

A Warrior Undefeatable 5651-5660

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Finally, a bank of silver mist parted, and an enormous hall materialized ahead-its spires spearing so high they vanished into low-rolling clouds.

It was as if the main hall was the dwelling of an ancient deity.

Walls of fitted stone blocks rose in solemn grandeur. Each block carried carvings of mythical beasts, coiled spells, and intricate array-work that seemed ready to breathe at any moment.

Jared and Sylvia drew closer. The main doors, sealed tight, were smothered in overlapping glyphs that pulsed with a forbidding, unspent charge.

Studying the carvings, Jared noticed familiar patterns-echoes of the very runes they had decoded throughout the stone forest-threaded here in a far more complicated tapestry.

"To open this door, we'll have to dismantle its seal as well," he murmured.

Closing his eyes, he began to run countless possibilities across the theater of his mind, searching for the single thread that would unravel the enchantment.

Sylvia waited in silence, gaze locked on the doors, her shoulders held rigid between eager anticipation and the fear of what might lie beyond.

At last, Jared's eyes snapped open. After much difficulty and trials, he finally found the method to break the rune restriction.

His fingers flashed through a rapid series of hand seals while a whispered chant spilled from his lips. Needles of light burst from his palms and struck the door's runes.

As the light shone, the rune began to undergo gradual changes. The once interlocked lines loosened like tangled vines coming free, and a surge of pressure thundered from within the hall.

"Now!" Jared barked. He shoved with both hands. The colossal gates groaned, surrendered, and drifted apart, releasing a breath of age-old air that smelled of forgotten worlds and boundless promise.

Jared and Sylvia felt as if they had stepped into a whole new world.

Inside, the chamber proved vast enough to swallow a cathedral. The marble floor, polished to a mirror's sheen, bore labyrinthine etchings that whispered beneath their boots.

Colossal statues ringed the walls—some austere, some enigmatic—all guarding the inner sanctum.

At the exact center stood a monolithic stone dais, and upon it rested a single tome bathed in soft golden radiance.

Jared and Sylvia approached the platform slowly, breaths shallow, every instinct telling them that within those gilded pages slept power-and peril-beyond imagination.

Sylvia whispered, eyes blazing with wonder, "Do you think this is the

fabled treasure of the Heaven Gate Sect's ruins?" That gaze of

Bel.ne

hers alive with unfiltered

excitement caught the lantern-light and seemed to shine all on its own.

Jared dipped his chin, the torch casting gold across his profile. "Very likely," he murmured, voice steady. "But keep your guard up. A hall this grand seldom reveals its last trap first."

They had scarcely extended a hand toward the ancient volume when the floor quaked, a deep, animalistic growl rolling through the chamber stones.

Immediately after, from every

archway burst spears of obsidian

light, converging overhead until they

whirled into a single, churning vortex black as midnight, foul as grave-soil-breathing a malevolent power that chilled the marrow.

"Move-danger incoming!" Jared barked, the words cracking through the vast room like a whip.

He lunged in front of Sylvia, shoulders squared, arms sweeping her behind the protective curve of his body. Fingers flashed through seals, weaving a net of light as

he readied himself for whatever might crawl out of that darkness.

From the heart of the vortex, a

silhouette coalesced and stepped forward—cloth as dark as the void, movements slow, deliberate,

sovereign. Aoke erasing any

murky mist clung to his

face like living

hint of human feature and turning him into a walking question.

"Who dares invade the Heaven Gate Sect's ruins?" The mysterious newcomer's voice scraped the air, low and rusted, as though it had clawed its way up from the underworld.

Jared met the void-shrouded gaze without flinching. "We stumbled in by chance, no malice intended," he said, tone calm but unyielding. "Yet those ancient records are ours for the taking."

The stranger let out a ragged chuckle. "You? Seize my ancient records?" The laugh curdled into menace. "I have guarded them for years beyond counting. None of you leaves with so much as a page."

With a violent sweep of his arms, ribbons of night burst from his sleeves, surging toward Jared and Sylvia like collapsing tides of ink.

Jared answered in kind, flooding the air with luminous power that hardened into a dome of gold, folding Sylvia inside its radiant shell.

At the same time, he swiftly performed a series of hand seals. From his fingertips streaked spears of crackling energy, each bolt a sun-hot arrow that collided head-on with the encroaching dark.

The collision hit with a thunderous blast that rocked the hall.

Light and shadow canceled in a blinding bloom, sparks hissing out like dying stars before silence rushed back in.

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Both combatants staggered backward, eyes locked, neither willing to surrender even a heartbeat of caution.

"Jared traded a quick glance with Sylvia. Resolve flared between them like flint against steel.

They understood without words that only perfect unity could carve a path out of these treacherous ruins."

"Ms. Vale, flank him-left and right-strike before he resets," Jared breathed, each syllable clipped, decisive.

Sylvia answered with a sharp nod. Her slender sword quivered, releasing a flash of icy glare. "Understood!"

"They sprang apart like twin bolts of lightning.

Jared blazed to the right, his aura swelling into a miniature sun that scorched the shadows, while Sylvia vaulted left, a swallow in mid-winter, blade poised for the heart."

The unknown guardian sneered, flicking through hand seals faster than candlelight can tremble, muttering words that tasted of sulfur.

