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Chapter 2791

“If you’re planning to trade, I recommend the stalls on the western side,” Corvin continued as he guided Dustin and the others through the market.

“The eastern section belongs exclusively to the Quinton family and the Moseys. The items there are good, but the prices are high. Some of them even come from questionable sources.

“The old man selling pills in the north is reliable. His goods are genuine, though he has a strange temper. The stalls in the south belong to rogue cultivators. Their prices are lower, but the quality varies, so you must know how to judge them yourselves.”

Corfin continued talking at length while leading them through the market until they had made a full circuit. Only after finishing the tour did he finally leave, but before departing, he gave one last warning.

“Remember this. Don’t offend anyone from the Quinton family. A few days ago, a rogue cultivator at the late-stage Adept argued with one of them. Not long after he left the market, they found his body halfway down the mountain.”

After he left, Scarlet couldn’t help but comment, “This Quinton family is acting far too arrogantly.”

“They have the strength to back it up,”

Dustin replied calmly. “Don’t worry. The ward keeps everyone in check here, so it’s safe inside the market. Let’s see if we can find any supplies we need first.”

The group split up to look around. Dustin took Scarlet with him and walked slowly toward the northern stalls. Just as Corvin had described, the northern section looked crude and disorganized.

Most of the stall owners were rogue cultivators who simply spread a piece of beast hide or a torn cloth on the ground before displaying whatever items they no longer needed or had taken from the dead.

Among the goods were damaged magical artifacts, unidentified pills, incomplete memory crystals containing cultivation techniques, and even various strange ores, beast bones, and spiritual herbs. Dustin stopped in front of an elderly vendor selling pills.

The elderly man had completely white hair and beard, a thin, gaunt face, and wore a patched robe. He had been sitting there with his eyes closed.

Only seven or eight bottles of pills were arranged on the cloth before him. But each one was stored in a vial sealed with a small rune designed to prevent spiritual energy from leaking.

“Sir, how much are these pills?” Dustin asked. The elderly man opened his eyes and looked Dustin up and down. His gaze paused briefly when he noticed the complete absence of spiritual fluctuations in Dustin’s body, and a slight frown creased his brow.

He then glanced at Scarlet beside Dustin before answering in an indifferent tone, ” Healing tablets are five celestial stones per bottle. Energy recovery pills are eight per bottle. As for Substratumis, there are only two left, and each costs 50 celestial stones.

Scarlet gasped at the price. It was more than ten times higher than what such pills sold for at the foot of the mountain.

However, Dustin simply nodded. He reached into his pocket and produced a small pouch of celestial stones. Using the stones he had gradually gathered on Mount Aethermoor, he purchased three bottles of healing tablets and two bottles of energy recovery pills.

After completing the transaction, the two continued wandering through the market. Before long, a commotion broke out ahead of them. A crowd had gathered around a particular stall, pointing and whispering among themselves.

Dustin and Scarlet approached and soon saw the item displayed at the center of the stall. It was a longsword entirely black in color, yet faint vermillion patterns seemed to flow across the blade’s surface, while an unsettling, murderous aura radiated from it.

“I-Is that a demonic weapon?” someone exclaimed. The stall owner was a burly man with a fleshy face, whose cultivation had reached the early-stage Adept level. He was speaking with visible pride as he introduced the item.

“I found this beside the remains of an ancient cultivator. It’s definitely an ancient treasure. It carries a bit of baleful energy, but once it’s refined, its power will be astonishing. The price is fixed at 200 celestial stones.”

The surrounding onlookers murmured among themselves, yet none stepped forward. A demonic weapon saturated with such heavy, baleful energy could easily backfire on its wielder, and a careless cultivator might even fall onto the demonic path.

Dustin continued studying the sword, and a subtle change appeared in his eyes. Although the baleful energy within the blade was strong, it was not chaotic. Instead, it seemed to follow a faint but discernible pattern.

This wasn’t an ordinary demonic weapon. It felt more like a righteous sword that had been sealed. At that moment, a cool female voice spoke.

“This sword... I want it.”

The crowd turned toward the voice and saw a beautiful young woman step forward. She wore a moon-white martial outfit, and although she appeared no more than 16 years old, the sharp, commanding air around her made it impossible to underestimate her.

The woman was none other than Elowen.

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Chapter 2792

Scarlet instinctively tightened her grip on the Wildfire Spear, but Dustin lightly pressed her wrist, signaling her not to act rashly.

Elowen stepped toward the stall. Without even sparing the burly vendor a glance, she tossed down a pouch of celestial stones and reached for the sword.

“Hold it!”

A voice cut through the air. Another man stepped out from the crowd. He appeared to be in his early 30s, wearing a blue-violet robe, and had a cold, predatory look on his face. Faint arcs of lightning coiled around his body, the unmistakable bearing of the Jornell family.

He said with a strained smile, “Miss, the baleful aura on that sword conflicts with the stormcraft my family cultivates. It would make an excellent subject for study. Why not let me have it?”

Only then did Elowen lift her gaze to look at him. Her eyes were as cold as frost. “Who do you think you are?” she shot back. “You think you’re worthy of competing with me for it?”

