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Chapter 2761

After leaving the ruins of the Weston estate, Blanche didn't go far. She took Snowy to a secluded cave in the wilderness outside Oakvale and set up a basic concealment spell before settling in to plan her next move.

"Narcissa holds grudges. The massacre at the Weston estate must have felt like sweet revenge to her," she said, sitting cross-legged with cold determination in her eyes. "But she won't stop there. I need to eliminate this threat."

Snowy lay beside her, looking up and letting out a soft whine. Blanche stroked its head. "You think we should strike back, too, don't you? Just hiding won't solve anything. Besides..." The image of the charred ruins flashed through her mind. "Those innocent people can't have died for nothing."

She pulled out the pendant Dustin had given her and ran her fingers over its smooth surface, lost in thought. Dustin might not be able to use his cultivation, but his medical skills were exceptional, and he carried himself with uncommon presence. He'd probably had some unusual encounters in his past.

However, the current situation involved a cultivator family and an extremely dangerous territory. Blanche didn't want to drag ordinary mortals into this mess.

"But I might be able to use this to my advantage," she said, her eyes narrowing slightly. She recalled the two distinct energy waves she'd sensed in the park a few days ago Evander and Elowen.

Those two were clearly from another hidden family. Their energy waves ran deep, their cultivation was solid, and they seemed to regard the mortal world with a detached indifference. It was completely unlike Narcissa, who was arrogant and domineering.

They were in Oakvale for a reason. If Blanche could steer Narcissa toward them, she might create some chaos. Maybe even get them to eliminate each other.

Blanche pondered for a long time before finally shaking her head. The safest approach was still to rely on herself and the limited allies she could reach.

She closed her eyes and focused. Her fingertip traced through the air in front of her, her mana weaving into a complex pattern of light

This was a secret communication technique unique to the Frost family. Due to the family's recent misfortunes, there were few people left she could contact, and the range of those she could contact was limited. But it was worth trying.

The glowing pattern flickered a few times before fading away, with no immediate response. Blanche wasn't discouraged. She'd known it was a long shot.

"Time to 'escape," she said, opening her eyes with a cold smile. She deliberately left faint traces of her energy waves in a small area, directing attention northwest of Oakvale toward the vast mountain range.

The terrain there was treacherous and nearly uninhabited. The area was a common refuge for cultivators seeking to fight or hide. She also let a wisp of her energy wave "accidentally" brush against a low-level wandering cultivator passing through the mountain's outskirts.

With that done, Blanche and Snowy headed deeper into the northwestern mountains. But she didn't go straight in. Instead, she found a hidden spot at the edge of a valley surrounded by peaks on three sides and began setting up a formation.

This wasn't her specialty, but the Frost family archives included a volume on formations, and her natural talent had allowed her to study the basics.

She pulled out the few celestial stones she had left, along with some materials containing spiritual energy, and used the valley's natural terrain to create a composite trap formation-the Mistbinding Trap.

Once activated, the formation would generate fog to obscure vision and partially block divine sense detection. It would also slow the flow of spiritual energy in anyone who entered.

The limited materials meant it wasn't strong enough to trap or kill powerful cultivators, but it could create chaos and buy her time

The formation took most of the day to complete and drained the spiritual energy she'd meant to use for healing. But her eyes remained resolute, without hesitation.

"Now I wait," Blanche said, swallowing a tablet and sitting cross-legged at the formation's core to meditate.

Snowy crouched on a rock outside the formation, eyes sharp as it kept watch. Two days later, outside the northwestern mountain range near Oakvale. Narcissa's face darkened as she listened to her subordinate's report.

"Lady Narcissa, we followed that faint trace of energy waves and found signs of Blanche's presence about 100 miles to the northwest. There are definite traces of healing and meditation," Ragnar reported respectfully.

"The northwestern mountains?" Narcissa sneered. "Of course, she'd try to hide in the wilderness to recover. Does she think I won't find her there?"

“Elder Sevran and the Shadow Guards will arrive in Oakvale tomorrow. Should we wait for him before...” another guard suggested cautiously.

“Wait?” Narcissa shrieked. “By then, that bitch might have recovered and fled! She’s badly wounded now, and this is the perfect time to capture her.

“Plus, Elder Sevran wants her alive. If we catch her first, won’t that be a major achievement? Even if we can’t capture her, we can wound her further and corner her. Once he arrives, taking her will be child’s play.”

Just thinking about Blanche made her teeth grind with hatred. Her son’s wounds hadn’t fully healed, and the cold poison still left him writhing and screaming. Each outburst stoked her rage.

The massacre at the Weston estate had offered some relief, but nothing would satisfy her like finally capturing Blanche.

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“But Blanche is quite strong, Lady Narcissa. She managed to injure you yesterday,” the guard said, voicing his concern. “Even though you were caught off guard, her Frostfall technique is truly formidable. The four of us-”

“What are you afraid of?” Narcissa snapped impatiently. “She’s badly wounded, and her strength has been seriously weakened. With the four of us working together, and my Violebolt Orb in hand, can’t we handle one wounded opponent?

“Besides, my husband knows I’m taking care of things here. If I’m ever in real danger, the protective charm he left me will activate. He’ll be able to sense it, then come to my aid.”

At the mention of her husband, a flicker of pride crossed her eyes. Her husband, Alarion Jornell, held considerable status among the younger generation of the Jornells of Amethysius. His cultivation had reached the early stage of Core-Forged Arcanist, and he cherished her above all.

Seeing that Narcissa had made up her mind, the three guards fell in line.

“We’re at your command, Lady Narcissa.”

“Send word to Elder Sevran. Tell him Blanche may be fleeing toward the northwestern mountains. We’ll track her down first and request that he come with reinforcements immediately,” she ordered.

With a sharp wave of her hand, she added, ”

Move out. Today, that wretch will have nowhere to escape.”

Four streaks of light shot into the sky, racing toward the northwest mountains. Fueled by her thirst for revenge and eager to prove herself, Narcissa didn’t notice how conveniently this lead had come. Blanche’s eyes snapped open in the valley.

“They’re here,” she murmured to herself. Through a faint signal sent by Snowy using their unique link, she knew at least four powerful presences were rapidly approaching. One of them carried that detestable purple lightning spiritual energy that could only belong to Narcissa.

Blanche took a deep breath to suppress the dull ache from her injuries, her eyes sharpening with resolve. In one swift motion, she slipped away from the heart of the formation and took up a position near the valley entrance, with a clear line of sight and an easy retreat

Moments later, the air split with sharp whooshing sounds as four figures landed just outside the valley entrance. It was Narcissa and her three guards.

As soon as she arrived, she surveyed the valley ahead. The mist inside was slightly thicker than in the surrounding mountains, but nothing out of the ordinary.

She scanned the valley with her divine sense and found no obvious disturbances or strong energy fluctuations. Only a faint chill lingered deep within the valley.

Narcissa scoffed. “So, you’re hiding here after all. This mist might provide some cover, but it can’t hide that icy aura of yours.”

She was certain Blanche was somewhere in the valley, nursing her wounds. Her confidence surged, and killing intent blazed in her eyes.

“Blanche, get the fuck out! Did you really think hiding in this ravine would keep me from finding you?” Narcissa gathered her spiritual energy. Her voice cut through the valley, echoing off the cliffs.

“You saw what happened to those insects from the Weston family, right? That’s what happens to anyone who stands against me. Today, I’ll make sure you suffer ten times worse than they did.”

A moment of silence fell over the valley. Then, a clear, cold voice echoed from the mist, calm and steady but carrying a piercing chill.

“Narcissa, you’ve slaughtered innocents and wiped out entire families. No wrongdoing goes unpunished. Today, I will see justice done for those who died unjustly.”

Before the words finished echoing, a figure in white emerged slowly from the mist. It was Blanche. Her face was still somewhat pale, but she stood tall, her icy gaze fixed on Narcissa and her guards.

“Justice? And you think you’re in any position to demand it?” Narcissa sneered. When Blanche stepped into view, the faintness of her energy waves erased Narcissa’s last trace of doubt. She threw her head back and laughed.

“Blanche, you’re staring death in the face and still talking tough.”

She furned to her guards and barked, “Get her! I want her alive. Break her core first, then destroy her arms and legs.”

At her command, the three guards moved in unison. They split apart and closed in from different angles, forming a triangle as their weapons flared with spiritual light.

Blanche looked ready to meet them head-on. But just as the three were about to surround her, she suddenly leaped backward. Her hands formed seals as she called out, ” Formation activated!”

At that moment, the mist in the valley seemed to twist and thicken as if stirred by an invisible hand. It rolled and curved, swallowing Narcissa, her three guards, and Blanche. The mist did more than block their sight as it also disrupted their divine sense.

Narcissa felt her senses pushing outward only to sink as if into quicksand, unable to reach far. Even more alarming, the flow of her spiritual energy had inexplicably slowed.

“A formation? You actually set up a formation?”

Her shock turned to anger. She hadn’t expected Blanche to have this trick up her sleeve, but she quickly regained her composure.

“Just a cheap trick. What can a formation laid by your wounded body possibly do to me? Break it!” She brought out the Violebolt Orb, and purple lightning erupted, attempting to disperse the mist and strike the formation’s nodes.

The three guards also employed their techniques, attacking in all directions. However, the Mistbinding Trap borrowed power from the valley’s terrain. Its formation nodes were well hidden, and it wasn’t designed for powerful direct attacks.

For the moment, the lightning and sword aura vanished into the thick mist, creating ripples without immediately breaking the formation.

At that moment, Blanche’s figure flickered in and out of the mist. An ice spike shot from nowhere, followed by a chilling palm strike. The attacks weren’t overwhelmingly strong,

but paired with the formation's interference, they threw Narcissa and her guards off balance.

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"Bitch! All you do is attack from the shadows!" Narcissa shouted. Her anger boiled over as she directed her guards to attack in the direction Blanche had appeared.

Blanche fought as she fell back, seeming to be driven deeper into the valley. In reality, she was leading Narcissa and the others straight into the heart of the formation, right into the trap she had set.

Just as Narcissa's frustration peaked and she was ready to use her strongest divine artifacts to break through the formation, something unexpected happened. Several beams of light suddenly appeared along the cliffs on both sides of the valley.

Moments later, five figures streaked downward, landing in a part of the formation where the mist was thinner. They had subtly surrounded Narcissa and her three guards.

All five were dressed in white, their sleeves decorated with faint cloud patterns. There were three men and two women, all in the mid to late-stage Adept realm. Leading them was a middle-aged woman whose presence was calm and commanding, at the peak-stage Adept realm.

"Aunt Aveline!" Blanche's eyes finally flickered with emotion when she saw her. She quickly retreated to the middle-aged woman's side. The middle-aged woman, Aveline Frost, had striking features and eyes that blended determination with the weight of experience.

She quickly assessed Blanche-noting that though her injuries were serious, she wasn't in immediate danger-and gave a slight nod. Then, her cold gaze settled on Narcissa, who looked slightly flustered in the mist.

"The Jornells of Amethysius, you have some nerve! Not only did you hunt down the last heir of my family, but you even carried out a massacre in the mortal world. Do you really think this entire world answers to you?"

Her voice was low, yet it carried clearly to everyone, sharp with unwavering righteous authority. Narcissa finally realized she'd walked into a trap.

It turned out Blanche hadn't been fleeing in panic. Instead, she'd deliberately revealed her location to lure them here. She had set the ambush with the formation and the reinforcements that had appeared out of nowhere.

“You... You’re the remnants of the Frost family!” Narcissa shouted. Her shock turned to anger, but she quickly sized up the situation. There were only five of them, and the strongest was barely at the peak-stage Adept realm.

Even with the formation weakening their power, four were at the Adept realm, while she was in the late-stage Adept realm with her divine artifact in hand. So, they could still put up a fight. Besides, Elder Sevran would arrive soon.

“So what if we are?” Aveline retorted coldly. “Today, we’ll start collecting the blood debt for the dozens of innocent lives from the Weston family.”

“You think you stand a chance?” Narcissa forced herself to stay composed, letting out a sharp laugh.

