

A Warrior Undefeatable

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A Warrior Undefeatable

Jared granted the shadow no breath, no second attempt at trickery.

The instant its form solidified, he stamped out with Arcane Footwork, his body seeming to blink from view and reappear directly before the thing.

The Dragonslayer Sword crashed down, unstoppable.

The slash looked plain, but it carried everything he could summon. Where the edge passed, the air split along a hair-thin black seam that refused to close.

The silhouette finally seemed to sense real danger. It refused to meet the blow head-on. Instead, it loosed a rasping, inhuman screech and thrust both distorted arms forward. Space itself rippled like water. Darkness condensed, coiling into a whirling barricade-an obsidian shield hammered out of pure night.

Boom!

The sword crashed against the shield with a thunderclap that would have split mountains.

The blast rolled outward in a perfect ring, sweeping the broken shards of time and space even farther away until a raw, unstable arena was scoured clean around the two combatants. The black shield shuddered. Web-thin cracks spread across its glossy surface, yet it held-just barely-against Jared Chance's full-power strike.

His pupils contracted. The creature's defense surpassed anything he had predicted. But long years of battle had carved adaptability into his bones.

Using the rebound, he drifted half a step back, flipped his wrist, and turned the descending slash into a lancing thrust. The tip of his sword vibrated at near-invisible speed, punching out hundreds-no, thousands of times in a single heartbeat, every thrust driving toward one spot: the fractured heart of that shield.

Stab! Stab! Stab!

The rapid-fire stabs melded into a single murderous hum. The shield, already splintered, finally surrendered. It burst apart in a

stor Charcoal motes

Sword-fight speared through the run

and raced on toward the silhouette's core.

Caught off guard, the creature contorted backward-bending in ways flesh and bone never could-while boiling ink-black vapors frothed from its skin to raise barrier after barrier of shadow.

Searing sword energy punched through the first screen, then the next, momentum bleeding but unbroken. The final few streaks drilled straight into the creature's torso.

There was no blood, no sound of pierced flesh, only a smoky ripple where the blows landed. The silhouette grew thin, then re-coalesced, yet the twin crimson embers that served as its eyes dimmed and flickered. It can be hurt.

"It's working!" Jared's voice rang across the shattered void.

Hope ignited behind Jared's eyes. He vaulted forward, the Dragonslayer Sword spinning like a furious golden dragon unleashed from its lair. Every lesson, every secret form he had ever mastered poured from his muscles.

Sometimes the blade cleaved wide arcs—an axe splitting the world.

Sometimes it slipped in light as mist, sly and treacherous. At other moments, it scattered into a blizzard of phantom edges, reality itself unsure which strikes were real.

Under that storm, the silhouette faltered. It excelled at hiding, at twisting space to ambush prey. Forced into a straight-on duel, it found no easy purchase.

It stutter-stepped through ruptured

space, dove into shadows, and

re-emerged from impossible angles. Each time it slashed with blades that could slice dimensions or hurled spears meant to rot celestial essence-but every attack met Jared's sword, waiting like a hunter who knew the quarry's heartbeat before it pulsed.

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Jared's spiritual sense fanned across the chaotic battlefield. Even here, where time and space fought each other, he clamped onto the creature's unique energy signature and refused to let go.

Wherever the silhouette shifted, the sword was already there-blocking, parrying, or striking along the very path the silhouette thought would be safe.

Sword light and pitch-black force kept ramming one another, detonating into feverish bursts of color that rippled across the silent firmament like outlaw fireworks.

For the moment, the fight hung in a deadlock, yet Jared felt the shadow's presence thinning-slowly, inexorably, like dusk draining out of a valley.

His own reserves were bleeding fast, but the deep foundation of the Human Immortal Realm braced him. Instead of fading, his battle lust only climbed higher.

He threw back his head and loosed a roar that shook the void. The Dragonslayer Sword flared, and a golden arc hundreds of yards long gathered above the blade, chiseled from pure intent to sever stars and shatter every law of nature.

Swinging with both hands, he hurled that blade of will toward the shadow's refuge. The stroke siphoned nearly one-third of his spiritual power-his single greatest release since advancing to Human Immortal Realm Level Two.

Even before the slash arrived, its crushing pressure froze space-time in that quadrant, locking the shadow in place with nowhere to run.

Sensing death, the silhouette's twin crimson eyes flashed in a panic. It stopped dodging. All the darkness around it shrank into a fist-sized sphere that dripped annihilation. With a shriek like tearing steel, it shoved the orb straight at the oncoming sword aura. This was a collision without retreat, without mercy.

Boom!

Language failed. Gold and black writhed together, corroded one another, then burst into a swelling globe of raw power that swallowed both combatants whole.

The flash outshone nearby stars; shockwaves vaporized drifting meteoroids as though they had never been.

The instant his cut landed, Jared rallied the last of his energy into a body-wide shield and summoned the hazy phantom of Pentacarna Tower at his back to absorb the blast.

Even so, the wave flung him thousands of meters before he clawed himself to a halt, blood surging, complexion ghost-white. He fixed his gaze on the rolling care of the explosion, refusing to blink.