Instantly, the surrounding gloom thickened, birthing jagged spears of shadow that shot toward both attackers in a murderous storm.

Jared's eyes hardened. He shoved both palms forward, and a colossal shield of molten gold erupted, swallowing every oncoming spike with a hiss of steam.

At the same time, Sylvia slipped through the gaps, her footwork feather-light. The sword traced a silver arc-beautiful, merciless-driving straight for the guardian's chest.

He pivoted, cloak swirling, dodging by a whisper. His counter came as a sweeping wave of black energy that howled toward Sylvia like a broken stormfront.

Sylvia tapped the flagstones, body drifting backward as lightly as falling snow, the sinister tide crashing harmlessly where she had stood an instant earlier.

A ripple of mocking laughter broke from the shadows beneath the stranger's hood. Moonlight caught the curve of his hidden mouth, revealing the upward twist of a cruel, knowing smile. "Is that truly the limit of your talent?" he sneered, every syllable sharpened to a taunt.

Jared answered with a clipped, contemptuous breath-half snort, half warning, the sound of flint striking steel. "Don't celebrate just yet," he said, voice low but thrumming with promise.

"Jared's hands blurred through labyrinthine patterns, each fingertip leaving a pale streak that lingered in the night air. Ancient syllables, heavy as stone tablets, rolled from his tongue.

The air convulsed around him. Strings of golden runes spilled from his chest, weaving above the battlefield until they formed a vast golden array that pulsed like a mechanical sun."

"A thunderclap seemed to answer him.

"Go!" he roared, flinging the newborn array toward his foe."

The golden array surged forward like a tidal wave of hammered light, bearing down on the hooded stranger with planetary weight.

Feeling the crushing pressure, the stranger's expression faltered. Dark energy coiled along his arms as he mirrored Jared's movements, desperate to raise a shield of black light.

Yet the array kept sinking, its radiance sharpening until every

beam felt like a blade. Sweat pearled on the stranger's brow. His shadowy shield trembled spider webbing with cracks.

Seizing the breath of hesitation, Sylvia sprang forward, her long sword flaring with argent lightning. She invoked the Earth Fiend Sect's ultimate skill: Earth Fiend Sword Shadows—a lethal ballet of spectral blades that split from her steel and streaked toward the stranger in shimmering torrents.

Caught between the descending golden array and the onrushing sword shadows, the stranger's defenses splintered. Every escape line was already stitched shut with light and steel.

With a guttural roar, he detonated waves of black light—each pulse a convulsive heartbeat-fighting to blast a tunnel through the golden array.

Jared answered by pouring still more spirit into the construct. The array blazed whiter than noon, slamming the stranger back as though the air itself had turned to stone.

Sylvia darted beneath the radiant canopy. Her blade flickered once, twice—then shot forward, straight for the stranger's heart.

"No!" The stranger's cry ripped from his throat, raw and broken.

He jerked aside, but destiny was already inches away. The sword's point burned toward its mark.

Steel met flesh. Sylvia's blade punched through his chest plate, and a spurt of tar-black blood hissed into the air, sizzling where it struck the light.

The stranger swayed, arms flailing, then toppled to his knees and collapsed, robes billowing like a fallen banner.

As his body hit the ground, a faint—almost content-smile ghosted across his lips, a detail neither Jared nor Sylvia noticed.

Jared dismissed the golden array. Its pieces dissolved into motes that drifted upward and vanished. He met Sylvia's gaze, and together they released the breath they'd been holding.

Sylvia wiped a strand of hair from her cheek, fatigue softening her eyes. "At last, he's finished," she murmured, a weary yet triumphant smile edging her lips.

"Jared nodded once, composure returning.

"Come on—let's claim that ancient records," he said."

They crossed to the weather-worn stone pedestal. A single book rested there, its cover emitting a gentle golden aura, pages rustling though there was no wind.

Jared stretched out his hand. The instant his fingertip brushed the tome, a nova of light exploded, swallowing them whole.

"Ah!" The simultaneous cry tore from both throats.

A colossal force surged into their bodies. The world wheeled in luminous chaos, and consciousness clicked off like a lamp.

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Jared and Sylvia stirred awake on the blistering sand. The moment consciousness returned, pain slammed through their skulls as if a blacksmith's hammer had landed squarely between their eyes.

When their vision cleared, an endless desert stretched to every horizon, wind screaming across the dunes and flinging needles of grit that stung their cheeks.

Overhead, the sun blazed like a thousand knives, turning the world into a furnace where even the air shimmered under the merciless heat.

Sylvia pressed a trembling hand to her temple. "Mr. Chance, where in the heavens are we?"

Her voice quavered, equal parts wonder and fear.

Jared shook his head, brow knotted, sifting desperately through ragged memories that refused to come together.

Moments ago—or perhaps lifetimes—they had been inside the main hall of Heaven Gate Sect's ruins, reaching for an ancient tome that pulsed with golden light. That touch had triggered a blinding flash; consciousness snapped off, and when he came to, they were on this alien wasteland.

"I haven't a clue," Jared admitted, sweeping the horizon again. "This isn't level nine, and it's nothing like any realm we've traveled before."

