

A Warrior Undefeatable 5861-5870

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"Not a slow reaction," the Frostdrake hissed, amusement curling around every word.

Its jaws gaped. A breath of condensed, law-woven ice poured forth—not flame but pure, merciless cold so dense it bent the surrounding light. That breath carved a warped cerulean corridor through the air and slammed toward Jared's chest in a blink.

"Golem Body!" Golden scales blossomed across Jared's frame as he forced every drop of chaotic essence outward, turning flesh and bone into living armor that shimmered like minted coins.

Across the ice, the unicorn roared and coughed up a beam of molten gold. Fire met frost with a vicious hiss, billowing white steam high as fortress walls. Yet the creature's holy flame faltered first. Inch by hard-won inch, the blue breath buried the fire, snuffed it, and kept advancing.

The advance ended against Jared's chaos-forged shield with a brutal crack. Spiderweb fractures raced across the barrier, then the whole shield exploded. An irresistible force hammered his ribs; he felt as though an ancient mountain had chosen him for target practice. Jared careened backward hundreds of feet before slamming into the ice. Blood sprayed from his lips—bright, steaming, flecked with glittering shards of frost.

The unicorn fared little better, tumbling across the frozen plain, scales splintering, its once-resplendent fire nearly out.

Two exchanges—no more—and both man and beast lay battered, perilously close

to defeat. Such was the might of a Top Level Nine Heavenly Immortal, terrible beyond words.

"Pathetic." The Frostdrake's voice carried the bored sigh of a predator denied decent sport.

Shaking its horned head, it studied the wounded pair with open contempt. "I thought I could at least stretch my muscles. Seems I overestimated you. Let's end this quickly."

Slowly, almost lazily, the colossal creature lifted one glacial claw. At its tips, five razor talons gleamed like sculpted ice, poised to descend and erase Jared from the frozen world.

One swipe from the monster's ice-blue talon would mash Jared Chance into a smear of torn flesh and shattered bone.

Outside the shimmering walls of the arcane array, Vermilion and Clara stared until their eyes burned. They flung themselves at the barrier, fists hammering uselessly against light that refused to yield, forced to watch in raw helpless terror.

Lady Aurora's brow tightened, the faintest shadow of concern sliding across her otherwise impassive face, yet she said nothing and let the moment hang like a sword above them all.

Cornered between life and death, a bright, manic glint burst in Jared's eyes—the look of a man willing to torch his own soul for a single breath more.

I will not die here—not today, not ever!

He bit through his tongue. A hot jet of blood splashed across the Dragonslayer Sword as his hands blurred through desperate seals. Within him, chaotic immortal force, the Chaotic Fire Lotus, and true dragon blood ignited, fusing into a single wild blaze.

"By my lifeblood, I summon my true name. By my very soul, I summon my true form. Chaos Dragonization-Golden Dragon Form!"

Jared's scream tore from his throat with an ancient, regal cadence that did not belong to any mortal tongue.

"Roar!"

A roar older, prouder, and more soul-shattering than the Frostdrake's own exploded from deep inside him, shaking the frozen basin to its roots.

This was no ghostly mirage.

It was the raw bellow of a primeval dragon echoing straight out of his blazing bloodline.

As the roar rolled outward, blinding gold light burst around Jared, bright enough to carve new dawns in the air.

That radiance was pure, holy, commanding an aura that stood above every beast ever born.

Within the glare, his body began to change.

Scales—minute, gold, and flawless—crawled across his skin in glittering waves.

His hands stretched into talons, each claw gleaming like a newly forged blade.

Two small yet impossibly dignified horns pushed through his brow, announcing a sovereign's birth.

A thick, powerful tail lashed from his spine and slapped the ice hard enough to spider-web the frozen ground.

His pupils narrowed into molten-gold slits-cold, imperious, and utterly dismissive of everything before them.

A dragon's might—older, purer, nobler than the Frostdrake's—rolled off him in tidal waves, flooding the basin in an instant.

Caught beneath that surge, the Frostdrake's once-overwhelming pressure melted like fresh snow beneath mid-summer sun.

The creature's raised claw froze in mid-air, unable or unwilling to fall.

Inside its vast, icy-blue eyes flickered disbelief, horror, and—far beneath—ancestral fear it could not name.

"Th-that... that's true draconic pressure!"

The Frostdrake's granite-deep roar cracked into a shuddering stammer. "Impossible! A mere human, yet your blood carries the unblemished lineage of a true dragon... Who-who are you?"

Jared-scale-armored and wreathed in molten-gold light-said nothing.

Power surged through every vein in his altered body, a tidal force that could rip mountains from their roots. Yet that same tide threatened to split flesh from bone and tear at the edges of his soul. He had invoked Chaos Dragonization a forbidden art that mimicked a sovereign dragon's form and roused the ancient blood sleeping inside him. The technique made him a living weapon-but only for a heartbeat in cosmic terms. He had to end this quickly or be consumed by his own awakening.

"Tell me," he rasped, each word scraping like steel across stone, the austere majesty of a dragon echoing behind the syllables, "am I now qualified to take the Blood Lotus?"

The Frostdrake's colossal frame

quivered. The feral gleam in its

vertical pupils guttered into net

dread. Even with a thread of

Frost-Drake ancestry, it could not lift its gaze beneath the crushing edict of a purer king. Like a vassal before his sovereign-like a mouse cornered by flame-eyed cat-the beasts instinct overrode pride. "You... you." The words collapsed into a low, strangled whine.

Slowly, the ice-plated leviathan lowered its mountain-long body, sprawled across the frozen lake, and pressed its horned head against the glassy floor in absolute submission.

Beyond the great array, Vermilion Demon Lord and Clara stared, spellbound. Even Lady Aurora, mistress of the palace, let awe flicker in her cool eyes. She whispered, "Such unadulterated draconic pressure... Maxwell, what sort of disciple have you chosen?"

Relief stirred in Jared's chest, but he strangled it before it could soften his focus. Not yet. Hold the form, finish the task. Maintaining the radiant Golden Dragon Form, he advanced—each step deliberate, taloned feet ringing softly against ancient ice. Behind him, the Frostdrake stayed flattened, muscles locked, too terrified even to breathe openly.

At the rim of the subterranean pool,

he beheld the prize: a

Thousand Year Frostblood Lotus. The bud was half-unfurled, crimson petals moist as fresh wounds, an intoxicating perfume drifting above the black-green water. He extended a clawed hand, severed foot and stem in a

reverent mation

and slipped the living treasure into a waiting jade-cold casket before

sealing the lid. The Frostdrake

watched in silence-sorrow

flickering through its gaze, reverence

eclipsing all else.

Task complete, Jared turned toward the basin's edge. A small fire-unicorn—limping yet unbowed—hobbled after him, awe shining in its ember eyes. Not until he stepped through the breached segment of the array did the Frostdrake dare raise its head. Its vast pupils followed the departing figure with a turmoil no tongue could

frame.

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"A true dragon walks the world again... the age is about to change," the Frostdrake murmured. Then it withdrew into its cavern. Icy mist rolled back across the entrance, erasing every trace of the encounter.

Outside the array, Jared finally released the Golden Dragon Form. Radiance winked out. He stood human once more—face paper-white, knees buckling beneath the sudden hollow where limitless strength had raged only moments before.

Jared stood swaying in the lingering haze of power he had just unleashed. The forbidden technique and the draconic pressure he forced into the air had gouged his reserves nearly dry, and only the ironclad toughness of his body—fortified by chaotic celestial energy—kept him from collapsing outright.

"Jared!" Vermilion shouted, his crimson cloak snapping behind him as he hurried forward and caught the staggering man by the shoulders. Clara arrived a heartbeat later, silvery hair plastered to her cheeks, her eyes bright with concern while she reached instinctively for Jared's wrist to feel the faint, ragged pulse.

Lady Aurora, who had been standing at the heart of the shattered array, let her pale hand fall. The glowing sigils around the hall winked out like dying stars. From her sleeve, she drew an ice-blue pill and pressed it into Jared's palm. "Swallow it. Your strength will return quickly." Jared did not hesitate. He tipped his head back, let the pill melt on his tongue, and felt its gentle yet immense medicine flow through every vein. Warmth spread like sunrise over frozen earth. Torn meridians knitted, frayed spirit threads rewoven, and the gaping emptiness inside him filled with clean, bright energy until his death-pale skin flushed with a faint, healthy red.

He clasped his hands to his chest and bowed. "My thanks, Lady Aurora."

She brushed away his gratitude with an airy flick. Her eyes drifted to the box Jared still carried. "The Blood Lotus is yours now. Return to the palace. Rest." With that, she turned. Silk robes whispered across the corridor as she escorted Jared and the others back through the archways of Northern Abyss Palace.

