

# A Warrior Undefeatable 5871-5880

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"Seems like Malevolent Path Hall has sunk its roots far deeper into level eleven than we imagined." Jared's voice stayed flat, yet the edge beneath it could have sliced iron.

Vermilion Demon Lord flipped through the ledger, his brows knitting tighter with each page. "According to this, five strongholds circle the Blaze Region alone. The one inside Crimson Flame City is the largest—a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Eight elder supposedly guards the area."

Jared nodded. "Crimson Flame City is the biggest city in the Blaze Region, and Earthfire Pavilion is headquartered inside its walls. With so much heat to draw on, the Hall's claws will be thick. We tread lightly once we arrive."

"There's still a little over two months until the Earthfire Trial... We have plenty of time," Vermilion Demon Lord said as he tapped the ledger.

"Each nest we torch buys us another dusk. Their chain of command will scramble, buying us a cleaner road south."

"That's right," Jared replied, cold light flashing behind his eyes. "By now, Malovelent Path Hall's higher-ups should already know that Darkwind Gorge has fallen. I bet they're weaving a net across Crimson Flame City, waiting for us. The racket we stir along the way might be able to throw them into a frenzy."

From then on, the duo kept drifting south, erasing two smaller dens along the way and feeding fresh panic into Malevolent Path Hall's rumor mill.

The farther they flew, the more the land itself began to change.

Heat bled into every breath; fire-type spiritual energy thickened in the air like invisible ash.

Beneath them, the gray badlands rippled into rust-red hills and knife-edged gorges. Steam vents hissed from scattered springs, and lone volcanoes sputtered sparks against a cloudless sky.

Plants thinned to stubborn clusters of thorn and flame-touched succulents, each one clinging to life the way a drunk clings to his last coin.

"We're close to the Blaze Region," Jared murmured, the heat stroking his cheeks like open furnace doors. "This environment is ideal for fire cultivators, but everyone else will be

suppressed by the aura. Those from the Malevolent Path Hall mostly dabble in Demonic Cultivation, so their powers will be more or less affected here." "It's not entirely great for us either," Vermilion grunted. "I am a Demonic Cultivator, and the fire spiritual energy here is too intense-staying for long will be uncomfortable. Your chaotic celestial energy is more tolerant, so it shouldn't be much affected. As for the small fire unicorn, I'm sure it feels right at home."

As if on cue, the small fire unicorn burst from Jared's storage ring, prancing through the air and gulping down flames nobody else could see. Its golden mane glowed several shades brighter.

The trio flew for another few days. At last, the horizon blushed crimson, and a colossal city rose from the scorched earth like a burning crown.

Walls one hundred yards high, forged from blazing-red stone, caught the noonday light and hurled it back in molten waves.

A faint scarlet shield shimmered over the battlements, and that, without a doubt, was the city defense formation.

Inside, towers thrust hundreds of yards into the sky, tiled roofs overlapping like dragon scales all the way to the clouds.

Even from afar, Jared felt the crush of countless auras. A few hid so deep and wide they could belong only to true immortals.

They had finally arrived at Crimson Flame City, the biggest city in Blaze Region.

Moments before dawn, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord drifted from the early-morning sky, touching down several miles outside Crimson Flame City. They shuttered every ripple of their cultivation, then mingled with the thick stream of travelers trudging toward the city gates.

Crimson Flame City dwarfed Sandrokk City by a hundredfold. At the gates, traffic boiled. Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six and Seven cultivators jostled everywhere, while Level Nine elites ignored the flight prohibition and sailed straight over the ramparts.

Additionally, the entrance fee into the city was a staggering ten thousand high-grade spiritual stones per person.

Without blinking, Jared produced twenty thousand. Fee settled, he and Vermilion Demon Lord strode beneath the crimson portcullis.

Inside, boulevards fanned out like rivers of molten stone, paved with polished flame-red slabs that reflected the furnace glow.

Storefronts crowded both sides, hawking fire ores, pills, and magical items. Sulfur and magma thickened the air, raising the heat so high that ordinary True Immortal Realm cultivators had to unleash their celestial energy just to shield themselves.

"Let's secure a room before anything else then we go to the Earthfire Pavilion," Jared said, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow.

After a brief search, they chose a mid-sized inn tucked along a quieter lane.

Named Flameheart Lodge, the place lay outside the bustling core, yet its rooms were clean and, more importantly, the proprietor's candid eyes suggested he was no spy for Malevolent Path Hall.

Once unpacked, Jared beckoned a young attendant to inquire about the Earthfire Pavilion's whereabouts.

Thankfully, the latter was clever and sharp-witted. Despite being only a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five cultivator, he knew Crimson Flame City very well. "Earthfire Pavilion? Ah, you must be here for the Earthfire Trial. Head straight to the city center, and you'll spot a big crimson tower. That's Earthfire Pavilion. You can't miss it. Be warned, though: entry requires either a personal referral or an official invitation to the trial," he explained.

Jared furrowed his brows. "A referral? We have come from afar and have none. How can we qualify to participate in the trial? Is there any other way?"

"Well..." the attendant said as he scratched his head. "The selection for the Earthfire Trial ended three months ago. At this point, you'd need special permission from an inner elder—or, before the trial begins, complete one of the Pavilion's special missions and trade the contribution points for a slot."

Upon hearing about the special missions, Jared perked up. "Where does Earthfire Pavilion post these missions?" he asked.

"In the Mission Hall in the southern part of the city... All the major

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factions release their assignments and the Earthfire Pavilion is no exception," the attendant said before dropping his voice to a hush

"However, just so you know, the missions issued by the Earthfire... Pavilion are usually very dangerous. They either require venturing into the perilous depths of the Blaze Region to gather rare materials or hunting powerful fire-type beasts. Many cultivators who tried to take

shortcuts by accepting these

missions never returned."

"Understood. Thank you," Jared replied before slipping him several spiritual stones.

The attendant beamed. "Thank you,

sir! If you wish to visit Mission Hall,

I'd be delighted to show you the way. One more thing-Crimson Flame City has been restless of late. Word is that a cultivator named Jared Chance had offended Malevolent Path Hall. They've placed a bounty

of one million high grade spiritual one million h stones on his head and are scouring every street for him. Should either of you cross paths with anyone the

least bit suspicious, I'd advise

keeping a very wide berth."

Upon hearing that, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord traded a glance. A silent, heavy understanding flared in both pairs of eyes—trouble had arrived faster than either of them expected.

Malevolent Path Hall moved with frightening speed; the bounty notice had already reached Crimson Flame City.

Judging by the attendant's tone, the reward was causing quite a stir. Countless strangers were no doubt searching the alleys for Jared's shadow even now.

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Jared offered a calm nod. "We understand. Thank you for the warning."

Once the attendant had gone, Vermilion Demon Lord raised a sound-shielding barrier and spoke in a low growl. "Jared, Malevolent Path Hall's roots run deep in this city. We must tread lightly."

"Mm," Jared replied with a nod. "First, let's get to Mission Hall and see if we can grab Earthfire Trial credentials quickly. After that, we visit Earthfire Pavilion itself. Even if we're barred from entering, I want the layout and its guard roster mapped." They took only a moment to compose themselves, then slipped out of the inn and headed toward the southern district, where Mission Hall towered above the rooftops. Mission Hall sprawled in a vast circle. Inside, the roar of voices rose like surf against stone walls. Hundreds of

jade screens floated overhead, each flashing mission notices in restless, shifting light while robed figures streamed in and out beneath them.

It didn't take Jared long to locate the section reserved for Earthfire Pavilion.