The man’s expression immediately darkened. “Don’t think you can act arrogant just because you’re from the Quinton family. My family-”

Before he could finish speaking, a razor-sharp sword aura was already pressed against his throat. But no one saw her make a move. One moment, the black sword was still at her side, and the next instant, it was already poised at the man’s neck.

“Say one more word, and you die,” Elowen said calmly. The man’s face turned deathly pale. Cold sweat streamed down his forehead, and he didn’t dare make another sound.

Elowen scoffed dismissively, withdrew the sword, and turned to leave. As she walked away, her gaze swept across the crowd and briefly paused on Dustin before shifting away as if nothing had happened.

The onlookers scattered immediately, unwilling to risk being dragged into trouble. The man from the Jornell family slipped into the crowd in humiliation and disappeared within moments.

“Elowen’s temper is even worse than the rumors say,” Scarlet muttered under her breath. Dustin watched Elowen’s departing figure with a thoughtful expression. “It’s not temper,” he said after a moment.

“It’s indifference. In her eyes, people like us are no different from insects.”

He had felt the same thing come from Evander before. It was a deep-rooted arrogance born from families that had lived apart from the rest of the world for generations and learned to look down on everyone else.

“Let’s go. We should find Grace and the others.”

Dustin looked away and left the area with Scarlet. By evening, the group reunited in a relatively quiet corner near the edge of the market. Grace and Adam had each come back with something useful.

Grace had traded several pieces of ore recovered from the ruins for a fragment of a sword manual, while Adam had managed to acquire several key materials needed to complete a formation.

“We’ll camp here tonight,” she said. “This place is relatively safe for now, so we can rest properly. Tomorrow we’ll decide where to go next.”

Night gradually settled over the market, yet the lights of the stalls remained bright. Not only had the vendors not packed up, but the place had also become even livelier as though certain items revealed their true value only after darkness fell

Dustin sat alone at the edge of the camp, his eyes fixed on the stone pillar rising at the center of the market. At its peak, the Storm-Calming Pearl emitted a gentle milky glow that spread outward, covering the entire marketplace in soft light.

A moment later, a figure approached and sat down beside him.

“Can’t sleep?” Grace asked.

Dustin nodded. “Just thinking things over.”

“About what?”

“I keep thinking about this mountain, this trial, and how we are supposed to leave here alive,” he replied softly. “Have you ever considered the possibility that Mount Aethermoor is not merely a test but part of a much larger scheme?”

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Grace looked slightly surprised before asking, “What do you mean?”

Dustin lifted his gaze toward the unreachable summit. “I can’t say for certain,” he said. “It’s just a feeling. This mountain is older than anyone can comprehend. Even its existence feels like a mystery.

“And those reclusive families, like the Quintons, clearly know things we don’t. Their determination to climb the mountain can’t simply be about acquiring a few treasures.”

After a brief silence, Grace replied, ” Whatever they’re planning, we can only deal with it one step at a time. At the very least, we’re still alive.”

He turned to her and smiled faintly. ” You’re right. Survival comes first. Everything else can wait.” The two of them sat side by side, looking out over Mount Aethermoor under the cover of night.

In the distance, the occasional roar of demonic beasts echoed through the mountains, sometimes followed by a distant scream from somewhere unseen. Each sound reminded them that beneath the night’s calm surface, danger waited on every side.

On the other side of the mountain market, Evander rested inside a comparatively luxurious tent with his eyes closed. Elowen stepped inside and tossed the black longsword aside before saying, “I saw someone in the market today.”

He opened his eyes and responded, “Oh?”

“It was the same mortal we saw by the lakeside at the foot of the mountain,” she said, a trace of curiosity flickering in her eyes. “His cultivation still seems sealed, but he is doing quite well traveling with Grace and her group. Who do you think he really is? Why does she value him so much?

Evander remained silent for a moment before replying in a calm tone, “I don’t care who he is. As long as he stays out of our way, we can ignore him.”

“But there’s something strange about him, “Elowen insisted with a slight frown. “I can’t explain it clearly. He just feels different.”

Evander glanced at his sister but said nothing more, though a hint of contemplation showed on his face. The first night at the mountainside market passed quietly, though unseen tensions simmered beneath the surface.

Early the next morning, Dustin and the others were having breakfast at their camp when a group of people approached them.

Anders led the group, wearing a gentle smile and carrying himself with refined composure. More than a dozen of the Moseys' elite retainers followed behind him, their composed bearing making it clear they were skilled fighters.

He stopped before Grace and gave a respectful bow.

"Your Royal Highness, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Anders Mosey, the adopted son of Sir Mosey. I hope you will forgive this sudden visit."

Grace rose and returned the courtesy, her expression composed. "Mr. Mosey, may I ask what brings you here?"

He smiled. "Don't worry. I simply heard that you were also staying in this market and wished to pay my respects. On this mountain, another ally could mean the difference between life and death."

His gaze moved across the people standing behind her, lingering for a brief moment when it reached Dustin before shifting away as if nothing unusual had happened.

Grace remained outwardly calm. "I appreciate the gesture. But are you speaking for yourself, or for the Quinton family?" she asked. Anders' smile stiffened for the briefest instant before returning to normal.

"Your Royal Highness, you're very perceptive. To be honest, I do have some cooperation with the Quintons. Even so, cooperation is one thing. In the end, I'm still a member of the Mosey family."

