

# A Warrior Undefeatable

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A maid knelt nearby and spoke in a whisper. "My lady, Mr. Saleto reports that Jared has left level three. His strength proved unfathomable; he even killed men from Malevolent Path Hall." The woman turned, rolling an emerald pendant between elegant fingers. "A Wandering Immortal Realm Level Five defeating Mr. Saleto? Jared is becoming a most intriguing variable."

"Mr. Saleto adds that he followed your command-only a light probe, no final break," the maid continued.

"Well done," the woman answered, allowing the ghost of a smile to touch her lips.

She inclined her head, the pale glow of the throne chamber glinting off the silver filigree of her coronet. "The Celestial Palace has decayed for far too long. Those moss-clad conservatives clutch the old codes like tombstones. If we can recruit a man of his caliber, the reformers might finally carve open a road to renewal."

She allowed the words to settle, then turned to her maid. "Isabel, travel to level four. If Malevolent Path Hall presses Jared too hard, intervene quietly, but do not wound their pride. The Celestial Palace—and the entire celestial race—already carries more enemies than friends. Until our power is absolute, strutting about as though we stand above the clouds will only earn us bruises."

Isabel Yeats dipped a knee, dark hair brushing marble. "As you wish, my lady."

"When you find Jared, tell him the slate is wiped clean. The Celestial Palace would rather bury the hatchet, and my Fourth Hall will lend its full weight if he should ever call upon it."

Isabel hesitated, lashes trembling. "And Mr. Enaricus, my lady?"

"Ignore him." Her voice chilled to winter steel. "If he insists on courting death, I will not stop him—but I will not allow him to drag the whole Celestial Palace into the grave alongside him."

At that very moment, deep within the gold-lit halls of the Third Hall, an entirely different storm was gathering.

Enaricus, wrapped in a robe

threaded with molten gold, slammed his palm against a jade table the instant the report ended. "Worthless! A mere Wandering Immortal Realm Level Five eludes you? Tell that Seventh Hall pup to hand in his badge!"

The courier-knees knocking-whispered, "My lord, the Seventh Hall serves the mistress of Fourth Hall. He was ordered only to test Jared, so he may have held back. Jared has already left level three. What are your commands?"

Enaricus drew a razor breath, cruelty glittering in his eyes. "Jared? A

leaping clown who dares to toy with the Celestial Palace! Carry my decree Drystan on level six is

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hunt him at once. Spare nothing-bring me Jared's head. If Jared steps off level six alive, Drystan can abdicate on the spot."

"At once!" The courier bowed so low his forehead kissed the marble before scurrying into the shadows.

Alone again, Enaricus let a thin smile curl across his lips. "So, Selena, you would court the upstart's favor? Childish Variables like him are.

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celestials were born above human cultivators. If you choose to cheapen yourself, do not blame me for the violence that follows.""

Thus, the Third and Fourth Hall Masters stood at sword-tips, each embodying a different future for the Celestial Palace. Yet with the Celestial King Decree resting inside the latter's sleeve, even Enaricus dared not strike her outright.

Outside sprawling Swordmaster City on level five, a fortress of stone and steel, three travelers approached beneath drifting banners of sword energy: Jared, Flaxseed, and Kishor.

"What a magnificent place!" Flaxseed gasped, tilting his head toward ramparts that soared a hundred yards high. Across the walls, endless runic blades were chiseled into granite, each carving crackling with caged lightning.

Kishor nodded. "Swordmaster City is level five's holy land of sword cultivation. Every resident lives and dies by the blade. Inside, masters abound-even seventh-tier Earthly Immortal Realm cultivators are common."

Jared brushed a hand over the cool stone, feeling the sword energy surge skyward. Interest flickered behind his calm gaze. "A whole city of swordsmen? Now that could be fun."

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A swordsman himself, Jared carried the Dragonslayer Sword—a legend forged of myth and steel-so the prospect of an entire city honed in its worship stirred a

pleasant curiosity.

"Let's take a look inside," Jared said, already striding toward the yawning gates.

Kishor halted on the dusty road outside Swordmaster City. Bathed in the late- afternoon glow, the ramparts before him loomed like an iron tide frozen in mid- crash, their arrow slits glinting with cold promise. He folded his thick arms, a single crease barely troubling his brow, then shook his head.

"I'll stay out here and wait," he said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate against the stone. "Inside, the rules chafe me." His gaze slipped past Jared, refusing to meet the younger man's eyes—an unspoken tension tightening the air like a drawn bowstring.

Jared studied Kishor's averted stare yet chose not to press. He had traveled long enough with the big man to know caution was never wasted. If Kishor-so blunt, so fearless-preferred the wilderness to those walls, there had to be ghosts waiting in that city.

"Very well," Jared said at last. "Flaxseed and I will gather what we need quickly. Stay sharp out here."

Kishor bared a flash of perfect teeth. "Relax. Even if an eighth-tier Earthly Immortal Realm shows up, I may not win, but I'm not foolish enough to stand and die."

With no more words, Jared turned on his heel, Flaxseed trotting beside him, both heading toward the yawning city gate.

They had scarcely drawn beneath the arch when Flaxseed's jaw dropped. High atop twin arrow towers stood two motionless figures-one on each side of the gate.

On the left waited an azure-robed swordsman, eyes closed, long blade slung across his back like a slumbering thunderbolt. On the right balanced a white-robed woman, her slim sword angled toward the flagstones, pale hair drifting as though stirred by some private breeze. Neither twitched, as if time itself had carved them from marble.

"What are they doing-being punished for skipping drills?" Flaxseed whispered, scratching his scalp. "Stand that straight for hours? I'd cramp in places I didn't know I had."

Jared narrowed his eyes. Invisible blades seemed to whistle between the two statues. He felt each silent collision, each burst of killing wind. "Their swords are already clashing," he murmured. "Not steel to steel-will to will. He wields a dominance that could cleave mountains. She answers with a gentleness supple as water, soft enough to swallow lightning."

"A duel? They haven't even blinked," Flaxseed protested.

"It's a contest of sword intent," Jared replied. "More lethal than any whirl of blades. Break your enemy's intent, and their cultivation shatters-sometimes their mind along with it."

Flaxseed gave a low whistle. "Swordmaster City folk sure play different games." Jared turned to continue, but a sudden, razor-edged beast-roar split the crowded causeway, slicing through conversation and thought alike.

"Make way-out of my path!" a man bellowed, his voice slicing the morning air like iron.

Clad in embroidered silks that

flashed gold and crimson, he thundered toward the city gate astride a hulking beast-part lion, part nightmare-its third eye blazing. Each hoofstrike pounded dust skyward, sending merchants and beggars scattering in shrill panic.

Flaxseed's instincts screamed for retreat; he reached to yank Jared aside. Jared caught the older man's wrist and, without a word, anchored himself to the cobblestones, facing the oncoming brute as if watching a distant tide roll in.

"Courting death!" the brocaded youth snarled, giving the monster's armored head

a brisk smack. "Trample that fool."

The three-eyed juggernaut seemed to understand. Its jaws yawned wide, fangs glittering like drawn sabers, and it hurtled forward, tearing up the roadway in a storm of stone and dust.

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