

A Warrior Undefeatable

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Compared with Immortal Lord Nimbus' presence, this new force stood a full tier higher-strong enough to shatter mountains and rip the sky like parchment.

That terrible weight spawned an abyss of helplessness, reducing every mortal ambition to dust.

"Benefactor... That pressure... It belongs to someone with a higher cultivation level!" Quincy's teeth chattered as he stared upward. "In Cardinal Realm, a being of Earthly Immortal Realm is pure legend. Please-stay vigilant!"

The other freed cultivators mirrored his dread, worry pooling in their eyes for Jared's safety.

A few even shuffled back a step-tiny, involuntary, yet betraying the deep quake in their spirits.

To them, Immortal Lord Nimbus had been an uncrossable canyon. Now a mightier shadow arrived.

Jared's earlier miracle-crushing Immortal Lord Nimbus-felt suddenly fragile, a candle before a storm.

Despair coiled tight, whispering that no victory remained.

Above, the cloud-sea writhed under savage wind, rolling like an ocean hurled into the sky.

From that convulsion descended a solitary figure draped in black.

His arrival dimmed the realm, as though daylight itself recoiled. Tall as a granite peak, he was swathed in living shadows-oily fumes that curled and twisted, exuding a stench of ancient wickedness.

Each time the figure set a boot upon the stone, the ground fractured into a spider-web of hairline cracks—as though an invisible scalpel were carving the earth.

The air, once clear and bright with spiritual energy, curdled around him. A rancid mixture of rot and sulfur filled every lung, proof that even the breeze bowed to his corruption.

From that raised perch, he let his gaze sweep across the battlefield, and the cold in his eyes felt like a pair of knives that forbade direct sight.

At last, those eyes fixed on Immortal Lord Nimbus-still dangling from Jared's hand-freezing the battered man inside a cage of terror.

"I warned you about loose tongues, Nathaniel." His words scraped together like rusted metal, spoken with the certainty of a sovereign who expects the universe itself to kneel.

Immortal Lord Nimbus convulsed as if lightning had just broken his spine; the flame of defiance in his eyes guttered out, leaving only raw panic.

Whatever he meant to say died unspoken. He shoved his face toward the shattered tiles, desperate to hide inside the dust.

Sweat the size of pearls rolled off his brow, soaking his robe. Terror of the man in black eclipsed even his fear of Jared, as though the man in black were the reaper come to grind him into ash.

Jared's brow lifted, a brief flicker of contempt cutting through the calm stillness of his stare.

With a casual flick of his wrist, Jared

cast Immortal Lord Nimbus aside,

and the latter hit the stone like a

discarded burlap sack the dull impact thudding through the silence.

"Who exactly are you?" Jared met the man in black's stare without a tremor. "If you mean to stand in my way, do you really think death will change my mind?"

The words struck the man in black as riotously amusing. He threw back his head and howled—no laugh at all but the shriek of a night owl tearing open the dark.

Thick waves of black mist billowed from his robe, roiling like a legion of enraged specters aching for release.

"Death?" the man in black sneered. "In Cardinal Realm, not a soul dares speak that word to me. Brat, you think felling one washed-up Wandering Immortal Realm makes you worth notice?"

He sniffed, impatience dripping from the shadowed hollows where his eyes should have been.

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The man in black's next step landed like a hammer on every watching heart. His aura detonated-an oceanic shockwave racing straight for Jared.

The weight of an Earthly Immortal Realm Level Two descended, a thousand-pound millstone intent on crushing lungs and hope alike.

Around them, the Demonic Cultivators collapsed to their knees, bodies quivering uncontrollably. They could not lift their heads, as though an invisible hand nailed each skull to the ground.

Quincy and the others turned chalk-white. Every breath felt like glass, their leaden legs barely holding them upright.

"Listen up!"

"I am the Enforcer of Malevolent Path Hall." The man in black's snake-cold gaze flicked across the crowd. "By decree, I oversee the refining of celestial gems here in Cardinal Realm. You disrupted our plans and even laid hands on Nathaniel_ proof you know nothing of fear. If you value what little life you possess, leave Cardinal Realm at once. Drop every celestial gem you stole on the ground. Refuse, and I will scatter you to ash-no reincarnation, no second chance."

The moment the words "Malevolent Path Hall" rang out, the Demonic Cultivators trembled with feverish zeal. In their eyes burned the light of long-dreamed revenge.

