

A Warrior Undefeatable 5961-5970

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The Guiding Talisman rested between Jared's fingers, its script pulsing like a distant heartbeat tugging him west. He and the Vermilion Demon Lord raced over broken ridgelines, letting the faint pull lead.

Level twelve sprawled wider than imagination. Even with both travelers pouring power into flight, the horizon refused to yield; day after day bled away until the seventh sunset finally painted dunes the map had promised. Jared felt grit between his teeth and anticipation under his ribs both told him they were close.

The farther they pushed west, the thinner the breath of the world became.

The familiar give-and-take of spiritual essence faded to a dry rasp in Jared's lungs, as if even air no longer remembered how to nourish.

Overhead, a once-blue sky had curdled into sickly ochre.

Jagged fissures-charcoal scars torn straight across the heavens-yawned open without warning, each one breathing a slow, predatory suction that prickled the back of his neck.

The wind stopped behaving like wind.

It hammered from every direction at once, crammed with splinters of broken space and strange, skittering currents, scraping across his skin the way a dull blade worries bone.

Even the body he had reforged through ordeal-and the Demon Lord's crimson shell beside him—couldn't shrug it off; pain kept blooming, sharp and deliberate, as if the storm enjoyed their flinch.

"Damn, this place is drier than a wasteland," Vermilion Demon Lord barked, scattering a blood-tinged wind blade with a casual swipe of his claw.

"But the more a land looks forsaken, the fatter the treasures buried in its ribs. I can smell opportunity under all this rot."

Jared kept his reply to himself; the Guiding Talisman nesting in his palm had begun to warm, a slow pulse that pushed against his skin like a heartbeat.

Ancient runes stirred across the slip of paper, shedding a steady halo no wider than a firefly, yet unmistakable—always pointing toward that one quadrant where the wind howled loudest.

"That should be it—the outer rim of the Void Gale," he muttered, eyes narrowing.

A pulse of displacement rolled from ahead, deep enough to rattle his teeth.

"Stay tight on me," he warned, voice low. "Those spatial eddies will tear you apart if they catch a sleeve."

He and the Demon Lord dimmed their auras until only a translucent sheen clung to their skin, then edged toward the shrieking corridor ahead.

Half a breath later, something slithered through his focus—wrong weight, wrong rhythm.

He halted mid-air and angled a whisper toward his companion. "Tail."

Vermilion blinked, then let his demonic sense unfurl like smoke.

A beat later he chuckled. "Three fleas. Two at Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Nine, one at the pinnacle."

"If this wasteland weren't so starved of essence, their escape art might have hidden them for good."

The Demon Lord looked almost disappointed, as if someone had promised him a duel and sent toddlers instead.

Jared knew the confidence wasn't hollow; at his present tier, a High Immortal Realm Level Three would struggle to leave a bruise on him.

So a handful of Heavenly Immortal Realm foot soldiers really were walking into their own funeral.

Jared's gaze skimmed a scatter of ruined stone mounds in the distance.

"They picked us up just after we left the canyon," he said softly. "Could be Malevolent Path Hall scouts, or—"

"Chasing the same Ancient Energy Refiners' Abode," Vermilion supplied. "Exactly."

A chill glimmer slipped across Jared's eyes.

"Let them follow. The Void Gale belt is perfect for taking out the trash."

They exchanged no more words, schooling their expressions into empty patience as they drifted onward.

Quietly, Jared widened the Talisman's search net; the faint brush of three camouflaged auras surfaced, clinging to the wasteland's texture like dust on dust.

"Not Malevolent Path Hall," he noted, filing the detail away.

He exhaled, tasting metal on the air.

"Arts from the Malevolent Path Hall reek of reincarnation aura or that Ninefold Nether rot," he said, voice low.

"Whoever trails us feels colder-more like a sect bred for shadows and knives."

Beside him, the Vermilion Demon Lord rolled his thick shoulders.

"Whoever tries to snatch my prize gets crushed, no exceptions!" he barked, white fangs flashing.

They drifted another mile through weightless dusk.

Without warning, the horizon tore open like fabric yanked too hard.

Sickly yellow sky showed a thousand slits, each one leaking gray-black void.

Webbed cracks crawled outward while gale howls traveled even across the dozens of miles still between them.

The trembling line where normal space ended and the Void Gale Belt began now glimmered beneath their feet.

Subtle prickles on Jared's skin

confirmed they had stepped into the

zone itself, the air sharpening with hidden blades.

He settled his breath. "We wait here and let them come to us."

He guided their sword-light toward a broad, floating slab of rock, its underside glowing a dull red.

With the boulder at their backs, they

folded their legs and closed eyes, reigning meditation yet

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Counting heartbeats Con, ex meimet

Less than ten breaths later, three shadows seeped out of different directions, silent as oil on water.

They drifted into a triangle, hemming the platform.

Each newcomer wore tight black robes and a strange metal mask that left only frozen, pitiless eyes exposed.

The tallest of them twirled twin crescent blades, their obsidian edges pulsing with faint blue venom.

His aura pressed against Jared's lungs-Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Nine Pinnacle and still rising.

The flanking two gripped mismatched stabbing blades, one long, one short, moving in perfect mirror rhythm.

Jared recognized a practiced three-point assault meant to choke space before a target could blink.

A name slid across Jared's memory: "Ghostspring Sect-Shadowkill Trio."

The masked leader spoke, voice scraping like blades on iron:

"Hand over your clue to the Ancient Energy Refiners' Abode, and we might leave whole corpses behind."

Jared rose slowly, brushing dust from his knees.

His face stayed calm. "Ghostspring Sect? Never heard of it. What makes you think we carry any clue?"

"We were sightseeing, stumbled in by mistake."

The Demon Lord snorted, red vapor curling from his nostrils.

"Cut the lies. Everyone knows an ancient abode hides somewhere here; finding the exact door is the hard part."

The left-hand killer barked a cold laugh.

"You crossed ten thousand miles just to wander? Don't insult our intelligence."

The one on the right leaned forward, blade tip wobbling like a serpent's tongue.

"Hand over the clue, and maybe we let you crawl away."

A quiet click sounded in Jared's mind; the pieces lined up.

He smiled "So you've been tailing all this time. And you think three scraps of trash can steal from tiger's maw

The leader cocked his head. "Tiger's maw?"

"One Level Five and one Level Eight dare call themselves tigers? I can kill you before the next breath," he said, amused.

Jared laughed back, contempt thick as smoke.

"A single Level Nine peak and two Level Nines? I can handle you alone."

The Demon Lord clapped, talons clicking. "Works for me. I'll watch the show from over here."

Vermilion Demon Lord ambled to the side and dropped onto a slab of rock as though the battlefield were a parlor.

Jared watched him, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Some sunflower seeds and a drink would make this perfect," the demon lord announced, utterly serious.

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Jared shot Vermilion Demon Lord a long, flat stare, the kind reserved for old friends who refused to behave.

Then he exhaled through his nose; any protest would only feed the demon lord's theatrics.

A harsh voice cracked across the clearing, slicing through the momentary lull.

"Brats, you're far too cocky. Today the Shadowkill Trio will teach you how real assassins play."

Jared angled his shoulders toward the sound, skin prickling at the threat yet oddly calm inside the pulse of coming violence.

Before he could blink, three silhouettes broke from the treeline and shot forward in the same breath.

They moved as though drawn by one wire, no stagger, no pause.

Space hiccupped—no trailing blur, no warning.

In the next heartbeat the trio materialized at Jared's flank, six toxin-coated blade arcs flicking toward every vital inch like serpent tongues.

Not even the rush of air announced them; whatever secret art they used swallowed the wind itself.

Against ordinary cultivators, that silence would have been a death sentence delivered before the victim knew a trial was underway.

Too bad for them, Jared thought, they had chosen the wrong audience.

"Party tricks," Vermilion Demon Lord cackled. "Jared, don't finish them too quick. Draw it out—I want a good show."

His delight flared in Jared's peripheral vision like a torch.

Jared dipped his chin once, the smallest promise.

Then the ground bent beneath his step and he broke forward, body loosening into motion the way ink spreads through water.

He let his sword rest, raised only his right hand, and extended his forefinger toward the dark.

A speck of colorless light bloomed at the fingertip, so faint it could have been dust catching a stray beam.

Yet the moment it appeared, Jared felt the world tilt around it, as if every nearby thing suddenly remembered a hunger to be devoured.

Light, sound, even the qi in the air bent inward, funneling toward that grain of gray.

The six poisoned arcs lost their aim, veering helplessly toward the point like iron filings dragged by a hidden magnet.

"What in the abyss is that?" the lead attacker shrieked, awe strangling his voice.

He had never witnessed a technique that warped trajectory itself; terror spat lines of cold sweat down his neck.

Jared did not bother to answer; his body was already an afterimage chasing itself.

The finger dropped; his palm turned over, five fingers curling as if seizing an invisible sphere.