Their gazes met an unspoken mirror of dread, each seeing in the other the same fragile uncertainty.

Determined to learn more, they agreed to gain perspective from the sky.

But when they summoned their energy, the desert answered with silence. An invisible weight clamped to their limbs, anchoring them to the sand and smothering every attempt at flight.

Even their spiritual senses bled away after only a few kilometers, as though the air itself chewed holes in their power.

"How can our strength be cut down so brutally?" Sylvia cried, worry carving lines across her dusty face.

Jared drew a slow breath, forcing calm. "Panic won't help. If we can't fly, then we walk. We might find other people somewhere out there, and we'll ask them."

They set off, every step carving a deep print in the scorched dune. Heat seeped through their boots, licked at their soles, and traveled like fire along bone.

Still, they pressed forward, teeth clenched against the pain and the mystery ahead.

After an uncounted stretch of time, a hush broke the soft, sinister rustle of something tunneling beneath the sand.

Instinct snapped them back-to-back, weapons half-drawn, eyes scanning the dunes' shifting skin.

Sand erupted. Serpents of every size and color burst upward—midnight black, kaleidoscopic, all glittering with lethal beauty.

Forked tongues hissed, forming a chorus that closed around Jared and Sylvia in a narrowing ring, hungry eyes shimmering like jewels stolen from hell.

"D*mn it-an entire swarm!" Sylvia gasped.

Her fingers locked around her longsword, shoulders coiled like a spring ready to snap.

Jared clenched his fists, voice steady despite the storm. "Stay sharp. We can handle them."

The reptiles struck first, arrowing through the air with terrifying speed.

Steel flashed, fists whirled; man and woman met the living torrent head-on, blades ringing against scale in a dance of heat, sand, and venom.

Their strength was strangled by the

strange pressure in the air. Each swing of the blade, each thrust of the spear moved through

honey thick resistance, draining their muscles long before metal ever met scale.

Around them, the serpents multiplied in a churning, living tide. Every time Jared and Sylvia beat one back three more snapped forward, fangs cutting fresh welts that bled through cloth and leather.

"We can't fight them forever! We have to break free before they drown us in their coils!" Jared screamed.

The sea of vipers split as a colossal

shadow rose. A serpent as thick as a

water barrel heaved into view,

ver

bronze-black scales glinting like hammered armor. It was the Serpent king. It loosed a roanthat, shook gravel from the cavern roof-challenge and warning in one thunderous note.

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Jared's gaze locked on the Serpent King.

In that instant, he remembered the blood that burned in his veins the Golden Dragon bloodline, sovereign of beasts, born to command anything that slithered or crawled.

Without hesitation, he tore a line across his fingertip. Crimson drops struck the stone. A silent detonation of dragon's power unfurled from him, rippling outward in concentric waves that rattled pebbles and bent cold air to his will.

The smaller snakes recoiled at once, hissing in primal terror, scales rasping as they scrambled over one another. Even the arrogant Serpent King faltered, eyes wide, before it wheeled and vanished into the darkness, its following horde slithering after like a retreating storm.

Relief crashed over Jared and Sylvia. They collapsed hard onto the rock, lungs clawing for breath, every limb trembling with spent adrenaline until even raising a finger felt impossible.

"That was far too close," Sylvia whispered, voice still quavering. "Without your dragon blood, we'd be bones by now."

Jared managed a weary nod. "The bloodline earns its keep when it matters. We need shelter, and we need to patch these bites before venom thinks otherwise."

Footfalls drifted from the tunnel mouth-soft, deliberate, human.

Instantly, their weapons rose again, eyes narrowing toward the sound, every muscle tensing despite the ache.

Out of the gloom shuffled a frail, silver-haired woman, a boy of maybe fifteen hovering at her side.

The old woman-Evelyn Grey-leaned on a knotty cane, each step tentative yet stubborn. Time had written deep stories across her face. Beside her, the boy, young Hugo, stared at the blood-streaked strangers with a mixture of fear and shining curiosity.

"Who are you, and what madness brings outsiders this deep?" Evelyn's knuckles tightened around her cane as she spoke.

Jared lowered his blade a fraction. "We're travelers who lost our path. Could you tell us where we've landed?"

Some of the wariness eased from the woman's eyes. "You stand in the Spirit Wasteland Realm-a corner of existence most have forgotten. How did you pierce its veil?"

"Spirit Wasteland Realm?" Jared and Sylvia echoed, the name tasting utterly alien on their tongues.

They traded a glance, unspoken questions crowding the space between them.

Neither had ever heard of such a realm, nor could they imagine how, or why, they had been drawn into it.

Jared drew a slow breath, then spoke, his voice hoarse from exhaustion yet steady with purpose "Ma'am, swear we have no idea how we ended up here. We were inside an ancient ruin. I brushed my fingers across an old manuscript, and the next thing I knew the worlds went black. When we opened our eyes again, we were lying on the ground in this place-confused, battered, and bleeding."

Evelyn's bramble-thin brows furrowed as she rolled the words around in her mind. "An old manuscript? Could it be the one the legends whisper of?"

She caught herself and waved the thought aside. "Never mind that for now. You two look half dead. Come back to Greedfall Hamlet with us. We still keep a few herbs in the storeroom. They'll stitch those wounds better than panic ever could."