Voices exploded around the scene. "Malevolent Path Hall-ruler of the lower realms!"

"Sir, strike him down! Avenge us!"

"He can't possibly beat the Enforcer our salvation is here!"

Their chanting shook the air, a tide of adoration for the man in black and hatred for Jared that threatened to drown all reason.

Jared blinked, momentarily stalled. So Malevolent Path Hall is involved-and these Demonic Cultivators know its name far too well.

It was unsettling enough to see disciples of Celestial Palace marching behind the cultivators of Malevolent Path Hall, their shared shadow sprawling across Cardinal Realm.

Quincy felt the weight of it first. A cold anchor dropped inside his chest, tugging his hopes under.

Around him, every comrade worn et

the same hollow stare. They had heard the rumors-Malevolent Path Haft frightened even the

immortals and how the nightmare stood in flesh and smoke before them. The man leading those

shadows was an Enforcer already at

Earthly Immortal Realm Level Two.

They thought Jared couldn't

possibly overcome that kind of

storm.

"Malevolent Path Hall?" Jared let the name float on a lazy breath, then laughed. The sound was light,

alprost casual, as though he had just recalled a pleasant joke told over coffee. "I expected a giant. Turns out you're nothing but an ant and an ill-trained one at that."

The man in the black went slate-gray with rage clouds gathering behind his eyes "Brat, you dare spit on

Malevolent Path Hall? i paint!!!

sky w

your arrogance and teach

you where the heavens truly sit!"

The man in black thrust his arm forward. Black mist knotted together, swelling until

it became a mountain-sized demon claw. It cut the air with a howl, diving for Jared.

Every shred of Earthly Immortal Realm Level Two power roared inside that strike. Space wrinkled like a wet canvas, sparks hissing as the very air ignited beneath the claw's passage.

Demonic Cultivators lined the ridge, eyes wide with savage delight. They could almost taste the blood they believed was moments away.

Grins cracked open across their faces, each one certain Jared would soon be torn into a red storm of flesh.

Quincy and the others shut their eyes. They could not bear to watch hope die.

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Just as the claw's shadow reached him, Jared moved.

The gesture looked unhurried-almost polite. He merely raised his right hand, palm facing the oncoming horror, as though greeting an insect on a summer evening.

Boom!

The demon claw shattered, bursting into a storm of black vapor that the wind carried away in a heartbeat. In the sudden quiet, the sky seemed cleaner, scrubbed by invisible hands.

An unseen force lashed backward along the man in black's arm, a venomous current racing toward his heart.

The sneer froze on his lips, fear chiseling new lines across his face.

That same force flooded his meridians, tore through his elixir field, and left ruin wherever it traveled. Bones splintered. Essence crumbled.

He slammed to the ground like a punctured drum, blood spilling from eyes, ears, nose, and mouth before breath could summon a scream.

An Earthly Immortal Realm Level Two Enforcer of Malevolent Path Hall had failed to withstand even one careless motion from Jared-and died for it.

The man in black, who only moments earlier had ruled the field with fearsome swagger, now sprawled on the stone like carrion, limp and crooked.

Every cheer froze in the throats of the Demonic Cultivators at the scene. Smiles set like cracked masks. Mouths gaped wide enough to hide a fist. Terror clouded their eyes, as though the last breath had been sucked from the world.

Their bodies shook without permission, seized by the same nightmare that had just murdered their certainty of victory.

Quincy and the other cultivators jerked awake, blinking hard. They stared at the corpse in its ruined cloak, then at Jared, who stood calm and steady beside it, and their minds simply stalled.

Moments ago, they had cowered

beneath an overwhelming

pressure an Earthly Immortal Realm expert no mortal could touch. Now that the expert lay crushed one casual slap. Impossibility had slithered into fact, and nothing made sense.

"I-Is this actually happening?" someone rasped, the words trembling as badly as his knees. The question hung in the air, hunting for an answer that refused to come.

Jared brushed his palms together as if flicking away dust, the gesture so light it mocked the carnage at his feet.

He turned toward Immortal Lord Nimbus who still kneeled, shivering and asked in a voice mild as drifting snow. You may go on now. How did Drystan fearn the Celestial Gem Refinement Method?"

Immortal Lord Nimbus glanced at the man in black's cooling remains, then back at Jared. Color drained from his face. He shook like a leaf caught in winter gale-force winds.

