An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2781

Panic was instantly replaced by despair and a kind of twisted fanaticism. With no way down, the only option was up. The only chance for both survival and fortune lay higher on Mount Aethermoor.

“Up! Keep climbing.”

“Move! I have to get out.”

“There are treasures up there.” The crowd erupted into chaos. People surged blindly toward any slope or rock face that looked climbable. But this was no forgiving mountain. Even the gentler stretches concealed deadly hazards.

Just then, screams rang out. Someone stepped on loose rocks and plummeted into a bottomless ravine. Another rushed into what appeared to be a calm bank of mist, only to be torn apart in an instant by venomous creatures or lurking fiends hidden within. Others drew weapons on their companions, fighting over what looked like the easiest route up.

Chaos, bloodshed, and death erupted across the midpoint plateau where the ” trial participants” had been forced to gather.

“Form ranks. Move into a defensive position!” Grace ordered. Around her, Sovereign Aegis guards, several royal retainers who had regrouped, and a handful of still-clearheaded martial experts moved swiftly into a circular formation.

They formed a tight circle around her and Dustin, shielding them from the stampeding crowd and the occasional arrows or spells that came flying their way.

Protected at the center of the formation, Dustin watched the hellscape unfolding around them and frowned. With his cultivation sealed, he was no different from an ordinary man. In this situation, he truly had become someone who needed protection.

The realization stirred something complicated within him. But more than frustration, he forced himself to remain calm, observing and thinking.

“Grace, we can’t stay here,” he said in a low voice. “When fear overrides reason, and they begin trampling and killing each other, they are more terrifying than any natural hazards in the mountain. We need to escape this chaotic area as quickly as possible and find a relatively safe route upward.”

She nodded, having reached the same conclusion.

“Captain Tort, Captain Crumb, clear a path, ” she ordered crisply. “Move toward the rock face to the northeast. There are fewer people there, and it looks climbable.”

“Yes, Your Highness.’

The two commanders, Ferrick Tort and Wyston Crumb, answered at once. One raised a massive axe, and the other gripped a long sword. Spiritual energy surged from them as they forced their way through the frenzied, crushing crowd, carving out a path with brutal efficiency.

The Sovereign Aegis guards formed ranks and followed closely, with shields and blades raised to block attacks from both sides.

Panic-stricken figures continued to rush at them. Some were struck by poisonous spikes and flying stones that suddenly shot out from the cracks in the rock face.

Casualties began to mount within the team. A guard protecting the flank was stabbed in the thigh with a poisoned dagger by a crazed rogue cultivator. His face turned black instantly, and he collapsed.

Another wandering martial artist was struck in the back by a fireball that came from nowhere. He screamed as flames consumed him.

Dustin struggled forward, shielded by Grace and another guard. Around him, men were wounded and killed protecting them.

He caught the strain in Grace’s expression, the sweat along her brow. The need for strength settled deeper within him than ever before. But he would not rush blindly toward it.

“Look out above!” he suddenly shouted. Though he had no spiritual energy, his eyesight and combat instincts remained sharp. He spotted several loose boulders on the rock wall above them, dislodged by the violent tremors and spellwork below. They were tumbling down with a rumble.

Grace reacted instantly. Her sword flashed, and a sharp arc of sword aura shattered one massive stone midair.

But the fragments still rained down like hail, injuring several team members who couldn’t dodge in time. Then, a millstone-sized boulder plummeted straight toward Dustin.

“Dustin!”

Her face paled, but she was already too far to reach him. At the critical moment, an elderly retainer who had been protecting Dustin suddenly moved; his figure blurred. In the blink of an eye, he appeared above Dustin and raised a withered hand.

A dull thud sounded as the massive stone, hurtling down with crushing force, came to a stop in his palm. With effortless ease, he flicked it aside. The boulder tore into the distant crowd, triggering a chorus of screams.

The elderly retainer retreated to his position without a word, his expression as blank as if nothing had happened.

Dustin cast a long, lingering look at him. The elderly man's energy waves had been concealed, and he'd never made a move before. To possess such unfathomable strength suggested he was a hidden guardian personally assigned to Grace's protection.

They pushed through the chaos and reached the northeastern cliff face without further incident. As expected, fewer people had gathered here. The rock wall, however, was steep and treacherous, slick with moss and edged with jagged outcroppings.

Looking up, they saw only a handful of figures struggling to climb. Higher still, the peak vanished into mist.

"Let's climb up," Grace said decisively. Those among the Sovereign Aegis guards skilled in scaling cliffs went first, securing ropes and grappling hooks to open a path.

Grace had Dustin follow directly behind her so she could keep an eye on him. The ascent remained a nightmare because the moss-slick stone offered almost no footing. At times, venomous snakes and scorpions burst from cracks in the rock without warning.

There were also surprise attacks from stray arrows or small-scale spells that came from nowhere. Even in these conditions, some competitors were still intent on eliminating their rivals.

Dustin relied almost entirely on instinct and coordination, with constant help from Grace and the others, just to keep pace.

After more than half an hour of grueling climbing, they finally pulled themselves onto the platform above. The area was small, but for the moment, their group alone occupied it. They had, at least temporarily, escaped the blood-soaked slaughter below.

After taking a headcount, they found that fewer than 20 of the 30 or so people they had gathered remained, and most were injured. Before they could even catch their breath and assess their surroundings, another unexpected event occurred.

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At the center of the platform, the ancient, weathered stone patterns carved into the ground suddenly flared to life, forming a circular array nearly 30 feet across.

As the light pulsed, three stone figures rose slowly from within it. Each stood nearly ten feet tall, carved from dark yellow rock and gripping a massive battle axe.

