

A Warrior Undefeatable 6001-6010

Chapter 6001

The trap he sketched was spare-only what the moment demanded—but every joint locked exactly where it would hurt an intruder most.

It cared nothing for killing. Delay, scramble, isolate that was the edge he needed.

He siphoned the rich wood and earth breath of the grove, folding it into the lines of chaotic force until the forest itself seemed to breathe unevenly.

If anyone tripped the weave, space would turn thick and sticky; power would crawl instead of race; thoughts would echo against cotton walls.

Sound, light, even raw energy would twist on themselves, too warped to escape the boundary.

Pulling this off without stirring outside aura demanded needle-point control of chaotic force, the kind earned one mistake at a time in darker places.

Each mark had to dissolve into bark, moss, or stone until not even a focused scan would scream deception—only a mild blockage of flow.

Anyone searching would shrug at a pocket of sluggish qi, never guessing guiding hands had shaped it.

Minutes slid by, then tens of minutes. Nothing but wind and resin scented the air.

Pines whispered overhead, scattering broken sun across mottled rock.

Jared slowed his pulse until even the ants on the branch ignored him. He listened for footfall the way a drawn bow listens for release.

All attention narrowed to the pathway's two mouths. Every rustle inside that range struck his mind sharper than speech.

Half an hour bled away.

A faint ripple touched the edge of his sense net.

They were here.

Three compressed signatures raced up the southern stretch, coy in their caution yet impossible to hide from him.

The lead aura was deep, cold, and edged-upper fifth rank among celestials—Quentin himself.

Two steps behind, twin guards in black kept pace. Their linked breath marked practiced tandem assaultants.

Both sat just a shade below their master yet moved as extensions of one blade.

The trio's rhythm never loosened. Watchfulness clung to them like a second cloak.

Quentin's narrow eyes swept the timbered walls. In his palm a sensing talisman pulsed, faint light glancing off blue silk.

Left and right, the guards flicked lethal stares into every knot of shadow, shielding him inside an invisible wedge.

Three hundred feet... two hundred... one hundred...

Boot soles kissed the rim of Jared's web.

A heartbeat later the unexpected cracked open.

The trigger was not Jared-it was Quentin.

The device in Quentin's hand flashed red. His step hitched.

"Something's wrong-ambush!" The words rasped out even as he moved.

He hurled himself backward, body folding into retreat before the echo faded.

A whip of his sleeve sent fan-shaped ice lances screaming toward the bend, blue light scarring the air.

Each lance carried refined frost law; passing through, the very breeze crystallized to pale rime.

A quick flicker of admiration crossed Jared's mind. Old fox-sharp instincts.

He welcomed the challenge, yet his body never slowed.

Muscles stayed loose, ready.

As Quentin sprang back and icy spikes fanned through the air, a muted gray sword- gleam burst from the pine canopy where Jared crouched.

It sliced downward, ignoring distance as if space itself bent out of its way.

The blade met the flagstones exactly where Quentin's next step would have landed.

Stone vibrated; a low, humming boom rolled outward, deep enough to feel in the ribs.

Gray sigils Jared had hidden in soil, bark, and air flared awake all at once.

The trap was live.

He had fired it himself, feeding it a surge of chaotic force before Quentin could so much as blink.

Everything within a hundred feet of the bend froze, just a fraction, yet enough.

Space thickened like syrup poured over glass.

Light wavered, voices drowned inside cotton.

Each breath tasted of iron stillness.

The blue ice spikes that had rushed ahead now crawled, their edges losing shine.

The two guards reacted fast, swinging in beside Quentin.

Black twin halberds snapped into their hands, runes already sparking.

They leveled the weapons toward the treetops and one of them opened his mouth for the warning cry.

The field answered first.

Their limbs slogged through invisible mud; speed bled away.

Sound stuck at the back of the guard's throat, escaping only as a rasp of breath.

That single heartbeat of delay was all Jared needed.

He dropped from the pine like a shadow shedding its branch.

Needles of bark scattered in his wake.

His descent ignored the snarling halberds; his line ran straight for Quentin.

Quentin's eyes flashed frosty light.

