

A Warrior Undefeatable 5851-5860

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"Dragonslayer Sword Technique Final Form-Chaotic Void!"

Jared drove the blade upward, carving against the heavens. There was no sound. There was no light. Only a hair-thin fissure of all-consuming night spilled from the sword's point, rising to meet the crystal colossus.

The instant that black scar touched the giant blade, time stopped. Space froze. Then, the next heartbeat arrived.

Ice cracked, bone by bone-then thunder ripped the silence apart.

The crystal greatsword—taller than a city wall-began to fracture from its ice-blue tip. Shards should have flown like shrapnel. Instead, every splinter slid noiselessly into the obsidian fissure yawning in the air, erased before the eye could blink. Within a single heartbeat, the ruin raced down the blade, devouring the guard and hilt alike.

Celladin's eyes, once colder than the sword he wielded, now swam with raw terror. He had poured burning blood into that strike; how could a power meant to freeze the world shatter like cheap glass?

"No... This isn't happening," he whispered, voice cracking like thin ice.

A soft hiss answered him. The obsidian fissure drifted forward, thin as a quill stroke, yet it carved through air and armor with a surgeon's patience.

Celladin froze mid-breath. He lowered his gaze to find a hair-fine black line stretching across his breastplate.

The line spread like ink in water. Wherever it passed, steel, flesh, even the divine frost in his veins lost all color-then crumbled into gray dust that the fissure calmly drank.

"Chaos... Void..." The half-formed words slipped from his lips as the light in his eyes guttered out.

A lonely wind swept across the frozen expanse.

Celladin's remnants fluttered away, and the ice domain he had raised collapsed after him, vanishing into ordinary silence.

The swirling Chaos Domain shrank until it was no more than a dim pulse inside Jared's chest.

Jared's face had blanched to parchment. His sword hand trembled so badly that he stabbed the blade into the ice just to keep himself upright.

Unleashing the move he called Chaos Void had scoured every reserve he owned; even his soul quivered on the edge of collapse.

Yet he had prevailed—slaying, from the very peak of Level One Heavenly Immortal Realm, a foe seven sub-realms higher, the third divine general of the Northern Abyss Celestial Clan.

The scene burned itself into the minds of the Vermilion Demon Lord and Clara—an image they knew would follow them for the rest of eternity.

"Jared!" Clara gasped, rushing forward to steady him.

He

The Vermilion Demon Lord arrived a heartbeat later, gratitude and awe warring behind his crimson eyes. He understood all too well that Jared had stepped into this deadly storm on his behalf.

"Don't worry," Jared said, waving them back. "I'm merely drained."

He tipped a handful of recovery pills into his mouth, sat cross-legged on the glassy

ice, and murmured, "Give me one hour. Guard me while I breathe."

"Yes, sir!" Vermilion and Clara answered in unison, taking flanking positions and letting their senses rake the empty tundra.

An hour later, Jared's aura had risen to more than half its strength. Not full, but enough to stand and meet another storm if it came.

He rose, eyes narrowing toward the deeper reaches of the icefield where three soaring peaks formed a distant trident of blue-white stone.

"The pool... it's just ahead."

"And the Northern Abyss Palace shouldn't be far either."

The three pressed on, their steps steady and unhesitant. After countless battles, especially the climactic fight against Celladin, their aura had transformed completely.

It was the aura of survivors from a hundred battles—unyielding, confident, unstoppable. Even the eternal winds of the ice plains seemed to shift around them.

The Northern Abyss Celestial Clan's interceptions hadn't ceased with the fall of Celladin. On the contrary, they became more frenzied and desperate. But to a nearly fully restored Jared, these ambushes were like ants trying to stop a rolling boulder-crushed effortlessly.

By sunset, painting the ice plains

with a mournful glow, they reached the depression encircled by three towering ice peaks. There lay the dark-red Blood Soul Cold Pool and beside it, the thousand-year-old Ice-Soul Blood Lotus, still in bud.

They also saw the Forbidden Area Protection Array spreading across the depression, its flowing light and intricate runes forming an impenetrable barrier. Beyond the array, deep in the ice plains, loomed the magnificent Northern Abyss Palace grand, majestic, exuding both authority and deadly intent.

The real challenge was only beginning. Yet Jared's gaze had already passed over the cold pool and the protective array, fixed on the innermost part of the ice palace.

Not only might it hold the key to breaking the forbidden formation, but perhaps other secrets of the clan as well. Jared knew far too little about the clan.

"Northern Abyss Palace..." he muttered, his hand brushing the hilt of the Dragonslayer Sword, which trembled faintly, as if echoing its master's resolve.

"I'm coming."

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Night had fallen over the ice plains as the three arrived in the depression encircled

by the three massive ice peaks. The sky held no stars, only auroras flowing like colored rivers across the dark heavens, casting a strange, eerie light over the frozen expanse.

At the center of the depression lay the Blood-Soul FrostPool, about thirty meters across, its waters dark red and eerily still, exuding both icy chill and the metallic scent of blood.

Beside it, the Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus swayed in the cold wind. Its nine crystalline leaves gleamed like red rubies, while the deep-red bud pulsed with life, ready to bloom at any moment.

The forbidden protective array loomed over the entire depression like an insurmountable chasm. The ice-blue light curtain was inscribed with ancient, intricate runes. From it hung chains tipped with ghostly ice beasts, radiating a pressure that made the soul tremble.

And behind the array—farther into the ice peaks—stood the palace, an imposing cluster of ice-crystal buildings. Its scale defied description, silent under the night sky and the dancing auroras.

The palace was not a single structure, but a sprawling city of ice. The main hall soared a thousand meters high, carved from millennia-old ice and core-cold jade, reflecting the aurora's beauty while radiating an icy, sacred authority.

Smaller halls, towers, and bridges circled it like planets orbiting a sun, connected by stairways and suspended walkways, forming a breathtaking yet perilous ice-crystal city.

Faint blue lights flickered inside, and powerful auras seemed to drift invisibly. The entire complex exuded an ancient, lofty, and unassailable aura, like slumbering ice deities.

"Finally..." Vermilion said, gazing at the lotus with a mixture of desire and anxiety. The protective formation before them, the palace behind retrieving the herb was still fraught with danger.

Clara gripped her sword, whispering, "Sir, the array..."

"We must first find a way to break it," Jared said, eyes fixed past the pool and the array, on the distant palace. "And the key must be inside the palace."

After a brief pause to recover, the three began their approach. The closer they got, the more overwhelming the palace's grandeur and oppressive aura became.

There were no walls around the palace—only towering ice-crystal barricades, each high, sharp as blades, engraved with defensive runes radiating icy refusal.

The only entrance was a huge ice-crystal arch. On either side stood tall statues of ice guardians, spears at the ready, giving the illusion they might spring to life at any moment.

When Jared's group was still far away, two figures emerged from the arch. One tall and broad, the other lean and pale, both radiating a suffocating, terrifying aura.