When their hostess vanished into inner chambers, Jared, Vermilion, and Clara withdrew to a quiet annex, a place of low lamps and cedar incense, to collect themselves.

Vermilion hugged the box to his chest, hands trembling so hard the lid rattled. Within lay the blood lotus—first real shard of hope after endless darkness. For him, that single bloom was dawn breaking across a night that had nearly swallowed them.

"Jared, the debt is beyond words," Vermilion said, then bent in a deep bow, the kind that set his crimson mantle sweeping over the stones. "If Selene is saved, it will be by your hand. I will remember this till my last breath. Whatever you ask of me—no matter the danger—I will answer."

"No, you overstate it. Selene's fate is bound to mine. The lotus is only the first step. We still need Jadeheart Marrow and the Nine-Orifice Divine Soul Herb. We'll keep moving."

Vermilion nodded gravely. "The Jadeheart Marrow lies in level eleven, the Nine- Orifice Divine Soul Herb in the Twelfth. Both are rarer than the lotus and twice as well guarded. Jared what will you do next?"

"First, level eleven," Jared answered without hesitation, his eyes steady as tempered steel. "Not only for Jadeheart Marrow. I have scores to settle there— wrongs I've carried too long." He thought of Soul Devourer, a shadow that still hung over every quiet moment. And of Malevolent Path Hall, where the spirits of Flaxseed's kin awaited justice.

At Jared's words, Clara's lashes flickered, a shimmer of reluctance passing through her pale eyes. She knew his road stretched far beyond the world her present strength could touch.

"Jared... please—be careful out there," she whispered, the words almost lost in the hush of incense.

"Clara, you take care as well. Mystic Sky Sword Sect still needs you, and Mr. Cloudridge needs your steadiness. Cultivate hard. When I finish things in level eleven, I may yet return to level ten."

She nodded fiercely, though light caught in her eyes like water trembling on glass.

Catching the intimacy of the moment, Vermilion cleared his throat and drifted to a far corner, pretending intense study of the blood lotus.

Jared drew Clara into his arms. In the quiet glow of moon-lamps, they joined their breathing, guiding their energies in the ancient art of paired cultivation. Every pulse of shared essence felt like a promise—because neither knew when fate would let them meet again. Clara met the moment with rare boldness, answering his touch with a fervor born of looming farewell. Dawn bled into dusk and again into dawn. At last, spent yet peaceful, Clara drifted into sleep against his shoulder, breath slow, smile soft.

Jared drew the Northern Abyssal Token from his sleeve and held it at eye level, as though a single glance might reveal every secret locked inside the ancient piece of artifact. The surface felt colder than winter water. It was neither metal nor gem, yet carried the patient weight of both. Across the front, the lone character for "Abyss" cut a bold, serpentine path, each brushstroke humming with threads of glacial law. He turned it over. On the reverse bloomed a labyrinth of interlocking snowflake sigils —an arcane recognition array waiting for the right hand to awaken it. "With this token," he murmured, voice low but steady, "I will at least have one safe foothold in level eleven." He slipped it inside his inner coat, as carefully as a priest sheathing a relic.

Half a day later, Clara sat upright again, her breath no longer ragged. Color warmed her cheeks, and the silver frost that once rimmed her lashes had fully melted away.

Jared rose in one fluid motion. "No point delaying," he said, every word crisp with resolve. "First, we escort Clara back to Mystic Sky Sword Sect. Then we carve a tunnel through the void and climb to level eleven."

Vermilion, the demon lord cloaked in red haze, nodded without a trace of argument.

Together, the three crossed the courtyard and offered their farewells to Lady Aurora.

The palace mistress kept her

counsel brief. She pressed three

bottles of healing pills and a device into Jared's palm-its etched lin mapped portions of level

eleven-and named the exact

coordinates of the Northern Abyssal

Palace stronghold hidden there.

"Remember—come back breathing," she said, the simple command ringing louder than any oath.

Her gaze lingered on him, soft yet unyielding. "Maxwell is still waiting for you."

Jared bowed, fists crossed. "I will not forget, my lady."

Outside the palace gates, Jared, Clara, and Vermilion lifted into the open sky. No war bands rose to block their path-Lady Aurora's decreebad cleared every

checkpoint After several

quiet days,

the serrated peaks of the Mystic Sky Sword Sect cut the horizon like a crown of obsidian blades.

The instant their boots met the flagstones before Mystic Sky Sword Sect, the posted disciples recognized them, saluted, and sprinted inward to announce the miraculous return.

Linden hurried out. The moment he saw his daughter alive, tears spilled down the weathered lines of his face, shining like dew on old stone.

"Mr. Chance, your kindness shall be carved into the sect's memory for all generations!"

Learning that Jared meant to press on to level eleven, the master folded at the waist, a bow so deep it brushed the mountain wind.

Jared eased him upright. "There is no need, Mr. Cloudridge. Fate tied my road to yours. The Blood Lotus is secured, yet I still need the next herb. That trail leads to level eleven, so I take my leave now."

Linden knew better than to argue. "May your journey stay clear of storms. Mystic Sky's doors will wait open for you always."

Jared turned to Clara. "Cultivate well-and keep a vigilant eye on your father."

She bit her lower lip, determination bright in her eyes. "Take care, Mr. Chance. I... I will wait until you return."

Jared answered with a small, untroubled smile. A heartbeat later, he and Vermilion streaked upward, vanishing into the clouds like twin streaks of dawn fire.

Linden watched the empty sky and breathed a long, awed sigh. "That young man was never meant for shallow waters. Level eleven will churn again the moment his shadow falls there."

He cleared his throat, lowering his voice. "Clara, did you and Mr. Chance share... intimacy?"

"Father," she whispered, cheeks flushing, "his dragon-gold blood essence already flows in my veins. Even so, I fear my body may never bear a child of such power."

Linden's brow knotted. "Why not?"

"Because that bloodline is forged from Golden Dragon Bloodline. I may not survive its weight, let alone cradle new life within me."

He closed his eyes and released the worry on a sigh. "Then we leave it to fate and to heaven."

Linden exhaled a weary sigh, the sound thin as wind drifting over ancient tiles. He turned away from the cliff, Nory robes trailing, like fading clouds, and strode back into the gloom of the corridor without another word.

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After leaving the Mystic Sky Sword Sect, Jared and the Vermilion Demon Lord veered off the main trail, slipping into a lonely ravine shrouded by cliffs and night-black pines.

"Senior, if you are ready, I'll tear open the gate to level eleven."

Vermilion nodded, voice low and rough. "Do it. But remember-level eleven is no tame cousin of level ten. More predators, harsher lands. We move with caution, or we do not move at all."

Jared said nothing more. He pressed his palms together, fingers flickering through seals that glimmered like threads of pale lightning. The mixed blessing of chaotic celestial essence inside him stirred, embracing every law it touched. His brief sojourn within Maxwell's void corridor had gifted him a taste of space itself, and now that insight flowed through his veins.

Jared thrust both arms forward, muscles taut beneath travel-stained sleeves, and roared, "Open!"

Space answered with a scream of tearing silk. A rift blossomed in the air before them, a curtain of night pierced by drifting pinpricks of starlight. Winds born of nowhere howled inside, shards of chaotic void swirling, yet the passage clung to a fragile stability.

Jared was first to leap into the breach. "Go!"

Vermilion slid in behind him, and the wound in the world sewed itself shut, leaving the valley silent and unmarked. Within the corridor, darkness did not reign. Holographic shards of distant realms drifted past like lanterns-oceans upside-down, burning deserts, temple spires floating in violet sky. Then the pressure came—an invisible vice crushing from every direction. Any traveler below the Heavenly Immortal Realm would have been pulped in a heartbeat. Jared expanded a shell of chaotic essence, its milky whirlpool embracing Vermilion as well. Shimmering within that cocoon, they sliced through the corridor at breakneck speed.

After what felt like half a day—though time here was a fickle thing—a silver gleam blossomed ahead.

Jared's eyes lit. "We're through!"

A whipcrack of displaced air—and they tumbled out of the tunnel, boots skidding across a barren expanse of rust-colored gravel. Behind them, the breach winked out like a candle, as though it had never been.

Vermilion surveyed the wasteland, crimson eyes narrowing. "So this is level eleven." An immeasurable brown desert stretched to every horizon; above it hung three suns of uneven size, each flinging spears of white-hot light across the cracked ground. The air was oven-dry, a punishing furnace that stood in cruel contrast to the Eternal Icefield Jared

had trekked not long ago. Spiritual energy here was richer by several orders, but it roiled with untamed currents—fire, wind, lightning, and things unnamed wrestling beneath the surface.

Jared drew a slow breath, tasting heat and power. "Abundant—yet volatile. Every mouthful could as easily nourish you as tear you apart."

