inside her. The jealousy, the sense of loss, the lingering resentment -all of it cut like a blade.

She forced herself to look away, staring at the sauce in her plate as she tried to stay composed. But her heart wouldn't settle.

The way Dustin indulged Natasha with all that patience and warmth was nothing like the cold silence that had defined the end of their marriage.

Dahlia wondered whether he had really found someone better suited to him after the divorce. That realization only deepened the bitter ache in her chest.

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"Ms. Nicholson, don't just sit there. The beef is delicious. You should try some," Natasha said. She seemed to have just noticed Dahlia sitting there in silence. Her tone was warm, but her smile carried a hint of triumph.

"Thank you," Dahlia replied, looking up and forcing a smile. She picked up a slice of beef, but her throat felt tight, and she could barely swallow. She tried to find something to say, both to break the awkward silence and to satisfy her curiosity about what Dustin had been doing lately.

"I heard you were away for a long time recently. Were you handling something important?"

Before he could answer, Natasha cut in. Her tone held both pride and a clear assertion of her knowledge of his whereabouts.

"You're right. My man is very capable. He was dealing with some very important matters and even saved the King. Isn't that right, dear?"

She placed another piece of meat on Dustin's plate while she spoke.

Dahlia's stomach dropped. She'd always known Dustin was extraordinary, but the fact that he'd saved the King revealed just how far he'd risen. The way she looked at him grew even more complicated.

Dustin didn't elaborate and simply hummed in acknowledgment. The kind of accomplishments that would define most people's lives seemed ordinary to him. His understated response only widened the distance between them.

The lunch continued in this strange atmosphere.

Natasha led the conversation, alternating between intimate exchanges with Dustin and "caring" questions about Dahlia's life that were really just subtle brags.

Dustin didn't say much, except for occasionally responding to Natasha, while keeping things polite but distant with Dahlia.

The murmurs from surrounding tables continued. "Did you see that? The stunning woman in red keeps serving him food. She's so attentive."

"The one in white looks kind of unhappy. She's barely said a word."

"That guy's got some serious self-control. Two gorgeous women are sitting beside him, and he can still eat so calmly."

"I bet it's a love triangle. Look at the tension over there."

"I'd give up ten years off my life for one meal with either of those beauties."

The chatter added another layer of drama to the scene.

Dahlia felt like she couldn't sit there much longer. She'd hoped this meal would give her a chance to talk with Dustin properly, maybe even apologize and clear up some misunderstandings.

But Natasha's presence blocked every attempt like an impenetrable wall. And his indifference made it impossible to find an opening to talk with him.

She watched Natasha lean close to Dustin and whisper something to him. He smiled faintly as he tilted his head to listen. The intimacy between them was almost painful to see

Dahlia grabbed her glass of iced tea and took a long drink. The cold liquid slid down her throat, but did nothing to cool the anger burning inside her. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she took a breath and put down her fork.

"I'm done eating."

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin, holding on to whatever composure she had left.

“I need to use the restroom.”

She had to get away for a moment, somewhere she could clear her head, and sort through the mess of emotions.

Watching her hasty retreat, Natasha’s lips curved into a satisfied smirk. She looked like she’d just claimed her territory. She leaned close to Dustin and lowered her voice with barely concealed smugness.

“So? Did I do well? Think I got under her skin?”

He shot her an exasperated look and tapped her nose lightly.

11 “Oh, you...”

There was no reproach in his tone, only indulgence.

Natasha giggled, thoroughly pleased with her victory. In the restroom, Dahlia splashed cold water on her face. The reflection staring back looked pale and shaken, her emotions a tangled mess.

She kept telling herself her relationship with Dustin was over, and all of it was behind her now. He’d moved on and found someone new. They even looked happy together. She had no right to interfere with their life. Still, she couldn’t understand why her heart still hurt so much.

Dahlia couldn’t stop replaying the way he’d reacted without thinking to protect her, and the tender look in his eyes when he gazed at Natasha.

She took several deep breaths, trying to steady herself. After fixing her makeup, she put her cold, aloof mask back in place and walked out.

When she returned to the table, Natasha and Dustin had their heads bent together over her phone, smiling at something on the screen.

The sight stung Dahlia.

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“Ms. Nicholson, you’re back,” Natasha said, looking up with a bright smile. “We were just finishing up. The food here was great. Thank you for the recommendation.”

The way she phrased it positioned herself and Dustin as a pair, with Dahlia as the outsider. Dahlia managed a strained smile. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

She glanced at Dustin. Whatever faint hope she’d had of talking to him alone withered under Natasha’s sharp look and his blank expression.