There, the jade screens glowed a deep crimson. Only a handful of missions scrolled by, yet every one promised rewards rich enough to dazzle—and every one shimmered with the warning that it was extremely dangerous.

"It's impossible to finish any of these missions quickly," Vermilion Demon Lord muttered, shaking his head. "And they're all far too risky."

Jared's brow tightened. To participate in the Earthfire Trial, he'd need ten thousand contribution points. Given the difficulty and reward scale on display, they would need to complete two or three of the extremely dangerous missions.

That, unfortunately, would take too much time.

"So much for playing by the rules," he whispered. "We'll need to think of another way."

Just then, a cluster of nearby cultivators lowered their voices-yet their words carried clearly to Jared's ears.

"Have you heard? Ferdinand Flameheart, the elder of Earthfire Pavilion, is leading a party into Flame Gorge to harvest Flame Spirit Herbs and is currently hiring temporary guards."

"Flame Spirit Herbs? That's the main ingredient for Flameheart Pills. They only grow deep in Flame Gorge, with a flame dragon guarding the area. The fact that Elder Flameheart is going in person means the demand for the herbs must be pretty significant."

"What's the pay like?"

"Generous, from what I'm told. Guards who complete this mission will receive plenty of spiritual stones, and discounts on pills and magical items from Earthfire Pavilion. Those who perform well and impress Elder Flameheart enough might even receive a personal recommendation into Earthfire Pavilion itself."

"Then what are you waiting for? Hurry and sign up! Elder Flameheart is one of the three great alchemy masters of Earthfire Pavilion. Following him on this mission is a rare opportunity!"

With that, a few cultivators hurried toward the recruitment area on the other side of the hall.

Jared's eyes lit up.

Elder Flameheart? An alchemy master of Earthfire Pavilion leading a team to gather Flame Spirit Herbs? Well, well, well. This could be a wonderful opportunity indeed. If

I can get into this team and perform well on the mission, I might earn Elder Flameheart's favor, thus qualifying for the Earthfire Trial. Hell, I might even obtain clues about the Jadeheart Marrow!

"Come on. Let's go take a look," Jared said to Vermilion Demon Lord.

The duo soon reached the recruitment alcove where several dozen cultivators- every one at least Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five-were already jostling to put their names on the ledger.

A rough-hewn platform of fresh pine planks dominated the makeshift square. Rope still glistened with sap where it bound the beams together. At its center stood an Earthfire Pavilion enforcer in ember-red robes, his authoritative voice carrying easily over the low morning hush.

"The escort assignment will last seven days. The destination is Flame Gorge. Your duties are simple: maintain a perimeter, lend muscle to our harvesters, and bring every person home alive. Applicants must already have reached Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five. Payment is 5,000 high-grade spiritual stones, with an additional bonus should the mission conclude without mishap. Also, there will be a brief competency test. Slots are limited-only the first ten who pass will be accepted." The terms were neither punishing nor lenient. The pay, by any metric, was fair. What was far more enticing was the promise that success would place a guard within whispering distance of Earthfire Pavilion's higher-ups.

Jared exchanged a look with Vermilion Demon Lord. In that silent glance, they reached the same conclusion-they would sign up.

The test, according to the bulletin, was little more than a public display of cultivation and raw combat ability—a formality for anyone truly qualified.

However, when they stepped toward the testing area, a young Earthfire Pavilion enforcer flicked his eyes over Jared, caught a hint of the man's meager aura, and immediately frowned.

"Hey, buddy, are you sure you wish to apply?" the enforcer asked, his tone dripping with doubt. "We need cultivators who are at least Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five. Forgive me, but you don't seem to meet that requirement."

Of course, the enforcer was right. Jared's current cultivation was only at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One-miles beneath the stated threshold.

His words snapped the attention of everyone waiting in line.

Dozens of eyes swung toward Jared. When those keen senses confirmed his paltry realm, many faces twisted into open sneers.

"He's only at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One, yet he wants in? Does he have a death wish or something?"

"Does he know what Flame Gorge is like? It's where flame dragons roost, for goodness' sake. Even Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six experts might not leave the place in one piece-what's a fledgling like him going to do, volunteer as dragon feed?"

"Must be some back-country fool who thinks a guard mission issued by Earthfire Pavilion is easy work."

"Hah... How ignorant."

Ridicule rippled through the crowd. Among cultivators no weaker than Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five, a Level One aspirant was insignificant to them.

Vermilion Demon Lord stood quietly behind Jared, crimson brows knitting. Jared, however, gave him a look, signaling him to stay calm.

"Yes, my cultivation level isn't high, but I possess several defensive arts that might prove useful. Since I am here already, may I at least attempt the test?" Jared said evenly.

The young enforcer hesitated, lips parting for a refusal—when a booming voice crashed in from the side.

"Attempt? Kid, do you think this is playtime? Where do you think you are?"

The speaker loomed nine feet tall, a slab-faced giant with two axle-sized axes strapped across his back and a Top Level Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six aura.

He stalked up to Jared, looking down from a height that felt like a cliff. "The gorge is a meat-grinder, not a sightseeing tour. Do yourself a favor-leave now and let real cultivators sign up."

Laughter erupted around them like dry tinder catching flame.

"The test has not begun," Jared replied, voice calm as still water. "How can you judge my worth so quickly?"

The brute barked a laugh. "Ha! Why can't I? With your cultivation, I can crush ten of you with just one finger! Stop embarrassing yourself and—"

Alas, his words snapped off, the final syllable sliced clean by a hush that fell over the courtyard.

Across from him, Jared shifted—not to strike, not even to guard, but merely to slide one foot forward.

In that understated motion, a pinhole of his presence seeped free, thin yet impossibly dense, as if a lone star had glimpsed through a crack in a cellar roof.

It was not the signature of a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five cultivator, nor the sharpened edge of a Level Six.

What leaked out felt boundless—an ocean that contained every law of creation and yet rode above them, sovereign and untouched.

The burly cultivator nearest Jared toppled into that ocean within a heartbeat. Chaos hemmed him in; the very rules around him quivered, then bowed.

His once-raging power turned thick and mute, as though it had stumbled on its natural predator. Draining, he lurched back three full steps sweat breaking across his brow while his gaze locked on Jared in raw, disbelieving dread.

Laughter strangled to silence.

Every cultivator who had been jeering a breath earlier felt an unnamed flutter—a cold palm brushing the heart.

They had no idea what they had sensed, but the giant's terror and that fleeting, alien tide spoke clearly enough.

The young man who seemed to be a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One cultivator was anything but ordinary.

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The young enforcer re-examined Jared, the smirk on his face replaced by cautious respect. "Very well, sir. Since you insist, step onto the trial platform. Three

assessments await you—a cultivation reading, an attack trial, and a defense trial. Follow me."

Jared dipped his chin and walked beside the enforcer toward the designated testing area.

The first trial was a test of cultivation.

On the stone platform lay a Spirit-Measuring Crystal. To pass the trial, one merely had to rest a hand upon its cool, translucent surface and pour in a thread of celestial energy. The crystal would answer—its shifting colors revealing both the depth and purity of that energy.

Many cultivators tried to fool such tests. Some suppressed their true cultivation level behind layered veils. Others swallowed pills that puffed up their aura for a single deceptive hour.

If the examiners judged only by the aura each candidate released, mistakes were inevitable.

Yet before the Spirit-Measuring Crystal, no trickery could stand.

So far, every contender had sparked red, then orange, then yellow—signals of Levels Five, Six, and Seven of the Heavenly Immortal Realm.

When Jared's turn came, he placed his palm upon the crystal. Slow and steady, he guided a wisp of chaotic celestial energy into the stone.

