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Jared listened, eyes wide with undisguised amazement.

The moment he heard Sylvia's invitation, Jared's brows knitted. He turned and studied her as though she were a puzzle box he could not quite pry open. This was Heaven Gate Sect's ruins-hallowed ground to half the realm—so why in the world would she want him tagging along?

If her plan amounted to nothing more than a token apology, he would never buy it. Only a fool would.

Seeing that wary glint in his eyes, Sylvia rushed her words, each syllable tumbling out in earnest urgency. "We've located the entrance to the ruins, but the passage is sealed tight. We can't force it, so I was hoping you could help us pry it open."

"You actually think I can break through whatever protects that doorway?"

The question slipped out before he could stop it. Confusion shadowed his features because he genuinely had no clue why she believed he possessed that kind of leverage.

Yes, Jared could hold his own against cultivators at the peak of the Human Immortal Realm. But Sylvia was already standing in the lofty Heavenly Immortal Realm—and even she had failed. By what logic would he succeed where she had

not?

"Not you," she answered, an easy smile blooming across her lips. "But the master who moves in your shadow? He certainly can."

Jared froze. His gaze locked onto her like a drawn blade. "How do you know someone powerful is watching over me?"

"Come now," she said, voice dropping to a measured, almost academic calm. "With your current cultivation, you could never stand alone against the Malevolent Path Hall. You'd never have slain their grand elder, their Law King, or that dreaded heavenly sovereign. The only plausible explanation is that a hidden powerhouse shields you. I see no second possibility."

Neville listened to her deduction and felt genuine respect stir in his chest. She might be young, but her mind was razor-sharp, slicing straight through murk and rumor. He

protected Jared for the same unspoken reason; Sylvia's sudden change of heart clearly sprang from that identical insight.

Jared tipped her a rueful grin. "I'm afraid I don't even know where that mysterious helper is, let alone how to summon him."

Sylvia's brows lifted. "Then how did you shake off all those assassins the Malevolent Path Hall sent after you?"

"Whenever my life truly hangs by a thread, the people trying to kill me simply... die. How do they perish? No idea." Jared's tone was almost conversational, though the words left a chill in their wake.

He wasn't exaggerating. Take Myles, the infamous Law King: Jared had merely needled the man into cursing Mr. Sanders, and moments later, the loudmouthed tyrant dropped dead. Whether Sanders struck the blow or some other unseen force intervened, Jared still had no clue.

Sylvia blinked, weighing that revelation. "In that case, our grand elder is fortunate he never tried to finish you off. If he had gone for the kill, he might already be a cold corpse himself."

"Wouldn't rule it out," Jared answered with a light chuckle.

Both Neville and Sylvia exchanged peculiar glances, unsure whether to deem his tale unbelievable-or terrifyingly true.

"Mr. Chance, even if you can't unseal the ruins, my invitation stands. From this moment on, the Earth Fiend Sect counts you as a friend. If it

eases your mind, you're welcome to bring Contrer

along. Her voice

softened at the edges, anxious to

dispel any hint of hidden malice.

"What's there to fear?" Jared shrugged, effortless confidence radiating from him.

"Just say when, and I'll be there."

"Mr. Chance, your decisiveness is a breath of fresh air. I'll hurry back and see to every last detail. Time is currency, so let's not lose a single minute. At dawn tomorrow, we depart."

With those words, Sylvia pivoted on a silken heel. A shimmer rippled through the air, and she was gone-like frost touched by sunlight, leaving only the faint scent of jasmine behind.

"She carries herself like royalty, and that figure... spending a little time with her wouldn't be the worst way to pass a night.

A tiny, wicked smile flickered across Jared's lips before he forced it away."

"Jared, are you truly planning to follow Sylvia to those ruins?"

Neville waited until Sylvia vanished completely, then voiced the doubt that had been tugging at him.

Jared gave a single, unhurried nod.

"And you're not worried she might double-cross you?" Neville's brow furrowed; the thought clearly bothered him.

"Neville, I don't believe she will."

"Why put that much faith in her?"

"Her eyes," Jared said softly. "I looked into them and saw nothing but honesty- pure, unwavering honesty."

He pictured those dark, willow-shaped eyes again, eyes that curved into crescent moons whenever she smiled-eyes capable of stealing a man's breath.

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"Tell me you're not just smitten by her looks."

Neville studied Jared's expression, trying to read the truth beneath the calm façade.

"Hardly. Beautiful women are hardly a novelty to me. Besides, you're coming with us tomorrow. If trouble shows its face, I'll have you standing between it and me." Jared's grin widened as he spoke, confidence rolling off him like summer heat.

Neville barked a laugh, clapped Jared's shoulder, and said, "With me around, Sylvia wouldn't dare pull any tricks. I'll make the arrangements right away."

He turned to leave, boots already scraping across the stone floor, when Jared's voice stopped him.

"Neville, one more thing I need to ask about someone."

"Who?"

"Do you know the Celestial King of the Celestial Palace-the one whose court sits on level eight?"

"Of course. The Celestial Palace is famous. That Celestial King may reside on level eight, but his strength is nothing to scoff at. Why the sudden interest?"