“You’re nothing but a bunch of fugitives barking empty threats. Once our Elder arrives, every last one of you is dead, wiped out without a trace. Hand over Blanche and the item right now, and I might be generous enough to let you die quickly.”

“Stubborn fool!”

Aveline was done talking to Narcissa, then she waved her hand.

“Forin the Lesser Five Elements Sword Formation! Blanche, get some rest and don’t push yourself. Leave this to us.”

“Got it!” the other four Frost family members responded in unison. They quickly took their positions. Sword light flashed as their energy waves linked, forming a compact formation in an instant.

Sharp energy crackled, locking onto Narcissa and her guards. They were clearly well-trained with seamless coordination. Narcissa knew she couldn’t wait any longer. She had to end this quickly before the sword formation fully deployed.

“Attack!” she shouted. “Kill their leader first!”

She activated the Violebolt Orb that transformed into a thick bolt of purple lightning that shot straight toward Aveline.

The battle erupted in an instant. Sword light and lightning flashed together as spells and divine artifacts clashed with thunderous booms that echoed through the valley.

The five-person sword formation led by Aveline combined offense and defense seamlessly. Sword aura crisscrossed the battlefield, splitting Narcissa’s group of four apart.

The Mistbinding Trap continued to operate, disrupting Narcissa’s side by impeding their spiritual energy flow and slowing their coordination.

Blanche withdrew to the side, taking healing pills to recover while keeping her eyes locked on the battle. She knew Aveline and the others had rushed here after receiving her message and taken great risks to come.

Though their strength was considerable, Narcissa had a spiritual artifact, and her guards were no pushovers either. A prolonged battle wouldn't favor the Frosts, so they had to end this battle quickly.

As expected, Narcissa relied on the Violebolt Orb's power to barely hold off Aveline's attacks. But her three guards struggled desperately under the sword formation maintained by the four Frost family members. One wrong move and it could be their last.

In less than 30 minutes, one guard was pierced through the chest by a cunningly angled sword aura and died screaming.

"Damn it!"

Seeing that, Narcissa panicked. She bit her tongue hard and sprayed a mouthful of blood onto the Violebolt Orb. The orb blazed with intensified purple light, its power surging as it transformed into countless lightning serpents that furiously bombarded the sword formation.

The formation shook violently. Aveline's face paled slightly, but she gritted her teeth and held on, directing the formation's transformation. The sword light contracted into a defensive posture while waiting for opportunities to counterattack.

A few moments later, the second guard was killed by two intersecting sword auras. Only Ragnar remained. He was still holding on, but he was already covered in wounds.

Narcissa realized they were outmatched and began to plan her retreat. She pushed the Violebolt Orb forward in a furious attack while secretly crushing a charm hidden in her sleeve to send a silent call to her husband, Alarion.

"Trying to escape?"

Aveline saw through her intention. The sword formation suddenly shifted from defense to offense. Five sword lights merged into one, forming a brilliant white arc that carried biting cold intent straight toward Narcissa.

This strike combined the power of all five cultivators, enhanced by the formation's frost energy. Its power was devastating. Narcissa's face went white with terror as she pushed the Violebolt Orb to its limit to defend herself.

The white arc collided with the purple lightning, unleashing a shockwave that dispersed large swaths of the surrounding mist. The Violebolt Orb let out a mournful cry as its light dimmed and it flew backward.

Narcissa took the impact, coughing up blood and staggering back. Her energy waves weakened dramatically.

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Seeing the situation turn against them, Ragnar turned to flee, but the two members from the Frost family caught up with him. With a flash of sword light, his head separated from his body. Just like that, only Narcissa remained. She was gravely injured and collapsed to the ground.

Aveline approached, her sword pointed at Narcissa's throat. Four other Frost family members closed in, cutting off all escape routes. Blanche walked over as well, staring coldly at the person responsible for the massacre of the Weston family.

Narcissa's hair hung loose and disheveled, her body covered in blood. The arrogance she once carried was gone, replaced by fear and bitter resentment.

"You... You dare kill me?" she screamed. " My husband is Alarion. The Jornells of Amethysius won't let you get away with this. Elder Sevran will arrive any moment. All of you must die."

Blanche stood before her, looking down without a trace of mercy. Only cold killing intent showed in her eyes.

"The Weston family had dozens of people, all of them innocent mortals. Tell me. Did any of them threaten you? Did you spare a single life?"

Narcissa froze, then screamed hysterically, "Why should anyone care about insects like that? Dying by my hand was an honor!"

She continued, "Blanche, if you dare touch me, my husband will rip your soul out and refine it until there's nothing left of you to reincarnate. As for the rest of the remnants of the Frost family, you will all be wiped from existence."

"You're hopeless."

Blanche slowly raised the ice sword that had formed in her hand, its blade gleaming with cold light. "Your threats won't save you. The blood debt to the Weston family can only be repaid with your life."

"No! You can't kill me. My husband..."

Narcissa’s terror overwhelmed her. Tears and snot streamed down her face, all semblance of a noble lady gone.

Blanche ignored her rambling. The memory of the charred ruins and the silently extinguished souls flashed through her mind. Her eyes gleamed with cold light as she swung her ice sword without hesitation.

The blade swung down, and Narcissa’s shouts and threats ended abruptly. A head rolled to the ground, eyes wide with unending hatred and fear. As the headless body fell, blood spread across the ground.

This proud and ruthless member of the Jornells of Amethysius, who treated life as nothing, had finally paid the ultimate price for her crimes.

Blanche looked at Narcissa’s body. No triumph stirred in her, only an icy stillness. She slid her ice sword back into its sheath and faced Aveline and the others.

“Aunt Aveline, thank you for coming,” she said.

Aveline shook her head, her expression grave.

“Blanche, we shouldn’t stay here. Narcissa must have sent a message before she died. The Elder Sevran she mentioned is likely a Core-Forged Arcanist. Her husband, Alarion, is dangerous as well. We must leave at once.”

“You’re right,” Blanche replied with a nod. “Let’s leave now.”

Aveline quickly gathered the Violebolt Orb and Narcissa’s storage pouch. Without wasting a moment, they turned and shot off on beams of light in the direction opposite Oakvale. They soon disappeared into the depths of the mountain forest.

In the valley, only a few corpses remained, along with mist that hadn’t quite dissipated and the heavy stench of blood.

About half an hour later, a violent streak of cyan light shot across the sky at incredible speed and crashed down into the valley. As the light faded, a young man in teal robes emerged.

His face, which would normally be refined and handsome, was now twisted with fury. This was Narcissa’s husband, Alarion.

After receiving his partner’s distress signal, he spared no effort, pouring out his essence to activate a secret technique and rush here as fast as he could. Even so, he was still a step too late.

“Narcissa!”

Alarion caught sight of his wife's body, her head torn from her shoulders. Rage and horror flooded him, and a raw, animalistic howl tore from his throat.

He stumbled to her side, hands shaking as he lifted Narcissa's head. He felt it in her fading spirit, the endless rage and hatred she carried in death. Grief and fury crashed through him, shattering his reason in an instant

"Who? Who did this?"

Alarion threw his head back and let out a deafening roar. His Core-Forged Arcanist aura erupted without restraint, shaking the valley. Rocks tumbled from the cliffs as the ground trembled beneath him.

Amid the chaos, he spotted the bodies of the fallen guards. The air still carried the lingering chill of Blanche's icy energy, along with faint traces of unfamiliar sword auras.

"Blanche!" Alarion snarled. "A remnant of the Frost family, and she wasn't alone." He gritted his teeth. The whites of his eyes were streaked red, his expression twisted with rage and venom.

"Fine," he said. "You killed my wife. That makes this a blood feud, and it ends with you. I'm going to tear you apart, Blanche. I'll rip your soul out and grind it down until there's nothing left.

"I'll make you suffer every torment this world has to offer, so you will never be reborn. Also, those who helped you and every last remnant of the Frost family will die the same way."

Violent spiritual energy raged around him, pulverizing the surrounding rocks and vegetation. He carefully gathered Narcissa's remains and stored them away. Then, he began to scour the scene, focusing on every lingering trace of energy waves.

"They fled west, but they won't escape."

Alarion smiled viciously and pulled out an ancient bronze mirror. He bit his finger, smeared blood across its surface, and formed several hand seals.

The mirror glowed with an eerie light. Within its surface, several blurred streaks of light appeared, fleeing westward.

"Found them Blanche, and those damned accomplices of yours, not one of you will escape."

Alarion put away the mirror and transformed into a cyan streak of light boiling with killing intent, racing westward in pursuit. His speed now outpaced even his arrival, showing he no longer held anything back.

The valley fell silent again. Only wreckage remained, along with the lingering stench of blood. It was a sign that this vendetta, sparked by mortal lives, was about to spiral into something far more brutal.

The storm was just beginning.

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After leaving the valley, Blanche, Aveline, and the others didn't dare to stop to rest. Instead, they flew west at full speed. Drawing on her wealth of experience, Aveline chose mostly remote paths where the complex terrain and chaotic spiritual energy made it easy to hide their tracks.

"Blanche, how is your injury?" she asked, her eyes darting behind them for any sign of pursuit. "It's under control after taking the pill," Blanche replied. The color hadn't returned to her face, but her eyes stayed sharp.

"It's just that my spiritual energy is recovering slowly. Narcissa's Violebolt energy is proving stubborn to clear, and the frost poison still flares up occasionally. Aveline nodded, her expression solemn.

"She must have sent a message to her husband, Alarion, before she died. I've heard of him. He's a standout among the younger generation of the Jornells of Amethysius.

"His cultivation has reached the early-stage Core-Forged Arcanist level, and he dotes on Narcissa. If he comes after us, we don't stand a chance."

One of the younger Frost family disciples couldn't help but ask, "Aunt Aveline, if the five of us form the Lesser Five Elements Sword Formation, can't we stop an early-stage Core-Forged Arcanist?"

Aveline shook her head. "There is a world of difference between Adept and Core-Forged Arcanist. Their spiritual energy is so condensed that it is practically tangible, and they can even tap into the world's raw essence.

"That is not a gap you can bridge with numbers or sword formations alone. We might hold him for a moment, but we will inevitably lose in a prolonged battle. We must also protect the injured Blanche."

After a short pause, she added, "Our only option is to shake off pursuit as quickly as possible and find somewhere absolutely hidden where Blanche can heal. After she recovers, her talent and lineage might give her a fighting chance. At the very least, we will have a better chance of escaping."

Another female cultivator said worriedly, ”

But if Alarion catches up this quickly, he must have a way to track us. After all, we left in such a hurry. Even though we tried to erase our tracks, we probably left traces of our energy waves behind.”

Aveline paused in thought. Then she said, “Let’s keep moving I remember there’s a place called Blackwind Marsh about 90 miles ahead. It’s filled with poisonous miasma, chaotic spiritual energy, and natural magnetic interference.

“It disrupts divine senses and tracking spells. If we can get deep into the marsh, we might be able to use the terrain to lose him.”

Everyone’s spirits lifted at her words, and they sped forward. But they had underestimated Alarion’s determination and speed in pursuit, as well as the potential a Core-Forged Arcanist could unleash when fueled by the grief of losing his wife.

About an hour after they left the valley, a heart-stopping pressure and a wave of violent killing intent erupted from the horizon behind them.

“Damn it! Alarion’s caught up already. He’s too fast,” Aveline said, her face draining of color.

She looked back and saw a streak of cyan light tearing through the sky like a meteor, closing the distance at a terrifying speed. The overwhelming killing intent was almost tangible, sending chills through everyone’s spines.

“Everyone, split up!” Aveline made a split-second decision. “Blanche, take Snowy deep into the marsh and find somewhere to hide. The four of us will scatter and draw him away ”

“No!” Blanche immediately objected. ” He’s coming for me. If you split up, he’ll just hunt you down one by one.”

“Listen to me,” Aveline said sharply, though her eyes held both resolve and tenderness. “You are our only hope, and we cannot afford to lose you. We will hold him off as long as we can. Now go ”

Before Blanche could say anything, Aveline gave her a light shove. The gentle force sent Blanche and Snowy toward the dense forest below. At the same time, Aveline barked a command, “Take formation! Engage the enemy!”