Red flames flickered within their hollow eye sockets. The spiritual pressure they emitted matched that of a late-stage Adept, and their burning gazes locked onto every living being on the platform.

“It’s the guardian trial,” Grace said, her eyes narrowing. “Defeat them, and we may be allowed to proceed or at least earn the right to remain here.”

The stone guardians let out a low, grinding roar. Their heavy steps shook the platform as they advanced, with their axes sweeping forward. The blades had not yet struck, but the violent wind generated by their swings already cut against the skin.

“Form rank and prepare to engage,” Grace shouted, drawing her sword and moving to intercept one of the guardians. She knew there was no turning back now. The only path forward was through the fight.

Dustin stayed behind the front line, protected by the others. His eyes never left the battlefield as his mind raced. The three guardians appeared slow and bulky, yet their strikes carried overwhelming force. Their defenses were formidable, and they moved with surprising coordination.

A drawn-out battle would quickly drain the team, especially after the chaos they had just endured and everyone was already injured.

His gaze tracked the guardians’ movements, their footwork, the rhythm of their strides, and the faintly glowing stone patterns beneath their feet.

Then, he noticed something. Whenever one of the guardians stepped down, its foot landed precisely on a specific node within the glowing array and the red flame in its eyes flickered.

“Grace!” Dustin shouted. “Strike where their feet meet the pattern on the ground. Those are the energy nodes keeping them balanced!”

Without hesitation, she changed her approach. Instead of clashing directly with the stone guardians, she transformed her attacks into swift, cunning strikes aimed precisely at their ankles, where they met the ground.

The others quickly followed her lead. Whenever their attacks landed cleanly on the flashing nodes, the statues faltered. Their movements grew sluggish, and the stone plating across their bodies seemed to weaken.

“It’s working!”

Grace’s spirits lifted, and her sword moved faster than before. With the team pressing its advantage, one statue’s ankle node was repeatedly struck. It collapsed to one knee, and moments later, its head was shattered under a concentrated barrage, crumbling into rubble. Using the same method, the remaining two statues fell in turn.

When the last guardian crumbled, the pattern at the center of the platform flared with brilliant light. Three soft halos rose into the air, each containing a vial of pills, a shimmering dagger, and a memory crystal inscribed with what appeared to be an earth-aspected defensive technique.

“Basic guardian trial passed. Rewards granted. You may rest upon this platform for six hours. When the time ends, you must either proceed upward or accept a higher trial.”

The grand voice resounded in everyone’s minds again. Simultaneously, a faint golden barrier rose along the edge of the platform, sealing it off from the outside world and granting them a rare moment of reprieve.

The group exhaled in relief, and several men nearly collapsed where they stood. Grace sheathed her sword and walked over to Dustin, holding out the pills and memory crystal.

“We only made it through because you spotted their weakness. You should keep these items for protection.”

He shook his head.

“Everyone should share the pills. Healing injuries is more important. As for the memory crystal, it’s no use to me right now. Give it to someone who needs it. You keep the dagger.”

Grace knew arguing would be pointless. She distributed the pills among the wounded and kept the dagger. Then, she walked to the edge of the platform and looked down.

In the distance, shouts and bursts of spiritual light still flickered faintly below. She lifted her gaze toward the mountain path stretching upward, seemingly without end. Her expression grew grave.

“This is only the beginning,” she muttered. “I wonder how Scarlet and Adam are faring. And the ordinary people who were sent to even more dangerous areas.”

Dustin stood beside her. He said evenly, ”

Right now, everyone has been pulled onto the same starting line. Or perhaps the same arena. The law of the strong devouring the weak will be magnified here.

All we can do is survive and keep climbing."

Grace nodded. She understood what he meant. Mount Aethermoor's forced trial had become an inescapable net, dragging everyone into it. Their original plans had been disrupted, and all semblance of order had collapsed.

Only strength, cunning, and luck would allow anyone to fight for survival on this suddenly crowded and blood-soaked path to the summit.

Those who had once stood ahead of the rest or watched from behind the scenes Evander, Elowen, Anders, Zephyrin, and the Frost siblings-had all been dragged into a deeper and far more unpredictable current. The brutal competition had finally begun.

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After six hours of rest, the group had regained some of their strength. The pills had taken effect, stabilizing the wounded and restoring most of their spiritual energy. When the time limit expired, the protective golden barrier quietly dissolved, signaling that their respite had ended.

"Do we head up, or search sideways for another route?" Grace asked the group. "Up," one of the retainers suggested. "If this trial is about climbing the mountain, then the higher we go, the better."

Dustin shook his head slightly.

"Climbing higher might not be the point of Mount Aethermoor's trial," he said. "At this elevation, there are multiple connected platforms and paths. If we move along the ridge instead, we may run into other teams. And right now, there's strength in numbers."

Grace accepted his reasoning and decided they would explore along the ridge at their current altitude.

The group advanced carefully. The terrain rose and dipped unpredictably, broken by ravines and sheer cliff edges that forced them to detour or climb over the rock faces. Progress was slow, but compared to the chaotic killing field they had passed through earlier, the mountain here felt eerily quiet.

Occasionally, they spotted lone cultivators or frightened civilians moving through the area. Both sides kept their distance, watching each other warily before slipping away.

After nearly two hours of climbing and navigating the broken terrain, the distant sound of fighting carried across the mountain.

Grace immediately raised a hand, signaling the group to take cover. While the others hid themselves among the rocks, she sent a scout ahead to investigate. A moment later, the scout returned.

“Your Royal Highness, it’s General Scarlet and General Adam. They’re being surrounded by a group of rogue cultivators, “he reported urgently. Grace’s eyes hardened.