"Chaos Origin—Return to the Void." The words left him quietly, less a shout than a verdict.

A dull thunder answered, pounding the air flat.

Centered on the gray mote, a whirl of ashen light a dozen feet wide tore open and drank greedily.

The stolen blade light vanished first, shredded to nothing; then the three black-robed men lurched, their protective aura strobing as the vortex tugged at bone and soul.

"Form the Nether Shadow Triad Array-now!" the lead figure barked, terror sharpening into discipline.

Their outlines blurred into three ropes of black mist, weaving around one another, trading places in a frantic attempt to outrun the pull.

He caught the hiss first, then the air turned into a glittering storm-needles no thicker than a strand of hair, all of them slick and black, all of them coming for every exposed inch of him.

"Inventive," Jared murmured, letting the mockery hang in the poisoned air.

He pinched a quick seal with his left hand; the half-formed chaotic force inside him surged forward, pouring through his palm until it fanned out in front of him as a translucent shield laced with four shifting colors.

The incoming needles met the barrier with a sizzling hiss that scraped across his teeth.

Each dart sank into the shield as if into deep water; not even a ripple escaped before the chaotic aura chewed them apart and swallowed the shards.

"My turn," he said, the words clicking like ice between his teeth.

Frosted light flashed in his eyes as he uncurled his right hand, fingers peeling away from an invisible grip.

The gray vortex hovering there didn't explode outward; it snapped inward, collapsing until it became a pitch-black point no larger than a clenched knuckle.

A low, bone-deep hum rattled the air.

The singularity winked out, and an unseen wave sheared across the arena faster than thought, faster even than spirit sense could track.

A ragged scream tore from somewhere inside the black smoke.

Wet coughing followed, too thick not to be blood.

The smoke unraveled, leaving three figures in tattered black robes stumbling into view.

Their masks had shattered; crimson dripped from their lips while naked terror widened their eyes.

Jared watched their defensive light flicker uselessly around them, as if whatever hit them had skipped the armor altogether and struck marrow and soul in the same heartbeat.

The foremost one choked, "Damn it—he's no Heavenly Immortal Realm Level Five!"

He staggered back, shock and fury wrestling across the blood-smeared half of his face.

The Vermilion Demon Lord barked a laugh. "Realization comes late, doesn't it?"

He screamed, "Nether Shadow Escape!"

The trio, elites of Ghostspring Sect, dissolved back into smoke and shot off in three desperate directions.

"Running already?" Jared snorted.

He stamped lightly, as if testing the ground instead of condemning it.

Another deep hum answered, this time under their feet.

A visible gray ripple spread from him, swallowing a hundred-yard circle in the blink of an eye.

Where the ripple passed, space itself looked smeared, thick and reluctant to let anything move.

The gray veil I wove over the clearing thickened, pressing against my ears like cotton.

When the three streaks of black vapor crossed its edge, their frantic whirl became a sluggish crawl, as if invisible resin clamped around them.

"A Domain? Impossible!" one of them rasped, the words straining through the tar-colored haze.

The voice broke again, higher, the leader's outline thrashing inside the mist like a hooked eel, fury already curdling into panic.

Of course they were terrified; only a High-Realm ascendant should bend space this way.

They still thought I stood in their tier, a mere Heavenly adept who ought to trade polite sparks instead of suffocating them.

Since merging with the Chaos Source Seed, every current of power felt mapped beneath my skin, as if law itself had left faint guide-lines for my fingers to trace.

This Stasis Domain was no true Immortal crown yet, only a sketch—but a sketch is enough to trap men who still measure strength by noise.

"We're finished here." My two fingers aligned, weightless, ready.

I cut three invisible marks through the air, each stroke cleaner than thought.

Threads of compressed chaos unspooled, leapt beyond distance, and slammed toward the crawling shadows before they could flinch.

Three wet pops cracked inside the fog, sharp as knuckles rapping glass.

The vapor coats fell away, revealing torsos bored clean through—a bowl-wide emptiness polished to mirror sheen, too absolute for blood to remember where to flow

Life, meat, spirit—everything had been swallowed in the heartbeat between one breath and the next.

What remained collapsed, thudding through the mist like sacks of dry parchment.

I flicked my wrist; their storage rings snapped into my palm with the quiet compliance of coin accepting a purse.

A sweep of sense sketched their inventories in my mind—piles of spirit-stones, glistening pills, daggers dipped in friendly-looking poisons.

Then a folded scrap tugged harder at my thoughts: an ancient map stitched onto some material neither hide nor silk, the edges bruised with burn scars.

One symbol near the corner mirrored the sigil on Sidney's guiding talisman-same crooked geometry, only smudged and missing the arrows that tell a traveler where to

Stand.

"So they did have a lead," I murmured, rolling the map tight. "Not the whole path, though. No wonder they were dogging our heels."

The Vermilion Demon Lord rose, joints cracking like fireworks. "Kid, you finished them too fast. I barely got a good look."

He knelt over the leader, rummaged, and fished out a jet-black jade tile etched with a snarling skull. "Ghostspring distress talisman," he said. "The fellow shattered it while we were trading blows."

"Then the rest of the Ghostspring crew will soon know their scouts are dead-and exactly where it happened."

His brow tightened. "We need to reach the Eye of the Return-to-Void before their response wave hits."

Jared shifted his weight and pushed off the trembling stone platform.

The howling pressure of the Void Gale Belt slapped against his face before he could catch a full breath.

Behind the roar, his own pulse sounded thin and distant.

To his right the Vermilion Demon Lord cut forward, crimson aura flickering like sparks torn from iron.

They dove deeper, the wind sharpening from gale to knives.

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Remembering Sidney's precise cadence, Jared pinched the ragged Guiding Talisman between two numb fingers.

With that memory guiding his fingers, he snapped the Guiding Talisman open; pale threads of light seeped out, wriggling like earthworms desperate for soil.

Each thread found a current in the raging void and anchored, tugging him toward a path too narrow to see.

He stepped after it, jaw clenched against the sideways gravity that kept trying to tear his boots free.

News of the Ghostspring Sect swelled behind his ribs like a second heartbeat, forcing speed over caution.

Boulders of compressed air slammed into them; what could have been clever detours became straight-through collisions.

Each impact left a fresh bruise singing beneath his armor.

Half a day of that punishment sharpened into raw ache along his shoulders and the back of his throat.

When the talisman finally led them to the warped shimmer at the belt's far edge, dried blood had glued one sleeve to his arm.

The sight still stole a breath: space folding into itself like liquid glass kneaded by invisible hands.

Jared traced the corrugated horizon, searching for shards of gray crystal sturdy enough to pin an array.

"Someone's coming, a lot of them, fast," the Vermilion Demon Lord whispered, sound cut thin by the wind.

Jared let his awareness unfurl, a silent net pouring from the crown of his head.

Ten... no, thirteen spears of presence ripped through the gale behind them, each one brighter than lightning on new snow.

Even the dimmest of those signatures burned at Heavenly Immortal peak; two at the front blazed hotter, High Immortal, second level the kind that stepped over mountains as stepping-stones.

The flavor of their energy matched the trio they'd gutted earlier-black water threaded with corpse-salt.

Ghostspring's vanguard, and now the rest of the swarm had found them.

He bared his teeth. Persistent, rotting ghosts.

"Let them catch up," he said, voice steady enough to surprise even himself.

The Demon Lord's eyes narrowed; recognition flickered like flint. "You plan to use their hands."

"Two of us against that snarl of glass? Arraying our own passage would bleed us dry and still leave the odds ugly," Jared replied.

"They brought a fragment of the chart. They've studied the Ancient Energy Refiners' Abode longer than we have. Let's watch, borrow what works, and slip through after."

He swallowed his breathing, then pressed into a cracked floating monolith veined like dried mud.

Chaotic aura seeped from his palms, blending scent and light until flesh became stone shadow.

Beside him the Demon Lord faded as easily as dusk.

Not long after, thirteen silhouettes punched through the wind wall and halted at the warped rim.

The tallest carried a Whitebone Staff; parchment skin clung to his skull, and his eyes sat in hollows deep enough to drink rain.

Beside him waddled a dwarf with an oversized head; sickly green light rolled in his pupils as he toyed with a string of miniature skulls.

Jared measured them—both High Immortal, second level, pressure thick as wet wool.

Ten lean figures in black robes fanned out behind, movements clipped, disciplined.

One of the robed men bowed so low his hood brushed his knees. "Great Elder, Third Elder, the soul-lanterns of the Shadowkill Trio have darkened. Their last pulse ended here."

The withered elder-Ghostspring's Great Elder-dragged his gaze across the gutted landscape, lingering on the ripple of warped space.

"Those three were cautious. Something far beyond their measure snatched them before they could even run. Whoever did it is already inside," he rasped.

