

A Warrior Undefeatable

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"Who says I can't call reinforcements without help from a branch?" Esorin replied, a frigid smile carving lines into his face.

The old devil's soft chuckle echoed like a rusted hinge. Cold promise shimmered behind his eyes.

Figures began to stride out of the gate one after another-none of them anything but Demonic Cultivators. Each arrival left a smoky after-image of black miasma curling over the ruined flagstones.

First to emerge was a giant of a man. He carried a mountain-cleaving axe whose iron edge could have split a city wall. Black fog coiled around his shoulders, making his outline blur and swell like a living shadow.

Jared's eyes narrowed. "That brute isn't from the Malevolent Path Hall?"

"Correct," Onneas said quickly, keeping pace beside him. "We're on level eight, Jared-that's Fiend-Titan Sect. The axe-bearer is their sect master, Maximilian Stonehelm. We have crossed blades with him before."

Jared's jaw flexed. "Then before his friends pour through, we hit hard."

He knew the longer the gate spat out warriors, the worse their odds became.

He raised the Dragonslayer Sword. One blazing stroke tore through the void, its light a crimson comet. Several Third Hall cultivators never even felt the blade that lopped their heads from their shoulders.

"Kill!" Onneas answered with action, leading the Celestial Guards forward in a silver-and-blue wave. Steel met flesh. Screams became wind. In a breath, the courtyard was a storm of limbs and sparks.

After Jared felled a fourth opponent, Esorin appeared in front of him with a single ghost-swift step. One casual palm shredded Jared's sword-light like paper, forcing him back on his heels.

"Jared!" Onneas cried, fear ripping the name from her throat.

She planted herself at his side, armor plates humming with gathered power. She knew-alone, Jared could never match the abyssal force radiating from that devil. They stood shoulder to shoulder, gazes locked on Esorin, whose aura rolled over the paving stones like an ocean trench come alive.

Esorin moved. The world blinked. Suddenly, he was before them, palm swinging down with the force of a collapsing mountain range. Air collapsed ahead of the strike, shrieking like tortured metal.

Jared roared, channeling every shred of will into the Dragonslayer. Scarlet fire ignited along the blade, sword-intent becoming liquid flame as he slashed upward to meet the descending hand.

In the same instant, Onneas' hands flew through a blur of seals. Threads of light stitched themselves into a clear, rippling barrier that wrapped both warriors in a translucent cocoon.

Bang!

Steel met flesh, flame met abyss. The collision split the silence with a thunderclap so brutal the flagstones underfoot exploded into a halo of dust.

A brutal current traveled the length of the Dragonslayer Sword, slamming into Jared's arms. Nerves sparked, flesh went numb, and thin splits opened across his palms, feeding streams of blood down the cross-guard and onto the blade.

At the same instant, the shimmering barrier before him fractured under Esorin's sweeping palm; spider-web cracks crawled across its surface, then burst apart with a single glass-like snap.

With a cold, amused breath, Esorin blurred from view, reappearing at Jared's flank

-his hand already arcing toward the young man's ribs.

The blow landed squarely on Jared's shoulder. Thunder boomed inside his bones, and his body flew backward through the air, a scarlet plume escaping his lips.

"Jared!"

Onneas hurled herself into the sky, catching Jared just before he could crash against the flagstones. His face had gone ghastly white, and fresh blood beaded at the corner of his mouth, sparking fury behind her eyes.

"I'm all right," Jared hissed between clenched teeth. "Focus on that old devil!"

Ignoring the fire searing through his shoulder, he wrapped both trembling hands around the Dragonslayer Sword's handle and forced the sword back into guard.

Esorin granted them no breath. He darted around their shared perimeter like black lightning, each sweep of his arms hurling crescents of lethal force toward them.

Jared and Onneas answered with desperate flashes of footwork, weaving through the air in a whirl of steel and light, every collision ringing like a forge in the night.

But as minutes bled away, the number of defenders inside the God-King Palace thinned.

Demonic cultivators poured in like a murderous tide. Though the Celestial Guards fought with reckless valor, the sheer weight of bodies and brutal power began to grind them down.

A strangled scream tore through the din. One guard fell beneath a giant war-axe; the blade split him from shoulder to hip, spraying hot red across the white marble steps.

Rage cracked through the remaining guards, yet for every cry of defiance, another life was extinguished.

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Jared and Onneas watched comrade after comrade collapse, helpless anger knotting their chests. At this pace, the palace gates would fall-it was only a matter of time.

"We have to take out that circle!"

His gaze locked on the distant ring of swirling runes where demons continued to appear. That portal fed the enemy's endless advance; severing it was their last, thin hope.

"Then we strike together!"

Onneas wove rapid seals, channeling bright currents of spiritual energy that streamed across the courtyard toward the portal.

Jared drew a breath deep into his bruised lungs, flooded the Dragonslayer Sword with every shred of energy he still possessed, and swung.

Boom!

Blade and spell crashed into the portal in the same heartbeat, detonating with a thunder that rattled every stone.

The ring quivered, glyphs flickering-but it refused to break.