The taller man was nine feet high, broad-shouldered, with a rough, rock-like face and a full beard, eyes sharp as copper bells. Bare-chested, his bronze-toned, scarred muscles gleamed, his lower body clad only in a blue ice war skirt, wielding a giant ice-crystal axe the size of a door. Just standing there, he emanated the weight of a mountain. His aura reached the pinnacle of Level Eight Heavenly Immortal, rivaling Celladin.

The slimmer man was pale and sallow, around thirty, with narrow, snake-like eyes radiating cold intent. His elegant ice-blue robes concealed a deadly, concentrated aura far surpassing his appearance. He, too, was a Level Eight Heavenly Immortal at peak, but exuded even more lethal danger.

"Northern Abyss Palace First celestial general—Montar," the giant announced, voice like a temple bell, causing nearby ice to tremble.

"Northern Abyss Palace second celestial general—Glacern," said the pale man, his voice sharp, like needles sliding across glass.

They stood side by side, blocking the entrance, dozens of elite Northern Abyss Clan warriors poised behind them.

Glacern's gaze skimmed across Jared's party, pausing on Jared himself. "You felled the Third General? Impressive." A thin smile ghosted across his lips. "Level One Heavenly Immortal Realm—such modest cultivation. You must harbor secrets."

Montar swung his axe in an impatient arc, flinging a gust that cracked the surface ice. "Enough chatter! Trespassers who slay our brethren owe a debt of blood. Name yourself, boy, so my axe does not claim an anonymous spirit!"

Jared inhaled the biting air and stepped forward half a pace, fists pressed together in courtesy. "I am

Jared Chance. We come wine

malice seeking only the

Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus from the Blood-Soul Frostpool. That blossom will save a life dear to us. I am prepared to barter treasures of equal value—grant us passage, and no further blade need fall." His words hovered, sincere yet unbowed.

"Grant you passage?" Montar erupted in laughter that shook the ground, fissuring

the ice beneath his boots. "Has the cold frozen your wits? The pool is our sacred spring; every reed and droplet belongs to the divine clan. You butcher our warriors, then beg convenience?"

Ice crackled like splintering glass as his mirth died.

Xuan Ming's voice was cold: "Hand

over the sword you carry, along with

all your cultivation techniques. Self-limit your power, and maybe I'll let you keep your corpse intact. As for the two behind you... the man will woman made a servant. This is the price for trespassing into the divine clan!"

have his soul extracted the Vipmen

Arrogance and malice dripped from his words.

Chen Ping's expression darkened. He knew negotiation was impossible. But the two opponents before him were Eighth-Rank Heavenly Immortals at peak—far stronger than anyone he'd faced before. He was confident, but not reckless.

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"Then there's nothing more to say." Chen Ping slowly drew the Slaying Dragon Sword. "Today, I claim the Blood Lotus. Stand in my way... and die."

"Arrogant!" Man Shan bellowed, launching the first strike.

He stepped forward; the ice beneath his feet cracked. Yet the massive man moved as fast as lightning, covering fifty meters in an instant. His ice-crystal axe descended like a mountain-splitting strike!

The blow was simple yet brutal, infused with terrifying force principles. Before the axe even landed, the ice under Jared's feet caved into a massive pit, and the surrounding air screamed under the pressure.

"Sir, watch out!" Clara cried.

Chen Ping couldn't take the blow head-on. With a flash of movement, he used the Dragon-Stepping technique to narrowly dodge sideways.

The axe hit the ice, sending a hundred-meter-long fissure spreading instantly. The shockwave forced Chen Ping to stagger back several steps, blood and qi surging.

"Quick on your feet," Man Shan sneered. He swung the axe horizontally, carving a crescent of ice-blue energy, cutting off all Chen Ping's retreat.

At the same time, Xuan Ming moved. He didn't advance physically, but his hands darted from his sleeves, fingers moving like playing a deadly piano.

Each finger flicked out a nearly invisible ice-blue thread. They weren't solid, but condensed from the pinnacle of ice-law principles, designed to bypass defenses and attack the soul and meridians.

"Netherfrost Threads!" Clara's face turned pale. "They target soul and meridians— one hit and it's fatal! Sir, dodge!"

Chen Ping sensed the lethal threat. He weaved around Man Shan's axe while slashing chaotic sword energy from his sword, trying to sever the threads.

But the threads were strange and resilient. The chaotic sword energy barely warped them; it could not cut them. Worse, a few threads slipped through, aiming straight for Chen Ping.

Heart racing, he unleashed his chaotic celestial energy as a shield. A glint of golden light from his brow burst forth, releasing a trace of dragon aura, barely deflecting the threads. Still, one grazed his arm. Cold shot through his meridians, numbing the limb and slowing the flow of immortal power.

In a single exchange, Clara and Vermilion were both wounded, their efforts to distract the enemies almost nullified.

Jared felt the weight of their failure settle squarely on his shoulders; the space around him seemed to shrink beneath the twin murderous auras.

"Kid, lasting this long against the two of us is achievement enough," Montar bellowed, laughter rolling like thunder across the field. "But here is where your story stops! Mountain-God Cleaver-Earth-Split!"

He raised the axe above his head with both hands. Ice-blue light erupted along its blade, and the very ground trembled beneath the gathering power. This single swing would be several times stronger than anything he had unleashed before.

At the same instant, Glacern's expression sharpened. The playful chill in his eyes hardened into murderous winter.

Between his palms, he pressed a silent prayer; the ice-sigil on his brow blazed, weaving countless Frost-Silk strands into a thumb-sized, glass-clear blue prism that hovered before him.

"Netherfrost Spike-Soulbreaker!"

The prism shot forward without a sound, moving so fast it outraced Jared's spiritual sense. Wherever it passed, the air froze into hair-thin black fissures-ice law refined to its limit, brushing the skin of space itself.

Strength and soul-two killing arts descended together like twin verdicts of an unforgiving heaven.

Jared's pupils contracted to pinpoints; for the first time in this battle he felt death breathe directly against his neck.

Can't meet that head-on.

In the heartbeat that followed he chose: flight over force.

With a snap of his wrist, Jared released the small fire unicorn from its talisman. Scarlet flames roared into being, the creature pawing the air, ready to answer its master's desperate call.

The small fire unicorn was no ordinary beast. Born of primordial flame, it countered every icy art the Northern Abyss Palace could muster.

"ROAR-!"

Its bellow rolled across the frozen plain like thunder over glass, shivering the miles-wide ice sheet until cracks sang beneath the snow.

From the storage ring at Jared's hip strode a creature three stories high, its hide armored in molten-gold scales, its mane a living blaze. Each hoof fall boomed, scattering frost into vapor. Months of hand-feeding deep inside the Beastwood had thickened its muscles and broadened its chest. Now its aura surged at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven.

The gold flames wreathing its body were not mortal fire. They carried a thimble of the world's first flame—a power that reduced ice to steam the instant it touched the air.

Sensing its master's peril and the

two juggernauts closing in, the unicorn reared. A pillar of gold fire-wide as a city gate-erupted from its jaws and shot toward the war axe Malcolm Tronnidge was, bringing down. At the same breath it flared outward, weaving a burning rampart before Jared.

"BOOM!"

