

A Warrior Undefeatable 5991-6000

A Warrior Undefeatable

Night swallowed the Western District by the time they slipped back into Jade Immortal City.

Jared led Luther through a lattice of half-collapsed alleys until the abandoned shack reappeared, squatting behind a curtain of moldy bamboo.

Inside, the young cultivator hunched over a pile of prime crystals, lips shaping silent numbers.

The door scraped, and he jerked so hard that glittering stones sprayed from his palms like startled fish.

His voice cracked before his knees did.

"S-Seniors, I swear that was everything I knew. Press me again and it will still be nothing!"

Jared said nothing. He untied a broader sack and let it settle between them with a muted thud.

The mouth gaped just enough for light to spill out-hundreds of high-grade prime crystals blazing beside sleek vials of recovery and cultivation elixirs.

The boy's pupils dilated, breath snagging like cloth on a nail.

Jared let the silence do its work, then spoke in a tone that offered no exits.

We are not here to rough you up.

"You live by trafficking whispers, so you know which doors such people hide behind."

He flicked a glance at the treasure, then at the quiet blades hiding in Jared's eyes.

His tongue rasped over cracked lips before words emerged.

"S-Senior... one wrong step could cost me my head-no, my very soul on Soulfall Slope."

Luther cut in, voice low but steady.

Exactly why we need them.

"This cache is your fee for the introduction. When the job is done, more will follow."

He watched calculation muscle its way past fear in the boy's eyes; silver always outshouted terror.

Teeth set, the youngster scooped the sack to his chest and whispered,

"Follow me. No talking, no sightseeing."

Monkey slipped ahead like a shadow, never pausing long enough for Jared's boots to settle on the cobbles.

Broken walls rose like jagged ribs; every few breaths Monkey vaulted one, obliging Jared to scramble after.

When gaps narrowed into black mouths, Monkey ducked and slid into tunnels that stank of wet stone.

Half an hour bled away before the alleys spat them into a district of sprawling, once-grand manors.

Their roofs still dwarfed the street, yet vines throttled every beam, and windows gaped like pulled teeth.

Monkey halted at a gate where half a door dangled from a single hinge.

He rapped the frame—three slow, two sharp—each strike echoing like a code Jared could not read.

A drawn-out creak answered. A narrow slice of courtyard appeared, framed by a single suspicious eye.

"Monkey? That you? Who are the others?"

The voice was a low growl, the kind that suggested steel lived somewhere beneath the speaker's ribs.

"Panther, it's me," Monkey hissed. "These two want in—hard fighters, generous gifts, serious about the big score."

Silence stretched, then the door yawned wider. A scar-faced man, compact as coiled rope, stepped aside and barked, "Inside, quick."

Jared crossed the threshold and felt the air shift, as though a film slid over his ears.

The courtyard sprawled, improbably neat amid ruin, flagstones reset, roofs patched. A faint ripple of warding energy kissed his skin—someone had carved symmetry into the chaos.

A few cultivators crouched in shadowed corners, oiling blades or steadying their breath. Their eyes lifted together, weighing the newcomers like coin.

Panther threaded them between columns into a smaller yard muffled by bamboo and mist.

A tall woman in teal fighting leathers stood with her back to them, studying the bamboo as if rehearsing a duel only she could see.

She turned. Clean-cut features, unflinching eyes, the cool authority of someone who had never lost her footing.

Her aura pressed out—High Immortal Realm Level Four—sharp enough that Jared's bones felt counted.

Panther dipped his head. "Boss Lady, Monkey's here with two arrivals who want in."

Her eyes skimmed over Luther, lingered on Jared, then moved on, yet the weight of them remained against his chest.

He kept his own cultivation folded

tight, a coin concealed in a fist; Luther let his power breathe. Together they must have looked mismatched pieces from two puzzles.

ke

"Who are you, and why seek us?" The woman's tone was winter-clear.

Monkey hurried forward, spine nearly folded in half.

"Ms. Lyza, these seniors are hunting word on Jade Immortal Manor and the celestials."

"Especially the business at Soulfall Slope. Their purse is heavy, and they felt trustworthy, so I—"

Lyza's stare sharpened. "Soulfall Slope is not yours to gossip about. You forget your place, Monkey."

Monkey's shoulders jerked like strings had been yanked, and silence swallowed him.

Jared stepped into the tension, palms pressed together in greeting.

"Forgive him. I am Jared, this is Luther."

"Those executed at Soulfall Slope were likely mentors of mine. The debt of blood cannot rest."

"I bear no mercy for Jade Immortal Manor or their celestial patrons. I come seeking comrades, not secrets."

Jared felt Lyza's gaze digging for something buried beneath his calm. From the corner of his eye, her pupils held the hard glint of a smith testing steel.

He kept the grief and the cold

promise of violence locked behind steady dashes, yet some shard of it

must have slipped because a faint tightening rippled across Lyza's shoulders content

Words mean nothing.

"For all I know the Jade Immortal Manor sent you as bait to flush us into the open. We've buried too many brothers lately."

"We can swear a Heavenly Law Oath," Luther offered, ghostly breath coiling around his words.

"A Heavenly Law Oath?" Lyza scoffed, the corner of her mouth slicing upward.

"With celestials worming their

influence across the Azure

Firmament Immortal Continent, tell

me does the sky st bother to

judge fairly? Oaths leak if you pry at the seams."

Jared's brow tightened. "What, then, would satisfy you?"

Lyza pivoted, eyes sliding toward the stand of emerald bamboo. "Follow me. We'll talk somewhere safer."

She slipped between the stalks. Jared exchanged a silent nod with Luther, then drifted after her, boots crunching on dry leaves.

Behind them, Monkey started to tail along, only to freeze when Panther's stare cracked down like a silent whip.

The grove looked ordinary—thin sunlight, green shafts, cool air.

Yet the instant Jared crossed the threshold the space twitched, as though someone tugged a hidden thread, and the flow of spirit energy bent sideways.

Ten or so steps in, Lyza's figure blurred, smudged like wet ink—and then she was simply gone.

All at once the surrounding stalks shivered without wind. Leaves hissed overhead, knitting together until daylight drowned beneath a swaying green ceiling.

The grove tightened, a living cage.

Pressure flooded from every direction; the soil split with glowing turquoise sigils that slithered like awakened vines toward Jared's and Luther's ankles.

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Hmph. I knew your hearts were rotten!"

"You barge in with parlor tricks to spy on me? Today you enter and never leave. The Thousand-Bamboo Soul-Locking Array could use fresh blood to season its birth."

Dark mist surged around Luther's frame, ready to lash out.

Jared lifted a hand, palm toward Luther, stilling him.

His own face remained unruffled as he studied the shifting bamboo and the crawling sigils.

A faint shake of his head dismissed their theatrics.

The formation is elegant—wood spirits woven with illusion, confinement, and killing intent.

"Whoever laid it knows wood-based arrays, yet forgot that nature flows, it never forces. Push it too hard and the stream chokes."

He drifted one step ahead.

The sole of his boot landed on the faint junction where several sigils intersected, a spot no broader than a coin.

Jared set his boot onto the pattern. No boom rolled out of the ground, only the faintest snap, brittle and sharp, like a bead of colored glass giving way.

The teal lines beneath him quivered. In the space of a breath they lost their spine, shriveling into dull sand, the way a snake collapses once the staff pinches out its bones.

The frenzied bamboo froze midwhip. Phantom leaves that had roared like a green storm sucked backward, tide reversing, until the grove stood plain and still.

Jared stepped again. The air felt viscous, yet it parted around him as though he were sliding through a curtain of water, and an instant later he was breathing on the opposite edge of the grove.

Lyza was planted beside a thick stalk of purple bamboo, fingers still fixed in a spell sign. Shock clung to her face, as if her mind lagged several heartbeats behind her eyes.

That Thousand-Bamboo Soul-Locking Array-her proud masterpiece, the trap that had once butchered cultivators of the High Immortal Realm-had shattered beneath a single casual step.

She had not even caught how he did it.