"A friend asked me to inquire. The Celestial King traveled up to level nine and then vanished. No one has heard from him since."

"I met him years ago near Heaven Gate Mountain. He had two hall masters with him, probably searching for the sect's old ruins. Where he's gone since, I can't say -but once we're at the mountain, we can poke around."

Neville's words made Jared's determination flare even hotter.

If the Celestial King had truly been spotted near Heaven Gate Mountain, Jared now had one more reason-perhaps the most pressing yet to make that journey. "Thank you, Neville." He dipped his chin in genuine gratitude.

Neville started off again, paused, then glanced back with a sly smile. "Jared, mind if I draw a bit of your blood later?"

Jared froze, breath locking in his chest. Why in the world does he need my blood all of a sudden?

"Please, don't misunderstand,"

Neville said, voice low, almost

reverent. Within Nethergate Sect, we guard an arcane practice. A single drop of your blood will let me triangulate the exact position of the presence shielding you." He let the promise hang. And you do wish to know where that hidden titan dwells, don't you?"

Without hesitation, Jared pricked a fingertip. The ruby bead slipped from his skin and splashed into Neville's waiting palm, then spread like red ink across parchment.

"Mr. Contreras," Jared warned, half-teasing, half-serious, "the person backing me is ridiculously powerful. If something goes sideways, I'm not covering the damages."

"Naturally," Neville replied with a thin smile. "I'm only sensing a location-not launching an assault. What could possibly go wrong?"

He shut his eyes. The blood in his hand boiled into vapor, rising as a crimson thread that curled around his fingers before drifting skyward.

Boom!

Neville's eyes flew open. Every stitch of fabric on his body aged a century in a heartbeat and powdered away leaving him bare as stone. The great halo Nethergate Sect bucked like a ship in storm-tossed seas. A mountain ten thousand feet high, just beyond the sect walls, crumbled in a single, thunderous heartbeat.

Disciples spilled outside in panic, only to stop short at the sight of their Sect Master-naked, trembling, and covered in dust.

Stunned, Jared took two careful steps back. "Mr. Contreras, does every secret art of Nethergate Sect demand a price this steep?"

Neville said nothing. He slowly uncurled his fist. In his palm, Jared's congealed blood had reshaped itself into one enormous scarlet character. "Leave."

Swallowing hard, Neville managed, "M-Mr. Chance... the being behind you is beyond anything I can even comprehend."

He spun and bolted, a damp trail glistening on the polished stone where his steps fell.

Neville had known Jared had an

expert backing him, but never

imagined a force so vast that a casual probe could nearly obliterate an entire sect. If that unseen grant had not shown mercy, the

Nethergate Secto

already he in

Fuin. Only mercy kept every soul here

alive.

Jared glanced down and realized the Sect Master had lost control of more than

just his courage.

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"Mr. Sanders, who are you really, and just how strong are you?" Jared whispered to the empty air, eyes fixed on the horizon above Heaven Gate Mountain.

Bewilderment clouded his face. From the day Mr. Sanders had joined the journey, Jared had never once seen the man show fear. The only true battle Jared could recall was the titanic clash they had fought at Rudy's side. Beyond that, Mr. Sanders strode through the world as though nothing under the sky could ever threaten him.

In the lofty Ethereal Realm, there had been one brief, disastrous reunion. When Mr. Sanders's shadow fell across Rudy's path, the brash young cultivator did not posture or bargain. He simply whirled on his heel, terror snatching the breath from his lungs, and fled as though chased by the judgment of the heavens themselves.

The next morning broke clean and pale, a hush of dew still trembling on every leaf when first light kissed the stone courtyards.

Sylvia arrived at Nethergate Sect alone, footsteps light yet purposeful, as though she feared even the rustle of her own sleeves might plant doubts in Jared's mind.

Jared gathered what little he needed—one travel cloak, a blade of plain make, and resolve sharpened by a night without rest—then followed Sylvia beyond the black-iron gates.

Neville, who had strained his very soul probing Jared's hidden patron the night before, remained behind. The fright had jarred his spirit loose, three wandering souls peeling away like frightened birds. Healing now demanded solitude, incense, and time.

Thus, Jared and Sylvia kept to the quietest trails, every sense tuned to danger the way a bowstring trembles before the arrow's release.

Around the rumored ruins of Heaven Gate Sect, cultivators teemed. Cloaked interests from every faction lurked behind smiles, each spy aching to strip the land bare the moment an entrance surfaced.

Heaven Gate Mountain, one of level nine's proud peaks, soared so high its crown speared mist and early cloud. From a distance, the ridgeline formed the shape of a colossal archway, a door flung open toward the fabled level ten. Dawn light now gilded that arch in molten gold, sanctifying rock and vapor alike. Yet beneath the hush, greed watched, wide-eyed and patient.

"Mr. Chance, that rise ahead is Heaven Gate Mountain."

Sylvia halted, arm lifted toward the layered silhouettes. Jared followed her gesture. Ranges rippled one after another, wrapped in streaming cloud—a landscape fit for dragon

legends. What troubled him more, however, were the countless auras flitting just beyond clear sight.