Time lost meaning. At last, the ruinous glare ebbed away.

Where the shadow had floated, nothing remained-only ragged, unstable space and fading flakes of black embers that crumbled into nothing.

The fiend had been forced to withdraw, or perhaps the golden strike had shattered its condensed core beyond repair.

Jared hovered amid the starlight, chest heaving. The Dragonslayer Sword's glow dimmed to an ember.

His brow furrowed; relief refused to come.

That shadow had appeared without

warning and vanished just as

abruptly never showing its true face,

never

word

er speaking a single wörer. Its

origin and goal were a riddle

swallowed by night. '

Who sent it? The Malevolent Path Hall? Some other power I offended without knowing?

Unease pooled inside him; the road ahead felt strewn with unseen snares.

He dared not linger. A second attacker-or a second wave-might already be on its way.

Steadying the turmoil in his veins, he raised the Dragonslayer Sword once more, tore open a relatively stable seam in the surrounding void, and stepped into the swirling, kaleidoscopic tunnel that led toward level eight. Behind him, the fractured battlefield and its dying shockwaves whispered of a brief yet ferocious skirmish that almost rewrote the stars.

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Ripping through layer after layer of reality, Jared finally broke into level eight. The passage had been torturously slow and brutally costly, yet every mile had tempered his spirit and flesh like molten ore in a celestial forge.

At the Celestial Guard Corps' royal stronghold, Onneas saw him arrive and hurried forward, worry etched across her features.

"Ms. Dusko, what happened? Was it truly so urgent that you had to chase me all the way to level five?"

Jared swung back toward Onneas, concern already clouding his eyes.

"Jared, the Celestial King might be in serious danger."

"What? The Celestial King is in trouble? How do you know?" He drew his brows tight, his pulse hammering in his ears.

"The Celestial King left for level nine half a year ago, taking Jaehaerys and Brennan with him. Every three months, he sends a voice-transmission jade to me. Yet six months have slipped past, and I still hear nothing-not a flicker from the Celestial King, not a breath from either hall lord."

A chill premonition slid down Jared's spine; whatever had happened up there was nothing ordinary.

"Don't panic. I'm headed for level nine anyway-I'll find out what's happened to him. But once I'm there, how am I supposed to reach the Celestial King?"

"All we ever used was the communication device," Onneas admitted. "He never told me his exact whereabouts."

Jared exhaled, frustration clipping his breath. Level nine spanned realms upon realms; finding one man there would be harder than looking for a needle in a haystack.

"Here—this is the Seeker Token. The instant you come within a thousand miles of the Celestial King, it will stir." She produced a slim bronze token, scarcely larger than a thumb, and pressed it into his palm.

"I leave at once. Hold the Celestial King Palace safe until I return."

Rescue or no rescue, Jared had to ascend. The palace now flew his banner; abandonment was not an option. Besides, the Vermilion Demon Lord needed his body reformed, and level nine offered the only hope of forging one.

"Jared, level nine seethes with peril—please, take care of yourself."

He caught the worry flickering in her eyes, and Lyra's words drifted unbidden through his mind.

"Ms. Dusko, are you, perhaps, interested in me?"

Onneas blinked, startled; a delicate flush crept across her cheeks. The man she once overlooked without a thought had somehow set her heart blooming like early spring.

"If you can bring the Celestial King safely back to level eight," she murmured, barely louder than a humming gnat, "I will dual-cultivate with you—let you taste every joy we can summon together."

Her whisper, soft as silk, still struck Jared's ears with perfect clarity.

"Then prepare yourself."

Jared finished the sentence, then snapped the Dragonslayer Sword through the air. The blade never touched stone or flesh, yet the sky itself tore like damp canvas, a black seam yawning wide where the edge had passed.

Onneas watched in horror. Jared was ignoring the established void passage to level nine; instead he meant to cut his own road through raw spacetime, gambling with chaotic void currents no mortal body had any right to brave.

"Jared, have you lost your mind?" The Vermilion Demon Lord's voice boomed from the depths of Jared's sea of consciousness, equal parts outrage and stunned admiration. "Tearing open spacetime just to reach level nine—are you trying to kill yourself, boy?"

"It may be slower, but I'll treat every mile as training." Jared flashed a wolfish grin,

as though rending reality were little more than a morning exercise.

The Vermilion Demon Lord sighed a weary, wind-worn sound. "Incorrigible prodigy," he muttered then brightened. Very well. Once we stand upon my old territory in level nine, should at least present you with a proper gift of greeting."

A gift? Jared's eyebrows lifted. The Demon Lord existed now as a single lingering wisp of soul—what treasure could such a remnant possibly bestow?

Instead of answering, the Vermilion Demon Lord settled cross-legged in the center of Jared's consciousness field, silent as a stone idol awaiting the turn of an age.

Moments later, a lone spark glimmered in the ruptured corridor ahead—one pinpoint of starlight swelling against the darkness, as though called by the old fiend's unspoken will.