While the astonishment still widened her eyes, Jared's shape flickered and re-coalesced three feet before her.

No crashing aura pressed on her chest, no blinding radiance wrapped his fingers. He simply raised two fingers together-sword-sharp-and aimed for the space between her brows.

At his fingertip the air dimpled inward. A thread of gray chaos pulsed there, swallowing light, exhaling a chill that made even thoughts want to freeze.

The defensive halo around her body looked suddenly flimsy, paper that had wandered into fire. Instinct screamed-if that touch landed, she would not leave a corpse.

Pupils contracted. Blood withdrew from her skin. She had no time to think of dodging, much less raise a guard.

His fingers halted a half-inch from her forehead, immovable, deliberate.

Jared lowered his hand, clasped both behind his back, and regarded her with an undisturbed calm.

"Shall we talk properly now?"

The bamboo glade held its breath.

The killing array and the illusions that had painted the sky were gone, as if childhood nightmares that fled with daylight.

Only the bead of cold sweat sliding from Lyza's temple, and the tremor in her still-raised fingers, testified that death had hovered here.

Panther, Monkey, and the rest finally burst past the outer boundary, saw the tableau, and froze like children who had walked into a funeral they did not understand.

Lyza drew a long breath, forcing the storm inside her chest to lie down.

When her gaze found Jared again it carried awe, caution, and an unexpected glimmer of—was that hope?

Anyone who could break the array so lightly and press death so close could never be a lapdog of Jade Immortal Manor.

If the manor possessed such a man, their rebellion would already lie in ashes.

"Senior... your power is astounding. I misjudged you and acted rashly." Hands folded, she gestured toward the deeper grove, tone now respectfully steady.

"Please, come with me. We should discuss this in detail." She hesitated, eyes sliding to the stupefied Monkey something unreadable in her look Monkey, you come too This time you truly have brought us someone extraordinary." The name jolted Monkey out of his fog.

Blankness cracked into wild joy, and he stared at Jared with a shining cocktail of reverence and excitement.

Jared inclined his head and trailed after Lyza, the hush of the bamboo closing around him as she led him toward a small lodge woven entirely from living green stalks.

Lyza lifted the reed curtain and Jared ducked in with Luther. Behind them, Monkey crept, so careful it made Jared's shoulders tighten.

Inside, the place was almost

bare—just three bamboo chairs and a writing table yet the air tingled richer and cleaner than the forest outside, as though a hidden array were pulling breath straight from heaven.

Lyza set her hand over the nearest chair. "Please, take a seat."

He lowered himself onto the chair, and Lyza took the one opposite, solemn purpose settling over her features.

Jared kept his voice even. "Ms. Lyza, those two cultivators beheaded at Soulfall Slope—what do you know? What crime did they commit, and who swung the blade?"

Lyza let out a tired breath. "Inside Jade Immortal City, even whispering about them is dangerous. We have only scraps of rumor."

"Officially, Jade Immortal Manor says they ripped open the barrier, deserted level thirteen for the Lower Realm, and broke a celestial decree, so they had to die."

"They slipped to the Lower Realm on their own?" Jared echoed, the muscles between his brows knotting. "Has that ever been punished this severely before?" Lyza's eyes sharpened. "That's the strange part."

"Plenty of cultivators have sneaked to the Lower Realm before. They pay a fine, endure a week of confinement—nothing fatal."

"But to execute them in public, at Soulfall Slope of all places, and use the Soul-Refining Grand Array... that has never happened."

"We think the pair must have uncovered something the Manor or the celestials behind it—cannot risk leaking. Killing them, then grinding the souls to ash, was the only way to seal the secret."

Jared felt his chest drop, as if the floor of the lodge had given way beneath him. The dread was familiar—confirmation, not surprise, and that made it worse.

Mr. Morse had explored more corners of the cosmos than half the academies combined, and his wife was just as sharp.

They hurried back to level thirteen, then surfaced here on the Azure Firmament Immortal Continent. It no longer felt random; it felt like a warning Jared had ignored.

He leaned forward. "Do you know when they were taken? Where? Did they fight back or leave any last words?"

A Warrior Undefeatable

Lyza shook her head again. "No fixed time or place-only that a month ago their names flashed onto the Manor's wanted rolls, tagged with 'deserting the heavens, prying into taboos.'"

"The arrest was swift, quiet; no one in the streets even sensed the ripple."

"Rumor says they first tried to sneak near the city lord mansion. No clue why. They vanished right after, and the next sighting was their execution at Soulfall Slope."

She hesitated. "The site was sealed by an isolation array—no sound escapes. Our watchers were too far; they saw the blade fall but heard nothing."

Jared held back the heat rising in his throat and spoke low. "Then whose order was it, and whose hand did the killing?"

Lyza felt levity leave the room like breath from a wound. She straightened, vertebra by vertebra, until only formality remained.

"From what we've learned, the order almost certainly came from Julian, the current City Lord of Jade Immortal City and master of the manor. The celestials back him, his cultivation unfathomable—at least High Immortal Realm Level Seven—and the city bends at his knee. A punishment that severe could only move with his direct command, or at least his nod. As for who actually carried it out..." She slid a glance toward Panther. The big man took the hint, stepped forward, and lowered his voice.

"We asked around. The day the escort marched to Soulfall Slope and activated the Soul-Refining Grand Array, the one in charge was the manor's Chief Steward, Quentin." Julian trusts him with everything. He hovers at High Immortal Realm Level Five, swims in formations and prisons, and his malice keeps the cells quiet.

"The axe itself fell by two veteran executioners from the Punishment Hall—brothers Garth and Miles. Both sit at High Immortal Realm Level Four, bodies tempered for killing, and they enjoy every stroke." Jared repeated the names, each syllable striking the table like ice chips. "Garth. Miles."

The temperature of his gaze dropped. "Where are they now?"

A pressure rolled off him, almost visible, as though steel had taken vapor. Lyza's lungs stalled; instinct begged her to recoil, but she held her ground.

She summoned breath and answered, steady only by will. "The brothers lodge in the Executioners' Quarters on the west side of the manor, alternating shifts. Tonight Miles is on duty, Garth is off. Garth drinks and gambles. When he rests, he drifts to the Drunken Immortal Tavern in the Western District, then empties his purse at the Thousand-Gold Parlor. Dusk is settling; he's likely at the tavern now." Jared rose, palms coming together in a brief respectful arch. "Your help matters."

Gratitude sounded mild beside the storm still simmering beneath his skin, yet Lyza accepted the bow and returned it.

"Please, Senior, we've endured Jade Immortal Manor's cruelty for too long. If your power can shake them, every common soul will owe you breath."

The plea slipped into caution. "But Garth still carries their emblem. An attack inside the walls will summon patrols and experts in a blink. Take care."

"I measure my steps."

His attention shifted to Luther. "Stay with Ms. Lyza. Unravel everything—Julian's routines, Quentin's vices, any loose hinge we can rip free."

Monkey jerked upright, as if a cold spark raced along his spine. "Senior, just say the word!"

"Lead me to the Drunken Immortal Tavern. Point out Garth."

His gaze pinned the youngster. "Do that, and more crystals will find you—along with a ticket out of this hive of trouble."

Fear and greed wrestled behind Monkey's eyes; greed won. "Yes! I'd know that brute if he were reduced to ash!"

Jared turned back to Lyza. "Let no one breathe of tonight. We'll decide the next move after I return."

He motioned for Monkey and melted into the deepening night, his outline swallowed faster than the lamplight could name it.

Only after the darkness quieted did Lyza release the breath she'd been hoarding. She glanced at Luther, voice nearly a whisper. "Senior, what realm has Mr. Chance truly reached? One finger shattered the array, and my strength vanished."

Luther's gaze stayed on the door Jared had taken. "His cultivation sits beyond our guessing. One thing matters: Jade Immortal Manor just kicked iron."

Jared stopped at the edge of the Western District. Ahead, the Drunken Immortal Tavern glowed like a brass furnace, every lantern turned to its brightest.