Grace smiled faintly. "If the Quintons heard you say that, I wonder what they would think."

Anders laughed without responding directly. "If Your Royal Highness ever requires assistance, you are welcome to seek me out. On this mountain, having one more friend is always better than having one more enemy. I'll take my leave now."

AWith that, he turned and left with his men.

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Chapter 2794

After Anders left, Scarlet couldn't help but speak up. "That man's smile feels so fake. You can tell at a glance he's not a good person." "Anders really isn't someone to underestimate," Adam said in a low voice. "

I looked into him before. He didn't gather so many people in such a short time just because of the Mosey family's reputation. He's cunning and ruthless, the kind of opponent who is extremely difficult to deal with."

Grace turned to Dustin and asked, "What do you think?" He considered it carefully before answering, "Anders claimed he came here on his own to pay a visit, but that doesn't necessarily mean the Quinton family wasn't behind it.

"The Quintons want to support Sir Mosey's ascension to the throne. For them, your status as a legitimate royal blood makes you both an obstacle and possibly a useful pawn."

Grace let out a cold laugh. "They want to use me as a pawn? That depends on whether they're capable of it."

"In any case, we should be careful," Dustin said. "Anders may be under the Quinton family's banner for now, but he has no intention of staying their subordinate forever. People who try to play both sides like that are the ones most likely to stab someone in the back at a critical moment."

Over the next two days, Anders dropped by several times. Each visit consisted only of a few polite exchanges and a small gift before he left again. But his attitude grew noticeably warmer every time, as though he genuinely regarded Grace as someone he wished to befriend.

However, the Quinton family had never shown up. Evander and Elowen seemed to show no interest in Grace's group at all.

Even when they occasionally passed each other in the market, they did nothing more than a brief glance before looking away. That indifference was more unsettling than open hostility.

"What are they even trying to do?" Scarlet asked irritably. "If they want a fight, they should just start one. But if they want to talk, then say so. What's with all this half-hearted nonsense?"

Dustin remained thoughtful and replied, " It's not that they don't care. They're observing. Someone like Evander would never do something meaningless. He must be waiting for something."

The answer revealed itself on the evening of the fifth day.

A man covered in blood staggered into the market and rushed straight toward Grace's camp. He was one of the Sovereign Aegis guards, a scout who had been sent out earlier to explore the surrounding area.

"Your Royal Highness... something has gone terribly wrong," the man gasped as he collapsed to the ground and struggled to lift his head. "G-General Adam and the others... They're trapped."

Grace's expression changed immediately." Speak clearly."

The guard spoke in broken fragments as he described what had happened.

Their scouting team had discovered a ruin about nine miles outside the market. At first, they believed it was a great opportunity. But when they approached, they triggered a restriction and became trapped inside a field.

Adam and several Sovereign Aegis guards were holding off the danger with everything they had so that he could break through and seek help. However, a group of rogue cultivators had already noticed the situation and were now attacking them while they remained trapped.

"Let's go," Grace said without hesitation as she immediately began gathering her forces.

"Hold on," Dustin suddenly said.

She looked at him in surprise. "What is it?"

He turned his attention to the wounded guard and asked, "You said they're trapped at a ruin nine miles away. Your team went together, yet you're the only one who managed to escape?"

The guard nodded.

Dustin pressed, "How many pursuers are there?"

"Roughly about 30 people."

"All rogue cultivators?"

"Yes. All of them."

Dustin fell silent for a moment before turning to Grace. "This is a trap."

Her eyes widened slightly. He continued, "Nine miles from here happens to be just outside the range of the Truce Ward. Somehow, a band of rogue cultivators shows up with just enough people to pin down Adam's formation.

“And the one scout who breaks through manages to make it all the way back to report. The coincidence is too perfect.”

The guard grew anxious and hurriedly said, “Mr. Rhys, everything I said is true. General Spanner and the others really...”

“I know you’re telling the truth,” Dustin replied, looking at him. “They are trapped, and they are under attack. But the people surrounding them may not be ordinary rogue cultivators.”

As he spoke, he turned and looked toward a section of the marketplace in the distance, where Anders’ camp was located.

He went on, “If I’m reading this right, someone’s testing us. They want to see how far we’ll go to save our people. They’re also gauging our strength and deciding whether we’re worth keeping as pieces on the board... or liabilities that need to be removed.”

Grace’s expression turned ashen.

“You think this has something to do with Anders?”

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“Anders might not have set things in motion himself, but this definitely traces back to him. The Quiton family could be involved, too,” Dustin said.

Scarlet said urgently, “Even if we know it’s a trap, we can’t just abandon Adam and the others.” “We’re not abandoning them,” he replied. “But we’re doing this with a plan.”

He quickly added, “Grace, you take the main force and move in from the front to mount the rescue, but don’t rush straight into the fight. Stay on the outer perimeter first, observe the situation, and delay as long as possible. Scarlet, you come with me. We’ll take another route.”

“Another route?”

Dustin pointed to a location on the map. “Here. This leads to the far side of the ruins. If we can go around it and sneak in from behind instead of the front, we might catch them off guard.”