"Did you truly believe two fledglings could unmake my transport array? Foolish."

Esorin flashed before the portal, releasing streams of obsidian light that hardened into a colossal shield, cocooning the array in pulsing darkness.

"Keep hitting it!"

Jared let out a thunderous cry that echoed across the shattered courtyard. Side by side with Onneas, he launched yet another flurry of strikes, each swing of steel dripping with raw, unyielding resolve.

Yet no matter how savagely their blades fell, Esorin's midnight-black shield remained flawless, a seamless wall that swallowed every blow without so much as a quiver.

Time crawled. The soldiers of the palace retreated inch by inch until the only ground left was the broad stone threshold before the main gate.

Backs pressed to the cold bronze doors, they met the encroaching darkness with eyes that blazed-grim, hopeless, and magnificent all at once.

Meanwhile, the circle of runes at the plaza's center sputtered and flared, spewing ever more Demonic Cultivators into the place like sparks blown from a furnace.

Seeing the palace's disciples cornered, the newcomers flashed feral grins, delight curling atop their lips like smoke from fresh blood.

Eager to claim a piece of the coming plunder, they crowded around Percival and Esorin, offering oily words and shameless flattery in hopes of buying favor.

"Prince Percival, from this day forward, the Fiend-Titan Sect serves the Malevolent Path Hall

Maximilian declared bet

so

his forehead nearly brushed the flagstones. "Spare us a generous glance, Your Highness."

Percival released a boisterous laugh that rolled across the assembly like distant thunder. "Well said! Perform to my liking and you won't leave empty-handed, I promise you that!"

Enaricus drank in the sight of tens of thousands of allied blades and felt pride swell within his chest like a trumpet blast.

Standing before the massed horde, hands braced on his hips, he bellowed, "Onneas! Jared! Surrender now while breath still fills your lungs. The moment this palace falls, there will be nē graves left to hide your corpses!"

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Fury flashed through Onneas's eyes. "Enaricus! You belong to the Celestial Palace, yet you conspire with the Malevolent Path Hall and invite them into level seven. Do you truly fear no judgment from the Palace itself?"

Enaricus snorted. "Judgment? Once we rule level seven, what chains can the Celestial Palace throw over me?"

Jared watched that arrogant grin and vowed in silence, I will break this noose before it tightens, whatever the cost.

His gaze swept the battlefield and caught a detail others missed: Esorin's focus lay wholly on the circle and on the two of them, leaving every other flank thin as paper.

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"Ms. Dusko, I've found a way!" he whispered, the words sharp and urgent. "I draw Esorin's attention When he's blind to all else, slip behind the circle and sever its power. Break the flow, and that gateway might collapse on itself!"

Onneas nodded once, the motion clipped and fierce. "Okay. Be careful."

Jared inhaled, forcing calm through his pulse. Then he blurred forward, body a streak of silver light racing straight at Esorin.

The Dragonslayer Sword leapt from its sheath in a blaze of azure, every swing forging arcs of sword intent that howled toward Esorin like hungry spirits.

Esorin curled his lips, fingers weaving seals so quickly they vanished. Bands of obsidian light shot forth, smashing into Jared's blade-winds in thunderous bursts that rattled the palace walls.

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"Child's play." Esorin sneered. "You dream of challenging me with such trifles?"

While his full attention was tangled with Jared's onslaught, Onneas slipped away on silent feet, circling behind the glowing gateway.

There she discovered its lifeblood—an enormous spiritual crystal buried beneath the stones, pulsing with raw power like a captive star.

Hope flared in her chest. Forming a rapid seal, she fired needle-thin streams of energy straight toward the crystal's heart.

However, a Demonic Cultivator caught the motion from the corner of his eye and shrieked, "Someone's sabotaging the teleport array!"

Esorin's head snapped around. Fury ignited across his features. "Courting death!" he roared, diverting part of his vast strength and locking onto Onneas' slender figure.

He vanished, reappearing mid-dash with murder blazing in his gaze, every ripple of his cloak tearing the air like claws.

Jared cursed under his breath and hurled himself harder into the fight, blade and intent exploding in a desperate bid to pin Esorin in place long enough for Onneas to finish the job.

Yet Esorin was a force of nature. With a mere twist of his sleeve, he shook free of Jared's relentless blade-work and streaked toward Onneas, his robes whipping behind him like storm-dark banners.

Seeing that towering silhouette hurtling in, Onneas felt panic claw at her ribs, yet she ground her teeth, gathered the last dregs of her spiritual aura, and hurled another volley of shimmering force.

Just as Esorin's shadow loomed over her, Jared burst from the flank. The Dragonslayer Sword flashed in his hands, its arc propelled by a boldness that seemed ready to split heaven itself, and he cleaved straight for the elder.

Esorin was forced to halt once more, swirling to meet that gilded edge with a palm strike that cracked the air like thunder.

Onneas seized the opening. Her next burst of power slammed directly into the spiritual crystal seated at the heart of the array.

The crystal boomed-a cannon in stone-and began to shudder so violently that fractures spidered across its flawless surface.