Inside and along the rails, merchants, rank-scented cultivators, and swaggering freelancers shoved shoulder to shoulder, their noise rising thick as frying oil.

Monkey led him across the street and into a slice of shadow opposite the tavern, then jabbed a finger toward the second floor window where a bare-chested giant drained a jug, candlelight licking across muscles and knife-white scars.

"Senior, that's Garth. See the scar cutting through his right brow? You can't miss it," Monkey whispered, voice trembling.

Jared lifted his gaze.

The man was enormous, face packed with slabs of flesh, laughing as he slapped mugs with equally brutal friends.

His High Immortal Realm Level Four aura lay bare, hot and rank, wrapping every gesture in a butcher's scent.

So this was the one who had carried Mr. Morse's severed head like a trophy?

His own eyes stayed still as pond water, yet his breath thinned into the surrounding dark until even Monkey, inches away, could no longer feel him, only a creeping chill. "Go back. Find Luther. What's next has nothing to do with you," Jared said.

Monkey nodded like a pardoned sinner and melted into the black. Jared did not strike right away.

He remained inside the narrow shadow, the way a patient cat sits beneath a birdcage, watching the second-floor revelry flicker against the windowpanes.

Minutes stretched, then more.

When the moon hung straight

1.n

overhead, Garth finally rose, staggering, traded filthy jokes with his companions, and lurched downstairs alone toward a quieter alley probably chasing cards or dice.

BUMS

Jared shifted.

He slid after the man like a smear of smoke, footfalls muffled beneath the tavern's leftover racket.

The passageway narrowed and darkened; only distant door lamps dotted the black like dying coals.

Garth hummed a lewd little tune, still blind to the reaper walking in his echo.

At the mid-bend, where crates and broken stools lay stacked high, the darkness ahead rippled.

Jared's arm flicked free of the gloom; his long fingers clamped Garth's throat before the man could choke on his next note.

A Warrior Undefeatable

The giant's eyes bulged, every swallow of wine inside him turning to icy sweat that slicked his skin.

He felt the man's core flare, a desperate swell of raw power trying to tear free. Jared pressed his palm harder. Heatless darkness slid from his fingertips, slipped under bone and tendon, and clamped every channel shut.

Muscles that had just bunched for a counter-strike sagged at once. The captive's eyes bulged, yet not even a finger twitched. Jared watched him stare into the gloom where Jared's outline slowly resolved, helpless to do anything but watch.

He let the half-light touch his face. He knew the effect: a young, unlined mask, eyes cold enough to scrape frost from stone. The contradiction always unsettled people, and tonight he needed the terror sharp.

"W-who... who are you?" The words rasped out of the big man's throat like rust scraped off iron. He gave no answer, letting the question hang, brittle and useless.

Jared leaned in until his breath stirred the man's matted hair. The alley smelled of damp stone and panic. "A month ago, Soulfall Slope. A man and a woman died there. Was that your work?"

He went rigid, as though the name of the place had turned his spine to glass. Disbelief flickered, drowned immediately by a darker, widening dread.

Jared noted the flicker of recognition-good, the man understood exactly why this visit had come. Direct, unavoidable, and judging by the way sweat sprang through pores—the most horrifying confrontation the brute had ever faced.

He tried to shake his head but found even falsehood too heavy; at last he managed a jerky nod.

"Whose order? Julian's? Or Quentin's?" His voice stayed flat, each name dropped like a stone into still water.

"M-Mr. Fay... he carried the City Lord's writ... my brothers and I... we only carried it out..." The confession scraped out in uneven gasps; the lack of air was already painting his lips a bruised blue.

Jared tightened his fingers, just enough for the man to feel how close the doorway to oblivion now stood. "Did they say anything before the end?"

"N-no... the formation cut all sound... they only glared at Mr. Fay... so angry..."

The freezing pressure reached his very soul; panic spilled past cracked composure. "I... I only followed orders, spare "

A sound like thin ice snapping under a boot whispered between them. Light left the man's eyes in a single pulse. The chaotic force rushed through marrow and mind alike, scrubbing every trace of life clean.

Jared opened his hand. The heavy body slumped, then sagged into dust, clothing and all, swept apart by the same wind that crawled through the alley.

Silence closed over the narrow passage again, as though nothing had ever disturbed its darkness.

What others called High Immortal Realm Level Four felt, to Jared, like the simple, dull work of splitting kindling.

He stood where the street dropped into shadow, night folding over his steady face. The first.

He raised his chin toward the city lord mansion, its blazing windows crowning Jade Immortal City with borrowed daylight.

Past the glare, his gaze speared the western annex—a tight, stone-walled compound the guards called the Executioners' Quarters.

Fewer lamps burned there, leaving the buildings to exhale a cold, metallic hush.

Lyza's last report said Miles, elder brother to Garth, held tonight's watch.

Garth's blood had merely opened the account.

Miles would settle it.

Neither butcher deserved dawn after what they did to Mr. Morse and his wife.

Jared slipped back into the dark, skating along tiled roofs and narrow alleys so quickly even the air failed to stir.

Every muscle answered him the way silk answers wind.

The nearer he drew to the mansion's heart, the thicker the spears of vigilance stood.

Uniformed patrol guards in jade-colored robes crisscrossed set routes, blades bouncing against their hips.

Hidden meshes of warning sigils stretched beneath the eaves like spider silk.

None of it looked perfect to him.

He let his awareness seep out, silent as mercury, sliding between ordinary detection nodes.

The chaotic force inside him read energy the way fingers read Braille.

Circuitry of power and rule unwound before his mind like glowing threads, knots bright where laws intersected.

The Quarters sat just inside the western wall, buffered from the inner court by layered gardens and side yards—outer ring, but still bristling.

A pale blue shield wrapped the compound, equal parts alarm and armor.

He paused under the fake boulder thirty paces out, tucked inside its leftover shade.

Touching the barrier without study would be noise he could not afford.

He watched its light breathe-expand, contract-slow, steady, predictable. Between breaths, a heartbeat of blindness flickered across the weave.

Jared stared at the shimmering shell of force until every muscle around his eyes cramped. Only then did the tiniest quiver appear a flaw that blinked for less than a hundredth of a heartbeat, invisible to anyone else.

He could see it; more importantly, he could reach it.

He let numbers tumble behind his eyelids, matching each pulse of the barrier, counting the rise, the fall, the pause in between. Patience steadied his breathing.

Beyond the stone colonnade, night wind combed through the garden, making the leaves whisper. A patrol passed along the outer path, boots

Padded, softened, then faded.

Now.

As the energy peaked and began that microscopic tilt toward the trough, Jared moved.

No blur followed him, no hiss of air. He thinned into something like smoke, slipped through the vanishing seam, and was simply on the other side.

The membrane of light did not even ripple.

Inside the Executioners' Quarters the pressure clenched around his ribs, heavier than before.

A faint blood-metal smell hung in the air, braided with a killing intent that had been stewing here for years.

Buildings squatted in harsh lines, all black stone, brutal and bare—nothing like the cloud-graced halls elsewhere in Jade Immortal Manor.

His spiritual sense crept forward like cautious antennae.

The compound spread wide, dozens of standalone courtyards. Most were dark; only a few spilled light.

At the very center the Duty Room blazed, two guards planted at its door, their auras far from weak.

|

Guided by the sketchy map and the threads of breath, Jared fixed on a corner court—quiet, out of the way yet pulsing with the on surge unique to a High Immortal Realm Level Four body-cultivator

The flavor of that surge matched Garth's, same blood, but tighter, more savage—
had to be Miles.

A Warrior Undefeatable

As expected, an independent warning array ringed the courtyard, finer than the outer barrier.

Linked to key nodes inside, it would not only scream an alarm but likely strike back or lock down any intruder.

Jared held his breath, eyes brushing over faint sigils scorched into the threshold stones and the low wall.

It was a layered Groundbinding Spirit Net Array-sensing, snaring, and stabbing in one spiteful weave.

The heart of it had to be buried beneath the courtyard's center.

Force it or crack it loud, and Miles would hear; the whole quarter might wake.