“I have a meeting this evening, so I should get going,” Dahlia said, grabbing her handbag and rising to her feet. “The bill’s taken care of.”

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly let you pay for everything,” Natasha said apologetically, but her expression showed no such concern.

“It’s just a meal. Don’t worry about it,” Dahlia responded, her eyes on Dustin. Something unreadable flickered in her face before she simply said, “Take care, Dustin. He nodded, his expression uncharged. ” You too.”

They exchanged no further pleasantries. The apology or reconciliation she might have hoped for never came.

Dahlia took one last look at them, as if committing the scene to memory. Then she turned and walked away, her heels clicking against the floor as she left the place that had brought her nothing but pain.

As Natasha watched her departing figure, she finally relaxed and exhaled deeply. She felt like she’d just won a battle.

“Thank god she’s gone,” she said, leaning against Dustin’s shoulder with a slightly playful tone. “Having a meal with your ex-wife was so stressful.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave it a gentle pat without saying anything. His gaze drifted toward where Dahlia had disappeared, but his mind was calm.

The past was behind him. What mattered now was the woman beside him.

After leaving the barbecue restaurant, Dahlia got into her luxury car and closed her eyes. She’d missed her chance with Dustin. That door had closed, and it wasn’t opening again.

Seeing him today wasn’t a coincidence. It was facing the truth of what she’d lost. The regret sat like a stone in her chest. It would take a long time before that weight was lifted.

Night fell over the city, its neon glow spreading like liquid light across the streets.

Dustin and Natasha ended their date and headed home. She drove her red sports car with mellow music drifting through the cabin.

She was still savoring her victory over Dahlia, while Dustin rested against his seat with closed eyes. He was still adjusting to the tiredness that came with being mortal again.

But the peaceful drive didn't last long When they turned onto a quiet stretch of riverside road leading to the gated estates, everything went sideways.

The screech of tires cut through the night, followed by the crunch of metal. About eight black vans suddenly appeared out of nowhere, surrounding them from all sides and forcing them to stop. One swerved directly into their path, its bumper scraping against the hood.

Natasha jerked forward before the seatbelt caught her. She looked out the window, her eyes flashing with shock and fury.

Something slammed into the hood hard enough to make the windows rattle.

Gilbert stood there with his face still wrapped in bandages, one arm in a cast. He was gripping a metal baseball bat in his good hand. He'd just brought it down on the hood, leaving a noticeable dent

His face contorted with savage pleasure as he screamed through the windshield, "Get the hell out of here, you bastards!"

The doors of the other vans swung open, and dozens of men jumped out carrying steel pipes, machetes, and clubs. They surrounded the sports car within seconds, murderous intent written all over their faces.

Behind them a Rolls-Royce door opened. A young man in a tailored suit stepped out, radiating cold menace. He leaned against the hood and casually lit a cigar. It was Gilbert's elder brother, Frederick Chandler.

He watched the surrounded sports car with a smirk, like he was about to enjoy a good show. Anyone who dared to cross the Chandler family and injure one of their own had it coming.

Inside the car, Natasha's face paled. She instinctively looked at Dustin.

Frowning, he quickly assessed the situation outside and saw dozens of armed thugs. With his current mortal body, he might handle ten with skill and experience alone. But against these numbers, fighting head-on would be suicide.

"Call the police," Dustin said decisively, his voice steady. "Then call your grandfather and tell him to send people over."

Natasha didn't waste a second. She grabbed her phone and dialed emergency services, quickly explaining their location and the armed mob surrounding them. As soon as she finished, she fired off an encrypted text to her grandfather.

Outside, Gilbert saw them sitting still in the car, and it only made him angrier. He kept hammering the hood with the bat, spittle flying as he screamed.

"Dustin! What happened to all that tough guy shit? Weren't you gonna kick my ass? Come out here and show me now. I'm gonna beat you so bad you'll be shitting yourself."

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"Ram them," Dustin said decisively. Natasha understood immediately. There was a sharp glint in her eyes as she floored the gas and drove straight at Gilbert and his men.

Gilbert was startled and quickly jumped out of the way. Two of his men weren't fast. enough and got knocked to the ground.

She shifted the gear into reverse and floored the gas again, scattering the group before backing straight into the cars blocking the intersection. The impact knocked the blocking vehicle to the side, opening a path.

Their plan worked. Without hesitation, Natasha spun the wheel and executed a perfect drift. The car sped through the opening and off into the distance.

"Dammit! Go after them. Don't let them get away," Gilbert roared, scrambling to his feet. He was covered in grime and shaking with fury.

Frederick crushed his cigar under his heel and got into his car, his expression grim.