“Prepare to move,” she said. “We’re assisting them.” The group advanced immediately. As they rounded a bend in the path, the battlefield came into view.

Scarlet stood at the center of the clearing, her signature crimson spear whipping in wide arcs as she fought off more than seven rogue cultivators. Her red robes were stained with blood, and her breathing had grown ragged. She had clearly been fighting for some time.

Adam stood behind his sister, guarding a cluster of more than a dozen wounded soldiers. While directing their defensive formation, he sent arcs of sword light flashing past her shoulders to keep the attackers at bay. Even so, the pressure from the attackers kept building.

Three of the rogue cultivators leading the assault were early-stage Adepts, while the rest were peak-stage First-Circle Arcanists. They attacked relentlessly while shouting their demands.

“Hand over the spiritual herbs!” one of them yelled. “Do that, and we might spare your life.”

“Not a chance!” Scarlet snapped, whipping her Wildfire Spear across her body and forcing the attackers back.

“Move!” Grace commanded, and the Sovereign Aegis guards instantly charged forward. The sudden arrival of reinforcements caught the rogue cultivators completely off guard. Grace moved first. Her sword flashed like falling snow as she stepped into the melee.

With a single strike, she killed a rogue cultivator leader at the early Adept stage. Behind her, the Sovereign Aegis guards surged forward. Each of them fought like a force of ten. Within moments, the rogue cultivators’ formation collapsed, and the survivors scattered in panic.

“Your Royal Highness!” Scarlet exclaimed. Her eyes lit up when she saw Grace. Then, her gaze shifted past her to Dustin standing among the group. She froze for a moment, clearly surprised.

“Thank goodness. Dustin, why did you come up the mountain, too?” she asked, clearly worried. “With your cultivation...”

“It’s a long story,” he replied, briefly explaining the upheaval that had happened at the mountain below. Adam stepped forward and offered a quick salute. Compared to his sister, he was far more composed. Without wasting time, he summarized their situation.

“We’ve already cleared three trials and gained a few opportunities along the way,” he said. “But we lost nearly half our people. Later, a group of rogue cultivators discovered some spiritual herbs we recovered from a ruin. They’ve been pursuing us ever since.”

“Are your men still able to fight?” Grace asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Thank you for saving us, Your Royal Highness.”

She waved it off. “No need for formalities. On this mountain, we’re all on the same side. Let’s combine our forces. A larger group will give us better odds moving forward.”

After the two teams merged, their numbers rose to more than 30, significantly increasing their overall strength. But a larger group also meant their supplies would run out faster. They needed to find fresh resources and a safe place to rest as soon as possible. Adam then shared an important piece of information.

“While we were scouting earlier, we discovered a dense forest about six miles ahead. There might be demonic beasts inside, but we also sensed the presence of spiritual fruit. If we can make it through that area, we might find a better place to regroup.”

After a brief discussion with Dustin, Grace decided they would head for the forest. Half an hour later, the group reached the edge of a dense, ancient forest. Massive trees loomed overhead, their twisted branches forming a tangled canopy that blocked most of the sunlight.

A light mist drifted between the trunks, and the distant roar of unseen beasts echoed through the woods, keeping everyone on edge.

“Stay in formation once we enter. No one breaks off,” Grace ordered. The group tightened into a combat formation and advanced into the forest.

At first, the march was uneventful. But only a few miles in, everything changed. The surrounding trees suddenly shook violently. Branches thrashed overhead as dark shadows dropped from the canopy.

They were ape-like demonic beasts with long arms and jagged fangs, known as Iron -Arm Demonic Apes. Each one possessed strength ranging from late-stage First-Circle Arcanist to early-stage Adept. There were at least 40 of them.

“It’s an ambush! Form a defensive line.”

The fight exploded instantly. The Iron-Arm Demonic Apes were enormously strong and frighteningly agile. In the forest, they moved with terrifying ease, leaping between branches and attacking from every direction.

In contrast, Sovereign Aegis guards locked into formation and held the line. Blades flashed as steel clashed against claws, and bursts of blood sprayed through the trees. Grace fought like a storm at the front. Each strike of her sword killed an ape.

Adam directed the formation from behind the line, trapping several of the stronger beasts in coordinated attacks. Scarlet was even more terrifying. Her spear tore across the battlefield like lightning, and the demonic apes scattered wherever she drove forward.

But there were simply too many of them. The apes kept coming in relentless waves, and before long, the group began to suffer casualties.

Dustin stood near the center of the formation, shielded by the others as he watched the fight closely. Something about the apes' movements caught his attention.

They attacked wildly, yet they never pushed toward one section deeper in the forest, as if they were avoiding it.

"They're herding us!" he shouted. "

They're not trying to kill us but driving us in a certain direction!" Grace heard him and immediately noticed the pattern. The demonic apes attacked fiercely. But whenever a killing blow should have landed, their strikes shifted just enough to drive the group backward.

"Break out toward the direction they're avoiding!" Dustin shouted, pointing toward the direction the apes avoided. Grace made the decision immediately.

"Everyone! Break out to the northeast!"

The group changed direction and charged northeast with everything they had. Just as Dustin predicted, the demonic apes faltered the moment they neared that direction. Their advance slowed, and several even retreated.

The group seized the opening and forced their way through the encirclement, sprinting deeper into the forest. They ran for what felt like ages before the sounds of pursuit finally faded.

Only then did they slow to a halt, gasping for breath. When they looked up, they realized they had already crossed the forest and arrived at the entrance to a secluded valley. At the valley's entrance stood a broken stone stele. Two words were carved across its weathered surface.

“Spiritfruit Valley.”

