

A Warrior Undefeatable

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"Lady Fiala," the general muttered, bobbing in an awkward bow, "these two scoundrels forced the city gate and injured my men. I, uh, took the liberty of binding them and bringing them here for your judgment."

A sheet of shadow rolled across Yuliana's face. The courtyard temperature seemed to plummet.

She strode forward and struck-one palm, then the other-each slap echoing like a hammer on bronze. The officer reeled, eyes spinning, palms pressed to burning cheeks.

"You reckless fool! Do you even know whom you dared to shackle? He is Mr. Jared Chance-savior of this kingdom. Touch him again and I will see you stripped of rank-and perhaps of life."

Color left the officer's face. Knees buckled, armor clanged, and he collapsed, a dark stain spreading across his trousers as terror overruled dignity.

"Mr. Chance, Lady Fiala, forgive me I was blind, utterly blind. Please, spare this worthless life!"

Jared's name had long risen through level seven like sunrise-whispered in taverns, etched into military briefings. Aurelius himself had ordered every soldier to remember that name, for without Jared, Celestia might already lie in ruins.

Watching how miserable the man was, Jared felt a ripple of pity.

He lifted a hand. "Enough. Ignorance is fault enough; I will not add blood to it. Stand up, then remember humility, or next time mercy may be harder to find."

The officer fled, blessedly alive.

Yuliana turned back to Jared, violet eyes sparkling with unhidden delight, the fury already gone like breath on glass. "Jared, you're finally here! I have waited-counted dawns-hoping you would walk through those gates."

"Yuliana, I came to ask a favor. I need everything you know about the current clan leader of the celestials," Jared said with a smile.

"Not in the open-walls have ears. Come inside." She twined her fingers through his and guided him across polished tiles toward her room. Flaxseed, catching the mood, whistled softly and stationed himself outside the door like a lazy sentry.

Once inside, Yuliana pushed the cedar panels shut, the click of the latch sealing them from the murmuring palace corridors.

She faced Jared in the lamplight, desire and purpose mingling in the blaze of her gaze, as though he were both lost friend and long-awaited answer to a thousand unspoken prayers.

The moment Jared shut the courtyard gate behind him, Yuliana burst forward like spring released In a single breath

from the snowed walk and threw

she crossed the

herself against his chest, he

perfume flooding the cool twilight

air.

"Jared, I missed you missed you more than words could ever repay," she breathed, the soft complaint tangled with a teasing lilt that made the words feel like silk brushing skin.

Her sudden warmth stunned him. For half a heartbeat, he simply stood there, arms hovering uselessly, until instinct eclipsed surprise.

"Yuliana, I've missed you, too." He curved his arms around her waist, then added in a lower, steadier voice, "But there's urgent business-something about the Celestial chieftain-"

"Not tonight. Tonight you are mine. No plots, no wars-just stay." Her eyes, bright as amethyst, rose to his. Before the last syllable cooled, she tipped up on her toes and pressed a fierce, silencing kiss to his mouth.

For a flicker of time, Jared resisted, duty flaring like a warning drum. Then the heat of her lips swept the argument from his mind the way wind scatters embers, and he answered with equal hunger.

Their bodies locked together, they moved across the lamplit chamber. Yuliana's fingers found his, guiding him toward the wide cedar bed

in

in silver squares What followed was not

where moonlight poolsmot

merely passion but the quiet, ancient art of sharing strength-two souls weaving power the way dawn braids light.

During that silent communion, Jared felt a river of raw spiritual energy surge between their hearts, cycling, refining, leaving his limbs thrumming with new life.

The current soothed his weary flesh, polished each meridian, and nudged his cultivation a shade higher, as though one more rung had been notched into an endless ladder.

Yuliana glowed as well-cheeks flushed rose, eyes crystalline and sharp-like a blossom that had drunk the first pure rain of spring.

Afterward, they lay tangled beneath linen sheets, the room scented with sandalwood and quiet triumph.

"Jared," she murmured, head pillowed on his shoulder, "digging into that clan leader has something gone wrong out there?"

He nodded, gaze drifting across the rafters as he told her everything-every danger on level eight, Maxwell's sacrifice, and the fact that he wished to find the clan leader and settle the score with him.

Worry tightened Yuliana's brow, the earlier glow shaded now by storm-gray concern.

"That clan leader is little more than legend to people like us," she said. "I can escort you to King Aurelius, but even he lives far below such secrets-and none of us even knows who he is."

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At dawn, Yuliana guided Jared through marble corridors to the heart of the royal palace. There, beneath a vault of carved jasper, Aurelius sat on a throne both lavish and austere, signing scrolls with quick, decisive strokes.

The instant the king spotted Jared, delight flashed across his face. He rose, robes whispering, and strode down the dais.

"Mr. Chance, what fortune brings you back to my humble realm?" He clasped Jared's hands with honest warmth that softened the chill of polished stone.