A faint white glow answered him, indicating Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One, the lowest tier of the realm.

The young enforcer's eyes narrowed, contempt bleeding through his polite mask.

Murmurs rose. Fingers pointed. A dozen half-smothered laughs danced across the courtyard.

The burly man whom Jared had cowed earlier bared his teeth, new malice glinting in his gaze.

Everyone knew the crystal never lied. Jared, it seemed, was truly a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One cultivator.

Relief flashed across the brute's face. He was no longer afraid.

That crushing aura from before—surely it had been some fancy trinket and nothing more.

Emboldened, the brute shifted his weight, eager to stride over and teach the newcomer a lesson.

Alas, he had barely lifted a boot when the crystal pulsed again.

White turned to storm-cloud gray. From that gray, seven halos bloomed—crimson, amber, gold, jade, azure, sapphire, violet—whirling faster and faster until they wove a swirling fog the color of unshaped chaos.

"W-What is happening?" the enforcer stammered, his voice cracking.

He froze, lips parted, the registration slips trembling in his clenched fist.

In all his years overseeing entry trials, he had never seen the crystal react that way.

Around him, the crowd fell into anxious whispers that rustled like dry leaves.

The burly man's eyes bulged. His raised foot hovered in mid-air, then lowered very, very gently.

Jared understood at once.

His chaotic celestial energy housed everything—murderous intent, the Power of Dragons, the Power of Three, and power from different fire nascences. The tangled forces confused the crystal, sending it spiraling beyond any scale it recognized.

"Perhaps there's something wrong with the crystal," Jared said mildly. "Shall we proceed to the next trial instead?"

The young enforcer stood with the registration slip trembling between his fingers. A heartbeat of doubt flickered across his face before he cast a questioning glance toward the elder reclining a short distance away—Earthfire Pavilion's appointed overseer for the day's trial.

The elder's eyelids lifted, their depths reflecting a quiet furnace. He studied Jared for a long, pressurizing moment, then gave a slow nod. "Proceed."

The second assessment tested raw destructive power.

Three specially forged Trial Pillars rose inside the arena, each calibrated to mirror the defenses of a Heavenly Immortal Realm cultivator at Levels Five, Six, and Seven.

From ten yards away, every contender had to launch an attack, and damage to the chosen pillar would reveal the true weight of their strike.

Those who had passed so far managed only deep gouges in the Level Five pillar,

while a rare Level Six talent scratched its higher sibling.

The Level Seven monolith, however, remained pristine and untouchable.

Jared stepped into the marked

circle, yet kept the Dragonslayer Sword sheathed at his back. Instead,

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he pressed two fingers together, raised them like a blade, and aimed at the Level Six pillar standing dead

center.

A thread of ashen sword energy slid from his fingertip, too quiet to hiss, too leisurely to blur the air.

"That's all? It looks so weak you could swat it away," someone muttered, the words barely louder than the rustle of robes.

Before the cynicism fully settled, the gray streak touched the Level Six pillar.

No thunder roared, no metal shrieked. Only a single crisp hiss rang out, like a hot iron sinking into snow.

Under every stunned gaze, the

pillar-engineered to endure a

Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six

cultivator's fiercest

blow surrendered. The sword

energy drilled straight through,

leaving a thumb-sized tunnel

polished to mirror-smooth

perfection, open from entrance to

exit.

Stranger still, the rim showed no shattered debris; it seemed a quiet law of the universe had simply erased the missing matter.

Silence fell across the courtyard, so deep that one could hear a pin drop.

After a few heartbeats, sharp breaths cut the stillness one after another, each inhale an unspoken question.

"H-How is that even possible?" someone exclaimed, trembling between awe and fear.

"H-He created a hole through the Level Six Trial Pillar?"

"What technique did he use? I couldn't see it at all!"

"That sword energy felt a little odd. Whatever it is, it's definitely no ordinary sword energy!"

The brawny loudmouth who had mocked Jared most loudly only moments ago now looked as if someone had drained every drop of blood from his veins.

He swallowed hard, shoulders trembling with delayed terror, suddenly aware of just how close he had come to disaster.

The young enforcer mouthed words that refused to become sound.

In all his years running these trials, the fiercest Heavenly Immortal cultivator he had seen carved only a half-inch groove into a Level Six Trial Pillar.

Piercing clean through, like what Jared had done, was unheard of.

The supervising elder's eyes snapped open again. A blade-bright glint cut across his stare as he fixed on Jared, intent on stripping every secret from the young man's soul.

Jared, as if he had merely brushed dust from his sleeve, turned toward the third station.

Next came the defense test.

Three Combat Puppets waited inside the ring, each able to unleash the force of a Level Five, Level Six, or Level Seven Heavenly Immortal Realm cultivator. Candidates were required to stand motionless, endure three blows, and let their injuries declare the truth of their resilience.

Jared stepped into the marked circle, boots clicking once against the stone before falling still.

"Select your puppet grade," the enforcer said, reverence softening the edges of his voice.

"Let's go for the Level Seven," Jared answered casually.

A fresh wave of cries broke over the spectators.

A Level Seven Combat Puppet wielded genuine, bone-shattering power. Even a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven would hesitate to swallow three hits unguarded yet Jared, whose aura barely brushed Level One, had just demanded it. Was he so utterly arrogant about himself, or did he just not care?

"Sir, a Level Seven Combat Puppet is exceedingly powerful. Perhaps you would prefer—"

"It's okay. Let's begin," Jared interrupted the enforcer, gentle yet immovable.

The enforcer looked to the supervising elder. A faint nod came in reply. "Activate the Level Seven Combat Puppet. Unleash the first strike!" he announced. A crimson, three-story automaton stirred to life. Scarlet lamps blazed in its eyes. Its right arm rose; molten light pooled around its fist, heat rolling through the arena like

the breath of a forge.

Boom!

The punch split the air, a blazing projection screaming toward Jared's face, trailed by a shock wave hot enough to sear stone.

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Jared did not dodge, nor did he conjure the faintest shimmer of celestial light shield. He simply stood there, calm as a mountain amid thunder.

"Is he insane?!" someone in the crowd exclaimed, voice coated with pure disbelief.

A towering crimson fist—nothing but condensed flame and fury—plunged toward him, ready to land.

Jared lifted his right hand, spread his fingers, then closed them with almost lazy grace around the incoming mirage.

Pop.

The blow burst like a soap bubble.

An attack fierce enough to maim a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six cultivator unraveled three feet from his palm. The energy dissolved into raw fire spiritual energy, drifting away on the breeze.

Throughout the process, Jared's hand never once shook.

"W-What?" The young enforcer stammered as his eyes bulged.

Every spectator froze, statues carved from shock.

Jared had taken a Level Seven Combat Puppet's strike head-on, walked away unscathed, then crushed it like an eggshell.

What kind of a monster was he?

"Second strike!" The enforcer forced the words out, his voice trembling.

Red light flared hotter in the puppet's eyes. Both arms rose. Twin fists collided, spawning a spinning fireball nearly a foot across, its surface laced with crackling blue arcs-thirty percent stronger than before.

"Attack!"

The puppet shoved. The blazing orb screamed through the air, heat distorting the path it carved.

Despite that, Jared still did not move.

He did not even raise a hand.

With just a thought, golden light instantly enveloped his entire body, and Golem Body was activated.

Boom!

The fireball slammed into the golden veil, detonating in white glare and a crack loud enough to shake lungs.

When the smoke curled away, Jared remained exactly where he had started.

The golden film around him rippled once, whole and unscarred.

Even the flagstones beneath his boots lay uncracked the barrier had swallowed every shred of force.