"So word of the ruins has reached every corner of level nine," Jared murmured, the observation flat but edged.

Below, on slopes and saddles, figures crawled like ants—some in trios whispering tactics, others lone wolves stalking for advantage. Excitement and tension

mingled in the wind, a scent as metallic as drawn steel.

"Exactly," Sylvia replied, offering a curt nod. "Fresh faces arrive daily, yet they circle only the outskirts. Not one has sensed the true doorway."

"Then where is our way in?" Jared asked.

"Deep in the range lies a secluded valley," she answered, voice dropping to a conspiratorial hush. "Ancient wards guard the spot.

hout guidance even the ket

eye would miss the veil. We must move carefully—no footprints, no whispers—until the mountain

swallows us whole."

Together they slipped into the folds of stone and cloud, every stride measured, every breath cautious.

They crossed paths with drifters and disciples alike—robed clansmen sporting polished sigils, scavengers in patched gear, all appraising Jared and Sylvia as potential rivals rather than fellow travelers.

Each glance they received carried the same wary question: friend, pawn, or the next obstacle to be buried beneath Heaven Gate Mountain's silent soil?

A sharp whisper sliced through the restless crowd. "Look up there— isn't that Ms. Vale, the sect leader of the Earth Fiend Sect?"

Another low voice followed, breathless with surprise. "I never imagined Ms. Vale would be interested in the ruins of Heaven Gate Mountain."

A third speaker leaned forward, curiosity flaring. "Who's that young man walking beside her? His face is completely new to me."

"No idea," someone answered, the words half-swallowed, "but from the way Ms. Vale treats him, you'd think he outranks us all."

Murmurs fluttered through the ranks of cultivators like startled sparrows. Eyes bounced between

and

the quiet stranger at her side-Jared-trying to stitch together an explanation from nothing more than posture and distance.

Jared felt several of those glances harden into needles, pricking at his skin with intentions that were anything but kind.

One gaze, colder than the rest, belonged to a black-robed cultivator who refused to blink. Though Jared never lifted his eyes his spiritual sense brushed the man lightly and confirmed the stare-steady

unbroken, lethal.

Buried in that stranger's aura coiled a thin ribbon of hostility, as chill and pointed

as mountain ice.

"Mr. Chance, we should move-quickly," Sylvia murmured, awareness sparking behind her calm voice. "Let's get out of this open ground."

Jared nodded once. Together they lengthened their stride, slipping deeper into the shadowed folds of the mountain range.

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An hour of steady trekking brought them to a secluded valley where the wind fell quiet and raw cliffs muffled distant chatter.

Here, cultivators were scarce-only a few solitary figures sifted through rubble, their movements slow, methodical, tired.

Sylvia glanced around, then spoke softly. "Mr. Chance, let's rest here and listen for rumors while we can."

Jared had already reached the same conclusion. He still needed a lead on the whereabouts of the elusive Celestial King.

They found a narrow cave half-hidden behind thorny brush. Sylvia raised a simple sound-dampening array; the air inside settled into hushed stillness.

"Wait for me here," Jared said, keeping his voice gentle. "I won't be long."

Concern flickered across Sylvia's eyes. "Where exactly are you going?"

"Just scouting for information," he replied with an easy smile. "I'll be back before the incense burns down."

With that small promise, Jared slipped out of the cave and into the paling daylight, footsteps light against moss and stone.

He did not venture far. A middle-aged rogue cultivator rested on a slab of granite nearby, shoulders slumped, breath uneven with fatigue.

Dust streaked the man's rough travel cloak; his eyes were half-closed, as though every muscle ached from days of fruitless searching.

Jared approached and offered a courteous nod. "Fellow cultivator, a moment of your time, please."

The man straightened, wariness flashing. "What do you want?"

"I'm Jared Chance-new to this territory. I'm hoping you can help me with a question or two."

As he spoke, Jared produced a high-grade celestial gem, its pale light catching the rogue's hungry gaze.

Greed flickered and quickly hid behind false dignity. "Ask," the man said, forcing composure. "If I know the answer, it's yours."

"Many thanks," Jared replied, offering a respectful dip of his head.

"Have you heard whether a Celestial King from the Celestial Palace-one who stands at the level eight-has arrived in these ruins recently?"

The rogue cultivator blinked, puzzled, then shook his head. "Can't say I have. But plenty of major figures are crawling around here. The great sects of the level eight have each sent their own."

Jared's shoulders sagged,

disappointment flickering across his eyes, yet his tone remained courteous as he pressed on Hay you perhaps heard of anything out of the ordinary recently? A man being hunted, maybe, or some violent clash in these parts?"

The middle-aged cultivator rubbed the grey stubble along his jaw, eyes narrowing in thought. "Well, there was one thing About a month back, in that valley over yonder saw several disciples from the Celestial Palace escorting somebody, and every one of them looked wound tight as a bowstring."

Jared's ears pricked. "Disciples of the Celestial Palace?"

Without waiting, he stepped closer, voice dropping. "Which direction did they take?"