The spark blossomed. Within its glow, unfurled a scroll woven of liquid gold, each rune on its surface pulsing with the heartbeat of ancient oaths.

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"I will give you the incantation now," the Demon Lord said, voice suddenly gentle. "Speak it once, and an envoy will appear to escort you the rest of the way to level nine."

"Who exactly is this envoy?" Jared asked, curiosity sharpening the edge of his words.

"One of my former lieutenants. In my current state, I cannot activate the rune myself—so you must." With that, the Demon Lord breathed the ancient syllables straight into Jared's mind.

Jared recited the chant. The golden runes ignited, flames of azure smoke spiraling upward until the parchment itself seemed to burn a hole through existence.

Where the smoke dispersed, a vast whirlpool of light unfurled-its rim spinning with silent thunder, its center a doorway to places mortals rarely dreamed and seldom survived.

From the vortex, a lone silhouette drifted forward, as if walking out of memory and myth alike.

The newcomer saw Jared, froze, and blinked twice, astonishment rippling across half-formed features.

"Who are you, and how did that Golden Pass of the Nethergate Sect wind up in your hands?" Suspicion writhed behind the envoy's eyes, yet duty anchored him in place.

"Name's Jared. I require the Nethergate Sect's assistance. You will not break the oath bound to that token, will you?" He met the envoy's gaze without flinching.

"Never," the envoy said, recovering his composure. "Our word is iron. I will dispatch escorts at once." His brow furrowed. "But tell me at Human Immortal Realm Level Two, what business have you on level nine?"

On level nine, even the weakest cultivator stood at Level Eight of the Human Immortal Realm; Jared's modest aura made as little sense up there as a candle in a tempest.

"I have unfinished scores with the Malevolent Path Hall," Jared answered, letting the words fall like steel.

He did not brag, did not threaten-he simply told the truth, and in that truth the envoy felt a storm beginning to stir.

"The Malevolent Path Hall?" The echo of the unknown envoy's voice wavered, the timbre slipping from iron-clad arrogance to something that tremored at the edges of unease.

Jared cocked a brow, letting a thin smile cut across his face like the glint of a drawn blade. "What's wrong?" he asked, voice as casual as a yawn yet sharp enough to score stone. "Is the mighty Nethergate Sect suddenly frightened of a single hall of cutthroats?"

He let the question hang a heartbeat, then flicked imaginary dust from his sleeve. "If you are, leave me be. I'll storm level nine on my own."

Every syllable was a deliberate prod—Jared's favorite brand of goading, slid between the ribs of an enemy so smoothly they only realized they were bleeding once the chill set in.

"Nethergate Sect fears no one," the wavering voice snapped back, trying-and failing—to sound unimpressed. "Remain where you stand. I will dispatch our finest at once."

The silhouette dissolved, spiraling with the vortex until both winked from existence. In their wake, the air sagged, as though the world exhaled after clenching its lungs too long.

Only then did Jared glance at the hulking Vermilion Demon Lord beside him. "Tell me, are all of Nethergate's cultivators your lackeys? From what I sensed, that envoy's strength nearly rivals yours."

The demon lord's laughter rattled like loose gravel. "Helped them once," he admitted, eyes gleaming with devilish mischief. They paid me in Golden Passes, so I puffed myself up, pretended they served me. Pure bluster, nothing more."

Cóntent

Jared's sigh was long, exasperated. "You're on the brink of annihilation and still have breath left for tall tales."

The demon lord only shrugged, grinning wider.

While Jared waited, that wounded silhouette he fought with tore a ragged seam through space and

stepped into another dimension net

Five figures awaited him there four

garb and, at their front, a

UM

broad shouldered swordsmän in middle years. A sheathed longsword rode across the man's back, the hilt wrapped in faded crimson silk that whispered of blood long dried.

The battered scout collapsed to his knees, forehead pressed to the ground.
"Greetings, Your Majesty."

Myles Moffat's gaze could have frozen fire. "Report. The Grand Elder and a Heavenly Sovereign fell on level eight. Prince Percival is dead as well. Have you uncovered the hand guiding Jared Chance?"

His words cut the air colder than winter steel.

"I know nothing of any hidden patron," the kneeling man stammered. "When I met Jared, he traveled alone-no allies, no guards."

"Alone?" Myles' eyes narrowed to slits. "Then how did a solitary wanderer butcher both the Grand Elder and Sovereign?"

"We fought," the man confessed, voice shrinking. "I was outmatched his sword is no common blade. One stroke, and I fled wounded."

"Useless." The title spat from Myles' tongue like acid.

He drew a slow breath, every muscle vibrating with contained fury. "Very well. I will face Jared Chance myself."

The man ventured, almost pleading, "Your Majesty, even Lord Ashcroft fell-if you

"Silence. The Sovereign's failure is not my fate. If not for past sins I'd wear their mantle already." With that, Myles flicked a sleeve. Space rippled and he vanished, his retinue folding into the breach behind him.

Left alone, the kneeling scout lifted his head. Moonlight caught the cruel smile curling his lips.

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That same disciple had once traded blows with Jared, enough to know the man alone could never topple a sovereign, not even Esorin.