The pillar met the ice-blue axe head-on. Extreme heat collided with murderous.cold. The detonation tore a crater into the glacier, vaporizing a lake of ice before flash-freezing the steam into jagged white shards that rained back to earth.

A cyclone tens of yards wide spun outward, scarring the tundra in rings of melted

glass and new frost.

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The unicorn grunted, staggering back a few paces; its once-dazzling flames flickered, proof that Montar's full-force strike had not been gentle.

Even as it reset its stance, Glacern's fabled Netherfrost Spike sliced through the flaming barricade like a rumor through silence, arrowing straight for Jared's brow.

The unicorn roared again, hurling its body forward, but speed was not on its side.

In that sliver of heart-pounding time, resolve flashed across Jared's eyes like a blade catching sunrise.

He dropped every conventional defense, clasped his sword with both hands, and summoned to mind the ancient, storm-worn legacy Maxwell had etched into him within the Void Passage.

He had never fully unraveled that scripture, yet on the knife-edge of death, partial understanding would have to be enough.

Chaotic celestial energy coursed along the technique's hidden meridians, and a sword intent fierce beyond measure burst from his spine.

"Void Slash!" he howled.

The Dragonslayer Sword carved an incomprehensible arc.

There was no gleam, no clangor of released energy—only the naked will to cut, to unmake.

The stroke sought no substance, no force; it sliced at the very threads binding cause to effect.

A single crystalline chime rang out.

A faint, brittle snap cracked through the vaulted darkness.

The Netherfrost Spike—a shard of killing ice—halted three inches from Jared's forehead, suspended as if the night itself had forgotten to breathe.

In the same heartbeat, Jared's sword carved through the unseen filament—an ice-law tether binding weapon to master—and sliced it clean.

Robbed of command, the spike shattered, scattering into primal frost-energy that hissed away on the wind.

"What?"

For the first time, Glacern's composure cracked; shock flooded his eyes. "You-how did you sever my technique? What sorcery of the blade is that?"

Montar stood dumbstruck. Never in his brutal life had he witnessed such a ghostly technique.

The moment the stroke ended, color drained from Jared's face; he swayed, lungs heaving for air, every muscle trembling like a bowstring ready to snap.

He had forcefully activated a sword art still half-learned, then dared cleave a law forged by a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Eight. The backlash battered him mercilessly. Strength bled away. Even his soul screamed with a tearing ache.

The little unicorn nudged Ethan's leg, emitting a low, wounded whine.

Clara dragged herself upright, staggered forward, and caught his collapsing frame. Tears streamed. "Sir!"

Even Vermilion's eyes reddened; he planted himself before Jared, demonic essence flaring, ready to die shielding his friend.

"Hmph—an arrow already spent. Whatever trick that sword art is, you die today. Such power must never fall into outsiders' hands."

Glacern quickly regained his composure.

Montar bared his teeth in a grin. "Come on, boy-show us the rest of your bag of tricks. I want to see how many breaths you have left."

Together, the two closed in, their killing intent sharp enough to chill the air.

Jared's gaze flicked from the advancing predators to Clara's wounded form, to Vermilion's trembling back, and finally to the small fire unicorn's desperate eyes. A wave of helplessness surged inside him.

Is this truly where I'm going to die? Selene still needs her lifeline, Mr. Sterling is still trapped, and promises I forged with blood remain unpaid. I cannot accept this.

Jared's eyes ignited with reckless fire. "I'll fight to the death!"

He drew upon the spark of his own origin, ready to burn everything for one last strike.

Yet in that instant, a voice sounded.

"Stop."

The words drifted from deep within the palace, a woman's tone clear, cool, and unworldly. Though no louder than a whisper, it rang in every ear with a quiet authority that allowed no argument.

Montar and Glacern froze mid-step, shock, confusion, and even a flicker of fear chasing across their faces.

Jared, too, paused and turned toward the sound.

Atop the tallest, thousand-foot main

hall, a white silhouette had appeared when, none could say She wore a simple snow-silk gown that fluttered gently, making her seem set apart from aurora and night alike, an existence untouched by the mortal world.

She looked no older than twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Her beauty was arresting-skin whiter than new snow, features painted with the precision of a master yet a hush of winter sorrow draped her like a veil.

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A wraithlike aura drifted around her, weaving so completely into the

swirlingst that no one could say

where the blizzard ended and the woman began, and still every

instinct warned that her depths were bottomless.

Suspended above the marble floor, she glided forward, descending from the summit

of the vaulted roof as though a staircase of pure nothingness unfolded beneath each step.

With every whisper-light footfall, a crystalline lotus of ice burst open, cradling her flawless feet before dissolving to mist.

Within the span of a few heartbeats, she drifted through the archway and came to rest between Charles and the two armored generals.

Montar and Glacern dropped to one knee, armor clinking against marble. "Your Grace! You should not have broken the seclusion. Rabble like this is ours to finish."

Your Grace?

A jolt shot through Jared's chest, leaving his heart hammering in the sudden hush. Could this composed, ice-wreathed beauty truly rule Northern Abyss Palace?

She ignored her kneeling generals. Instead her gaze slid to Jared—more precisely to the sword in his grasp and to the lingering curl of sword intent that still shimmered around him.

Her eyes were winter itself, yet the instant they brushed that intent, they quivered, hairline fractures racing across the frozen calm.

Inside those sapphire depths a storm erupted—shock, disbelief, yearning, pain, fragile hope—all colliding like waves beneath a cracking glacier.

Her voice trembled as she stared at Jared. "You... That sword art you just used—where did it come from?"

The question blindsided Jared, and he blinked, unsure how much to reveal.

"That technique was taught to me by a senior swordsman."

"What is his name? Where can I find him?" Her words cut sharper, and she stepped closer, urgency bleeding through the ice of her composure.

"He calls himself Maxwell Sterling," Jared said after a breath. "He is trapped in a peculiar fracture of the void, and I stumbled in by chance. There, he passed his sword art to me."

He left unspoken the secrets of Dragon Sect and the fact that Maxwell had once been one of its hall masters.

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"Maxwell Sterling..." Her slender frame swayed. Tears shimmered in her eyes, only to freeze at once and fall as tiny shards of ice.

"He's alive? Is he truly... still alive?"

"Yes. He lives, but remains confined, unable to break free."

"Impossible! Maxwell violated the Celestial Clan's strictest decree and..."

Glacern shot a glance at the woman, throat tightening. "The clan leader himself destroyed him. His very soul was meant to be dust. Kid, don't you dare spin lies to her!"

Jared lifted his chin and met the woman's glacial stare without flinching. "I have not lied. Mr. Sterling himself told me the Celestial chieftain hurled him into a sliver of the void, condemning him to eternal imprisonment. Were it not for his peerless skill and the protective arts guarding his soul, he would have perished ages ago."

The woman closed her eyes, letting the silence swell until even the torches seemed to hold their breath.

When she opened them again, the gale behind her gaze had quieted, returning to its earlier frost, though deep inside lay a tangle of emotion impossible to name.

"All of you, withdraw," the palace leader said, her tone brooking no dissent as she flicked a glance at Glacern, Montar, and at the Celestial warriors crowding the archway.