"Impossible..." someone whispered, as though watching their faith crumble to dust. The words hung in the air while the crowd's certainty died, one heartbeat at a time. "Third strike!" The young enforcer's voice cracked through the testing hall, raw with disbelief and the panic of a man watching the impossible unfold.

He stood there, lungs tight, mind blank, every scrap of composure scalded away by the spectacle before him.

Across the arena, the Combat Puppet's eyes blazed scarlet until they resembled twin suns about to burst. Its massive frame shuddered so violently that brass joints screeched, and a complicated array carved into its chest flared alive, siphoning every shred of fire-type spiritual energy from the air.

A deep, metallic hum rolled outward, vibrating through the stone floor and rattling ribs.

Above the puppet's steel skull, a colossal greatsword of pure crimson flame coalesced inch by inch, each ember locking into place as though hammered by an invisible smith.

Three stories tall, the blade writhed with

dragon phantoms that hissed around its

edge, radiating a heat so savage it seemed to blister the soul and a sword aura sharp enough to flense bone.

This was the Level Seven Combat Puppet's ultimate technique-Flame Dragon Slash.

Witnesses whispered that a full-force blow from it rivaled the strike of a Top Level Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven cultivator.

"Slash!"

The puppet brought both arms down. The flaming greatsword crashed toward Jared, promising to cleave heaven, earth, and every fragile thing between.

Even seasoned cultivators at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five and Level Six staggered back, chests tight, breaths stolen by the pressure that poured from the descending blade.

Only then did Jared move.

He lifted his left hand, pressed his index and middle fingers together, and raised them toward the falling inferno as though about to pluck a stray thread.

Yes-he meant to pinch a flaming sword the height of a house with just two fingers.

Around the arena, gasps turned to horrified silence. To every onlooker, the gesture looked like nothing short of suicidal.

And yet-

Ding!

A bell-clear ring snapped through the hall. Jared's two fingers clamped the flaming blade's tip, holding the entire mountain of fire and steel as easily as one might still a quivering candlewick.

The sword's deadly plunge halted. Dragon shadows coiled and roared in frustration, powerless to advance another inch.

The next second, Jared exerted the slightest pressure.

Crack!

Hairline fractures spider-webbed outward from the blade's tip, fine as frost on winter glass.

In a single heartbeat, those cracks raced the sword's full length, until every glowing inch of it trembled on the brink of ruin.

"Break," Jared uttered.

Boom!

With that, the three-story blade exploded into a storm of ember shards. Fire rained in dazzling sheets, yet each spark that neared Jared glanced off the thin golden aura sheathing his body and winked out of existence.

When the last cinder died, only two figures remained within the test arena: a Combat Puppet, its power reserves spent, standing dull and lifeless and a man in pale green robes hands folded behind his back clothing rustling in a breeze born of his own quiet supremacy?

The Mission Hall plunged into a graveyard hush, as though every brazier had sputtered out in the same instant.

That silence lingered-ten full breaths, perhaps more-until it felt endless, as if the very air had forgotten how to move.

Then the spell snapped. Voices detonated overhead, rolling across the vaulted

rafters like war drums suddenly unleashed.

"Oh, my goodness! What did I just see?"

"He caught a Level Seven Combat Puppet's Flame Dragon Slash with his bare hands and crushed it!"

"I-Is he really at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One? Who's he trying to fool?"

"With that power, he has to be at least a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Eight... No, Level Nine! He might already be brushing the threshold of the High Immortal Realm!"

"Earthfire Pavilion has struck gold this time!"

The cultivators who had mocked Jared only moments ago burned scarlet with shame, each wishing for a fissure to swallow him whole.

The burly heckler slipped to the back of the crowd, shoulders hunched, praying the young man's gaze would never find him.

The young enforcer drew three deep breaths, steadying the storm hammering inside his chest.

He stepped up to the supervising elder, bowed, and spoke. "What's your judgment, Elder Zuver?"

The elder rose, robes whispering, and strode to Jared. His eyes gleamed with admiration and inquiry. "Remarkable technique, young friend. May I know your name and who your master is?"

Jared offered a polite bow. "I am Jared Chance. I'm a wandering cultivator and have no fixed master."

"A wandering cultivator?"

A flicker of surprise crossed the elder's gaze, yet he pressed on with a warm nod. "Your strength far exceeds our guard requirement. With you aboard, this escort mission gains a mountain of safety."

"I am Royce Zuver, one of Earthfire Pavilion's outer court elders. If you're interested,

I'm more than happy to welcome you into Earthfire Pavilion as an inner court disciple once this mission is completed."

As soon as Jared was offered direct admission to becoming an inner court disciple, sharp intakes of envy rippled through the hall.

Within the Blaze Region, Earthfire Pavilion reigned. Its inner court disciples enjoyed the prestige that ordinary cultivators could chase for a lifetime and never grasp.

Yet Jared only smiled, calm as autumn water. "Thank you for thinking so highly of me, Elder Zuver.

For now, only seek the mission's pay and the tempering it brings. can discuss joining Earthfire Pavilion another day."

Thankfully, Royce did not press. "Very well—each to his own path. Having passed the trial, you are hereby a guard on this mission. And who is this companion of yours?" he asked as he turned toward Vermilion Demon Lord.

"This is my comrade, Mr. Vermilion," Jared said, introducing the demon lord with a respectful tilt of his head.

Vermilion Demon Lord stepped forward, releasing the steady aura of a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six cultivator—respectable, if less earth-shaking than Jared's display.

"Mr. Vermilion has also passed the trial," Royce declared. "Please step forward to register and receive your Guard Tokens. Assemble outside the south gate at dawn tomorrow. Do not be late."

Jared dipped his chin in a slow, unhurried nod. "Understood." The single syllable rang across the marble floor like a gavel, final and undeniable.

Once the registry clerk stamped the parchment, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord accepted two crimson Guard Tokens. The medallions pulsed with faint heat against their palms formal proof they now served as escorts for Earthfire

Pavilion.

They turned and strode from Mission Hall. Behind them, a sea of cultivators craned for a better look, whispers rising like sparks that refused to die in the air.

"Jared Chance... It won't be long before every street in Crimson Flame City learns of that name."

"With such strength yet so unassuming, this person is definitely not ordinary."

"Hey, Malevolent Path Hall posted a bounty on someone called Jared Chance, too. Could he be the one?"

"Hush! Watch your words! You can't say stuff like that without thinking!"

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Outside the colonnaded entrance, Vermilion Demon Lord kept his voice just above the wind. "Jared, the power you revealed earlier will draw sharper eyes. Malevolent Path Hall in particular-"

"It's okay. Let them come," Jared replied calmly. "It's only a matter of time before they track me down anyway. Showing a fraction of what I can do scares off bottom-feeders and saves us needless skirmishes. Besides, Earthfire Pavilion is curious about me now. That curiosity could turn into protection if we play our cards right."

Vermilion Demon Lord mulled the logic, then offered a brief nod, scarlet hair stirring in the dusk. The pair returned to their inn, spending the rest of the evening sharpening blades, minds, and resolve for the journey through Flame Gorge at dawn.

Unbeknownst to them, word of the afternoon's spectacle raced along every information channel in Crimson Flame City. By nightfall, each major faction— Malevolent Path Hall included—spoke of a young, enigmatic cultivator who crushed a Level Seven Combat Puppet with bare hands.

"He shattered a Level Seven Combat Puppet's Flame Dragon Slash with just his bare hands?"

Bennett Bloodwyn listened to the report, crimson eyes gleaming like coals. "No wonder Darkwind Gorge fell. That boy truly does have some skill."