A look of grim resolve crossed the faces of the other four disciples, but not one of them retreated. They quickly joined Aveline. Sword light flared once more as the Lesser Five Elements Formation solidified in an instant, forming a barrier between their group and the approaching Alarion.

Blanche steadied herself midair and looked back. Aveline and the other four stood suspended in the sky, their sword formation's light seeming so fragile yet so resolute against the rapidly approaching cyan streak.

Tears glistened in her eyes as she bit her lip hard. She knew this wasn't the time to hesitate. Turning around, she transformed into a white arc and dove toward Blackwind Marsh below with Snowy without looking back.

"Remnants of the Frost family, go to hell!"

Alarion's roar thundered like lightning. The cyan streak closed in instantly, revealing his twisted, savage face. When he spotted Blanche fleeing below, his fury erupted. He raised his hand and sent a massive cyan lightning spear, tearing through the air to strike at Blanche's back.

"Don't even think about it!" Aveline shouted. Five sword lights merged into a massive barrier of sword-screen, blocking the lightning spear.

The spear slammed into the sword-screen, erupting in a blinding flash and a deafening explosion. The barrier trembled violently as its light began to dim.

Aveline and the others groaned in unison. Blood trickled from the corners of their mouths, but they had managed to block the strike.

"Know your place! You are a grain of sand trying to stop a landslide."

Alarion's rage intensified when his attack was blocked. Without slowing down, he charged straight for the sword formation. His hands moved in a blur, raining down bolts of cyan lightning that were even more powerful than before.

Aveline and the other four struggled to hold the formation. Driven onto the defensive, their situation grew increasingly dire. Each collision sent their life essence churning, battering their internal organs. Yet, their eyes remained resolute as they held the line.

They were determined to buy Blanche every precious second they could.

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As Blanche dove toward Blackwind Marsh, she fought the urge to turn back and help Aveline and others. She pushed her speed to its absolute limit as she plunged into the treacherous land, shrouded year-round in a gray-black, poisonous miasma.

The moment she entered the marsh, her vision and divine sense became severely restricted. The air reeked of rot and toxins, while the ground beneath her was a treacherous sprawl of soft bogs. Occasionally, strange black shadows flickered beneath the murky water's surface.

She didn't dare slow down. Guided only by a hazy memory of the terrain, she flew deeper into the marsh toward the core region rumored to have the most chaotic magnetic interference. Snowy stayed close by her side, nimbly avoiding puddles and hidden dangers.

Blanche could feel the violent spiritual energy from the sky far behind her, an echo of Alarion's raw killing intent. She could sense Aveline and the others' energy waves fading, their presence flickering out like dying embers.

Her heart twisted with anguish, but she forced her grief into a desperate burst of speed. She flew until the roar of battle began to fade. Yet, the sensation of being hunted, like the feeling of a predator's gaze locked onto her, remained.

Blanche knew Alarion must possess a tracking technique that could pinpoint her even through the thickest miasma.

Suddenly, a strange area appeared in the marsh ahead. The fog ahead took on a dark red hue, and the air hummed with chaotic magnetic forces. The pressure made her spiritual energy sluggish and limited her divine sense to only a few yards.

Strange, jagged black rocks, magnetized by the environment, lay scattered across the ground.

"This is it," Blanche muttered. "It's the edge of the Crimson Magnetic Abyss in Blackwind Marsh."

Her heart finally eased a little.

The extreme conditions here were her best hope for throwing him off her trail. She landed on a relatively dry mound partially sheltered by a cluster of massive magnetic stones and quickly set up a small concealment formation.

Blanche gripped the pendant Dustin had given her. Its cool surface seemed to steady her mind and ward off the marsh's oppressive weight.

She sat cross-legged, trying to seize every moment to recover. However, her mind refused to settle. She couldn't stop worrying about Aveline and the others. High above, the battle was already nearing its end.

Alarion struck with a fury that was nothing short of terrifying

Though Aveline and the other three fought desperately in formation, the gap in strength was too great. After enduring over a dozen of his savage lightning volleys, the sword formation finally shattered.

Aveline took the brunt of the final blow as a bolt of lightning slammed into her chest. Blood sprayed from her mouth as she spiraled downward, going limp midair.

“Aunt Aveline!”

The other four watched in horror, their eyes wide with helpless rage. They lunged forward to save her, only to be snared by a web of lightning Alarion cast with a flick of his wrist.

“Pathetic weaklings! You really thought you could stop me?”

Alarion didn’t even spare them a glance.

His divine sense had already locked onto the faint but distinct icy aura belonging to Blanche in the marsh below. With a cruel grin, he transformed into a streak of light and dove downward.

Then, something unexpected happened. From somewhere deep within Blackwind Marsh, a brilliant pillar of golden light suddenly shot into the sky.

The pillar contained pure and vast spiritual energy that instantly dispersed part of the miasma and even temporarily calmed the chaotic magnetic forces.

The sudden transformation made Alarion pause mid-flight. Even the gravely injured and barely conscious Aveline, along with the four Frost family disciples trapped in the lightning web, instinctively turned toward the golden pillar.

What surprised everyone even more was that the pillar seemed to have risen not far from the edge of the Crimson Magnetic Abyss, where Blanche was hiding.

Alarion narrowed his eyes. He’d never heard of such a phenomenon in Blackwind Marsh. But the spiritual energy in that pillar made even him feel a twinge of unease.

“Could it be some kind of rare treasure appearing? Or...”

His thoughts raced, but his thirst for avenging his wife quickly suppressed his curiosity.

“I don’t care what it is. I’ll deal with Blanche first.”

Alarion was about to continue his chase when he noticed two figures faintly appearing within the golden pillar. One of them felt strangely familiar, and it filled him with an unexpected sense of dread.

Down in the marsh, Blanche was still tightly gripping the white pendant as she meditated. The sudden eruption of the golden pillar so close to her position jolted her from her trance.

She looked up in shock, peering through the faint shimmer of her concealment formation. To her surprise, the white stone in her hand began to glow, radiating a gentle warmth that seemed to pulse in sync with the massive pillar of light.

“Is this...”

Blanche’s heart pounded as an incredulous thought flashed through her mind.

“Could it be... Mr. Rhys? But he renounced his cultivation to live as a mortal. This spiritual energy in the golden light...” 2

She didn’t have time to finish the thought because after Alarion’s brief pause, his killing intent locked onto her again.

Ignoring the golden pillar’s phenomenon, a sharp cyan condensed sword aura tore through the miasma and slashed down ruthlessly toward the mound where she was hiding. The concealment formation shattered under the furious strike of a Core – Forged Arcanist.

Blanche’s face went deathly pale. She barely managed to gather what little spiritual energy she had left to form an ice shield in front of her while retreating quickly.

As the condensed sword aura struck down, the mound exploded, and mud splattered everywhere. The ice shield shattered, and she was caught by the shockwave.

She coughed up another mouthful of blood and stumbled backward into the muck, her energy waves growing even weaker.

Snowy was also thrown back by the blast and landed some distance away, crying out Yanxiously.

Alarion’s figure emerged through the settling dust and the fading golden light, landing in front of Blanche. His eyes were cold and cruel, like a venomous snake eyeing its prey.

“There’s nowhere left to run, Blanche.”

He slowly raised his sword, which gleamed with flowing cyan light.

“First, I’ll cripple you and strip you of your power. Then, I’m dragging you back to my estate to bleed you dry before my wife’s grave. Once you’re dead, I’ll ensure your soul knows only agony for eternity.”

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Blanche struggled to her feet and wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes remained cold and defiant as she conjured another ice sword in her hand, though the glow was faint.

“If you’re going to kill me, then do it!” she snapped. “Enough talk. No one from my family dies on their knees!”

“Fine! Die with your pride, then.” Alarion snarled, his face twisting into a cruel grin. ” I’ll be happy to oblige.”

His cyan sword aura condensed again, radiating a destructive pressure as he brought it down. He held nothing back, pouring every ounce of his rage into a single strike meant to end her life on the spot.

Blanche knew she had no hope of stopping the blow. A flash of grim resolve crossed her eyes as she prepared to throw her very life into one final, desperate counterattack. She was determined to take a piece of him with her to the grave.

But at the critical moment, the air began to hum. The golden pillar of light in the distance suddenly erupted with intense brilliance. This time, the light didn’t surge toward the sky. Instead, it condensed into a razor-sharp beam of gold.

It struck the side of Alarion’s cyan sword aura with perfect precision, intercepting the blow just before it reached Blanche.

The golden beam slammed into the energy with a deafening metallic ring, deflecting the seemingly unstoppable strike off course. The cyan sword aura veered wildly and crashed into a nearby black magnetic stone, shattering the 30-foot-tall rock into dust.

“Who’s there?” Alarion roared as he spun toward the golden light, his fury mixing with sudden alarm.

A white streak cut across the northeastern horizon, moving with such blistering speed it defied the eye. It wasn’t a standard light from a flight but a condensed sliver of pure, crystalline sword aura.

Wherever the streak passed, the poisonous miasma in the sky was shredded and purified by an invisible edge, leaving a clear, brief vacuum in its wake.

“Is that… Prismatic Aura Streak? The control is perfect.”

Alarion's mind reeled. This newcomer's sword attainment was terrifying. The lethal refinement and speed of that sword aura alone were enough to send a jolt of cold apprehension through even a Core-Forged Arcanist like him.

In a heartbeat, the white sword aura had already crossed the sky and appeared above the battlefield. Instead of attacking him, it traced a perfect arc around the area where Blanche stood.

The air hummed as the circle completed. A shimmering barrier of ice-blue sword curtain manifested out of thin air. It was translucent and delicate as a dragonfly's wing, yet radiating a bone-chilling cold. It formed a perfect dome, shielding both Blanche and Snowy

Alarion's delayed cyan sword aura slammed into the ice-blue curtain with a heavy, muffled thud. The barrier rippled violently under the impact. Waves of energy shimmered across its surface, but it held firm. It had weathered the full force of the blow without a single crack.

"Show yourself!" Alarion roared, his voice a jagged edge of fury and alarm as he fixed his gaze on the source of the sword arc.

The white light receded, revealing a figure suspended in the air. To Alarion's shock, it was a young man. He looked no older than 17 and wore a simple, moon-pale tunic with fitted sleeves.

Albus Frost stood with natural, commanding poise. His features still held the soft traces of youth, yet he was strikingly handsome. However, his eyes were the most striking part of him. They were clear and bright, but they held a cold intensity that seemed far too old for his face.

He didn't rely on a flying sword to stay aloft. Instead, he stood upon the empty air as if it were solid ground. That terrifying streak of light from before hadn't come from a weapon. It had been a pure manifestation of his own sword aura.

A longsword floated at his side. Its scabbard was ancient and pale blue, etched with shifting patterns of frost. Even though the blade remained sheathed, it radiated a chill so sharp it made the skin crawl.

Albus' gaze swept over the severely injured and frail Blanche below. Pain and fury crossed his face before he turned his eyes back to Alarion. His voice was clear but carried a bone-chilling edge.

"The Jornells of Amethysius certainly know how to throw their weight around," he said. "You hurt my sister. For that, you shall die."

His voice wasn't loud, but every word cut through the air with resonant clarity. There was a lethal finality in his tone that allowed no room for doubt

"Sister?" Alarion's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before a fresh wave of bloodlust took hold. "So, you're another remnant of the Frost family? You're her brother?"

He swept his divine sense over Albus and felt a wave of relief. Though Albus' presence was sharp and his sword aura was terrifyingly pure, his raw spiritual energy told a different story. He hadn't even reached the core formation realm but was merely at the peak-stage Adept realm.

A peak-stage Adept brat? It didn't matter how gifted he was with a sword. At that level, he was nothing.

"Arrogant whelp!" Alarion spat, forcing down the inexplicable chill in his heart. He let out a cold laugh.

"A mere peak-stage Adept realm dares to talk back to me? Fine. I'll take both you and your sister today. I'll send you both to the afterlife for a family reunion."

Without waiting for a response, he launched his assault. He knew well enough that swordmasters possessed terrifying offensive power. Given the purity of Albus' sword aura, he couldn't afford to let the brat strike first.