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Spiritfruit Valley lived up to its name. The valley was lush and overgrown, brimming with spiritual energy. Exotic flowers and rare herbs grew in abundance throughout the area. Scattered among them stood several low trees heavy with clusters of crimson fruit that pulsed with dense spiritual energy.

They were Vermilion Spiritfruit, a rare treasure capable of quickly restoring depleted spiritual energy and even slightly strengthening one’s cultivation. The sight of the spiritfruit lifted everyone’s spirits.

“That’s great,” someone said. “With these spiritfruit, we can heal our injuries and restore our spiritual energy.”

However, Dustin remained cautious. His eyes moved slowly across the valley, and he felt something was wrong. The valley was unusually quiet. There were no birds calling, no insects buzzing, and even the wind seemed absent.

He lowered his voice and warned them, ” Stay alert. There could be danger.”

The moment the words left his mouth, the ground began to shake violently. A deep rumble rolled out from the depths of the valley, like the thunder of a thousand hooves. Moments later, the group saw what caused it, and the sight made their scalps prickle with dread.

Countless demonic beasts poured out of the valley. Among the horde were Ironback Wolves, Blazing-Maned Lions, One-Horned Giant Pythons, and Winged Night Fiends.

The sheer variety and overwhelming numbers made it clear that this was no scattered attack but a full-scale beast tide emerging from the depths of the valley.

“Damn it! It’s a beast tide,” Adam shouted, his face draining of color.

“Everyone, fall back! Now,” Grace barked. But it was already too late. The beast tide was moving far too fast, and within moments, the first wave crashed straight into their position. The group was forced into battle as a savage fight erupted across the valley.

Grace’s sword flashed in snow-bright arcs as she cut down the charging beasts, but their numbers were overwhelming. For every creature she struck down, several more surged forward to take its place.

Adam's formation had barely trapped a handful of the stronger creatures before the next wave smashed straight through it.

The Sovereign Aegis guards locked themselves into a defensive formation and held their ground, but the casualty count began climbing at an alarming rate.

"Protect Your Royal Highness and Mr. Rhys!" someone roared over the chaos. Scarlet planted herself firmly in front of Dustin and refused to yield even a single step. Her Wildfire Spear swept through the air in blazing arcs, the weapon's movements weaving a rolling cloud of fire that shredded every beast that tried to reach him.

Even so, the strain was evident. Several wounds had already opened across her body, and blood had soaked through her robes.

"Don't worry about me. Go help them," he urged from behind her.

"No!" she said firmly without turning around. "I told you already. No one is going to hurt you."

At that moment, a mid-stage Adept realm Blazing-Maned Lion spotted the gap created during the exchange and lunged straight toward Dustin.

Scarlet threw her spear out with everything she had left. The strike pierced through the lion's body and stopped it from charging, but the exertion threw her off balance. She staggered and fell to the ground.

Just then, another beast seized the opportunity. An Ironback Wolf sprang forward, its jaws opening wide as it lunged straight for her throat.

"Scarlet!" Dustin shouted, his eyes blazing with alarm. Just as the wolf's fangs were about to clamp around her neck, a streak of sword light tore through the air and cleaved the beast in half.

Adam rushed in immediately afterward, grabbing his sister and pulling her to her feet before placing himself between her and the charging beasts.

"Adam..." Scarlet said weakly as she struggled to catch her breath.

"Don't talk. Fall back!" he shouted as he swung his longsword in rapid succession, forcing several beasts back. As more beasts surged forward, the group could no longer hold the line.

Grace watches as more of her subordinates fall one after another under the relentless assault. A wave of despair rose in her chest as the thought forced its way into her mind.

Were they going to die here?

At that critical moment, Dustin noticed something unusual. The beasts attacked with wild ferocity, yet none of them dared approach the rock wall along the left side of the valley. The surface of that cliff was covered with strange patterns that emitted a faint, flickering glow.

“Grace! Order everyone to move toward the rock wall on the left!” he shouted.

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Grace had no time to think it over. She immediately ordered the entire group to fall back toward the rock wall on the left. The group fought desperately, carving a bloody path through the swarm of beasts until they finally managed to retreat beneath the shelter of the cliff face.

Just as Dustin had predicted, the bests charged forward but stopped when they came within roughly 100 feet of the rock wall.

They stopped one after another, pacing restlessly and letting out agitated roars, yet none of them dared take another step closer. After circling for a short while, the entire pack withdrew like a receding tide, as though something about the rock wall inspired deep instinctive fear.

The remaining guards collapsed to the ground, gasping for breath as the tension drained from their bodies. When they counted their numbers, the grim reality became clear. Of the original group of more than 30, fewer than 20 remained, and nearly every one of them was wounded.

Scarlet’s injuries were the worst. A deep claw wound tore across her back, the gash so deep that bone showed beneath the torn flesh, and the bleeding had yet to stop.

“Scarlet!” Dustin hurried forward to examine her injuries. Although his cultivation remained sealed, his medical skill hadn’t diminished. He tore a strip from his clothing, pressed it against the wound, and wrapped it with practiced precision until the bleeding stopped.

She watched his focused profile as he worked. The warmth of his fingers lingered on her skin, and a faint, unnatural flush appeared on her otherwise pale face.

“I’m fine…”

“Don’t talk,” Dustin said as he tied the final knot, his voice low but firm while the concern in his eyes remained unmistakable. “Save your strength.”

Only after finishing the bandaging did he finally breathe a sigh of relief. Turning toward Grace, he said, “We can’t stay here for long, but everyone needs time to recover. I’ll take a look at that rock wall and see what’s unusual about it. There must be a reason the beasts won’t approach.”