So Jared let the depth of his array-craft unfold again.

He lifted his right hand, index finger forward; at the tip, a fleck of grey chaos gathered, tiny enough to hide in dust.

He aimed a fingertip at open air. Gray light sharpened into threads finer than hair and sank, without a sound, into the earth's key runes.

Chaotic force origin of every art, solvent of every art-hummed along those threads, eager to remake whatever it touched.

Each filament slipped into the formation's meridians, not tearing but numbing, coaxing the flow to forget its own shape.

Where a current should report intruders, he pinched it into blind alleyways-tiny loops that talked only to themselves.

The silence felt surgical, the kind that belongs to a master physician holding his breath over a nerve.

Three heartbeats later the ward still glimmered at the gate, harmless as ever, yet under his touch it was now both blind and deaf.

Jared's figure blurred, sliding over the courtyard wall like a curl of smoke, landing without a whisper.

The yard was modest: three black-stone rooms in line, a training plinth to the left, a weapon rack to the right where cleavers and chains dripped a stinging, iron scent.

From the middle house a yellowish lamp leaked through the window; inside, a hulking shape sat cross-legged on a mat, breath uneven, brow knotted.

Miles, the butcher of Soulfall Slope.

His face echoed Garth's but darker, a jagged scar raking his left cheek, carving malice into every angle.

Even at rest his chest lifted too fast, and a bead of sweat collected at his temple— signs of a mind that could not settle.

A moment earlier he had flinched, hand jerking to his heart as though something cold and unseen had threaded his spine.

The tremor passed, but the unease stayed, circling him like a silent hound.

Jared remembered the rumors: Miles and Garth were twins who could taste each other's trouble.

If that bond had just gone slack, the butcher would feel the void in his bones.

"What in blazes...? Did that brat Garth stir up trouble again, or—" He snapped his eyes open, a feral glint sharpening the question.

His stare drifted, snagging on ghosts Jared could not see—perhaps the condemned man and woman from Soulfall Slope, the nightmares the rumors mentioned.

Miles shook himself, snarling, "Dead is dead. Their souls were boiled clean. They can't claw their way back—must be my training wearing thin."

He still pushed to his feet, intent on a round through the quarters to taste the night air and his own nerves.

He moved toward the door, shoulders rolling, hand lifting for the latch.

Just as his fingers grazed the wood...

A jolt split the moment.

Behind him the air rippled, faint as a sigh, as if an invisible stone had kissed a still pond.

Later, he would realize that in that instant the air three feet behind him had folded open, as if someone had stepped straight out of nothing.

No warning reached him—no scent of steel, no rustle of fabric, not even the chill that usually rode on hostile intent.

Only

theena hand settled against

the center of his back so could have been a lover's

gentle it

caress—did Miles' nerves detonate.

Cold recognition punched through the calm he'd been holding.

"Who-?"

Terror ripped through every muscle; they locked into iron at once.

The protective aura he'd spent decades mastering surged outward on reflex, a blazing shell of power.

He threw himself toward the hallway's mouth, lungs straining for the shout that would bring his guards running.

Too slow. The thought hit just as the world tilted.

From that placid palm, a pull erupted—vast, hungry, impossible.

It felt like the universe had chosen his spine as a drain and begun to empty itself through him.

This was no ordinary spirit power, no icy ghost breath, no blistering inner flame.

It was a raw, directionless hunger—chaotic force that intended to swallow, dissolve, erase.

The shining barrier around him met that hunger and evaporated like frost under sunlight.

The pull bored inward.

Every channel that once ferried energy through his limbs snapped, one after another, sharp as dry twigs.

Deep in his core, the reservoir he had tended for centuries popped like a punctured lung.

Power flooded out, but the force drank every drop before it could even taste the air. Then it shot upward, straight for the sanctuary behind his brow.

His very consciousness rallied, desperate to detonate, to scream a warning, but the thing clasped it tight, fingers around a throat.

Pressure mounted—slow, inexorable—like massive stones grinding grain until nothing but dust remained.

"Ugh... hhk..." Miles' eyes bulged, webbed with red.

His jaw fell open, yet only a broken hiss slipped out—no word, no cry.

Awareness slid backward, as though a tide were pulling him off a cliff.

Light, sound, even weight abandoned him at terrifying speed.

He tried to turn, to claim a single glimpse of his killer.

His neck might as well have been carved from stone.

In the blurred edges of sight, one hand hovered—long-fingered, unwavering, as though it held the rules of the world inside its palm.

A voice spoke inside his skull, so calm it chilled the marrow.

"Go keep your brother company below."

"Brother.....? Garth—?" A final spike of horror and disbelief flashed through Miles' eyes.

Then the light inside them went out.

Somewhere far away, a dull, heavy pop echoed—like a sack of wet sand splitting open.

He watched Miles' broad torso buckle inward, as though the man had swallowed acid. Flesh blistered, cracked, and then, like sun-baked clay, collapsed into dry charcoal flakes that sifted to the floor.

Even the robe, the storage ring on the man's thumb—everything the chaotic force had touched—frayed into Soot and drifted away, leaving

the air spelling of hot Saving

of hot metal

A Warrior Undefeatable

Jared withdrew his hand. A bead of gray light clung to his palm, winked out, and was gone.

He stayed still. His spiritual sense fanned across the room like a silent radar sweep, tasting for loose threads, alarms, or anything that remembered Miles' existence.

Two breaths. That was all the span between arrival, strike, and erasure.

Fast, precise, merciless—carried out beneath the threshold of sound.

He moved to the window, tilted his head, and let the night breathe against his ear.

The Executioners' Quarters remained hushed. Far off, voices drifted from the Duty Room, and beyond them the measured crunch of patrol boots passed by and faded. Nothing from the cottage leaked outward; the silence lay intact.

Still, he did not step away.

His gaze dropped to the cushion where Miles had been meditating. Beside it, a dull stone slab covered a thumb-sized recess, faint sigils pulsing beneath the dust.

A flick of will unraveled the sigils. He lifted the slab and found several jade slips, a pouch of prime crystals, and a black token carved with the single, snarling word Execution; the reverse carried Miles' name.

Jared gathered the slips and slipped his awareness inside them.

One held execution logs. He skimmed until one line snagged him like barbed wire.

Date: Umbral Calendar year nine thousand seven hundred sixty-three, Frost Month seventeen.

Location: Soulfall Slope.

Condemned: Sidney (male), Cadence (female).

Charge: Desertion from Upper Heaven, violation of forbidden knowledge.

Overseer: Grand Chamberlain Quentin.

Executioners: Garth, Miles. Note: Soul-Refining Crystal A11-73 employed. Souls secured and delivered to Mr. Fay.

The clinical columns sliced deeper than any blade, each word a splinter driven under the ribs.

Sidney, Cadence their names reduced to items on a butcher's ledger.

His fingers blanched around the slip, yet he forced his breath to smooth out, one slow draw after another.

The other slips yielded only Punishment Hall bylaws and tattered body-training fragments-useless debris.

His attention returned to the Execution Token.

The material hummed, faintly threaded into the wards that webbed this quarter of Jade Immortal Manor; a key, perhaps, or a pass deeper inside.

After a moment's thought he pocketed the token and the incriminating log, restored every other object, then set the stone back as though it had never been touched.

He flicked the last speck of ash from his sleeve, then drifted back through the numbed warning sigils. The courtyard wall gave no protest; stone, moonlight, and shadow all stayed silent beneath his feet.

A familiar throb in the outer barrier guided him to the thin seam where power traded places. He slipped through it as easily as breath leaves a lung, and the Executioners' Quarters fell away behind him.

From the moment he had entered to the instant he emerged, every layer of Jade Immortal Manor's vaunted defense had behaved like painted scenery-lovely to admire, useless to touch.

He reappeared at the Bamboo Grove Lodge scarcely half an hour after he'd left, dew still clinging to the slender leaves as though time itself had been reluctant to

move.

Through the lattice door he spotted Lyza, Luther, and Panther, with Monkey pacing tight anxious circles that never quite crossed the threshold of the low table.