"This is bad-the array's about to blow!" someone among the Demonic Cultivators screamed, terror shredding his voice.

Realizing the peril, Esorin's eyes flashed with urgency. He poured everything into a blistering assault, desperate to snuff out Jared and Onneas before ruin descended.

But Jared and Onneas moved like twin flames on a shared wick, covering one another's weak spots, refusing to yield even an inch.

At the brink of destruction, an unseen force swept in from the horizon-subtle yet immeasurably vast-and the crystal's wild energies steadied under its invisible grip.

Both fighters felt their hearts sink. Whatever hand had intervened, it had tilted the field once more against them.

"Ruin the Celestial King Palace and kill every soul inside!" Enaricus shouted, unable to contain his bloodthirsty excitement.

Just as blades were raised, Esorin lifted a hand. "Hold," he commanded, voice low yet ironclad.

Enaricus blinked, aghast. "Grand Elder, this is the perfect moment to seize the palace why hesitate?"

"Oh? Are you instructing me now?" Esorin asked, each syllable edged like broken glass.

He leveled a glacial stare at Enaricus that made lesser cultivators shrink back. Enaricus' bravado evaporated. He shook his head so fast his helm rattled. "I... I wouldn't dare, Grand Elder. Your judgment is absolute."

He understood all too well: the rabble here answered to Esorin, not him. Crossing the elder would get him erased faster than a candle in a gale.

Esorin turned to Jared, greed flickering in his pupils. "Boy, that sword of yours is extraordinary

Hand it over and spare your life-let you walk away unharmed."

A metallic chill flashed through Jared's gaze, though he masked it with a show of uncertainty. His fingers tightened around the Dragonslayer Sword until his knuckles blanched.

"Will you keep your word?" Jared asked, voice trembling just enough to seem convinced by fear.

"Hmph. My word is law," Esorin declared, hands clasped behind his back, arrogance thick enough to taste.

Onneas cried out, "Jared, you can't bend! These butchers honor nothing they say!"

Isabel added, "Mr. Chance, you mustn't trust anything those villains promise!"

But Jared acted as though their pleas were wind through dead leaves. Slowly, he raised the Dragonslayer Sword horizontally, as if ready to surrender it.

The hunger in Esorin's eyes blazed brighter. He could not stop himself from stepping forward, palm already half-extended.

In that lightning-split heartbeat, Jared said, "Here. Take it."

The Dragonslayer Sword erupted in a shockwave of golden light. The dragon runes along its spine writhed

to life

pouring out a chorus of ancient roars that rattled every soul present.

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"Good! Only the truly clever know when to bow!" Esorin's laughter rolled across the ravine. He thrust out a claw-like hand, eager to claim the legendary sword.

Before his fingertips reached the hilt, Jared's wrist cracked sideways. Steel flashed, carving a sinister half-moon that lunged not toward the blade but straight for the elder's core.

Terror jolted through Esorin. Thick black energy hurried into a makeshift shield.

The swordlight struck first. Golden, venom-swift, it pierced the barrier and drilled toward his abdomen.

"You!" The word ripped from him as the edge scored his abdomen, opening a trench that bared bone. Demonic miasma gushed out like a broken dam.

"How dare you toy with me!" he shrieked, eyes blazing while the escaped energy writhed around him.

Onneas and the others gaped, shock melting into sudden, fragile hope.

Jared withdrew in a single fluid bound, steel still singing. Cold amusement curled across his lips. "Old geezer, you think you're worthy of owning the Dragonslayer Sword?"

Clutching the wound, Esorin glared through fingers slick with blackened blood. A rasping chuckle slithered from his throat.

"Excellent... It has been far too long since anyone drew my blood."

An even darker pressure burst from him. Flesh stitched together before their eyes, sealing the gash as though time itself bowed to his will.

"Pity-you wasted your one chance." He lifted a palm. Ink-black power coalesced into a sphere that devoured the light around it. "Today every last one of you dies here."

"Grand Elder," Maximilian purred, stepping forward, "no need to soil your own hands. Allow me to butcher the whelp for you."

The Fiend-Titan Sect master all but prostrated himself. Pleasing the elder first meant reaping the richest spoils later-his greed showed in every bow.

Esorin glanced at the brawny flatterer and nodded once.

Maximilian advanced, broad shoulders blocking the sun. "Boy, after mocking the Grand Elder, you deserve a thousand cuts. Kill yourself now, and we might leave the corpse intact."

"I'll slit my own throat the day your father gives birth," Jared replied, a lazy smile dimpling his cheek.

"Very well—no mercy it is." Maximilian's gaze sharpened as power gathered. Onneas and the others tightened their grips on battered weapons. Slim odds or none, they would fight beside Jared rather than wait for death.

Just as Maximilian struck, a silhouette began knitting itself together in front of Jared—materializing from empty air, thread by shimmering thread.

Gasps rippled across friend and foe alike.

"Mr. Chance, are you hurt?" asked the newcomer once fully formed a composed middle-aged man who bowed with respectful grace toward Jared.