She nodded and ordered two guards to accompany him for protection. Dustin approached the rock wall and began studying the strange markings carved across its surface. The patterns were ancient and intricately layered, resembling both a naturally formed array and the traces of a long-standing seal.

He reached out to examine the markings. The moment his fingertip touched the grooves, a gentle force pushed his hand away.

“This rock wall... There seems to be something behind it,” he murmured. Dustin continued to search carefully along the face of the cliff, tracing the stone until he discovered a concealed opening hidden behind a curtain of vines.

The entrance was narrow enough that someone would have to turn sideways to squeeze through. Beyond it, the tunnel descended into complete darkness, while a faint current of air drifted outward from within.

“Should we go inside and take a look?” one of the guards asked. Dustin considered it for a moment before replying, “Not yet. Let everyone rest and recover their strength first. This passage might become our way forward, but it could just as easily lead to greater danger.”

Once he returned to the group, he reported his discovery to Grace. She agreed with his judgment and ordered everyone to rest where they were while assigning several people to keep watch.

After eating the Vermilion Spiritfruit they had gathered, the group’s injuries and spiritual energy began to recover rapidly. Scarlet’s wounds began to heal under Dustin’s careful treatment, aided by the fruit’s medicinal properties.

Night fell, and a campfire was lit in the valley. The group gathered around the flames, relieved to have survived but uncertain about the road ahead.

“Dustin, do you think we can leave this mountain alive?” Scarlet asked softly as she leaned against him. He watched the flames flicker for a moment before replying calmly, “We will. As long as we stay alive, we will find a way out.”

“But your cultivation...” she began, then trailed off. Dustin smiled faintly. “Just because my cultivation is sealed doesn’t mean I’m useless. I still have my eyes, my mind, and all of you. Scarlet, thank you for risking your life to protect me today.”

Her face flushed, and she lowered her head as she replied quietly, “I... I only did what I should have.”

Grace watched the exchange from the side, a complicated look passing briefly through her eyes. She then walked over and sat beside Dustin on his other side before handing him a piece of roasted beast meat.

“Eat something,” she said. “We still have a long road ahead of us tomorrow.”

He accepted it and thanked her. As the night deepened, the group took turns standing watch while the others gradually fell into a deep sleep.

However, Dustin remained awake long after everyone else had fallen asleep. His gaze lingered on the ancient patterns carved into the rock wall. A strange premonition stirred in his mind.

This mountain, and the trial unfolding within it, seemed far more complex than he had imagined. Within that hidden depth might lie the chance for his cultivation to recover, but it could just as easily conceal dangers far greater than anything he had faced so far.

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The following morning, sunlight filtered through the treetops at the mouth of the valley and scattered across the ground, driving away the chill that lingered from the night. After a full night of rest, most of the group had recovered from their injuries, and their spiritual energy had largely been restored.

Dustin informed the others about the hidden opening he had discovered in the rock wall, after which Grace gathered the key members of the group to discuss their next move.

“We do not know where this opening leads, “she said. “However, the fact that the beasts refuse to approach this section of the cliff suggests that something here frightens them. That means it is either a great opportunity or a great danger.”

Adam considered the situation before offering his analysis.

“Based on the rules governing Mount Aethermoor, the most dangerous places usually hold the greatest opportunities. We are trapped here, and moving upward is our only path forward. If that opening leads higher up the mountain as a shortcut, it’s worth investigating.”

Scarlet turned to Dustin with a worried look.

“But his cultivation is sealed. If something happens inside...” She trailed off. Dustin waved his hand dismissively. “No need to worry about me. If we move as a group, then we advance together and retreat together. I will not hold everyone back again.”

Grace listened to both sides before finally making her decision. “Then, we’ll explore the passage,” she said. “But we go in fully prepared.”

Once the group had reorganized and equipped themselves, Dustin led them to the concealed opening in the rock face.

Several members of the Sovereign Aegis guards who specialized in scouting entered first to check the passage. After a short while, they sent back a signal indicating that the interior was safe for the moment and the rest of the team could proceed.

They entered one after another and proceeded single file through the narrow passage, which was so tight that each person had to turn sideways to pass. The rock walls on both sides were slick with moisture, and the air smelled damp and stale.

After moving forward for roughly half an hour, the corridor gradually widened, and a faint light appeared ahead. When they stepped out of the passage, the space opened abruptly before them. What lay inside the mountain’s hollow was an enormous cavern.

The vaulted ceiling rose hundreds of feet overhead, with countless stalactites hanging downward. Light filtered in from somewhere above and struck the stone formations below, scattering into shifting bands of color. At the cavern’s center stood a ruined ancient hall.

The structure had been built entirely from a bluish-gray stone. Though much of it had fallen into ruin, traces of its former grandeur were still visible.

The doors of the hall were tightly shut, and intricate carvings covered their surface, depicting what appeared to be an immortal wielding a sword to cut down demons Above the entrance, “Hall of Hidden Truth “had been carved in large, ancient script.

“It’s a relic left behind by ancient cultivators,” Adam said with surprise.

The group approached the hall cautiously. When they came within roughly 30 feet of the entrance, a ring of light suddenly ignited on the ground and spread outward, enveloping everyone present. From within the hall, an elderly voice spoke.

“Who goes there? Do you possess a token?”

The group exchanged uncertain glances. Dustin’s thoughts raced. Reaching into his robes, he took out the ancient token he had found earlier in the valley. He had picked it up from a crack in the rocks shortly after being teleported onto the mountain and had kept it with him ever since.

The moment he took out the token, it began to glow faintly, resonating with the circle of light around them. At the same time, the carved patterns on the hall doors lit up, and the massive doors slowly parted to either side.