"Your Grace!" Montar cried, alarm edging his voice. "This stranger trespassed upon our sacred ground, killed our warriors he must not be spared! And his claims could still be lies. The fate of Mr. Sterling is a Celestial taboo."

Her reply came soft yet immovable. "I said, withdraw."

The words carried a weight that pressed upon the bones, brooking no challenge.

Montar and Glacern traded looks heavy with frustration, yet neither dared defy her command. They bowed in unison. Gathering the warriors, they melted into the palace's darker corridors until only echoes remained.

In the emptied chamber, only Jared, his two traveling companions, and the enigmatic palace leader remained. Her gaze returned to Jared, no longer judging, but studying with an emotion he could not yet read.

"Your name is Jared?" she asked, the question rolling off her tongue like a stone skipped across ice.

"It is," Jared replied with a steady nod.

"You claim Maxwell still lives—what proof do you carry?" Her eyes pinned him, unblinking.

Jared considered for a moment, then said, "When Mr. Sterling taught me his sword art, he left a sliver of his lifebound sword intent within me. He instructed that I reveal it only to one I could trust."

Summoning the last threads of his fading chaotic celestial energy, Jared fed them into the Dragonslayer Sword and recalled the cadence of Maxwell's teaching.

The blade trembled. From its steel rose a hair-thin strand of argent light—so pure, so absolute, it seemed forged to sever every law and roam unchained across creation. The wisp was fragile as dew and could vanish at a breath, yet its flavor was unmistakable.

At the sight, the palace leader jolted as though struck, staggering half a step; her face drained to snow-white in an instant.

She lifted a trembling hand toward the silver filament, halting a hair's breadth away, afraid the vision might shatter if she touched it.

"It truly is him... his sword intent... Millennia have passed. I thought you were long... long..."

Tears finally broke free, yet before they could fall, they froze upon her cheeks as flawless beads of ice.

Jared let the argent thread fade back into the steel and lowered the sword, standing quietly.

He could feel, as surely as a heartbeat, that this woman and Maxwell shared a history carved into the marrow of their souls.

After a long moment, she smoothed the tears away, the frost returning to her features, though her eyes now carried a gentle warmth.

"This hall is no place for such talk. Come with me," she said, turning toward a shadowed passage.

Her words were scarcely spoken before she pivoted, cloak whispering against the ice-laced floor, and strode toward the cavernous entrance of the palace.

Jared's eyes drifted from Clara to Vermilion, then flicked toward the distant Blood-Soul Frostpool whose crimson mist churned like a wounded dream. "Māam my companion's life depends on the Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus that grows within that pool. Could you—would you—let us retrieve it?"

At the threshold, she halted, the hem of her robe settling with a sigh of silk, yet she never bothered to glance back. "The lotus will be discussed later. For now, follow me. I have questions—and there are truths you need to hear."

Her voice admitted no room for dissent.

A hush held him for half a heartbeat before he turned to Clara and Vermilion, resolve settling behind his eyes. "Let's go."

The trio fell in behind her, crossing the threshold into a realm carved entirely from living ice.

Beyond the soaring archway stretched an avenue of glimmering crystal, flanked by statues chiseled from frost and lamp-pillars whose pale hearts glowed like captured dawns.

Bridges of ice laced one hall to another, while silent waterfalls hung mid-cascade, frozen ribbons that caught and fractured the dim light into shards of cold color.

Occasionally, celestial warriors appeared on patrol, their armor singing faintly against the marble-ice. They bowed to the woman yet sent curious, wary, sometimes hostile glances at Jared's party, held in check by her unquestioned authority.

At last, she stopped before a smaller but exquisitely wrought side hall whose doors opened soundlessly at her presence.

Within, a single table of pure ice and several translucent chairs waited in pristine stillness. Mirror-smooth walls reflected the four arrivals as though the room itself were a sentinel taking note.

The palace leader raised one immaculate hand in a simple, unmistakable command. "Sit."

She claimed the central seat, leaving the others little choice but to settle opposite her, the faint creak of frost the only sound in the chamber.

Once their movements stilled, her gaze found Jared with surgical precision. "Begin. Tell me everything you know about Maxwell, every fragment-no omissions, no excuses."

Jared nodded, drew a measured

breath, and began: how an accident

in the void corridor had hurled him

into Maxwell's prison, the void

passage; how the ancient

swordsman had granted him legacy and guidance. He kept one piece hidden-the matter of the Dragon Sect.

The palace leader listened in perfect stillness, yet her clasped hands whitened at

the knuckles, and the quiver of her lashes betrayed a storm her face refused to show.

When Jared spoke of Maxwell enduring millennia of tearing space, nursing only the hope of word reaching his friends and relatives, she closed her eyes, drew several shaky breaths, and wrestled her grief back into its cage.

"Did he did he speak of me by name?"

She opened her eyes again; a fragile expectancy shimmered there, daring the world to give her hope.

Jared sifted through the recollection, then slowly shook his head. "Mr. Sterling never spoke a name. He only asked that, if chance allowed, I find ascertain celestial, tell them he still lives, and beg them not to seek vengeance only to live well."

Jared improvised the tale as he went, having long sensed that something unspoken bound the palace leader to Maxwell.

Perhaps lovers, perhaps allies-whatever they had been, their history was anything but simple.

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Lady Aurora's shoulders quivered. A sorrowful smile tugged at her lips, brittle as frost clinging to a dying leaf. "No revenge," she whispered, each syllable a shiver of air. "Live-live well. Maxwell, you are still the same fool."

After a long, weight-heavy silence, she turned back to Jared, her gaze dark and searching. "Tell me," she asked, voice scarcely more than a breath, "do you know what I am to Maxwell?"

Jared answered only with a wordless shake of the head.

"We were lovers." The confession floated from her throat as though cut from her soul with a silver knife. "Ten millennia ago, I was the celestials' holy maiden, and he —he was their peerless prodigy of the sword. We might have become the envy of every realm but..." Her stare turned to ice, fury swirling beneath the glaze. "Our clan binds its holy maiden to eternal chastity. She must remain untouched, a vessel for the Frost Deity-no husband, no union, no clandestine heartbeat for any man. Maxwell defied that iron law for me." Her fingers curled, nails drawing tiny crescents in her palm. "He planned our escape, swore to

steal me into the void. When the Patriarch learned of it, lightning fell. Maxwell shielded me, embracing nearly the full punishment so I might live. In the aftermath, I was stripped of the saint's diadem and exiled to this bleak Northern Abyss. I raised North Sea Palace with my own hands— yet in truth, I severed every tie to that heartless clan. A public decree claimed the Patriarch obliterated Maxwell's very soul as a warning to the rest. I searched for thousands of years. Not a trace. At last, I had to believe he truly..." Her voice fractured. No more words would come.

Love so fierce it broke commandments, so brave it shattered lives... A hush fell over the frozen hall. Jared's chest tightened, struck by the tragic grandeur of what he had just heard. Even Clara and the usually impassive Vermilion bowed their heads, hearts caught in the tale's cruel beauty.