"Elder Bloodwyn, shall we strike now?" a subordinate asked.

Bennett shook his head. "No. There's no hurry. He's currently a guard on one of Earthfire Pavilion's missions. If we launch a blatant attack, we'd only offend Earthfire Pavilion. Let's wait until he leaves the city and steps into Flame Gorge—chaos is our ally there. Tell Barnaby to head there first and set the Myriad Ghost Devouring Grand Array along the outer rim. This time, I will take action personally. Jared Chance will not escape again!"

"Understood!"

In the hollows of that lair, murderous intent gathered like frost, invisible yet bitterly real.

Meanwhile, in a rented room above a quiet tavern, Jared sat cross-legged, eyes closed, steadying his breath. Each inhale drew in fiery essence; each exhale forged calm into steel for tomorrow's march through Flame Gorge.

At first light the next morning, beyond Crimson Flame City's southern gate, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord arrived punctually at the rendezvous point.

More than twenty figures had already gathered beneath the smoldering dusk, their murmurs swallowed by the wind that rolled off the distant lava fields. Ten were newly hired guards-blades gleaming, eyes alert—while the rest wore the deep-crimson tokens of Earthfire Pavilion: disciples and enforcers standing in disciplined rows.

Ahead of the gathering, three sumptuous carriages waited in silence. Each carriage was yoked to four Crimson Flame Steeds whose burning hooves cast restless sparks across the baked roadway.

Resembling stallions yet bred from fire, the Level Three spirit beasts boasted hide the color of molten iron and an endurance few could match, making them the preferred mounts for exhausting treks through the searing Blaze Region.

Shortly after sunrise, a figure in ember-red robes glided through the main gate, snow-white hair framing a face as unlined as a child's, disciples crowding in formation behind him.

Warm benevolence softened his smile, yet every slow blink released a needle-bright spark that hinted at power pooled deep as an ocean-Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Eight.

He supported himself with a crimson-jade staff, its head holding a fist-sized fiery-red gemstone. The stone burned, but its heat felt more like sunlight on skin than an open flame.

"Greetings, Elder Flameheart!" the Earthfire Pavilion disciples shouted together, bows crisp and perfectly timed.

The hired guards, more rough than refined, scrambled into clumsy imitations of the salute.

After all, the elder before them was one of Earthfire Pavilion's three legendary alchemy masters.

"Stand easy," Ferdinand Flameheart said, his voice spreading like warm coals beneath a winter cloak. "Our mission is to gather Flame Spirit Herbs inside Flame Gorge, so 4 be counting on everyone to escort us there. That said, I have to remind everyone that deep within the gorge lairs a Flame Dragon-temper fierce, strength equal to a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Nine cultivator. Our goal is to quickly gather enough Flame Spirit Herbs and withdraw before the Flame Dragon notices us. Therefore, speed and safety are

our top priorities. Avoid direct confrontation with the Flame Dragon whenever possible. Do you all understand?"

"Understood!" The response cracked in perfect harmony, echoing against the red- stone walls.

"Good. Let's move out."

With that, Ferdinand stepped into the center carriage, scarlet curtains dropping behind him with a muted hiss of silk.

Out on the wide road beyond Crimson Flame City, the convoy rolled forward. Crimson Flame Steeds struck the dust, each hoof igniting brief tongues of orange fire that left no ash behind.

Some guards rode horseback beside the carriages, others hovered on flight devices just above the ground, scanning every ridge and ravine for trouble.

Meanwhile, Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord chose to travel by flying, giving them a wider field of vision and allowing them to respond to sudden situations at any moment.

Gliding on steady currents, Jared let the region's dense fire-type spiritual energy flow through him inside. chaotic celestial energy adjusted, absorbing the raw heat until it felt almost cleansing. '

Half an hour later, the procession entered rust-colored hills.

The temperature climbed sharply, and a faint tang of sulfur drifted in every breath.

At that moment, a carved window on the lead carriage creaked open.

A girl of perhaps seventeen leaned out. Her skin was milk over moonlight; her brows curved like brushstrokes; and her eyes-bright as twin flames-held both mischief and curiosity.

Hair piled high, secured by a single crimson-jade pin, she wore a flowing fire-red gown embroidered with golden three-legged sun-birds that seemed ready to leap from the cloth.

Youth could not hide the innate grace that clung to her like perfume, a quiet authority impossible to ignore.

Her gaze wandered over the escort until it caught Jared gliding above the column.

When their eyes met, Jared saw unmasked wonder in her burning irises, as though she had stumbled upon a fascinating new toy.

He blinked, offered a courteous nod, then turned his eyes back to the horizon, heartbeat just a shade quicker beneath his calm exterior.

Yet the instant their eyes brushed against each other—a spark that lasted no longer than a heartbeat the hush of the cammet

broke leads turned as though a silent bell had tolled, summoning every curious gaze.

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"It's Princess Lindsay Flameheart! She's the beloved daughter of Ignatius

Flameheart, head of Earthfire Pavilion," someone exclaimed. "What is she doing here, though?"

"I heard Princess Lindsay is a prodigy. She may be young, but she's already at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five. Mr. Flameheart and the elders at Earthfire Pavilion love her to bits. She rarely leaves the Pavilion, yet here she is, marching beside Elder Flameheart himself."

"Look—she keeps glancing at that guard named Jared Chance."

"Tsk tsk. Lucky devil. A single look from Princess Lindsay could make a man happy for life."

Soft murmurs rustled through the air like wind over dry leaves, swelling, fading, swelling again.

Vermilion Demon Lord nudged Jared in the ribs, his voice sliding along a private tide of sound that only Jared could hear. "Not bad, Jared. You've barely set foot in level eleven, and you're already collecting admirers. This young lady is the daughter of Earth Pavilion's leader. Win her over, and Earthfire Pavilion could be at your bidding."

Jared threw him a warning stare. "Stop it, Mr. Vermilion. She's only looking at me out of curiosity."

Vermilion Demon Lord chuckled. "Out of curiosity? I doubt it. That look held more than curiosity. Seize the opportunity, young man. She's lovely, noble, gifted—exactly your type. And since you never lack for women, what harm is one more on level eleven? Besides, every young lady you've encountered eventually succumbs to your charm."

"Stop right there," Jared interrupted with a weary wave of his hand. "We have enough problems as it is. Let's not invite more."

Even so, why does her gaze feel so oddly warm-almost as if she somehow approves of me? Lindsay Flameheart's her name, yes? Her eyes are clear as spring water, shimmering with something beyond mere interest-recognition, perhaps, even a strange, delicate familiarity. Is it because I possess chaotic celestial energy and the Golden Dragon Bloodline, which triggered a response from her sensitivity to fire-type spiritual energy and draconic energy?

Just then, a young disciple from Earthfire Pavilion descended on a swirl of wind, bowed, and spoke with polished courtesy that failed to hide his subtle scrutiny. "Mr. Chance, Her Highness requests your company in the carriage."

Jealous heat flared around them, dozens of eyes stabbing forward like tiny daggers dressed in envy.

Jared hesitated only a breath, then inclined his head. "Very well."

Vermilion Demon Lord's grin stretched wide and knowing as Jared followed the disciple down to the road and toward the lead carriage shimmering in the noon glare.

The door swung open, releasing a puff of cool, perfumed air that wrapped Jared in relief. Clearly, intricate cooling arrays hummed within, holding back the desert heat like invisible walls.

"Mr. Chance, please step inside," the maid who had earlier unlatched the window said as she waited at the carriage's steps.

Her posture was straight, her hands folded before her waist, and her voice carried the soft elegance of well-trained service as she invited him inside.