Which meant someone-hidden, potent-stood behind Jared, lending him the kind of power stories whisper about.

If Myles ever crossed that person backing Jared, he would be marching straight to

his grave.

What they needed now was patience-investigation, not open combat. But Myles refused counsel, insisting on hounding Jared, and there was nothing the lower-ranked runner could do to stop him.

Jared waited alone in the wasteland between moments-a barren pocket of torn space where even sound seemed exiled. Only the stray wind stirred, fluttering the corner of his coat.

"The Dragonslayer Sword rested in his clenched hand while his eyes swept the nothingness, alert for the allies the Nethergate Sect had promised. Fate, however, loved its little jokes."

A pressure rolled toward him, violent as a typhoon. The instant it touched his skin he felt the malice coiled inside it and knew-the Malevolent Path Hall. Only they hated him that much.

Myles appeared first, striding from the gloom with four shades at his heels, each movement as silent as candle smoke. His posture was ramrod straight, the sword over his shoulder shining a glacial blue that seemed to slice the darkness by simply existing.

Behind him, the four black-cloaked subordinates showed only eyes-cold, narrow slits that watched Jared the way wolves study a wounded stag.

"So, you're Jared Chance?" Myles asked, his words sliding across the void like drawn steel.

Myles' voice drifted across the battlefield like wind leaking from an ice cellar-low, detached, and deathly cold. The mere sound of it pricked the skin the way frost bites fingers left too long in winter air.

Jared's heartbeat lurched, yet his face never showed it. He straightened, shoulders squared, and met that chill voice with one of iron. "That's right. The Malevolent Path Hall has hounded me again and again. What trouble have you brought today?"

Myles let his lips curl, a smile that carried neither warmth nor humor. "Trouble? I came to collect your life, Chance-to avenge the Grand Elder and Lord Ashcroft."

He flicked his wrist. A silver-blue

blade of sword energy cracked from

vele

the tip of his weapon and tore

through the night like lightning freed from a storm cloud

Jared pivoted just in time. The crescent of light scraped the edge of his tunic and seared a jagged scar into the empty air behind him.

Inside, awe swelled. One casual slash and the pressure alone felt as heavy as a mountain. Myles Moffat is no ordinary foe.

"Is that the best you can muster?" Jared barked, refusing to give an inch.

The Dragonslayer Sword quivered in his grip. A golden arc burst skyward, then plummeted toward Myles in a shining counter-stroke.

Myles barely tilted his sword. Jared's gilded strike scattered into harmless sparks, the fragments snuffed out before they could reach him.

In the same breath, Myles vanished and reappeared a breath away. Steel drove forward with thunder's weight, a straight thrust aimed for Jared's heart.

The speed stunned Jared-too fast to sidestep cleanly.

He twisted, sparing his vitals, yet metal still kissed flesh. A deep line split his shoulder. Blood blossomed, soaking cloth in crimson seconds.

Scarlet dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Pain flared-but so did fury, bright as forged iron.

Retreat was gone, washed away the moment steel touched skin. Only one road remained: fight until either night or heartbeat ended.

A sudden whistle cut through the dark. Black light streaked overhead, landing in sparks before the two

A woman clad in

combatan midnight stepped from that comet trail, ten men in white fanning out behind her.

She moved like a reed in storm water-supple yet unbreakable. Gold beauty framed her features; ebony haired and fell with the night breeze like ink spilled into sky

In her right hand coiled a jet-black whip, its length flickering with a ghostly sheen that promised hidden, lethal power.

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Myles reemerged amid swirling dust, only to find a woman in shadow-black robes and several strangers blocking the path. His brow dug a hard line across his forehead. "Identify yourselves." His demand drifted across the stilled air, each word a warning that battle might follow the answer.

The woman, Rowena's cloak flared behind her like a shard of midnight glass. Her eyes-hard, glacial-swept across Myles' party before freezing on him. "We are disciples of the Nethergate Sect. This man holds our Golden Pass. While that sigil shines, he stands beneath our shield. Touch him, and you make corpses of us first."

Myles answered with a crooked smile that cut as deep as the sword at his hip. "Nethergate Sect? Step aside. The Malevolent Path Hall has business here. Interrupt us again, and we will not stay civil."

Rowena's jaw tightened, fury flashing like lightning behind her dark lashes. "The Malevolent Path Hall means nothing to us. If you thirst for blood, begin with ours - only then may you reach the man you seek."

The sneer vanished from Myles' face, replaced by a murderous chill. He had expected fear, not defiance.

"Then die for your arrogance."

His roar cracked the still air. Four of his black-clad subordinates sprang forward as his sword carved a silver arc toward the disciples of the Nethergate Sect.

Steel met steel. Sparks hissed like angry snakes, and the clearing exploded into chaos.

Outnumbered yet unbowed, the Nethergate elites answered with blades honed by hardship. Their war cries rose, fierce and steady, as they locked steel with the advancing assassins.

Rowena snapped her whip. The ebony coil morphed into a black dragon, lancing across the melee toward Myles himself.