Testing the ground, he felt how this realm's fabric was denser; gravity tugged at his boots like hidden anchors.

He lifted off, but the air resisted. His speed dropped nearly a third, and the drain on his essence spiked accordingly.

Vermilion landed beside him, cloak whipping in the thermal wind. "Seems our strength will be throttled here."

Jared gave a short nod. "True, but the density will also fuel faster cultivation. First, let's find inhabitants—information is worth more than spirit crystals."

The two figures lifted off the scorched plateau, riding narrow ribbons of air that spiraled beneath their boots like quicksilver banners. For almost two hours, they cut across a pale sky. At last, a splash of emerald glimmered ahead—an oasis whose palm crowns cradled ghost-gray silhouettes of walls and roofs.

"There a town."

Jared's eyes flashed with restless excitement. He banked toward the green smear, and Vermilion swept after him, scarlet mantle cracking in the desert wind. With every heartbeat, the mirage sharpened, trading watery haze for the hard outlines of rampart and tower.

The settlement curled around the water in a rough crescent, modest yet sound- large enough, Jared guessed, to shelter several tens of thousands.

Its walls, built from locally quarried brown stone, stood nearly thirty yards high. Beneath the sun-bleached gate, uniformed sentries kept silent watch.

Jared stifled his aura and, with Vermilion beside him, touched down before the gate. Four guards waited in identical gray tunics, each chest stitched with a single sand- brown sigil.

Their cultivation hovered around Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Three.

A respectable level—nothing lethal, Jared decided, feeling the knot between his shoulders ease. So the famed level eleven isn't wall-to-wall monsters after all.

Here on the frontier, a Level Three or Level Four Heavenly Immortal already counted as the backbone of the garrison.

"Hold it. Entry fee—ten inferior-grade spiritual stones, or goods of equal worth."

The sentinel's tone was brisk rather than bullying, the cadence of one long accustomed to obedience.

Unwilling to spark trouble, Jared placed twenty inferior-grade spiritual stones in the guard's open palm.

The man weighed the payment, let his gaze skim Jared's deliberately restrained aura—Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One, harmless—and waved them through.

Inside, the streets ran surprisingly clean. Stalls and timber shopfronts flanked orderly flagstones.

Traffic bustled—most passersby carried the Level Four or Level Five of Heavenly Immortal cultivation. Now and then, a Level Six expert strode past, entourage parting the crowd for them.

So-Level Four or Level Five is average; Level Six counts as elite.

Confidence settled in Jared's chest like warm iron.

With his current strength, anyone below Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Eight

would fall quickly, and even a Level Nine foe could be coaxed into retreat.

As long as no High Immortal monster appeared, survival seemed assured.

"First, lodging," he told Vermilion, "and while we rest, we'll sniff out rumors of Jadeheart Marrow."

They wandered until they found an inn whose lantern-lit porch looked acceptably clean.

"Welcome, honored guests. Rooms or a meal?" the porter asked, bowing with practiced grace.

In a place like this, innkeepers learned to read power. Though Jared masked his cultivation, his easy bearing warned the porter that he was no ordinary cultivator "Rooms—two of your best," Jared said. "And I need a bit of information."

He set a single mid-grade spiritual stone on the counter, its faint glow enough to buy silence and cooperation.

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The inn servant's eyes lit up. whisked the spiritual stone into an iron box, snapped the lid shut, and beamed so brightly the lamplight Seemed der beside him. "Anything you wish to know, sir. I have roamed

Sandrock City for centuries.

Whatever I have heard, you shall

hear-no secret left unspoken."

Jared didn't bother with pleasantries. He leaned forward, voice dropping to a conspiratorial hush. "Have you ever heard of something called Jadeheart Marrow?"

The servant mouthed the words, brow creasing like crumpled parchment. "Jadeheart Marrow? I'm sorry, sir. I've never heard of it. What marvel might that be?"

Disappointment tugged at Jared's chest. Even the locals have never heard of it?

Seeing the traveler's expression dim, the servant scrambled for another answer. "Treasures that rare seldom circulate in a place as modest as ours. You might try the Myriad Treasures Pavilion in the city center. They trade in rarities and keep their ears open."

Jared inclined his head. "Where exactly is this Myriad Treasures Pavilion?"

"Straight ahead to the city's very heart—the tallest building there. You cannot miss it."

Jared offered a final nod, then led Vermilion upstairs. The guest room smelled of sandalwood and fresh linen. They barely set their packs down before slipping back into the sunbaked streets, every stride aimed at the pavilion's looming spire.

The Myriad Treasures Pavilion dominated the skyline-five stories of carved eaves and gilded rafters that glittered in the harsh light. Two guards Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Four clad in burnished armor, flanked the door while cultivators of every stripe flowed in and out without pause.

Inside, shelves stretched wall to wall, crowded with pills, artifacts, and materials that shimmered like constellations trapped in glass.

An elderly steward glided forward, robes rustling like parchment. "Good sirs, how may the Myriad Treasures Pavilion serve you today?"

Jared spoke without preamble. "We're searching for a material called Jadeheart Marrow. Have you heard the name?"

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The elder's brows pinched together, carving a fine line between his eyes. He weighed his words, then spoke with the care of a seasoned archivist—his voice little more than the hushed crackle of parchment. "Jadeheart Marrow... I recall seeing a fleeting reference to it buried in one of the oldest compendiums I ever handled. It is said to gather in the deepest fissures of the Infernal Lava Abyss, seeping drop by patient drop from the living veins of the planet's core. One drop takes ten millennia to form. And that single drop, legend claims, can fortify the body's root, bind the soul to its shell, and anchor the spirit against oblivion. Understand, though—these are only whispers handed down as myth. I have lived in level eleven for several thousand years, and in all that time I have never met anyone who has actually laid eyes on the thing."

Once again—the same hollow answer, echoing like a door that refused to open.

Jared masked his disappointment and forced his voice steady. "Then where, exactly, is this Infernal Lava Abyss?"

"South of here," the elder replied, lifting a finger as if tracing a distant horizon. "Deep inside the Blaze Region of level eleven—no less than a million miles away. The place is merciless. Earth-fire rages there without pause, rivers of molten stone cross the land like hungry serpents, and even those who stand firmly in the Heavenly Immortal Realm hesitate before stepping across its threshold. If you truly intend to venture there, young friend, you must prepare for every terror the abyss can conjure."

A million miles. At Jared's current top speed, even flying without pause he would need a full month just to arrive.

And that was only the travel. Surviving the Blaze Region itself would demand a plan far more intricate than anything he had sketched so far.

What Jared did not know—could not have known—was that the moment he and Vermilion had stepped through Sandrock City's gate, a silent pair of eyes had fixed on them and never once blinked.

News of their arrival had already streaked up to Malevolent Path Hall's headquarters in level twelve, riding the sect's lightning-swift channels of information.

Several streets away, inside the private loft of a three-story tea-house, a man in an unremarkable gray cloak watched the entrance of the Myriad Treasures Pavilion through a narrow window slit. In his palm glowed a dusky message token—its surface pulsing with cold, secret light.

"Target confirmed inside Sandrock City, currently asking about 'Jadeheart Marrow," he murmured to the token, his tone flat as winter stone. "Companion: one, a demon cultivator. Target's visible aura places him at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One, but his composure suggests hidden depth."

A rasping voice bled from the token. "Maintain surveillance. Do not rattle the cage. The Master orders that this boy must die, but only after his movements become predictable. Also discover why they seek the Jadeheart Marrow."

"Understood."

The watcher folded the token away and resumed his statue-still vigil. He employed no detectable spiritual sense, relying solely on keen mortal sight and an impeccable vantage—an observer carved from stone and shadow.

Jared prided himself on caution, yet fresh to level eleven, even he could not guard every blind spot. And who would imagine that within mere hours of arrival he would already sit beneath so tight a noose?

Such efficiency was common currency in Malevolent Path Hall's sprawling network—an empire of hidden shops, inns, and guild fronts embedded in every major sky-realm.

Sandrock City held one of the smallest of these towns, yet its importance as the lone supply oasis in the northern desert region of level eleven guaranteed Malevolent Path Hall agents a foothold here.

When Jared and Vermilion had paid their entrance fee, their faces and signatures of their auras were quietly etched onto a covert ledger and pulsed straight to the local node. Malevolent Path Hall had long since circulated Jared's likeness across every branch; the bounty promised for his head set greedy hearts pounding. The Sandrock overseer received the alert in less than a breath.

Far above, in Malevolent Path Hall's citadel on level twelve, the signal strobed crimson across a thousand scrying mirrors.

There, a range of jagged peaks lay drowned beneath permanent black fog, and within that darkness rose a city of ink-dark palaces.