The dwarf's tongue slid over cracked lips. "Could be the Malevolent Path Hall. Their agents crawl all over level twelve, recruiting anything with teeth."

"No. We've never crossed them, and we have stayed hidden. They have no reason to strike us," the Great Elder answered.

The dwarf frowned, skull beads clacking. "Then who, in all of level twelve, can butcher the Shadowkill Trio?"

The Great Elder's voice cracked through the wind, impatient and metallic. "Enough waiting. We go in now. Someone else might already be eyeing that abode."

One gloved hand lifted, fingers snapping for obedience. "Map."

A nervous disciple in black rushed forward, presenting a cracked strip of leather.

Even from the ledge, Jared recognized the etchings—it matched the copy tucked inside his sleeve, only older, edges worn thin as dried bark.

The Great Elder and the Third Elder bent over the parchment like surgeons over an open heart, lines of gold light bobbing across their faces as torn space writhed before them.

Their voices dropped to a hush, syllables lost to the gale, but Jared read enough from their urgent gestures—measure, align, argue, decide.

Then the Third Elder produced a gourd the color of pitch, its surface riddled with tiny round holes. He uncorked it and muttered a rhythmic string of tones that scraped across Jared's nerves.

A torrent of black insects, each no larger than a bean, poured from the gourd.

Transparent wings buzzed against one another, a raw, fevered hum that thickened the air as they arrowed toward the warped horizon.

At the boundary, the swarm slowed, spiraling like shavings around a magnet. In sudden accord they formed a single-file braid and threaded into the distortion along a jagged, unseen corridor.

Where they passed, the savage rips in space rippled like bruises touched by a healer's palm, the turbulence settling into sluggish eddies.

"Tracker Beetles, flawless as ever!" The Third Elder's laughter bounced off the broken void.

He turned to his followers, voice dropping into lecture.

"This maze only
pretends to chaos.

It follows the ancient Chaos

Reversion Array. When the pattern

realigns, a safe insect trail shows

Shadow the swarm and the gate to the Eye of the Return-to-Void will open."

The Great Elder offered a curt nod, eyes cold with calculation.

"Move. The trail won't hold."

Every robed figure stiffened, waiting for the next tremor.

Then, single file, the Ghostspring Sect members stepped into the distortion, shoes skimming patches of suddenly quiet air that closed behind them like cooling glass. Above them, concealed on a hovering slab of rock, Jared and the Vermilion Demon Lord watched the procession sink into the labyrinth.

"Clever little trick," the demon murmured, admiration edged with hunger. "Breeding insects that chew through space itself."

Without turning his head, Jared formed a silent thread of intent.

"Stay on them. Let them clear the thorns; we claim the rose once the door shows."

The pair slipped after the sect, cloaked in Jared's chaotic aura, senses tuned to every ripple.

He kept roughly a hundred yards of breathing room, close enough to borrow the beetles' passage, far enough to stay unseen.

Inside the corridor the air felt tight yet steady, while beyond its edges spatial currents still snarled like chained storms.

The route corkscrewed, paused, resumed at times the procession halted, holding their breaths until the next pulse of calm.

Jared realized the worm-road itself drifted, a living vein sliding through muscle.

Nearly an hour later the twisting grew violent; light braided into knots, and Jared's spirit sense returned only static.

Following the beetles, they slipped through a membrane so thin it offered no warning.

The pressure vanished.

A blue sky poured over them, mountains emerald, rivers glass, birds singing as though the void outside had never existed.

Jared tasted loam and blossoms on the air-this had to be the Eye of the Return-to- Void, Sidney's rumored paradise hidden in the storm.

Ahead, the Third Elder's voice cracked again, this time with trembling joy: "We found it! A true sanctuary!"

Even so, the Great Elder's gaze sliced through the meadow.

"Do not grow careless," he warned, every syllable weighted.

"An Ancient Energy Refiner never left treasure without tests. Muffle your breath and probe with care."

The Ghostspring Sect members

stifled their excitement as they crossed the threshold. Frederick, crouched behind a mossy boulder, caught the held breath in each of them as though Reach Blossom Haven might shatter if they exhaled too loudly.

A current of antique energy drifted past the boulder, smelling of wet stone and forgotten incense.

Frederick felt the fine hairs on his wrists lift. Ahead, the intruders slowed in unison, palms half-raised, fighting an urge to run that none of them dared admit.

"Jared, they've found the spot," the Vermilion Demon Lord hissed, voice

vibrating like a struck blade. "Let's

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butcher them now and claim the

Ancient Energy Refiners' Abode for

ourselves."

His crimson sleeves twitched, as though raw impatience had become a living animal under the fabric.

"Hold it," Jared murmured without turning his head.

"This place feels wrong."

A frown pinched the bridge of his nose. To Frederick the world ahead looked serene, yet Jared's unease seeped outward until the silence itself seemed staged.

"Let them scout," Frederick whispered, letting the breeze swallow the words. "Peach Blossom Haven looks calm, but every breath inside carries a knife."

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The Vermilion Demon Lord gave a curt nod, scarlet eyes dimming to embers.

He and Jared resumed their slow pursuit, matching the cultists' footprints as though the earth were strung with tripwire.

The Ghostspring vanguard reached the first stalks of the Jade Bamboo Grove.

Frederick had barely inhaled the grove's cool scent when the air convulsed.

Emerald light erupted skyward, bright enough to carve green shadows across Frederick's cheek.

Leaves sheared from the stalks, each one hardening mid-flight into a jade razor. They slammed toward the intruders like a sideways cloudburst.

From the soil, ink-dark vines burst forth, writhing toward ankles with the hunger of snakes smelling blood.

"Ambush! Defense formation!" the Great Elder's shout cracked through the grove, sharp as a whip.

He drove the Whitebone Staff into the soil. A ripple of gray death-mist unfurled from the impact, meeting the leaf-blades and hissing them into powder.

Beside him, the Third Elder rattled his Skull Bead Chain. A pane of green light expanded outward, sheltering their ranks beneath a sickly glow.

The remaining black robes answered with venom clouds, flickering darts, and cold hellfire, each strike colliding against the grove's fury in rolling detonations.

Frederick grudgingly respected the synchronicity. Level twelve devil-cultists or not, they moved like one organism, the two High Immortal elders steering every counterstroke.

Each sweep of the Whitebone Staff smeared rancid fog over a clump of bamboo. The glossy stalks withered on contact, collapsing into black mulch.

The Third Elder's ghost-green flames licked the vines, burning them faster than they could recoil.

Yet the grove refused to stay dead. New shoots erupted from ruined soil, and every severed vine multiplied like a hydra answering insult with numbers.

Somewhere deeper, a bass tremor began, collecting strength until Frederick's teeth clicked. An unseen will was gathering itself.

"Stop stalling!" the Great Elder barked, chest heaving. "The ward is draining Peach Blossom Haven itself. Every heartbeat makes it stronger."

Pale with fury, he slammed the Whitebone Staff again. "Deploy the Ghostspring Life-Extinguishing Array. Carve us a path!"

"Yes!" his disciples answered, their voices converging into one guttural vow.

Ten figures in soot-black robes fanned out beneath the drizzling moonlight. Jared, from the thicket's shadow, watched each man ram a lacquered banner into the soil, then bite his tongue and smear hot blood across the cloth.

At the formation's heart, the Great Elder and the Third Elder planted their feet, palms touching the air, pouring swelling torrents of power into the newborn pattern.

The earth bucked with a hollow boom.

Black radiance burst from the ten banners; tar-thick liquid gushed out, racing across the ground. Wherever it swept, leaves shriveled, the air thinned, and even space itself hissed as if being eaten.

Jared's gut knotted-Ghostspring Life-Extinguishing Array. The technique devoured the casters' own blood and strength to birth a wellspring that erased everything it touched.

The oily flood slammed into the emerald barrier woven through the bamboo, and the clash screamed like metal scraped raw.

Green luminescence and black fluid tangled, each bite producing a puff of gray ash where living stalks had stood moments earlier.

Yet the spreading sludge began to slow, the ward's pedigree showing: layer after layer of scriptural light kept forcing the corruption back.

For a breath, neither side advanced.

Jared exhaled once and slipped from cover, boots barely kissing the damp leaves.

He arrowed straight toward the banners, not the men who tended them. "Chaos Origin-Flow Severance."

Fingers blurred; ten threads the width of hair, colored a quiet stone-gray, sprang from his tips and spiraled toward the energy nodes where banner met earth.

Each line had congealed from pure chaotic aura, hungry to unravel whatever system it touched.

They entered without ripple, gliding between ghostspring and banner like scalpels through water.

Soft, wet pops followed.

The ten banners trembled; the crawling black glow upon them guttered and thinned.

Their feed lines were gone, severed in a blink.

The Great Elder and the Third Elder whipped around, horror splashed across their faces, just as Jared drew the gray filaments backward met their stare with ice-still eyes.