Jared mounted the short stairs and crossed the threshold. The interior was far larger than the carriage's modest exterior suggested-an.

intimate salon lined with mink

furs, moon-stone panels that gave off a candle warm glow, and low lacquered tables set with jeweled plates of spirit fruit and delicate porcelain teacups.

At the head of this mobile parlor, Lindsay Flameheart lounged sideways on a cushioned bench. One elbow propped her chin, and fiery amber eyes tracked Jared with an almost childlike curiosity.

All this satin and privacy-surely the princess didn't summon me here because she wants a little carriage adventure, did she?

Upon noticing how intently Jared was staring at Lindsay, the maid's voice dropped to

a scolding whisper. "You stand before a princess. Mind your manners."

"Jared Chance pays his respects to Your Highness," the man hurriedly said and bowed—neither servile nor arrogant, just enough deference to satisfy courtly decorum.

"Don't worry about the formalities. Sit."

Lindsay's tone rippled like water over stone-bright, musical, impossible to ignore. "I heard from Elder Zuver that you shattered a Level Seven Combat Puppet's Flame Dragon Slash with your bare hands during the test. Is that true?"

She blinked, wide-eyed, no royal stiffness about her more the inquisitive girl next door, desperate for a good story.

Jared settled opposite her as the maid poured translucent tea that steamed with faint crimson wisps.

"It was just a parlor trick. Forgive me if it disappointed Your Highness," he replied, letting the steam mask an unreadable half-smile.

Lindsay's lips puckered in disbelief. "A parlor trick? Elder Zuver swore your sword energy punched straight through a Level Six Trial

Pillar something he hasn't al ne

in

his entire lifetime. Also, that O Spirit Measuring Crystal couldn't even detect your cultivation level and flashed seven colors of chaos. You're quite the mystery, eh?"

The next second, she leaned forward, her eyes like living flame. "Tell me—what's your cultivation level? Are you really only at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One? I don't buy it. And your cultivation technique is strange. Your aura feels familiar, yet foreign at the same time..."

Jared's pulse ticked once-just once-but he masked it behind a sip of tea. Deep down, he was truly impressed by Lindsay's keen perception.

"My cultivation level is only at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One," he answered calmly. "I admit my technique is unconventional. It lets me strike above my level, nothing more. The strange aura you sense likely comes from that technique." "Nothing more?" Lindsay uttered as she cocked her head. "A Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One cultivator smashes a Level Seven Combat Puppet, and that's 'nothing more?' If that's the case, how are the rest of us supposed to survive?"

Lindsay leaned across the swaying carriage window, amber eyes sparkling like live coals. "So tell me mysterious stranger-where did you come from? Who taught you? Why slip into Crimson Flame City? What drives you to sign up for guard duty? The Earthfire Pavilion offered to make you an inner court disciple, yet you refused. What, then, could you possibly be after?"

The volley of questions hit Jared like a hail of sparks against dry tinder. He straightened, managed a faint, respectful smile, and bought himself one long breath before answering.

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"I'm from level ten," Jared began, voice calm but measured. "A wandering cultivator, beholden to no formal master. I came to Crimson Flame City in search of Jadeheart Marrow to save someone. Guard duty offers coin, and more importantly, a path into the Earthfire Pavilion's records where clues to the location of Jadeheart Marrow might lie."

He revealed enough to satisfy courtesy, yet kept the darker truth—the lethal hunt launched by the Malevolent Path Hall—locked firmly behind his eyes.

"Jadeheart Marrow?" Lindsay exclaimed. "That's something spoken of only in legends, found in the deepest reaches of the Infernal Lava Abyss—only a single drop forms every ten thousand years. Who are you trying to save? Why do you need something so valuable and rare?"

"It's the partner of a respected senior of mine," Jared said softly. "Her physical body is on the verge of decay, so we need this item to anchor her life force."

"Oh..."

A thoughtful hush quickly settled over the princess. When she lifted her gaze again, respect glimmered there. "Loyal and tender-hearted—remarkable. However, I must tell you that Jadeheart Marrow is exceedingly rare. Even the Earthfire Pavilion only possesses a few leads regarding the Infernal Lava Abyss—we have no ready stock. If you want to obtain it, it will be extremely difficult."

"No matter how difficult it is, I must still give it a try," Jared replied, steadiness ringing through every syllable.

For several heartbeats, Lindsay studied him, then her lips curved into a mischievous grin. "You're an interesting one. Very well-out of sheer admiration for such sincerity, I might petition Father on your behalf. But there is a price..."

She winked, playful as a spark skimming oil. "You have to keep me company on this entire journey. Tell me every tale the greater world hides. I've been caged inside the pavilion walls since childhood, and boredom may yet kill me before any foe does."

A laugh escaped Jared before he could restrain it, light and genuine.

For all her rank, the princess proved refreshingly direct-almost endearingly so.

"If Your Highness can endure my boring tales, I would be honored to oblige." He realized, with a ripple of amusement, that part of him looked forward to the game.

From that day on, Lindsay sought him out whenever opportunity flickered.

Sometimes, a maid invited Jared up to the velvet-draped carriage; at other stops, Lindsay darted away from the royal retinue to sit beside Jared and Vermilion Demon Lord under the shade of a lone basalt spire.

Her curiosity blazed hotter than any forge. The saga of Jared's climb from level ten to level eleven drew gasp after delighted gasp.

"Is the Eternal Ice Plains in level ten really that cold? Is it colder than our Frostbite Cave? Is the Northern Abyss Celestial Clan really that arrogant? What do they look like? And how on earth did you defeat a Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Eight celestial general?"

Jared answered what he could, letting silence paint over the secrets better left unspoken.

Even the half-told stories left Lindsay wide-eyed, exclaiming, sighing, sometimes simply staring at him as though he were the very horizon she longed to cross.

Meanwhile, Jared gleaned much about the Blaze Region and the Earthfire Pavilion from her eager chatter.

The pavilion—one of the Blaze Region's twin titans—was famed for alchemy and blacksmithing, its power braided through three great halls: Pill Hall, Forge Hall, and Combat Hall.

Lindsay's father, Ignatius Flameheart, stood atop both titles and cultivation—a Top Level Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Nine cultivator and among level eleven's foremost alchemy masters.

From the moment Lindsay could walk, flames answered her touch. The court seers proclaimed a prodigy, and so the royal wards rose around her—layers of silken guards, enchanted palanquins, and rules that barred even a single unsupervised step beyond the walls.

"Father keeps insisting the outside world is dangerous, so I'm never allowed out," Lindsay uttered, cheeks red and puffed. "If I hadn't begged for days—and if Mr. Ferdinand hadn't vouched for me I wouldn't be here at all. Yet even now I'm stuck inside this swaying carriage, going nowhere. It's enough to bore me to death!"

Jared offered a soothing smile. "Your father only wants you safe. Flame Gorge truly crawls with danger. The Flame Dragon lurking there is viciously strong. A little caution never hurts."

Lindsay rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, yes. I've heard that speech before. Gosh. You sound just like my father."

She waved the thought away, then her eyes lit up, bright as newly struck sparks. "Anyway, what kind of goodies do you have on you? Come on, show me something formidable!"

The question caught Jared mid-breath, and he blinked like a man jolted awake.

Goodies? What could she possibly want to see? Dragonslayer Sword, Dragon Bell, Divine Bow, or Demon Flogger? Wait... Could she be referring to my...

Jared's gaze dipped toward his own waist, and a blush as hot as forge-steel crept across his cheeks; if he revealed that particular "weapon," he would scare the poor girl senseless.

Lindsay leaned closer, suspicion flaring. "Don't tell me you've got nothing on you at all?"