"Across these long centuries," Aurora said, embers igniting behind her eyes, "I have breathed only to avenge him—tear down those merciless laws, dethrone the Patriarch who chained him. But my strength is a lone candle. Though I founded this palace, the celestials still watch every flicker. I have had to wait, gathering power grain by grain." She looked at Jared, something like sunrise softening the storm. "You bring word that he yet lives. Nothing in the world means more to me."

Jared lowered his head. "You once taught me, my lady. Passing the news was only my duty."

Aurora studied him. "You spoke of claiming a Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus to save a friend—did I hear correctly?"

"Yes," Jared said at once. He sketched the plight of Vermilion and Selene—how one lay poisoned, how the other slept in crystal stasis beneath moonlit ice.

Aurora nodded slowly. "A rare bloom, but to me of little consequence. I can grant it, and I can unseal the protection array guarding the frostpool outside."

Vermilion's eyes flared crimson with delight; he nearly rose to prostrate himself before her.

"However," Aurora continued, voice turning to tempered steel, "there is a price." Jared felt a chill slide down his spine. "Name it."

"First," she said, unwavering, "I need the precise location of your void passage and the method to open it. When fortune allows, I will step through and stand before Maxwell myself."

Jared weighed her request, then bowed. "I will share all I know. Yet the passage lurks in lethal turbulence, and even I cannot promise safe entry a second time Maxwell now lingers as a mere wisp of spirit—if he lingers at all."

Back then, to save Jared from the boiling maw of the void, Maxwell did the unthinkable. He tore himself clear of the swirling corridor and hurled Jared to safety,

and the recoil shattered Maxwell's soul into drifting embers.

Jared could never speak of that sacrifice. If Lady Aurora learned the whole truth, her fragile calm might snap and turn to sudden fury.

"I know how dangerous it is, yet I still have to go."

"A century of yearning," Lady Aurora cut in, her snowy lashes quivering, "and I must see with my own eyes that he still lives. As for

danger believe me, my countermeasures are in place. Second," she went on, "because you now bear Maxwell's legacy, you are, in spirit, his disciple. Promise me

that when your

strength at last

suffices, you will find a way to break

the chains that hold him. If fate allows, strike down the celestials' rotten laws so that lovers are never again condemned to such torment."

Jared dipped his head in solemn agreement. Truth be told, he had longed to cross blades with the clan leader of the celestials. His power was lacking now, but that would not, always be go. Even today, of thate ge arrogant ruler stood before him, Jared would not hesitate to curse him to his face. Should the clan

leader dare strike, Mr. Sanders

would emerge from the

shadows-and then the so-called

celestials would be finished.

"I give you my word."

"When I am strong enough, I will stride into the celestials' sacred court and demand Maxwell's release. If the clan leader refuses, I'll beat him until he agrees. Any decrees that shackle the innocent will be smashed, one by one."

"Good—such spirit!" Admiration flickered through Lady Aurora's pale eyes. "No wonder Maxwell chose you."

She sobered. "But for now, you remain too weak, and you know far too little of the clan. Rushing in blindly would be suicide."

She opened her gloved hands. "Use this moment. Whatever you wish to know about the celestials, ask, and I will answer."

A Warrior Undefeatable

Jared straightened, a spark of hope igniting behind his weary eyes. This was exactly what he needed.

"Lady Aurora, what exactly are the celestials? Why are they so proud-so closed to every outsider? How vast is their strength, and what realm has their clan leader reached?"

Lady Aurora gathered her thoughts, letting the hush of the icy hall settle before she began.

"The celestials is no single bloodline," she said softly. "It is an ancient, sprawling alliance." They claim descent from primordial gods and demons. Their veins carry a spark of divinity, allowing them to master the laws faster than any mortal race and to live far longer. That blessing has hardened into arrogance. They view every other race as 'common'-as lesser beings. Within the clan, there are many branches. I was born of the Frost Deity Branch, masters of ice. There are also the Flame, Storm, and Verdant branches, each wielding its own dominion. Together, those branches elect a single emperor, aided by an elder council and the Celestial General Hall. The current emperor has ruled for more than 30,000 years. His cultivation is unfathomable at least the Golden Immortal Realm.

Jared's breath caught. Golden Immortal Realm!

Jared's field of vision tightened, the world collapsing to a single bright pinprick as his pupils shrank in a reflex born of equal parts alarm and wonder.

He reviewed the cosmic hierarchy he had only recently memorized. Above the heavenly immortals stood the high immortals, and ascended beyond even them were the earthly immortals. Yet earthly immortals were themselves but stepping-stones. Beyond that impossible summit waited the golden immortals-beings who could roam an entire realm at will, carve out their own order, and found a lineage that might endure for epochs.

The thought alone sent a throb of pain behind his temples. In his current state, a single high immortal could erase him with a flicker of power. Golden immortal He dared not picture it-unless, perhaps, Mr. Sanders chose to intervene.

Regardless, Maxwell still had to be rescued. The man was a hall master of the Dragon Sect, and Jared would not abandon him to whatever cage the enemy had forged.

"The celestials' xenophobia is two-fold," Lady Aurora said, her voice edged with frost. "They cling to the arrogance of their bloodline, and they guard a stockpile of ancient secrets they fear the outside world might plunder. To preserve the 'purity' of their descendants, intermarriage is forbidden-doubly so for someone of my station. The rules they impose on a holy maiden would make even stone flinch. What happened to Maxwell is one tragedy among countless others enacted over the last century."

Jared wet his lips. "Then this Northern Abyss Celestial Clan—what of them?"

"My so-called Northern Abyss branch is a banner I raised after arriving on these ice plains." Aurora's smile held no warmth. "I gathered those who were discontent-or simply out of favor and forged a faction of our own. Officially, we remain a subsidiary, obliged to bow to the main clan. In truth, our hearts drift elsewhere, and the clan elders know it. Your relentless advance today has surely reached their ears already."

A chill coiled in Jared's gut. If the main body of the celestials turns its gaze this way, we are finished.

Aurora read the worry in his eyes and waved it aside. "Calm yourself. Their pride will keep them idle for a time; they will fault my palace long before they lift a finger themselves. And I possess more than one hidden card. Even if they send envoys, I can bargain for space."

"What matters now," she continued, "is that you grow stronger. Your technique is boundless, tinged with the dragon's power, but your realm is far too low. Against a true champion of the celestials, you would be little more than a glowing ember in a blizzard."

"I understand," Jared replied. "Once we secure the blood lotus, I will head for level eleven. I need Jadeheart Marrow-and any chance to break my current shackles."

"Level eleven Aurora's gaze

drifted

to the storm it horizon. "It is fiercer than level ten, its treasures more heavily contested. But given your potential the risk may be worth it. Northern Abyss Palace maintains several covert outposts there. Present yourself, and they will lend what aid they can."

level ten

"Beyond level ten lies a realm so fierce that even the void itself bites," Lady Aurora said, fingers drumming the armrest as though playing out silent Calculations. "Resources there are scarce, and every scrap is fought over with blood. Yet your strength, Jared, and the promise coiled inside you like a waking dragon, give you a

fair chance to survive-and perhaps

fo

you. to flourish should you choose to step through that that storm. My Northern Abyss Palace keeps a handful of covert outposts up there. Present this emblem, and you will find doors unlatched, information shared, and a measure of aid extended."