Jared and Sylvia traded a wary glance. Their ribs ached, their heads swam, and this barren land offered no other mercy. Trust would have to wait; survival could not. They nodded and fell into step behind the old woman and the kid.

The path curled through withered wheat and crooked fences. All the while, Evelyn filled the air with gentle chatter-asking about distant cities, about the color of the sea, about whether the sun still set red in lands beyond her hills.

Jared answered in cautious fragments, watching the road. Sylvia, limping badly, kept one hand on her dagger and her eyes on the boy. Hugo only stared straight ahead, silent as twilight.

At last, the hamlet appeared-a knot of mud-brick cottages clinging to a hillside like barnacles to stone. Smoke drifted from low chimneys. Doors creaked. Faces peeked from every window. As Evelyn' shepherded the strangers through the main lane, those faces followed, studying the newcomers the way wolves size up wounded deer.

She led them into a sagging hut that smelled of wet earth and stale straw. There, by the glow of a single tallow candle, Evelyn crushed herbs and pressed poultices over split skin. The moment her back turned, Jared noticed other villagers outside the doorway, their pupils gleaming with something colder than curiosity-something that looked very much like greed.

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"Ma'am, why does everyone here look at us that way?" Jared asked, trying to keep his tone light even as unease crawled up his spine.

The old woman's hands trembled, just once, before she forced a smile. "Think nothing of it. They're all good people. Rest now. I'll fetch supper."

She slipped out, the door thudding shut behind her like the final word in a grim sentence.

Jared met Sylvia's eyes across the dim room. Neither spoke, but in that silent exchange, they laid out every fear. Something here is wrong. We need to be ready to run.

Two days crawled past. Every hour, the villagers' stares grew bolder, their smiles thinner. At night, Jared heard whispered gatherings beyond the livestock pens- dozens of voices murmuring over the crackle of hidden fires, as though rehearsing a terrible chorus.

On the third night, a sudden clamor shattered the hush. Boots pounded, dogs howled. Jared snatched Sylvia's arm, and together, they crept to the cracked wooden door. Through a narrow gap, they saw orange torchlight flickering across the yard.

Villagers ringed the shack shoulder to shoulder, torches in one hand, farm tools and rusted blades in the other. At their head stood a broad-shouldered, scarred man, grinning with teeth that caught the firelight like broken glass. A cleaver-sized knife rested easily across his palm.

"You outsiders must be carrying fine treasures," the man, Bruno, bellowed, voice booming over the crackling flames. "Hand them over, nice and quiet, or we'll carve the truth out of your hides!"

The words fell like stones into place. Jared felt it first-a cold, clean certainty. Sylvia understood an instant later. The villagers' smiles had never been welcome; they had been measuring tapes. Greedfall Hamlet, true to its name, intended to bleed them for every last secret they possessed.

"You pack of ravenous scavengers!" Jared's voice cracked through the still morning air like a whip, his chest heaving with fury. "We came to Greedfall Hamlet seeking aid, yet all you can think about is how to bleed us dry?"

Bruno curled his lip into a sneer, the broad blade resting across his shoulder gleaming wickedly. "Save your breath. In a land ruled by tooth and claw, power crowns the king. You two strangers wander in with your strength shackled by this realm. Hand over whatever treasure you carry, or die where you stand."

Jared and Sylvia traded a single, silent glance. In her storm-grey eyes, he saw the same grim resolve that burned in his own.

Mercy had been offered and rejected. The villagers had chosen savagery; Jared would answer in kind.

"Ms. Vale, let's go!" he roared, flinging himself forward in a blur of motion.

Sylvia met the charge without a flicker of fear. Her longsword swept in a shimmering arc, releasing a razor ribbon of sword energy that screamed toward Bruno's throat.

Bruno twisted aside with practiced ease. Steel flashed as his cleaver hacked down, its wind-shear howling for Sylvia's blood.

Jared's palms ignited with runic gold. Sigils burst from his skin and streaked outward like meteors, each rune a miniature spear aimed at the encircling villagers.

The villagers scattered. Even so, several were struck; their agonized cries rose above the clash of metal before fading into gurgling silence.

The clearing erupted into chaos. Though suppressed by the realm's unseen chains, Jared and Sylvia fought with veteran precision, matching will for will against overwhelming numbers.

But the mob seemed endless. From every shadow, more villagers poured in, their crude weapons glinting, their eyes feral with greed, closing the circle tighter and tighter.

Minutes bled away. Blades rang, bones cracked. Exhaustion nibbled at Jared's focus, at Sylvia's breath.

Fresh wounds opened—slashes across shoulders, punctures along ribs each one leaking crimson that soaked into the dust.

Still, they refused to yield, teeth clenched against pain, hearts locked on survival.

When hope thinned to a thread, Jared's mind flashed to the ancient power coiled within his veins, his Golden Dragon Bloodline.

He summoned it. Energy surged, molten and majestic, fusing with his stifled spirit.

A thunderous power exploded from

his body. The very ground shuddered as invisible wings unfurled behind him spreading a... Sovereign dragon's power across the battlefield.

Faces blanched. The villagers staggered back, terror widening their eyes as that primal pressure crushed their courage.