He threw himself forward, forehead slamming the flagstones. "I-I will speak.& swear. Mr. Hexford heard it from Enaricus, the overlord of the Third Hall How Emarious discovered it, never learned!"

Terror and despair painted every line of his bowed body. Jared had become executioner, judge, and fate itself.

"So Enaricus of Celestial Palace is already colluding with Malevolent Path Hall?" Jared muttered, brows knitting.

The Celestial Palace was the core of the celestials. Treachery at that height could topple empires.

Worse, Onneas had long opposed Enaricus. If Enaricus had joined the enemy, Onneas would soon be targeted.

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Jared owed Onneas a debt of friendship. He would not allow treachery to swallow them.

Reading Jared's grim expression, Immortal Lord Nimbus stammered, "I-I have told you everything. Matters of the overlord of Third Hall lie far above a servant like me."

"I know," Jared said with a curt nod, conceding the point while his eyes hardened with decision.

He lifted one hand. A tongue of internal flame unfurled, white at its heart, violet at its edges. Before Immortal Lord Nimbus could gasp, the flame folded around him like a blooming flower.

A single scream knifed through the silence, then was gone. Quincy and the others watched the ashes scatter, hearts pounding with savage relief-true freedom at last.

Jared turned to Quincy. "Buddy, gather every refined celestial gem in Cardinal Realm and bring them to me. I will need them to cultivate. As for the remaining spiritual stones, halt all reckless mining. Your people still require spiritual energy to advance."

Quincy and the others could draw only from ordinary spiritual stones, never from the richer celestial gem. Jared's order preserved their future even as he prepared for his own.

Once they broke through the celestial realm and stepped into Wandering Immortal Realm in cultivation level, their bodies would finally be able to draw pure celestial energy.

"We obey, Immortal Lord." Quincy dipped his head quickly.

Moments later, he herded the others across the glittering plain, sweeping every newly refined celestial gem into velvet sacks for Jared.

Jared had spared the Demonic Cultivators. He understood that erasing them would leave only humans and beast race cultivators, and those two races would surely turn their blades on each other.

Three races in balance-he believed that was Cardinal Realm's only shield against another war.

While Jared waited among rising mounds of glittering treasure, Flaxseed clambered up to level seven, chasing every rumor that might lead him to the elusive Malevolent Path Hall.

On the mist-choked rim of that tier sprawled Blackwind City, a settlement forever wrapped in lifeless gray fog.

It felt forgotten by heaven and earth; an oppressive hush drifted along its crooked streets like dust caught in moonlight.

Even the street vendors veiled themselves in heavy black robes, as though fabric alone could keep catastrophe at bay.

Their words were little more than breaths, each syllable smothered before it could wake the lurking dangers.

Flaxseed, clutching a meager handful of celestial gems pilfered from level six, crouched in the darkest corner of a battered teahouse.

His strength had returned, but here

on level seven that power amounted to almost nothing, he now stood at the very bottom of the ladder

Every nerve stood at attention; his ears caught the clink of porcelain, the scrape of boots, even the sigh of the draft beneath the door.

For three full days, he had waited, praying a stray whisper would mention Malevolent Path Hall.

He dared not ask outright-questions in this city were invitations for knives.

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Between his fingers lay a cloaking charm, thin as parchment yet thick enough, he hoped, to muffle the pulse of his cultivation aura a little longer.

Bang!

The thunderous slam cracked the teahouse's stagnant hush.

The door flew inward, and Scarface muscles knotted, a blade-shaped scar slashing down one cheek-strode inside two

black-robed cultivators sliding after

him like twin shadows.

Flaxseed lowered his gaze at once, fingers tightening around the charm tucked inside his sleeve.

"Keeper, your strongest wine-now!" Scarface bellowed the order and slapped an overstuffed pouch onto the nearest table.

The crystalline chime of celestial gems inside rang so sharply it seemed to cleave the silence in two.

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From beneath his hood, Flaxseed glimpsed a black token dangling at Scarface's belt. He spotted a character identical to the token he had seen before, one used by Malevolent Path Hall.

His heartbeat spiked. At last, the trail has surfaced.

From the neighboring table drifted a murmured exchange between two cultivators.

"Have you heard? The people from the Celestial Palace keep giving talks. Crowds pack in to listen, yet everyone who attends walks away hollow, like their souls were stolen," one of them whispered.