The air inside felt crowded, the quiet so thick it seemed to press against his teeth; they must have been rehearsing every possible outcome of his errand.

When they finally noticed him-unruffled hair, clean sleeves, not a drop of blood in sight-faces that had braced for calamity slid into a confusion halfway between relief and fear.

Lyza's mouth worked twice before sound emerged. "Senior, you..."

Jared answered only by placing the matte-black Execution Token beside a slender jade slip on the bamboo table; the soft clack of stone on wood said more than explanations ever could.

Panther sucked in a breath so sharp it whistled. "That... that's a Punishment Hall Executioner's pass! Only someone like Garth or Miles is issued one!"

Lyza seized the jade slip, pressed her consciousness into it, shoulders tightening as unseen words scrolled before her mind's eye.

A heartbeat later she looked up, face drained of color. "This... this is Miles's execution log! Senior, you-"

He met no one's gaze. "Garth is dead-found in the alley behind the Drunken Immortal Tavern. Miles is dead as well, in his quarters at the Executioners' compound."

The silence ruptured as if a silent gong had slammed against the rafters. Despite having braced for it, every soul in the room-Luther included-went rigid, pulses hammering so hard Jared could see the skin at their throats jump.

Murder. The word crawled across their faces before any of them could speak.

Understanding flickered in their eyes—he really had done it.

And he had done it in less time than it took them to boil a kettle.

Sneaking into the alley was one thing; the Executioners' compound sat inside the city lord mansion itself.

Layered wards, patrolling guards, lethal arrays—every inch designed to keep men like him out.

How had he breached it?

How had he tracked the target so quickly?

How, in that throttled sliver of time, had he killed?

Lyza's heartbeat stalled. The newcomer stood in the doorway again, impossibly unruffled, and the only thought she could form was the same stunned question looping inside her chest: How had he slipped back out, and back in, unseen?

She alone, after years of mapping every patrol line and blind corner inside Jade Immortal Manor, understood how absurd that was. Not a single corridor lay unwatched, not a single sigil slept, not for a heartbeat.

Even if she burned every sleeper she had planted, rehearsed the approach a thousand times, she still could not imagine sliding a blade across Miles's throat inside the Executioners' Quarters without alarms exploding like firecrackers.

The attempt would bleed resources, friends, probably her own life, and it would still end with iron-shod boots pounding toward the crime before the body cooled.

Now this quiet traveler had strolled out less than an hour ago, alone.

He returned carrying two deaths, a jade slip still glimmering with proof, and the loose, satisfied air of a man who had merely gone to stretch his legs.

Beside her, Monkey's knees folded until he balanced on trembling calves; the way he looked up at Jared reminded Lyza of a village boy gawking at a storm-god, awe knotting with raw animal fear.

She saw the moment understanding rifled through him—the slight gasp, the pupils shrinking—when he realized the monster he himself had led through the warded gates.

Across the table, Luther's usually placid face tightened, as if an invisible string had drawn his thoughts painfully taut. Even he, the man who claimed to know Jared's measure, looked newly uncertain.

His eyes lowered, a private concession that whatever scale he had used to weigh his master still came up short.

Lyza could almost taste the elegance of it slipping into enemy marrow, cutting only what mattered, drifting away untouched. That wasn't combat. was choreography performed by someone who had long ago memorized every beat of power.

"S-senior, your might is boundless!" Panther stammered, his throat so dry the words scratched out like gravel, hands pressed together in a clumsy salute that dripped reverence.

The jade slip trembled between Lyza's fingers. She exhaled twice, then a third time, forcing the quake in her chest to settle before she nestled the fragile evidence onto the bamboo desk.

"Senior, your cultivation is beyond anything I can grasp, and I bow to it completely. With this slip, no one can deny that Elder Musa and his wife were framed."

"But the Turner brothers have died suddenly. Jade Immortal Manor—especially Quentin—will hunt for answers. He is Julian's favorite Supervising Executioner. We need a plan before their nets tighten."

A Warrior Undefeatable

Jared nodded once, gaze settling on the token and slip. The confidence in his voice felt almost casual.

"They will find no trace. The next move is Quentin."

"Quentin?" The single name escaped Lyza before she could stop it, tight with instinctive dread.

"He isn't like the Turners, Senior. He serves as Grand Chamberlain inside the city lord mansion, buried at the heart of every barrier."

"His cultivation already stands at High Immortal Realm Level Five, and he weaves formations and wards the way others breathe. Suspicious, shrewd there will be no opening for the same approach."

Jared lifted a hand, cutting her protest short.

"Precisely because he understands formations, he may also know what Jade Immortal Manor and those celestials are hiding. Elder Musa's real cause of death might be locked in his head. Capturing him—and prying out the truth—matters more than killing him."

Capture? The word ricocheted around the chamber, as if even the stone walls doubted they had heard correctly.

Lyza felt every gaze swing toward her and back to Jared. To steal the Grand Chamberlain from the manor's core? The thought alone pricked sweat along her spine.

The difficulty towered over assassination like a cliff over a ditch; if killing an executioner had been bold, this was lunacy squared and set ablaze.

"Mr. Chance," the older tactician began, his voice low and thick with caution. "This matter is no small affair. We should plan at length before we move."

Luther pressed the point before the silence could settle.

"Quentin's routines, the places he favors, every guard who breathes near him—we have to map them in detail."

"And once we strike, success or failure will roar through Jade Immortal Manor. Even Julian will feel the shock, maybe the celestials themselves."

Jared knew all of that; the risks sat in his chest like cold iron filings.

Yet anger kept sparking against the metal, refusing to cool.

Every stolen moment meant the souls of that senior couple remained twisting inside the Soul-Refining Grand Array, and it was only a matter of time before someone realized the Turner brothers had not died by accident.

He turned to Lyza, the calculation already hardening behind his eyes.

"You have worked this ground for years. I need the window—within the next three days—when Quentin is likeliest to step outside the core of the city lord mansion. Time, place, usual guard detail. Nothing vague."

Lyza's mouth tightened; Jared could see the argument rise and die behind her lashes. His earlier display of power had carved a sliver of hope even into her caution.

She drew a slow breath before speaking.

"Quentin is painfully careful," she said. "Except for official duties, he rarely leaves the inner court."

"But every fifth night, at the stroke of midnight, he walks alone to the Spirit-Nurturing Pool on the border between inner and outer courts and cultivates for one hour."

"We lost a brother to uncover that secret. The next session is tomorrow night."

Jared's gaze flickered. "Spirit-Nurturing Pool? Where exactly is it, and what kind of watch does he keep?"

"It's buried deep inside the Hundred Blossom Garden, off every main path, and wrapped in a formation."

"Each visit he brings only two bodyguards—High Immortal Realm Level Four, sworn to die for him."

"While he cultivates, they stand outside the array at the rim of the pool."

"It's the sole pattern we have ever found. Even so, the pool sits inside the inner court; one ripple and half the manor will descend in breaths."

Tomorrow night. Spirit-Nurturing Pool.

The words circled like a blade on a whetstone.

Opportunity, yes—yet every variable would belong to Quentin.

Jared forced the tremor out of his breathing. A familiar equation filled his mind: danger multiplied by delay equaled suffering.

"Does he have any other fault lines? Family, vices, grudges with Julian or rival factions—anything we can pry at?"

The question spilled out sharper than he intended; he needed a psychological seam, something softer than steel.

"Julian lifted him from obscurity, and Quentin worships the hand that fed him. No spouse, no children."

"He is shamelessly greedy and obsessed with power—that's why the pool calls to him."

"But allies are another matter. He

runs the manor's coffers like a

tyrant so the outer court Elder

Enforcers would toast his downfall,

though we don't know the depths of their quarrels."

Quentin's greed, his tunnel-vision on cultivation—those flaws hung in Jared's

thoughts like hooks, tugging at every scrap of strategy he owned.

Ideas ricocheted through his head, fast enough to leave sparks behind.