The pattern buckled, and the recoil struck instantly.

All ten robed cultists coughed arcs of blood, their strength collapsing like tents in a storm.

Deprived of fuel, the ghostspring sludge recoiled; emerald light surged over it, boiling it to mist.

Worse, the kickback tangled their own currents, and when the bamboo sigils lunged again, panic scattered their defenses.

"You wretched brat-who in blazes

are you? the Third Elders

strike at

s from the dark?"

The Great Elder spat the word across the courtyard. "An ambush?" The syllables

bounced off cracked stone.

Jared let it hang, enjoying the sting it left in their pride.

He dipped his chin as though granting a favor.

"I'm only borrowing your strength to crack the seal," he said, voice almost bored.

"Charging a little interest while I'm at it."

His gaze slid over them. "Now, time to send you on your way."

The Great Elder's laugh burst out, raw and cracked.

"Arrogant whelp! Formation or not, I can butcher you like a chicken!"

Saliva gleamed at the corner of his mouth; Jared only marked the distance between them.

The elder thrust his Whitebone Staff forward and the courtyard dimmed.

A pallid streak—too fast for breath—drove at Jared's face, sealing every angle of escape.

At its tip a pin of ghost light gathered, sharp enough to drill through any high-grade shield.

Off to the side, the Third Elder rattled his Skull Bead Chain, each skull's hollow stare igniting with swamp-green fire.

Nine needles of that flame lanced toward Jared from nine smart directions, pairing with the staff for a killing net.

Two High Immortal Level Two elders—both seething—poured everything into the strike, and the air itself flinched.

Jared lifted his right hand as though silencing a noisy room.

No flare of power yet, just the promise of it in his steady palm.

The faint Chaos Vortex Mark in his palm winked awake, a coal catching wind.

He named the shape that waited there. "Chaos Origin—Return to the Void Vortex."

Space folded; a three-foot-wide swirl of sullen gray air blossomed before him and began to turn.

Its center felt bottomless, like staring into a starless gulf, while four muted colors chased each other along the rim.

The staff light and the nine green threads flew straight in.

They vanished without so much as a spark, the vortex sipping them down like water through cracked earth.

Only a faint ripple puckered the air, gone before sound could form.

"Impossible!" Both elders' voices broke in the same disbelieving rasp.

Their pupils shrank to pinpoints; for the first time Jared saw real fear stirring behind their practiced cruelty.

They had thrown everything—and it had slipped away like smoke.

Jared stepped forward, closing his fingers around empty air.

"My turn."

The gray vortex shuddered, then spun the other way, shrinking fast enough to whistle.

A pull erupted—fierce, wordless, everywhere at once—drinking in light, aura, even the scent of dust.

Jared felt their panic before he

heard it; the elders' life force, spirit power and something deeper peeled off them funneling toward his hand.

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"What cursed art is this? Fall back!"

The Great Elder's voice squeaked at the edges, already losing substance.

He clawed at the air, flooding himself with power, yet the drag answered laws beyond sheer force.

Third Elder's charm snapped first. Jared heard nine sharp pops—each skull bead cracking open. The gray spirits caged inside wailed once before the invisible funnel drank them down and spun their shrieks into raw, hungry power.

"No—my treasure!" Third Elder's voice cracked, slicing through the roar.

Third Elder folded around the empty chain, ribs heaving as though the loss had torn something inside him that even blood could not reach.

"Still worried about trinkets when your pulse is minutes from stopping?" The taunt rolled across the chamber, oily and amused.

A rasping laugh followed, and Jared's neck prickled the Vermilion Demon Lord had slipped behind them without stirring a single mote of dust.

Dark talons ballooned to the width of millstones, nails curving like sickles that scraped sparks from the air as they scythed toward the elders' unguarded spines.

Suction still yanked at their chests from the front; death now streaked in from the rear. Boxed in, the Great Elder and his junior looked suddenly very small.

"Then we go together!" Spittle flew as the Great Elder bared his teeth.

Instead of resisting the pull, he poured every drop-essence, blood, even shards of soul-into the Whitebone Staff and hurled it at Jared like a comet of spite.

Once free, the staff mushroomed to a hundred-foot giant, awful white flames blooming along its length and radiating an ache that promised to unmake everything it touched.

Jared tasted iron; a relic nurtured for uncounted years by a High Immortal Realm Level Two cultivator was about to detonate at kissing distance, enough force to peel mountains.

"Careful!" The Demon Lord's bravado slipped, the word cracking like old timber.

Yet Jared felt no rush of alarm, only a stillness that collected behind his breastbone like held breath.

"Still." The single word left his lips soft as dust settling.

A low hum answered, deeper than stone under ocean.

Power rippled outward from him; the world thickened, syrup-slow, every heartbeat stretched into a thousand.

The blazing titan of bone, the green sparks, the lunging Demon Lord, even the panic carved into both elders' faces—all of it crawled like insects pinned in amber.

Only Jared moved freely.

He lifted his left hand, a single finger glowing with flecks of star-colored dusk, and touched a spot halfway down the staff's spine.

He had felt the lattice there, thin as old ice.

Crack.

The tiny sound rang absurdly loud inside the slowed moment.

The flames snuffed, the bloated staff shrank, dulled, and dropped with a hollow thunk—nothing more than a dusty bone rod deprived of every flicker of will.

Time snapped back to its ordinary drumbeat.

The Great Elder stared at the inert stick; whatever light had kept him upright guttered and went out.

A ribbon of black blood, laced with shredded organs, burst from the man's mouth.

The sound hit Jared before the smell; he felt the life beneath his fingertips sag, as though the body had given up in a single exhale.

Two wet pops followed, sharp and obscene, echoing between the bamboo trunks like nails against glass.

Beside him, the Vermilion Demon Lord drove his claws clean through both elders' spines.

The talons burst from their chests, each hand cradling a heart still fluttering like a trapped bird.

A shredded whisper escaped their throats, more breath than word, and died.

The Great Elder lowered his gaze to the hole yawning through his robes.

Disbelief collided with despair in his pupils; then the light behind them guttered and the body folded.

The Third Elder followed a heartbeat later, crumpling against the bamboo roots like empty cloth.

Beyond them, the ten remaining black-cloaked zealots lay tangled in splintered stalks, throats sawn open by the forest's hidden snares.

Jared exhaled, flicking two fingers.

The rings, pouches, and the bleached Whitebone Staff tore free of the corpses and zipped into his sleeve.

Even the cracked Skull Bead Chain rattled after them like obedient bones.

His awareness skimmed the haul.

Ghostspring Sect had lived up to its rotten legend; the depth of greed glimmering inside those artifacts made his own pulse stumble.

Almost a million high-grade spirit stones stacked themselves inside the spatial rings, bright as cracked ice.

Mountains of rare ore, elixirs, and jade scriptures-many steeped in curses so foul Jared's brow tightened just reading their names.

Beside him, the Vermilion Demon Lord pawed through the spoils like a jackdaw spotting mirrors.

Anything that promised to toughen flesh or sharpen spirit vanished into the demon's cloak with a pleased hum.

Together they raised a silent pyre.

Crimson flame folded the corpses inward until only charcoal bones remained, then those too were ash.

The moment the last skull cracked, the world blinked.

Peach Blossom Haven peeled away like stage scenery, leaving them perched on the ragged lip of a cosmic landfill.

All around, shattered continents drifted in silence; broken pagodas clung to the rock like barnacles remembering a drowned empire.

Typhoons of multicolored energy screamed between the islands, collisions booming so hard Jared's ribs vibrated.

Space itself warped, folded, then tore open a darkness that swallowed anything foolish enough to exist nearby.

"Turns out you were right. That little paradise was a lie," the Vermilion Demon Lord muttered, awe leaking through the bravado.

"From here on, we make our own trail," Jared said, frown tightening, a prickle of regret crawled up his

se might have needed one of

those Ghostspring zealots alive.

The real threat now was the wind that wasn't wind at all.

It carried the taste of shattered space-razor laws woven into empty air.

Invisible until it sat upon you, it chilled the marrow with a silence that promised nothing would survive its touch.

Jared watched a boulder of black iron, wider than a house, drift into a pale gust and dissolve to powder without a sigh.

"Damn this treacherous breeze—here one moment, chewing on your heels the next!" the demon snarled.

He shaped a shield of roiling

crimson mist the gale kissed it once and peppered it with holes draining his aura like blood from a slit throat.

Gray currents bucked against his shield, cold needles scraping across his cheeks

before the energy skin softened them.

Every pulse of chaotic celestial energy tugged at his core, as though someone kept twisting a knife behind his navel.

He could feel spirit-power burning away faster than breath.

Thin lines—five interlocking sigils and a flicker of earthfire glimmered across the

back of his hand.

They sucked at the chaos around him, drawing crumbs of five-element essence and the fading warmth of subterranean flate into his starving

meridians.