Myles met it with a lazy flick of his sword, parrying the dragon-whip in a bright shower of sparks.

"Is that all you can do?"

With that taunt still hanging in the wind, he blurred-lightning given human form—rushing straight for Rowena's heart.

Rowena's breath snagged. She had known he was quick; she had not imagined he could vanish between beats of her heart.

She twisted aside, lashing low. The whip curled like a living thing, hunting Myles' ankle.

Myles bicycled upward, the tip of one boot barely kissing the earth as he vaulted over the snare.

From mid-air, his blade sang, releasing a crescent of sword-light that screamed toward Rowena's chest.

Rowena cracked her whip again. The cord split the air, shattering the sword-light into harmless motes that died before reaching her.

Meanwhile, the Malevolent Path Hall killers crashed into the Nethergate disciples. The fight devolved into savage grappling—no distance, no mercy.

Blades clanged, voices cried, and the grove shook beneath a storm of metal and resolve.

Jared watched, blood pounding in his ears, every heartbeat a drum of panic.

They fought only to shield him. Letting them fall would make his own life worthless.

I will not wait for death like livestock in a pen.

Biting back the pain slashing through his wounded shoulder, Jared lifted the Dragonslayer Sword and charged into the fray.

His sudden entrance lit the Nethergate ranks with renewed fire, courage roaring anew behind every swing.

Side by side with Jared, the disciples met the Malevolent Path Hall's assault head-on, blades flashing with desperate conviction.

Yet strength alone could not bridge the gulf. Minute by minute, the Nethergate disciples began to buckle under the force.

A single scream ripped the din.

One Nethergate warrior staggered, Myles' henchman's sword buried in his chest. He collapsed, crimson staining the grass.

"No!" Rowena screamed. In the half-lit chaos, she caught sight of one of her own falling, blood blooming against the dust. A stab of grief hit so hard it stole her breath.

Grief became fury. She roared—a raw, ragged sound—and her long whip cracked through the air like lightning, carving wild arcs as she plunged toward the masked killers of the Malevolent Path Hall.

But Myles had already read the

rhythm of her anger and seen the

gap it opened. He slipped from sight, reappearing behind her like

ghost mist. His sword gleamed, a cold promise, and drove for the center of her back.

"Look out!" Jared shouted, his warning knifing through the din.

Jared hurled himself forward, the Dragonslayer Sword flashing in his grasp, its edge burning silver. He slashed at Myles' path, desperate to intercept the strike, yet Myles moved with impossible speed the change to block simply vanished.

An instant before steel met spine, Rowena spun—grace born of years in the Nethergate Sect—so the blade missed her heart. Even so cold steel kissed her forearm, tearing a deep red groove that spilled across her sleeve.

"Rowena!" a young disciple cried, voice cracking with dread.

He darted toward her, panic shattering his composure, but the melee kept him from reaching her side.

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One of the white-robed guards lunged first, blade flashing. Myles turned the attack aside with negligent ease, sending the man skidding backward on his heels.

Around them, bodies from the Nethergate Sect already littered the ground-some still, some groaning. The few left standing clutched wounds that bled as fast as their courage.

"At this rate, we're finished!" someone cried, voice cracking under terror.

Rowena's eyes narrowed. She knew the battlefield's tide needed turning-now.

An idea flashed-sharp, desperate.

She drew a small onyx emerald vial from her sleeve and popped the seal. Acrid fumes surged out, eye-watering and vicious.

Myles caught the scent and barked a warning to his followers. "It's toxic mist! Back away!"

It was too late. Rowena flung the vial. Dark vapors billowed, wrapping the Malevolent Path Hall fighters in a choking shroud.

Coughs rattled through the fog.

Eyes watered and blurred. Swords wavered as lungs fought for breath.

"Now! Strike!" Rowena shouted.

Whip lashing like a lightning bolt, she plunged into the haze, her ten companions close behind, turning venom and twilight into their cruel allies.

Steel scraped against steel as the disciples of the Nethergate Sect-Rowena's desperate cry still ringing in their ears-surged forward beside Jared, blades gleaming through the churning veil of emerald poison.

For a brief, breath-stealing heartbeat, the toxic haze gave them cover. Swords whistled. Sparks flared. The fighters of Malevolent Path Hall staggered, coughing, half-blind.

Then, Myles planted one boot on the fractured flagstones. Power rippled off his shoulders like a shock wave. His long sword snapped up in a silver arc, severing the poison mist with a single, ruthless slash. The noxious cloud shredded and vanished. Myles blurred there one instant, gone the next-reappearing beside Rowena. His blade cracked against her ribs, hurling her across the courtyard as though she weighed nothing at all.

Rowena skidded through gravel, scarlet splattering the ground. She forced herself upright, wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth, and tasted the bitter truth: every trick, every talisman, every last shred of cultivation-they had spent it all, and still could not touch the man who stood laughing in front of them.

Jared watched Rowena wobble to her feet, pain etched across her pale face, and a helpless breath leaked between his teeth.