"Hush-keep your voice down! Do you think we can gossip about the Celestial Palace? Last time a wandering cultivator shot his mouth off, someone from the Celestial Palace slapped him half-senseless."

The second robed cultivator leaned in, eyes wide with dread, and hissed the warning as though even the air might carry tales back to the Celestial Palace.

"Oh, quit trembling." The brash one scoffed, lowering his tone only a shade. "I hear the Celestial Palace has gotten cozy with Malevolent Path Hall lately."

He brought his lips to the other man's ear, the words sliding out like a poisoned blade. "Malevolent Path Hall is hunting something called a Soul Urn-big enough to cage ten million spirits. Rumor is the Celestial Palace already owns one."

Hidden two tables away, Flaxseed felt his heart plummet as if a stone had been dropped into a well.

The phrases "Soul Urn" and "ten million spirits" struck him like iron hammers. Could this be tied to the disappearances of my family members' spirits-the very mystery that dragged me here?

Before he could strain for more, Scarface cast a sidelong glance across the room. Words died on the two gossips' tongues; they slapped down coin, fled the teahouse, and vanished.

Scarface drained his cup, motioned to his two subordinates, and strode for the door.

Opportunity flared in Flaxseed's chest. If ever there was a thread to tug, this was it.

He slipped from his seat, tapped a cloaking charm, and let its dull shimmer swallow his outline as he flowed after them.

The pursuit wound through cramped alleys that reeked of rot. Black vines clung to crumbling walls like the talons of night itself, brushing his shoulders as though eager to drag him into darkness. '

At last, the trio halted before an abandoned stone altar.

Unholy runes-ink-black and pulsing-webbed its surface, each glyph winking with secrets better left unopened.

In the center squatted a clay vessel half a man's height. From its mouth seeped a keening so sharp and mournful it seemed ripped out of the abyss, and cold sweat prickled down Flaxseed's spine.

"Is everything prepared?"

A cultivator in spotless white robes emerged from behind the altar. Gold thread stitched the name of the Celestial Palace at his hem.

Scarface nodded, producing a bulging item pouch. "Five hundred thousand celestial gems inside. More shipments are coming up from the lower realm soon. When do we get the Soul Urn?"

The cultivator in white's laugh was thin and icy Impatient, are we? Our overlord will fill the Soul Urn to the brim first. Once it's swollen with spirit Malevolent Path Hall may take it. You Cultivate with divine souls, and we cultivate with celestial gems. Everyone wins."

Scarface clicked his tongue. "Still faster than us. We have to scavenge battlefields, while you lot lure naïve cultivators to hold talks and strip their souls clean on the spot."

Flaxseed's fists tightened until his knuckles blanched. The Celestial Palace—stealing souls so those victims can never ascend again? That's a fate no better than death.

He inched closer, desperate to examine the clay vessel's cursed mouth for any sign of the missing Flaxseed clan spirits.

The cloaking charm faltered. Like a candle snuffed by wind, his concealment winked out, baring his aura to the open night.

"Who's there?"

The white-robed cultivator whirled. His longsword lashed free with a metallic cry, hurling a crescent of golden light that tore through the gloom toward Flaxseed.

Flaxseed slammed a fresh cloaking charm to his chest and twisted aside. The sword energy missed his heart but the edge of his sleeve

split, fabric curling under a heat so fierce it stung his skin.

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"Intruder!" Scarface bellowed, his shout cracking through the alley like shattered glass.

He whipped a black chain from beneath his cloak and snapped it toward Flaxseed's hiding place with the violence of a man strangling a serpent.

The links bristled with backward barbs, each joint bleeding a greasy, ink-black mist. This chain was made to drink spirit itself, a punishment far crueler than death.

Flaxseed knew better than to stand his ground. He pivoted and ran, loose robes flapping behind him.

The white-robed swordsman was faster. Golden arcs peeled from his blade and streaked after Flaxseed like falling meteors, driving the trickster into a desperate zigzag retreat.

Each sidestep shaved moments from his life. Sword light slashed new seams across his coat, smoke curling from the fresh cuts.

"Take him alive-do not let that rat slip away!" Scarface barked as he charged.

The black chain whirled above his head, weaving a net that dropped with the certainty of nightfall. A rancid stench rolled off the iron as though it had been quenched in the bile of hell.