Even Bruno-so smug moments earlier stumbled, all bravado draining from him as he realized the storm he had provoked.

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"You greedy people! Today's the day you die!" Jared bellowed, voice ringing like a temple bell.

His hands blurred through a rapid seal. Golden lances of light erupted, streaking toward every armed villager with unerring aim.

Where each beam struck, bodies ruptured into scarlet mist-blood, bone, and regret dissolving beneath the dragonfire radiance.

Bruno saw the massacre and bolted, stumbling over corpses as he sprinted for the tree line.

Jared flickered across the space, reappearing before the fleeing man. One savage kick crumpled Bruno to the earth.

"Mercy, sir! We were ignorant! We were fools!" Bruno babbled, clawing at the dirt, whole body quivering.

Jared stared down, eyes as cold as forged steel. "You chose cruelty for gain. Pay the price."

Gold-bright sword energy flashed. Bruno's head parted from his shoulders, a fountain of red painting the air before collapsing into silence.

The remaining villagers blanched, all color draining as terror stripped them bare. One after another, they collapsed to their knees, palms slapping the dirt in frantic supplication.

Jared watched the spectacle without so much as a flicker of mercy.

He knew with brutal clarity that, had he and Sylvia lacked both skill and the intimidating echo of his Golden Dragon Bloodline, these same people would already have torn them apart.

"Greedy vermin like you deserve no sympathy." Jared's voice sliced through the courtyard, hard and clean as winter steel.

The Dragonslayer Sword flared in his grip, loosing a storm of razor-bright sword energy that rippled outward like a hurled net of light.

Screams erupted. Bodies crumpled where the blades of force found flesh, the dirt drinking in lives faster than breaths could be drawn.

Moments later, Greedfall Hamlet lay silent-every soul extinguished save an elderly woman and the wide-eyed boy at her side.

Jared and Sylvia advanced, their shadows long across the blood-spattered ground.

"Sir, spare us!" Evelyn trembled so violently her bones seemed to rattle. She pressed her forehead to the mud again and again. "They made us do it-we never meant you harm!"

Hugo stared up at the pair, eyes enormous, terror beating in his chest like a trapped bird.

Jared's gaze remained an arctic sheet-no pity, no hesitation.

"Mr. Chance," Sylvia whispered, tentative, "perhaps we could let these two go?"

He offered no answer. Instead, he raised the sword and stepped so close that their reflections quivered in the polished blade.

"I make it a rule never to slay women or children..." His tone was almost conversational.

Relief loosened the old woman's shoulders; even the boy's mouth twitched toward a hopeful smile.

A wet crack split the quiet. The Dragonslayer Sword punched straight through Evelyn's chest. Blood blossomed behind her like a poisoned rose.

"You said you don't kill women or children!" she gasped, disbelief drowning her voice.

"Correct. And you, ma'am, are no child." Jared's reply landed with pitiless finality. Speech failed her; only a silent gape remained as life fled her eyes.

Another sickening thrust followed. Steel pierced Hugo's small torso. The boy crumpled before he understood the pain.

His eyes widened, glassy.

"Don't stare at me like that. You're not a woman either," Jared murmured, mouth curling into a cold half-smile.

Hugo made no sound at all; the stillness answered for him.

With both bodies motionless at their feet, Sylvia found herself nonplussed at Jared's grim humor.

"Enough. Let's leave this place." Jared's words snapped the moment like dry twine.

He turned, nodding for Sylvia to follow toward the edge of the ruined hamlet.

An earth-splitting roar burst overhead. Sky and soil twisted, reality folding like shattered glass.

Blackness swept in. Their bodies sagged, consciousness torn away as the world itself collapsed into chaos.

They came to slowly, as if waking from a fever dream, and at once knew they were in yet another mysterious realm.

Above them spread a bruised-violet sky whose clouds churned like living fire, lighting the air with a lurid glow.

Beneath their boots sprawled a

shattered land-deep, jagged fissures clawed across the earth though some unseen colossus had tried to tear the continent apart.

Far off, mountains stabbed straight into the heavens, their peaks swathed in oily black smoke that coiled and throbbed with a quiet, poisonous life.

"Mr. Chance, where are we now?" Sylvia's voice wavered, her face as bloodless as paper. The earlier battle and the teleport had gutted her strength, leaving her swaying on her feet.

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Jared shook his head, every muscle drawn tight. "I don't know. But nothing here feels right. We move carefully, every step."

They pushed themselves upright, meaning to scout the wasteland, when a distant, keening scream ripped through the alien air.

Their eyes locked for a heartbeat, then both sprang toward the cry, boots hammering the cracked stone.

The trail plunged into a narrow valley, and the sight waiting there punched the breath from their lungs.

A pack of bandits, eyes wild and blades flashing, hunted a family of three. The mother and father shielded their child while the marauders closed in, laughing with feral delight.

"Stop!" Jared's roar cracked across the valley like thunder.

He tried to charge, yet an invisible grip clamped around him. His limbs turned to lead, each step slower than the last, as though time itself conspired to hold him back. Beside him, Sylvia fought the same strangling force, eyes wide with helpless terror while the family before them slid closer to doom.

"No!" Sylvia's cry shattered against the stone walls.

The scream tore from her throat, raw and desperate, but the unseen shackles did not break.