Jared had been gone since he breached level six; Aurelius had half-feared he would never look back. After all, who wouldn't enjoy staying in higher planes?

Jared returned the bow of courtesy. "Your Majesty, I come seeking answers-one question only you might illuminate."

The king ushered him to an ebony chair, ordered his subordinates to serve coffee, then leaned forward, eyes intent. "Speak freely. I'll tell you everything I know."

Jared recounted the ambush that happened on level eight, about Maxwell, and his desire to know more about the celestial clan leader.

Aurelius listened in silence, knuckles whitening around his cup, sympathy warring with helplessness.

"Mr. Chance, I will not deceive you. Even a king sits several walls away from that throne. Our hierarchy is rigid; chambers close before one can glimpse their hinges. I have never laid eyes on the chieftain, nor heard a description unmarred by rumor."

He exhaled, a rueful, resigned breath. "Stories grant the figure a dozen shapes and powers, but proof-proof is mist. I wish I could give you more."

Jared felt a faint sting of disappointment, though he also understood that the outcome lay far beyond Aurelius' reach.

He lowered his head in quiet acceptance. "It's all right, Your Majesty. There's no need to blame yourself. Since things stand as they are, I'd better not linger any longer."

Aurelius stepped forward, urgency flickering in his eyes. "Mr. Chance, would you not remain in Celestia for a few more days? Allow me, at least, to act the host you deserve."

Jared answered with a gentle smile that brooked no argument. "Your kindness is noted. Unfortunately, I still have pressing matters-I truly must be on my way."

Realizing persuasion would only deepen awkwardness, Aurelius ordered his attendants to prepare several rare treasures, each packed with silent gratitude, and entrusted them to Jared before letting him depart.

Outside the soaring palace gates, Yuliana walked beside Jared. Tears shimmered in her lavender eyes, her expression as desolate as autumn rain.

Moments ago, she had finally seen the man she had missed for ages; now, he spoke of leaving again, and the ache in her chest spilled over unchecked.

Jared's resolve faltered at the sight. He could not bring himself to break her heart so soon, so he decided to remain on level six a few more days.

Those added days became a hushed

whirlwind of tangled sheets,

whispered Naughts, and breathless embraces Xuliana seemed

determined to taste every moment-quite literally-asking Jared, again and again, to worship her with lips and tongue until dawn

slipped through the curtains.

Jared often chuckled in embarrassed surrender. In those stolen hours, he sensed how completely she had fallen for him.

Even amid pleasure, Jared's mind

returned to heavier

burdens-locating the celestial clan leader, freeing Maxwell from captivity, and sharpening his own power before the Malevolent Path Half descended upon the realms.

And so, after a final lingering farewell, he and Flaxseed stepped into a shimmering void passage and vanished toward level five.

Swordmaster City loomed ahead-sprawling battlements of dark steel and soaring ramparts crowned with banners that snapped like blades against the sky.

Its influence now stretched across the entire level five, every street pulsing with the hum of sword aura.

Jared and Flaxseed passed through the gate and discovered that the metropolis had more than doubled in size; alleys they once knew were now lost beneath gleaming new districts.

The moment they entered, Flaxseed offered Jared a roguish grin, muttered something about "important personal research," and bolted toward the nearest entertainment quarter.

Jared could hardly blame him-after watching his friend survive Jared's own procession of ardent companions on levels six and seven, Flaxseed's restraint was at its limit.

He let the elder wander. On level five, Flaxseed's cultivation was peerless, and danger was unlikely.

Besides, so long as Ararat—the indomitable city lord-ruled these walls, no harm would dare approach Jared's friend.

Jared drew a calming breath, soft words slipping from between his lips. "Lyra, I'm here..."

It had been far too long since he last saw Lyra, and worry gnawed behind his steady composure.

While making his way toward the

Sword Sect compound, he spotted column of young cultivators in matching sable uniforms. Each man carried a finely forged blade, their

footsteps, timed to a martial O

heartbeat. Curiosity Sharpened

within him.

When had the Sword Sect amassed so many disciples—and with enough audacity to march so ostentatiously through Swordmaster City?

Jared angled toward them for answers, but a sudden tug on his sleeve halted his stride.

A stranger in a sea-green tunic, a sword resting across his back, pulled Jared aside and asked in a hushed voice, "Sir, what exactly are you planning to do?"

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Jared studied the man-average height, clear eyes, the familiar garb of countless swordsmen who drifted through the city each day.

"I simply saw those Sword Sect disciples showing off. Thought I'd stroll over and have a friendly word, that's all. Why are you stopping me?" Jared halted, confusion rippling across his features.

A quick sweep of his gaze took in the Sword Sect disciples swaggering in bright uniforms. Their brazen display struck Jared as reckless. Swordmaster City- Ararat Goizeder's stronghold-was generous ground for the Sword Sect, true, but there were boundaries even hospitality should not cross.