Engines roared as eight vans took off after the fleeing red sports car. A high-speed chase through the streets unfolded under the cover of night.

Natasha was an excellent driver. She wove through traffic, drifting around corners. and making sharp turns to shake off their pursuers.

Dustin kept his eyes on the vans behind them, shouting warnings about the pursuers' positions and obstacles ahead.

But there were too many vehicles chasing them, and the drivers knew what they were doing. They stayed right on their tail.

After a frantic chase, Natasha's car was finally forced onto a massive overpass spanning the river. The bridge was wide, but Gilbert's convoy had it completely blocked off at both ends. With nowhere left to go, Natasha slammed her hand against the steering wheel.

Dustin watched the thugs pour out of their vehicles and close in. He took a deep breath, unbuckled his seatbelt, and removed the expensive suit jacket she had bought him earlier. He tossed it onto the seat, leaving only his white dress shirt.

"Stay in the car and lock the doors." His voice was calm, but his eyes were resolute. "I'll go down and hold them off until reinforcements arrive."

"Be careful."

Natasha was worried, but she trusted Dustin enough not to stop him. She knew he was more than capable of handling these thugs if it came to a fight.

Dustin stepped out of the car and closed the door behind him. The night breeze ruffled his white shirt, outlining his tall frame.

He stood alone, facing dozens of armed thugs with vicious expressions. There wasn't a trace of fear in his eyes. Instead, he looked cold and completely calm.

Gilbert was stunned when Dustin actually got out of the car alone. Then he let out a mocking laugh.

"Look at this idiot. He must have a death wish. Take him down!" he barked. Frederick leaned against his car, watching with cold indifference.

"Kill him!"

Dozens of thugs roared and rushed toward Dustin. Dustin narrowed his eyes. Rather than facing them head-on in the open, he nimbly flipped backward and landed onto the slightly elevated pedestrian walkway along the bridge's edge. He knew the narrow space would force them to come at him in smaller numbers.

The fight erupted instantly.

Though he could no longer use his cultivation, his combat instincts, techniques, and timing were still second nature to him. He struck like lightning with his fists, elbows, knees, and legs. Every move was ruthless and precise.

Dustin's fist smashed into one thug's nose. The man screamed as blood sprayed from his face, and he hit the ground.

Next, a side kick landed squarely on another thug's knee. The sickening sound of breaking bone was followed by howls of pain as the thug crumpled to the ground, clutching his leg.

Then a hand strike to the side of a club-wielding thug's neck. He didn't even make a sound before he went limp and fell.

Dustin moved between them like water flowing through gaps, dodging and weaving through the narrow walkway Every time he attacked, another man went down.

But even the best fighter couldn't hold off a mob forever. He was mortal now, with limited stamina and no enhanced senses. Against the clubs and blades coming from every direction, taking hits was inevitable.

Just then, a steel pipe slammed into his back, making him stumble forward as pain shot through his chest. A machete grazed his arm, tearing through his shirt and leaving a bloody gash.

Pain shot through him, but his eyes remained ice-cold, and his movements didn't falter. If anything, the injuries made him fight even more viciously. In less than ten minutes, over a dozen thugs lay groaning on the walkway

Dustin's white shirt was soaked with sweat, streaked with dirt, and splattered with blood. His breathing had turned ragged, sweat beading on his forehead. Even his movements were noticeably slower than when he'd started.

Inside the car, Natasha watched with her heart in her throat, her palms slick with sweat. Every blow he took felt like a knife twisting in her chest.

Then one of the thugs saw an opening while Dustin blocked an attack from the side. He raised his club and swung it hard at the back of Dustin's head.

"No!" Natasha screamed, her eyes widening. She couldn't hold back anymore and pulled out a compact pistol. She aimed at the thug trying to ambush Dustin and pulled the trigger without hesitation. Two sharp gunshots cut through the chaos of the night.

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The bullet missed the thug but struck the ground near his feet, sending up sparks. He scrambled backward in terror, rolling and crawling to get away.

The other thugs froze at the sudden gunfire, staring in uncertainty at Natasha with the pistol in her hand. None of them dared move closer.

"Dear, are you okay?" she asked, rushing forward and keeping the gun trained on the thugs. Dustin leaned against the overpass railing, breathing hard. He wiped blood from the corner of his mouth and waved her off.

“I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.”

Natasha looked at his battered state and noticed his movements were not as sharp as before. Something wasn’t adding up, so she asked, “You used to handle guys like them easily. Why are you struggling now?”

Dustin smiled wryly. He didn’t see a point in hiding from her anymore and said, “I can no longer use my cultivation. I’m no different from an ordinary person now.”