The bandits overtook their prey. One raised a cleaver and brought it down on the father's shoulder. Bone split; blood fountained across the dust. The man staggered but kept himself between the blades and his child, teeth clenched against agony.

"Father!" the child shrieked, voice splintering on grief.

Another bandit's sword punched through the mother's ribs. She thrust herself forward, taking the steel so her child would not, then crumpled to the ground, eyes glazing with love and unfinished words.

"Mother!" The child threw tiny arms around her body, tears streaming unchecked.

The valley echoed with the child's sobs-raw, jagged sounds that made the very rocks seem to bleed.

Rage detonated inside Jared. He strained against the invisible chains until his vision swam, desperate to reach the slaughter unfolding yards away.

Pain lanced through every nerve and then, all at once, the unseen shackles snapped. Power flooded back into his limbs like a storm tide released.

"You animals!" Jared's voice thundered, promised reckoning, and the valley itself seemed to tremble at the coming storm.

Jared roared—a raw, bestial sound that cracked across the ravine like thunder. He hurled himself at the bandits, the Dragonslayer Sword flashing in his fists.

Silver light erupted along the blade's edge, each swing a hammer-blow of power that split the dusk.

Beside him, Sylvia—finally freed from the strange paralysis, too—snapped her own sword forward. She fell into flawless cadence with Jared, her footwork fluid, her strikes—a storm of razor arcs—sliding neatly into the spaces his left uncovered.

The brigands had expected victims, not executioners. Panic flickered over scarred faces. Yet their leader barked curt orders, rallied them, and steel swept up like a closing hedge as they surged back toward Jareds and Sylvia.

Jared's eyes narrowed to frozen shards. He drew breath, flooded every vein with spiritual energy, and let his ultimate skill bloom.

Forks of gold sword light fanned from him, streaking into the mob. Wherever those rays touched, men screamed, armor burst, and bodies thudded lifeless to the mud.

Sylvia answered in kind, unleashing

the Earth Fiend Sword Shadows.

Jet-black silhouettes of blades rained down-so many they seemed a midnight hailstorm-tearing. through flesh, scattering crimson droplets across the trampled grass In heartbeats, the charge dissolved. Steel rang out once-then silence swallowed the clearing.

When the last cry faded, only Jared, Sylvia, and a grisly carpet of corpses remained.

Gasping, swords still trembling in their grips, they walked to the lone survivor-the little girl.

She knelt between the broken bodies of her parents, tears streaming unchecked down dirt-smearred cheeks.

"Why didn't you act sooner?" she screamed, hatred sharp enough to cut. "If you'd moved faster, they'd still be alive!"

Jared's heart lurched. "Child, an unseen force held me and slowed every muscle. I broke free only moments ago."

She shook her head, sobbing. "Liar! You killed them. You killed them by waiting!"

Anger surged through Jared, hot and sudden. "I understand your grief," he answered, low and cold, "but do not pour blame on the first face you see. I was bound, and I fought the instant I could."

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The child's fury only deepened. She sprang at him, tiny fists flailing, wild and desperate.

Jared slipped aside with a whisper of boots on gravel; her blows struck empty air.

"Enough!" he snapped, brow furrowing.

She froze, glare turning eerily calm. "You will pay for my parents' blood," she whispered.

Jared blinked. The words chilled him more than any blade.

A prickle of danger washed over him—instinct screaming like a struck bell.

The girl whipped a dagger from her ragged coat and lunged, point aimed at his heart.

Reflex took him. He twisted, caught her slender wrist, steel hovering inches from his chest.

"What are you doing?" he thundered.

She answered with a cold, brittle laugh. "You stole their lives. I'll take yours."

Rage and sorrow collided within Jared. He stared into those grief-black eyes and felt a grim resolve settle over him. If mercy cannot reach her, then only finality remains.

Jared knelt, the valley wind tugging at his dust-stained cloak, and leveled his gaze with the child's haunted eyes. "Child, I can bring you to your parents," he promised, voice low yet carrying the weight of an oath.

A spark of desperate hope broke across the child's grime-streaked face. "Really? Then hurry!" the youngster cried, bouncing on bare heels.

Jared's reply was a single, somber nod. He rose, the sword flashing out. A crescent of icy, steel-blue energy ripped from the blade and sped toward the child with impossible speed.

"No!" Sylvia's cry split the air, raw and sharp.

She had never believed Jared would truly strike. Terror pinned her feet to the earth even as her hands flew up, far too slow to halt what was already done.

The arc of energy passed clean through the child's slight torso, leaving no blood—only a ghostly shimmer that fizzled in the sunlight.

Wide-eyed, the child stared at Jared as though the world itself had betrayed him. Then, like a puppet whose strings were severed, she folded silently to the ground.

Jared lowered his sword, its humming edge subsiding. "Your parents are waiting for you in hell," he murmured. "I merely opened the door."

Sylvia whirled toward him, shock and confusion crashing across her pale features. "Jared, how could you..."

He drew a long breath, the metallic aftertaste of violence still clinging to it. "Ms. Vale, I know you ached for that child, but hatred had already blinded her. Moments ago, she tried to end my life. In a land where the strong devour the weak, mercy is a luxury that drags its bearer to ruin."