With a flick of her snow-pale wrist, Aurora produced a rhombic sigil the color of glacial dawn. The token hovered above her palm for an instant, chilling the air, before she set it gently into Jared's hands. "This is the Northern Abyssal Token; carry it, and my outposts will answer."

The metal bit cold, almost painfully so, as Jared closed his fingers around it. An archaic 'Abyss' rune glimmered on the face; the reverse bloomed with interlocking snowflake sigils that seemed to breathe frost.

Jared bowed, stowing the emblem as though it were a live ember. "My deepest thanks, Lady Aurora."

He knew Aurora's might could have carried her into level eleven, even level twelve, with ease. That she remained in this frozen palace could only be the decree of the celestials themselves, chaining her brilliance to one lonely post.

"Gratitude is unnecessary," she replied, a rare warmth softening the silver in her voice. "You inherit Maxwell's legacy. That makes you, in effect, family."

Aurora's manner eased further, like a thaw spreading across ice. "Rest here tonight," she said. "I shall have healing draughts sent."

"At first light, we will harvest the Blood Lotus, and I will brief you on every peril level eleven conceals."

She rose, robes whispering like snowfall. "Rest well."

As she turned, Jared's guilt caught him by the throat. He stepped forward, voice low. "Lady Aurora, I did not know. I have slain many of your palace's disciples. I—"

She raised a hand, stilling the confession mid-sentence. "It matters not."

With a gentle sweep of her palm, a translucent dome brightened at the room's edge. Inside, the very disciples Jared had cut down lay in perfect repose, as though merely dreaming. Even the third celestial general Celladik, rested among w them. "Fear not," Aurora's voice drifted over his shock. "Within these ice plains, their spirits cannot perish; in time they will rise again."

Having spoken, she glided away, leaving Jared, Vermilion, and Clara alone in the

hushed side-hall.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Vermilion Demon Lord nearly vibrated with excitement, crimson aura flickering around him. "Jared, this is splendid! The Blood Lotus is within reach at last!"

Jared answered with a sharp nod, hope lighting his tired eyes. "Yes."

Moments later, several celestial handmaids drifted in, each bearing a tray.

The trays gleamed under torchlight, crowded with crystal pills whose fragrance rolled like fresh snow-air, alongside fruits native to the frozen waste and a steaming pot of spirit tea.

"By the lady's order, please heal and rest without worry."

Bowing in silence, the maids arranged the offerings and withdrew as softly as they had come.

Vermilion uncorked one vial, letting the aroma billow. His battle-worn blood immediately stilled. "Top-tier medicine," he murmured, admiration sneaking into his gruff tone. "Lady Aurora is more considerate than I guessed."

Clara selected a single pill, settled cross-legged, and closed her eyes, letting its warmth thread through her meridians.

Her wounds were not grave; the true threat was the chill of the Netherfrost Thread still gnawing at her channels, a cold that would take patience to melt.

Jared swallowed a recovery pill of his own, then eyed the remaining bottles. "Vermilion, these pills are gentle yet potent-exactly what you need to restore your injuries."

Vermilion Demon Lord lowered himself onto the crystalline floor, crimson vapors coiling around his frame like living smoke. He had no time for courtesy. Selene's life still hung on the blood lotus, and every heartbeat squandered invited another shade of danger.

The small fire unicorn sprawled beside Jared's boots, its flanks rising and falling in weary, shallow breaths. Moments earlier, it had traded a ferocious blow with Montar, and the effort had dimmed its golden flames to a trembling ember.

Jared ran a slow, calming hand over the creature's scaled brow, slipping a thread of chaotic celestial power into its core so the ember could kindle anew.

The little beast nuzzled his palm, humming a soft, contented purr that vibrated in the chilled air.

That night, the three of them sat in a side hall wrapped in silence, each mending wounds by the faint light of suspended frost-lanterns.

Outside, patrols stamped past in practiced rhythm while an endless blizzard howled across the ice plains beyond the walls.

As Jared guided energy through fractured meridians, Lady Aurora's earlier revelations replayed in his thoughts like distant thunder.

Celestials. Divine Emperor. Golden Immortal Realm. Hatreds that had fermented for ten thousand years-names and numbers heavy enough to bend the spine.

For the first time, he saw the celestials with fearful clarity, and the weight of that vision pressed against his chest.

Golden Immortal Realm-power so high he could not even glimpse its summit.

He stood at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One. Yes, he could outfight peers and even cleave through an opponent at the top of Level Eight, but before a Golden Immortal, he doubted he could withstand even the echo of a careless breath.

I am still far too weak. Level eleven must be reached. Only there can I climb faster- claim Jadeheart Marrow Milk, find the Nine-Orifice Divine Soul Herb, and, above all, seize the chance to break through.

His chaotic celestial energy held every affinity, yet those very depths demanded rarer insight and rarer fuel whenever the next barrier loomed.

He could feel the wall of Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Two beneath his fingertips, solid yet fragile, as though one missing puzzle piece kept the gate from yielding.

At dawn, when the first pale shard of light slipped through the ice-crystal lattice, Jared opened his eyes—and the hall, for one poised moment, exhaled with him.

Just then, the great doors drifted apart without a sound. Lady Aurora stood framed in the archway. She still wore an unadorned white gown, but her hair was now coiled with precise grace; last night's grief had cooled into an austere, regal calm. "Did you rest well?"

"Your elixir worked wonders, Lady Aurora. I'm fit to travel again."

"Good. Come with me. I will take you to the frostpool."

Jared, Clara, and Vermilion fell in behind her at once.

She brought no entourage save four serene celestial handmaidens whose auras pulsed like buried glaciers. Together they threaded through alabaster corridors, angling toward three jagged ice peaks that loomed behind the palace complex.

Every guard and servant they passed bowed low to Lady Aurora. Their eyes, however, slid toward the three outsiders—shining with

curiosity, edged with wariness.

Bright with speculation. News of the Palace Master's midnight guests had clearly raced ahead of them.

They exited a secluded side gate. Beyond lay a sunken basin, and only a few hundred paces farther, the Blood-Soul Frostpool waited—dark and still.

Day had fully broken; the night's aurora had retreated, leaving the ice plain draped in ash-gray light. Three sky-piercing ice peaks stood like silent titans around the basin. The pool itself shimmered a deep arterial crimson, and on its rim a single blood-lotus bud quivered in the chill breeze, rounder and richer than it had been the night before.

"The blood lotus is about to bloom," Lady Aurora murmured, eyes locked on the swelling bud. "It opens for only three days. Your timing, it seems, is impeccable."

Vermilion trembled from horn to heel, staring at the lotus as if salvation itself pulsed inside those petals.

But her voice sharpened like a blade sliding from its sheath.

"My permission alone will not let you pluck it."

"What obstacle remains, my lady?"