Flaxseed slammed a golden charm onto the stones. A column of flame howled upward, bending the alley itself beneath its heat.

The blaze roared like an uncaged beast, forcing Scarface and the swordsman to reel back, arms raised against the searing tongues.

Seizing the heartbeat he'd bought, Flaxseed slipped into a side passage scarcely wider than his shoulders. Rough bricks scraped his sleeves as he wriggled deeper into the shadow.

He had covered barely ten paces when his chest slammed into someone standing silent in the dark.

"Easy there, friend. What's the hurry?" the stranger asked, voice smooth as warm wine.

The man wore homespun robes and an easy smile, the very picture of a harmless passerby caught after dusk.

Yet when their sleeves brushed, Flaxseed tasted the metallic tang of Celestial Palace authority. It clung to the stranger's aura like hidden steel beneath velvet.

Alarm bells screamed inside him. He spun, ready to bolt once more.

unhurried, inescapable. The

A hand settled on his ex

stranger's smile iced over. "You're already here Might as well stay and

tell

us exactly what you overheard."

Numbness flooded from that touch, a strange current burrowing through muscle and meridian, sealing his cultivation as neatly as wax over a letter.

Weight crashed onto him, a

mountain he could not lift. Scarface

and the white-robed swordsman

appeared at the alley's mouth

closing a tight ring around their prize.

"So, just a wandering cultivator bold enough to spy on the Celestial Palace," the swordsman sneered.

He brought the blade to Flaxseed's throat, edge gleaming like winter moonlight. "Speak-whose dog are you, and why were you sniffing around our affairs?"

Flaxseed clenched his teeth and swallowed every answer.

He knew truth would not save him; it would only make his death uglier.

Scarface drew a dagger of pitch-black metal, dark-red runes pulsing across it like living worms.

"Silent, eh?" he growled. "Then the Soul Devouring Dagger will teach you how it feels to lose a soul one scream at a time."

He waved the blade before Flaxseed's eyes, the alley air turning icy along its passage.

The dagger stopped nine centimeters from Flaxseed's brow. Its chill bored through bone and spirit alike.

He felt the weapon's hunger—a shadow-beast crouching inside the metal, ready to lunge and swallow him whole.

Every strand of hair on his body bristled, broadcasting naked terror.

His heart hammered against his ribs, desperate to escape the cage of bone before the dagger did.

A golden streak burst from the mouth of the alley, the silent night ripped open as if lightning had decided to fly low to the ground.

Crack!

The bone-splitting report rang sharp and cold, like a funeral bell struck by death itself. The Soul Devouring Dagger clanged against the cobblestones, its fall loud and lonely inside the tension-thick passage.

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Clutching his mangled wrist, Scarface screamed—a single, ragged note of pain and fury. "Who's out there?"

Flaxseed jerked his head up. At the alley's entrance stood a figure he knew by heart—white shirt fluttering like a defiant banner in the breeze.

Black-White Flame coiled around Jared in quiet spirals, ancient charms of heat and shadow breathing power into the night. He had rushed over from the Cardinal Realm.

"Jared? What are you doing here?"

Joy and disbelief collided in Flaxseed's eyes, turning into tears.

A heartbeat ago, he had pictured only death, the alley shrinking into the mouth of a grave. Now, as Jared stepped from the darkness, hope cut through despair like dawn through fog.

Jared answered nothing. His gaze slid across the three men circling Flaxseed, ice-hard, merciless. The look alone sent a visible shiver down their spines.

The white-robed cultivator snarled, tightened his grip, and lunged. "Another meddler! Kill him with me!"

His sword flashed like a silver snake, striking straight for Jared's face.

Halfway in, the blade stopped-caught between Jared's fingers as though steel were soft clay. No matter how the attacker strained, the weapon refused to advance a single inch.

Jared's mouth curved in mild contempt. "Is that all you can do?"

Pressure tightened. The sword snapped clean, severed like a dry twig. The broken halves traced forlorn arcs before ringing off the stones.

A globe of internal flame blossomed in Jared's palm—bright as a newborn sun, blistering hot.

He set that miniature star against the cultivator's chest. Flame engulfed the man so quickly that no scream escaped; body, hope, and life curled inward, consumed.

Moments later, nothing remained

but acrid ash swirling in the

heat-warped air.