"They headed deeper into the range," the man said, lifting an arm toward the dark, saw-toothed peaks looming behind him.

"But it's treacherous in there. People say savage demon beasts prowl those slopes-ordinary travelers keep their distance."

"I appreciate the warning." Jared inclined his head in genuine thanks.

He drew several pristine high-grade celestial gems from his sleeve-each one pulsing with milky light-and pressed them into the man's calloused palm. "A small thank-you."

The cultivator's face split into an astonished grin. He clutched the stones to his chest, bowing repeatedly. "Thank you, friend-thank you!"

Jared strode away, boots crunching over broken shale. In his mind, pieces of the puzzle began to click Disciples guarding someone and heading for the heart of the

averant

mountains-it matched every rumor

about the Celestial King's hidden entourage Rather than return empty-handed, he questioned several more wanderers. Their tales echoed the first, each pointing to the same anxious procession. Everything suggested the Celestial King was still lurking somewhere in the range's shadowed interior.

As he finally turned toward camp, a silhouette crossed the trail-a figure he recognized at once.

It was the black-robed cultivator he had met at the mountain's base earlier that day, the one whose stare had crawled across his skin.

The man noticed Jared as well. Malice flashed like a knife behind his eyes, but he pivoted and melted into the passing crowd.

Jared's lips curved in a chill, knowing smile. So, someone has decided I'm worth following.

He brushed off the notion. Unless the spy was a Heavenly Immortal Realm expert -and few were he could handle whatever came.

He slipped back into the narrow limestone cave. Sylvia sat cross-legged in the glow of a spirit lamp, aura steady as falling snow.

The moment his foot scuffed the stone, her eyes opened—clear, alert.

"Mr. Chance, have you uncovered anything?" Sylvia asked, her voice soft yet edged with expectation.

"A few threads, nothing concrete yet. I still need to verify them."

"Ms. Vale, when do we seek the entrance to those ruins?" he asked.

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"No rush," Sylvia replied. "Crowds are thick right now. We should wait. If you've other affairs, see to them first."

Jared gave a crisp nod. "Very well. Stay here and wait for me. I'll scout a bit farther."

"Be careful, Mr. Chance." She spoke the words like a gentle tether.

He inclined his head once more and vanished into the night-cooled air.

This time, he followed the route the middle-aged cultivator had described, cutting through bramble, mist, and moonlit granite. Half an hour later, he stepped into a secluded gorge, its silence so deep it felt as though the valley itself had forgotten the world.

The farther Jared ventured, the more the crowd thinned. At last, only a few veteran cultivators remained—grim silhouettes whose very breath hummed with restrained power, sweeping the broken landscape as though prying secrets from dust.

Among them stood a white-haired elder. Every measured shift of his robe

suggested the authority of a senior master from some storied sect, the sort of man to whom halls of disciples bowed without being told.

Jared closed the distance in three long strides. "Honored elder, might I trouble you for a word?" he asked, polite but unflinching.

The elder turned, eyes sharp as awls. "Speak. What is it you want?"

Still speaking gently, Jared produced a palm-sized item pouch. When its seal flickered open, the soft glow of a hundred high-grade celestial gems spilled through his fingers like starlight. "I seek information, Sir, and would rather compensate you than waste your time."

A brief spark of surprise danced behind the elder's calm mask, but he allowed no other emotion to surface. "Very well," he said, voice suddenly smoother. "What do you wish to know?"

"Have you seen, within this region, the Celestial King from the level eight Celestial Palace?" Jared asked without preamble.

The question seemed to stun the elder. He shook his head slowly. "I... do not know what you are talking about."

Yet while the denial hung in the air, the elder's gaze drifted back to the pouch as though iron filings to a magnet.

Understanding the silent price, Jared produced another identical pouch—another hundred stones. "If your answer proves useful, these are yours as well."

Greed gleamed, then vanished behind the elder's measured smile. "All right," he said. "What I witnessed was this—the so-called Celestial King had been subdued by two of his own hall lords."

"Subdued? Are you sure?" Jared's pulse hitched. They've already bound him?

"Yes," the elder affirmed. "I saw it with my own eyes. The hall lords were tense, and the Celestial King looked hollow-minded elsewhere, body moving like a puppet."

"Which way did they take him?" Jared pressed.

The elder fell abruptly silent, pupils shining with renewed hunger for payment. The meaning was plain—knowledge exchanged only for more celestial gems.

Without hesitation, Jared tossed out a larger pouch—500 high-grade celestial gems that clattered together like tiny bells. "The direction—now."

Joy split the elder's face. He pointed toward agagged horizon. "They went toward Death Gorge. The place crawls with savage beasts, and agents of the Malevolent Path Hall haunt those cliffs."

He let his eyes rake Jared's frame. "With cultivation only at Human Immortal Realm Level Three you'll never reach the Death Gorge alive. Allow me to guide you-for a modest fee, of course-"

Jared cut him off with a courteous nod and another pouch of 500 celestial gems. "Your counsel is appreciated. This is gratitude, nothing more."

To Jared, such treasures amounted to drizzle against an ocean; parting with them cost him nothing but seconds.