Aurora's voice drifted across the frost-bitten basin, low yet carrying the unmistakable authority of a verdict. "The Blood-Soul Frostpool was born of pure, murderous negative energy. Any ordinary stalk would have withered in an instant, yet this Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus chose to flourish here—proof it is no common bloom. And make no mistake." Her pale eyes shimmered like hoarfrost. "The lotus is not masterless. It has a guardian all its own."

"A guardian?" Jared, Clara, and Vermilion echoed at once, their gazes whipping toward the frostpool.

The surface lay utterly still, no ripple, no breath of wind—merely a dark crimson sheen that hinted at poison beneath, and a cold so vicious it seemed to gnaw straight through bone.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Not in the water." Aurora shook her head, then lifted one gloved hand toward the tallest of three jagged ice spires. "There."

Following her gesture, Jared squinted up the sheer wall of frost. Halfway to the summit, a cavern of blue ice yawned, its mouth obscured by swirling mist that never dispersed.

That mist carried a presence—subtle, ancient, and vast. It seeped out in slow breaths, coiling round them with the oppressive majesty of something that had ruled these wastes long before mortal memory.

Cold, feral, imperious—the aura rumbled with a bestial violence barely held in check, like winter itself deciding whether the intruders were worth sparing.

"What..... is that?" Jared's pupils constricted, heartbeat thundering inside his ears.

"The ice soul blood lotus guardian spirit beast," Aurora answered, every syllable turning the freezing air brittle. "One of the original natives of Eternal Ice Plains. For more than a thousand years, it has watched over the lotus. The two exist in symbiosis: the flower drinks in venomous chill and iron-rich lifeblood from the earth, while the beast cultivates on the lotus's distilled frost essence. If we wish to harvest the lotus, we must secure its permission—or defeat it outright."

Vermilion's face blanched. "Defeat it? Then... how strong is that creature?"

Aurora glanced sideways at him. "When I first stepped onto this tundra several millennia ago, it already stood at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven. Where it ranks now... Even I cannot say."

Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven, several millennia ago! The thought struck like a shard of black ice.

Vermilion inhaled sharply, the ember of hope in his chest snuffed out before it could warm him.

A being of that caliber—Aurora herself might wrestle with it for days, and the three of them together would be snowflakes against a glacier.

Jared's brow knit into a hard line.

Level Seven back then... If it has advanced even one rank since, we're talking Level Eight or Nine—perhaps higher. I can push my limits to feel an upper Level Eight and dance with a Nine, but anything beyond... would swallow every trick I possess and still come for

more. Worse, spirit beasts at equal rank already outmatch human cultivators in raw brutality.

"Lady Aurora, there has to be another way," Clara blurted, her voice a brittle chime in the stillness.

"There is." Aurora inclined her head. "I may attempt parley—offer treasures of equal worth. Yet the creature is proud, volatile, and bound to the lotus by a bond forged over centuries. It may refuse outright, and if it does..."

Lady Aurora's voice rang out, cool and precise. "What that beast despises above all is the mortal taint clinging to human cultivators. Yesterday, your group hacked its way here, blood mist billowing into the heavens. It sensed you instantly. The only reason it kept its claw was out of respect for me."

Jared fell silent for a heartbeat, his breath fogging in the frigid air. "And if the attempt at parley fails?"

"Then, Jared, your fate will rest on your own shoulders."

A thin smile ghosted across her lips. "I can suppress the barrier encircling the frostpool long enough for you to slip into the basin. Whether you pluck the blood lotus or perish beneath the ice depends entirely on your skill."

Unable to hold back, Vermilion barked, "Lady Aurora, can't you fight beside him?"

She shook her head, silver locks

chiming against her pauldrons. "The beast and I struck a pact long ago—non-interference. It guards the blood fots while I keep my bo

outside the basin. I command Northern Abyss Palace, and it spares my people. Should I break that covenant, its fury could grind the palace to frozen rubble."

Her gaze shifted to Jared, keen as moonlight on steel. "Know this—the guardian carries a trace of Ancient Frost-Drake blood. It is not pure, yet still formidable. Dragon's power—or any divine-beast aura—stings its senses like fire. If you possess such a card, play it now."

Ancient Frost-Drake blood... dragon's power... I carry the pure Golden Dragon bloodline. Spirit beast or divine beast—before Golden Dragon, they should kneel. The power inside me isn't fully awakened, yet authenticity may outweigh sheer force. I have to try.

"I understand."

Jared drew a deep breath, resolve kindling behind amber irises. "Lady Aurora, open the array. I will meet the spirit beast."

"Jared!" Vermilion blurted, panic flaring. "That creature stands above level five of the True Immortal Realm. You-"

"This is our only chance," Jared cut in. "Whatever happens, I must attempt it. Selene cannot wait much longer."

Vermilion's mouth opened, closed, then opened again, ending in a long, resigned sigh. He slapped Jared's shoulder hard enough to rattle his bones. "Be careful... If the odds turn impossible, retreat at once. We'll find another cure for Selene."

Clara's concern glittered like frost in her eyes. "Please... come back to us alive." Jared nodded to them both, then crouched to rub the small fire unicorn's blazing- warm head. "Little one, I may need your help."

The creature nuzzled his palm, ember-maned, and loosed a low, eager growl— battle lust incarnate.

Lady Aurora's eyes softened with a flash of approval. "You have courage. If the fight turns hopeless, fall back to the basin's edge. I will reactivate the barrier and shelter you-for a time."

With that, she raised both hands and wove sigils, murmuring words older than winter. An ice-blue rune blossomed on her brow.

A deep hum rolled through the valley, reverberating like a glacier groaning in its sleep.

The colossal ward shrouding the basin rippled an ocean of cerulean light disturbed by unseen wind. Directly before Jared, the veil parted, peeling back into a slim fissure just wide enough for one body.

From that slit poured air so bitterly cold and rank with iron that Jared shuddered despite himself.

"Go," Lady Aurora whispered.

Jared offered Vermilion and Clara a final nod, saluted Lady Aurora, then became a streak of golden light as he slipped through the gap and vanished into the frozen basin.

The small fire unicorn loosed a deep, rumbling snarl that fluttered embers across its golden mane, then

bounded after Jared, metal-hardoet

hooves sparking against the mirror-slick ice. Behind him, the fracture in the array zipped shut like a reversed lightning bolt, erasing all trace of entry and leaving the barrier smooth, cold, and whole again. Outside that shimmering veil, Vermilion and Clara stood

rigid, shoulders squared, their eyes locked on the vanishing outline of Jared's back as though sight alone might haul him safely home. A few paces farther off, Lady Aurora waited in absolute stillness, gaze dark and distant, the faint lift of her chest the only sign that anything stirred beneath her snow-pale composure.

The instant Jared stepped into the basin, the temperature plummeted at least tenfold colder than the world outside—and the air slapped his cheeks like knives honed on midnight. Ice-deep chill gnawed at his bones, and even with chaotic celestial essence swirling around him, silvery threads of frost needled past the shield to bite his flesh. Beneath his boots, the ice was not clean white but veined with ghostly crimson, as though slow blood coursed in secret channels beneath the frozen skin. A coppery reek mingled with an acrid, poisonous tang hung in the air; each breath felt

heavy, thick, and slow, stalling the flow of his essence the way tar snuffs a flame.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"That frostborne poison is brutal." Jared's voice slipped out in a hushed rasp, words fogging the frigid air.