At the complex's heart, a tower a thousand yards tall speared through the boiling clouds. On its summit burned an undying witch-green flame, staining the sky for hundreds of miles around with a ghastly, emerald glow.

Nethergloom Mountain rose like a jagged black crown against a moonless sky. At its heart lay the headquarters of the Malevolent Path Hall, a sanctuary of shadows and whispered terror.

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High above the mountain's hollowed peak stood a cyclopean tower. Inside the tower's summit hall, the air felt as dense as poured lead, every breath drawn at the risk of snapping the silence. At the far end, a throne fashioned from interlocking skulls crouched beneath the rafters. Swirls of viscous midnight mist cored around it, hiding the seated figure as though darkness itself had decided to wear a cloak. Only a pair of eyes showed through-cruel slits of scarlet that bled an icy dread into every soul below. Those eyes belonged to Malcolm Vayne, master of the Malevolent Path Hall. Dozens of senior officers flanked the aisle, ranks divided with military precision. The weakest among them commanded the Level Seven of the Heavenly Immortal Realm, while a handful radiated depths best left unmeasured. Yet every one of these monsters stood rigid, heads bowed, lungs locked, terrified of drawing attention they would not survive.

A moment earlier, Elder Shadowshade-the Hall's spymaster-had delivered news

so savage it seemed to bend the very beams overhead. Jared, the upstart who had butchered squad after squad of Malevolent Path Hall disciples, had already slipped into level eleven.

Malcolm's voice seeped from the fog, as raw and cold as wind moaning through a crypt. "Is the report confirmed?"

"Confirmed beyond dispute," Shadowshade replied, bowing until his spine creaked. "Our Sandrock City outpost transmitted both image and aura-match. It is Jared— and he is accompanied by a rogue demon-cultivator. The pair asked, almost the instant they arrived, where they might procure something called Jadeheart Marrow." "Jadeheart Marrow." Malcolm tasted the words like poison on his tongue. "A relic that stabilizes marrow and chains wandering souls. Why would he hunt for that? Is he trying to heal someone or to shield himself from our Soul-Devouring Art?" Shadowshade held the bow a fraction deeper. "I cannot say, Master."

"Intelligence from level six adds one more thread," Shadowshade continued. "Jared appears friendly with a wanderer named Flaxseed. Years ago, we harvested souls from that man's clan. Chance swore he would settle the debt."

A low, mirthless chuckle rippled through the chamber. "The boy has no sense of scale," Malcolm rasped, scarlet eyes flaring. "I expected him to stew in lower realms for decades. Instead, he walks willingly into my domain. Very well—he spares me the trouble of hunting."

His gaze fell upon a gaunt elder

whose smile was all knives and no

warmth. "Elder Quill-north of level

eleven is your jurisdiction. I want Jared dead. Bring me his head Matty Quill, famed across the Halls for turning venom into art, dipped so low his robe kissed the skull-tiles.

"Consider it done, Master A first-tier brat may carry trinkets, but against- true power he is dust. I will arrange everything personally. When the wind next shifts, he will already have vanished."

Malcolm raised one taloned hand.

"Complacency kills. This youngster

crippled multiple Heavenly

Immortals while still at the Human

Immortal Realm. Either he hides strength or secrets far more valuable. The mist thickened as his

words slithered downward. Finish him quickly, yet leave no trace to snare us. An ambush that looks like a robbery, a duel that appears to be revenge-whatever mask you choose, let it fit so tightly even the gods cannot peel it away." Matty's eyes gleamed with understanding. "Master, your will is law."

Malcolm flicked his wrist, scattering the fog like startled crows. "Go. Within one month I expect good news. Use the Jadeheart Marrow as bait if you must-sooner or later, a man driven by desperation will walk straight into his own grave." "Yes, my lord." Matty's answer cracked through the chamber like a snapping twig. The next instant, his crimson-edged cloak dissolved into the lurking shadows. A faint ripple—no louder than a sigh—was all that remained before the darkness folded in on itself and swallowed him whole.

Silence slid back over the grand hall. Only the restless spit of Netherworld Ghostfire green, hungry, eternal-kept the hush from turning absolute as it licked along black-iron braziers and scattered sparks across the marble floor.

On the obsidian throne, Malcolm lounged like a great cat at dusk. His eyes, two raw rubies burning in the gloom, drifted beyond the vaulted ceiling-beyond distance, beyond worlds. Somewhere far above, in level eleven's Sandrock City, a young figure moved through sun-blasted streets. Malcolm watched that distant silhouette with a hunger sharp enough to slice the void itself.

A Warrior Undefeatable

After leaving the Myriad Treasures Pavilion, Jared and Vermilion did not hurry back to their inn. They wandered Sandrock City instead letting its heat, grit, and golden dust seep

into their clothes—ducking into cramped stalls and back-alley shops, whispering the same question at every counter: Jadeheart Marrow, have you seen it? Every merchant's answer was a shrug painted in different words. They had heard of the miracle Jadeheart Marrow, never tasted it, could not point to so much as a rumor on a map.

"So the legends were right," Vermilion sighed, pushing a curtain of rusty hair from his brow. "Even cultivators in level eleven treat Jadeheart Marrow as a bedtime story."

Jared nodded once. "A treasure formed drop by drop over ten millennia isn't likely to sit in a corner shop. The real clues live with ancient monsters—or the sort of sects that eat kingdoms for breakfast." His smile was thin. "And we're strangers here. Digging out those clues will be anything but easy."

Their shared frustration was still hanging in the air when a mild, well-polished voice rose behind them. The tone carried no edge, yet it cut straight through the crowd. "Gentlemen, might you be searching for Jadeheart Marrow?"

Both men pivoted, muscles coiled. Vermilion's cloak flared; Jared's hand brushed the hilt at his waist.

A scholar in sea-green robes stood a polite ten paces away. His face was ordinary, almost forgettable, but his eyes glittered with the bright calculation of a seasoned broker. His aura, Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five, rested against the city's din like calm water. Hands clasped, he offered an amiable smile that never quite reached those quicksilver eyes.

"And you are?" Jared asked, voice cool yet courteous.

While he spoke, Jared's divine sense brushed over the stranger—no poisonous intent, no hidden surge of killing qi. Even so, years of survival kept a taut line of caution strung inside his chest.

"Dustin Rivers, steward of Whisperwind House," the man announced with a crisp bow. "I happened to hear you questioning an elder outside the Myriad Treasures Pavilion. Forgive my bold approach—I simply dislike watching opportunity drift past." Whisperwind House? Jared sifted his memory and came up empty. The name rang no bells.

Catching the flicker of doubt, Dustin's smile widened. "We're a local information guild—small, but well connected throughout Sandrock City and its deserts. If knowledge has a price, we likely know the numbers."

"Then you truly possess news of Jadeheart Marrow?" Vermilion could not hide the flare of hope in his voice.

"Fragments, at least," Dustin allowed, spreading his hands. "This street is ill suited for business. If you are willing, follow me to Whisperwind House. We'll talk like merchants—nothing more. Whether we strike a bargain rests entirely on your

comfort."

Jared met Vermilion's gaze. In that brief silence they both felt the same tug-thin and electric, a chance too valuable to ignore.

"Lead the way, Mr. Rivers." Jared inclined his head. "We'll impose upon your hospitality."

"Delighted." Dustin's grin sharpened. Turning on his heel, he slipped into the afternoon throng, the two visitors pacing close behind.

Whisperwind House occupied a prime corner in the city's heart—a three-story timbered structure whose unpretentious façade belied the rivers of rumor that flowed beneath its roof.

The building was elegantly arranged. The first floor served as a reception hall, the second held private rooms, and the third appeared to be office space.

Dustin led the two of them straight to a window-side private room on the second floor. After instructing a waitress to serve refreshments, he closed the door. "Please, have a seat."

Dustin gestured for them to sit and took his own seat, getting straight to the point. "Jadeheart Marrow is produced deep within the Jadeheart Vein at the deepest part of the Infernal Lava Abyss in the Blaze Region. It takes ten thousand years for a single drop to form it has. miraculous effects in strengthening one's foundation, nourishing vitality, and stabilizing the soul. Even in level eleven, it is considered a legendary treasure, and information about it is indeed hard to obtain through ordinary channels."

"Since you are aware, I assume you have a lead, Mr. Rivers?"

"I do have some leads." Dustin nodded, then shifted his tone. "However, the value of information this precious, surely the two of you understand."

"Name your price," Jared said bluntly.

Dustin raised five fingers. "5000 top-grade celestial gems or any other magical item with equivalent value."

5000 top-grade celestial gems!

Jared's brow tightened, a single line etching itself above his eyes.

That figure was several times more than everything he owned.

17.