Grace looked at him with a complicated emotion flickering across her face. She finally understood why she still relied on him even after his cultivation had been sealed because his mind was worth more than brute strength.

“Okay. We’ll do it your way,” she said decisively. “Just be careful.” Dustin smiled faintly. “Don’t worry. With Scarlet with me, nothing will happen.”

Scarlet nodded firmly. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

30 minutes later, the two teams set out in different directions. Grace led the main force toward the ruins in a broad, imposing advance. She deliberately kept their pace slow and paused often to scout the surroundings while maintaining the appearance of heightened vigilance.

Meanwhile, Dustin and Scarlet slipped around toward the rear of the ruins with three elite guards.

As night deepened over Mount Aethermoor, a carefully laid trap waited for its prey. But what the hunters didn’t realize was that among those they intended to capture was someone who had already seen through the entire scheme.

Outside the ruins, Grace’s forces had arrived. The ruins consisted of a half-collapsed stone hall concealed within a dense grove of towering trees. Spiritual light flickered around the structure, and a large formation could be faintly seen enveloping the hall.

Inside the formation, Adam led more than a dozen Sovereign Aegis guards as they struggled to resist the siege of several dozen rogue cultivators.

“Your Royal Highness, we should charge in, “one of the guards urged anxiously. Grace raised a hand to stop him and said, ” No. Let us observe first.”

She studied the battlefield carefully. At first glance, the rogue cultivators looked disorganized, yet their advances and withdrawals revealed subtle coordination, proving they were no improvised mob.

Although their encirclement was tight, they avoided lethal strikes, as if deliberately trying to stall for time.

“Just as I suspected. This is a trap,” she said with a cold smile. Then, she issued an order. “Pass the word. Hold position and secure the perimeter.”

At the same time, Dustin and Scarlet advanced quietly along a narrow mountain ravine that led toward the rear of the stone hall. The terrain was steep and choked with thorny undergrowth, which made it clear that no one had expected anyone to approach from that direction.

“How did you know there was a path here?

“Scarlet asked while clearing the way through the thorns.

“Just a guess,” he replied. “Ancient ruins like this usually have multiple entrances and exits. If the main gate is blocked, the rear passage may offer a way through. Look over there.”

He pointed toward a collapsed section of the hall’s rear wall and continued, “Air is flowing through that gap. That means the space behind it connects to the inside.”

The group climbed up to the collapsed section and soon found a concealed opening. The entrance was narrow, allowing only one person to crawl through at a time, but faint light could be seen deeper inside.

“I’ll go first,” Scarlet said as she moved forward without hesitation and crawled inside.

Dustin followed right behind her. The passage was narrow and damp, and the air smelled of decay. After crawling for about ten minutes, the tunnel opened abruptly into a wide chamber. They had finally entered the interior of the stone hall.

Inside, Adam and his men were barely holding their ground. The formation was already on the verge of collapse, and casualties continued to rise. When he saw Dustin and Scarlet appear suddenly behind them, his face lit with relief.

“Don’t make a sound,” Dustin said quietly.

“There are still reinforcements outside.

How long can you hold on?”

Adam gave a bitter smile and answered, ” At most, half an hour.”

“That will be enough,” Dustin replied. After quickly scanning the surroundings, he continued, “Scarlet, take your people and secure this position.”

He then turned to Adam and said, “Hand me the formation control.”

Although Adam didn’t understand what Dustin intended to do, he didn’t hesitate. He immediately passed Dustin the rune slate that served as the formation’s control core. Dustin accepted it and began redirecting the flow of spiritual energy within the formation.

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Dustin had no cultivation, but setting up the formation relied on understanding how it worked. Over the past few days, he had studied many common restrictions and formations

scattered across Mount Aethermoor. So, when he began adjusting the formation now, his movements were precise and controlled.

As the formation shifted, the rogue cultivators attacking from outside immediately sensed that something was wrong. The formation, which had seemed ready to collapse moments earlier, suddenly stabilized and even began to show signs of backlash against its attackers.

“What’s going on?” the leader of the rogue cultivators asked with a frown. “Didn’t you say this formation wouldn’t last much longer?”

“Boss, should we just rush in?”

“Rush my ass. Our job is to stall them until. Before he could finish speaking, a wave of battle cries erupted in the distance as Grace finally moved with the main force.

“Charge!” At her command, the Sovereign Aegis surged forward and rushed straight into the rogue cultivators’ line. The attackers’ formation collapsed instantly. Although they had numbers, most of them were nothing more than loosely gathered mercenaries who had been temporarily bribed to take part in the assault.

They were no match for the disciplined Sovereign Aegis. After only a few hard charges, their ranks collapsed completely as they scattered in all directions.

Just as Grace believed the situation was under control, everything changed without warning. From the darkness surrounding the stone hall, dozens of figures suddenly emerged.

Every one of them wore identical indigo combat attire, faint arcs of lightning flickering across their bodies as a sharp and dangerous aura radiated from them.

They were members of the Jornell family. Karos Jornell, the man leading them, was the same sinister figure Elowen had humiliated earlier at the marketplace. A savage grin twisted across his face, and his eyes gleamed with the thrill of revenge.

“Grace, didn’t see this coming, huh? You thought Anders set this up?” Karos said with a laugh. “He’s nothing. This trap was laid by the Jornell family.”