"Those men are Sword Guards, keepers of order in Swordmaster City. Step too close, and one of them might choose to 'keep order' with the edge of a blade." The stranger spoke mildly, as though reciting the weather.

"Sword Guards?" Jared's brows arched. "Is this not Ararat's city? Since when did Sword Sect disciples police the streets?"

The man let his eyes travel from Jared's boots to the crown of his head, a slow appraisal that ended in a thin smile. "How long has it been since you last set foot inside these walls?"

"Quite some time," Jared admitted, unembarrassed.

"Then hear the news," the man went on, voice easing into the practiced cadence of a guide. "Swordmaster City now belongs to the Sword Sect. Mr. Goizeder has wandered off to pursue higher cultivation. The Sword Sect's reach is vast; people flock here daily, begging to join. Tell me—are you looking to wear our colors as well?" He tilted his head, genuinely curious.

Jared blinked, surprised. He had never imagined Ararat would hand an entire city to the sect. Jared himself was from the Sword Sect, yes, but even he found the gesture astonishingly bold.

Seeing Jared's silence, the man leaned closer. "Strength alone won't secure you a spot. You'll need connections. See those Sword Guards? Becoming one costs at least one hundred thousand celestial gems, and you still require someone powerful to pull the right strings." His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Bribes just to enlist?" Jared's mind reeled, the notion almost absurd.

Only a short while ago, the sect had been on the brink of collapse-few disciples, fewer resources, no hopeful faces at the gate. Now people lined up, favors in hand and coin purses open?

"Of course," the man said, warming to his theme. "Here on level five, no force rivals. Swordmaster City, and within these walls the sect rules supreme. A disciple named Jak Chance led an assault that wiped the Sacred Sword Manor from the map. Since that day, no one on level five dares challenge us, which is why every up-and-comer scurries here searching for patronage."

The more he spoke, the more animated he became, as if he himself had swung a blade in that legendary purge.

"So, you've met this Jared Chance?" Jared asked, lips curling with a half-smile.

"Met him? Certainly." The man's eyes

gleamed, voice lowering to a

reverent hush. "But he moves like

ghost

shadow. After destroying the manor, he vanished in an instant once nothing like ordinary folk. He stood nearly nine meters tall. The sword in his grip stretched more than three meters. With a single stroke, he obliterated every expert in

that manor, carving an open scar through the very void itself."

The stranger painted the tale with sweeping gestures and hushed awe, his words so vivid that each detail

felt projected onto the afternoon ne

air-swords flashing under

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sun washed skies Jared's name ringing like legend born before their very eyes. Jared listened, bemused yet fascinated, as though the storyteller's breath alone could summon the impossible.

A laugh escaped Jared-warm, full, impossible to hide. Delight shimmered behind his eyes; even if every sentence was blatant invention, hearing wild myths spun in his honor still tasted sweet, like secretly sampling victory before any duel had begun.

"Friend, I never imagined you'd actually met this Jared Chance in the flesh," he said. "If that's true, does it mean you once trained under the Sword Sect as well?"

The man blinked, caught off guard, then scratched the back of his neck with a sheepish grin. "Not exactly. Joining the Sword Sect costs ten thousand celestial gems. I scraped the sum together, sure, but without the right contact to vouch for me, the gates stayed shut."

Jared's brow arched. "So everyone pays up front... and still needs influence to get inside?"

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"It wasn't always like that," the man continued, lowering his voice as if afraid the walls might listen. "Once, raw talent and a clean fight earned you a robe. Then the back-door favors started. Bit by bit, the elders demanded gems, and every promising recruit arrived pre-approved."

He sighed. "These days, anyone who walks straight into the Sword Guards' ranks has already purchased the privilege."

He studied Jared's travel-stained cloak. "You're new here, aren't you? No network yet. Don't waste your strength forcing doors that won't open."

Jared let disappointment cloud his features. "Seems I'll have to hunt down connections before I swing a blade."

The man clapped him on the shoulder. "Cheer up. You're already in Swordmaster City. Even if you never sign their roster, you can still enter the public trials, trade blows, steal a few techniques-learning happens wherever steel meets steel."

Jared nodded. "Fair point. By the way, sir, what name do you go by?"

"Noah Farrow," he replied, offering his hand.

Jared hesitated, almost speaking his true name. "Oh. I'm Jared... Jerry Strong."

Noah laughed, shaking his head. "With a name like 'Strong,' your cultivation can't be too fearsome."

Just then, a stocky middle-aged man in a faded short-sleeved tunic drifted over, eyes narrowed to cautious slits.

"Heard you two talking," the newcomer murmured. "Looking to join Sword Sect, are we?"

Noah tipped his chin. "That's right, but without a sponsor, we're stranded outside those walls."

"I can secure you a sponsor—if you're willing to part with a few celestial gems," the man whispered, glancing left and right as though the cobblestones might echo his scheme.

Noah's curiosity kindled. "How many gems are we talking about?"