Alarion slammed his hands together, instantly manifesting three massive spears made of pure, cyan lightning. Each one hummed with the raw power of destruction. They tore through the air in a triangular formation, hurtling toward Albus like thunder.

This was no longer a test. He put everything into the blow, determined to kill Albus with a single strike. Faced with the devastating lightning of an enraged Core-Forged Arcanist, Albus remained unfazed. He didn't even spare a glance for the incoming spears.

He simply raised his right hand, forming a sword-finger gesture. With a calm, graceful motion, he beckoned toward the ancient longsword floating at his side.

A resonant ring echoed through the marsh, a sound so pure and powerful it seemed to vibrate through the very air. The pale blue scabbard slid away on its own, revealing a three-foot blade. It looked as though it were forged from mountain ice, its surface shimmering with the fluid grace of flowing water.

When the sword emerged, the temperature plummeted. The humid air instantly crystallized, turning the mist into fine frost that drifted down around him like falling snow.

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Albus gestured with his sword finger, then uttered, “Go.” The crystalline longsword trembled slightly. Without any visible wind-up, it transformed into a streak of azure light, surging forward to meet the three terrifying lightning spears.

Alarion watched in disbelief as the streak moved with a lightness that defied physics. It was so fast his divine sense could barely track its trajectory.

Instead of clashing head-on, the streak flashed through the narrow gap between the spears in the blink of an eye. What happened next left everyone stunned.

The three devastating lightning spears froze mid-flight as if caught in an invisible ice storm. The crackling cyan lightning on their surface rapidly dimmed and solidified.

Three sharp cracks echoed simultaneously as the spears snapped in two. The breaks were perfectly smooth before the remnants dissolved into a mist of ice-blue light and vanished without a sound. They might as well have been fragile icicles rather than powerful lightning techniques.

“What?” Alarion’s breath hitched, his voice cracking in a strangled cry.

His full-force strike had been dismissed so casually. How was that possible? What kind of sword was that? What kind of technique?

Albus hovered calmly in the air, but his sword finger moved again. The crystalline longsword traced an elegant arc and hovered before him, its tip locked onto Alarion with a soul-chilling focus.

“You...” Every instinct in Alarion screamed in warning as an unprecedented sense of dread washed over him. He no longer dared to underestimate Albus.

With a guttural roar, the golden core within him spun wildly and unleashed a torrent of raw spiritual energy. A set of emerald-toned plate armor materialized over his body, glowing with a hard, glassy sheen.

At the same time, his hands formed a rapid series of hand seals to summon his soul-bound artifact. It was the Stormbreaker, an ancient bronze mirror etched with jagged lightning symbols.

The mirror rose into the air, its surface crackling with lightning before erupting into a massive pillar of cyan thunder. It was a concentrated torrent of pure destruction that roared toward Albus with devastating force. This was Alarion’s trump card, a strike far more devastating than the previous lightning spears.

Faced with the devastating roar of the oncoming strike, Albus' gaze finally sharpened. He raised his sword finger in a slow, deliberate motion, and the hovering crystalline longsword thrummed in response.

The light dancing along the steel swirled into a brilliant vortex as a surge of sword aura-vast and terrifyingly pure-erupted skyward in a pillar of absolute frost.

"Third Form-Glacial Sepulcher."

Albus' voice was cold and detached, devoid of any emotion.

This time, the crystalline longsword didn't blur. Its path through the air was slow enough for every eye to follow. It left a shimmering trail of frost in its wake as if it were freezing the very fabric of space. The tip of the sword met the head of the roaring lightning pillar with a gentle tap.

Time seemed to stop at that moment. There was no earth-shaking explosion or blinding flash of light. Instead, the terrifying pillar-with enough power to level a mountain-was overtaken by a surge of azure ice.

Startling from the point of contact, the frost raced backward, swallowing the lightning in a crystalline casing. The freezing advance was irresistible, surging up the stream of thunder toward the Stormbreaker itself.

"No!" Alarion screamed, his mind shattering in terror. He could feel his connection to the Stormbreaker being ruthlessly severed, frozen solid by a terrifying chill. He tried to recall the artifact, but it was already too late.

A sharp, crystalline crack echoed through the marsh. In an instant, the Stormbreaker and its pillar of thunder were completely encased in ice.

They became a massive, life-like monument, a tableau of a strike frozen in mid-air. The lightning was trapped within the glass, suspended in its final moment of fury.

As his soul-bound artifact was neutralized, Alarion reeled as if he had been struck by a sledgehammer. He coughed up a mouthful of blood, his aura collapsing instantly. His face turned a ghostly, papery white, his eyes wide with a primal, bottomless terror.

Alarion's mind failed him.

Just what kind of monster was he looking at? Albus' cultivation was clearly that of an Adept, but the reality before him made no sense. No one at that realm should have been able to freeze a Core-Forged Arcanist's artifact in a single strike.

Albus lowered his hand, and the crystalline longsword gave a soft hum as it flew back to his side. He didn't even look at the frozen mirror. Instead, his gaze remained fixed on Alarion, who was now reeling from the backlash in total terror.

"Injuring my sister is an unforgivable sin," he said. He slowly raised his hand, his fingers forming the sword-finger again. Terror seized Alarion. Any thought of revenge was gone, replaced by a primal need to survive.

Albus' sword mastery was beyond anything he had ever encountered. If he stayed another second, he would be a dead man.

"Run!"

The thought screamed through his mind. Without even a glance toward his frozen soul-bound artifact, he bit down hard on the tip of his tongue. A mouthful of blood essence, mingled with fragmented specks of his golden core, sprayed forth. It coalesced into a thick, crimson radiance that wrapped around him.

Blood Flash was a forbidden technique that sacrificed one's foundational cultivation to achieve an impossible burst of speed.

In a blur of crimson, Alarion vanished. He moved so fast the air cracked in his wake, leaving only a jagged, hate-filled roar to echo over the marsh.

"Stray of the Frost line! I will remember today's grudge. The Jornells of Amethysius will hunt you to the ends of the earth. We will not rest until your entire bloodline is wiped out."

The streak of blood-light tore across the horizon at an impossible speed. In the blink of an eye, it was nothing more than a fading speck against the sky. And then it was gone.

Albus didn't chase him. He merely cast a cold, indifferent glance toward the horizon where Alarion had vanished.

"Pathetic pretender," he muttered. With a casual wave, the frozen Stormbreaker and the ice-sculpted lightning pillar rapidly shrank to palm size and dropped into his hand. He casually tucked them into his pocket.

Once that was done, the overwhelming sword aura radiating from him vanished.

He transformed back into his youthful, handsome appearance, with a hint of boyishness. His figure flashed as he descended to the ice-blue sword barrier protecting Blanche below.

Once the barrier was gone, Albus rushed to Blanche's side. Seeing her pale face and injuries covering her body, his eyes reddened, and his voice choked with emotion.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “I’m sorry that I came too late.”

Blanche looked at her younger brother, who felt both familiar and like a total stranger. Her heart was a storm of conflicting emotions-the hollow relief of survival, the sudden warmth of seeing family, and the staggering shock of the power he had just displayed.

She forced a smile and raised her hand to pat his head, though the movement made her wince from her wounds.

“Albus, you’ve grown up. And you’ve gotten so much stronger.”

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Albus rushed forward to support Blanche, carefully checking her injuries. His eyes were filled with concern.

“Don’t talk. Let me treat your wounds first. He pulled out a small vial and tipped two pills into his palm that gave off a fragrant aroma and shimmered with spiritual energy. He fed one to his sister and crushed the other, sprinkling it over her most serious wounds.

The pills were remarkably effective. Blanche felt warmth spreading through her body as her condition stabilized, and her spiritual energy began to recover.

She couldn’t help but ask, “Albus, how did you find me? And...”

“I received a communication device, a rune slate, left behind by our family. That’s how I learned that you might be in danger somewhere around the Oakvale region. I’ve been searching for you ever since.

“Two days ago, I sensed a faint fluctuation from the rune slate you used, so I hastened my pace. When I was 30 miles away, I felt a massive surge of spiritual power, along with a familiar icy aura and the Stormcraft energy of that Jornell bastard.

“I knew you were in danger, so I streaked across the sky on a blade of cyan sword light to reach you.” He paused and scratched his head a bit sheepishly.

“That attack just now... I’ve been refining it during my seclusion over the past two years. It was the first time I used it in real combat. Glad I didn’t embarrass you.”

Blanche looked at Albus. Despite possessing terrifying strength, he still acted like a child who still relied on his elder sister. Her heart felt both comforted and conflicted. She knew he must have experienced unimaginable trials to possess such a shocking sword attainment at such a young age.

Just then, Snowy padded over and nuzzled affectionately against his leg.

He smiled and patted its head. “Thank you for protecting my sister.” Blanche suddenly recalled the earlier battle and looked frantically toward the sky.

“What about Aunt Aveline and the others...

Albus’ expression turned solemn.

“Don’t worry. When I arrived, I rescued the four trapped members on my way here. Aunt Aveline’s injuries are severe, but she’s not in mortal danger. I gave them healing tablets and had them rest and recover at the base of that cliff over there.”

“It’s a long story,” Albus said quickly as he continued tending to her wounds. As he spoke, he pointed toward a location at the edge of the marsh. Blanche finally let out a full breath of relief, the weight lifting from her chest.

“We shouldn’t stay here,” he said seriously. “Even though I forced Alarion to retreat, the Jornell family will not let this matter rest. They may already have stronger experts on the way, such as Elder Sevran, whom Narcissa had mentioned before.”

He added, “We must leave immediately and find a place that is absolutely safe for you to recover.”

Blanche nodded, leaning on him for support. She glanced in the direction of Oakvale, her gaze complicated.

The white pendant she had held so tightly earlier was still faintly warm. But with her brother as a powerful backup, she was temporarily safe and no longer needed to involve Dustin.

“Albus, let’s regroup with Aunt Aveline and the others first.”

Blanche pushed aside her wandering thoughts. Her top priority at the moment was to recover quickly so she could deal with the Jornell family’s inevitable retaliation.

Albus nodded, his hand lifting in a silent summons. The crystalline longsword appeared again, transforming into a broad, gentle cyan sword light that lifted Blanche and Snowy into the air. He himself rode the currents of energy beside his sister.

The siblings turned into two streaks of light. They flew toward the marsh’s edge-where Aveline and the others were-and quickly vanished into the dense, poisonous miasma and chaotic magnetic currents.

Blackwind Marsh returned to its eerie silence. Lingering traces of icy sword aura and scorched earth were all that remained, signs of a brief but momentous clash that would unsettle those who understood its significance.

A brilliantly talented young Sword Whisperer was now entering these increasingly turbulent undercurrents with Blanche.

Far away, Alarion crashed into some wilderness, battered and disheveled. He coughed up blood, his face ashen. Beyond the venom in his eyes, there was now a deep fear and lingering dread.

His hands were trembling as he pulled out a higher-grade rune slate and sent a message through gritted teeth.

“Elder Sevran! Blanche has a powerful backup. It’s her brother, around 17 years old, with terrifyingly advanced sword attainment. He appears to have mastered an extremely profound Crystalline Strike technique and can freeze my soul-bound artifact across cultivation realms.

“I... I was severely injured and couldn’t defeat him. I request the family to dispatch stronger experts at once. We must kill these two and reclaim ‘that item.'”

After sending the message, Alarion collapsed on the ground. Starling up at the gloomy sky, all that remained in his heart was endless hatred and a chill he refused to acknowledge even to himself.

The Frost family had actually produced such a prodigy. The storm, triggered by this Sword Whisperer’s sudden emergence, had become even more unpredictable and fierce.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2770

Several days after Alarion fled in disgrace and Albus quietly vanished with Blanche and their clan, a cataclysmic upheaval erupted in Dragonmarsh. It struck without warning at Aylka, the inner city in Oakvale.

That day began with clear skies, and Oakvale was as bustling as ever. At noon, a deep, distant rumble rolled through the earth. It was as if some primordial leviathan was waking deep within the mantle.