What is with this Nethergate Sect, anyway? They strut around like legends, yet the escort they sent for me can't defeat one swordsman-numbers on their side and still losing. Ridiculous.

Rowena's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry," she whispered, shame clouding her dark eyes. "We failed to keep you safe."

"Forget it. Leave now," Jared said, brushing dust from his cuffs with exaggerated nonchalance. "Myles and his killers came for me, not you."

They won't waste time cha

rest of the sect. Get out while can."

the

Rowena shook her head, midnight hair whipping across her cheeks. "We leave only in death. Our mission is to deliver you to level nine, whatever the cost."

Jared blew out a long, weary sigh. "Fine. Then let's die together, shall we?"

Across the courtyard, Myles let out a cold, indulgent laugh. "Jared, call out the hidden master backing you. Do that, and I might consider sparing your life."

"No master," Jared replied, voice calm as falling snow.

Myles' smile twisted. "Liar. Without support, you couldn't have slaughtered our Grand Elder and even Protector Sovereign Ashcroft. Quit the act."

"Believe what you want," Jared answered, stepping forward and baring his throat, the pulse at his jugular beating steadily. "Since you're convinced, go on—kill me."

The invitation rattled Myles. Instinct dragged him backward two full steps. No one volunteered for execution-unless a blade far sharper waited in the shadows. Unease tightened around his lungs.

Rowena stared, baffled. Who stretches his own neck beneath a murderer's sword? Has he lost his mind-or is he certain some unseen storm will strike the moment Myles lifts that blade?

Jared's eyebrows rose in mock impatience. "Well? Going to strike me down, or should I be on my way?"

Myles clenched the hilt so hard his knuckles blanched, the sword's edge hovering inches above Jared's exposed throat. The blade

leapt

shook not from weight but from the tremor running through the man who held it, a silent confession that he could not bring himself to drop the blow. In the charged hush, even the air seemed to curl away in dread, waiting to see which would give first: steel or resolve.

"Look at you—quaking like a kicked pup," Jared scoffed, his voice light but laced with contempt. "If you can't finish me, then do us both a favor and stop getting in my way."

Jared had already made his calculations. He knew-coldly, calmly-that he was no match for Myles. Better a clean swipe than a slow beating, he decided, and so he gambled on one last variable. Mr. Sanders won't let me die. He's pulled me from worse. If he doesn't show... Well, one stroke will be faster than being pummeled into paste.

That brutal arithmetic steadied him, but it also left him strangely weightless, as though the outcome-life or death-were no longer in his hands at all.

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"D*mn it-did you just insult me?"

Myles's face darkened; his long sword flashed free, yet he could not make it fall.

The calmer Jared appeared, the more Myles' courage shrank.

He simply could not decipher what hidden card Jared held.

Jared knew every stalled heartbeat tilted the fight against him.

Suddenly remembering something, he let a faint, knowing smile bloom.

The unintended grin made Myles' heart clench.

"You wish to meet the man behind me? Very well-I'll invite him out now." "Fine, call him forth."

Myles tightened his grip, body coiled like a spring.

He could belittle Jared, but anyone who had slain Ashcroft deserved caution.

"If I shout, he might ignore me. But if you call his name, he will certainly appear."

"I'm supposed to yell what?" Myles blinked, thrown completely off balance by Jared's demand.

"Just holler, 'Mr. Sanders, get out here before I beat the crap out of you!' "

Jared spoke calmly, almost cheerfully. "The moment those words hit the air, the powerhouse who watches my back will show up."

He remembered how Ashleigh had screamed that same insult and lost her life before she could draw another breath. Now, he figured, was the perfect time to see if lightning would strike twice.

"That mysterious ally of yours... His name is Mr. Sanders?" Myles' voice trembled between curiosity and dread.

"That's right. Go on-shout." Jared nodded, as casually as if he were giving directions to the market.

Myles hesitated. What game is this lunatic playing? First, he tells me to cut him down, now he wants me to curse some Sanders fellow...

Confusion churned behind his eyes.

Jared's gaze turned razor-sharp. "Don't tell me you're scared of a little trash talk. Or is it that you simply don't know how?"

"I know plenty," Myles snarled.

He drew a breath so deep his ribs creaked, then roared, "Mr. Sanders, crawl out here, or I'll beat the crap right out of you!"

The insult shot through the ravaged square, then tore across overlapping layers of space-time like a jagged ripple.

"Ah-choo!"

Somewhere far beyond mortal reach, Arthur sneezed. "What now? Why do people keep threatening to beat the crap out of me?"

His brows knitted. An icy displeasure bleached the color from his face.

He flicked a finger. A blade of white light sheared open reality and raced along the echo of that shout.

Meanwhile, Myles finished yelling and found only silence. No savior appeared. He chuckled coldly. "So where's your so-called powerhouse?"

Jared scanned the night. The air lay still, as though nothing in the universe had moved at all.

"Maybe Mr. Sanders didn't hear it." Jared frowned.

"Bull. My voice just punched through several dimensions. If your hotshot was anywhere nearby, he'd have heard me. I think you're just—"

Splat!