Seeing her eager face, Jared sighed, slipped a hand into his storage ring, and called forth a creature of legend. With a pop of ember-scented light, a small fire unicorn trotted onto the carnage floor, hooves sparking against the lacquered wood.

Since its recent rest-and a steady soak in the Blaze Region's fiery spiritual energy-the beast had filled out splendidly. It could now tower more than forty feet when it pleased, every crimson-gold scale gleaming like fresh-poured steel. Golden flames flicked around its four hooves while it pawed the air, fierce yet noble, a living embodiment of

molten majesty.

The creature nuzzled Jared's shoulder with the weight of a boulder yet the gentleness of a housecat, then turned its curious, molten-amber eyes on the cavern and-most of all-on the princess.

"Oh wow! You're gorgeous!" she squealed.

Fearless, Lindsay sprinted forward and reached for the unicorn's head, eager to feel those incandescent scales under her palms.

The unicorn tensed for an instant. Then, sensing the princess' pure fire aura—and finding no hint of hostility in Jared's stance—it dipped its head like a knight offering fealty, allowing her touch.

"It's so soft and warm," she whispered, eyes crinkling into crescent moons.

A few seconds later, she asked, "What's his name?"

"He doesn't have one yet. I just call him the small fire unicorn for now," Jared admitted.

"That won't do at all! Look at him-gold and crimson, wrapped in living flame: How can such a majestic celestial beast not have a name

scolded not

mdsay scolded as she gave

it some thought. "Ah! I got it! Let's

calfhim Lucky. He'll bring fortune to

everyone who meets him?"

"Lucky?" Jared echoed, stunned by the down-to-earth choice.

For a heartbeat, he was back on Earth, remembering the mutt next door-also named Lucky-chasing mailmen and chewing garden hoses.

How utterly different that scruffy hound was from the majestic fire unicorn before him.

It was rare for a princess in level eleven to choose such a homespun name, but in some ways, it was also heartwarming.

Surprisingly, the small fire unicorn seemed to understand. It rumbled approval and rubbed its head against Lindsay's hand, sealing the choice.

"See? He loves it!" she laughed, utterly delighted.

Jared chuckled as well. Clearly, the dear little fire unicorn had no idea who the name

once belonged to.

Still, the beast had no objections, and neither did he.

"We'll do as you say, Princess Lindsay. Lucky it is," Jared said with a helpless smile.

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Upon hearing this, Lindsay happily led Lucky around, running and playing chase with it. Lucky was also quite affectionate toward her, often carrying her on its back for strolls around the camp, much to the envy of the disciples from the Earthfire Pavilion and the guards.

"Mr. Chance truly is favored by the heavens-formidable strength and now the princess's fondness," a guard murmured.

"And that fire unicorn! Have you ever seen such majesty? Pure-blooded, they say. Fortune has kissed Mr. Chance square on the brow."

"Princess Lindsay is cute and lovely. She and Mr. Chance are a good match."

Praise floated on the air, braided with envy and darker whispers that slithered between the guards and the disciples.

Not every pair of eyes welcomed the relationship between Jared and Lindsay.

Elliot Ember, a rising prodigy of Earthfire Pavilion, watched from the shadows. Only twenty-five, handsome and sure-footed, he already stood at the Top Level Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven. None of the young disciples could compete with his strength.

The elders lauded both his sword skills and his rare gift for alchemy. Elliot was one of the candidates for the future head of the Earthfire Pavilion.

Everyone in the Earthfire Pavilion knew Elliot had long adored Lindsay. He rated himself highly and was convinced that only a peerless talent such as his could ever be worthy of her.

Volunteering as her escort had seemed the perfect chance to get close to her.

Yet from the moment Jared appeared, Lindsay's gaze clung to the newcomer. Day after day, she chatted with him or played with Lucky, offering Elliot little more than polite nods.

Elliot was extremely jealous.

A wandering cultivator riding a few parlor tricks dares hover near the princess?

Watching Jared and Lindsay laugh together, Elliot's pleasant mask slipped, leaving only the hard glint of a simmering threat.

He's just a temporary escort. How arrogant!

Elliot tried several times to be alone with Lindsay.

"Lindsay, Elder Flameheart is looking for you. He wishes to discuss something urgent," Elliot said gently.

Though his tone struck courtesy, the look he leveled at Jared was pure contempt.

"Mr. Ferdinand needs me?" Lindsay blinked, dreamlike, still caught in Jared's tale of the level ten.

"Must it be right now? Can't it wait a little?"

"The matter concerns the Flame Gorge. It's important," Elliot replied sternly.

With a sigh and an apologetic smile for Jared, Lindsay hurried off.

Elliot did not follow. He pivoted instead, eyes leveling on Jared as the courteous warmth drained from his face. His expression was cold and threatening.

"Jared Chance, right? I don't care what trick won you a place in the trial, nor why the princess finds you amusing. I must warn you to put 4

yourself in place. You're just a

short-term escort when the mission ends, scram off!" Elliot threatened.

"Princess Lindsay is not someone you can get close to. Please stay away from her. It'll do you good."

"You worry too much. I came at the princess's invitation, nothing else," Jared replied calmly.

Elliot let out a curt, disdainful snort. "I hope you keep your promise. Earthfire Pavilion is no playground for wandering cultivators. If I catch a threat from you or any harm toward the princess, the consequences will crush you."

With that, Elliot turned and left.

Jared watched the retreating figure until it vanished. Then he exhaled, shook his head, and let a half-smile tug at one corner of his mouth.

Jared had no interest in snatching Lindsay from Elliot. If not for the clue that might lead him to the Jadeheart Marrow, he would ignore the Earthfire Pavilion.

However, the situation worsened.

Over the next few days, Elliot's possessiveness grew brazen.

Whenever he saw Lindsay speaking with Jared, he conjured some urgent erranda summons from an elder sudden alchemy question, even the dusty excuse of "men and women should keep their distance."

It was so frequent that Lindsay finally noticed Elliot's actions.

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"What is wrong with Elliot lately?" Lindsay asked, brows knit in genuine confusion.

Once again, Elliot called her over to discuss alchemy. Later, she returned and grumbled to Jared. "He's not that enthusiastic before."

Jared's smile was mild, almost amused. "Perhaps he truly cares for Your Highness."

"Oh, spare me," Lindsay huffed, rolling her bright eyes.

"I can read him like a scroll. He sees us getting close and gets jealous. He's so petty."

A playful glint flashed across her gaze. "Don't worry. As long as I'm here, he won't dare lay a finger on you. If he disturbs you again, please let me know. I'll have Father set him straight."

Jared chuckled under his breath. "Your protection is greatly appreciated, Your Highness. I can handle trifles."

"Handle? How, exactly?" Lindsay asked, curiosity sharpening her tone.

"Elliot's cultivation level is at the Top Level Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Seven. Among Earthfire Pavilion's young disciples, he is top three. You might be formidable, but your cultivation level..."

Lindsay did not continue, but her intentions were clear. Jared was only at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level One. Even though he was powerful, fighting with Elliot was

not easy.

"Rest assured, Your Highness," Jared said calmly. "I know my limits."

Two more days passed. The convoy had reached Flame Gorge.

When resting, Jared and Lindsay fed Lucky a fire fruit. Meanwhile, Elliot approached them.

"Lindsay, Elder Flameheart needs you. He wants to discuss entering the Flame Gorge," Elliot said.

Lindsay frowned. "We discussed those plans an hour ago. What changed?"

"New intel surfaced," Elliot replied.

With a reluctant sigh, Lindsay rose and said, "I'll be back soon. Please look after Lucky."