At first, people felt only a faint tremor beneath their feet and assumed it was an earthquake. But then, in the center of the vast plaza before the Aetherium in Aylka, the seemingly indestructible golden brick pavement suddenly bulged upward and cracked.

The explosion was deafening. A blinding surge of ochre light erupted from the fissures as the base of an impossibly massive mountain tore through the earth's crust. It had not flown in from afar but grew from deep within the ground, rising at an unnatural speed that defied all reason.

Massive boulders tumbled as soil surged like tidal waves. The palace of golden brick and carved stone crumbled like a child's blocks before this irresistible force. Its structures were shoved aside, torn open, and buried.

Ramparts, towering halls, and meticulously crafted gardens collapsed in rapid succession. In mere moments, the grand architectural complex that symbolized the absolute pinnacle of secular royal power was mercilessly swallowed by the rising mountain base.

And that was only the beginning. The mountain's base alone was vast enough to blanket the entire former site of Aylka, and it continued to expand outward at a terrifying pace.

Its surface was ancient and weathered, a mottled grayish-brown stone unlike any ordinary rock. Enormous, cryptic patterns covered it naturally, emanating a desolate, primordial presence that made souls tremble.

Strange light coursed over the mountainside, flaring and dimming in turn, as though it contained secret power left behind at the birth of the universe. It continued to grow, thrusting straight toward the sky. At first, the mountain's full form remained visible. Moments later, its midsection vanished into the clouds.

No matter how hard they strained to look up, people could see only a colossal peak with no discernible end, rising from the center of what had once been Oakvale.

Clouds swirled around its midsection. Higher up, the peak vanished into raging gales and lightning beyond mortal sight, its actual height impossible to measure.

The entire city of Oakvale shook violently. Countless houses collapsed, and the ground split apart. The citizens were seized by terror, crying out as they fled in all directions, as if it were the end of the world.

"Oh my God! What is that?"

"A mountain! It's rising out of the ground."

"The royal palace complex is gone!"

"Run!"

Although the mountain's growth was astonishing, it wasn't instantaneous. Its expansion centered primarily around the former royal palace complex, which gave people time to react.

Grace, the future queen, immediately mobilized government personnel to evacuate citizens toward the outskirts of the city. She activated all preset evacuation routes to protect as many people as possible.

Faced with this catastrophic event, she displayed decisiveness and leadership far beyond that of ordinary people. She'd already prepared contingency plans for " extraordinary incidents" that might occur in Oakvale, though she'd never imagined something on this scale.

Grace personally oversaw operations from the temporary command center, issuing orders in rapid succession and mobilizing every available government resource.

Chaos was inevitable, and casualties did occur. Still, under her efficient leadership, the vast majority of Oakvale's residents were evacuated over the next two days from a capital suddenly overtaken by a towering mountain.

The entire nation was in an uproar, and the world was stunned.

Through the communication networks and satellite systems that were still operational, images of a colossal mountain suddenly appearing in the capital of Dragonmarsh and swallowing the royal palace complex were transmitted worldwide.

With no scientific explanation and no rational answer, panic and speculation spread rapidly across the globe. Senior officials in governments around the world urgently reached out to Dragonmarsh, attempting to learn what had actually happened.

But unlike the fear and unease gripping the outside world, the reaction within the reclusive cultivation families was entirely different. Many had already quietly slipped into Oakvale, while others had been watching it for a long time.

After the initial shock passed, what rose within them wasn't fear, but an indescribable surge of excitement and elation.

"It's Mount Aethermoor. The mountain is manifesting in our world."

An elderly cultivator from a lineage recorded in an ancient manuscript was moved to tears.

"This mountain appears once every 3,000 years, bridges the Heavenly Realm and the mortal world. Legend says there's the Aethermoor Palace at its peak, housing ancient immortal artifacts and supreme cultivation methods."

"This is our chance. A once-in-an-era opportunity. If we can reach the palace and obtain even a single treasure, it would be enough for our clan to rise and dominate an entire region."

“Quick! Summon all our elite disciples immediately and bring our most precious treasures. We must reach Mount Aethermoor.”

The Jornells, the Frosts, the Quintons, the Judds, and the Killians emerged one after another from their hiding places. Some were well known, while others had remained unseen for generations.

They mobilized their elite forces, their gazes burning with desire as they fixed on the towering mountain that now stood atop the ruins of Oakvale.

All the conflicts and schemes that had arisen from hunting Blanche or supporting the Mosey mansion were suddenly and unanimously set aside. Nothing mattered more than the opportunity that awaited on Mount Aethermoor.

Even reclusive independent cultivators of great power and ancient sects that hadn’t been heard from in ages were stirred into action. They dispatched their disciples or came themselves toward Oakvale.

For a time, all forces converged, and hidden powers finally revealed themselves.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2771

Three days had passed since Mount Aethermoor appeared. The mountain’s growth had finally stopped.

By now, roughly half of what had been the bustling city of Oakvale lay buried beneath the mountain’s massive foundation and sprawling foothills.

What remained in the emptied city were official forces handling cleanup and security.

Martial artists who hadn’t evacuated in time or refused to leave had also gathered there, alongside daring adventurers seeking fortune and cultivators from every corner of the world, many accompanied by followers. Each group was marked by distinct energy waves.

Inside a makeshift official camp at the foot of Mount Aethermoor, Dustin stood on a nearby rise. He gazed at the towering mountain before him, its immense presence rising into the sky and carrying a boundless sense of desolation that left him deeply contemplative.

Earlier, he’d personally seen Natasha off on a train bound for safer territory. She’d wanted to stay behind, but after joint persuasion from him and Grace, she realized that the dangers here had far surpassed any commercial risk.

Ultimately, Natasha agreed to leave temporarily, holding back tears as she warned him to be careful.

“Mr. Rhys, please report to the command tent,” said an officer wearing the Sovereign Aegis uniform.

Dustin nodded and entered the largest tent. Inside, Grace was studying intelligence reports and maps spread across a table, surrounded by several key advisors and cultivator consultants.

She was dressed in practical, rugged traveling leathers. Though her eyes remained sharp, they were rimmed with the exhaustion of several sleepless nights and a deep, underlying dread she couldn’t entirely hide.

Before her lay fragmentary terrain maps of Mount Aethermoor and ancient journals with every scrap of information they’d managed to compile.

“Dustin, you came at the right moment.”

Seeing him enter, Grace quickly had someone bring him a seat.

“The Jornells, the Quintons, the Frosts, and several other hidden families have all mobilized their elite forces to different areas at the mountain’s base. Independent cultivators are pouring in. The ascent is inevitable now. What should be our next step?”

“Mount Aethermoor offers both opportunity and mortal danger,” he replied. “Only those with extraordinary willpower and fortune can succeed there. The palace’s forces shouldn’t and can’t commit everything to this gamble.

“But abandoning it entirely isn’t wise either. We should send elite scout teams. Their goal shouldn’t be reaching the summit or seizing treasures, but gathering intelligence, training personnel, and collecting resources along the way while securing our position at the base.”

Grace nodded. That was exactly what she had been thinking

“As for the selection of personnel... Scarlet and Adam have volunteered for the lead multiple times. They’ve both reached peak -stage Adept level, have extensive combat experience, and their loyalty is beyond question.

“I’m thinking of having them lead the team, supported by handpicked experts from the Sovereign Aegis and the royal retainers.”

“The Spanners’ twins are excellent choices, “Dustin said thoughtfully. “But Mount Aethermoor’s dangers are unpredictable. Their strength may not be enough.’

“We do what we can and accept what fate brings. I’ve already distributed every protective charm, rune, and tablet from the treasury that could help. I hope it will keep them safe,” Grace said with a sigh.

He nodded slightly, then stood up.

“Though I can’t use my power right now, I still have a couple of old items that might help them. I’ll go look for them.”

In a corner of the official camp at the southeastern foot of the mountain, Scarlet was polishing her signature crimson spear, Wildfire. Cold light rippled along the spearhead, reflecting off her striking, determined face.

Nearby, Adam was focused on adjusting a set of formation flags. The siblings had both changed into specially made climbing gear with light armor over it, ready to depart.

“Do you think Dustin will come see us off?

“Scarlet asked softly, her rhythmic polishing slowing to a halt. Adam glanced up at his sister, clearly understanding what she meant.

“He values loyalty above all else,” he said gently. “He’ll be here. But Scarlet-”

“I know,” she cut him off with a smile that carried both self-mockery and acceptance “I see him as a brother, and he sees me as a sister. That’s fine. At least... I can still stand beside him, right?”

Just as she finished speaking, the tent flap lifted, and Dustin appeared in the doorway.

“Dustin?”

Scarlet’s eyes lit up as she jumped to her feet, then she felt self-conscious and blushed slightly.

“Hey, buddy.” Adam rose to greet him as well. Dustin entered the tent, his gaze sweeping over them both. Without a word, he pulled two items from his bag.

One was a thumb-sized, dark red shuttle-shaped pendant. It was neither made of metal nor stone, but it was covered in intricate cloud patterns and strung on an unknown black cord. The other was a palm -sized bronze mirror with slightly damaged edges and a dull, tarnished surface.

Dustin handed the items to them separately.

“This journey will be dangerous. Take these with you. In a critical moment, they might save your lives,” he said. Scarlet accepted the dark red pendant. It felt slightly warm in her hand, and she sensed a strange spatial fluctuation within it.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It’s called the Cinnabar Void-Shuttle. It’s not an offensive or defensive treasure,” Dustin explained.

“If you encounter absolute danger you cannot resist, crush this shuttle. It will trigger a single short-range random spatial teleportation

“But you can’t control where it sends you. You might escape danger, or you might land in another perilous place. And it only works once. Don’t use it unless you have absolutely no other choice.”

Scarlet gripped the pendant tightly, feeling the concern in his words, and nodded firmly.

“Got it,” she replied. Adam took the ancient bronze mirror. It felt cold and heavy in his hand. The surface was cloudy and couldn’t reflect a clear image.

“Dustin, this mirror...”

Dustin explained, “This mirror is called Obscura. I obtained it by chance. It can’t actively attack or defend, but if you encounter illusions, maze formations, or spiritual attacks, hang it at your chest and channel spiritual energy into it.

“It will generate a layer of Obscura radiance that protects your mind and reveals falsehoods. It’s also effective against certain sinister ghostly techniques. However, the mirror itself is fragile, so handle it carefully.”

Adam’s expression grew solemn as he carefully put the mirror away. “Thanks, bud.”

Dustin looked at the Spanners siblings, who were about to enter a place where life and death were uncertain. His own emotions stirred.

He patted Adam on the shoulder, then looked at Scarlet and said warmly, “No opportunity is worth more than your life. Mount Aethermoor’s trials test the heart and affinity. They can’t be forced. You should focus on keeping yourselves safe and returning alive.”

“Got it.” Scarlet nodded vigorously. Looking at Dustin, her eyes seemed to hold a thousand unspoken words, but in the end, she only said, “Dustin, you take care too. When we get back, the drinks are on us.”

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2772

The following morning, the first light of dawn spread across the horizon. At the foot of Mount Aethermoor, near the southeastern entrance to the Elderwood Path, a long flight of ancient stone steps yawned open like the gaping maw of some colossal beast.

Nearly 100 members of the official expedition team stood at attention, their presence sharp and focused. Leading them were Scarlet and Adam. Scarlet wore crimson battle gear beneath silver armor. She gripped her spear tightly, her stance radiating fierce resolve.

Adam wore dark blue expedition gear with a longsword at his waist. Formation flags were strapped to his back. His scholarly composure was tempered by unmistakable readiness.

Grace had come personally to see them off, with Dustin standing beside her. Looking at the team assembled and ready to depart, she spoke solemnly.

“Everyone, the road ahead is dangerous.

I’ll be waiting here for your safe return.

Remember, your safety comes first.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the team answered in unison, their voices echoing off the mountainside. Scarlet and Adam offered one final, formal salute to Grace and Dustin. Then, the siblings turned toward the stone steps that stretched endlessly upward.

“Move out.”

The group began their ascent of Mount Aethermoor. Almost at the same time, sharp whistling sounds rose from other directions. Figures and streaks of light converged from all sides, like countless streams flowing together, drawn toward the colossal peak as it awakened once more after 3000 years of silence.