"Maxwell? How in the realms did you get here?"

Stunned recognition widened Jared's eyes. The man standing between him and death was Maxwell, last seen in the void passage.

Jared's breath caught. Maxwell—the

wanderer who once claimed the void

itself held him prisoner now stepped from thin air as though he had never spoken those words.

Maxwell offered only a quiet, almost playful smile. "Mr. Chance, this battle has honed your sword intent again. The edge feels cleaner pure than ever."

Jared let out a rueful chuckle, the sound dry and self-mocking. "Still a long way to go. I'm being pushed around out here, see?"

"Leave the rest to me. Anyone reckless enough to torment Jared Chance will spend eternity begging for a rebirth that never comes."

The words hung like frost. Only then did Maxwell allow his eyes to slide toward Esorin and the others, gaze sharp enough to carve stone.

Maximilian stared, momentarily stunned by the newcomer's sudden arrival
Sensing no aura, he barked

"Who are you aura,

fost if

youvaltie

your life-"

Maxwell tipped his head, voice mild and curious. "Are you speaking to me?"

"Of course I'm talking to you!" Maximilian roared. "Leave now, or taste my Mountain-Cleaving Axe!"

He drove the massive axe into the earth. The ground shuddered, stones skittering like frightened insects.

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"You're not worth my swing," Maxwell said, tone colder than moonlight. "Send out whoever passes for your strongest."

A faint, icy smile traced his lips, as though he were watching a child's tantrum.

"What did you say?" Maximilian's veins bulged. "You're courting death!"

He gripped the axe. A brutal aura billowed from his frame, dark and heavy as iron fog.

Black mist erupted around him, condensing into jagged armor that clacked into place over muscle and bone.

Sky and earth dimmed. Clouds rolled like bruises across the heavens.

Even Onneas and the others felt their brows draw tight, the weight of that aura pressing on rib and lung.

Maxwell exhaled a single, bored breath. "That's it? A toddler would be fiercer." To him, Maximilian's full power looked like a wooden sword waved by a child. Laughter rippled through the onlookers, sharp and derisive.

Enaricus laughed so hard tears glazed his eyes.

"Are you blind? Maximilian Stonehelm ranks among the best on level seven, yet you call him weaker than a toddler?" Enaricus wheezed between guffaws. Maxwell's glance cut across the distance. "You serve the Celestial Palace?" "Exactly. I am the Third Hall Lord. Frightened yet?"

Maxwell sighed, the sound heavy with disappointment. "When did the Celestial Palace sink so low? Even rubbish can claim a hall now-such a pity."

The regret in his eyes felt almost paternal, as though watching a favorite student squander promise.

Enaricus froze, then exploded. "Who the hell are you to mock me-mock the Palace?"

"You'll learn my name soon enough," Maxwell murmured, voice soft as falling ash -and twice as final.

Maxwell tipped his chin toward the Fiend-Titan Sect's hulking leader. "You get exactly one strike. Make it count."

Maximilian blinked, his brows knitting above small, startled eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Just what the words say," Maxwell replied, a cool smile flickering across his mouth.

From the rear of the crowd, Jared watched Maxwell soak up the spotlight, envy burning like acid in his gut. I have to climb faster. The stronger I become, the more chances I'll have to shine like that.

Maximilian snorted. "Hmph! I'll even give you three strikes, and you'd better know those are the only three you'll see."

With that, the giant lowered his Mountain-Cleaving Axe, arrogance rolling off him like heat from a forge.

Under his breath, Jared muttered, "Idiot."

Maxwell sighed. "Now you don't even have the one I offered."

A gentle breath escaped Maxwell's lips as steel whispered from its sheath.

Swish! An almost lazy sound, gone as soon as it arrived.

No one saw the blade move. The titan simply toppled.

While the corpse fell, his flesh burst apart, scattering in a grisly spray of crimson shards.

That casual slash had not been one sword stroke but a storm of blades, each cut precise enough to carve the monster into morsels before his knees touched dirt.

Every spectator gaped at the butchered remains, frozen in disbelief.

An immense hush pressed on the field until the air felt thin-one could have heard a pin drop.

Beads of sweat slid down Enaricus' forehead, gathering at his jaw before falling like tiny, terrified tears.

Maxwell shook his head, almost rueful.

He had offered the man a single chance; it was a pity the fool refused.

Esorin stared at the scattered flesh, the weight of the moment darkening his face.

Still, pride kept his spine stiff. The Malevolent Path Hall stood at his back, and that was no small shield.

"So that explains your audacity,

Jared," Esorin scoffed, voice slick

with sarcasm. "You brought muscle. But do you truly believe one swordsman can face the might of the entire Malevolent Path Hall?"

Jared gave the elder a single, dismissive glance and said nothing. Another clown who has no idea whom he's provoking.

Maxwell's gaze slid to Esorin; a faint grin curled. "The Malevolent Path Hall? They're nothing."

He had once founded the Celestial Palace, a bastion that shook continents. Years of decline did not erase the blood in his veins.

Esorin's brow tightened; he had not expected so brazen an insult.