The elder, cheeks flushed with profit, offered one final warning. "Young man, meddling with the Malevolent Path Hall seldom ends well. Remember that."

"Thank you. I know my limits," Jared replied, voice steady.

He turned and strode toward the bleak line of peaks that concealed Death Gorge, resolve hardening with every step.

Though the terrain was strange to him, Jared would never entrust his path to a stranger. In this celestial furnace of a world, goodwill bowed before profit; escorting him might prove the elder's swiftest route to betrayal.

Generosity can sharpen another man's knife. Best I travel alone.

Death Gorge-its very name a promise of peril.

Fetid miasma coiled between craggy walls littered with bleached bone. Even the wind reeked of endings.

Survivors, they whispered, were rarer than phoenix feathers.

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Jared stayed on high alert, placing each footstep gingerly as he ventured deeper into the shadow-choked gorge. Dank, venomous miasma curled around his calves, yet his tempered flesh dismissed the poison as though it were morning mist. For nearly an hour, he pressed on, nerves stretched taut until a faint conversation drifted through the haze. He slid behind a crooked pillar of rock, held his breath, and narrowed his eyes. Barely fifty paces ahead, three figures hovered in the murk. The first, wrapped in regal gold, should have radiated authority. Instead, lifeless eyes and a slack face marked him a puppet bereft of will. Beside him stood two men in austere white robes-Jaehaerys of the First Hall and Brennan Hartley of the Second-pillars of the Celestial Palace.

"Mr. Jaehaerys, how much longer must we wait? Why hasn't Malevolent Path Hall shown up?" Brennan's impatience rasped across the fog-laden air. They had shackled the Celestial King for days, loitering in this cursed canyon, yet their partners in treachery remained ghosts.

What the two conspirators did not know was chilling. Prince Percival Wulverton- the envoy meant to meet them-and the Grand Elder were already dead. Even Lord Ashcroft, a celestial lord, had fallen. Percival's plan had been simple: subdue the Celestial King's palace with the Third Hall Master, then escort their prize here. Fate, bloody and abrupt, had intervened. Now Malevolent Path Hall scrambled for a stand-in, leaving Jaehaerys and Brennan marooned with their living trophy.

"Quit fretting. Malevolent Path Hall promised they'd come today," Jaehaerys said, voice cold as wet marble. "Once we hand them the Celestial King, we'll receive our reward. When we return, we'll report that the king fell while seeking the Heaven Gate Mountain ruins. After that, I will ascend the throne. And when I wear that crown, I'll make Onneas Dusko pay for crossing us-violate her dignity, then erase her for good."

"I still feel uneasy," Brennan muttered, shifting his weight. "What if the Fourth Hall Master learns of this and tells the patriarch? The clan chief forbids pacts with Demonic Cultivators!"

"Relax. Once we reach level eight with our payment, we'll silence Onneas first. No one will interfere."

Jared needed no further proof. The two Hall Masters had betrayed their sovereign, bargaining to sell him to Malevolent Path Hall.

Footsteps rustled beyond the swirling vapor. A squad of black-robed cultivators emerged, led by an elder of Malevolent Path Hall. His aura fell far below the slain Grand Elder's, a sign that his faction did not deem this transaction crucial.

"Ha! I never thought you'd truly dare betray the Celestial King," the elder boomed, laughter ricocheting off the canyon walls."

"Spare the bluster. Did you bring what we asked for?" Jaehaerys snapped. He fixed the newcomers with a stare as icy as the lingering fog.

"Of course, The elder, Morcant,

produced an item pouch, runes flickering across its surface. "Everything you requested lies within. Hand me the Celestial King, and the pouch is yours."

Jaehaerys accepted the item pouch with a casual flick of his wrist, as though the weight of fortunes meant nothing to him. A quick glané confirmed the contents. He closed his fist

and nodded, an oily smile spreading beneath the torchlight. "Excellent. The Celestial King is right here. Take him away."

Morcant stepped up to the bound prisoner and studied the man's pallid face, the way a butcher eyes a prize carcass. Not bad, Not bad, he murmured.

voice thick with greed. "It truly is the Celestial King. We will refine his soul at once."

From the shadowed archway at the rear of the hall, Jared finally revealed himself, walking into the torch-glow as if he had always belonged to the scene.

"You seem to have forgotten to ask whether I approve," Jared said, his tone so mild it cut deeper than any shout.

Every head in the chamber snapped toward him. For a heartbeat, nothing stirred, the torches crackling louder than the stunned men who stared at the intruder.

Jaehaerys narrowed his eyes. "Who are you?"

"Who I am is irrelevant," Jared replied, each syllable crisp as falling ice. "What matters is that you will not leave here with the Celestial King tonight."

Morcant raked his gaze over Jared, then snorted. "Kid, you must be tired of living. This isn't a place for wanderers. If you value your hide, vanish."

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Jared chuckled, low and almost pitying. "Vanish? I believe the ones who should disappear are standing right in front of me."

A vein pulsed in Jaehaerys' temple. "This is internal Celestial Palace business. Meddle, and you will suffer for it."