Whatever savings he had scraped together in the level nine and level ten meant little up here mid-tier celestial gems and ordinary res were almost pocket change.

5000 high-grade celestial gems equaled 50000 high-grade ones, an ocean he could not cross today.

"Too steep," he said at last, shaking his head. "We've only just arrived level eleven. I can't pull that many top-grade celestial gems out of thin air."

Dustin's eyes glimmered, as though he had been waiting for that answer. "Then pay another way.

Whisperwind House is always in need of capable hands complete one task for us, and the information is yours."

Jared's voice dropped, calm but edged. "What task?"

Inside, his wariness flared brighter than any hearth-fire.

This won't be simple. There were no free meals in any heaven, and any bargain

Dustin proposed would carry teeth sharp enough to draw blood.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Truly, it isn't difficult," Dustin continued, his tone silky as moonlight through lattice screens. "Three thousand miles east of Sandrock City lies an Ancient Immortal's Abode about to surface. Our sources claim its owner was a primeval true immortal- meaning the place is likely crammed with rare techniques and treasures. Whisperwind House wants a share, but we're short on trustworthy muscle. The fact that you two journeyed all the way up from the lower heavens tells me your strength is anything but ordinary. Help us breach the estate, and I will place every lead to the Jadeheart Marrow in your hands-free of charge. Profits from the Ancient Immortal's Abode will be divided strictly by contribution; I guarantee you'll leave richer than you arrived."

An Ancient Immortal's Abode, just handed to strangers?

Doubts piled in Jared's mind like storm clouds over desert sand. Opportunities this rich seldom knock on a door without knowing the occupants.

How had Dustin judged their strength so quickly? Simply because we climbed from the realms below?

He met the steward's steady gaze. "Why pick us, Mr. Rivers? Sandrock City surely isn't lacking for seasoned fighters."

Dustin's sigh carried genuine weariness. "Word of the Abode has leaked. The Wildsand Gang and the Ironstone Society both have eyes on it. Whisperwind House, frankly, is weaker. Alone, we might not even sniff the leftovers. You and your companion are unfamiliar faces—ideal for slipping beneath rival notice. More importantly," he added, glancing from Jared to the silent figure wrapped in a vermilion cloak beside him, "your composure speaks volumes. You, Jared, veil your aura so deeply that, while you present as Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One, your eyes cut sharper than most lords I've met. In ruin delving, raw power is less valuable than partners who are steady, shrewd, and—above all—reliable."

Reasonable though it sounded, Jared's unease refused to fade. Dustin had appeared with suspicious timing, and his warmth felt more like a pre-dawn chill than sunlight.

"We'll need time to consider," Jared said at last, folding the doubt behind a polite nod.

"Naturally." Dustin offered no pressure. Instead, he slipped a slender device across the table; its surface pulsed with faint runes. "It holds every detail we possess— location, defenses, rendezvous point. Three days from now, midday, Blackwind Gorge, three hundred miles east of the city. Whether you come or not, I'll be there." "If the two of you are interested, meet us there and merge forces. As a gesture of sincerity, I'll offer one morsel about the Jadeheart Marrow. The Infernal Lava Abyss hides its mouth well, yet in the Blaze Region's Crimson Flame City stands an order called Earthfire Pavilion. They have spent generations mapping ley-lines and underground flames. They may hold the key to more precise coordinates."

Crimson Flame City. Earthfire Pavilion. Two names that glowed like fresh coals against the haze of memory.

Jared etched both names into his mind the way a cartographer presses ink into parchment—slow, deliberate, unerasable.

"My thanks, Mr. Rivers."

Jared slid the device into his sleeve, the gesture neat, military. "Three days from now you'll have our answer."

Dustin inclined his head, escorting them to the stairwell. "I'll await good news."

Night wind combed through Whisperwind House as the pair stepped into the street. Vermilion-mantle flaring crimson at the edges—leaned closer. "Jared, can we trust this Rivers?"

"Hard to say."

Jared let the words settle, eyes narrowed behind the glow of passing lanterns. "The manor layout he gave us looks genuine. Earthfire Pavilion could truly possess deeper clues. Yet the timing—too smooth, too tidy makes my skin crawl."

Vermilion's ember-bright gaze sharpened. "You think it's a trap?"

"I can't rule it out."

Steel flickered in Jared's eyes. "But we can't abandon the trail to the Jadeheart Marrow. In three days, we'll scout Blackwind Gorge. If anything smells wrong, we vanish—no hesitation."

Vermilion gave one firm nod. "Your lead, I follow."

Back at the inn, Jared unfolded the device beneath lamplight and sank into study without a word.

Coordinates, ward schematics, danger notations—even a scratched map—spilled across his mind like sparks racing through tinder.

The detail felt solid, not something cobbled together over ale and rumor.

Vermilion exhaled, doubt thinning. "Maybe we really are being paranoid."

Jared offered no reply, only sealed each diagram inside memory's vault. Whether snare or salvation, they would be ready for the worst.

He drew out piles of components and began lacing the room with sigils— concealment webs, alarm glyphs, even the skeleton of a quick-cast portal.

Layer upon layer, the arrays intertwined—fragile in power yet priceless when a heartbeat decided life or death.

Vermilion busied himself beside the window, polishing artifacts, uncorking elixirs, tuning every fragment of strength.

At Jared's boots, the small fire unicorn curled, golden flames pulsing over its scales in silent vigilance.

Preparations devoured the hours the way sand drinks ink.

Elsewhere far beneath Sandrock City-Dustin Rivers knelt inside a lamp-lit vault, face lowered before a black-cloaked elder.

"Elder Quill, the fish has taken the bait," Dustin reported, voice thin with reverence. "They accepted the device. In three days, they'll head to Blackwind Gorge."

The elder-none other than Elder Matty Quill, one of the Earth Fiend Sect's seventy-two shadow lords-seemed an unremarkable, withered man.

But when green light flickered inside his triangular pupils, even the torches shuddered, and the vault grew several degrees colder.

Matty's voice slithered through the candlelit chamber, rough as gravel yet laden with satisfaction. "Well done. And Blackwind Gorge—are every last detail and trap in place?"

Dustin straightened, pride flickering

behind his eyes. "Everything is set.

fully

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The Blood Forging Soul Array is erected. Once they step into the heart of the gorge, the formation will snap shut and butcher any cultivator below level eight of the Heavenly Immortal Realm. In addition, the three Ghostshade envoys are already hidden and prepared to strike on my signal."

The Ghostshade envoys-elite assassins honed within the Malevolent Path Hall— always moved in threes, their synchronized attacks lethal to anyone beneath level seven of the Heavenly Immortal Realm.

Matty shook his head, the gesture slow and venomous. "Not enough. The master warned me-the target is anything but ordinary. We must erase him in a single thunderclap and leave him no chance to rise fell the three envoys to unleash the Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array at once. He is to die instantly."

Dustin's heart turched. He knew the Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array demanded fresh blood as fuel its hatred-laden blades able to threaten even atop Heavenly Immortal Reatm Level Nine cultivator, and they planned to expend that horror on a mere level one amateur?

A Warrior Undefeatable

Dustin dared not argue. "Yes, Elder Quill. I will relay the order immediately."

In the wavering torchlight, Elder Quill's lips curled into a crescent of cruelty. "Jared...

I wonder how many heartbeats you can last inside the Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array. After you fall, even your wandering soul will feed my cultivation-hee-hee- hee." His icy laughter slid along the stone walls like a serpent tasting air.

Three days slipped by in the blink of an hourglass.

Dawn of the third morning found Jared and the Vermilion Demon Lord standing once more outside Sandrock City's eastern gate, every precaution taken.

Jared now wore a teal combat suit cut for freedom of movement, several storage pouches, and a miniature array of plates dangling at his belt.

Though his surface aura still mimicked a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One cultivator, chaotic celestial energy flowed steadily inside him, ready to explode at a flicker of intent.

Vermilion, clad in a dark-crimson robe etched with occult sigils, kept his demonic essence banked low; yet his hawk-bright stare promised violence. In his breast pocket rested vials of life-igniting elixirs-final measures for the worst.

Jared had stowed the small fire unicorn inside a storage ring; its blazing majesty would draw too many eyes.

Jared glanced eastward, toward the direction of Blackwind Gorge. "Time to move."

The two rose into the sky, streaking away as twin trails of light toward Darkwind Gorge three hundred leagues distant.

Level eleven's fabric proved denser, the very air pushing back against flight.

Jared estimated that his top speed here had dropped by roughly forty percent compared with the previous level.

Which meant that, should disaster strike, retreat would be far harder.

Half an hour later, a stretch of obsidian canyonland surfaced on the horizon.

Sheer black cliffs walled the chasm on both sides, and perpetual cyclones of sable wind whipped sand and stone through the gorge, reducing sight to a ghostly blur.