Her heart sank after hearing that.

He continued, “We’ve been watching your group for a long time. Those remnants of the Frost family mixed themselves in with you and ruined several of our plans. Today, we’ll eliminate you first. After that, we’ll deal with them.”

Karos swept his arm forward, and dozens of Jornell experts answered with a unified shout before charging straight at Grace’s forces.

These men were nothing like the scattered rogue cultivators from earlier. Every one of them possessed cultivation at the Adept realm or above, and their stormcraft struck with destructive force.

The Sovereign Aegis were elite soldiers, but they had already spent considerable strength during the earlier battles. Facing these aggressive experts from the Jornell family, they were quickly forced into a defensive position.

“Form ranks! Hold the line!” Grace shouted as her sword flashed repeatedly, intercepting the coordinated assault of two Jornell attackers at once.

Scarlet charged forward from the stone hall with her Wildfire Spear. The weapon lashed forward in sweeping arcs, each thrust striking another Jornell man. Yet, the enemy’s numbers were overwhelming. For every man she killed, two more surged forward to take his place. The battle turned against them with alarming speed. Karos laughed triumphantly.

“Grace, today is the day you die. After you’re gone, we’ll deal with that mortal called Dustin as well. I hear all of you value him quite highly. Don’t worry. I will make sure his death is particularly miserable.”

A cold voice cut through the chaos.

“Oh? Who do you intend to kill?” The voice wasn’t loud, yet it carried with perfect clarity to everyone present. The Jornell family man’s smile froze as he turned toward the source.

From the darkness, a figure in white approached at an unhurried pace. He was a young man, tall and composed. A crystalline longsword circled him, radiating a piercing cold that froze the air around him.

The newcomer was Albus. Behind him were Blanche and Aveline, followed closely by the members of the Frost Family.

“It’s that Frost family brat!” Karos blurted, his expression changing instantly. “What are you doing here?”

Albus didn’t answer. He simply raised a hand and pointed forward. The crystalline longsword instantly erupted into a streak of deep blue light and shot forward in a streak of blue light.

Wherever the sword light passed, three Jornell family experts were frozen solid before they could even react. Their bodies were instantly sealed in ice like lifeless statues.

“You-”

Karos' face drained of color as he hastily activated his stormcraft in an attempt to defend himself. But Albus' strike was faster than he could react, and colder than he could endure.

The lightning had barely formed before it was swallowed and frozen in place, the frost racing up his arm and locking it solid.

He screamed in pain and staggered backward.

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Chapter 2797

Albus recalled his sword and stood still, his gaze cold as it settled on Karos. "Last time at the Glacial Abyss, you got away," he said calmly. "That won't happen again this time."

Karos' face was drained of color. All his earlier arrogance vanished as he staggered back, panic taking over.

"Retreat! Fall back now!" he shouted. The Jornell family forces broke instantly, Yscattering in disarray as they fled into the night. Albus didn't pursue them. He just stood there and watched until they disappeared out of sight.

"Why didn't you kill them?" Scarlet asked in confusion. He glanced at Dustin. Seeing him nod, he spoke calmly.

"Let them go back and report. The Jornell family's true experts haven't appeared yet. Killing a few lackeys now would only put them on guard."

Blanche walked toward Dustin and gave a respectful nod. "Mr. Rhys, we arrived late."

He shook his head with a faint smile. "No. You came at the right time. Thank you for stepping in."

A faint blush appeared on her face as she replied softly, "It's nothing. You've helped our family before, so we should repay that favor."

Grace sheathed her sword and stepped forward. "Ms. Frost, you came at the right time. But how did you know we were in trouble here?"

Blanche answered calmly, "We noticed members of the Jornell family gathering secretly in the marketplace earlier, so we suspected they might be planning something against you. We followed them quietly, and it turns out they had indeed set an ambush."

"Good thing you showed up," Adam said with a sigh. "Otherwise, tonight could've gone very wrong."

The group moved quickly to clear the battlefield and tend to the wounded. Even with the Frost family arriving in time, the Sovereign Aegis had lost eight men, and no one had escaped injury. The stormcraft used by the Jornell family was brutally effective, leaving wounds that were difficult to treat.

Dustin worked without pause, moving from one injured man to the next, while Scarlet assisted him. As she watched him, focused and composed, a complicated feeling stirred in her chest. His cultivation was sealed, yet when it mattered most, he was always the one holding everything together.

She asked softly after a moment, “Why is the Jornell family targeting us? We don’t have any grudges against them.”

He didn’t look up as he replied in an even tone, “It’s because of the Frost family. They’re mortal enemies with the Jornells, and we chose to help them. That makes us their allies in Jornell’s eyes. On top of that, Grace is a royal princess. Anyone backing Sir Mosey’s claim to the throne will see us as a threat.”

He paused briefly before continuing, “Up here in Mount Aethermoor, it’s not about grudges but about interests. You can’t count on anyone. Enemies become allies, and allies can turn on you just as fast. Keep that in mind.”

Scarlet nodded slowly, lost in thought. By the time they were done clearing the battlefield, night had fully fallen. The group withdrew to the marketplace to regroup. At Grace’s invitation, the Frost siblings temporarily joined forces with them.