Silence settled between them. Sylvia's lips pressed together as she acknowledged the harsh logic even as her heart rebelled.

In this alien wilderness, trust was brittle and saintly compassion an invitation to catastrophe.

"We should go. This valley has seen enough," Jared said, catching Sylvia's wrist. He turned, intent on leading her out beneath the crooked cliffs.

Right then, the ground convulsed beneath them.

Before they could flee, reality fractured anew; the sky splintered like glass, and the mountains folded inward on themselves.

"D*mn it-again?" Jared spat.

Words failed him; only exasperation clouded his eyes.

The collapsing dream swallowed them whole, and both plunged into darkness.

When awareness returned, they floated-not on solid earth, but in a field of endless nothing whose color could only be called void.

Gazing into the swirling gray, Jared finally understood.

"Mr. Chance, where are we?" Sylvia whispered, bewildered by the boundless emptiness.

"It's a trial," Jared breathed. "All those shattered worlds were tests."

Sylvia's brow furrowed. "A trial?"

"Yes. It gauges whether we cling to saintly ideals. In this realm, letting morality shackle you means you will never reach the summit. Whoever built these ruins wants proof that we can cast aside misplaced mercy. Only by passing do we earn the right to reach the true ancient ruins."

Otherwise, their erratic leaps from one illusion to the next would defy any sane explanation.

"Then what sort of trial awaits us this time?" Sylvia asked, steadying her resolve. Sylvia tilted her head, a silent question hanging between them.

"I have no idea," Jared said with an indifferent shrug. "As soon as we see children, women, old men-anyone-we kill first and sort things out later."

Sylvia's mouth opened, closed, and nothing came out.

As their brief exchange faded, the air

in front of them quivered. A stone gate rolled out of nothingness—a gray monolith of a gate that climbed toward infinity it filled the word, blotting out everything else.

"Seems we have to get through that thing first Jared said, staring

Until his neck ached. He

spoke without glancing back his gaze welded to the colossal threshold.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Jared and Sylvia approached the stone gate, their footsteps echoing in a hush that felt like a chapel.

Up close, the surface was glass-smooth, unmarked by rune or word—an obstinate slab of eternity.

Jared planted his palms and shoved. Muscles corded, breath hissed; nothing.

Sylvia laid her hand upon the rock. Without a sound, the gate parted like polite servants, rolling aside.

Why would it open for her and not for me? Jared was shocked.

"Why?" Jared asked, eyes still wide.

"Maybe," Sylvia said with a playful shrug, "the gate just prefers women."

Jared had no comeback. They stepped across the threshold together. The moment their heels left the sill, the stone wings slammed shut, sealing them inside a breathless darkness.

"Welcome, you two..." a voice rasped, each syllable brittle with age. Light seeped in. A white-haired elder coalesced from the gloom, beard and hair drifting like cobweb.

"Jared, that old man-" Sylvia began, concern sharpening her whisper.

"Kill him." The single word left Jared's mouth like the pull of a trigger. His Dragonslayer Sword flashed, an arc of silver fury cleaving the elder cleanly in two. The halves slid apart on a line of light.

The old man was taken aback.

A heartbeat later, the bisected body flowed back together, flesh knitting as though time itself rewound. "What are you doing?" he barked, brushing phantom dust from his robes. "Why did you attack right away? Lucky for you, I'm only a projection, or I'd be dead already!"

"Isn't this a test?" Jared lowered his blade, utterly unapologetic. "They want to know whether I'm soft. So when I meet the old or the young, I strike first. Saves everyone the trouble."

"Yes, this is a trial," the man said, voice like gravel raked over steel. "But I'm the examiner. Lay a finger on me, and you'll never set foot inside those ruins again."

The words cracked across the air. Rage flickered in his ancient eyes, louder than any thunderclap.

Jared snapped the sword back into its sheath, dropped into a hurried bow, and spoke in one breath. "Forgive me, sir. I meant no disrespect. I misread the moment. It was truly a misunderstanding."

"Enough," the Examiner cut in, lowering his tone to a slow, ominous rumble. "Time to see what lurks behind that bravado of yours. Answer my question."

Jared inclined his head, curiosity sharp in his gaze, ready to discover what nightmare riddles the old man kept in store.

"Suppose your entire family is slaughtered," the Examiner asked. "When you finally gain power, will you wipe out the murderer's bloodline in return?"

"Without hesitation," Jared replied. The answer fell like iron dropped onto stone.

The Examiner leaned closer, the flame of the torch dancing in his clouded pupils. "After you've ended them all, you discover a lone child, barely walking. What then?"

"I'll kneel to the child's height," Jared said, voice flat. "I'll tell him my name so he can hunt me one day. When we meet again, I'll kill him, then walk away."

The Examiner started to smile, but Jared's words rolled on like a cold tide. "After walking away for a few steps, I will turn back and remind him that this is our second meeting I gave him a chance. He squandered it. Then I'll strike-clean, final."

The Examiner's smile froze, brittle. "After killing him, do you simply leave?"

"Of course not," Jared answered. "I'll stay hidden, watching in case there are other children alive."

"And should one more stumble out? Will you swing again?"

Jared shook his head, the gesture slow. "Not once. Four times." Sylvia blinked, stunned. "Four times?"