The rest of the sentence never left Myles's mouth. His lips were still parted when his head parted from his neck, spinning skyward in a grisly arc.

Blood geysered. The severed head thudded onto the flagstones, eyes still blinking in frantic disbelief.

The four guards who had marched in behind Myles froze, terror whitening every inch of their faces.

They had sensed no aura, seen no blade, yet their leader now lay headless at their feet.

Reason fled. They spun on their heels and bolted. If their king was dead, they had no reason nor courage to stay.

"Do not let them escape!"

Rowena let out a sharp command that cracked through the ruined courtyard. In one fluid burst, she flew forward, her black cloak billowing like a midnight banner behind her, blade poised to strike.

Close on her heels came the white-robed cultivators she had assembled, their steps synchronized, eyes fixed on, the four

Malevolent Path Hall disciples now

scrambling for weapons and hope alike.

The outcome was never in doubt. Moments later, the four demoralized men lay in a widening pool of blackened blood, cut down by the relentless blades of Nethergate Sect.

With a casual flick of his wrist, Jared summoned Myles' storage pouch. The silken bag streaked through the air and settled obediently in his palm.

Rowena stripped the four subordinates of their pouches, too, slipping the trophies beneath her cloak without breaking stride.

She approached Jared, boots splashing faintly in the still-warm blood, and stared at Myles' lifeless face as though expecting it to speak. Who finished him off? Was it really that Mr. Sanders?"

A Warrior Undefeatable

"I honestly don't know," Jared murmured at last, shaking his head while the question still echoed between them. His uncertainty wasn't feigned; even he could not swear whether Arthur had intervened or not. Yet the doubt gnawed at him, an invisible thread tugging at the edge of his thoughts.

Rowena's gaze softened—just a fraction—before she turned away. "Come with me to level nine," she said, voice low, as though the very name might summon unseen winds.

With a curt gesture, she gathered her white-clad guards, pivoted on booted heels, and set off. Jared fell in beside her, footfalls mingling with theirs as they slipped into the vast corridors of cloud and stone that led toward level nine.

Moments after they vanished, the surrounding void rippled like a pond struck by a sudden stone. From that distortion a lone silhouette stepped forth the same shadowed figure who had first tried to waylay Jared.

He stared at Myles' crumpled corpse; a shiver rattled down his spine. Had he followed Myles into that slaughter, he, too, would now be cooling on the ground, ignorant even of how the killing blow had landed.

"Report," he whispered, the single word snagging in his throat. Then, like smoke, he faded back into the trembling air.

Reporting was all that remained to him; whatever predators the Nethergate Sect might unleash upon Jared were matters far above his pay grade. One thing he knew for certain—he was no longer a match for Jared.

Elsewhere, Jared walked in guarded silence at Rowena's side, the path before them spiraling toward heights draped in storm-colored mist.

"How's the wound?" Jared asked, genuine concern slipping through his usual bravado as he glanced at the dark stain beneath Rowena's cloak.

Rowena flicked him a cool look, ignoring the question. "What I want to know is this how did Myles die so cleanly?"

Jared lifted his palms in helpless surrender. "I'm telling you, I've got no idea."

"Fine—keep your secrets," Rowena muttered, rolling her eyes in theatrical exasperation.

"Suit yourself," Jared shot back, matching her gesture with a comically exaggerated eye-roll of his own.

The exchange broke the tension; Rowena's sudden laugh rang bright in the high air. "You're ridiculous, you know that? Tell me, is the Vermilion Demon Lord the puppet-master behind you?"

Jared blinked, genuinely baffled. "Why on earth would you think that?"

"Because," Rowena said, her tone settling into the measured cadence of someone revealing classified files, "the Golden Pass you carry was issued years ago by

Nethergate Sect to the Vermilion Demon Lord himself. Every Golden Pass is cataloged. Did you imagine we hand those things out like festival flyers and forget who receives them? We know precisely where each one lands-and yours traces straight back to him."

Jared's grin spread, a quiet chuckle slipping from his throat. For a beat he neither confirmed nor denied the jest, merely letting the mirth hang between them like a lantern in warm night air.

Deep inside his mind, the Vermilion Demon Lord drifted—a wisp of a soul, so tattered now that even the weakest cultivator wandering these caverns could swat him aside. Forget contending with Myles; the once-terrifying lord could scarcely stand against a novice.

"And you are?" Jared asked, tilting his head, voice gentle but probing.

The woman in black dipped a courteous nod. "Rowena," she answered, her tone lilting, eyes bright with curiosity.

"Rowena?" Jared blinked, laughter bubbling up again. "That's a beautiful name." Rowena blinked, then broke into a smile. "Thanks."

Their shared laughter softened the atmosphere, the tension that had clung dissolving like morning fog beneath a rising sun.

"All kidding aside," Jared said, letting the humor fall away, "could you tell me—truly—about the Nethergate Sect? Its history, its present standing?"