The man swept the plaza with one more furtive look, then crooked a finger. "Not here. Follow me. Better to discuss prices where shadows keep secrets."

The man beckoned, slipping off the crowded avenue and into a weather-beaten house tucked between shuttered storefronts.. Jared followed at his shoulder, Noah a step behind. A single cracked

window let in dull light, and the room smelled of damp wood and

something that had long ago begun to rot.

"Finding a sponsor-hard if you're clueless, easy if you grease the wheels The man's grin widened as he lowered his voice. "But you need thirty thousand celestial gems Not one less, not one more."

Jared's eyes flicked toward the smile, and he understood at once. A scalper-hustling hopefuls for a percentage. The revelation tasted of stale smoke and street dust.

Noah's face drained of color. "Thirty thousand? Scraping every corner I've got might get me just over ten. The gap's bigger than a canyon."

He sank onto a crooked stool, shoulders folding inward, the weight of defeat settling around him like wet wool.

Jared rested a steady hand on Noah's shoulder. "Whatever he's short, I'll cover it." The words left no room for argument.

Noah's head snapped up. His lips parted, but gratitude drowned the sound. His gaze clung to Jared, shining with a stunned, wordless thanks.

Greed flashed in the scalper's eyes. "Now that is the spirit! Let's get you boys sorted right away."

He hurried them back outside, twisting through alleys until they reached a lonely courtyard boxed in by moss-stained walls.

At its center lounged a Sword Sect disciple, uniform crisp, boots on the stone bench, legs crossed like a petty king with no throne.

The scalper nearly folded in half with flattery. "Sir, these two wish to join the Sword Sect. Their tribute is ready. Your guidance, please."

The disciple rose, arms folding across his chest, gaze sliding over Jared and Noah as though they

were market produce. "Entrance net

rests on my word alone. Examinations begin tomorrow. Whether you pass depends on how well you honor me today"

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Jared drew an item pouch from his belt and tossed it across the courtyard "Sixty thousand-for the two of us."

The disciple's brows lifted. Someone who could hand over sixty thousand without blinking had to come from wealth or power.

"Generous," he chuckled. "Still, beginners start as janitors." Each sentence dripped condescension.

"If you'd rather join the Sword Guards," he added, "I could-arrange introductions." His tone made the arrangement sound infinitely expensive.

Noah waved both hands. "Joining the sect itself is honor enough."

He knew Jared had shouldered his thirty thousand. Sword Guard entry meant one hundred thousand just to register-an impossible dream that could crush the chance they already held.

"Suit yourselves," the disciple said, turning away. "After you're disciples, further tests may open that door."

He disappeared into the house, letting the door thud shut behind him.

The scalper shot Jared and Noah a reassuring wink. "Relax. He's tomorrow's examiner. With his nod, you'll breeze through."

Jared and Noah exchanged resigned nods and followed the scalper back into the maze of lanes.

Morning brought a sea of hopeful cultivators to the testing grounds, voices clattering against the sky, every soul dreaming of Sword Sect robes and meteoric rise.

Among the robed officials, Jared spotted yesterday's disciple-now a full examiner-preening behind a registration desk. A cold smile tugged at Jared's mouth. Let's see how far that arrogance stretches once the swords come out.

The assessments began at dawn, each trial unfolding like a finely tuned performance-swordplay duels that sent sparks leaping, spiritual-energy gauges that thrummed with blue light, every feat more dazzling than the last. .net

Through it all, Jared and Noah

moved with quiet certainty, carving a clean path from one station to the next. Blades sang, auras flared, the time the

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judges whispered. Bames blazed

final bell chimed both

at the top of the slate, drawing wide-eyed envy from the crowd.

Noah's cheeks burned crimson, fists pumping the air. "I did it-do you hear me? I finally made it into the Sword Sect!"

He spun and crushed Jared in an exuberant hug, his voice cracking. "Jerry, I owe this to you. Without your help, this door would've stayed shut forever."

Jared forced a thin smile, tapped Noah's back twice, and said, "Congratulations. From today on, we train under the same roof."

Yet the curve of his mouth never reached his eyes; a cold edge of worry settled behind the smile.

He'd watched unremarkable

applicants some barely able to hold a sword straight-glide through whispered favors, while gifted duelists were dismissed without a glance. This was what happened

when strings were pulled. If this

continued, the Sword Sect would crumble from the inside out.

Newly admitted disciples were herded into a sprawling compound of slate roofs and practice yards, their futures echoing in every footstep.

A knot of senior students swaggered over. At their head strode Trevor Wolfe, eyes sharp with greed, arms folded across a broad chest.

"Well, look at the fresh meat." Trevor's tone dripped mock concern. "First lesson-pay your respects. Hand over your celestial gems, and maybe we'll let you breathe in peace."

Noah's brow pinched. He swallowed the anger in his throat and said, "We just joined. We don't have much. Could you give us a little grace, sir?"

Trevor's laugh was a rusty hinge. "Grace? Not in my courtyard. No gems, no training. Simple as that."