On the other side of the marketplace inside the Quinton family’s tent, Evander listened quietly as a subordinate delivered his report.

“...The Jornell family’s ambush failed. The Frost family stepped in, and Grace’s group made it out unharmed.”

Evander gave a nod and dismissed him. Elowen, sitting beside her brother, asked, ” If Grace becomes entangled with the Frost family, will it affect our plans?”

“Affect our plan? No. If anything, it works in our favor,” he replied with a faint smile.

“Let them fight. Whether it’s the Jornell family, the Frost family, or Grace, they’re all pieces on the board. The more chaotic the pieces become, the easier it is for the one playing the game to see the full picture.

Evander turned his gaze toward the night sky beyond the tent, a glint of something unreadable passing through his eyes.

“The real trial of Mount Aethermoor hasn’t even begun,” he said. News of the Jornell family’s failed ambush spread quickly through the marketplace.

Some took quiet satisfaction in the news, others whispered among themselves, but most began to reassess Grace's group. Anyone who could work with the Frost family and walk away intact from a Jornell ambush was no longer to be taken lightly.

Over the next few days, the atmosphere within the marketplace grew increasingly tense. The Quinton family, which had previously paid them little attention, began watching more closely.

Anders visited more often, his attitude noticeably more attentive. But Grace remained measured and distant, never allowing him to grow too familiar.

"That Anders definitely isn't here with good intentions," Scarlet said to Dustin in private. "Every time he shows up, his eyes are everywhere, like he's trying to size us up."

He smiled faintly and replied, "Of course, he is. He's trying to figure out how strong we are, how close we are to the Frost family, and see whether we might be worth recruiting."

"In his dreams." Scarlet scoffed. "I don't trust people like him."

"You're right not to," Dustin said calmly. " But he's still useful. Through him, we can keep an eye on the Quinton family."

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Chapter 2798

On the fifth day, Anders arrived again. This time, he brought important information. "In three days, the second trial of Mount Aethermoor will begin," he said, lowering his voice. "Based on information from the Quinton family, the next trial is called the Heartfall Stair. It has 99 steps, and each one forces you to face your inner demons. Only those who reach the top can proceed to the next stage."

Grace and Dustin exchanged a glance before asking, "Where is it located?" Anders pointed toward the northeast, beyond the marketplace.

"It's about 15 miles from here. There is a place called Stormspire Arena. That's where the entrance is. When the time comes, every faction planning to continue upward will gather there."

He paused briefly, then added in a more deliberate tone, "However, the arena itself is also a trial. The wind and lightning there never let up. One mistake is enough to get you killed.

"And with so many factions converging, competition for position will be unavoidable. Your Royal Highness, if you intend to go, you should make preparations early."

After Anders left, Grace gathered the group for discussion

“The Heartfall Stair has 99 steps, and each one forces you to face your inner demons,” she said solemnly. “Some of us may have strong cultivation, but their resolve may not be as steady as it should be. We should be prepared for losses in this trial.”

Dustin replied, “A trial like this has nothing to do with cultivation level. Some people aren’t particularly strong, but their resolve is firm, making them more likely to make it through. Others may be powerful, but if there are cracks in their mindset, this is where they’ll fall.”

He swept his gaze across the group and continued, “Over the next few days, get your heads straight. Whatever you’re holding onto, whatever you’ve been avoiding, face it now. On that stair, you might fool other people, but you won’t fool yourself.”

The group fell silent, each lost in thought. Scarlet stole a glance at Dustin, unease stirring as she wondered what her inner demon would be. Three days later, they arrived at Stormspire Arena.

The terrain was steep and treacherous. A massive platform hung suspended in midair, with a bottomless abyss stretching below and unceasing wind and lightning raging on all sides. Thunder rolled without pause, the force of it so overwhelming that it made even the strongest flinch.

Hundreds of people had already gathered on the platform, including the Quinton family, the Moseys, the remnants of the Jornell family, and the rogue cultivator alliance. Each faction occupied its own territory, watching the others warily.

As Grace arrived with her group, countless gazes turned toward them. Some were curious, others watchful. A few were hostile, while the rest remained cautious.

“The Quinton family is over there,” Adam said quietly, pointing toward the eastern side of the platform. Evander stood calmly with his hands behind his back, as if the dangers of Stormspire Arena didn’t concern him.

Beside him, Elowen idly spun a rune slate in her hand. Behind them stood more than a dozen guards, their energy waves restrained but formidable.

“The west side is the Jornell family,” Adam continued, indicating the opposite direction. The Jornells brought nearly eight people. But each of them carried a sharp, oppressive presence, leaving no doubt they were elite.

Leading the group was a pale-faced middle -aged man. Faint arcs of lightning moved across his body, and the pressure he gave off was enough to unsettle those nearby. He was a mid-stage Core-Forged expert.

“The Jornell family’s real powerhouse has finally appeared,” Grace murmured. The Mosey family occupied the southern side of the platform. Anders stood at the front, speaking quietly with several leaders of the rogue cultivator alliance. When he noticed Grace, he gave a slight nod in acknowledgment.

“Get ready for the trial,” Dustin said. “It’s about to begin.”