Scarface and his subordinates went corpse-white, legs shuddering like saplings in

a gale. Panic hurled them toward the far end of the alley.

Two chains of living flame snapped from Jared's fingertips, twisting through the night like hunting serpents. They coiled around fleeing limbs; struggle only

tightened the fiery noose, wringing out hopeless cries.

"Want to run? Did you bother asking me first?"

Jared stepped forward. His boot settled between Scarface's shoulder blades, pinning the man to the dusty flagstones with a weight that felt as immovable as a mountain.

Power rippled down Jared's

leg-silent, merciless. Scarface's ribs

1 glas

creaked. Air fled his lungs with a strangled cough leaving him squirming like a beetle under an iron heel. His face darkened to amugly crimson. Wide, bloodshot eyes swam with terror and pain, reflecting the cold flame burning in Jared's gaze.

"Talk. Why is the Celestial Palace conspiring with the Malevolent Path Hall? What filthy scheme have they hatched?"

Jared's voice cut through the night air-ice sheathed in steel-each syllable a blade aimed straight at Scarface's heart.

Crushed, breathless, and having tasted Jared's overwhelming strength, the thug no longer dared hide a single secret.

"I-I'll tell you!" Scarface sobbed, words tumbling out in a panicked rush. "The Celestial Palace gathers the souls-we harvest them, see? In exchange, we pay with celestial gems. That... that's all I know, I swear!"

Tears pooled in the corners of his eyes. Raw fear quavered in every word, as though the confession itself flayed him open.

Jared's stare hardened. A tide of fire erupted from his palm-white at the core, ringed in furious scarlet. In a single hungry rush the flames devoured Scarface and the cronies beside him, leaving nothing but drifting ash.

A harsh, acrid stench hung in the stillness, the unmistakable perfume of death.

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"Flaxseed, you've grown bold, haven't you?" Jared turned, voice soft but edged.

"Vanishing without a word and charging up to level seven with power that flimsy— you nearly lost your soul back there."

Behind the rebuke lay a current of concern that ran deeper than the words allowed.

"I... I just didn't want you worrying," Flaxseed muttered, scratching at his scalp. "And I thought, maybe if I hurried I'd find my clan's wandering spirits sooner..." The last syllables dwindled to a childlike whisper.

Guilt clouded his features, shoulders slumping beneath the weight of his own recklessness.

"Not worry?" Jared's sigh slipped free. "Running alone into a nest like this is exactly what makes me worry."

His tone softened. "Tell me everything you uncovered from start to finish."

His eyes held steady on Flaxseed, offering the reassurance of a fortress despite the gathering storm around them.

"I pieced it all together at a teahouse, then saw the altar myself," Flaxseed said, voice shaking with fury. "Those priests advertised some grand sermon- cultivators flocked in, hoping for enlightenment. Instead, their souls were siphoned off! If I found out days later, who knows how many more would be hollow husks by now!"

Rage vibrated through him, raw and roaring, like a cornered lion forced to watch its pride fall.

Jared's expression grew grave, shadows pooling beneath his eyes.

The Celestial Palace-supposed keepers of divine order-consorting with Demonic Cultivators and butchering cultivators. If word spread, the entire heavenly realm would quake.

Visions flashed behind his eyes: citadels burning, refugees spilling across shattered roads, the sky itself torn by warring factions.

He understood the stakes. This darkness had to be cut out before it poisoned every corner of the realm.

"We head for the Soul Convergence Altar. We find out exactly how they steal those souls-then we end it."

Resolve settled over him, solid as a mountain range refusing to bow to any storm.

They slipped into a tailor's shop, exchanged their attire for coarse black robes favored by level-seven drifters, and used a wisp of aura to blur their features. Two anonymous wandering cultivators seeking a sermon-nothing more.

Their strides were unhurried yet unyielding, each step echoing with the pursuit of truth and an unbreakable devotion to justice.

The Soul Convergence Altar rose atop the central dais of Blackwind City, ringed by a sea of cultivators. Most had come chasing breakthroughs or a coveted place within the Celestial Palace, faces alight with yearning.

Their eyes shimmered with desperate hope, hungry for any fragment of enlightenment the "holy" priests might offer-never suspecting the price those teachings would demand.