A hot flare rose behind Jared's ribs. Bullying for gems on day one-utterly shameless. This sect needs cleansing before it rots beyond repair. Mr. Cantrell, what have you been doing while I'm away?

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Jared's gaze turned to ice. "Gems? Not happening. If you want them, prove you're strong enough to take them."

Trevor's face purpled. "Stupid fledgling, I'll show you who rules the Sword Sect!"

He snapped his fingers and the seniors lunged in a tight flank.

Jared never lifted a hand. A single pulse of pressure rippled from his core. The attackers flew backward like leaves in a gale, clattering across the cobblestones.

Color drained from Trevor's face. Realizing brute force had failed, he spat an order for reinforcements.

Moments later, Clive Dexter, an enforcer in dark robes, hurried over, boots striking sparks on stone.

Clive was Trevor's frequent conspirator, well-seasoned in shaking coins from newcomers.

"What's all this noise?" Clive barked, letting his voice boom so the courtyard walls carried it.

Trevor scrambled to Clive's side and jabbed a finger at Jared. "Sir, that upstart refused proper tribute and even struck us. You must set him straight!"

Clive's gaze flicked over Jared, sly satisfaction glinting. "So brazen on your first day? According to sect rules, you forfeit three thousand celestial gems and spend three days in confinement. Consider this your welcome."

Jared let out a low, cutting laugh, the sound as sharp as steel scraping flint. "Playing favoritism, aren't we?" he said, voice smooth but ice-cold. "They started it, yet you punish me, hinting I should pay a fine to walk free. The rules of the Sword Sect are rotting because of men like you."

Color drained from Clive's cheeks, then flared crimson with fury. "Insolent wretch!" he barked, trying to claw back authority. "If I don't make an example of you today, how will discipline survive in this sect?"

He swept an arm forward. At once, the guards behind him surged like hunting dogs loosed from a chain, rushing straight at Jared.

A glint of winter flashed in Jared's eyes. In one fluid motion, he swung his blade. A cyclone of sword energy exploded from the arc, shrieking across the courtyard.

The guards never even reached him. The gust hit first-then their bodies, flung backward like leaves before a storm tugged against stone. They landed in a coughing heap, blood speckling the flags beneath them.

Clive watched the scene in horror, face bleaching to paper white. He had never imagined the newcomer's strength could be so terrifying.

Noah, who had witnessed everything, sprinted over and grabbed Jared's sleeve. "Jerry, please leave while you can. They won't let you go if this keeps up."

Jared remained perfectly still, sword tip resting against the ground. "I'm staying," he said, voice flat as iron. "I want to see exactly what sort of

en now sit at this sect's summ

The clash thundered through every corridor. Within moments, executives of the sect flooded toward the courtyard.

Lyra, as one of the sect's important figures, arrived in a swirl of pale robes, breathless from haste.

Her gaze locked on Jared, and sudden, unguarded joy sparked in her eyes.

"Jared, is it really you?" she asked, words trembling with disbelief as she hurried to him.

He answered with a quiet, steady smile. "Lyra, it's me."

Only then did the surrounding disciples realize the plain-clothed recruit was none other than the legend said to have once led the Sword Sect to glory-Jared Chance.

Trevor, Clive, and every disciple involved in the scuffle went chalk-pale; knees buckled so hard that several of them nearly wet themselves.

Lyra's face hardened as she turned on the bullies. "How dare you bully new disciples and stain the sect's name?" Her voice was a blade of frost.

Clive and Trevor dropped to their knees, foreheads nearly touching stone. "We were wrong-spare us, please!"

Lyra ignored their groveling and looked back to Jared. "Tell me everything. How did the Sword Sect fall so low?"

Jared nodded once. He laid the rot bare-bribes demanded at the gate, rigged trials, senior students preying on novices each outrage delivered in calm, unhurried detail that made it sound all the more damning.

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As Lyra listened, flames of fury ignited behind her usually cool eyes. A chill surged from her body that made even the air recoil.

"Parasites," she hissed, sweeping a lethal glare across the cowed crowd. "You poison the very air of this sect. You will not walk away today!"

Her sword rang free, silver light streaking like a meteor across midnight.

She moved one moment beside Jared, the next a phantom weaving through the guilty. Steel flashed, each strike deliberate, merciless, final.

Clive, Trevor, and the others found themselves pinned by an invisible pressure, limbs refusing to obey even the instinct to flee.

Heartbeats later, they lay sprawled and broken, blood blooming across the courtyard stones like dark flowers after rain.

Watching disciples stood frozen, too afraid even to breathe loud enough to be noticed.

Effortless and absolute, Jared thought, quietly impressed as Lyra sheathed her blade without a speck of red marring its edge.

He stepped forward when silence fell. "Lyra, how did the Sword Sect decay into this? When I left, we were battered but united."

Shame washed over her features. She exhaled softly. "Jared, since Master entered closed-door cultivation, every burden has fallen on me alone."