The Guiding Talisman hovered ahead like a nervous firefly, its halo tilting toward a

quiet swirl deeper inside the lethal expanse.

Even from here he saw columns of air calm near the vortex.

Yet the very beams of light reached that pocket and snapped sideways, as if space

there had forgotten straight lines.

A Warrior Undefeatable

The name Eye of the Return-to-Void formed on his tongue, half-whisper, half-curse.

"Looks like the only path runs straight through that crooked stretch," he said after letting his focus trace the vortex's trembling edges.

Vermilion Demon Lord's growl rolled over his shoulder.

"Then what?" the demon pressed. "Do we just smash our way in?"

The fiend glared at the twisting light ahead.

"If I hadn't gutted those two scouts, maybe they'd know a trick," he muttered, almost to himself.

Jared kept his voice steady, though sweat already salted his lips.

"Too late for regrets."

"Besides, with their strength they'd never cross that fold. The paradise we saw was a mirage spell-follow them and we'd still be wandering in it."

The demon's wings rustled, impatient.

"Then what now?" he barked.

Jared let three heartbeats pass before answering.

"We don't brute-force it. That field is cut from a higher order. Charge in and it'll either shred us or spit us somewhere we won't like."

His gaze skimmed the chaos until a slow-drifting slab of dark purple stone slid between the currents.

It bore veins shaped like puzzle paths.

As the rock rolled, the markings hummed, knitting the air around it into brief, quiet pockets.

A primitive anchor, but an anchor all the same.

Hope tightened his chest.

"I've got it," he said.

His eyes brightened.

"See the stones with those stabilizing veins? Quality is low, quantity isn't. We can turn them into allies."

The demon cocked an eyebrow.

"And the trick is?" he asked.

Jared tapped two fingers together.

"A formation."

"We set the Space-Stabilizing Stones as base points," he explained, voice quickening.

"Then I weave a temporary array with my five-element power—nothing fancy, just a Mini Wind-Sheltering Transposition Array."

"It doesn't need to block everything," he continued.

"All we require is the few breaths it stays alive to sling us clean into the eye of that swirl."

The demon wasn't fluent in arrays, but the grin that split his face said he understood enough.

"You keep inventing new games," he laughed. "Fine—I'll haul rocks and beat back whatever wind tries to bite."

Jared nodded once, sharp.

Action chased thought.

Both men sprang apart, purpose dividing the air between them.

A towering demon silhouette unfurled behind Vermilion, slipping between razor currents like a shark through reeds.

He ripped stone after stone from their drift paths, sometimes letting astral wind rake bloody grooves along his arms to claim a stubborn prize.

Meanwhile Jared darted from boulder to boulder, his fingers spilling sparks as temporary runes blossomed across each surface.

Every sigil locked a sliver of space, knitting the chaotic air into something that almost felt trustworthy.

He pressed his forefinger to the cold stone as though it were the only stylus left in the universe. Chaotic celestial energy seeped from the nailbed, dark and viscous, sketching a crawl of five-element and spatial locking sigils.

The environment roared around him-shredded currents, feral sparks-each pulse jarring his focus. He felt thought fray at the edges; one misplaced stroke and the carving would implode, hungry enough to bite back through bone and soul.

Twice a rolling knot of wild energy lunged out of the haze; another time an unseen rift yawned where there had been only gloom. Each threat met the Vermilion Demon Lord's talon or his urgent tug, saving Jared by a breath.

A slit of void, silent as regret, slid so near it kissed the hairs on his spine. The warding glow ripped open, pain spiking; flesh parted to the bone, space-rot spiraling in the wound, hot blood soaking his robe.

"Stay sharp!" the Vermilion Demon Lord barked.

The Vermilion Demon Lord hurled his claw into a swirl of ghost-fire, crunching it to embers before the sparks could taste them.

Jared grunted; four colors churned across the torn light around him, smoking out the spatial rot. Muscle braided itself new, the cut knitting even as warmth leaked down his ribs.

He didn't bother looking back; the motion of the chisel-finger dictated every breath. "Time's thinning," he muttered. "The Guiding Talisman is thrumming harder. The Eye settles incycles next full is coming and we must be ready before it blinks."

Nearly a full day bled away-cuts, fumes, grit in his lungs-before the seventy-two Space-Stabilizing Stones floated into their appointed compass points, sketching a crude circle roughly thirty feet wide.

Standing at the heart of it, Jared slid the Guiding Talisman into the very center.

The Vermilion Demon Lord stepped onto the pattern beside him, silent but bristling.

"Awaken," Jared whispered.

He pressed both palms to the nexus. Chaotic celestial energy,

five-element power, Earthfire True Essence, and the stubborn will of his Golden Dragon Bloodline fought for the same conduit, yet raggedly, they poured into the array.

A low, resonant hum ballooned into a violet halo as all seventy-two stones flared at once. Lines of light snapped between them, weaving a translucent shell that settled over the two figures.

Gale-sharp winds and roaming power slammed the shell, raising concentric ripples, but for the moment the storm stayed outside.

Sweat beaded on his brow; holding the barrier against the chaos gnawed at him.

He forced himself to breathe deeply and pushed the Guiding Talisman harder.

The talisman blazed, projecting its ancient glyph into the air. A narrow, unwavering beam speared toward the whirlpool of warped space ahead.

At the beam's touch the vortex shuddered, then pinched inward, revealing a dark passage no bigger than an eye, perfectly still in the maelstrom.

"Now-go!" he shouted.

He ripped every last thread of array power and the talisman's pull into a single detonation.

The blast roared; Space-Stabilizing Stones burst apart, and the violet shell fractured into shards that vanished against the storm.

A cool, immense shove of spatial force wrapped him and the Vermilion Demon Lord together, flinging them forward as a single streak of light.

The silver ribbon cast by the Guiding Talisman streaked ahead, and before Jared's mind could name the risk his whole being rocketed after it, aimed straight at the midnight iris that waited like an unblinking abyss.

Impact arrived without warning.

Space folded, stretched, then crushed in on itself, and Jared's bones squealed like ice under a spring thaw while his skull tried to twist away from his spine.

Inside the grinding dark he felt his spirit being taffy-pulled to the breaking point.

He bit down hard, tasting iron, and forced the four currents he depended on to knit a shield around his flesh.

Beside him the Vermilion Demon Lord spat out a guttural snarl, scarlet radiance erupting from every plated muscle.

Time dissolved.

It might have been a heartbeat, it might have been years.

Then the tearing stopped, as suddenly as a drum cut mid-beat.

Solid earth caught the soles of his boots.

Cool, unmarred air flooded his lungs.

Somewhere close, water chuckled over stone while bright birds argued in the canopy.

He staggered a single step, regained his knees' obedience, and swept the clearing with a guarded stare.

The Demon Lord shook off an invisible ringing, slit pupils glinting as he scanned for threats.

What met their eyes froze both men where they stood.

They had walked into a valley the ordinary world had forgotten.

Above, the sky lay clear and blue, marbled only by lazy scraps of cloud.

Layer upon layer of jade-green ridges rose farther off, each draped in slow-moving veils of mist.

Closer, knee-high grass whispered around blooms so strange they hurt the memory of color, perfume lifting like cool wine.

A glass-bright stream threaded the meadow, each ripple pulsing with a dim silver glow.

At its edge a spirit-deer lowered delicate horns to drink while white cranes stepped through the reeds like drifting paper.

But the power floating in the air felt nothing like the twelve-tier heavens he knew.

It was older, heavier, the raw breath of creation before any god bothered to trim the edges.

With each inhale his core answered, chaotic celestial energy stirring first, then the coiled Golden Dragon blood humming in agreement.

"Jared, tell me this isn't another fake another trick." The Vermilion Demon Lord's usual confidence sounded thin at the edges.

A Warrior Undefeatable

A faint pulse flickered in the Illusion Origin Star deep within his private realm, answering the scene before him.

After a heartbeat he shook his head.

"This one is real."

"Thank the void!" the Demon Lord barked, relief cracking through his harsh voice.

"The Eye of Return-to-Void really does hide a world," he said, pulling in a measured breath.

"But it's quiet—so quiet it hurts my ears."

Jared nodded; the same unease needled beneath his ribs.

The beauty was skin-deep; the cranes' eyes held no spark, and the deer moved like winding clockwork.

Beneath it all, he could taste an immense, nearly invisible field-part prison, part rulebook-woven through every inch of sky and soil.

Jared slipped the Guiding Talisman out of his sleeve again.

Instead of pointing, it throbbed with a feverish pulse; the shifting runes blinked on and off, as if something in this valley was answering it.

"The sanctum must be tucked deeper inside this peach-blossom paradise. Stay sharp—nothing here is what it seems."

After pocketing the talisman, he wrapped his fingers around the Dragonslayer Sword and stepped ahead, following the ribbon of water toward the heart of the grove.