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Percival snapped, "Who do you think you are, belittling the Malevolent Path Hall?"

Swish!

Percival's tirade ended mid-word; his head spun into the sky, a crimson geyser erupting from the stump of his neck.

The gathered cultivators froze mid-breath, their faces draining of color in unison, as though some unseen hand had wrenched the air itself from the plaza.

Not a soul had noticed Maxwell move. His arms stayed tucked inside his cloak, his boots rooted to the flagstones, yet Percival's head now tumbled across the marble-severed clean, crown still perched absurdly atop it.

"Prince Percival!"

Esorin stared helplessly, mouth sagging open.

The rest of the Malevolent Path Hall's retinue could only gape, eyes ricocheting between the fallen head and the man who had apparently killed without lifting a finger, their minds scrambling for logic that simply was not there.

"How dare you butcher the heir of our hall?"

Esorin's voice thundered, yet his feet edged backward, instinctively measuring escape routes. The murderous calm clinging to Maxwell's shoulders warned him that caution, not rage, would decide whether he saw another sunrise.

"He's only the beginning. Not one of you is walking out of here alive."

Before the final syllable faded, Maxwell's sword flashed from its sheath—a streak of argent moonlight too swift for mortal sight. A single crystalline hiss sliced the air, razor-sharp and impossibly soft.

Instantly, tens of thousands of Demonic Cultivators-fighters Esorin had rallied only moments earlier-saw their heads lifted from their shoulders in perfect unison, as though snatched upward by invisible strings.

Scarlet fountains erupted where bodies remained, painting towering columns of blood that rained back upon the square like a grotesque thunderstorm.

Enaricus and his surv men stood paralyzed, stupefied to discover still possessed functioning necks amid the suddenly silent sea of corpses.

ey alone

Jared felt his pulse hammer against his ribs. He had witnessed formidable swordplay before, but annihilating tens of thousands with a solitary stroke belonged to a realm of power he had never even imagined.

A dark thrill curled through him despite himself; he could almost taste Maxwell's savage delight—the intoxicating euphoria of displaying overwhelming dominance with effortless grace.

Esorin pivoted, staring at the endless carpet of bodies stretching behind him. Carrion steam rose in wavering veils, and his own hands began to tremble uncontrollably.

Raw strength alone rarely unnerved him, yet the butcher's lust radiating from Maxwell felt bottomless, predatory, eager to exterminate every spark of life it touched.

One sword, tens of thousands

dead-no errant soul-wisp escaped the strike, resurrection was impossible. The feat bordered on myth, beyond anything expecte

on

lever eight. Esorin's stomach sank with realization: this man must hail

from a

plane far above, where laws bent and existence itself became a

weapon.

"Stranger, from which level do you hail? The Malevolent Path Hall's reach extends beyond level eight. We have allies in on level twelve, too."

The question was less inquiry than warning, a desperate attempt to wrap Maxwell in the shadow of powers even he might hesitate to offend.

"So what?" Maxwell said expressionlessly.

The retort knocked the breath from Esorin's lungs. His brows knitted, confusion battling dawning dread.

"Trash," Maxwell added.

"Very well. If that's your answer, then we fight to the death, you and I!"

Esorin finished speaking. With a

sudden, almost frantic motion, he drew a jet black token from his robe. His fingers flashed through a series of incantatory gestures. The en

ignited, missing into a spear of

midnight light that tore upward

through the sky.

"Stop him! He's summoning reinforcements!"

Onneas felt her stomach knot. Esorin was summoning warriors of level twelve. If those monsters arrived, none of them-herself, Jared, or any other soul present-would leave this field alive.

Against such beings, they would not even manage a single glance. One careless breath from a level-twelve sovereign could snuff out their lives like candles in a hurricane.

Jared turned, seeking Maxwell's face.

Maxwell did not stir. His expression remained an unreadable mask. That calm told Jared everything: even

fighters from level twelve

descended, Maxwell would not
flinch. Neither, therefore, should
Jared.

A quiet thrill rippled through Jared's chest. With Maxwell at his command, he
might one day roam unchallenged on level twelve.

After all, Maxwell was obliged to obey Jared's every word.

Above them, the burning token shed layer upon layer of crimson flame. Each
flicker congealed into Fire Charms that spiraled together, forging a colossal
teleportation array mid-air.

The instant the array completed, a dreadful aura poured outward, thick as molten
lead.

When the black token finally disintegrated, the array, constructed by Fire Charms,
ballooned—swallowing light itself, a black sun devouring day.

The dimension shrieked, fracturing like glass under a hammer.

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Pressure far beyond this realm's tolerance cascaded out of the portal in a tangible
tidal wave.

Day collapsed into dusk. Sun and moon vanished. Only the churning maw of the
formation spat destructive radiance.

Boom!

From the swirling darkness thrust a single boot-stitched from beast hide, natural
runes flowing faintly across the leather.

That solitary step shattered the earth below, dropping the ground by several
yards. Without Maxwell's protective aura, Jared and the others would have been
reduced to drifting ash.