Dustin watched until the group disappeared around a bend in the misty mountain path. He stood there for a long moment. He’d done what he could for now.

The road ahead was theirs to navigate. Grace came to stand beside him. “How far do you think they’ll make it?” she asked.

He gazed at the summit hidden above the clouds and replied, “Mount Aethermoor tests each person differently. Scarlet is fierce and courageous, while Adam is steady and strategic. Together, they complement each other well.

“As long as they don’t get greedy or reckless and proceed carefully, they should gain something from this. As for how far they’ll go... That depends on their luck and destiny.”

The expedition advanced along the Elderwood Path of Mount Aethermoor. At first, the mountain trail was still manageable. The ever-present pressure that forbade flight weighed on them from the outset, making each step heavier than on level ground.

Grayish-brown rock surrounded them in dead silence. Even the spiritual energy saturating the air felt dense and oppressive.

After about an hour of travel, the terrain began to steepen. The stone steps cracked and shifted underfoot, forcing them to rely on both hands and feet as they climbed. A faint mist soon spread along the path, carrying a strange, sweet, metallic scent.

This was the Bone-Eroding Miasma recorded in the expedition information. The miasma not only obscured vision but also steadily drained their protective spiritual energy and numbed their senses. “Put on your miasma-warding charm and circulate your internal energy to resist it. Pick up the pace through this area,” Adam ordered calmly.

At the same time, he flicked his hand, sending several clarity charms that dispersed some of the thick fog ahead.

Leading the team, Scarlet swiped her spear through the air. Crimson arcs of flame scattered the encroaching miasma and drove away several brightly colored venomous snakes lurking within the fog.

The group followed close behind, advancing quickly.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek echoed from deep within the miasma. Several dark shapes lunged out. It was the miasma-corrupted demon beasts called Rotbone Apes.

Their bodies were covered in festering wounds that reeked of decay. Their claws and fangs dripped with deadly poison, and they moved with inhuman speed.

“Form ranks! Shields up!”

Scarlet’s sharp command rang out as her Wildfire Spear transformed into a cloud of flame, tearing apart the two Rotbone Apes charging at the front. The elite soldiers of the Sovereign Aegis quickly formed their battle formation.

Blade light, sword shadows, and spellfire lit up the area as they clashed with the swarming demon beasts. The battle was brutal. Team members kept getting scratched by poisoned claws or inhaling miasma while fighting, their faces turning black as they collapsed.

The field medics worked alongside Adam, quickly treating wounds and purging poison. Scarlet fought like the Goddess of War. Her spear lashed forward in sweeping arcs, cutting down everything in her path as she held the line at the front of the formation.

After a grueling battle, they finally drove off the pack of Rotbone Apes. A quick count revealed three seriously wounded, who had to be carried by their comrades, and five more with minor injuries. The lingering miasma poison would take time to purge, and the team's morale suffered as a result.

"Rest here for 15 minutes. Treat the wounded and recover your strength," Adam ordered while keeping a wary eye on their surroundings.

Near a crack in the rocks, he found half of a rusted sword and several dim celestial stones, likely left behind by previous climbers. The spiritual energy within them had almost completely faded, leaving them of little value.

After resting, the group continued upward. Once they passed through the Bone-Eroding Miasma zone, the view opened up before them.

They found themselves in a relatively flat valley covered with crystal clusters of various sizes and colors. Sunlight filtered through the thin clouds above, refracting off the crystals in mesmerizing, dreamlike halos of light.

"Be careful. This might be a natural formation of the Prismatic Illusion," Adam warned, having read about similar phenomena before.

"These crystals refract light and spiritual energy, creating sensory illusions that can even trigger inner demons."

Before he finished speaking, some members of the group had already grown dazed, mumbling to empty air, either crying or laughing. The light and shadows around them began to twist, conjuring visions of clear paths, treasure glows, and even apparitions of deceased loved ones.

Scarlet's eyes sharpened. She struck her spear against the ground and shouted, " Hold fast to your hearts. They're all illusions."

With her high cultivation and strong will, she was less affected by the illusions. Adam immediately pulled out the Obscura that Dustin had given him and channeled spiritual energy into it.

The dull mirror surface rippled with a hazy bronze glow that spread outward, enveloping over a dozen nearby team members. Those covered by the light quickly recovered from their confusion, their eyes clearing

"It works," Adam said with relief, directing the team members carrying Obscura to spread out and expand their protective range.

However, the illusions weren't the only danger. From within those beautiful crystal clusters, sharp luminous blades would occasionally shoot out without warning, or a blinding flash would explode.

Under the dual threat of illusions and physical attacks, the team struggled forward. People were constantly getting cut by luminous blades or stepping into hidden crevices while dodging illusions.

Just as the group reached the center of the valley, an unexpected change occurred.

The largest crystal clusters suddenly burst into blinding light. The beams wove together in the air, forming a translucent giant wielding an energy blade.

The giant roared silently and swung its blade toward the team. Even before the strike landed, the sword aura alone made their skin prickle.

"It's a phantasmal spirit condensed by the formation. Its strength is close to the Core-Forged realm," Adam said, his expression tightening. "We cannot confront it head-on. Spread out and look for the formation's core or a weak point."

But Scarlet showed no fear. A fierce, predatory light ignited in her eyes as she leveled her spear.

"I'll handle it," she said.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2773

Scarlet knew that if she didn't stop this phantasmal spirit, the team would suffer devastating losses. Her Wildfire Spear erupted in crimson flames more intense than ever before. She became one with her weapon and shot forward like a meteor, meeting the descending energy blade head-on.

"Scarlet!" Adam shouted, but it was too late to stop her. Spear and blade collided with a deafening explosion and blinding light.

Scarlet grunted as she was thrown backward, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. But her grip on the spear never loosened. The energy blade-wielding phantasmal spirit also staggered, its glow dimming slightly.

"It's not a physical entity, and its power comes from the crystals! Attack the largest crystal clusters!" Scarlet shouted sharply as she steadied herself midair. Adam understood immediately and directed the remaining combat-capable members.

“Fire and lightning casters, focus your attacks on the third and fifth crystal clusters on the left. Everyone else, maintain defenses and provide interference.”

In an instant, fireballs, arcs of lightning, and rune seals rained down on the designated crystal clusters. The phantasmal spirit roared in fury, swinging its energy blade to intercept them.

But then, Scarlet charged forward again. Her spear shadow loomed like a mountain, binding the spirit in place and denying it any chance to break away.

Under the concentrated assault, two critical crystal clusters shattered one after another. The phantasmal spirit twisted and let out a silent roar of defiance before shattering into countless motes of light that scattered into nothing.

With the crisis resolved, everyone exhaled in relief. They nearly collapsed from exhaustion

Scarlet landed and braced herself on her spear, breathing heavily. The head-on clash had sent her internal energy into violent turmoil, leaving her with internal injuries. Adam rushed over with healing tablets and checked her condition

“Don’t be so reckless next time,” he scolded, though his voice was full of concern. She swallowed the tablet and flashed a bloody grin.

“If I hadn’t stopped it, everyone would’ve been in danger. Besides, I’m fine.”

She glanced around the team. After that intense battle, another seven or eight members had lost their fighting capability, with two critically wounded. The valley returned to silence, leaving only piles of shattered crystal fragments at its center.

Adam’s sharp eyes caught something beneath the largest pile of debris. He carefully brushed aside the fragments to reveal a perfectly preserved memory crystal and a sapphire-blue short blade emanating spiritual light.

“I found something,” he said. He pressed the memory crystal to his forehead. After a moment, his face lit up with excitement.

“It’s a high-level technique called the Phantasm Step that combines movement and illusion. This short blade appears to be the Azure Shadow Blade. It’s a matched artifact for the technique, and its quality is exceptional.”

The team’s spirits lifted at once. After paying such a heavy price, they’d finally gained something worthwhile.

Adam quickly copied the memory crystal's contents several times. He distributed them to the core team members, while the Azure Shadow Blade would remain communal property for now.

"Rest here," he ordered. "Treat the wounded and study the technique. We move out in one hour."

He knew the path ahead would only get harder. But with this discovery, the team's cohesion and confidence seemed to strengthen.

On other paths up the mountain that were invisible to them, similar battles, struggles, gains, and deaths were constantly unfolding. Mount Aethermoor, in its ancient and cruel way, was testing every visitor who sought to ascend to the top.

At the observation platform in the base camp, Dustin stood at the railing, gazing into the distance. Though he couldn't see the specific events, he could faintly sense spiritual energy fluctuations coming from different areas of the mountain, sometimes violent and sometimes fading into nothing.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2774

The entrance to Thunderscar Gorge lay southeast by north, about 30 miles from the Elderwood Path. Unlike the route taken by the official expedition, the terrain here was far steeper and more dangerous.

There were no stone steps at the entrance. Instead, a deep canyon had been carved open by years of relentless violet lightning.

The rock walls on both sides were charred black and veined with lightning scars. The air carried a faint stench of ozone and sulfur, and violent lightning-aspected spiritual energy churned restlessly throughout the gorge.

A team of about 50 people had gathered at the entrance. They all wore matching dark blue combat uniforms under light armor, and the armor bore subtle Mosey insignia. This was the elite mountaineering team Seamus had dispatched, led by his most capable foster son, Anders.

He was a Grandmaster-level expert, his cultivation at the peak of the Adept stage. In the mortal world, that was naturally quite impressive. But in the eyes of true cultivators, his strength was merely average.

At that moment, five people stood quietly about 100 feet in front of Anders and his men. Leading them were Evander and Elowen.

Evander wore a deep-blue, cross-collared long coat. His expression was as calm as still water, his hands clasped behind his back, as though the perilous Thunderscar Gorge before him were nothing more than an ordinary view.

Meanwhile, Elowen had changed into a moon-white fitted outfit suited for movement. With her long hair tied back, she seemed less ethereal and more capable. She studied the thin arcs of lightning that occasionally leaped within the gorge with open interest.

Behind them stood three middle-aged cultivators. Their energy waves were restrained, and their expressions impassive. They were the Quinton family guards, each at late-stage Adept or higher, with one having already reached the quasi Core-Forged realm.

“Mr. and Ms. Quinton, ahead lies Thunderscar Gorge,” Anders said, stepping forward. He kept his head lowered, his tone carefully deferential.

“According to ancient manuscripts, this gorge not only suffers from natural lightning strikes, but also contains lightning spirits formed from condensed Violet Thunder Miasma left over from ancient times. It’s extremely dangerous. So, perhaps-”

Evander didn’t even bother to look at him. ”

Since you know it’s dangerous, let your men take the lead and clear the path. We will follow behind.”

For a heartbeat, something dark flickered across Anders’ face before it vanished. He cursed inwardly at the realization that they were being used as cannon fodder. But with the situation stacked against him, he could only swallow his pride and agree.

He answered humbly, “Yes. We will comply with your instructions, Mr. Quinton.”

He turned around, his face hardening, and barked orders to his subordinates. “First squad, form the Mystic Water Formation, then lead the way. Watch out for lightning strikes and be alert for lightning spirits. Move out!”

Ten Moseys’ elites answered and stepped forward. Each produced a water-blue formation flag and channeled spiritual energy into it. In an instant, a shimmering, aqueous defensive array took shape around them as they cautiously entered Thunderscar Gorge.

Inside the canyon, the light was dim. Overhead was a narrow strip of sky, and violet electric arcs occasionally leaped and crackled between the rock walls. The ground was rugged and slippery, covered in sharp stone fragments shattered by lightning strikes.

The Mystic Water Formation formed by those ten men glowed with a faint blue light, blocking the occasional small lightning arcs that struck down.

The first quarter mile passed without incident, but deeper into the gorge, the Violet Thunder Miasma grew thicker, and the stray arcs of electricity in the air multiplied.

Suddenly, a mass of thick Violet Thunder Miasma on the cliff wall ahead began to roil and condense. It formed into a leopard -shaped creature made entirely of lightning that silently roared and lunged at the Mystic Water Formation.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2775

“It’s the lightning spirit! Hold the formation,” the squad captain barked. The lightning spirit slammed into the Mystic Water Formation’s barrier, erupting in blinding violet light accompanied by a harsh crackling hiss.