Maybe he did not have to choose one approach. Maybe he could squeeze him from two angles at once.

"Ms. Lyza, could you slip word to Quentin that the Turner brothers are dead—and hint it might be payback? Do it in a way that never points back to you. Jared said, each word laid down like a chess piece.

"Make the message itch. Let him suspect someone inside the manor has started a private war."

Lyza's eyes caught the torchlight. "You want his nerves frayed, so he acts rashly—or at least doubles the guard around whatever he trusts most."

Jared's gaze darkened. "He'll run to check on the Soul-Refining Crystal. He can't help himself."

The room went still, everyone's pulse ticking louder than the lanterns.

The Soul-Refining Crystal-heart of the entire Soulfall Slope array-was not a name they spoke lightly.

Luther exhaled. "If his paranoia drags him to the vault personally, that's our window, isn't it?"

Jared's voice cooled. "A makeshift storage room, with fewer loyal guards, is a kinder place to hold a conversation than his sanctum ever will be."

A chill slid up Lyza's spine. Strength was one thing; this man's patience and precision were another beast entirely. He was baiting a serpent toward its own exposed heart.

"Understood," she said.

Lyza bowed slightly. "We'll leak the tale through a few unreliable mouths and let rumor do the work. Whether his suspicion bites is up to his nature."

Jared nodded toward Luther. "Help her. Monkey, Panther-watch the manor's outer ring, especially any place they stash high value goods. want every odd twitch Quentin makes tomorrow on my desk."

ods. 1:

"Yes, sir." The answer came as one voice; somewhere along the way, they had started following him without question.

A Warrior Undefeatable

First light pried at the horizon, a weak blade of silver cutting through the spiritual haze above Jade Immortal City. It did nothing for the knot twisting in Quentin's gut; the whole manor felt braced for bad news.

Inside the Executioners' Quarters duty room the air was worse, as if frost had been packed into the walls and told never to melt.

Four enforcers stood below him, faces leached of color, sweat shining on their lowered brows. None dared draw a full breath.

He rested behind the broad slab of obsidian that served as his desk, the stone cold enough to bleed through his sleeves.

The ink-green brocade of his robe rasped when he shifted, the cloud-stitching catching at his forearms.

A tight ache rode the muscles around his eyes—he did not need a mirror to know the look would slice.

Quentin, Grand Chamberlain of Internal Affairs, let the silence steep one breath longer.

"Over one night, two living men vanish right beneath your eyelids—care to explain?"

His tone stayed level, almost mild; the words still made the four men shiver as though he had slammed a blade into the table.

"R-revered Grand Chamberlain," the lead enforcer began, his voice trembling.

"We kept to routine. At the midnight hand-off the logs were clean, Miles was on duty and never left the quarters. Garth—he had the day off—went to the Drunken Immortal Tavern as usual and has yet to return. At roll call this dawn, neither could be found. We searched the quarters, the tavern, the Thousand-Gold Parlor, every haunt they favor—nothing. We questioned their colleagues; no one heard so much as a creak last night..." Quentin cut the report short, letting one fingertip drum the obsidian—sharp, metronomic.

"What about the warding formation around the quarters? Any sign of breach?" "The formation ran normally, no record of a trigger," came the answer.

"We inspected Miles's quarters and every corner inside and out. No marks of struggle, no lingering aura, nothing. Everything is... unnervingly intact."

A second enforcer swallowed and added, his disbelief plain, "It's normal in a way that feels wrong, Grand Chamberlain."

Quentin mouthed the words—normal in a way that feels wrong—letting them roll across his tongue as his eyes narrowed, the chill in them sharpening.

"Two High Immortal Level Four body cultivators," he said, voice silk around steel.

"Miles on duty inside a warded compound—yet they vanish without a ripple? Not even dust out of place?"

He rose and paced to the lattice window.

Dawn spilled pale gold across the courtyard, but his stare only deepened, tunneling past the light.

He had plucked the Garth-Miles brothers from gutter brawls, shaped them into fists for chores no ledger would admit-like the Soulfall Slope matter weeks ago.

For both fists to vanish now, leaving neither blood nor corpse, screamed design. Without turning from the window he asked,

"Lately, has anyone been sniffing around the city for things they should leave buried?"

The men traded looks.

Finally one ventured, "Grand Chamberlain, a few days back... rumors said someone paid heavily at the Knowledge Pavilion in the Western District, asking about Soulfall Slope."

"Specifically about the man and woman involved," he continued, shrinking under Quentin's silence.

"But the pavilion's old keeper guards his clients; we couldn't learn who asked."

Quentin's gaze snapped to the enforcers, voice low but serrated. "Soulfall Slope... that pair..."

He pivoted slowly, the lamplight sliding over his cheekbones as a brief shadow flickered behind his eyes.

"What else?" The words sounded almost bored, but the hush that followed hurt the air.

The youngest enforcer swallowed so hard Quentin heard it. "And... and....." He forced the next pieces out in a rasp.

"Yesterday afternoon, one of Punishment Hall's outer lookouts sent word. Fresh faces were circling the Drunken Immortal Tavern, asking after Garth."

"We thought it was a routine grudge, maybe debt collection, so we... dismissed it."

The report barely landed before a sound like ice shattering cracked across the duty room.

Quentin's palm hammered the obsidian tabletop; a corner splintered, powdered stone dusting his boots.

"Incompetent!" The shout felt heavier than the broken stone.

He leveled that fury at them, eyes alive with the wish to wound.

"Someone is sniffing around the Executioner himself, and you call it trivial?"

All four enforcers dropped as one, knees clacking on stone, foreheads chasing the floor.

"Grand Chamberlain, forgive us! We failed. We deserve death!" they babbled, each word falling over the next.

Quentin's chest lifted, fell, lifted again. The rage scraped the inside of his ribs before he caged it.

Under the anger, something colder—unease—spread like spilled ink.

The Turner brothers were missing; now strangers asked about Soulfall Slope and the Executioner. The line between those points burned neon in his mind.

Could it be the old friends of that wandering couple, come to call in a blood debt?

Yet according to every report, the pair had no footing on level thirteen, no wealth, no allies.

So who moved for them—a phantom able to slip past the Executioners' Quarters array without even stirring the wards?

Unless their earlier crawl around the city lord mansion had uncovered secrets bigger than either of them.

Possibilities wheeled, colliding, shattering, reforming. He chased each, caught none.

He knew Julian's temper-cut once, never twice. Fail the celestials' directive, and punishment would arrive faster than breath.

The Soulfall Slope incident had to stay buried; any hand reaching for the lid must be broken at the wrist.

"My orders, now." The chill in his tone felt surgical.

"First: seal the rumor. Tell the world Garth and Miles are on confidential duty. Anyone who whispers otherwise is sabotaging the mansion and will bleed for it."

"Second: Punishment Hall and the Internal Guard move out. Quietly screen every newcomer to the city, especially those whose cultivation masks itself or whose routes make no sense."

"Focus on the two asking about Soulfall Slope and the Turner brothers. Dig them up, even if you have to peel the streets."

"Third: tighten every ward around the mansion, the inner court, the vaults, and especially Soulfall Slope. Without my seal, no one breathes near them."

"Fourth: alert the Western District. Lock the city. Entry only, no exits. Every gate and transport array gets inspected to the bone."

The commands fell in ruthless sequence, each sharp enough to cut the next one free.

"At once, Grand Chamberlain!" Relief flooded their voices as they scrambled out, clutching his wrath like a pardon.

Silence returned, elastic and suffocating. Quentin stood in it, face shifting between hard resolve and the dread he refused to name.

Quentin pressed the knot of wood that only he and the architect knew. A panel sighed open. Inside, rows of jade caskets waited, squared shoulders gleaming under dustless lamplight, each with a neat parchment tab curling against its lid.

He let a knuckle drift across the labels-AQ9-51, B37-12—until the skin tingled over A-73. There his pulse shagged that was the one Soulfall Slope had cost him two battalions to salvage.