"Internal business?" Jared's laughter carried iron beneath velvet. "You betray your own master and still dare hide behind protocol? I'm here to clean house for the Palace."

Brennan-second of the hall masters-threw his head back and roared. "You? Boy, you don't even know how to spell the word death."

"Let's find out together," Jared answered.

Power spilled from him in a ringing wave, rattling the chains that bound the Celestial King and dimming the torches as though they feared his light.

Jared was only Human Immortal Realm Level Three, yet the pressure he exuded eclipsed many who had clawed their way to level nine.

Jaehaerys stood at Heavenly Immortal Realm, Brennan at Human Immortal Realm Level Nine. Even so, both men felt an unexpected weight pressing against their lungs.

"Interesting," Jaehaerys muttered, a spark of genuine intrigue flickering across his face.

"Impressive talent for one so young," he admitted. "But rescuing anyone from us is still far beyond you."

"Try me." The last syllable had barely left Jared's lips before he blurred forward, a streak of silver in the smoky light, aimed straight at Jaehaerys.

Caught off guard by the sudden lunge, Jaehaerys hastily wove a hand-seal. A column of divine force thundered from his palms toward the charging youth.

Boom!

The two forces collided, hurling a shockwave through the hall that rattled iron sconces and sent dust spiraling from the rafters.

Stone tiles fractured like thin ice beneath their feet, spider-web cracks racing outward in every direction.

Jared skidded back three paces before steadying. Jaehaerys slid only one, yet surprise widened his eyes.

"Not bad," Jaehaerys conceded. "You actually withstood my first strike."

"You're no slouch either," Jared replied, brushing a speck of dust from his sleeve. "But this was only the opening act."

He shot forward again, faster, every movement a blade of intention.

Sword intent blossomed around him-countless arcs of gleaming energy spiraled outward, each one honed to lethal clarity, converging upon Jaehaerys like a storm of living steel.

Jaehaerys's face drained of color. In

one frantic motion, he summoned a defensive technique, and a

transfused golden barrier bloomed around him like a hastily raised

citadel. Light rippled across its

surface, desperate to blunt the
razor-thin sword energy Jared

hurled forward.

"Clang-clang-clang!" Each invisible blade slammed into the shield, ringing out with the clarity of struck crystal.

Under the relentless barrage, fractures spider-webbed across the barrier. Hairline at first, they deepened, glowing white against the gold.

"How can this be?" Jaehaerys gasped, panic overtaking pride. "You're only Human Immortal Realm Level Three. Where does such power come from?"

"Nothing is impossible," Jared said, his voice cold as winter steel. "And today marks your end."

With that, he drove harder. Sword energy multiplied, a torrential downpour of gleaming arcs that hammered Jaehaerys's shield until chunks shattered away like ice in spring. Jaehaerys fought to reinforce the failing wall, but every pulse Jared unleashed tore another piece loose.

A jet-black beam suddenly split the gloom-Brennan's sneak attack. "Coward," Jared spat. He pivoted, meeting the darkness with a single backhand slash that burst into sparks, swatting the ambush aside.

"Jaehaerys, together-we finish him now," Brennan urged. Jaehaerys nodded once. The two hall masters lunged, twin storms converging on one target.

Death Gorge erupted in strobing light. Waves of force ricocheted off jagged cliffs. Jared, outnumbered yet unbowed, wove through the onslaught. His footwork flowed his blade found every seam in their defenses with surgical certainty.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!" Explosions rolled across the canyon. Boulders vaporized,
and the valley floor cratered into gaping pits.

Not far away, Morcant Crowhurst-elder of the Malevolent Path Hall-watched with idle fascination, hands clasped behind his back, clearly content to let the three bleed each other dry.

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The Celestial King still stood where he had first appeared, eyes vacant, as though this cataclysm were no more than wind passing through reeds.

Half an hour dragged by. All three combatants bled strength, yet Jared drew fresh reserves, siphoning stray celestial energy from the air to refill his lungs and limbs.

Jaehaerys and Brennan were not so blessed. Their faces had gone ash-pale, their breathing ragged, each heartbeat louder than the last.

Every clash sharpened Jared further. Even pressed by two masters, he still held the line, growing stronger stroke by stroke.

Jaehaerys fought for breath, shoulders lifting like bellows. "Boy, what are you?" The words scraped from his throat, equal parts demand and disbelief.

"Who I am is meaningless. What matters is that tonight you breathe your last," Jared answered, his voice flat as winter steel.

Footsteps rang across the ruin-littered courtyard, crisp and hurried. Through the drifting dust strode Sylvia, cloak snapping behind her. The instant she took in the scorched flagstones and blood-slick walls, the color drained from her cheeks.

"Jared, are you hurt?" Concern thickened her tone, though her stance was already poised for war.

"Nothing serious," Jared said, brushing ash from his sleeve. "Sylvia, why have you come?"

She stopped an arm's length away, gaze sweeping over him for hidden wounds. "I followed because I feared for you," she admitted, soft yet steady. "I never imagined the danger would be this real."

Her eyes iced over as they shifted to Jaehaerys and Brennan. "You dared lay a hand on Jared? You just signed your own death warrants."