A cultivator in a golden robe, Edison Hews, stood alone at the heart of the stone dais, a figure draped in shimmering gold robes. In his raised hand @inted a slender jade scepter sha His voice jade scepter roffed across the plaza, bright and irresistible. "Friends, today's open sermon will draw the hidden breath of heaven and earth into your bodies and lift you past every bottleneck. Quiet your hearts and follow my lead!"

Unseen at the fringe of the crowd, Jared let a thread of divine sense slip from his brow. Like an invisible hand, that thread swept across the platform, brushing every hidden corner.

Almost at once, he felt the wrongness—a ring of black runes buried beneath the dais, oozing a sinister pulse as though guarding ancient secrets.

Those runes fed a narrow recess at the center, and from that cavity drifted the sickly scent of a Soul Um. Even the jade scepter in that cultivator's hand breathed a faint, soporific mist, coaxing the gathered cultivators into languid trust. That

narcotic aura, as soft as spider silk, wrapped itself around every robe and wrist, lulling its victims toward sleep.

"Watch the centers of their brows," Jared murmured.

He kept the words low enough for only Flaxseed to hear, as though a louder breath might awaken something hungry in the air.

Flaxseed focused and saw it—threads of pale blue soul essence seeped from each meditating forehead, drifted toward the jade scepter, and slipped unseen into the waiting recess.

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Each thread resembled a secret stream, carrying vital soul energy toward some unseen abyss. Yet the cultivators remained rapt, convinced they were listening to esoteric wisdom. Serene smiles rested on their faces, as if wrapped in a pleasant dream.

"Using hypnosis to pull out their souls... that's beyond cruel!" Flaxseed hissed.

His fists clenched until the knuckles blanched, rage simmering like magma beneath cracked stone. Pictures of innocent cultivators having their spirits stripped flickered behind his eyes, stirring grief as sharp as his fury.

On the dais, Edison stiffened, his gaze sweeping the crowd before fastening on Jared and Flaxseed.

A predator's alertness flashed in those eyes, the way a leopard pauses when the wind shifts.

"Why do the two of you remain open-eyed? Do you doubt the depth of my teaching?" Edison boomed, a thread of menace coiled beneath the warmth.

A jolt shot through Jared's chest. He knew their probing had not gone unnoticed. "My friend, your discourse is undoubtedly profound," Jared answered with a calm smile. "We are newcomers to this method of guiding spiritual energy into one's body. Before closing our eyes, we wished to clarify a few points."

His words emerged as steady as moonlit water, impossible to read.

The Edison narrowed his eyes and let them roam over the pair, searching for the smallest crack. The stare felt like twin blades scraping across Jared's and Flaxseed's skin.

"Oh? What troubles you, then? Speak, and I may dispel your doubts," he said, probing.

Despite the cordial tone, the offer hung like bait on a barbed hook.

Jared's mind whirled. Letting suspicion fester any longer would ruin everything.

"Before one can draw the energy, it is said the heart must be cleared of every stray thought. Could you, sir, demonstrate the correct way to achieve that clarity?" Jared asked calmly.

Jared's question had sounded

harmless-just another query from an eager novices but beneath its plain surface it slid like a wall oiled blade slicing the gold-robed cultivator's attention clean away from everything else.

"Purifying the mind," Edison answered, his tone now

satin-smooth, "relies on banishing every stray thought until nothing but stillness remains. Sit, breathe, and

Yoxation ferty your hear back

to perfect calm."

The edge in his voice softened, a faint nod acknowledging that Jared's inquiry had pleased him.

"Much obliged," Jared said, bowing just enough to pass for reverence. "We will sit at once and follow your guidance."

Jared tugged lightly on Flaxseed's Updates are released by find~novel~net

patched sleeve. Both men folded their legs, closed their eyes, and adopted the placid masks of

seasoned meditators. Beneath that still surface, their spiritual senses stretched outward, nerves taut, mapping every flicker of movement inside the cavernous hall.

Seeing their apparent compliance, Edison's eyes glimmered with approval before he returned to his sermon.

His voice billowed through the incense-thick air, a rhythmic hum that pressed against the senses like a lullaby woven with hidden hooks.

All the while, pale soul threads kept drifting from the cultivators' brows, drawn inexorably toward the shallow channels carved into the dais.

Minutes crawled by. Outwardly, Jared and Flaxseed appeared absorbed in holy doctrine; inwardly, they diagrammed the Celestial Palace's unseen machinery, piece by sinister piece.