They called this place Blackwind Gorge. Every gust roaring through its fissures carried coal-black grit, a savage breath that had scoured the canyon walls for ages until even daylight seemed bruised.

Guided by the markings, Jared had studied on the device; he and Vermillion touched down at the mouth of the gorge. More than twenty cultivators had gathered there already. Each one pulsed with power in the middle tiers of the Heavenly Immortal Realm, their auras bristling like unsheathed steel.

Dustin, smiling broadly, pushed through the wary crowd and hurried toward them, the tails of his cobalt robe snapping in the restless wind.

"You two are right on time." Dustin's voice carried an easy warmth, but his eyes kept a merchant's tally of every blade and badge on their persons. "Allow me to introduce Conrad Hawke. He stands at the very peak of Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six and will lead today's expedition. And this distinguished friend beside him..."

Name after name spilled from Dustin's lips until each principal figure had been presented like pieces on a freshly set game board.

Connor, expression placid, let his gaze drift across the assembly. Most were veteran rogues or minor-sect fighters-seasoned, distrustful, and careful to leave a sword's length of space between alliances.

Conrad looked every inch his reputation: broad-shouldered, bare-armed, a coffin-wide Ghoublade strapped over his back. His stare raked Connor with open disdain. A Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One? Not worth a full breath, that glint seemed to say.

"We're moving," Conrad barked. Without waiting for agreement, he tramped into the gorge, boots cracking loose shale. The rest of the party fell in behind, the clink of talismans and the hush of caution merging with the mournful wind.

No sooner had they crossed the threshold than Darkwind Gorge exhaled its signature storm—black, knife-edged currents that slapped their protective light with a hiss of sand. Worse, the wind gnawed at the mind. Connor felt his spiritual sense cramp until it could barely stretch a hundred paces.

"Stay close. This gale muddles perception—lose the line, and you're done," Dustin warned from the safer middle ranks, voice low but firm.

They threaded deeper through a maze of gullies. Conrad moved as though following an invisible map, pausing to study faint sigils etched into the basalt before choosing each turn.

Perfect ground for an ambush, Connor thought, noting the overhangs that could rain stone and the blind corners begging for traps. A single misstep here would cage us like crabs in a pot.

After the time it took an incense stick to burn, the group halted before a low opening half-hidden by slabs of obsidian rock.

"This is it," Conrad announced, pointing with two fingers still stained by old blood. "Intelligence says an ancient barrier seals the lair. We break it together-brace yourselves."

At once, treasure lights flared-swords, flags, and jade seals rising like a field of tiny suns while their owners funneled celestial energy into them.

Conrad roared, swung the Ghoublade, and unleashed a crescent of blood-red light that hammered the doorway.

Boom-stone exploded, shards whirling past protective shells in lethal streaks.

Behind the rubble shimmered a translucent veil, rippling with pale runes ancient, stubborn, still intact.

The others attacked in waves-spears of frost, arcs of flame, sonic talons-each strike denting the shield and sending rings of silver light coursing across its face.

Connor added only a few understated sword arcs, their glow deliberately dim. Better to watch for now, he decided, than to show the cards the wind had not yet read.

Jared caught a flicker of motion at the edge of his vision and realized Dustin had joined the assault. Yet, like Jared Dustin withheld a portion of his true power, releasing just enough force to look committed while secretly gauging the field. C6ntent

Half a quarter-hour later, the barrier cracked with a rubbery pop. Shards of red light dissolved into smoke, and a yawning, soot-black tunnel mouth appeared where polished stone had stood only seconds earlier.

"Move!" Conrad barked, his great blade already flashing ahead of him as he dove into the darkness.

The rest of the party poured in after him, a staggered river of anxious silhouettes that vanished one by one beyond the lip of the opening.

Inside, the passage sloped downward in lazy coils. Walls wide as city streets bulged with age-polished rock, their faces etched with facing murals flames, magma rivers, creatures half serpent half bird each panel pulsing with old, furnace-hot breath that mocked the valley's usual chill.

A voice drifted from the rear. "Whoever owned this lair must have practiced some ancient fire technique." The words trembled between awe and greed.

Jared's skin prickled. Those flames... that molten abyss... Dustin spoke of a Blaze Region, of an Infernal Lava Abyss. Could this place be linked? The timing feels too neat, too convenient.

After another quarter-hour, the corridor abruptly widened into a vast subterranean chamber, the ceiling lost in shadow.

At its heart stood a crimson dais nearly twenty feet tall. Upon it rested a jade casket that shimmered with liquidsight, exhaling waves of tempting spiritual energy. Around the dais lay brittle skeletons and shattered relics, bleached by centuries.

"Treasure!" a wide-eyed cultivator cried and sprang forward, hunger smothering caution.

"Hold it!" Conrad roared, sweeping his blade sideways. "There's a trap!" His warning came a heartbeat too late.

The instant the first two zealots crossed within thirty yards of the dais, blood-red sigils spidered across the floor, glowing like fresh scars.

Boom!

A crimson curtain-wide as a parade ground-erupted, swallowing both men. Their screams rose, shrank to gurgles, then stopped as flesh, bone, even soul vaped into nothing but oily mist.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"The Blood-Forging Soul Array!" an elderly scholar shrieked. "An ancient demonic formation—back away now!" Panic slashed through every face.

The group scattered toward the tunnel. Jared retreated with them, cold clarity settling in his chest. So it is a snare—someone doesn't merely want us dead. They want our very spirits refined into fuel.

Shadows peeled from the cavern walls, resolving into more than a dozen figures clad in black combat gear. Each wore a snarling demon mask, their aura sharp as winter steel.

The three at the front radiated power equal to Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven; the rest hovered only a tier or two lower. Together they formed a silent, murderous barricade between the survivors and any hope of escape.

They closed in from every direction, barricading every alleyway, rooftop, and break in the rubble until flight itself felt impossible, as though an iron net had dropped over the plaza.

"Malevolent Path Hall!" Conrad growled, the scar along his jaw whitening as his teeth clenched so hard the sound cracked like ice.

Dustin, now safely among the black-robed intruders, bowed to the foremost figure and reported with practiced servility, "Lord Ghostshade, the target has been delivered."

The envoy inclined his hooded head. A pair of coal-dark eyes skimmed the penned-in survivors before boring into Jared. His voice rasped like frost on steel. "So you are Jared Chance?"

As expected. They came for me and no one else.

"I am," Jared answered, stepping far enough forward that every torch lit the calm on his face.

"For spies, your Hall is quick," he added, voice level and almost courteous. "I set foot on level eleven only hours ago, and already you can't wait to rush over and die." "Die?"

The envoy gave a soft, derisive laugh. "Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One, and you dare speak of our deaths?"

"Orders from the Hall Master," he continued, letting the words ring out. "A cool one million high-grade celestial stones and an elder's seat to whoever brings back your head. My brothers and I gladly accept the bounty."

He flicked his gaze to the men flanking him. "Third, silence the rest—leave no witnesses."

"Second, help me subdue the boy. Alive. The Master needs his soul intact."

"Understood." One black-robed killer lunged toward Conrad and the trapped cultivators while the second fell in beside the envoy, both advancing on Jared with predatory poise.

Vermilion Demon Lord roared and leapt in front of Jared, rivers of dark-crimson demonic essence surging around his armor like living flame.

"A demon-cultivator?" the envoy sneered. "Novel, but insufficient."

His hand snapped downward. "Attack."

The order was still echoing when both assassins struck at once.

One blurred forward with a dagger black as night; its tip gleamed with a cold blue toxin and speared toward Jared's throat as silently—and as swiftly—as a viper's tongue.

The other swung a pair of metallic ghost claws. Wind screamed around the talons as they scythed straight for Jared's chest, heavier than a hammer, shriller than tearing glass.

Fast matched with vicious, finesse with brute force—the duet calculated to leave not a fingerbreadth in which Jared could slip away. Victory, they believed, would be instant.

After all, against a mere first-grade Heavenly Immortal, two seasoned killers felt like overkill, not risk.

Across the square, Conrad and the other captives buckled under the third assassin's assault, each heartbeat adding blood to the stones.

Vermilion tried to break free, but five- and six-grade disciples from Malevolent Path Hall swarmed him, shackling his power with their own.

For a breathless instant, it seemed Jared would die where he stood—
—until he moved.

He neither dodged nor raised a guard.

Instead, he drew his sword, the motion so measured it felt like the hush before thunder.

The instant Jared's Dragonslayer left

its sheath, a sword intent fierce

enough to sever karma and unravet

every spet burst toward the cavern roof. Frost followed in its wake, draining several degrees from the air and blanching the stone walls.

Jared roared, "Void Slash!"