A figure followed-clad in shadow-black armor etched with dragon runes, towering like some dread war-idol.

He was not overly tall, yet the universe seemed to pivot on his presence. Around him swirled visions of stars collapsing into ruin.

He released no deliberate killing intent; his existence alone wilted grass, bent laws, and forced every lesser path to kneel.

"Greetings, Protector Sovereign!"

Esorin led the surviving cultivators in trembling unison, prostrating themselves as though before a god.

Lucian Ashcroft's eyes swept across them-cold, detached, measuring them as insects pinned beneath glass.

His voice came low, yet it rang inside every soul present: "Who dares trespass upon the majesty of the Malevolent Path Hall?"

Emotionless words alone sent Onneas, Jared, and the rest spasming. Blood burst from their lips; a simple sound had wounded them gravely.

Fighting terror and wild elation, Esorin pointed a shaking finger at Maxwell. "Lord Ashcroft, that man! He slaughtered our disciples and mocked us. He deserves death a thousand times over!"

Lucian's gaze settled on Maxwell. Beneath that stare, whole worlds might crumble back into chaos.

Maxwell remained perfectly still. He did not so much as acknowledge the Sovereign, merely murmuring, "How noisy."

Before the final consonant faded, his sword darted free. No blinding radiance flared, no thunder split the heavens. The stroke came and went so fast it left no trace-so fast one could doubt it had ever been.

For the span of a breath, time itself forgot to flow. Space folded in on silence, wiped clean.

Every witness saw the world blur, their own thoughts blinking out like candles in a gale.

When awareness staggered back, Lucian—so recently descended in cosmic majesty—hung motionless in midair, caught in a moment that would never complete.

For the first time, emotion cracked his porcelain calm. Stark bewilderment, raw and shaking, filled those once-cold eyes.

Then, beneath a thousand horrified gazes, the seemingly immortal body of Lucian began to unravel.

From the crown of his head, flesh, bone, and the orbiting constellation of shattered stars powdered to dust-wind-blown sand scattered on a breath.

Even the vast teleportation array behind him winked out, a candle guttering in a vacuum.

Silence. A graveyard hush pressed down; wind ceased, clouds dissolved, the metallic tang of spilled blood scrubbed clean from the air.

Esorin's grin froze, splintered, then melted into gut-churning terror. The pillar he had leaned on a protector from the Malevolent Path Hall—had been erased in a heartbeat,

Maxwell drew his blade back into its scabbard with unhurried grace and, for the first time, allowed his gaze to settle on the elder.

"Anyone else?" His question fell like ash-soft, weightless, yet signaling the end of all things.

Esorin's mouth flapped, but no sound dared emerge.

Far below, Enaricus discovered his trousers soaking through. He was so scared that he wet himself. He had prayed the elder would summon a higher realm Savior, that hope died as swiftly as the last.

Maxwell was too strong—far, far too strong.

"Spare me please, spare me! The Malevolent Path Hall forced my hand; had no choice but to strike at Jared Chance! Enaricus collapsed crawling until his forehead touched Maxwell's boots.

He knew nothing of Maxwell's title, only that this swordsman fought beside Jared.

Maxwell's lip curled. "Save the honorifics. If you must address me, call me your ancestor."

Enaricus blinked, stunned. Onneas looked equally lost, unable to grasp what she had just heard.

Jared offered the answer. "Meet the founder of the Celestial Palace the very first Hall Lord to sit its throne."

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The moment Maxwell's quiet declaration swept through the shattered sanctuary, every soul inside stood frozen, thunderstruck.

Even the marble pillars seemed to tremble beneath the weight of his words. Enaricus stared wide-eyed, unable to reconcile the plain middle-aged man before him with the fabled founder of the Celestial Palace.

Across the blood-streaked floor, Esorin, too, felt his breath stall. Of all foes he had imagined, he had never pictured the Palace's first hall master.

Celestial Palace had endured for tens of thousands of years; clearly, so had its creator.

A hard swallow shuddered down the elder's throat. His knees quaked. Instinct drowned every shred of courage with one primal order-run.

A thin, metallic whistle sliced through the air, keen as a freshly drawn blade.

Esorin spun and bolted, streaking away like living lightning.

"He's escaping! Stop him!" Onneas shouted, her voice bouncing off the vaulted ceiling.

Jared's chest lurched. Reflex yanked him forward, ready to give chase.

Maxwell did not stir. He did not spare the fleeing elder a single glance.

A strangled scream burst from the void overhead. It was Esorin's cry—and it ended far too quickly.

No one saw what claimed him. Maxwell alone might know.

Terror emptied Enaricus' bowels. His body convulsed with dread.

"Please, sir, spare me!" he sobbed, slamming his forehead against the floor. Maxwell never looked his way.

Color drained from Maxwell's face; his outline wavered, turning quietly translucent.

"Sir?" Onneas cried. "What is happening to you?"

"Your body—it's fading!" Jared shouted, panic snapping at his spine.

"Mr. Chance, leaving the void passage carries a price," Maxwell replied, smiling with gentle resignation. "I sensed your danger. How could I do anything but come?"