"At the beginning," Lyra said, her voice low yet steady, "I could still hold the Sword Sect together. But as the months dragged on, duties multiplied like weeds."

My strength-once enough-could no longer keep pace. Those with darker ambitions crept in through every unattended gate. They formed cliques, traded favors, and stuffed our halls with smoke and noise until the very air tasted foul. I tried—again and again—to purge the sect, yet every time I raised the blade of discipline, a different faction seized my wrist. That is how things rotted into what you see today."

"Lyra, blame yourself no more," Jared replied, giving one decisive nod. "I'm back now. I swear I'll lend you every ounce of my strength to set the Sword Sect upright."

Relief and gratitude flickered in Lyra's eyes like dawn breaking through storm clouds. "With you beside me," she said, "I can steer our sect back onto its rightful course."

The days that followed felt like tempered steel-unyielding, precise, and hot with purpose. Jared and Lyra governed the Sword Sect with iron-clad resolve.

They rewrote the rules from the ground up, nailing punishments and rewards into place so clearly that even the youngest recruit could recite them by heart. No rank pedigree, no buried favor could shield a lawbreaker now.

They tore apart the old entrance trials and built new ones in their place fair, open, merciless—so that only true talent and grit could step beyond the gate.

Bullying, once a sick tradition, met a fresh watchdog. Jared and Lyra created a supervisory bureau and urged disciples to watch one

another. Report an abuser, and the

hammer fell instantly. Veterans who tormented newcomers paid in celestial gems and days of

isolation-or, when cruelty ran deep, expulsion without appeal.

Under that relentless pressure, foul airs thinned. Fresh disciples tasted fairness for the first time and trained like wildfire Senior members, their swaggerclipped bent over their own cultivation in sober silence

Yet Jared knew a hard truth: in a realm where the weak feed the soil of the strong, order alone is a paper shield. Power-personal, unshakable power-remains the only true law.

"After our night together," Jared whispered to Lyra once their duties paused, "my real purpose in returning is to cultivate in silence. When my strength rises a little more, I'm aiming for level nine."

Lyra's breath caught. "Level nine?" she echoed, stunned.

To any cultivator still trapped on level five, level nine was a summit of myth-so distant it might as well have lived beyond the stars.

"Your ambition never knew walls," Lyra said at last. "Here on level five, our Sword Sect already stands unrivaled. Stay, train, and let nothing distract you."

"Go to the back valley behind Swordmaster City," she added. "I'll assign guardians to keep watch while you meditate."

Lyra understood too well: Jared belonged neither to level five nor to her. His path reached farther than her longing could follow.

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Jared nodded once, strode to the hidden valley, and raised a protective array of modest talismans. Then he stepped inside Pentacarna Tower and let the mortal world fade.

Tens of thousands of item pouches bulged with resources, more wealth than most sects could dream of. For now, he was rich enough.

Time blurred. At some forgotten moment, the very last pouch cracked open, spilling its final crystal. Only then did he feel his realm shatter through its ceiling-Earthly Immortal no more, but Human Immortal Realm Level One.

That avalanche of treasure had carried him only so far. "May what little remains," he murmured, eyes half shut, "be enough for me to pierce level two."

High above Swordmaster City, Lyra spent each day drowning in petitions and decrees, yet she still found moments to glide to the valley mouth, peering in to see whether Jared had emerged from the tower's black maw.

One such day began like any other ledgers, judgments, endless footsteps echoing through marble halls.

Without warning, the sky above Swordmaster City rippled. Space itself trembled, folding open into a humming corridor of void.

From that ragged wound poured more than a dozen auras-each vast, ancient, and terrible enough to darken the sun.

Over Swordmaster City-and indeed across the entire level five-a hush of dread spread like frost on glass.

From the void above rolled a dozen crushing auras, vast and unfamiliar, unmistakably belonging to immortals from realms higher than their own.

No one understood what had drawn such giants to level five, and that ignorance only sharpened the terror.

Lyra gathered every disciple onto the windswept plaza. Jaw tight and eyes bright with worry, she stared into the dark, spiraling passageway yawning over the city. Inside a distant guesthouse, Flaxseed jolted upright-half-dressed, scrambling away from the startled woman beside him. He pulled on wrinkled robes and stumbled into the street, heart hammering as loudly as the city's alarm bells.

Panting, he reached Lyra's side. The void crackled. He forced a crooked smile. "Lyra, let's not panic just yet. Maybe just maybe-whatever's coming means no harm," he said, voice far steadier than the throb in his throat.

He himself, however, was nervous, too. Courageous words could not calm the riot in his chest.

Flaxseed knew Jared had offended more than a few powers from loftier heavens.

If those powers had traced Jared here, Swordmaster City would offer as much protection as paper before a storm. None among them could stop such vengeance.

The approaching presences drew nearer-heavy footfalls of divinity. Slowly, figures emerged from the swirling rift.