“The token is valid. Entry to the hall is permitted. Each person may enter only once. Whatever is obtained inside will be determined by fate. However, the hall is filled with mechanisms and traps. Whether you live or die will be your own responsibility.”

The elderly voice echoed again before falling silent. The group exchanged glances, their expressions reflecting both excitement and caution. Grace was the first to step forward. “Let’s go. We’ve come this far. There’s no reason to hesitate now.”

When they crossed the threshold, the surroundings changed abruptly. Instead of entering a single grand hall together, they found themselves separated and transported into different isolated spaces.

Dustin stood alone in a narrow corridor. Along the walls on either side, eternal lamps had been set into the stone at regular intervals. Their dim flames cast a faint glow, illuminating countless intricate diagrams and inscriptions carved across the surfaces.

He advanced forward slowly, examining the patterns carefully. They appeared to record a cultivation technique. But the information was incomplete, leaving the meaning fragmented and difficult to comprehend.

At the end of the corridor stood a stone chamber. In the center of the room sat a skeleton in a meditative posture, wearing an ancient ceremonial robe.

Although countless years had passed since its death, the remains still maintained their seated position, faintly radiating a lingering pressure. Resting across the skeleton’s knees lay a memory crystal.

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Dustin stepped forward and gave a respectful nod toward the skeletal remains. “Sir, I mean no disrespect. I only seek a way to survive here. If I manage to leave, I will remember your kindness.’

The moment his words fell, the withered bones stirred faintly. A dim wisp of light drifted out of the skeleton, gradually coalescing into the translucent figure of an elderly man with white hair and a long white beard.

“3,000 years have passed,” he began as he studied Dustin, a trace of surprise flickering in his eyes. “At last, someone has come here.”

Dustin felt a jolt of alarm. He hadn’t expected the skeletal remains to conceal something so mysterious. The elderly man stroked his beard and chuckled softly.

“Don’t be nervous. I died long ago. What remains here is only a fragment of my soul, left behind to wait for someone who might one day reach this place. You made it into this hall carrying that ancient token, so our meeting wasn’t a coincidence. Tell me, are you willing to accept my trial?”

“Go ahead,” Dustin replied.

“The trial is simple. Study this scroll, the Mortal Transforming Art. If you can grasp even a portion of its meaning, you will be considered to have passed. If you can’t...”

The elderly man left the sentence unfinished, though the implication was obvious. Dustin accepted the memory crystal and pressed it to his forehead. In the next instant, a torrent of information poured into his mind.

The Mortal Transforming Art was created for cultivators preparing to break through to the nascent soul realm. Its principle was simple yet profound. When a cultivator’s power was sealed, it didn’t mean they had become powerless, nor did it mean their progress had stopped advancing.

Instead, it offered a rare opportunity to temper the body, refine the soul, and deepen one’s foundation. When the nascent soul finally formed, that long accumulation would erupt at once and allow one to soar to unprecedented heights.

Dustin immersed himself in the teachings, studying them with a hunger that pushed everything else from his mind. Time slipped away unnoticed. It might have been a single moment, or perhaps several days. When he finally opened his eyes again, a faint trace of understanding had appeared within them.

The elderly man nodded with satisfaction.” Your comprehension is acceptable. You pass. This scroll of the Mortal Transforming Art is yours. And one more thing...”

He raised a finger, and a strand of spiritual light shot forward, sinking into Dustin’s forehead.

“This is a fragment of my soul mark. When your life hangs in the balance, it will protect you once. Go now. Your companions are waiting.”

As his words faded, the elderly man dissolved, leaving Dustin alone in the stone chamber. He gave a respectful nod to the skeletal remains before him, then turned and departed.

Meanwhile, the others were also encountering opportunities of their own. In a chamber dedicated to sword practice, Grace obtained a superior sword manual titled 13 Frostflash Strikes. Adam discovered a complete set of formation banners and diagrams.

Meanwhile, Scarlet fought an illusory beast in a trial arena and slew it, earning a Dragonblood Pill that strengthened the body.

When everyone finally regrouped outside the hall's entrance, the satisfaction from their gains was evident on every face. Scarlet immediately ran to Dustin and looked him over from head to toe before asking, "Are you all right?"

He nodded and replied, "I'm fine. In fact, I learned something as well."

Afterward, he glanced at the others and added, "This place isn't safe. We should continue upward."

The group nodded, then left the ancient hall behind. They proceeded along the passage on the opposite side of the cavern until they reached a flight of stone steps ascending deeper into the mountain.

As they stepped on the steps, the surrounding spiritual energy grew noticeably denser, and the invisible pressure bearing down on them intensified.

Mount Aethermoor was testing the resolve and endurance of every climber who sought to ascend it.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2788

While Dustin and the others explored the ruins within the mountain, the region at the foot of Mount Aethermoor had already descended into chaos beneath the golden barrier. Tens of thousands of people had been randomly transported onto platforms scattered around the mountain's base.

With no leadership and no order to restrain them, the only law that remained was survival of the fittest. The strong killed the weak, while those unable to resist became servants or even food.

On the largest platform at the mountain's base, Evander stood with his hands clasped behind his back, observing the chaotic slaughter unfolding below with cold detachment. Beside him, Elowen idly toyed with a wildflower she had picked somewhere nearby.

"These insects are so noisy," she said, frowning. "They won't be noisy for long," he replied calmly. "This place runs on survival of the fittest. Most of them will be gone soon."

"But we're trapped here as well," Elowen complained with mild irritation. "We had planned to sit back and reap the rewards afterward, yet now we have been dragged into this ridiculous game as well."

"A game?" Evander responded with a faint smile. "You can say that. But a change in the rules isn't necessarily a bad thing. There are far more opportunities on this mountain."