"If you abandon that passage, will your soul be torn apart?" Jared demanded.

He lunged to grasp Maxwell's arm, but his fingers closed on empty air.

"Not entirely. I left a fragment of myself inside the passage. When the Celestial clan leader one day releases it, I may forge a body anew."

His words fluttered like wind-borne ash; Maxwell was already gone.

"Jared, what just happened? Where is he?" Onneas asked, her eyes still searching the thinning air.

She frowned, dark brows knitting as she lifted her face to Jared. A note of raw bewilderment slipped into her voice spilling into the charged air between them.

"Your ancestor was imprisoned inside the void passage after offending the chieftain of the Celestials long ago. If I had not. broken into level eight today had that channel not been tampered with—we never would have laid eyes on him again. He forced his way out, and the moment he stepped beyond, his body scattered like dust on a storm wind."

Fury—and something more desperate-flickered behind Jared's eyes, a heat so sharp it could have melted steel.

Maxwell might have carried Celestial blood, yet he had also sworn himself to

Jared, serving as the proud hall master of Dragon Sect.

No price felt too steep. Jared would hunt down the celestial clan leader, drag him back in chains, and command him to rebuild Maxwell's fallen flesh.

"Maxwell, hear me. I will bring that leader before you myself, and he will loosen every shackle he ever tightened around your soul." Teeth grinding Jared sealed the Vow deep inside his chest where it thrummed like thunder.

Across the ruined courtyard, Enaricus watched Maxwell disappear and felt his own pulse gallop with panic.

While Jared and his comrades weren't paying attention, Enaricus gathered every trembling tendon and leapt for freedom.

Jared's voice cracked through the rubble like a whip. "Running, are we?"

Still blazing with anger, he raised his Dragonslayer Sword high and cut the air in a single, ruthless arc.

A thousand sword gleams burst outward, carving the sky and the very void into trembling ribbons of light.

Enaricus had no time to scream. One heartbeat, he was whole, the next, he dissolved into scarlet mist-shredded to nothing by the storm of blades.

His followers collapsed in perfect unison, knees slamming stone as they begged for permission to keep breathing.

Jared stared at their bowed heads and understood they were soldiers, nothing more, puppets tangled on a dead man's strings.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"I spare you today," Jared declared, voice rolling across the shattered pillars. "But you will earn that mercy. Guard the Celestial King Palace with every drop of blood you still possess."

The kneeling cultivators bobbed their heads, relief and dread warring on their ashen faces.

Most of the palace's own guards lay wounded or dead. Someone had to stand between this palace and the next wave of darkness.

Jared swept a slow gaze over the battlefield. With one quiet motion of his palm, tens of thousands of item pouches ripped free from fallen Demonic Cultivators and streaked toward him like a swarm of silver comets.

A small smile tugged at his mouth. This cache alone could feed his cultivation for months.

A single thread of internal flame spiraled from his fingers. In a breath, every corpse on the field turned to soft gray ash that the wind carried away.

Jared counted out ten thousand pouches and pressed them into Onneas' hands. "Ms. Dusko, the palace is crippled. Use these to heal, rebuild, and grow stronger quickly."

Onneas accepted without protest, then lifted her gaze. "What about you? What will you do?"

"Get stronger," he said, the words as low and certain as a mountain's heart. A hush followed, thick with promise—and with the gathering storm yet to come.

Jared's lips bent into a rueful half-smile.

He had risen fast-blindingly fast-but every fresh rung on the ladder only unveiled stronger, crueler foes. If Maxwell had not thrown his life across that last battlefield like a shield, Jared would already be dust floating on the heavenly wind.

Strength was the only currency that was spent here. Even the privilege of swaggering required solid power behind the pose.

Not long ago, he had sworn that, if level eight yielded no clues about the lost souls of the Flaxseed clan, he would simply batter a path to level nine.

Now, that vow felt reckless. First, he had to sharpen his own edge.

He needed might not only challenge the Malevolent Path Hall but also stare down the celestial clan leader himself and ransom Maxwell's freedom.

Maxwell was a legend-yet he lay in chains. The gulf between Jared and that patriarch was an abyss.

If only Mr. Sanders were here... With him beside me, even the clan leader would probably be groveling for mercy.

But he had vanished the moment they set foot in the celestial realm, and Jared could not keep staking his life on the echo of another man's shadow.

"Let me take you to a quiet sanctuary, somewhere you can lock the world outside and cultivate in peace," Onneas said, her voice a mix of worry and calm authority.

"No. I'm heading back," Jared replied with a shake of his head, the decision already settled in his chest. "Flaxseed is still on level seven, and I need to check on him."

He had no intention of lingering on level eight. Level five was safer, and he burned to know how the Sword Sect had fared after the recent chaos.

While there, he would climb to level six and press Aurelius for information about the celestial clan

leader if anyone possessed those secrets, a monarch of celestial blood surely did.

"Very well," Onneas said with a small nod. "I won't keep you. I'll seal the Celestial Guard Palace and focus on my own recovery."