At their head drifted a woman in silken white-Onneas, flanked by ten Celestial Guards clad head-to-toe in burnished gold.

Flaxseed sagged with visible relief, shoulders dropping. "Thank the stars," he breathed, the words fogging in the chill air.

"Lyra, it's all right," he said quickly. "They're allies. That's Onneas from the Fourth Hall."

So it was-Onneas Dusko, radiant and unreadable, having crossed worlds with her Celestial Guards.

Even the casual pulse of her power pressed every local cultivator to their knees. Beneath her gaze, the proud warriors of level five felt as small as ants beneath an eagle's shadow.

"The overlord of the Fourth Hall?" Lyra whispered, swallowing hard.

A bead of sweat traced her temple. The Sixth Hall lord had once seemed invincible here; the Fourth was said to be stronger still.

"Mr. Flaxseed, is Mr. Chance within the city?" She spoke without threat, yet the very question bent the air.

"Ms. Dusko, Jared has been

cultivating inside Pentacarna Tower for some time. He has not yet

replied,

Coed flaxseed owing

low.

"Still in seclusion?" Onneas murmured, a faint crease marking her brow.

"Has something happened, Ms. Dusko?" Flaxseed asked, unable to mask his concern.

"When he exits, tell him to reach the Celestial King Palace on level eight at once. I will be waiting." Her tone brooked no delay.

"Understood. The moment he returns to daylight, I'll send him to you," Flaxseed promised.

Onneas' gaze slid toward Lyra.

Determined not to flinch, Lyra raised

her chin, meeting the immortal's

eyes while her knees quivered

beneath her robes, resolve and awe

warring in her chest.

Onneas let her eyes linger on the other woman, then asked in a low, deliberate tone, "Are you Jared Chance's woman?"

Lyta gave a small nod, only to shake her head a beat later, the gesture a tangle of silk-black hair and uncertainty.

What am I to him? A senior? A lover? A wife he has never spoken of out loud? The unspoken possibilities burned behind her eyes.

"You're lucky. Cherish him," Onneas said, the words slipping out on a sigh that carried equal parts envy and blessing.

A Warrior Undefeatable

To belong to Jared-Onneas had come to believe that was a kind of blessed state.

There had been a time she barely glanced his way. When his needs arose, she would send Isabel, to ease them, shrugging it off as beneath her notice.

Now Jared filled her mind until the night air itself smelled of him. She ached for him to favor her the way he favored the others, just once.

But she would never dare ask. Shyness chained her tongue, and Jared was already surrounded by women. So she watched Lyra with wistful eyes.

"You want to be with Jared, too, don't you?" Lyra's smile was gentle, almost conspiratorial. "If you like, I'll carry the message. I know you're dying to speak, but pride keeps the words locked behind your teeth."

Women, after all, read one another like open pages.

Even from a field away, Lyra could feel the storm of pheromones that crashed off Onneas whenever Jared's name surfaced. She remembered her own first glimpse of him-how her body had turned restless, fevered with wanting. None of them could mock the other; desire leveled every woman the same.

Onneas lowered her eyes, cheeks glowing wine-red. Without another word, she swept a palm through the air, tearing open a glimmering fissure of void and stepping through before the blush cooled.

Flaxseed, standing to one side, whistled under his breath, a grin stretching his weather-lined face.

Why are Jared's women all so understanding?

They even recruited more companions for him and never tasted a drop of jealousy.

Several days later, the stone doors of Pentacarna Tower groaned open, and Jared emerged.

He now stood at Human Immortal Realm Level Two, every scrap of stored resource burned to ash inside him.

Lyra and Flaxseed lit up at the sight of his breakthrough, joy flashing across their faces like sunrise over steel.

"While you were secluded, Ms. Dusko came looking for you," Flaxseed reported. "She said it's urgent. The moment you stepped out, you were to meet her at the Celestial King Palae."

Jared's brow tightened at once. Onneas never traveled from level eight to level five without reason; trouble must be stirring.

"Mr. Flaxseed, stay here for now," Jared said, voice steady but brisk. "Help Rowena watch over Sword Sect. The instant you discover where your clan's lost souls drift, send word and I'll come."

He was leaving for level eight, a realm far too perilous for Flaxseed's current strength.

"Understood. Take care of yourself," Flaxseed replied, clasping his hands. "If you can recover my people's souls, wonderful. If not, don't bleed yourself dry trying Malveolent Path Hallis monstrously strong-do your best to avoid it."

Flaxseed's weathered face tightened with quiet resolve. He could not bear the thought of Jared risking his life yet again on behalf of the Flaxseed clan.

"Even if I stopped investigating, they would still hunt me down," Jared murmured with a smile, his tone oddly calm, as though he were simply stating the color of the sky.

Turning to Lyra, he spoke with a softness reserved only for her. "Lyra, take care of yourself. If trouble comes knocking, seek out Mr. Flaxseed-he'll be close."