Elliot did not follow after Lindsay. He fixed Jared with a glare fierce enough to scorch stone. "Did my last warning never reach your ears?"

Jared gently smoothed the mane of Lucky and replied, "I remember your words, but the princess approached me first. Would you have me refuse to talk to Her Highness? If you object, perhaps tell Her Highness to stop talking to me."

The words sounded civil, yet Jared's tone was sarcastic. Elliot could not control Lindsay's actions, so it was not Jared's fault.

"Are you provoking me?" Elliot's voice dropped.

"No, I won't dare." Jared's tone stayed even.

"I simply state facts. And if we are finished here, Lucky needs its evening walk."

He patted Lucky's head and turned on his heel to leave.

"Stay right there!" Elliot barked.

A scorching aura locked onto Jared. "Don't think you can act recklessly with Her Highness's fondness for you. I warn you for the last time. Stay away from Her Highness. Or else."

"Or else what?" Jared halted, turning slowly.

His gaze remained placid, yet an icy splinter flashed deep inside. "Are you going to attack me? Remember. Our mission is to guard Princess Lindsay and Elder Flameheart while

they gather Flame Spirit Herb. If a private feud wrecks the mission or costs a life, can you carry the blame?"

The reminder punched the heat from Elliot's aura. He dared not risk Lindsay's safety and Ferdinand's fury. Moreover, Jared's uncanny performance at the trials haunted him.

Although Elliot could win a battle with Jared, he was not confident.

"Sharp tongue!" Elliot growled, forced to swallow his rage.

"Fine. When the mission ends, we'll settle the score in the Earthfire Pavilion. We will see whether you are still this fearless."

He hurled Jared one last glare, then strode off.

Jared watched Elliot and gave a small, weary shake of his head.

Jealousy had robbed better men of judgment. He had met their kind too many times to count.

So long as Elliot did not disturb his search for Jadeheart Marrow, he would ignore Elliot. Yet if Elliot dared to hurt him, he would not hesitate to fight back.

Sensing his mood, Lucky rumbled softly and nudged Jared's arm, a wordless pledge of companionship.

Jared laughed and patted Lucky. "Come on, let's walk."

The next day, the convoy finally reached the entrance of Flame Gorge.

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Flame Gorge reached across the endless scarlet wasteland like a giant scar.

Peering over the gorge revealed cliff walls that plunged sheer as a cleaver stroke, the rock stained dark red—as though blood had congealed.

Not a single plant grew on the cliffs. Only jagged crimson crystals juttied out, scattering the sunlight in blinding shards.

Deep within the gorge, waves of heat rolled unchecked. The blast furnace breath of the earth bent the very air, twisting it into shimmering ripples that danced and shuddered like mirages above desert sand.

Visible torrents of crimson vapor surged upward, carrying the pungent odor of sulfur and a scorching heat.

A stream of magma flow across the gorge, making gurgling noises and spurting over fifteen meters.

Crimson exotic creatures swam at a rapid speed in the magma river.

Then a single roar—low and commanding—rolled out of the gorge.

The roar struck the cliff walls like a hammer that rocks rolled off the cliff.

The roar came from the Flame Dragon. It stunned cultivators at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five.

Someone whispered, "So this is Flame Gorge."

Jared narrowed his eyes and felt the intense fire-type spiritual energy.

His chaotic celestial energy circulated twice as quickly, sharpening every sense until each ember in the wind felt mapped against his skin.

Standing beside him, Vermilion Demon Lord's brows creased with unease. "The malice and fire-poison here is intense. Many enforcers must have died here."

The Earthfire Pavilion party raised its camp on a rare stretch of level ground near the gorge.

Ferdinand soon gathered everyone and said, "Flame Gorge has three parts: the outskirts, the middle, and the heart. The Flame Spirit Herb grows on the border of the middle and the heart of the gorge, in what we call the Flame-Spirit Basin, which also happens to be where the Flame Dragon resides."

"Our objective is simple. Reach the Flame-Spirit Basin, harvest at least thirty mature Flame Spirit Herbs, and leave. We only have three hours. Any longer and the dragon will notice and attack."

Sweeping the crowd, Ferdinand paused on the ten hired escorts and said, "You should know the risk when you accepted the mission. You must obey orders and cooperate, so the chance of surviving will be huge. The Earthfire Pavilion rewards success generously."

Yet Jared sensed an invisible boundary between the Earthfire Pavilion disciples and escorts. The disciples clustered around Ferdinand and Lindsay, leaving the escorts to watch the perimeter.

Elliot stood beside Ferdinand. His gaze drifted across Jared. He had a contemptuous smile.

"I'll allocate the tasks. When we enter the gorge, I need people to explore the path and remove the threats. Who can accept this task?" Ferdinand asked.

Before anyone could volunteer, Elliot stepped forward and said, "This task is perilous and crucial. We need someone agile and strong. I nominate Jared Chance. During the trials, his performance was extraordinary-strength well above his tier. He is the perfect choice."

Elliot turned to look at Jared with a smile.

The hired escorts' expression changed.

People who explored the path faced the most dangers since many venomous bugs and vicious beasts resided in the Flame Gorge. Plus, there were traps.

Although they would receive a higher pay, the risk was the highest.

The escorts who passed the trials were mostly at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five. They were not willing to accept the task.

All eyes turned to Jared.

Jared met Elliot's gaze for several silent breaths, then dipped his chin. "I'll do it."

Vermilion Demon Lord opened his mouth, ready to protest, but the words caught in his throat.

"No worries at all. In fact, I've been looking for a chance to study this gorge," Jared explained.

A thin gleam of triumph skimmed

across Elliot's eyes as he nodded. "Since we're clearing the path, a smaller group makes less noise and is less likely to spook the Flame Dragon. Jared, pick two to three companions." s̄novels

Elliot intended to isolate Jared.

Jared's gaze swept across the escorts. Many of them lowered their head, afraid to look at him.

Only a tall and slim cultivator with a bow at his back and a short and stout cultivator wielding two hammers stepped forward.

"I am Lyndon Forest, Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Six. I'm good at long-range attacks and scouting. I'm willing to join Mr. Chance," the tall man introduced himself.

"Name's Ethan Stone, Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five. I can take the hits," the short man said.

Caleb nodded his head. "Thank you. I'll count on you."

"I'm going too!"

Lindsay walked through the disciples and stood beside Jared. "I have never had an adventure. This is a good chance to explore the world."

"Nonsense!" Color drained from Elliot's face as he snapped, "Lindsay, exploring the path is dangerous. You cannot risk yourself. Return at once!"

"Lindsay, don't be ridiculous," Ferdinand warned, brows furrowing. "Stay by my side. Your safety comes first."

"But—" Lindsay began, sparks of stubborn fire in her eyes.

Caleb spoke before the quarrel ignited. "Your Highness, your presence is too valuable to gamble. Let us handle the path-finding."

Lindsay bit her lower lip, then retreated a step. "Please be careful. Lucky, protect Jared, understood?"

Lucky answered with a deep huff and nudged Jared in solemn promise.

Elliot watched the exchange, the darkness pooling in his eyes growing a shade darker.

"Jared, I'll come with you," Vermilion Demon Lord suggested.

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"We can't both step into danger. If we fall together, no one will carry the word back. Stay behind me. If real trouble strikes, you'll still be close enough to save me," Jared replied.

Jared feared losing Vermilion Demon Lord to whatever waited ahead. Vermilion Demon Lord's eyes softened with gratitude.

Not long ago, when he was no more than a ragged wisp of soul, he had helped Jared. However, with his body restored, Jared had stood upon heights he could barely fathom.

He needed Jared to protect him.