Both hall masters blanched, sweat beading at their brows. Sylvia stood at the Heavenly Immortal Realm—a summit they had never reached. If she joined the fray, they knew survival would slip beyond prayer.

Jaehaerys forced a brittle smile. "Ms. Vale, this is an internal matter of the Celestial Palace. I ask that you stay neutral."

"Internal?" She let the single word fall, sharp as broken glass.

"Offending Jared means declaring war on the Earth Fiend Sect," she warned, every syllable humming with latent thunder.

Lightning seemed to crackle around her fists as she stepped forward, ready to strike.

"Ms. Vale, wait." Jared's voice cut through the tension like a blade pulled free of its sheath.

He planted himself between her and the hall masters, spine straight, eyes unflinching. "The quarrel is mine. I will end it with my own hands."

"But there are two of them. Alone, you-" Worry tremored behind her steady façade.

"Trust me," he replied, calm yet resolute. "This is between me and the Celestial Palace. I intend to cleanse my own house."

He refused to borrow another warrior's strength. Victory earned alone honed the edge of his soul. Near-death battles had become whetstones. Each brush with the Reaper tempered him faster than months of silent cultivation. Let danger come again. I will rise higher once more.

Sylvia hesitated, then dipped her chin. "Very well. Be careful."

She withdrew to the courtyard's fringe, every muscle coiled, ready to leap in if fate turned against him.

Morcant, elder of the Malevolent Path Hall, shrank back when Sylvia's shadow crossed him. Even he, steeped in savagery, knew he could not weather her storm.

"Since you crave death, boy, I shall oblige," Jaehaerys sneered, lip curling. "Prepare to witness the true might of the Celestial Palace."

He and Brennan locked eyes, then moved as one. Golden sigils burst from their palms, weaving into a radiant battle array that painted the night with searing light.

Golden light cascaded from the two hall overlords, divine runes igniting across their robes like molten scripture. With a thunderous

cry-"Sacred Domain!"-Jaehaerys and Brennan let their separate realms unfurl, then wove them together into one colossal aureate sphere that snapped shut around Jared like a celestial bear trap. Inside that prison, the air thickened; every heartbeat echoed in his skull,

and even raising a finger felt like

lifting a mountain.

"Hahaha! Boy, within our Sacred Domain, your strength is crushed to dust. Today

you die," Jaehaerys laughed, arrogance ringing like bells of doom.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Jared answered with nothing but a cold snort, sword aura seeping from his pores like starlight through cracked stone. "Even caged in your little world, I can kill you both," he said, voice low and flat as drawn steel.

He summoned the ultimate secret Maxwell had hammered into him beneath a sky of dying suns."

"A titanic sword phantom bloomed in his palm, its edge forged from raw intent, vast enough to cleave worlds.

"Myriad Swords Integration!" He brought the phantom down in a single impeccable arc toward the two overlords."

Shock blasted across their faces; never had they imagined the prisoner could launch such force while shackled. "Sacred Guard!" Twin golden shields erupted before them, each the size of a fortress wall, runes pulsating like terrified hearts.

Boom!

Thunder louder than the birth of a star shook the canyon. Sword phantom slammed into the shields, the collision birthing a roar that tore at eardrums and sanity alike.

All Death Gorge quivered; cliffs crumbled, rock spray turning the air to gray snow. Fissures spider-webbed across the golden barrier, each crack screaming a warning of imminent collapse. Pallor drained what remained of the overlords' arrogance; they felt their grand defense buckling grain by grain.

"Impossible utterly impossible! You're only Human Immortal Realm Level Three. How can you wield such devastating power?"

"Nothing in this world is impossible," Jared replied, eyes like frozen lightning. "Today is the day you die." He drove the phantom harder, pouring every shred of celestial essence into its burning edge. The blade's glow intensified, a newborn sun threatening to ignite the very concept of shade.

For a breathless stretch, they locked in stalemate—light against light, will against will—neither side advancing, neither willing to yield.

Minutes bled away, and strain began carving trenches across Jared's features. Veins bulged at his temples; each motion felt submerged in tar as the merged Sacred Domain pressed harder, seeking to still him forever.

The phantom blade-pregnant with enough power to sunder heaven and earth-crashed against Jared's golden shield. Bit by stubborn bit the shadow's radiance drained away until only black motes drifted in the air then nothing at all.

"Gah-!" Agony detonated in Jared's chest. Blood surged up his throat and sprayed out in a vivid arc, and his body flew backward like a kite, slamming into the rocks.

caved under hiscoop sne

out fresh crater while dust boiled

skyward in a choking cloud.

Across the ruined ground, Jaehaerys and Brennan shared a beast-like grin, their faces twisting with cruel delight. "Well, whelp, do you believe in our might now? This gorge will be your grave, Jaehaerys, snarled. He Stapped his fingers into a new seal, threads of harsh light gathering for the next, lethal strike.

Sylvia's face blanched. A single shimmer of motion and she was ready to lunge toward the crater-

"Sylvia, stay back!" Jared's hand shot up, voice hoarse yet thunderous. "This fight is mine. I'm still standing!"