By now, Flaxseed's power had grown so formidable that, within level five, no rival remained.

"You look after yourself, too," Lyra said, her eyes reflecting equal parts pride and worry. "When you reach level eight, be good to Ms Dusko càn see it in her eyes she cares for you. If it feels right, give her your time. She's a woman, alone at the top. Loneliness clings to her like frost. She needs a man's company more than she'll ever admit."

Lyra understood all too well that Jared's departure could stretch into years, perhaps lifetimes, before fate would wind him back to her doorstep.

With Jared gone, she feared the emptiness that would shadow him if no woman stood at his side. That fear drove her blunt honesty.

Caught off guard, Jared blinked, then laughed. "You're teasing me, Lyra. All right. I'm off..."

Before the final syllable finished echoing, his figure shattered into a streak of gold and vanished, as though the universe itself had whisked him away.

He did not pry open a void passage this time. Instead, he chose the older, harder road-leaping star-field to star-field toward level eight. After his last brush with a collapsing void passage, he dared not gamble on such passage again.

Moments later, he burst from level five into a velvet sea of stars, each one pulsing like a silent drum in the dark.

"Boy, you truly mean to cross the heavens like this?" The Vermilion Demon Lord's voice echoed in Jared's skull, smooth yet threaded with admonition "A void passage may be dangerous, but tearing through spacetime one layer at a time is far worse."

The demon lord's wary counsel rang on inside Jared's thoughts like a distant bell.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"It's still better than getting stuck," Jared answered under his breath. "Better to face uncertainty head-on than be trapped forever in the dark."

The Dragonslayer Sword gleamed in his grip as he ripped through the folds of reality. Without a prepared passage, his speed dropped sharply, every step a grind against the fabric of existence.

"Kid, incoming!" the Vermilion Demon Lord barked.

No sooner had the warning sounded than a thunderous detonation split the silence.

Before Jared's eyes, the space itself fractured, shards of shimmering moments scattering like broken glass.

From that jagged rupture, a formless silhouette oozed into view, shadow darker than the void behind it.

Jared did not wait to learn whether the newcomer came in peace. The Dragonslayer Sword whistled forward in a single golden arc, his body following the blade's promise of first strike, no regret.

He knew the creed well-strike first, survive; hesitate, perish.

A wet crack sounded.

The sword pierced the shadow, yet the silhouette disintegrated instantly, as if it had only ever been a trick of the light.

The stars around him blurred, smeared into liquid colors. Some hidden force wove itself around Jared, tugging him away from familiar spacetime and toward an unknown elsewhere.

Jared's heart lurched, the shock so fierce it felt like a fist closing around his ribs. He had never imagined a presence inside this warped pocket of time that could steer his every move without ever revealing a face.

"Die-now!"

He snapped the sword through the air. A single stroke cracked the surrounding continuum, fissures racing outward like lightning across black glass.

Blades of light poured from those cracks-ten thousand slivers of murdering brilliance that tore the fabric of the realm apart. As they spread, the unseen pressure that had been clinging to him began to thin, as though burned off by the glare.

Every nerve in his body twanged tight, a bowstring drawn to its limit.

He still could not name the shadow stalking him, only sensed that anyone who could track him through chaotic void currents and peel open spatial walls in silence must dwell somewhere beyond dread itself.

The force coiling around him-cold, inexorable-carried the bite of an alien law that promised no appeal.

"Show yourself, coward-come out and face me!"

His roar ricocheted through the broken shards of space, but nothing answered except the hollow hiss of emptiness.

The invisible drag tightened. Colors bled into spirals, the whole scene spinning like down a drain until only a vortex of bruised light remained.

paint suckcene

He dared not pause. Celestial essence of the Human Immortal Realm Level Two burst through his meridians, a river in spring flood.

The Dragonslayer Sword felt that hunger and sang-a keening, metallic cry. Dark-gold runes ignited along the blade, each rune pulsing with ruin.

Jared flicked his wrist. Essence rushed into the weapon, shaping a strike at once sharper and more ruthless than any thrust.

"Cleave!"

A column of light flared a thousand fathoms high. Compressed sword-energy erupted like a cyclone, tearing outward from him in every direction.

This was no reckless swing. Each arc carried his first grasp of

dimensional law, slicing at the exact knots where the binding force anchored itself.

Ripping sounds overlapped, shards of warped space spider-webbing apart like shattered mirrors.

The chill pull on his limbs faltered, wobbling like a line about to snap.

Relief steeled him. His assault only grew more savage.

Sword-light crossed and recrossed, until the very air became a thicket of death.

Fragments of sundered dimension whirled inside that thicket, forming a localized storm where anything caught within would be ground to dust.

At the maelstrom's brightest instant, the vanishing silhouette returned.

It did not step in from any direction; it bled into existence, the way ink blooms through water.

No face, no edges-only a
man-shaped knot of twisting black,
crowned by two scarlet pinpoints
that stared through him with dee
different patience