His gaze swept across the platform before settling on Anders, who was not far away, gathering the remnants of his scattered troops. He went on, “And besides... Some people should finally begin to serve their purpose.

At that moment, Anders was leading a group of elite troops from the Mosey mansion along the edge of a platform, gathering survivors who had been scattered by the chaos. Wearing a gentle and reassuring smile, he spoke calmly to the frightened civilians and wandering cultivators who had taken refuge nearby.

“Join my party. If we stay together, everyone will have a better chance of surviving,” he said.

In less than half a day, he had already gathered nearly 100 people, greatly strengthening his force. However, beneath the warmth of his expression, a cold calculation lingered deep in his eyes.

Occasionally, his gaze drifted toward the direction where Evander was said to be advancing, and a complicated mixture of emotions flashed across his face. There was caution, respect, and also a trace of resentment.

“My godfather ordered me to follow the Quinton family’s command,” Anders thought silently, his expression remaining composed while the thought sharpened in his mind.

“But I wasn’t born to live forever beneath another man’s shadow. Once I obtain enough opportunities on Mount Aethermoor, the situation may not remain the same.”

Deep within the Glacial Abyss, the Frost siblings were advancing with the few remaining members of their family. The route through the ravine had always been treacherous.

After the forced teleportation scattered their people, many had disappeared along the way. Now fewer than ten remained at their side.

“Your injury hasn’t healed yet,” Albus said, glancing at Blanche with clear concern as they moved carefully across the frozen terrain. “You should rest for a moment.”

She shook her head and continued forward without slowing down.

“I’m fine,” she said. “There’s a glacial cave ahead, and I can feel that the cold energy inside is extremely pure. There may be something there that suits our cultivation.”

He nodded and stayed close beside her, quietly shielding her as they pressed onward. When they finally reached the cave, they found the entrance sealed behind a thick wall of dark ice.

Raising a sword finger, Albus released a tightly compressed stream of frost sword aura, and the barrier of dark ice split apart with a sharp crack.

Inside the cave, the cold was overwhelming. At the center stood an icy platform, and resting upon it was a crystalline longsword. Its transparent blade shimmered faintly as currents of light flowed within it. When he stepped closer, the sword gave a bright, eager hum before lifting from the platform and flying directly into his hand.

“Has... Has it acknowledged you as its master?” Blanche asked, her voice bright with surprise. Albus held the longsword in his hand and felt the faint sense of affinity flowing from the blade into his palm. A flicker of excitement passed through his eyes.

This sword was far stronger than the one he had carried before. Within it, he could also sense what appeared to be a complete sword technique sealed inside the weapon itself.

He had just begun to calm his mind in preparation to study the technique when a sudden commotion erupted outside the cave. Several figures rushed inside, and at their head stood none other than the Jornell family elder, Zephyrin.

“Brats of the Frost family, you weren’t easy to track down,” he said with a vicious grin. “Hand over whatever treasures you obtained here. Do that, and I might grant you a cleaner death.”

Albus stepped forward with the sword in hand and met him with a cold gaze. “Scum of the Jornell family, did you not learn your lesson last time?” he snapped.

Zephyrin’s face darkened instantly as the humiliation from Storm Ridge resurfaced in his mind. The memory of being badly wounded by a single strike from Albus filled him with rage.

“You bastard!” he spat. “Last time I was careless. This time, I brought enough men with me. Let’s see how arrogant you can still be.”

At his signal, more than a dozen Jornell family experts surged forward together. Albus let out a cold snort. He drew the newly acquired sword in a single motion and swept it outward as a blade of bone-chilling sword light burst from the edge.

Where the light passed, the air itself froze and crystallized. Three Jornell family experts failed to dodge in time. The instant the sword light struck them, their bodies locked in place and froze solid, turning into lifeless ice statues.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2789

Zephyrin’s expression changed sharply when he realized that Albus had grown stronger again. The discovery caught him off guard, yet the situation left him no room to retreat.

Having already committed himself to the confrontation, he could only grit his teeth and charge forward.

Moments later, the battle erupted again. Facing multiple opponents alone, Albus moved through the clash with relentless precision. Streaks of sword light swept across the field, and his frost sword aura was pushed to its absolute limit.

Blanche and the other members of the Frost family fought beside him. They coordinated their attacks and defenses to support his advance while struggling to contain the relentless pressure from the Jornell family.

Despite their efforts, the imbalance in numbers gradually became apparent. The Jornell family held the advantage in sheer manpower.

Although Zephyrin hadn't fully recovered from his injuries, the foundation of a Core-Forged cultivator still made him a formidable force. Under the combined pressure, the Frost family slowly began to lose ground.

"Blanche, take the others and go," Albus shouted. "I'll hold them off here."

"No," she replied without hesitation. "If we die, we die together." At that critical moment, a rush of footsteps echoed from outside the cave. Everyone froze in shock, assuming another enemy force had arrived. Zephyrin stared at the newcomers in disbelief.

"People from the Moseys?" he muttered. At the mouth of the cavern, Anders arrived with several dozen followers. He paused just inside the entrance and surveyed the chaotic melee unfolding in the chamber, a thoughtful smile slowly appearing on his face.

Seeing him, Zephyrin immediately called out, "Mr. Mosey, help my family deal with the Frosts, and you'll be richly rewarded!"

Anders made no move to intervene.

Instead, his gaze shifted toward Blanche, lingering briefly on her strikingly beautiful face before he spoke in an unhurried tone.

"Ms. Frost, how would you repay me if I were to help you repel the Jornell family?" he asked. She was momentarily taken aback, though the surprise vanished almost instantly as her expression turned cold.