Water was meant to restrain lightning, so the formation should have held a natural advantage. Yet, the lightning spirit carried an unusually pure and violent strain of Violet Thunder Miasma. The impact sent the barrier shuddering violently, and several people inside the formation went pale.

Seeing this, a calculating gleam flashed in Anders’ eyes. He was about to order the second squad to provide support when he heard Elowen chuckle behind him.

“Evander, this lightning spirit is quite interesting. The thunder miasma it condensed is remarkably pure.”

Her brother merely nodded slightly without any other reaction. The three Quinton family guards were like wooden statues, completely indifferent to the fierce battle ahead. In contrast, the people from the Moseys felt an even deeper chill.

A dark look flashed across Anders’ face before he quickly composed himself and waved his hand.

“Second squad, provide long-range spell support. Don’t get too close.”

Another ten people stepped forward, casting water arrows, ice spikes, and other spells to attack the lightning spirit from a distance. Under the combined assault from inside and out, the lightning spirit was finally dispersed and collapsed into a mass of thunder miasma.

However, three people in the Mystic Water Formation had already been invaded by scattered thunder miasma and suffered serious internal injuries. They needed to withdraw for treatment.

“Keep moving forward!” Anders ordered. His face was a blank slate, though his mind raced. He was calculating how to minimize their own losses while observing the Quintons’ attitude.

As they advanced deeper into the gorge, the emergence of lightning spirits became more frequent and far more lethal. At times, several would emerge at once.

The Moseys’ elites had to take turns forming defensive arrays, expending runes, magical artifacts, and even lives. One cultivator was struck by a lightning spirit while covering for his companions. His entire body instantly charred black. He collapsed, convulsed briefly, and died.

Another had a violent thunder miasma invade his heart. Though his companions managed to save him, his cultivation was completely destroyed, and he barely clung to life.

The Mystic Water Formation was besieged again by several powerful lightning spirits. The formation shattered, people were injured, and several more fell.

During each crisis, the five people from the Quintons simply watched from a distance.

They occasionally commented on the lightning spirits’ forms or the purity of the thunder miasma. But they never lifted a finger to help.

Fury and humiliation churned in Anders’ chest, but his expression grew increasingly calm. He even began deliberately adjusting the formation, placing weaker or less obedient team members in more dangerous positions.

Evander remained indifferent until a massive lightning spirit king, nearly at the quasi-Core-Forged realm, crippled an entire Mosey squad with a single strike, and its residual force reached his group. Only then did he frown slightly.

“So noisy,” he said. The words fell lightly from his lips as he raised his hand and flicked his finger. A barely perceptible golden gleam flashed and instantly penetrated the roaring lightning spirit king. The next moment, the mighty spirit suddenly froze.

Golden light seeped through it from inside out before it was completely annihilated without leaving even a trace of thunder miasma. In the blink of an eye, Evander had destroyed a quasi-Core-Forged realm lightning spirit.

The Mosey people stared in shock, cold dread rising from the depths of their hearts. The strength Evander displayed far exceeded their imagination.

Anders’ eyes sharpened. His wariness toward the Quinton family and his humiliation at being controlled by them reached their peak.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2776

But Anders quickly lowered his head, hiding the cold calculation in his eyes. “Let’s move,” Evander said, withdrawing his hand as if brushing away a speck of dust. Anders took a deep breath, suppressing the turmoil roiling inside him, and replied respectfully, “Yes, Mr. Quinton.”

He turned and continued directing his remaining men forward, though his hunger for power had never burned more fiercely.

After suffering nearly 20 casualties and leaving everyone injured, the group finally made it through the long stretch of Thunderscar Gorge. At the end of the canyon lay a relatively open platform formed from some kind of lightning-resistant crystal.

Scattered across the platform were several charred skeletons, likely the remains of previous climbers. Nearby lay lightning-tempered ore still glowing with electrical energy, along with fragments of badly damaged lightning-attribute artifacts that still retained faint traces of their former power

Elowen walked over and picked up a few pieces of lightning stone with mild interest. She kicked at the artifact fragments and wrinkled her nose.

“These have been eroded too badly by thunder miasma. They’re basically useless. Her gaze swept over the Moseys’ injured men without a trace of sympathy, holding only a cold, superior indifference.

Evander walked to the edge of the platform and looked up at the mountain path, barely visible through the clouds and mist above.

“This place is a minor leyline node. Lightning energy is dense enough to aid recovery. You have two hours to tend your wounds. We will move out after that.”

Anders looked at his exhausted, battered men, then at the lightning ores and broken artifacts that the Quinton siblings had dismissed as trash but which still held some value for the Moseys. He forced a smile and spoke to Evander.

“Thank you for your consideration, Mr. Quinton.”

With that, he turned and calmly instructed his men to collect the spoils and treat the wounded. Only he knew what dark currents churned beneath that calm surface.

On the Frost family's chosen route, the terrain was perilously steep A deep ice ravine wound upward, flanked on both sides by sheer walls of dark ice that had never melted for millennia.

The cold was biting, and even cultivators protected by spiritual energy felt their internal flow grow sluggish. Freezing gale winds howled through the ravine, carrying razor-sharp ice crystals.

The Frost family's group was small, with just eight people. Aveline led them, Blanche and Albus walked behind her, along with five other carefully selected elites from what remained of the Frost family. Blanche's injuries had mostly healed thanks to the medicine her brother had brought.

"The icy ravine's extreme cold environment enhances our family's Frost-Mantle technique, but we can't underestimate the ice spirits and soul-freezing winds here either."

As the eldest and most experienced, Aveline offered warnings as they walked.

"Watch out especially for ice surfaces or pillars that look calm. They might harbor spirits inside. Albus, your sword aura is strong, but you need to control your spiritual energy consumption. Don't just rely on brute force."

"Got it," he responded with a nod. He was still dressed simply, in pale, swordsman's attire. The ice-crystal longsword hovered at his side, his aura restrained, yet when his gaze swept across the ravine, it was sharp as a drawn blade.

Blanche remained mostly silent. She circulated her cultivation technique to resist the cold while observing their surroundings and held the white pendant Dustin had given her. Warmth flowed from the pendant into her palm, helping stabilize her mind and offset some of the chill.

The group advanced cautiously. They hadn't gone far when a section of the ice wall split open. Several semi-transparent humanoid spirits, condensed entirely from glacial miasma, burst forth, wielding ice blades and radiating a cold that froze the soul.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2777

"Watch out!" Aveline warned as she drew her twin daggers and charged forward. Blanche followed closely behind, drawing her longsword rimed with frost.

The Frost family members quickly formed ranks and unleashed their techniques in unison. Intersecting arcs of icy spells and sword aura crisscrossed the gorge.

The glacial wraiths were formidable foes, especially within their native terrain. Their translucent forms flickered through the frozen air, and the ice blades in their hands were razor-sharp, each strike freezing the target.

One of the Frost family members was slashed across the arm. Frost raced along the wound, and within seconds, his limb went numb.

Albus' eyes sharpened at the sight. Without drawing his longsword, he raised two fingers and gestured toward the injured man's arm. A thread of icy sword aura, nearly visible yet refined to an extreme degree, shot forward and sank into the wound.

The spreading frost met something colder and purer than itself and was instantly driven back. The superior chill consumed the invading energy completely.

The injured Frost family member finally regained sensation in his arm. The wound remained, but the invading energy had been entirely dispelled. Aveline stared at Albus, stunned.

"Has his sword aura already reached such a level?" she thought. By countering the frostbite with an even purer cold energy, Albus displayed a mastery in his sword aura that exceeded anything she had anticipated.

He didn't pause to explain. With a slight motion of his fingers, the crystalline longsword hovering at his side gave a low hum before transforming into a streak of azure light that wove through the horde of glacial wraiths.

Wherever the blade passed, wraiths froze solid and shattered, dissolving into drifting frost energy. Before the others could finish a single exchange, half the enemies had already fallen.

With Albus anchoring the formation, the team's advance accelerated. Yet, the trials of the Glacial Abyss were far from over.

As they ventured deeper, a silent current of Soul-Freezing Astral Wind began to stir within the ravine. It didn't affect the physical body, striking instead at one's spiritual consciousness.

Those caught in its current felt their minds grow sluggish, their thoughts slowing as if encased in ice. Soon after, terrifying visions of freezing to death overwhelmed them.

The white pendant around Blanche's neck released a gentle warmth at that moment. A steady current flowed through her, guarding the clarity of her inner sanctums.

Aveline and the others relied on their own techniques or artifacts to steady their minds. But one weaker Frost family member faltered.

The astral wind swept over him. His eyes turned vacant, and his movements stiffened. He nearly stumbled into the bottomless icy abyss beside the path, but a strand of Albus' sword aura lashed out and pulled him back to safety.

At a bend in the ravine, they came upon the preserved remains of a long-deceased cultivator sealed within a massive block of dark ice.

The body remained seated in meditation, its features lifelike despite the passage of years. It wore archaic robes, and beside it lay an ice-blue emerald ruler. Spiritual light shimmered faintly within the artifact. Though tempered by countless seasons, it hadn't lost its extraordinary energy waves.

"This is the preserved remains of a long-deceased cultivator," Aveline said as she examined the ice and the ruler more closely.

She went on, "This dark ice is no ordinary substance. It was likely formed from the cultivator's own cold essence at the moment of death. It serves as both a seal and a form of protection.

"As for this emerald ruler, it appears to be a high-grade auxiliary artifact of the ice element, suitable for establishing formations and amplifying ice-aligned techniques."

To retrieve the treasure, they would need to break through the dark ice without damaging either the remains or the artifact within. The task would not be simple.

Albus stepped forward and placed his right palm lightly against the surface of the ice. He closed his eyes and concentrated. The crystalline longsword rose above his head as threads of exceedingly pure icy sword aura flowed from both his palm and the blade, seeping gradually into the dark ice.

He was using his sword aura to resonate with the preserved remains of the cultivator's cold essence sealed inside. Moments later, a faint cracking sound echoed from within. Hairline fractures spread across the surface in a web of fine lines.

With a crisp shatter, the dark ice broke apart evenly, revealing the corpse and the emerald ruler within, both completely intact. Aveline carefully picked up the ruler and examined it. Her face lit up with joy.

"It is indeed a rare treasure," she said. " This is the Glacial Sky Measurer. It can establish ice formations and greatly amplify the power of ice-aligned techniques. It will be invaluable to us."

The unexpected gain lifted the group's spirits. During the earlier resonance, Albus appeared to have gained a deeper insight into his icy sword aura. His energy waves now felt steadier, more integrated than before.

After a short rest, the group continued upward. At the end of the Glacial Abyss stood a towering waterfall of dark ice, nearly 300 feet high and smooth as polished glass. Behind it, the faint outline of a cavern entrance could be seen.

That would be their next trial.

Meanwhile, the Jornell family had chosen Storm Ridge in the west. The route was infamous for its danger. The mountainside rose almost vertically, its exposed rock face devoid of vegetation, polished smooth by year-round astral winds and lightning.

The climb was brutal. One had to withstand violent gusts capable of hurling a person from the cliff, as well as golden celestial lightning that struck down from the skies without warning. The Jornell family had dispatched an impressive force this time.

An elder in the early stage of the Core-Forged realm, Zephyrin Jornell, led the expedition personally. More than 30 members accompanied him, the weakest among them already at mid-stage Adept, with several experts at their peak-stage Adept.

Alarion didn’t go with them. His injuries hadn’t healed, and he was required to oversee the family’s affairs. Yet, his resentment toward the Frost family had been passed on in full to those making this journey.

Zephyrin was tall and broad-shouldered, with a stern, ruddy face and a bristling beard. Faint arcs of lightning coursed around him, and his presence carried an unmistakable dominance.

He gazed at the sheer cliff before him, where wind and thunder roared without cease. Not only did he show no fear, but he also threw back his head and laughed.

“Storm Ridge suits the temperament of our Violet Firmament Thunder Art. Everyone, follow me upward. Let these winds and thunder temper our bodies and refine our souls.”