Behind that lid glimmered a

Soul-Refining Crystal, the size of a

sparrow egg spun from the

shredded spurts of Sidney and

Cadence on the night the valley

screamed. He could still taste ash

when he thought of it.

By doctrine, crystals forged from named souls had to be re-shackled every three

days and logged with the celestials-paperwork he filed, sigils he renewed, vows he pretended to respect.

"Could that be what they're after?" The words slipped out before he could cage

them.

Light jittered across his eyes the way it did whenever risk and profit tried to share the same seat.

Instinct shoved him toward the vault door, but years of surviving other people's mistakes yanked him back.

If someone watched the secret vault, his sudden appearance would shout louder than any alarm.

He steadied his breathing, drew a custom message sigil from his sleeve, and poured a thread of power into it.

"Status of A11-73," he whispered, each syllable keyed to the wards.

A heartbeat later the sigil pulsed—cool, even, unquestioning. The reply wrote itself inside his skull: perimeter intact, no disturbance recorded.

Relief loosened his shoulders, but the very space that filled his lungs reminded him how much further they could still fall.

Enough guessing. Before dusk he would stand in front of Manor Lord Julian and let the man taste this danger for himself.

A Warrior Undefeatable

By late morning the sunlight felt metallic against the tiles of Jade Immortal City, and even the pigeons circled lower, wary.

At the main avenues he found ranks of Jade Immortal Manor guards in teal armor, their clipped breaths rising like steam off sharpened steel.

They had closed every archway in the outer wall except a single side gate, and anyone walking through it was peeled open by questions and runes.

Patrols now moved ten strong instead of three, each led by a High Immortal Realm Level Four officer whose gaze combed pedestrians like fingers seeking loose threads.

The teleport dais at market square was wrapped in ward-wire; anyone approaching it met a gauntleted forearm across the throat before finishing the request.

"What happened? Why the lockdown?" Someone behind Quentin muttered, voice cracked thin by caution.

"No clue—rumor says the city lord's estate erupted last night."

"Shh, keep it down! Those guards will gut you for curiosity."

"Haven't seen this many blades in centuries. Maybe a dignitary is coming-or maybe something worse already arrived."

The street performed a nervous ballet-ropes whispering, heads tilting together, eyes scattering the moment a helmet turned their way.

Jade Immortal City had slept in peace too long; now the pressure in the air felt like the hush before thunder tears the roof off.

Word drifted in like dusk smoke: neighboring sects barred their doors, recalled every wandering disciple, and waited behind locked halls.

Jared heard the whispers, but they brushed the edge of his thoughts and settled there, a low thrum of confirmation rather than surprise.

The bamboo around the lodge quivered, sheathing the courtyard in pale green shadow.

From where he sat, Jared felt the city's pulse change-guards' boots striking stone in quicker rhythm, the breeze carrying clipped orders that did not belong in a garden.

Luther tilted his head, eyes narrowing through the slits between swaying stalks. "They moved fast," he muttered.

"The Turner brothers disappear and Jade Immortal Manor panics-look at them. Patrols clog every street, gates shut behind us. This dragnet is for us."

Monkey's face drained to the color of ash; his hands worried one another so fiercely Jared expected sparks.

"S-Senior... what now? The city gates, the teleport array-everything's sealed. How do we get out?"

Panther's shoulders hunched, as if he could already feel the net tightening.

"Jade Immortal Manor wouldn't thrash this hard just for two dead executioners. That old cur Quentin must have sniffed something uglier."

Lyza turned toward Jared; his stillness seemed to draw every plea, every decision.
"Senior, fresh intel just came in."

"Their internal probe now targets two strangers who asked about Soulfall Slope in the Knowledge Pavilion a few days back."

"They're sweeping the city in secret. Our hideout is good, but not forever."

Jared opened his eyes; the pond-water calm inside them had not stirred.

"Expected."

"Quentin's no fool. The Turner brothers lead straight to Mr. Morse. Lockdown and hunts are the obvious ripples."

He paused, gaze sliding to Lyza.

"You said you could muddy the water-make him chase ghosts. How far along?" Lyza straightened, relief sparking across her features.

"Our people already seeded rumors through a chain of unreliable go-betweens tied to outer court enforcers. First thread says the Turner brothers learned dirty secrets about Manor resource deals-so they got silenced. Second points a crooked finger at elder enforcers unhappy with Quentin's grip; revenge, pruning his wings, that sort of poison. Third, whispered softest, hints the stones at Soulfall Slope might be crumbling—maybe the Soul-Refining Grand Array, or its crystals, is sick. Trails are twisted enough that no one traces them back quickly. Paranoid as he is, Quentin can't ignore any of it—especially the last. The Soul-Refining Crystal is his heartbeat." Jared nodded once, approving.

"Well played. His worst nightmare is Soulfall exposed and crystals failing."

"Rumors of internal knives will make him hoard his trusted few, maybe even leave the manor to lay hands on the thing himself." Luther glanced at Jared.

"You think he moves tonight?"

Jared's gaze cooled, calculating.

"The cordon chokes outsiders, but securing his secrets presses harder."

"If he plans to brief Julian, he'll first visit one place..."

Lyza's eyes lit like struck flint.

"The secret vault where he locks the Soul-Refining Crystals!"

"Exactly."

He pushed off the tatami, knees firing a dull complaint that never reached his face.

The others straightened instinctively. Only Lyza held his gaze.

"Ms. Lyza, do you have anyone who can slip inside the inner court," he asked, voice kept to a calm rumble, "or at least linger near its vital corridors without attracting suspicion?"

"They won't need to do anything reckless," he added before she could answer.

"All I require is a distant

eye-someone to confirm whether Quentin leaves the core district this morning, especially if he heads west of the Hundred Blossom Garden toward the Treasury or any lonelier corner."

Lyza's pupils flicked left and right, gears spinning behind them.

"Yes. A brother of ours works scut duty in the inner court kitchens. He ferries supplies along the outer passages—nothing remarkable."

She tapped a knuckle against her lower lip. The western side of the Hundred Blossom Garden skirts the cold cellar and the Old Alchemy Chamber-quiet ground. I'll send him to loiter along those lanes at once.

Jared nodded once, letting the ripple of approval settle their nerves. "Luther, Panther-keep tracking the city-wide dragnet and any new signals from Jade Immortal Manor's brass. Monkey, you stay put. No errands."

Lyza hesitated, breath barely audible. "Senior, are you planning to—"

The unspoken worry tasted metallic on his tongue, but he voiced only the plan.

"If rumors have truly spooked Quentin-if he fears for the Soul-Refining Crystal-he may inspect the secret vault himself."

His tone remained level, yet certainty rang like iron on stone. "Catching him on the secluded trail to that vault is a far safer play than assaulting the Spirit-Nurturing Pool wrapped in protective arrays."

Panther shifted, shoulders bunching beneath rough cloth. "Even outside the core, he'll keep guards close, and the vault itself will bristle with defenses..." Jared let the concern hang, then cut it clean. "Every lock was made by hands. Hands can open it."

He offered no further assurances. The quiet authority radiating from him rolled across the room like deep water, and one by one their doubts drowned in it.

Time thickened.

Lamps burned low; even the incense seemed afraid to flicker. In the smothered hush each person heard the ragged drumming of his own pulse.

After roughly an hour, a crisp three-note birdcall sliced the stillness from beyond the shutters.

Footsteps hurried away, then back. Lyza re-entered, excitement pressed beneath forced restraint, pupils shining like wet obsidian.

"Senior, word just arrived!" Her voice raced to keep pace with her thoughts.

"About half an hour ago, Quentin left the Tranquil Heart Pavilion with only two bodyguards and headed west-behind the Old Alchemy Chamber, toward the ground past the Hundred Blossom Garden."

"Deeper in that direction lies an abandoned courtyard against the cliff face-marked forbidden. We have long suspected a hidden door or chamber there."

A keen gleam lit Jared's eyes. "Just the two guards?"

"Confirmed. Both are his sworn retainers, each at High Immortal Realm Level Four."

"They kept to side paths, moving fast, wary of every shadow."