"The Nethergate Sect," Rowena began, straightening as though reciting sacred scripture, "stands among the oldest orders on level nine. Our roots reach back to the dawn when the world first drew breath and every creature groped through darkness for a path to divinity. We vowed to govern life and death, to shepherd the wheel of reincarnation, keeping the balance unbroken. Era after era, we forged a practice uniquely our own-layered in discipline, drenched in lore-and it has carried us through uncountable ages."

She's laying it on thick. Far-ancient origins, cosmic balance-give me a break. The skepticism flickered across Jared's thoughts like sparks from damp tinder, yet he kept his expression politely engaged.

"Kid, the Nethergate Sect really is the

oldest sect on level nine," the Vermilion Demon Lord muttered, his voice a ragged echo in Jared's skull. "They've simply fallen on hard times, that's all why else would have

pointed you their way? We're

partners, aren't we?"

The rasping whisper lingered, swirling at the edge of consciousness before fading into silence once more.

Jared tapped a knuckle against his chin, weighing the Demon Lord's words. If the sect is half as mighty as they claim, befriending them could prove priceless. Ancient relics... Forgotten techniques... who knows what sleeps in their vaults?

The possibilities glimmered before him like moonlight striking buried treasure, and he resolved to keep listening-carefully, appreciatively.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Rowena, your Nethergate Sect must be the crown of level nine," Jared said, admiration dripping from every syllable.

Rowena laughed again. "Maybe not the crown these days," she conceded, "but we still rank among the top three. Back in our prime-ah, then we truly ruled the sky."

"Back then, our disciples strode through level nine unchecked," she added, pride glinting in her eyes. "Other sects scattered when they saw our colors."

Her confidence swelled. Behind her, fellow Nethergate disciples straightened their spines, faces glowing with collective pride.

"Fantastic," Jared said, broad smile returning. "With the Nethergate Sect at my back I'll fear nothing in these realms-not Soul Devourer, not the Fire Demon Lord, not even the Malevolent Path Hall itself."

Rowena's laugh caught in her throat. The earlier pride froze upon her features.

"Wait-Soul Devourer? The Fire Demon Lord?" she asked, brow creasing. "I thought you had trouble only with the Malevolent Path Hall. The Soul Devourer vanished a millennium ago, and the Fire Demon Lord-he's pure legend. How could you possibly know them?"

To her knowledge, both figures belonged to history's deepest vaults—the Soul Devourer sealed away ten thousand years, the Fire Demon Lord a myth from ages even older.

Jared raised an eyebrow, brushed a speck of dust from his sleeve, and said in a tone so casual it felt almost insulting, "I wouldn't claim we're acquainted, but the Soul Devourer and the Fire Demon Lord? Let's just say we've crossed blades once or twice."

"That's impossible-stop bluffing," Rowena snapped, the disbelief bursting out of her like sparks from flint. "Those two were titans of level nine long before any of us were born and have been gone for millennia. Someone at your measly second level of the Human Immortal Realm wouldn't even appear on their radar, let alone offend them."

She swept her gaze over him, head to toe, and the verdict in her eyes was clear: Jared Chance had to be spinning a grandiose tale.

Jared chuckled. "The Soul Devourer nearly died under my palm. The old brute spent ten thousand years suppressed on level six, survived only as a shred of soul, and even though he's rebuilt a body, he's nowhere near full strength. One clean strike from me and he'd crumble to ash. If the Fire Demon Lord hadn't swooped in at the last second, hauling him away like some tattered trophy, the Soul Devourer would already be dust riding the wind."

He deliberately left out any mention of the Fire Spirit Lord—the detail that might expose his bravado for the fragile thing it was.

Rowena's eyes narrowed. The more she studied him, the more certain she became—Jared was bragging, perhaps even trying to comfort himself with his own exaggerations.

"So the Soul Devourer and the Fire Demon Lord... are they back on level nine already?" she asked, voice dipping to an anxious whisper.

Jared shrugged. "Feels that way. The Devourer's licking his wounds somewhere, but whether the Fire Demon Lord is still on level nine—I couldn't say."

He knew the truth all too well: the Soul Devourer's injuries, nearly fatal from the Fire Spirit Lord's assault, would take ages to mend.

As for the Fire Demon Lord-those ancient fiends had long since transcended level nine. Whether they intended to linger there again was a mystery Jared had no answer to.

Rowena's face drained of color. Mid-stride, she halted, boots grinding against the gravel road.

"Rowena, what is it? Why stop now?" Jared asked, turning back when he realized she was no longer beside him.

She parted her lips, then closed them again, words crumbling before they reached daylight.

"Don't tell me the mighty Nethergate Sect is frightened of the Soul Devourer and the Fire Demon Lord," he prodded, half-teasing, half-challenging.

Rowena said nothing, but her wide eyes and tightened jaw confessed the answer: fear-raw and unvarnished.

The Nethergate Sect could afford to

spar with the remote Malevolent

Path Hall after all, the Hall's true

power lay far from level nine. But the Soul Devourer and the Fire Demon Lord were born of level nessofo legends etched into its bedrock. C6ntent

Jared pressed on, his voice like a finger poking an open wound. "Your Nethergate Sect is one of the oldest orders in existence its weight on level nine is supposed to be immeasurable."