The Vermilion Demon Lord glided behind him, demonic senses stretched thin like wires, testing every shadow for a hidden barb.

At first, the path behaved-no ambush, no stutter in the air, only scenery so flawless it felt manufactured.

When venerable-looking herbs shimmered beside the rocks, rich with ambient breath, Jared still harvested them, every motion cautious and measured.

A stand of bamboo-leaves jade-bright, trunks glass-smooth-rose ahead; both men stopped at its edge.

This was exactly where the Ghostspring Sect had been jumped a day ago.

Their attackers then had been smoke and suggestion, not the true Eye of the Return-to-Void.

Even knowing that, unease seeped beneath Jared's ribs.

"Jared, tell me we're not about to get the same welcome."

"Unlikely. This isn't an illusion; it's the real Eye. If—"

A thunderous blast swallowed the rest of his words.

Vision lurched; everything around him wrinkled and peeled away.

The bamboo vanished; the green mountainside bled out of color.

Sudden, endless starlight replaced it, and beneath his boots lay a cold, iron-hard meteor plain.

Silence pressed in-broken asteroids drifted nearby; farther off, remote suns blinked like distant eyes.

"Illusion?" the Demon Lord muttered.

For proof, he slashed a claw; a floating stone shattered, fragments skittering across Jared's boots-solid, undeniable.

"Not just mirage," Jared rasped.

The veins of power that usually threaded the sky were faint, his own energy dragging like wet sand. "It feels like a displacement-someone's domain. We've been hauled into a special trial space."

If this were mere glamour, his command of the Essence of Illusion would have rung alarms. It hadn't twitched.

That left one conclusion: some hidden engine had dragged the two of them wholesale into another pocket of reality.

Perhaps this pocket overlapped the Eye itself-like two rooms briefly sharing the same walls before one collapsed and the other showed through.

Pinpricks of silver drifted across the black, sliding toward one another as if some hidden magnet had been switched on.

Jared felt the small hairs on his arms stiffen before his mind found an explanation.

Within the shifting glow three outlines bled into existence, too blurred yet to own a face.

Only a breath later the haze receded.

They wore rough hemp robes cinched at the waist, their hair knotted high the way old scroll-paintings showed forgotten sages.

The features refused to settle, as though the starfield itself kept them from choosing a single form.

No blades hung from their sleeves.

They simply stood, perfectly still, yet Jared's lungs shrank as if the entire night sky had leaned onto his chest.

Could these be after-images left by the Ancient Energy Refiners, or had some hidden ward finally shown its fangs?

Jared had crossed paths with Heavenly Immortals before; the raw power here felt comparable.

What chilled him was the texture of the force-the way it folded back to childhood simplicity, wasting nothing.

The figure in the center raised a languid hand, index finger resting, unhurried, on Jared's heart.

A voice older than stone unfurled inside his mind, vast and indifferent.

"Posterity who would enter our

dwelling must endure three trials et

This first gate measures your command of force and your talent for adaptation

"Shatter our after-images, or survive the time of one incense stick without defeat, and you may proceed."

The final syllable had not faded when all three moved at once.

No flaring sigils, no roar of heaven.

Just motion-clean, deliberate, terrifying.

The phantom on Jared's left stepped forward.

A dead rock under his heel sifted to dust, then the man shot toward the Vermilion Demon Lord like a cannonball.

He drove one fist out.

Wind compacted so tight it became a white shockwave, the passing air making space itself quiver.

On the opposite side the right-hand phantom shaped a cradle with both palms. Starlight slid in, weaving itself into a glittering whip whose tail shivered like a snake tasting the wind, fixed on Jared.

Its course bent at impossible angles, each twist hinting at a net meant to seal the very room around him.

Strangest of all, the center phantom did not attack.

He folded himself into a seated posture, fingers locking into an ancient seal Jared had never studied.

The moment the seal closed, weight crashed onto Jared's shoulders-tenfold, twentyfold.

Beside him the Demon Lord's knees flexed under the same invisible burden.

Then the pull tipped sideways, yanking down one instant, left the next, like a vicious child shaking a toy.

Balance fractured; every step threatened to betray its own intent.

"Clever trick!" the Vermilion Demon Lord roared, muscle and smoke swelling around him as he met the incoming fist head-on.

A sound like a mountain collapsing cracked across the void.

Fist and crimson talon struck, the concussion rippling outward in rings that made the stars tremble.

To Jared's shock the Demon Lord stumbled three full paces, dark ichor scoring his armored arm where the shockwave had kissed him.

He bared his fangs. "Such power-and condensed hard enough to rend steel!"

Jared slashed the Dragonslayer Sword in a rising arc, blades of light licking off the edge.

The whip answered with serpentine grace, coiling along the blade

instead of meeting it, siphoning the

force

and directing it past Jared's

ribs.

Every cut left him feeling as though his strength had missed the world entirely.

The shifting gravity shoved at his boots, driving him sideways mid-stroke so the next swing veered wide.

"This can't go on." Jared's throat tore the words free before he felt them form.

A hard flicker skimmed across Jared's eyes.

The three phantom fighters shifted

around him; none of their force

outward, yet the air itse

Sned and folded like wet cloth."

They were pulling energy inward, knitting it tight, then letting the world do the rest.

Modern sword work suddenly felt gaudy, all glare and shapes, no spine.

He leveled his voice, low and steady. "If you want control, taste mine."

He filled his lungs and forced the hunger for spectacle out with the breath. Attention slid inward, past muscle and marrow, until the quiet well of his core gleamed.

The Origin Star pulsed there, four newborn streams of power humming along its rim. He didn't stack them; he listened, searching for the single note they might share.

A Warrior Undefeatable

When he lifted the blade again, a dusky swirl of unformed matter oozed from the steel.

Instead of gushing out, the chaos folded back, braiding itself around the edge, breathing a promise of erasing all things.

Next came the five-element rhythm, not in loud colors but in a whispered cycle, each phase birthing the next so quickly the eye lost count.

Earthfire True Flame licked along the spine, savage and clean.

A pale gold dragon sigil coiled at the guard, sharpening every breath of metal with imperial bite.

Compared with the hundred-yard storms he had flung earlier, the weapon now seemed almost polite, even ordinary.

He cut toward the whip of starlight.

The moment chaos touched it, that dense ribbon-strong enough to garrote artifacts - melted like frost under noon sun.

The elemental cycle slipped inside the fracture, scrambling its spine, and Earthfire burned the scraps to smoke.

The dragon whispered, and the point sailed on, straight for the phantom's throat. Blur rippled across the phantom's face.

Its seals reshuffled; the body shattered into motes, reassembled several yards away, the aura clearly dimmed.

It studied the sword and spoke in that indifferent monotone, "Interwoven forces, chaos as root... interesting. The first trial is yours."

At the last syllable, the other two figures broke off—one from battering the Demon Lord, the other from pinning gravity—and began to thin like mist.

Stars peeled away, colors bled, and suddenly the hum of insects in the Jade Bamboo Grove returned as though someone had unmuted the world.

Yet the hollowness in Jared's limbs and the fresh blood striping the Demon Lord's arm said the fight had been anything but illusion.

"That was passing?" The Demon Lord flexed his tingling arm, unease still clouding his eyes.

"Those three tricks were outright wicked. If not for that final stroke of yours—"

"A shortcut, nothing more." Jared shook his head; no triumph warmed his face, only a deeper gravity.

"The way they handled power just rewrote my map. Maybe we've been flinging too much outward and keeping too little close to the bone."

The insight from the first trial still hummed behind Jared's breastbone: true strength lived in the precise union of every strain of power, not in raw force alone.

He tasted the warning nested in that lesson. This was only the opening gate; whatever waited deeper would cut closer to the bone.

He and the Vermilion Demon Lord let their lungs settle, trading one slow breath after another until the tremor in their limbs calmed.

When the last echo faded, Jared tipped his chin toward the darkened tunnel. They moved again, boots whispering over ancient dust.

The passage bent, and the air ahead thickened, bright as struck iron. Jared barely registered the change before a new threshold unfolded across the path.

So the second trial had not waited long after all.

One step later the tunnel was gone. Wind drenched in mist slapped his face, and he stood on the knife-edge summit of a lone peak wrapped in drifting clouds.

At the very crown, a plain stone pavilion hunched like an afterthought. Inside, a figure sat—white hair against a childlike face, hemp robes falling through his body as if he were smoke.

Before the phantom rested a board Jared first mistook for polished slate.

Then the surface breathed—threads of black and white vapor wove runes that birthed each other, died, and returned, a quiet storm contained by square borders.

"Sit." The command arrived like a leaf settling on water, gentle yet impossible to ignore.

The phantom lifted one translucent hand. "This trial asks no blood," he said, voice even as dusk light. "Only insight. The Vital Force Chessboard carries the ancient art of drawing breath from heaven and tempering yin with yang."