“What?” Her eyes widened in disbelief. ” How did that happen?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain later,” he replied, shaking his head.

Questions and worry flooded her mind, but she knew now wasn’t the time to press him. She gritted her teeth and said resolutely, “Fine. Then I’ll guide you out of here ”

Just then, the crowd parted, and Gilbert walked over with Frederick, who had been watching from the sidelines with cold indifference.

Gilbert looked at Natasha holding the pistol without a trace of fear. If anything, he seemed amused.

“Put the pistol down and come with me. Maybe I’ll consider letting your little boy toy live. But if you resist, he’s a dead man.”

Her face darkened, and she spat coldly, You’d better not do anything stupid. I’m warning you. He is someone you can’t afford to mess with.”

“He’s someone I can’t afford to mess with?

“Gilbert laughed like she’d told the world’s funniest joke.

He went on, “What bullshit. In this country, is there anyone our family can’t mess with? Stop trying to scare me. Sure, I can’t do anything to you, but this guy? He’s done for today.”

He paused, his gaze roaming over Natasha’s body with crude intent as he licked his lips.

“Of course, I could spare him. Spend one night with me, and I’ll pretend this never happened. What do you say?”

“In your dreams,” Natasha snapped, shaking with rage. Gilbert’s expression turned cold as he said, “Then there’s nothing more to discuss.”

He waved his hand sharply and barked at the hesitant thugs around him.

“Get him! Whoever takes that punk down gets one million dollars.”

With the promise of the hefty reward, the thugs gripped their weapons tighter and started closing in.

Natasha gripped the pistol tightly and fired a warning shot into the air. “I dare anyone to come closer!” she barked. The gunshot made everyone freeze again, Gilbert scoffed at her threats.

“She’s got one pistol, and how many bullets could she possibly have? There are dozens of us. You think we should fear her? Chargee! Whoever brings me that kid gets double the reward!”

The thugs exchanged glances. Greed won out over fear, and they charged forward again with renewed shouts. Natasha’s face turned white. Her hand holding the pistol trembled slightly as she tried to decide who to shoot first.

Dustin squeezed her hand and glanced down at the dark, churning river below the overpass. His eyes hardened with resolve. If they were truly cornered with no way out, their only chance would be to risk jumping into the river.

At that critical moment, a sharp chorus of sirens suddenly wailed to life. The sound came from all directions, quickly enveloping the entire overpass area.

Then came the rhythmic thump of helicopter blades overhead. A police helicopter appeared above the overpass with its searchlight blazing down, illuminating everything below as bright as day.

At both ends of the overpass, dozens of police cars with flashing red and blue lights. They instantly surrounded Gilbert’s convoy and all his thugs.

Doors swung open, and countless fully armed officers poured out with riot shields and weapons, their guns all pointed at the thugs in the center.

“Drop your weapons. Hands on your heads. Get down.”

The authoritative command boomed through loudspeakers, echoing through the night sky.

This sudden turn of events left all the thugs dumbstruck.

Faced with that wall of gun barrels and overwhelming force, their earlier ferocity evaporated. Their faces went white as they dropped their clubs and knives with clattering sounds, placing their hands on their heads and crouching on the ground.

Natasha exhaled in relief. The tension she’d been holding finally released, and her body went slightly weak as she leaned against the car.

“Thank god they made it in time.”

Dustin quietly exhaled in relief as well.

Since he couldn’t use his cultivation and become mortal, he’d nearly fallen to these small-time thugs. He’d need to be more careful going forward, or he’d end up getting taken out by people who shouldn’t have stood a chance against him.

Gilbert and Frederick frowned at the sight, their faces darkening. But they didn’t look scared like common thugs would when caught. They just looked irritated that their plans got interrupted.

Frederick straightened his suit and snorted. With the Chandler family’s influence, even if they got arrested now, it would just be going through the motions. They’d be released safe and sound the same day. Still, it was a blow to their reputation.

He watched the police lock down the scene, then his eyes shifted to Dustin and Natasha standing together. His expression darkened with cold intent as he silently vowed that this was far from over.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2740

Both Gilbert and Frederick were forcibly hauled to their feet. As they were led down the corridor, Gilbert spotted Dustin standing nearby, watching calmly. His eyes burned with hatred, and he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“You’d better not celebrate too soon! I’ll be out tomorrow! And when I am, I’ll make you wish you were dead! Just wait!”

His shouts echoed through the empty corridor, filled with madness and rage.

Dustin’s eyes turned cold. He met Gilbert’s venomous glare and spoke slowly, his voice low but carrying clearly to everyone around them.

“In that case, you won’t be getting out.”