Beneath the platform, ebony runes pulsed like hungry organs, siphoning those threads and funneling their essence straight into the yawning mouth of the Soul Urn.

The urn, ancient and mottled, behaved like a bottomless well, swallowing each luminous strand without the faintest sign of reaching capacity.

"If this keeps up, who knows how many of us will be bled dry," Flaxseed murmured, shaping the words so only Jared could hear. Concern trembled beneath his rough-hewn whisper.

"We have to break their apparatus soon, or the aftermath will be unthinkable," Jared replied, a curt nod underscoring his resolve.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Determination crystallized behind Jared's steady gaze; whatever came next, he was prepared to meet it head-on.

Just then, Edison's sermon crested into a feverish crescendo.

He lifted his jade scepter high, and its radiance flared brighter than midday sunlight, a molten spear that forced every eye to squint.

The brilliance was so savage it seemed to burn straight through eyelids, imprinting crimson afterimages even on the most disciplined minds.

At the same instant, his gold robe rippled although no breeze stirred, buoyed by an invisible power that crowned him with eerie majesty.

"Now-draw the profound breath of heaven and earth into your bodies. Shatter your chains!" he thundered.

The command detonated like artillery, rolling across the hall until the very stone vibrated.

On cue, the gathered cultivators activated their techniques; multicolored auras blossomed around them as they strained to welcome what they believed was salvation.

Hope glazed their faces-hope of finally breaching the stubborn wall that had held them prisoner for so long.

None of them suspected they were inching toward an abyss carved for their souls alone.

Upon the Soul Convergence Altar, sigils winked, shedding ghost-blue light that hinted at secrets best left buried.

Kneeling in concentric rings, dozens of disciples wore expressions equal parts devotion and mania, swaddled in the narcotic atmosphere. Above them, Edison's chant burst from his lips, and the scepter blazed anew-an orbiting sun no mortal eye could endure.

A cold wave lapped at Jared's heart. Something is terribly wrong.

Years spent dancing along the edge of death had honed Jared's senses to a blade's point. In a heartbeat, he read the hidden gears of the ritual and saw the trap closing around everyone on the altar.

Once the guiding chant reached its peak, an unseen siphon would tear away most of the soul threads keeping these cultivators sane. Their bodies might live, he realized, but their minds would be left wandering-empty husks shambling through the rest of eternity.

We can't wait anymore. His eyes flew open. They were dark, still, and fathomless as though winter had carved twin wells of ice in his face.

Black-White Flame surged from his skin, roaring up like twin tidal waves of night and dawn. In an instant, the living fire ringed both Jared and Flaxseed, sheltering them beneath its swirling petals of light and shadow.

The fire was the living breath of Jared's private technique-shield and spear in equal measure, forged to repel any curse and sear any foe.

He raised the Dragonslayer Sword. Moon-pale steel flashed, and the blade answered with a hiss of sword aura sharp enough to whistle in the air.

With a shouted command, he swung. A bolt of sword light split the gloom, cracking toward the shallow recess carved at the altar's center.

That unremarkable groove was the throat of the Soul Convergence Array. From it, an invisible current drank greedily at every soul thread that drifted close. "Enough!" Edison thundered.

His voice struck the altar like rolling thunder, making the entire Soul Convergence Altar hum in pain.

He slammed the jade scepter between the sword flash and the groove, barely catching the strike. Even so, spiderweb cracks raced through the runic stones beneath the platform.

Soul threads that had been flowing obediently toward the recess jolted to a halt—choked as though an unseen hand had closed around their throats.

Across the plaza, hundreds of cultivators snapped out of their trance. Glassy eyes fluttered open meeting the chaos with mute confusion. Moments ago, they had tasted the edge of enlightenment. Now they stared bewildered, at the storm of flame and steelerupting before them.

Seeing the spell unravel, Edison's previously serene mask shattered. Rage warped his features into something wolfish. "Fellow cultivators!" he barked, stabbing a furious finger at Jared.

"That man is a demon spy. He fears the heavens aiding your breakthrough and has attacked to keep us weak. Are you going to let him rob you of your future?"

The crowd erupted. Raw resentment, still smoldering from their interrupted advancement, now found an easy target.

They had waited months-years, some of them for this single step forward. To have it stolen in the final heartbeat lit a fire hotter than reason. Angry murmurs became a roaring tide.