The rest of the Jornells responded in unison, their momentum rising like a surging tide.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2778

The Jornell family was masters of stormcraft; they had a relatively high resistance to the forces of wind and thunder. Plus, their cultivation methods resonated with the environment here. Their morale was high. However, the dangers of Storm Ridge far exceeded their expectations.

The astral wind was no ordinary mountain gust. Mixed within it was the Aetherwind Essence drawn from the upper firmament. Its force was immense, and it could steadily erode the spiritual barrier.

The celestial lightning was even more unpredictable since its power was impossible to gauge. Even members of the Jornell family wouldn't escape unscathed if struck directly.

Before long, the relentless Aetherwind Essence began eroding the spiritual barrier of one mid-stage Adept. Caught off guard, he was grazed by a sudden streak of golden celestial lightning. He screamed as his body was charred black and sent tumbling from the cliff, his remains reduced to nothing.

Zephyrin didn't even frown. Instead, he shouted, "Hold your footing! Circulate your stormcraft and guide the lightning into your bodies. Endure it, and you will emerge stronger."

At his command, the Jornell family members gritted their teeth and pressed on. Even as they climbed, they activated their techniques and attempted to guide a portion of the celestial lightning's power into themselves and absorb it.

Though risky, the method proved effective Several family members' energy waves showed subtle signs of improvement as they resisted the wind and thunder.

But the cost of progress was written in blood. Some lost their footing and fell. Others were critically injured by the excessively violent lightning, forcing their companions to intervene. As a result, they quickly lost many people.

About halfway up the climb, they discovered the charred remains of a lightning-struck tree upon a protruding platform. At its core, something extraordinary had formed. It was a fist-sized sphere glowing with violet light and wrapped in coiling arcs of electricity.

The object contained an immense and exceedingly pure concentration of lightning essence. For cultivators of stormcraft, it was a priceless treasure.

"It's a millennial lightning core!" Zephyrin's eyes lit up with excitement. " Retrieve it at once!"

However, a small natural lightning field had formed around the core. Countless fine strands of golden electricity wove together into a dense net. Anyone who approached was met with violent resistance. Two disciples attempted to break through, but were injured and repelled by the electric serpents.

Zephyrin snorted coldly. "Incompetent fools. Watch and learn."

As he strode forward, violet thunderlight flared around him. He actively drew the surrounding celestial lightning and electric serpents down upon himself.

Clasping his palms together, he compressed the raging lightning between them until it condensed into a razor-sharp violet lightning spear. With a thrust, he drove it at the heart of the lightning field.

“Break!”

The lightning spear collided violently with the lightning field, erupting in a blinding flash and a thunderclap that shook the mountainside. The field was torn open by brute force, but the backlash made Zephyrin stagger, his face paling slightly.

Seizing the moment, he reached out through the air and closed his hand. The violet lightning core shot toward him and landed in his grasp.

The instant it touched his palm, a vast and exquisitely pure surge of lightning power coursed through him. A look of satisfaction spread across his face.

“Excellent! With this, my stormcraft will advance further. All of you have done your part. When we return, you will be rewarded.

The treasure bolstered their spirits, but they had already lost nearly ten members. Zephyrin paid the losses no mind. To him, the sacrifice of the weak was an inevitable price for the advancement of the strong.

They continued climbing, but the wind and lightning only grew more violent. On a nearly vertical stretch of cliff, they were struck by a combined assault of Razorwind Astral Gale and Adamantine Divine Lightning. The attacks were incomparably sharp and specialized in breaking defenses. Even the protective shields formed through stormcraft struggled to endure.

One after another, the Jornells were torn apart as the astral wind shredded their protective spiritual radiance. Others were pierced clean through by the Adamantine Divine Lightning, screaming as they plunged from the cliff.

By the time they finally reached the summit of Storm Ridge, the group of more than 30 had been reduced to fewer than 20.

Every survivor bore injuries, and their spiritual energy was heavily depleted. Though Zephyrin had secured the lightning core, he had also sustained some internal injuries from forcibly breaking open the lightning field earlier. His energy waves were no longer as imposing as before.

The summit was a wide stone platform polished smooth by wind and lightning. At its center stood a solitary, charred stone pillar. A broken sword was embedded at its peak. It was dark gold, its design austere and old-fashioned. Faint threads of lightning coiled around it.

Only half the sword remained, yet the sharp sword aura and lingering thunderous force it radiated were enough to unsettle even Zephyrin.

“This... Is this the remnant of an ancient lightning cultivator’s artifact?”

His gaze burned with greed. If he could subdue the broken sword and extract the ancient lightning sigils and sword aura sealed within it, the benefits to the Jornell family’s stormcraft would be immeasurable.

He was just about to step forward when the broken weapon seemed to sense his approach. It trembled violently, and an invisible yet razor-sharp surge of lightning -infused sword aura erupted outward, sweeping in all directions.

“Watch out!”

Zephyrin’s expression changed sharply as he unleashed the full strength of his protective lightning aura. Several injured members of the Jornell family who stood too close were struck by the sweeping sword aura. Their protective spiritual radiance shattered like fragile glass.

They were hurled backward before they could even scream. The lightning sword aura had already destroyed their spiritual consciousness, killing them instantly.

Zephyrin was forced back several steps. His protective lightning aura dimmed, and blood traced the corner of his mouth. He stared at the broken sword, fury and greed warring in his eyes. The treasure was valuable, but claiming it would demand a far greater price.

At the moment, the summit fell into a tense standoff. The remaining members of the Jornell family gathered around the broken sword, breathing heavily as they tended their wounds.

At the same time, they kept wary watch for other forces that might reach the summit and for the defiant broken sword itself. Three paths, and three different encounters.

They reflected the different styles and costs of each group and explored them. The Quinton family’s cold exploitation, the Frost family’s unity and fortune, and the Jornell family’s domineering approach and sacrifice.

Yet, Mount Aethermoor remained unmoved. In the clouds above, even harsher trials, more tempting treasures, and inevitably more brutal conflicts awaited these battered climbers.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2779

Climbing teams from various factions struggled up the different slopes of Mount Aethermoor as they fought for opportunity and survival.

At the base of the mountain stood a massive abandoned city. It was surrounded by a sea of temporary camps with tens of thousands still lingering there.

Among them were a small number of civilians who hadn't fully evacuated, and personnel left behind by various factions to handle logistics and supplies. There were also rogue cultivators and wandering martial artists who were drawn by rumors but hesitated to venture close.

Grace and Dustin remained behind, overseeing operations or calmly observing how the situation developed. None of them realized that Mount Aethermoor, a sacred peak silent for 3,000 years, had never limited its trials to those who climbed it.

At midday, an abrupt change occurred. Without warning, the base of the mountain suddenly lit up with countless crisscrossing, intricately complex golden sigils.

The glowing lines spread beneath their feet like a rising tide. From the base of the mountain, the patterns surged outward across the earth, spreading with explosive speed. No escape technique could have outpaced it.

Wherever the sigils passed, scorched soil, shattered stone, ruined structures, even drifting dust and open air were washed in a faint golden glow.

In just a few seconds, a colossal formation had materialized. Its reach encompassed the entire original site of Oakvale and the surrounding region.

"What is that?"

"Oh my God! The ground is glowing."

"Damn! It's a formation. Run for your lives. At the base of the mountain, the entire camp was stunned by the sudden upheaval. A heartbeat later, panic exploded.

People tried to flee the area that was now engulfed in golden light. But no matter which direction they ran, the glowing lines spread beneath their feet like a rising tide, pulling everything into the formation's reach.

Grace and Dustin were on the raised platform of the temporary command center. They had been discussing their next move when the sudden change caught them off guard.

Grace reacted instantly, shouting, "Send the order! All personnel fall back to the formation's outer perimeter. Activate emergency defenses."

But before her command could fully circulate, the formation had already completed its activation. A deep, resonant vibration groaned from the depths of the earth and the heart of Mount Aethermoor at once. It carried the weight of a primordial age, a tectonic thrum that made souls tremble and their heads spin.

In the next heartbeat, every area traced with golden patterns was enveloped in a soft yet irresistible glow. Human or beast, no one was spared.

Dustin felt a surge of golden light flood his vision. A strange spatial force seized him, locking his body in place as though he had been dragged into a boundless vortex. He couldn't use any spiritual energy to resist and could only submit to this force.

The last thing he heard was Grace's urgent cry.

"Dustin..."

The next moment, everything spun, and his vision blurred. It felt as though he had passed through a void both endless and fleeting. When his feet struck solid ground once more and his vision cleared, he found himself in an entirely unfamiliar place.

Dustin was no longer within the ruins of Oakvale but stood high upon the slopes of Mount Aethermoor. Around him were jagged, steep, gray-brown rocks. The air was filled with spiritual energy several times denser and heavier than the air below, mixed with a faint smell of blood and burnt flesh.

Looking up, the peak still towered impossibly high, wreathed in mist and clouds.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2780

Instead of the well-trained Sovereign Aegis guards and their advisors, Dustin was surrounded by a throng of people of all kinds, panic-stricken and bewildered.

Some were ordinary civilians, shivering in fear. Others were martial artists gripping their weapons and scanning their surroundings with wary eyes.

There were rogue cultivators in mismatched clothing, each with a distinct energy wave. Even personnel from the various factions who had remained at the mountain's base camp were now mixed into the crowd, all of them thrown together like gravel dumped from a cart.

"This... Is this Mount Aethermoor? How did we end up here?"

“It was that golden light. The formation must’ve brought us here.” “Good heavens! It’s so high and terrifying. How are we supposed to get down?”

“My child! Has anyone seen my child?” Cries, screams, curses, and questions rose in a cacophony, creating a scene of utter chaos.

Dustin forced himself to stay calm and scanned his surroundings. He stood near the edge of a broad mountain ridge. The platform was large, yet hundreds of people were packed tightly across it.

Golden light continued to flash along the distant paths and cliff faces as more people were deposited onto the mountain at random. It soon became clear that everyone in Oakvale had been scattered across Mount Aethermoor by that terrifying formation.

“Your Highness!”

“Mr. Rhys!”

A series of familiar shouts cut through the noise. Dustin turned and saw several Sovereign Aegis guards forcing their way through the crowd toward him. Their armor was damaged and slick with blood. Behind them came Grace, her face pale.

Her fitted combat attire was torn in places, her hair slightly disheveled, yet her gaze remained sharp. A drawn sword was clenched firmly in her hand.

Dustin felt a knot of tension loosen in his chest as he shoved through the crowd to reach her. The guards instantly formed a protective perimeter around them.

“Dustin, are you okay?” Grace asked, scanning him from head to toe. Seeing only dust on his clothes and no visible injuries, she let out a sigh of relief. Her expression then hardened.

“The situation is catastrophic. We appear to have been forcibly transported to Mount Aethermoor, and... look over there.”

She pointed toward the void at the platform’s edge. What should have been the path down or a sheer drop was now sealed off by a hazy curtain of light.

Golden runes flowed endlessly across its surface. The barrier was solid and heavy, emanating a sealing force that made the air itself feel oppressive.

One wandering martial artist tried to rush down the mountain and had barely touched the barrier before a powerful force hurled him backward. He crashed to the ground and began coughing up blood.

“The formation not only teleported us up here, but also sealed off the roads down the mountain,” Dustin said grimly.

He studied the runes rippling across the light barrier. Although they were mysterious and difficult to understand, he could vaguely sense a governing force within them.

“It seems the trials of Mount Aethermoor are now open to everyone. Perhaps only those who meet certain conditions will be allowed to leave.”

As if to confirm his words, a grand, ancient voice, devoid of any emotion, resounded directly in everyone’s minds. Regardless of cultivation or language, its meaning was unmistakable.

“The Aethermoor Trial treats all beings equally. Climb the Heavenly Path, pass the trials, and you may gain fortune and leave the mountain. Do nothing, and you shall remain trapped here. Die, and your soul shall become one with the mountain.”

The voice repeated three times before fading into silence. Its message required no further explanation. Either climb upward, pass the trials, and earn the right to leave, or die trapped on this mountain. Dying here meant the end of everything.