Before he finished speaking, the lightning above the Stormspire Arena surged violently. Countless golden bolts intertwined, forming a massive vortex overhead. At its center, a brilliant column of light descended and struck the middle of the platform.

As the light faded, a stone staircase with 99 steps materialized out of thin air. It rose straight upward, disappearing into the vortex above.

“The Heartfall Stair has appeared,” a commanding voice resounded in everyone’s mind.

“Those who ascend must face their inner demons with unwavering resolve. Each step is a trial, and altogether there are 99 in total. Those who reach the summit may proceed to the next level. Fail, and your soul will be obliterated.”

The moment the voice faded, the crowd erupted into motion. Some stepped forward eagerly, while others hesitated, held back by fear.

Evander was the first to step onto the Heartfall Stair. His expression remained calm as he moved step by step upward, his footing steady. The inner demon illusions -enough to make a normal person break down-seemed to have no effect on him.

“Who... Who exactly is he?” someone asked. Evander paid no attention and continued upward. He passed ten steps, then 20, then 30, pausing only briefly at the 50th before continuing on.

“He’s a monster,” Adam murmured. “His resolve is unshakable.”

Then, Elowen stepped onto the Heartfall Stair. She moved with equal ease, even glancing around with curiosity at certain steps, as though observing the illusions rather than being affected by them.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2799

“It’s our turn,” Grace said, taking a deep breath as she looked at the group. Remember what Dustin said. Stay sharp. Whatever you see, don’t lose yourself.”

She stepped onto the Heartfall Stair first, followed by Scarlet, Adam, Blanche, Albus, and the others. Dustin stepped on last. Though his cultivation was sealed, his resolve was as strong as anyone else's. The moment his foot touched the stairs, the world around him shifted.

He saw Natasha standing not far away, tears in her eyes. Her lips moved as if she were speaking, but no sound reached him.

"Natasha..." he muttered, his chest tightening. She reached out to him with a pleading look in her eyes. He almost stepped forward, but he quickly stopped himself. Then, he remembered that she was still at the foot of the mountain and couldn't be here.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, the illusion had vanished, leaving only the stone steps of the Heartfall Stair before him.

"I've passed the first step," he murmured, then continued upward. Meanwhile, the others were also facing their own inner demons. Grace saw her mother lying on the ground, covered in blood. Her mother's hand reached out toward her as she pleaded, " Save me... Please save me.."

Grace's eyes reddened, but she clenched her jaw and forced herself to keep moving forward. Scarlet saw Dustin. He stood before her dressed in a wedding suit, holding Natasha's hand with a smile.

He said, "Scarlet, thank you for staying by my side all this time. I've found my happiness now. You should go and find yours as well."

The words hit her hard, but she took a deep breath and replied quietly, "As long as you're happy, that's all that matters."

The illusion vanished, and she continued upward. Adam saw his deceased wife. She stood a short distance away and waved at him.

"Come with me... I miss you so much..."

His eyes welled up with tears, then he closed his eyes and muttered, "I'm sorry. My sister still needs me. Just wait for me... Let me finish what I have to do, then I'll come and accompany you."

When he opened his eyes again, she was gone. He clenched his jaw and kept climbing. Blanche saw her family being wiped out, flames surging into the sky as her family members screamed in agony. She tried to run toward them, but an invisible force held her back.

Her lips pressed tight, and her nails dug into her palms as she forced herself forward, one step at a time. She had already lived through this countless times in her mind. Although facing it again still hurt, it no longer affected her.

Albus saw another version of him standing before him, gripping a demonic sword. The other presence was thick with killing intent and sneered at him.

“Sooner or later, you will become me. Your sword was always meant to kill,” the figure said. Albus regarded him coldly before replying, “My sword is meant to protect my sister and my family. I am not you.”

With that, he swung his sword, and the illusion disappeared. The Heartfall Stair had 99 steps, and none of them were easy. Every step was a torture and tested their resolve.

Some people broke down halfway through. Their screams echoed as they fell into the abyss below. Others were consumed by their inner demons and turned to stone, their bodies left standing on the Heartfall Stair. A few pressed on, gritting their teeth as they kept climbing.

When Grace stepped onto the 99th step, she was nearly spent. When she turned back, she saw that more than half the figures on the staircase had already disappeared. Spotting Scarlet, Adam, Blanche, and Albus among those who had made it, she felt a measure of relief.

“Where’s Dustin?” she asked suddenly.

The others turned to look, but couldn’t see him.

“Dustin, he...”

Scarlet’s face turned pale. At that moment, a figure slowly emerged at the far end of the 99th step. It was Dustin. Though visibly exhausted, his eyes were still sharp.

“I’m fine. Didn’t mean to worry you,” he said quietly. Everyone was relieved to see him. Scarlet couldn’t hold herself back. She rushed forward and threw her arms around him.

“You had me worried sick,” she complained.

Dustin gently patted her back and said, ” It’s alright. I made it.”

At the top of the Heartfall Stair, the path opened onto a wide platform. A bronze hall stood there, flickering in and out of view, its form indistinct and mysterious.

“Is that The Aethermoor Palace?” someone exclaimed. However, the hall was just a projection and hadn’t fully taken shape. Then, a commanding voice rang out again

“Those who have passed the Heartfall Stair may enter the Bronze Sanctum to contend for the final opportunity Countless treasures lie within, but only one may claim the Ascendant Pill. The gates will open in seven days.”