"One through the heart," Jared explained. "A second into the right chest-hearts sometimes grow on the wrong side. A third through the throat lest he wear his heart there A last into the belly for those who hide their hearts deep."

Sylvia could only stare, words withering before they formed.

The Examiner threw another impossible scenario. "Now picture yet another child. He clings to leg, begging for life. You hold a sword in one hand, a piece of candy

in the other How do you judge

whether he deserves death?"

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"Child's play," Jared said with a faint smile. "If he is holding a sword, he intends to

kill. He cannot live."

A Warrior Undefeatable

Sylvia's voice wavered. "But if he picks the candy?"

"Then he is crafty," Jared answered. "He still cannot live."

Sylvia pressed on, almost whispering. "If he takes both?"

Jared's reply came colder than winter rain. "Greed, too, deserves no future. He cannot live."

"And what if the child refuses to choose either one?" Sylvia asked again, her words soft yet edged with an urgency that seemed to echo beyond the stone walls.

Jared let out a slow breath, eyes narrowing as though he could already read the inevitable future. "Then the child carries rebellion in his very bones," he said. "Someone like that can never be allowed to stay."

Sylvia's lips parted, but no sound emerged. A long, uncertain silence stretched between them, louder than any argument.

If the "child" were really here, he'd probably say, "You think you're so great—so high and mighty! If you can't stand to lose, don't play at all."

The old man's gaze drifted to Jared—equal parts exasperation and affection. "Your talent is real," he said, voice low and gravelly. "Focus on training harder, and not on pointless things."

The last syllable had barely faded before his figure dissolved like morning mist, leaving only a quiver in the air where he had stood.

At the very instant he vanished, the void before them twisted as though an invisible hand wrung reality itself. When the distortion settled, a towering mountain materialized—its ridges abrupt, its shadow swallowing half the sky.

High upon those crags, palaces rose one after another, their jade roofs glinting cold and remote, like silent sentinels guarding forgotten secrets.

Jared's brow furrowed. "Why does that peak look so familiar?" he murmured, heart thudding as memories stirred just out of reach.

A sudden spark lit Sylvia's eyes. "Heaven Gate Mountain," she breathed. "That's Heaven Gate Mountain, isn't it?"

Only then did Jared see it. It was the same steep face, the same heaven-piercing summit he had climbed once in dreams and legends.

"Have we walked out of the ruins?" he whispered, baffled by the impossible leap from one realm to the next.

Sylvia shook her head, silver hair catching the breeze. "I don't think so. Look at those palaces—this must be the long-lost Heaven Gate Sect itself, revealed at last."

Excitement flared in her voice. "Come on, let's see it up close!"

Side by side, they strode toward the mountain path, anticipation quickening every step.

Yet the moment their boots met the first stone stair, an unseen wall struck them—vast, unyielding, forcing them back with a silent roar.

Power shimmered in the air, an ocean-wide barrier locking the entire mountain inside a single luminous shell.

"Looks like one last trial," Jared said, resolve settling over him like armor.

He scanned every ripple of energy, every faint rune flickering in and out of sight, searching for the key that might prise the barrier open.

A deep, authoritative voice rolled across the summit, closer than thunder yet nowhere to be seen. "Young ones, you have finally arrived."

Their hearts jolted. They spun in all directions, but only swirling mist and silent stone answered their frantic glances.

"Do not bother looking," the voice intoned, calm as ancient wood. "I am already here."

From the thinning haze stepped an elder robed in flawless white. He moved with the quiet gravity of snowfall, each stride erasing the distance as though the ground itself bent to greet him.

Hair and beard gleamed like new-fallen frost, yet his kindly features could not disguise the centuries etched into his eyes.

A pure, formidable aura radiated from him—so clean and vast that Jared and Sylvia bowed instinctively, the breath caught in their lungs.

Jared straightened, voice respectful. "May we know your name, sir?"

The old man's smile was gentle, almost wistful. "I am Gareth Hawksley, the last sect leader of Heaven Gate. You may call me Elder Hawksley."

"The Sect leader of Heaven Gate?"

Shock blazed across both faces. Legends spoke of the master, but none had expected to meet him in living flesh—or spirit—upon this very peak.

Elder Hawksley let their amazement wash over him before he continued, voice low and steady. "Yes. Since the sect vanished, I have stood guard

over these ruins, waiting for those fated to inherit our legacy

"Have you truly been waiting for us this whole time?" Sylvia asked, her brows knitting as the faint glow from the ruin's torches drew a quiver of silver across her eyes.

Elder Hawksley gave a grave nod. "Indeed. In the two of you, I see a sliver of dawn—one bright enough to rouse Heaven Gate Sect from the ash heap history left behind. Yet, before I entrust that hope to our hands, you must first hear a story of the naked, unvarnished truth of how

Heaven Gate vanished."

Jared and Sylvia fell silent. Anticipation—sharp as an unsheathed blade—pressed against their hearts.

The old man drew a breath so long it

seemed to scrape the centuries. Pain and regret simmered in his dimmed gaze. "A thousand years ago, Heaven Gate stood at its zenith. I, as its master, was hailed the unrivaled force of level nine. And that was precisely when a single child altered the fate of us all."