"Good." Jared's hesitation snapped. "Show me the spot along that path where opportunity is thickest."

Lyza unfurled a dog-eared inner court perimeter map, its ink almost worn to ghosts.

She traced a crooked route threading between artificial crags and a ruined garden. "Pine-Whisper Path," she said, fingertip tapping a narrow bend.

"Old pines and tumble-stone choke the view, patrols pass only sporadically, and it's one of the unavoidable links between the pavilion and that forbidden yard."

The paper smelled of dust and lamp oil.

|

Jared pressed its corners flat with his thumbs, let his gaze crawl along every bend in the trail, every cluster of buildings. He rehearsed the turns

felt

silently until the parchment te printed behind his eyes.

Luther, you're with me. Stay just outside Pine-Whisper Path. If something tilts sideways, you move first and draw the heat.

"Lyza, grab everyone and vanish. Go to the safe house you stocked earlier. Until you hear from me, keep the doors bolted and your heads down."

Lyza's voice landed harder than her hand on his sleeve, a quiet tug that said she would rather have chained him to the floor.

"Senior, please be careful. Quentin isn't weak, and he's sly. He'll have something hidden for when the blades come out."

Jared answered with a single nod; words would only slow the blood already drumming in his ears.

He caught Luther's gaze, the brief spark of shared intent, and then both men slid forward, letting the corridor light swallow them until they were nothing but the idea of shade leaving the lodge behind.

They had minutes, maybe less—the space of a kettle coming to boil before Quentin reappeared.

Intercept on the path, pin the man, bleed answers from him, vanish again; each step sharp as glass, none allowed to slip.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Warm sunlight spilled across the step outside the lodge. Bamboo leaves swayed, shaking thin slats of shadow over the flagstones.

Lyza squinted into the brightness. Jared and Luther stood beside her a heartbeat ago. Now their outlines shimmered, slipped between light and shadow, and were simply gone.

Her fingers curled against her palm. Breath held, she shaped a prayer she dared not speak: Come back alive, both of you.

She spun to Panther and Monkey. Sunlight slid off her face, leaving only hard intent.

"Pack everything," she said, voice low but sharp. "We move to Number Two safehouse exactly as the elder ordered. Fast, no trace."

Roof tiles flickered past beneath Luther's boots as he followed Jared across Jade Immortal City. They were nothing more than wind-rushed shadows slipping over tangled alleys and eaves.

Jared never took a straight path. He cut left into a deserted lane, dropped behind a collapsed courtyard wall, then vanished through a drain mouth that stank of moss and rust.

Luther mirrored him, letting every wisp of his own ghostly breath thin until even he could barely feel it.

Shadow craft was blood and bone for Luther, a birthright of the Ghost Clan. Yet tonight he chased Jared's heel prints and still couldn't catch the man's scent.

Awe pricked beneath his ribs a sharp, wordless thrill that someone not born to darkness could fold himself this thin.

Time stretched, the cadence of their footfalls matching Luther's pulse. After what felt like a single slow exhale, Jared halted beneath the west wall of Jade Immortal Manor.

No guard had barked, no dog had stirred. They could almost hear dust settling.

The section wasn't the formal gate. A single lantern burned far off, and the patrol route left lazy gaps.

Still, pale runes trickled along the spirit-jade blocks, and small eye-slits marked sniper niches every dozen paces.

Jared waved Luther down the wall line to a tangle of ancient vines. The cords were thick as arms, knotted into the stone like stubborn veins.

Pausing, Jared pressed two fingers to the vine-coated brick. Luther felt nothing, but Jared's eyes unfocused, listening with a sense far deeper than hearing.

"There's an old runoff pipe inside," Jared murmured, barely shaping air.

"Rusty, forgotten, and too small for maintenance spells to bother with." Jared's mouth curved. "Perfect."

Jared's thought brushed Luther's mind like cold breath. "Here's our door."

A bead of gray haze pooled on Jared's fingertip. He tapped a brick beneath the vines.

The haze seeped inward. Tiny clicks rang, soft as beetle jaws behind the stone. Hidden tumblers rolled open.

A hand-sized panel slid back without a whisper.

Cool, musty air gusted from the gap, carrying the taste of old water and stone. The passage was barely shoulder wide.

Jared slipped sideways and was gone. Luther inhaled once, flattened his shoulders, and flowed in after him.

Once they stood within, Jared pressed an inner catch. The brick eased shut, erasing every seam.

The tunnel dropped at a shallow angle. Slime-dark moss slicked each stone, making their steps whisper. Mildew and wet earth thickened every breath.

They descended what Luther judged to be several dozen yards before the shaft split.

Jared paused, comparing Lyza's markings with his own sweeping sense. He pointed toward the left fork, half choked with rubble and night.

They burrowed forward, bodies folding and twisting like climbing animals, squeezing between cracked drain tiles and natural faults.

Where rusted grates blocked them, Jared brushed them with a flicker of chaotic force; metal sighed and fell away like dust.

Elsewhere he guided Luther around splinters of bygone wards still sparking weak, mean bites.

Again and again he sensed stress points Luther hadn't noticed, whittling the route to a silent sprint.

Luther kept pace, saying nothing. Each new display tightened the knot of respect and unease inside him.

Skill alone couldn't explain it. This was battlefield memory layered over ruthless calm, hammered into muscle and nerve.

How many times had Jared walked edges sharper than this to learn such poise? The question throbbed without answer.

Another hush of time slid by. A breath of fresh air drifted forward, stirring a shy glow ahead.

Jared halted beneath a mat of hanging weeds. His awareness poured outward like water through cloth.

Beyond the veil lay a forgotten corner of garden: toppled rock mound, dry pond, weeds up to Luther's knees.

Farther off, jade roofs of the manor's inner court cut the skyline, proud and gilded. Here, time had been allowed to rot.

"We're at the outer fringe of Hundred Blossom Garden," Jared's whisper slid across the bond.

"Pine-Whisper Path lies east. Cross the dead garden, slip through a bamboo stand, and we're there."

"Quentin has to walk that way from Tranquil Heart Pavilion. We'll prepare the ground first."

They floated out of the hole and melted into the ragged undergrowth, moving soundless toward the pines.

The path lived up to its name—a ribbon of gray flagstones winding through towering old pines.

Trunks as thick as four men braided skyward. Interlaced needles sifted sunlight into glittering shards across moss-slick stones.

Jagged boulders crowded either side, bending the trail into blind turns. No footstep, no bird, only wind rustling pine.

Jared's gaze raked the scene, quick and hard, fixing angles and cover the way a craftsman studies grain.

He pointed to a shallow bend boxed by stacked fake cliffs and two massive pines whose branches wove a ceiling of needles.

"Luther, behind that boulder," Jared breathed. "Shut your presence down. Unless I cue you, hold your strike."

He kept his voice lower than the wind in the pines.

"If a patrol wanders through, or Quentin's guards try to raise an alarm you shut them down first. No flash, no trace. Misdirect them, ställ

them, do whatever buys us time."

A quick brush of his gaze measured every blind spot. The assignment had left his mouth before the sap cooling on his gloves even stiffened.

"Understood." Luther's answer was a wisp of breath that vanished between two heartbeats.

Luther blurred. One moment he

stood beside the boulder; the next the shadow behind it swallowed him whole. Jared's senses skimmed bare stone-heat, sound, presence, all gone.

Jared bent his knees, sprang, and let the old pine embrace him. A nest of needles folded around his shoulders, muffling his heartbeat.

From the crook of the trunk he

watched the bend below, a hundred

feet each way. Any

using that

path would step into his sightline,

yet not a glance could find him

among the green. '

The waiting began.

Breath by breath he sank deeper into stillness, mapping every root and pebble to the ambush that would bloom without a sound.

He spread his hands. At each fingertip a dust-fine mote of gray chaotic force glimmered, softer than dew on bark.

A flick of his wrists, and hair-thin threads shot into air, needles, cracks, loam. They nested, linked, and vanished-tightening the invisible net.

With each new line the pattern thickened, patient and silent, its outline known only to him.