"Take black first," he continued. "Place each piece where the currents cross. Stir the board until either I must rise or chaos's first dawn blooms. Only then will the gate open."

Jared's eyes slid toward the Vermilion Demon Lord. The other man's crimson pupils mirrored his own confusion.

Chess? The single word rang hollow in his skull, equal parts disbelief and dread.

A moment ago he had braced for swords or flame. Now strategy and subtlety stood in their place, and somehow that felt more lethal.

The Demon Lord scratched the back of his head. "Games like this aren't in my repertoire. Jared, the board is yours."

Jared swallowed the protest that tried to rise, stepped to the stone table, and lowered himself onto the cushion opposite the phantom.

The instant his gaze met the swirling runes, the world pitched. Vertigo clamped around his temples, turning the pavilion floor into spin and blur.

What had seemed a board now.

sprawled into countless miniature realms black breath pursuing white,

white folding over black each

pocket a living cosmos rewriting its

own laws.

Somewhere inside that storm lay the junctions of force he needed, yet every time he fixed on one, it drifted like smoke at dawn.

He extended a thread of consciousness, hoping to map the flow.

The current swallowed it without ripple, as a sea absorbs a droplet. A hollow click echoed in his chest; brute perception would not save him here.

The revelation stung—the board tested not strength of sight but harmony, the capacity to resonate with the dance already underway.

Jared let his lids fall, denying the flickering universe its grip.

He traced memory instead the moment his four forces fused into a single newborn haze before light and shadow learned their names.

Breath slowed. Thought unknotted. The summit wind drifted through him without finding purchase.

Warmth budded along the sigils that braided his forearm, a quiet answer to the board's silent rhythm.

Deep within, the Four-Colored Origin Star began its unhurried spin, each hue chiming in turn, weaving a pulse that promised alignment.

He had lost track of time. A hush settled inside him, like the moment before an inhale.

Without summoning even a flicker of power, he lifted his hand. Intuition tugged, directing his index finger toward an unremarkable intersection on the board.

A low, metallic hum vibrated through the air the instant skin touched wood.

Black and white currents beneath the grid jolted awake, spreading in ripples the way water answers a stone.

Something inside him answered. A pearl of dim light—grey, neither black nor white - gathered unbidden at his fingertip.

The mote carried the breath of four converging forces. It slipped from him and landed with deceptive softness on the chosen point.

The moment it settled, the calm shattered. The entire field churned as if a boulder had been hurled into still water.

Twin currents rushed, collided, absorbed each other. Shape and strategy dissolved, giving way to wild, unreadable motion.

Across the table, the robed phantom

who had watched with austere

detachment finally twitched Light flared in the old man's eyes, bright enough to stain the dim pavilion.

Jared hardly noticed; the board itself demanded all attention. Boundaries of black and white bled together Here a white thread wormed through midnight swirls, there a dark seed sprouted inside p ate fog.

Out of the turbulence rose faint images-cracking earth, licking fire, coursing water, keening wind-each birthed, each snuffed, faster than breath.

At the heart of it all, color vanished. A pin-head pocket of swirling mist remained, featureless, ancient, frightening in its simplicity.

The sight pulled at his chest like gravity, as though everything that had ever mattered could emerge from that speck of nothing.

The phantom's lips parted, and the words that drifted out were almost swallowed by the storm. "The first breath of chaos... a true beginning made manifest."

Jared felt the pronouncement settle over him like ash, cold and electric.

The elder lifted his gaze, pinning Jared with an intensity that made him want to step back, though his feet refused.

"In this age," the phantom said, each syllable trembling with awe, "a cultivator who touches such origin power is rare. Very well. You have passed this trial."

The pavilion, the lone peak, and even the elder's outline thinned to mist, then to nothing, as though swallowed by the same primal haze.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Cold creek spray pricked his face. He blinked and found himself once more beside the water in Peach Blossom Haven, the dream of stone pavilions already dissolving.

Yet the resonance lingered. Deep within, the four entwined forces sat more snugly than before, and the impression of nascent chaos pulsed against his soul like a fresh brand.

The Vermilion Demon Lord cocked his head, crimson curls dancing over one horn. "What just happened? You shut your eyes for a breath, and the old man waved you through."

"Hard to unravel," Jared said, still tasting the hush of that vanished board. "Call it an insight."

He let the questions hang. His gaze traveled to the farthest reach of the haven where fog curled around the mouth of an ancient cave, lines of time etched in its shadowy arch.

"That should be the final dwelling," he murmured. "The third trial waits at its door."

He and the demon lord moved, the hush of peach petals giving way to the crunch of gravel as anticipation nudged them forward.

Ahead, the mountain wall folded inward and revealed a cavern mouth nearly a hundred feet high—too sudden to be anything but nature's own doorway.

A liquid curtain of seven colors draped the opening. Light rippled like water, and within the ripples drifted sigils far more intricate than the ones he had studied on the stone board.

On the left stood a statue: a human face atop a serpent's coils, a measuring rod balanced in slender hands, its carved gaze cool and exacting.

On the right towered another—broad human torso, tiger's head, stone axe lifted as if one swing might split the unborn world. Time had eroded nothing of its menace.

Jared and the Vermilion Demon Lord had barely crossed within a hundred paces when both statues' eyes flared, bright and sudden.

The glow was not inert gemstone light; it moved, alive, and for one breath Jared felt as though something inside the stone had awakened and fixed on him.

"Children of the after-times, stay your steps. This retreat belongs to my master. Only those of fate, virtue, and capability may pass." The first two gates weighed your strength and perception. The third will measure your heart, your purpose, and the breadth of what you can bear.

"Break these bodies we guard with or earn our approval," the tiger-headed statue thundered. "But fail, and body and soul alike will shatter beyond the wheel of rebirth. Do you dare the trial?"

The air thickened. Pressure dropped onto Jared's chest like a falling cliff, stealing half a breath before he forced his lungs to move again.

That single moment of weight eclipsed the strain he had felt under the three shadow guardians and the old man at the game board combined.

Beside him, the Demon Lord's pupils burned crimson. A grin split the fiend's face. "Finally-something with teeth. Jared, straight through or—"

Jared let his glance travel from the statues to the shifting barrier, mind spinning through options the way a gambler palms dice.

Force a way in?

The two guardians shared one current of power, an unseen formation humming between them and the multicolored screen. Even victory would likely leave him too drained to breach the barrier itself.

Earn their approval, then. But how?

He remembered Sidney's warning: Ancient Energy Refiners cut straight to essence. The test strikes at heart, will, and the space within a soul that can hold the world. A reckless thought took shape, bold enough to quicken his pulse.

"Seniors," Jared said, stepping forward with palms pressed together in formal salute, "I, Jared, seek to fuse the alien force within me and grow strong enough to resist the devouring evil. I mean no disrespect to ancient wisdom. The earlier gates taught me how vast your path is. For this third, I offer my own way for your judgment."

He did not lift his fists. Instead, he allowed his eyelids to fall, shutting out the guardians, the Demon Lord, even the wavering colors ahead.

Within the hush of his body, the Origin Star in his core began to turn. Light welled outward, pulse on pulse, each surge louder than words.

He let the surge carry everything he was: the years of clawing upward the vow to protect, the need to avenge, the restless hunger for truth.

Every memory spilled into the pulse

that fanned outward.

It felt nothing like an attack. It was a bare-souled introduction, a hand stretched

open so the world could read the lines on his palm.

A dim grey breath coiled first, patient, primordial, big enough to swallow quarrels. In its haze, anything could begin again.

Then color stirred: five interlocking bands, metal feeding water, water feeding wood, the old rhythm of creation arguing with itself inside a spinning prism.

Earthfire True Flame rose through the weave, scarlet at the core, white at the tips, promising to burn everything down and seed the ash with unborn gardens.

Across it glided a pale-gold dragon shape, voice stretched into a long brass note-unyielding, hungry for horizons no one else dared to chart.

None of them stayed separate.

Chaos herded them together, awkward, stubborn, but inch by inch

they resonated, knitting a

field still

raw at the edges yet aching with possibility.

Heat flashed across the sigil on Jared's hand. A ghost of the same pattern shimmered on his brow, four colors joined by threads too fine to name.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the Vermilion Demon Lord gaping. The man tasted the air like someone hearing a language unknown yet older than bone.

Farther ahead, the two stone sentinels' pupils flickered, their severities thawing as light coursed behind the granite.

They were watching him. Of course they were.

Let them weigh the mess inside that force, the stubborn mercy, the blood compiled,

the nerve to weld opposite roots and dare it to grow.

"Chaos as guide, four forces

entwined... your path is steep, without precedent," the Serpentine Guardian murmured, the note inside, its stone throat shaded with

emotions Jared could not pin to one name.

"Yet in its change and creation I hear an echo of our master's final truth: all phenomena return to source, and source births all things."