His blade drew an arc so abstruse it defied geometry, brushing aside the poisoned dagger and the lunging ghost claw with what looked like an off-hand flick.

No thunder cracked. No blinding flash heralded the cut.

Instead, a single gray filament—thin as spider silk, nearly invisible—slipped from the sword's tip.

Where that strand drifted, space quivered, ripples spreading like circles in a pond struck by a lone pebble.

A heartbeat later—

Shch-shch!

The sound resembled silk being sliced in a tailor's shop.

The venom-tipped dagger, still three inches from Jared's throat, snapped in two, its break as smooth as mirrored glass.

At that same breath, the iron ghost claw shattered on contact, exploding into a glittering cloud of metal shards.

The two black-clad assassins froze mid-lunge, horror widening their eyes beyond belief.

They stared at their ruined weapons, then at the fading gray filament as though the laws of reality had been rewritten before them.

"What-what sword art is that?" the leader gasped.

Jared answered with an icy stare—and a second stroke.

The filament split, two serpents of steel-gray light gliding soundlessly toward the men's throats.

Fast. So fast thought itself trailed behind.

Panic warped their faces; they hurled celestial power into makeshift shields and tried to dive away.

The serpents ignored distance entirely. The moment the idea of escape formed, the threads had already whispered past their necks.

"Pfft! Pfft!" Two wet pops broke the hush.

Masked heads arced skyward. Blood geysered from open stumps, only to hiss into crimson vapor against the cavern's heat.

Two elite assassins of Malevolent Path Hall—both Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven had not survived a single exchange.

Silence crashed over the chamber.

The third assassin menacing Conrad, and every cultist locked with the Vermilion Demon Lord, simply stopped, gaping while the headless bodies toppled.

Dustin 's sycophantic grin petrified, melting into bottomless terror; his knees rattled like dice in a cup.

Conrad and the others stood dumbstruck-their rush of survival drowned out by this overwhelming spectacle.

A Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One-one sword-two seventh-tiers slain?

In that instant, their understanding of power inverted.

Jared lowered his blade. A ghostly pallor crept across his cheeks.

He had already unleashed Void Slash twice in a row. The brutal stroke siphoned almost half of the celestial essence still racing through his veins. For a man at his present stage the technique was earth-shattering, yet the strain it left on muscle marrow and spirit was heavier, still. He never got the chance to steady his breath. The third black-clad assassin snapped back to awareness and tore the silence with a shriek sharp enough to peel stone.

The man howled, "Form the array-Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array!"

A Warrior Undefeatable

At once, the remaining dozen Malevolent Path Hall disciples broke away from their skirmishes and converged on the screeching leader, planting their boots at precise, ghostly angles around him.

Each cultivator bit through his own tongue and spat scarlet blood essence across the air before flashing complex hands seals and chanting in tones that rattled the walls.

A deep, metallic hum instantly rolled outward, as though the underworld itself had just drawn breath.

A wave of murderous, carrion-cold aura erupted from their circle, foul enough to wrinkle reality.

Thirteen streams of blood essence and celestial energy swiftly wove together overhead, coalescing into a black arcane array more than ninety feet across.

Within its heart, a three-headed, six-armed wraith rose like a nightmare given form. All six eyes kindled at once, spraying six crimson lances that locked onto Jared without mercy.

"With my blood essence, I feed the spell. With my soul, I guide the fiend. Rise, darkness of the netherworld, and claim that head!"

The leader's roar scraped raw throats and stone alike. His face blanched paper-white from the blood essence he had surrendered, but the madness in his gaze burned brighter than ever.

The Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array was one of Malevolent Path Hall's forbidden formations. It demanded at least three Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven cultivators at its core and ten Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five cultivators as support, all willing to burn their own blood essences to activate it.

Once unleashed, the array's power could menace even a low-tier True Immortal Realm cultivator.

Therefore, it was clear that in their bid to kill Jared, Malevolent Path Hall had gone for the jugular, sparing no cost.

"Jared, look out!" Vermilion Demon Lord shouted anxiously, but the moment he lunged forward, the array's pressure slammed him back, step after sliding step.

That same invisible weight, too, crushed Conrad and the others flat against the stone. Each of them lay prone, pinned to the cavern floor, despair painting their faces a lifeless gray.

Dustin collapsed in a quivering heap, a dark stain spreading across his trousers. His lips quivered around a single mantra. "It's over... It's over... They even brought out the Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array..."

Having felt the array's murderous tide batter his skin, nerves, and bones, Jared frowned ever so slightly, his pupils shrinking to slits of gold.

The force pressing against him had long since stepped beyond the Heavenly Immortal Realm, brushing the door of the True Immortal Realm itself.

If he chose simply to endure it, he would be torn apart. However, there was no retreat for him either.

The six blood-red beams lunged like venomous dragons, each wide as a man's arm. They shredded pockets of space, then thundered straight for his heart.

Where the rays passed, heat froze, stone hissed into poison mist, and the cavern floor sank into molten grooves.

There was no room left to dodge.

Jared drew a single, icy breath. Gold fire flickered behind his eyes.

If escape was impossible, he would meet the attack head-on and shatter it.

He clenched both hands around the hilt of his Dragonslayer Sword. Whatever chaotic celestial energy remained inside him erupted, the Chaotic Fire Lotus in his core spinning like a cyclone. Even the faint trace of draconic energy hidden in his veins burst awake, roaring for release.

Jared raised the blade and bellowed, "Chaos Origin-Dragon Fire Thrust!"

With a roar that shook loose dust from the ceiling, he drove the Dragonslayer Sword straight into the stone floor, steel screeching against rock.

Boom!

From the point of impact, an indescribable pulse of swirling chaos burst outward, rippling the air like heat over desert sand.

Smoky strands of chaotic celestial energy braided themselves with dark-gold draconic flames, molding into a titanic fire dragon. The beast threw back its blazing head and bellowed at the ceiling, then lunged toward the six crimson beams that slashed down from above.

The fire dragon and blood-red radiance collided in mid-air with a crack that felt like the sky breaking apart.

A rolling thunderclap followed, long and guttural, pounding through the cavern walls.

Light so bright it turned everything white seared every eye, while the blast's roar ruptured eardrums, leaving faces streaked with blood.

The shock wave barreled out like a tidal bore, scraping a fresh layer from the cavern walls and splintering the floor into jagged plates.

Vermilion Demon Lord, Conrad, and the others were flung like dolls, each slamming hard into rock before coughing out bright arcs of blood.

Dustin took the full brunt and dropped unconscious before he even hit the ground.

Of the thirteen black-clad Malevolent Path Hall cultivators, only the third-held upright by Level Seven strength-remained standing. The rest collapsed, blood leaking from every opening as the array shattered beneath them.

Dust settled in slow, ghostly curtains.

At the center knelt Jared, one knee down, Dragonslayer Sword planted like a crutch while he dragged ragged breaths through blood-slick lips, his skin chalk-white.

His teal combat jacket hung in tatters, revealing skin that flickered with faint golden light-his supposedly unbreakable body now spider-webbed with cracks. Despite all that, he was still alive.

Across from him, the surviving man in black stood glass-eyed, a bowl-sized hole punched clean through his chest where chaotic dragon fire had burned heart and viscera to ash.

His lips twitched, as though searching for final words, but nothing came. The next second, he toppled like a felled tree and lay still.

Just like that, the Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array was broken.

Thirteen elite cultivators of Malevolent Path Hall, three of whom were Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven Ghostshades, were wiped out completely.

A formation said to imprison even a Top Level Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Nine cultivator had failed to cage Jared.

He, however, paid dearly for the escape.

With three Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven and ten Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five elites, it was obvious Malevolent Path Hall had emptied half a nest just to set this trap.

That meant Jared could no longer afford to underestimate them.

Dragging themselves upright, Conrad and the others stared at Jared as though beholding some god of war dredged up from antiquity-equal parts reverence, terror, and disbelief.

Staggering over, Vermilion Demon Lord caught Jared's shoulder. "Jared, talk to me are you all right?"

"I'll live... I'm just drained," Jared rasped, the words sticking to his throat like gravel. He shoved a handful of pills past cracked lips, then pressed several more into Vermilion Demon Lord's palm.

Turning to the remaining cultivators, he said, his voice low but unarguable, "I don't want anyone to speak of what happened here today. You guys can leave now."

Conrad and the rest bowed as if a noose had just been lifted from their necks. "Don't worry!" they blurted, voices topping over one another You saved our lives today, and that is something we will remember forever. Not a whisper of this shall ever leave our lips!"

Shoulders still touching, they half-dragged, half-carried one another toward the cave entrance. Boots skidded on loose gravel, the scramble frantic, desperate. None dared

glance back, terrified Jared might reconsider and seal their fate before they reached open sky.