Hold your breath, draw it inward, cut the lungs from the wind. Jared clamped down on his breathing, switching to an inner cycle that starved the toxin of entry.

The small fire unicorn faltered, clearly uncomfortable; fire-aligned beasts were always throttled by such cold. Even so, the proud little creature lifted its head and pressed close to Jared's flank, a corona of gold flame roaring along its scales, pushing a clear pocket of warmth around them both.

The basin was not vast—no more than a few hundred yards from rim to the frigid pool at its heart—yet each step felt like crossing an endless tundra.

Jared advanced with painstaking care, spiritual sense fanned wide, every flicker of movement, every shift of air, passing through his mind like signals across taut wire.

The nearer he drew, the clearer the Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus appeared. Nine crystal leaves, red as faceted rubies, stretched around the stem, their veins pulsing as if true blood pulsed within. At the center, the bud had already cracked, a shy slit revealing petals the color of fresh wine. A heady perfume—sweet, metallic, strangely inviting—floated on the cold, making his spirit quiver with exhilaration even as instinct whispered of lurking danger.

"It's almost in bloom." Jared's heart kicked with tight, bright urgency.

He quickened his pace, boots tapping over thin ice that pinged under the strain.

But when scarcely a hundred yards of killing ice remained between him and the pool

"Roar!" The sound detonated through the basin, so vast it seemed to rip clouds from the sky.

The bellow thundered from a cavern mouth halfway up the tallest ice peak—a savage birth-cry of some primordial behemoth waking after uncounted ages.

Sound-waves hammered the basin; the ice under Jared's feet spider-webbed with cracks that raced outward in frantic, splintering lines.

Then came the pressure-cold as polar oceans, heavy as collapsing stars-bursting from the cavern in a tidal flood that blanketed the entire hollow.

Under that weight, Jared felt like a paper boat hurled into a hurricane, every joint screaming that the next breath might tear him apart.

He grunted, forced chaotic essence outward, and a hazy gray shield congealed around him, allowing him-only barely-to keep his footing.

Uni dropped to a low crouch, legs trembling, golden blaze raging higher in defiance of the crushing aura.

"Heavenly Immortal Realm-Top Level Nine!" The words escaped Jared between clenched teeth, half awe, half warning to himself.

Jared's expression tightened despite himself. From the sheer weight of the unseen force pressing on his bones, he could already tell—the spirit beast lurking ahead possessed strength far beyond anything they had faced.

Booming thunder rolled through the cavern like stone grinding on stone, a deafening prelude to the terror about to reveal itself.

The curtain of frigid vapor guarding the cave entrance churned into a storm, as though some colossal heart were pushing against it from the dark within.

Then a shape-vast, sinuous-slowly probed out of the fissure, its silhouette hinting at a dragon's majesty.

No... not a true dragon. Jared realized with a chill, but something born of the same ancient blood.

Its head resembled a dragon's yet bore only a single horn, the entire crown cast in translucent ice-blue crystal.

Its body, thick as an anaconda, was masked in palm-sized sapphire scales that refracted a cruel, frosted light.

No claws clung beneath its belly, yet from either flank sprouted wings as thin as cicada membranes, almost invisible against the snow-pale air.

Stretching more than three hundred feet and thick as a manor wall, the creature coiled in midair like a glacier-hewn mountain newly given life.

Ice-blue pupils, each the size of a lantern, sliced downward, studying Jared and the small fire unicorn with a mixture of contempt, scrutiny, and violated rage.

An ancient aberration—the Frostdrake.

Not of pure dragon stock, yet carrying a sliver of that royal blood, it wielded the absolute law of ice-power that froze hope itself.

"Human... and a little fire unicorn?" the Frostdrake rumbled, each word rasping like glaciers grinding. "It has been tens of millennia since any mortal dared trespass upon my domain," the creature hissed, its voice the screech of ice upon ice. "Did that little girl fail to explain the rules?"

The "little girl" could only be Lady Aurora—the palace mistress who had guided them this far.

Given the beast's tens-of-thousands-year lifespan, calling her a girl was, unfortunately, accurate.

Summoning every shred of will to stand beneath that crushing aura, Jared clasped his fists in formal salute. Senior, my name is Jared Chance. Tintrude only out of desperation. A loved one's life hangs in the Thousand-Year Frostblood Lotus within your care. I beg your leniency and will trade treasures of equal worth.

"Save someone?" the Frostdrake echoed, mirthless.

"The life of an ant concerns me, how?" it sneered, azure pupils flickering with scorn.

"That Lotus has grown beside me for ten thousand years—it is mine. Because the little girl permitted your entry, I grant you one mercy: leave now, and live."

His arrogance mirrored that of the two celestial generals Jared had faced the day before—cold, condescending, absolute.

"Senior, the Lotus is vital. I can offer artifacts in exchange—please reconsider." "Artifacts? Laughable. What could a lowly human possess? Leave, or I shall sample the flesh of a human cultivator and a unicorn alike."

Its vast tongue slithered over dagger-like teeth, predatory light blazing in its eyes.

The small fire unicorn sensed the threat, reared, and loosed a roar; golden flames erupted from its coat, baring fangs at the Frostdrake.

"It seems we have no more words to trade," Jared murmured.

Steel whispered free as he drew the Dragonslayer Sword, his gaze sharpening to a cutting edge.

"Oh? You would draw steel against me?" The Frostdrake's amusement rippled through the air.

One lowly Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One and a level seven unicorn dare challenge me? Admirable courage-yet utter folly.

A thunderous boom cut short its words as the creature's massive tail whipped through the cavern, hurling razor winds toward them.

A deafening blast cracked through the frozen sky, the kind of violent boom that makes a man's bones vibrate before his mind can register fear.

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From the heavens plunged a column of icy blue light, wider than any city gate and fashioned entirely from absolute cold. It looked like a sky-bone pillar shattering on descent, a cosmic lance aimed straight at Jared and the small fire unicorn. Wherever that frozen torrent passed, the very a fractured into hair-thin black fissures. Below the lake's surface flash-froze into a new sheet several feet thick, as though winter itself had slammed a hammer onto the world. The force behind that strike pushed far beyond

ordinary Heavenly Immortal power-this was the ferocity of a True Immortal made manifest.

"Move!" Jared barked, voice raw with urgency.

He skidded left while the small fire unicorn bounded right, their bodies blurring in opposite streaks just before the avalanche of cold reached them.

Another thunderous boom followed. The ice-bluet forrent struck the lake, and the world lurched. Ice cracked mountains rumbled, and a crater fifty yards across yawned open, its depths lost to darkness. From that pit surged a murderous chill that turned everything within a hundred yards into glittering crystal wasteland.

Jared escaped the center of the blast, yet the shock wave still punched through his chaotic celestial essence and churned his blood. He coughed hard, tasting iron. Beside him, the unicorn staggered; frigid mist gnawed its golden flames until they dulled toward ember-red.