"Your mind is steady, untempted by corruption. You guard what matters and break ground where none exists... your capacity is acceptable," the Tiger Guardian pronounced.

As the last word fell, the two guardians turned to each other, shared a single, flinty nod, then faced him again.

"You may enter," the Serpentine Guardian said.

"Inside, fortune answers only to itself. Conduct yourself wisely," the Tiger Guardian added.

The brilliance drained from their eyes, leaving plain stone again.

The Seven-Colored Light Screen rippled outward like rain-rings on still water, then vanished, baring a tunnel that breathed cold dark.

"That... that actually worked?"

Behind him, the Vermilion Demon Lord sounded betrayed by the absence of spectacular violence.

A Warrior Undefeatable

He let his lashes lift. The sigil faded from his brow, leaving him pale and hollowed; opening himself that wide had drained the marrow of his focus.

He drew a ragged breath that steadied on the way out.

"The gamble paid off. Ancient Energy Refiners value the fit between heart and path more than raw might. Let's go."

Jared drew his shoulders tight and stepped through the jagged mouth of the mountain. The Vermilion Demon Lord's footfalls ghosted a pace behind him, as though the creature feared brushing Jared's sleeve.

Inside, no gems flashed, no golden idols gleamed. The passage was wide but spare, its stone walls worn glass-smooth.

Faded murals surfaced here and there—priestly silhouettes, archaic skies, clouds swallowed and breathed again.

A denser breath pressed against his skin, purer than the air outside. Every step thickened that ancient weight, as if the mountain remembered a time before men spelled power into names.

The tunnel seemed endless, yet only the slow burn of tension marked the minutes. Then the ceiling soared away and he found himself in a cavern that swallowed torchlight without effort.

At the chamber's center lay a modest pool, water so clear he could reconstruct his pulse in its mirror. Yet threads of shifting starlight drifted under the surface, flowing like a quiet galaxy.

Suspended above that stillness, three artifacts hovered, each turning with the patience of worlds.

To the left drifted a bamboo scroll, parchment neither silk nor hide, dark ochre with age. An unfamiliar black thread bound it shut, yet a tide of vast, smokelike knowledge leaked through the weave.

Opposite, a clay jar no larger than his palm spun in silence. Its soot-gray skin showed nothing, but the sealed mouth throbbed with stormwind and the subterranean heartbeat of continents.

Between them pulsed a fist-sized orb, its hues sliding from smoke to newborn dawn. Within its depths galaxies birthed and burned in the blink of an eye.

Raw origin his bones could taste it.

At the pool's edge sat a skeleton robed in coarse hemp. Snow-white beard and hair clung to the bone, preserved in a posture that suggested the heavens themselves had once listened.

No breath lingered in those ribs, yet the figure remained upright, earth-steady, sky-minded. In front of the crossed legs, the stone floor carried several lines gouged so deeply the chisel marks still shone.

Jared caught his own inhale and let it hang, stepping closer with almost reverent slowness. The Demon Lord moved beside him, the monster's crimson eyes suddenly respectful.

The carved characters were older than any academy chart-jagged pictographs whose curves implied thunder and prayer in the same stroke. The moment his gaze brushed them, meaning bloomed unasked behind his eyes.

"I, Grant, Energy Refiner, sense the shadow of my final breath. Here I set down my inheritance, waiting for whoever arrives by destiny."

"Left rests the Primal Unity Refinement Tome, the sum of my life's study on the breath that divides chaos and gives pulse to all things."

"Right stands the Mountain-River Cauldron, holding a wisp of innate earth-and-sky essence; it can break devils, nurture veins of spirit, and teach the land's patient virtue."

"Center lies the Chaos Source Seed, condensed from a thread of primal breath after ten thousand years beside the sea of chaos."

"It offers infinite futures and unmeasured peril; approach only with towering resolve, rare fortune, and an innate bond to chaos. Beware."

"Whoever claims this legacy, honor our craft; do not stain the name of Energy Refiners. The heavens are vast, the way without end, may you—"

The final stroke dissolved into stone dust, time having licked away the master's closing wish.

Heat flooded Jared's chest. A legacy of the ancient Energy Refiners—real, intact, his for the taking.

The Primal Unity Refinement Tome alone could untangle the snarl where his four powers met and kept each other bleeding.

The Mountain-River Cauldron would be a treasure by any era's measure, yet his gaze slid past it.

The orb-chaos distilled—pulled at him like gravity made personal.

Inside his core, chaotic celestial energy stirred, the Four-Colored Origin Star whirling so fast the hues smeared together. Their hunger mirrored his own, urging him forward.

Beside him, the Demon Lord barely spared the relics another glance. The creature sniffed the air, pupils narrowing toward a shadowed fissure in the cavern wall.

There, half concealed in the crack, a translucent herb with nine tiny apertures quivered, releasing a scent that cooled the mind and polished every thought.

"Nine-Orifice Divine Soul Herb!" the Demon Lord blurted, voice cracking with raw delight.

The sound ricocheted off the vault, startling even Jared; he had never heard unfiltered joy in that grating baritone.

He almost missed it. In the hairline crack between two slabs, a tuft of silver-veined leaves glimmered like chilled moonlight—the exact Nine-Orifice Divine Soul Herb the manuals said he still lacked.

A prickle ran down his spine, equal parts disbelief and raw, hungry relief.

At Jared's side, the usually unflappable Vermilion Demon Lord drew a sharp breath, crimson eyes widening like coals struck by wind.

The shared astonishment fluttered in the dusty air, fragile yet electric.

"Senior, we hunted half the world for this and it chooses to greet us here without a single footstep wasted."

He felt the grin on his face stretch uncomfortably wide, as if fear and triumph were vying for the same space.

Jared swallowed the tremor in his throat and lowered his voice.

"You take the herb, I will claim the legacy. We cannot linger once each is secured, we leave."

Vermilion Demon Lord bobbed his head, once, twice, the chains of impatience rattling behind his careful steps.

He padded toward the fissure, claws curved inward lest a careless scrape shatter the miracle before them.

Jared turned to the sun-bleached bones throned against the cavern wall.

He dropped to his knees and bent forward three times, each bow measured, forehead almost brushing grit.

"Senior Grant, Jared of the late age receives your chance. I swear to wield it with honor and press onward."

Rising, he let the echoes of his vow fade, then angled toward the rolled bamboo slip titled Primal Unity Refinement Tome.

The instant his fingertips grazed the brittle reed, the scroll unfurled on its own, slats whipping open like a startled bird.

A torrent of symbols, visions, and vibrating intent slammed through his mind, louder than thunder, brighter than sunrise, unstoppable.

These were no mere words.

Within each ideogram lived the hum of universal law, the pulse of energy cycles, the shifting silhouettes of countless meditation diagrams.

The load swelled until veins drummed at his temples; vertigo spun the cave ceiling into a blurred whirl.

He dropped into a cross-legged seat, palms face up, forcing every breath to braid with the flood until shapes began to settle.

Time melted.

When his lashes finally lifted, the air

seemed clearer, as though.

revelation had washed the motes

front-his gaze shimmered with

equal parts awe and certainty.

Understanding slid into place. "So that's what they meant by qi," he whispered.

It was not just the spiritual mist he had inhaled for years, but the unborn state of every force matter, energy, even the skeletal rules that hold the cosmos upright.

Chaos condensed to one breath; the breath split to light and shadow; light and shadow bred the five motions he knew too well.

To weld alien powers, he had only to trace them back to that shared unborn breath, feed it through his will, and forge anew.

Doors he hadn't known existed now stood ajar, puzzles that had snarled his nights falling apart like rotten rope.

Ahead, a road stretched-wild, perilous, irresistibly lit.

With careful reverence he slipped the scroll into the storage ring, sealing it behind a flicker of runes.

His attention slid to the thumb-sized Mountain-River Cauldron resting on an altar of cracked quartz.

When his fingers curled around the tiny vessel, it shuddered like a caged beast, rims clinking with muted protest.

He poured a thread of fresh Primal

Unity Energy over his palm; the trembling eased, and the cauldron folded into the ring without another sound.

Only the swirling Chaos Source Seed remained, hovering over a shallow basin like a storm trapped in glass.

Desire tugged him forward; prudence yanked just as hard.

No other relic in this cave promised as much power-or as much ruin.

He drew a long breath, letting his pulse slow to the cadence the tome described. Mind withdrew from noise, curled around the silent point where all things begin.

A muted gray mist, speckled with four drifting sparks, seeped from his palm as he inched toward the churning seed.

The moment the haze brushed the outer shell, time seemed to hold its breath.

A detonation split existence-the wordless boom roared inside his skull rather than through the air.

The blast felt vast enough to invent worlds, cracking his sea of consciousness wide open.

Light erupted from the seed, colorless yet blinding, and swallowed him whole before he could draw another breath.

Primeval chaos surged in, pure and regal, but savage-a flood breaking every dam his body had ever raised.