"Jared, you're bleeding everywhere-stop pretending you're made of iron!"

He forced himself upright. His knees shook, but his eyes burned with an iron steadiness that refused to yield.

"Every brush with death rips another chain off my power," he said, voice low yet ringing. "I'll use this edge of the abyss to draw every last spark out of my body— right now!"

Breathing deep, he crushed the turmoil in his veins, set his cultivation roaring, and a frail yet unbreakable glow kindled around him once more.

Clutching his longsword, he staggered toward the two hall masters, each footfall wrung from whatever strength remained.

Jaehaerys and Brennan traded a mocking glance. "You insist on dying-very well, allow us the honor!"

They unleashed their art again; countless golden beams streaked out like arrows aimed straight at Jared's heart.

He swung his sword, but pain slowed him. Shafts of light punched through his guard, carving fresh gashes and painting his body with crimson ribbons.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Blood poured from the new wounds, soaking Jared's clothing a deep scarlet.

"Jared!" Sylvia's voice cracked as tears glazed her eyes, yet she locked her arms at her sides and honored his wish to fight alone.

Jared teetered on the cliff edge of exhaustion, but the fire in his spirit only blazed higher.

He pictured Maxwell, remembered that this sacred palace was meant to be his own dominion, and that these two before him were traitors defiling it.

From that vision surged a defiant force that drove back the darkness pressing on his mind.

I will not fall. I will break them.

Eyes shut, he focused and drew a black-ringed storage ring from his finger, producing the Divine Bow.

The moment the bow appeared, Death Gorge shuddered, as though some

ancient deity had opened a hidden eye; even the air turned heavy and unwilling to move.

Jaehaerys and Brennan felt that tide of power and their confidence flickered. Color drained from their cheeks.

"What weapon is that? How can it weigh on us like a mountain?" Brennan gasped.

Jared ignored the question. He drew the bowstring back, slow as sunrise, and a single arrow-forged from pure, murderous intent-solidified against the cord, hungry for release.

The moment Jared drew the Divine

Bow to full tension, the single arrow resting on the string burned with shifting bands of crimson, jade, and sapphire light. Those colors bled into one another, churning like a living storm, promising devastation. "Fly!" The command burst from his throat, thunderous and absolute. He loosed. In the instant the bowstring snapped forward, the arrow became a streak of condensed lightning, so swift the world itself seemed to pause. It tore across the courtyard toward Jaehaerys and Brennan. Where it passed, the air ruptured in jagged seams that screamed like metal being ripped apart.

Jaehaerys and Brennan felt the murderous wind a heartbeat before impact. Terror widened their eyes, yet they thrust their hands forward, weaving every scrap of holy power they possessed into a radiant shield of beaten gold. For a breath it looked unbreakable. Then the Divine Bow collided with it. The detonation sounded like worlds

colliding, a shockwave that rocked the stones beneath their feet. Cracks spider-webbed across the golden barrier in a blink. The next heartbeat, the shield shattered into a million glittering splinters, no louder than rain against the ruined flagstones.

Nothing remained to halt the projectile. It speared straight on, drilling through flesh and bone as though the two hall masters were made of paper. Blood geysered behind them in a dark, gruesome fountain. "No-impossible!" Their shared scream rattled the broken columns. Bodies staggering, they stared down at the gaping holes bored clean through their chests, life draining like sand through broken glass. Yet even on the precipice of death, they would not yield. A single, desperate glance passed between them—one final covenant. They summoned the last embers of their immortal strength. "Sacred Dual Assault!" they bellowed. Their figures blurred, fusing into a single torrent of luminous gold. The merged radiance coalesced into a towering pillar that howled toward Jared, intent on taking him to the grave with them.

Jared had emptied every reserve he owned. Sweat and blood mingled on his brow, sword trembling in his grip, but his gaze never faltered while that golden pillar roared closer. If this is the last breath destiny grants me, I will meet it standing.

Just as the radiant column was about to swallow him, Sylvia blurred across the field like moonlight on water. She planted herself before Jared, hands dancing through a flurry of arcane seals. A translucent dome of pure celestial force blossomed around her. "Boom!" The golden pillar slammed into the shield. The impact shook the heavens, sparks of holy and celestial power cascading in blinding sheets. Hairline fractures etched themselves across Sylvia's barrier, each one glowing white-hot, threatening to burst.

"Ms. Vale—" Jared tried, voice ragged, yet the word was a tangle of gratitude and protest he could not untie. She glanced back over her shoulder, smile soft yet unyielding.

"Jared, allow me to end this. I know men cling to pride, but pride is cheap—life is priceless. You don't have to pretend bravery in front of me." Her eyes shone with a fierce tenderness. "Even if you chose to stand aside and let me fight alone, I would still find myself hopelessly drawn to you. For someone at Human Immortal Realm Level Three to have come this far—it is more than enough." Jared froze for a heartbeat. He had thrown himself into the fight to sharpen his edge, nothing more. Impressing Sylvia, let alone grandstanding in front of her, had never crossed his mind. Still, the assumption stung like an undeserved slap.