Only after the last echo of fleeing footsteps died did Jared allow himself to turn. His gaze settled on Dustin, sprawled unconscious on the blood-slick stone. Vermilion Demon Lord stepped forward, scarlet robes brushing corpses, and upended a brimming wooden bucket. Cold water crashed over Dustin's face with a slap like a whip crack.

Dustin sputtered awake, eyes wide. Seeing Jared's glacial stare-and the corpses of Malevolent Path

cultivators-he collapsed to his knees forehead striking rock and again. "Spare me, Mr. Chance! Please spare me! I was forced into this Malevolent Path Hall captured: my family and made me work with them to set the trap. I had no choice!"

Alas, Jared remained unfazed. "Is the clue to the Jadeheart Marrow true or false?"

"It's true! Every word of it is true!"

Dustin hurriedly replied. "The Infernal

Lava Abyss lies in the southern Blaze Region, and the Earthfire Pavilion truly holds several leads. I also know that every hundred years,

they host an Earthfire Trial. Finish in the top ten, and you may search the abyss' outer rim for fortune. The next trial is three months from now."

"Earthfire Trial, huh..." Jared muttered as he filed the thought away. "How many bases does Malevolent Path Hall have in level eleven, and what's their power like?" "Um... I-I'm small fry. I only know of their bases in Sandrock City and a handful of nearby towns," Dustin stammered before rattling off coordinates with frantic precision.

Under the promise of life, he poured out everything he knew-alliances, rivalries, supply routes—until words became a waterfall and his throat burned raw.

At last, Jared straightened. "You aided Malevolent Path Hall in murdering innocents.

By rights, you should die. Yet you have provided me with valuable information, so I will not kill you." Relief instantly washed over Dustin. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Jared's next words, however, landed like an axe. "If someone else ends you, will you object?"

Dustin's jaw dropped. A single curse slipped out-then terror froze it on his tongue.

Vermilion Demon Lord read the unspoken command and swiftly unleashed an attack.

Dustin crumpled where he knelt, skull split, apology still wet on his lips.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Time to move," Jared murmured. "Staying here any longer will only invite trouble."

Together, he and Vermilion Demon Lord stripped every corpse of storage rings and useful gear, then destroyed the cavern walls until all traces of battle melted into dust. Without a backward glance, they left Darkwind Gorge and headed for

Sandrock City.

What they didn't know was that shortly after they left, a lone figure in onyx robes drifted into the cave, silent as dusk.

Matty Quill had arrived.

He surveyed the wreckage—the ruined Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array, mangled corpses, splintered stone—until the air around him felt colder than the grave.

"Impressive, Jared Chance," he rasped, voice like poison sliding over steel. "You actually managed to break the Netherworld Triple-Slaughter Array. Seems like I've underestimated you."

Crouching beside the Ghostshades' bodies, Matty traced a severed wound and frowned in shock. "This sword intent can sever Heavenly Law, huh? Wait a minute... Could this be Maxwell's legacy?"

As a high-ranking elder of Malevolent Path Hall, Matty was no stranger to the name, Maxwell Sterling.

After all, Maxwell was the sword prodigy who had once stunned all the celestials— only to be suppressed and sealed away in the end.

A cold gleam flickered in Matty's eyes. "So Jared's a successor of Maxwell... All the more reason he must not be allowed to live!"

With that, he produced a communication charm, its surface swirling with dark crimson mist, and breathed a command into it in a voice as thin as a razor's edge. "Relay my order to every branch in level eleven. Hunt down Jared Chance by any means necessary. Also, summon the elders Bennett Bloodwyn and Barnaby Bonegrave at once. They are to leave

for Crimson Flame City in the Blaze Region immediately and wait for the target. I'm very sure Jared is headed toward Earthfire Pavilion!"

"Understood," a ghost-soft reply drifted back through the communication charm before the glow inside the stone went dark.

With that settled, Matty slipped the charm away, cast one final, measuring glance at the ruined cave around him, then stepped into a fold of shadow that swallowed his body like ink poured on parchment. In the next heartbeat, he was gone.

Three days had passed since the carnage in Darkwind Gorge. Jared's wounds- though brutal-had mended well enough that fresh strength now stirred beneath the newly knit skin.

After quietly sorting through the spoils stripped from Malevolent Path Hall cultivators, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord left Sandrock City under the cover of predawn haze, their departure nothing more than two fleeting streaks of light that vanished into the open sky.

Before leaving, Jared paid one last visit to the Whisperwind House.

Guided by information Dustin had provided, he located several dossiers detailing Malevolent Path Hall strongholds scattered across the northern half of level eleven —and helped himself to every scrap of intelligence and every useful supply he could carry.

"The Blaze Region lies in the far south of level eleven-well over one million miles from here," Jared murmured, unfolding a star-specked map he had plucked from Whisperwind House. "Our route cuts through hundreds of towns of every size. According to Dustin's information, at least three of those stops hide Malevolent Path Hall outposts."

A dangerous gleam rippled behind Vermilion Demon Lord's crimson pupils. "So what you're saying-"

"Well, since they have marked me for death, we shall return the courtesy," Jared answered in a voice as quiet as iron. "We travel south-and along the way, we erase every one of their dens we uncover. Doing so will weaken Malevolent Path Hall, fatten our own stores, and who knows-may even shake loose new clues about Jadeheart Marrow or the lost souls of Flaxseed's kin."

"Sure!" Vermilion said with an eager nod. "Then let's paint the road red!"

Without another word, the two lifted into the air. Azure wind howled over their shoulders as they arrowed toward the southern horizon.

Level eleven stretched wider than mortal imagination. Even a Heavenly Immortal Realm cultivator could take months to cross it from one end to the other.

Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord, both shackled by the realm's suppressive force yet strong enough to defy it, still managed to cover ten thousand miles a day.

Town after town blurred beneath their feet—most the size of Sandrock City, some larger, ringed by towering walls and arrays that hissed with the presence of true immortals safeguarding the gates.

The pair steered clear of those great cities, pausing only in lesser settlements to replenish food and rumors—quietly prying for any whisper of Malevolent Path Hall activity.

Dustin's intel proved eerily precise, turning each hunt into a blade-sharp procession instead of a blind gamble.

Their first target hid behind the facade of a humble medicinal herb shop in Bluestone Town.

Under the cover of night, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord infiltrated the area and with lightning-swift methods, eliminated two Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five

cultivators from Malev

Bath

Half who were guarding the place, along with several of their

subordinates. After that, the duo seized a batch of pills and materials and obtained some intelligence regarding Malevolent Path Hall's activities in the surrounding region.

The second nest festered inside Blackwater Stronghold—a bandit haven already steeped in blood.

Here, Malevolent Path Hall cultivators colluded openly with cut-throats, so Jared showed none of the mercy the guilty might have prayed for. By dawn, the stronghold lay flattened. Three Malevolent Path Hall elders were corpses cooling among smoking timbers, and dozens of shackled civilians staggered free, blinking at a sky suddenly wide and clean.

The third lair waited beneath a gambling hall in Ironrock City. Guarded more tightly than a king's treasury—and reinforced by a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven cultivator—the place promised a fight worthy of legend.

As such, Jared chose caution over bravado. Before dawn, he slipped into the gambling den beneath a borrowed face, studying every

corridor, counting every guard net

memorizing each hidden stair as though the blueprints were etched behind his eyes. When the weakest hour arrived, he signaled Vermilion Demon Lord from within. The demon lord's red mist seeped through the eaves, matching Jared's silent blade. Together, they sprang the trap they had drawn, turning the sleeping warren into a killing field before anyone thought to scream.

This fight proved nastier than the last two. Their target, Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven enforcer, wielded a repertoire of poisons and black magic that could unravel flesh or spirit with a single gesture. Even so, Jared felt only excitement ripple through his veins.

He never offered the man a chance. The instant steel met shadow, he unleashed Void Severance, carving clean through the enforcer's protective magical item. Vermilion Demon Lord's crimson form and the small fire unicorn's golden blaze hit next, hammering from opposite fronts. In that searing onslaught, Jared thrust once-straight through the man's heart-and the body folded without a word.

Of the twenty-odd Malevolent Path Hall cultivators quartered in the fortress, three escaped into the predawn haze. The rest lay strewn across the blood-slick corridors, their ambitions cut as short as their breaths.

Razing three nests in a row paid handsomely. Jared's storage ring now rattled with spiritual stones, pills, rare ores, even devices inscribed with mission rosters and assassination lists-evidence enough to choke the entire sect in court.

More valuable still was a leather-bound ledger he discovered in a hidden chamber beneath Ironrock City's base. Its brittle pages mapped half the Malevolent Path Hall's outposts across the southern region of level eleven and detailed exactly how to reach them.