As the voice faded, the scene before them shifted again. When they came to, they found themselves back on the Stormspire Arena.

The Heartfall Stair had vanished, and the terrifying lightning vortex had dissipated. But everyone knew that the real trial had only just begun.

An Understated Dominance

Chapter 2800

After returning to the marketplace, the camp settled into an uneasy calm. Many were relieved to have survived, but no one felt secure about what lay ahead.

Grace’s group had eleven survivors from the Heartfall Stair, including Scarlet, Adam, Blanche, Albus, Dustin, and five Sovereign Aegis guards with strong resolve. On the Frost family’s side, Aveline also made it through, but three of their family members had been left behind on the stairs.

Other factions fared worse. The Quinton siblings passed without difficulty, but out of the dozen or so guards they brought, only three survived the climb.

The Jornell family lost most of their elite fighters as well, with only a mid-stage Core - Forged cultivator and two others making it through. The Moseys suffered heavy losses as well. Anders made it through, but only four of his men remained.

“Ascendant Pill...” Grace murmured. “So that’s what the Quinton family is really after.”

Dustin nodded. “For a reclusive family like the Quintons, ordinary treasures hold little value. But the pill is different. It can create an Ascension realm expert. Whoever obtains it will gain an overwhelming advantage in the next trial.”

“And what about us?” Scarlet asked. “Are we going to compete for it as well?”

He fell silent for a moment before answering, “Of course. But our objective doesn’t have to be the pill itself.”

Grace’s eyes sharpened as she caught on.” You mean...” “There is only one Ascension Pill, but the Bronze Sanctum holds more than that,” Dustin said.

“With our current strength, we don’t stand much of a chance against the Quintons and the Jornells. Even if we join forces with the Frost family, taking them head-on would still be a

losing fight. But we can take a step back and aim for other treasures instead. At the same time..."

His gaze darkened slightly as he added, " We observe the situation and watch how things unfold "

Inside Anders' tent, the atmosphere was just as heavy.

He sat alone, frowning as he stared at the memory crystal in front of him, which had just been delivered by one of Evander's men. The message stored within it was simple. When the Bronze Sanctum opened, the Moseys were to fully cooperate with the Quintons in securing the Ascension Pill.

Once it was done, the Quintons would support Seamus' rise to the throne. Anders looked at the memory crystal, his expression holding no hint of pleasure.

Fully cooperating meant they would be used as expendable forces, sent to wear down the Jornell family and the other factions. And afterward, the Quintons would claim they would honor their promise. Even if they did, that promise was made to Seamus. It had nothing to do with hím.

Anders thought back to how the Quinton siblings had treated him over the past few days. They summoned him at will, dismissed him just as easily, and treated him like a servant. In Evander's eyes, he was nothing more than a useful dog.

"I'm done being used like this," he muttered. All these years, he had risked his life for the Mosey family and done whatever Seamus demanded. But in the end, being adopted meant he would never measure up to a real son.

To the Quinton family, he was merely a pawn. He wasn't going to spend his life paving the way for others. Anders' thoughts drifted to Grace. She used people, too, but she didn't treat them as disposable the way the Quintons did. The loyalty of those around her came from the way she treated them.

Then, there was Dustin. He looked like an ordinary man, yet he had survived that trial and even inspired others to follow him without hesitation. There had to be a reason. Anders knew it was Dustin's sincerity and presence that made people trust him and stand with him.

"What if... What if I sided with Grace?"

This thought caught Anders off guard. He immediately shook his head, dismissing the idea. There was no connection between them, and no reason for her to trust him.

Still, he wasn't without leverage. He had influence within the Mosey family, and he knew about the Quintons' secrets. That might be enough to bargain with.

The real challenge was reaching her without alerting the Quinton family. After a long moment of contemplation, Anders finally came up with a plan.

The following evening, he made his way through the marketplace and passed by an elderly man's pill stall as if by chance. He exchanged a few words with the man before leaving without drawing any attention.

Dustin received word that Anders wanted to meet him alone that night.

"Is it a trap?" Scarlet asked warily.

"Maybe," he replied. "Or maybe he actually wants to talk."

Grace frowned. "It's too risky. Plus, your cultivation is sealed. What if he makes a move-"

"He won't," Dustin cut her off. "At least, not now. Besides, he chose the marketplace. No one's going to start anything there with the Truce Ward in place."

She wanted to persuade him, but he had already made up his mind. "I'll meet him. Grace, bring a team and stay on the perimeter. If anything happens, move in immediately."

Anders was already waiting in a secluded corner at the northwest marketplace late that night. A flicker of surprise passed through his eyes at the sight of Dustin coming alone, but his expression quickly returned to normal.

"You've got guts to come alone, Mr. Rhys," he said quietly. Dustin stopped across from him and answered in an even tone, "You requested this meeting at a late hour, Mr. Mosey What is it about?"

Anders fell silent for a moment before lowering himself to one knee.

"I'm willing to bring what remains of my house and place it under Princess Grace's command," he said. Dustin didn't look surprised. He just looked at him and asked, "Why?"

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