Jared raised his palm. Spatial energy rippled, unfurling a pale corridor of light through the void. Opening passage toward level nine was still beyond him, yet descending to tower levels now felt effortless.

He stepped inside. The portal folded behind him with a sighing rush of wind.

His first stop would be level seven to collect Flaxseed and explain that their hunt for the clan's scattered souls must pause.

Without greater power, they could not even brush the borders of the Malevolent Path Hall, much less save the Flaxseed clan's spirits.

Ever since Esorin spoke of level

twelve and summoned the Protector

Sovereign, Jared had chet

raw courage would never suffice.

Without a miracle-or Mr.

Sanders-he could not hope to

counter such might.

Moments later, the corridor spat him out over Eastshire District, moonlight washing the tiled roofs like liquid silver.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Since the uprising that had shaken Eastshire District, every street, fort, and manor now answered to the Lantz family. What had once been a patchwork of petty warlords lay under one banner, its banners snapping bright crimson against the morning haze.

Marvin, head of the Lantz household, treated Flaxseed like visiting royalty. Each dusk, he sent a different courtesan through silken drapes, and Flaxseed, drowning in wine and laughter, seemed in no hurry to ever find his way home.

Luna, however, grew quieter by the hour. Jared had broken through to level eight and vanished beyond the clouds. She did not know whether he was thriving or dying, or if fate would ever let them meet again.

Three weeks later, Jared strode unannounced into the Lantz residence. Luna's composure shattered in an instant. She flew down the marble steps and wrapped both arms around him as though terrified the vision might dissolve.

They locked themselves away for three full days, their laughter rising above the courtyard ponds like startled swans. Between embraces, Jared still sat cross-legged at dawn, channeling energy through every vein, making the most of his time.

Soon, Jared summoned Flaxseed. Together, they stepped into a rippling corridor of void light and let the world fold around them. Eastshire fell away. Level six opened ahead like a second sunrise.

Luna was sad to watch Jared leave, but knowing he had important matters to attend to, she made no move to stop him.

Celestia awaited them. Though scars of past wars still marred its borders, its strength was already counted among the mightiest realms of level six.

Dust cloaked Jared and Flaxseed by the time they reached Celestia City, the kingdom's storied capital.

Marble spires gleamed where scaffolds had only recently stood. Market stalls crowded the avenues wall to wall, and the thunder of hammers on bronze rang beside the soft call of temple bells. Even half rebuilt, the city pulsed like a living heart.

At the northern gate, a hulking captain blocked their path. Folds of muscle strained his iron breastplate, and a crooked grin split the mass of scars across his cheeks. Beady eyes flicked over their travel-worn cloaks and judged them easy prey.

"Hold it. Road toll," he barked, planting both fists on his hips so his voice boomed across the stone arch.

Jared's brow creased. He had crossed deserts and star-fields to stand at this gate, never expecting to be shaken down like a back-alley peddler.

"Since when does the Divine Kingdom charge travelers to enter its own capital?" His words came softly, yet filled with authority.

The captain spat in the dust. "Since I said so. Pay up or turn around. I have no time for your questions."

Flaxseed's temper flared. He strode forward until his finger all but touched the captain's nose. "Who do you think you're bullying? One slap and you'll be fertilizer under this wall. Want to test me?"

The captain's face darkened. "Guards! Bind these loudmouths." His gauntlet swept through the air like a judge's gavel.

Steel boots pounded from every direction, forming a ring of spears around the two travelers.

Jared sighed, shaking his head with a weary half-smile. He had hoped for a quiet entrance, yet ignorance, it seemed, had an uncanny talent for finding him.

With a casual flick of Jared's wrist,

raw spiritual energy thundered

across the gateway. Soldiers never even screamed shields rang like cracked bells, bodies pinwheeled through dust, and a heartbeat later the entire squad lay sprawled, groaning in disarray.

The commanding officer-broad-shouldered, iron-helmed-felt the blood drain from his face Moments earlier He had dismissed the pair as wandering vagabonds; now he understood he had poked at mountains that could move.

"How dare you create havoc before the gates of Celestia City!" he bellowed, voice cracking with forced bravado. "Seize them! Drag them to the palace. His Majesty himself will decide their punishment!"

Ropes were tossed over Jared's and Flaxseed's wrists, and a ring of spears herded them toward the palace like livestock toward market.

Flaxseed grumbled the entire march-about bruised joints, incompetent soldiers, and the price of ruined robes-while Jared walked serene, almost amused. Let's see what game King Aurelius means to play once we step inside.

As the procession crossed the marble drawbridge of the palace, a slim figure in violet silk stepped from a colonnade-Yuliana's sharp eyes catching the ropes before the guards even announced their prisoners.

Now Prime Minister of the realm, Yuliana wore a sweeping orchid gown whose jeweled hairpin caught the afternoon sun like a shard of lightning. Grace clung to her the way fragrance clings to fresh lilac.

Seeing Jared and Flaxseed bound, she froze a single stunned heartbeat-then rage blazed behind her lashes, hot enough to melt the palace snow that still lingered in shaded courtyards.