"What do you want?"

He smiled faintly and responded, "I haven't decided yet. I'll call in the favor later. How does that sound?"

Zephyrin's expression changed drastically. "Anders! You dare cross us?"

The smile on Anders' face didn't fade. "Mr. Jornell, please forgive me."

With a casual wave of his hand, the Mosey family's elite troops behind him surged forward at once. However, their target wasn't the Frost family. Instead, they turned their weapons on the Jornell family.

The sudden reversal threw the Jornell family's formation into complete disarray. Seizing the opportunity, Albus struck with a decisive sword slash that severely wounded Zephyrin.

Zephyrin let out a cry of pain. Since he couldn't stabilize the collapsing situation, he fled in panic with the remnants of his forces. The battle finally ended. Blanche remained wary as she looked at Anders. "Why are you helping us?"

He answered calmly, "No need to be suspicious. I simply dislike seeing the strong bully the weak through numbers."

As he spoke, his gaze shifted briefly to the sword in Albus' hand before he continued, "Besides, this young man possesses astonishing talent in the sword. Someone like him is destined to achieve great things. Forming a favorable connection is far better than making an enemy."

Blanche studied him for a long moment but said nothing further. At last, she nodded in acknowledgment. "Thank you. I will remember this favor."

Anders nodded with a faint smile and turned to leave with his men. But the instant his back was turned, a deep and calculating glint flashed through his eyes.

His intervention on behalf of the Frost family had never been an act of goodwill. The Jornell family was too powerful, and allowing them to secure too many opportunities here would only strengthen a rival to the Moseys.

On the other hand, the Frost family might prove useful if they could be drawn into a cooperative relationship. As for Blanche, Anders had plans of his own.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2790

After passing through Spiritfruit Valley and spending two full days climbing along the rugged mountain path, Dustin and his group finally arrived at a new place. It was unlike anything they had encountered before on Mount Aethermoor.

The mountainside suddenly opened into a broad terrace, a relatively flat platform carved into the slope and large enough to cover several football fields. What surprised them most

was the sight of a temporary marketplace appearing there. Dozens of crude stalls were scattered across the open ground.

Some vendors spread animal hides across the earth and laid out a handful of faintly glowing spiritual artifacts. Others propped up rough wooden frames and hung cloth canopies from which rows of pill bottles and medicinal flasks were displayed.

Many people threaded between the stalls, stopping to examine goods and haggling in low voices.

“This... This is incredible!” Scarlet exclaimed, staring wide-eyed at the scene. “A marketplace in a place like this?”

“As more survivors gather on Mount Aethermoor, people need a way to trade supplies and information. A market like this was bound to appear sooner or later,” Dustin said, slowly scanning the area. ” Look over there.”

He pointed toward the center of the market, where a stone pillar nearly 40 feet tall stood upright. Its surface was etched with runes, while above its summit hovered a fist-sized orb of milky-white light that emitted a steady, gentle pulse.

“That’s probably the ward’s core meant to maintain order,” Adam said after sensing it carefully. “Anyone capable of setting up a formation like that in a place like this must have serious backing”

Grace nodded. She lowered her voice and reminded them, “Stay alert and don’t cause trouble. Let’s observe the situation first.”

The group advanced cautiously toward the edge of the marketplace. The “residents” here came from all walks of life. Some were ragged rogue cultivators with hollow faces, while others were well-dressed scions from powerful families.

There were also wary wandering martial artists with killing intent in their eyes, mingled with calmer veterans who seemed already accustomed to life on the mountain.

Dustin soon noticed something peculiar. Although everyone in the marketplace had their own agendas, they all seemed to follow an unspoken rule against fighting.

Even when disputes arose, they rarely escalated beyond angry glares and a few heated insults before nearby onlookers stepped in to separate them.

“It seems whoever runs this place has enough authority to keep order,” Grace said quietly. As she spoke, a thin, middle-aged man approached them. His washed-out gray robe had clearly seen years of wear.

Although a friendly smile covered his face, his eyes remained sharp and calculating.

“You look new here,” he said in a low voice. “Need a guide? Just need to pay one low-grade celestial stone. I’ll explain the rules and tell you the background of every stall in the market.”

Adam was about to refuse, but Dustin raised a hand to stop him. He took a celestial stone from his pocket and handed it to the middle-aged man. The man’s eyes lit up instantly. He accepted the stone, and his attitude became noticeably warmer.

“Please follow me,” he said. “I’ll explain as we go.”

He introduced himself as Corvin Hollis, a rogue cultivator who had been transported to Mount Aethermoor when it suddenly appeared out of nowhere. After spending more than two weeks around the marketplace, he had grown familiar with everything there.

“This market first appeared about two weeks ago,” he said while leading them along the path.

“At that time, several major factions arrived first. They realized this place had flat terrain and was easy to defend but difficult to attack, so they joined forces to clear out the surrounding beasts and dangers before setting up this Truce Ward.

“The ward’s core, the Storm-Calming Pearl, was left behind by a Core-Forged expert. As long as someone remains inside the ward’s range, no one is allowed to fight. Anyone who breaks that rule will suffer backlash.”

“Which major factions are we talking about?” Grace asked.

Corvin lowered his voice. “The strongest faction here is the reclusive Quinton family. Ever heard of them? They’re no small force. The ones leading them are the Quinton siblings-Evander and his sister Elowen. Their cultivation levels are impossible to gauge.

“The Mosey family is here as well, led by Anders, who is also a dangerous figure. There are a few smaller families and a loose alliance of rogue cultivators, too, but they all have to follow the Quinton family’s instruction.”

Dustin and Grace exchanged a glance, realizing that the Quinton family was here as well.