Fear flared, but discipline snapped into place.

His right hand swept to his belt and hurled a palm-sized black shield that ballooned to door height between them.

Ancient weight pressed from its surface.

With the other hand he shaped a seal; midnight vapor burst from every pore
and froze into a

runes.

translucent carapace vel

Mystic Tortoise Spirit Shield paired with Umbral Ice Armor-his best defense.

Even a sixth-rank immortal's full strike should bounce, or so he believed.

Jared, however, did not meet power with power.

Mid-air, his body bent like a fish swiveling through reeds; he slipped

the two hurried halbert

arce:

He brought two fingers together, drawing a bead of chaotic force so dark it
seemed

to eat the daylight.

The finger thrust forward, almost casual.

No thunder rolled, no flare blinded.

The tip kissed the very center of the black shield.

A sound, soft as a soap bubble popping, answered.

Light along the shield's surface snuffed out.

From that single point, gray fissures webbed across the shell.

An instant later it sifted away as weightless ash.

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Quentin's pupils constricted to pinpricks; horror flooded the cracks of his

composure.

That Mystic Tortoise Spirit Shield had cost him a fortune, yet Jared had erased it with one lazy tap.

Before he could rally the armor or any other trick, Jared's chaotic-force-lit finger slammed into his Umbral Ice Armor.

A brittle snap echoed under the trees.

A sharp, glass-like crack rang out.

The Umbral Ice Armor-strong enough to shrug off sacred blades-met the chaotic force and shattered, turning to glittering frost in a heartbeat.

The annihilating surge riding Jared's fingertip punched through the ruin of armor and flooded straight into Quentin's chest.

"Urgh!" Quentin's breath burst out in a ragged grunt.

His lips blanched, shoulders shaking, as a killing chill seemed to hollow him from within.

Under Jared's spiritual sense, the man's meridians flashed frost-white, his aura tearing apart in jagged bursts, and even his soul spasmed with needle-like agony, dragging him toward a cold abyss.

Centuries of honed umbral power boiled away like snow flung into a furnace.

"Hold him back!" Quentin rasped, stumbling in retreat.

He forced the last threads of energy to propel himself rearward.

A Crimson Jade Talisman-his lifeline to summon Julian's aid-slipped from his sleeve, pinched between trembling fingers, ready to shatter.

The two guards, however, had troubles of their own.

From the shadow of the boulder, Luther struck.

Two hair-thin strands of Nether Soul Threads whipped out, so faint they barely bent the light.

They were no physical blades; they flew straight for the mind.

Focused on Jared's pressure and the sluggish air, the guards never saw the trap.

The threads vanished into the base of their skulls without a ripple.

Both men jerked, eyes clouding with pain and confusion, movements locking mid- swing.

Their rank and will kept their souls from tearing free, yet any warning cry died in their throats.

Jared never let Quentin reach that talisman.

His left hand flashed out and clamped around Quentin's wrist.

Crack!

The bones inside splintered under that grip.

Quentin's wrist collapsed, angles warping grotesquely.

"Argh!" A short, broken scream slipped out of him.

The Crimson Jade Talisman spun free, tumbling through the thick air.

Jared ignored it; his right hand flattened into a palm and drove into Quentin's lower abdomen.

Every ounce of strength was measured to a hair.

Chaotic force roared in, then wove itself into countless gray chains, wrapping his energy center, meridians, even the man's sea of consciousness.

A second strand shot higher, pressing his very spirit under an iron lid.

Quentin's eyes rolled; color drained from his face.

Just before darkness claimed him, he stared at Jared's gaze-cold, deep, star-lit.

Thud.

The big body sagged onto the mossy path, breathing shallow, shackled tight by chaotic force.

From the first glint of danger to this collapse, barely a couple of breaths had passed.

Fast.

Too fast.

And every link in the plan had clicked exactly where it should.

The two guards blinked through the lingering soul-pain and saw their commander sprawled in the dirt.

A young man stood over the fallen figure, expression calm, eyes unreadable.

Terror drenched the guards; with Quentin captured, they doubted they would leave this path alive.

They trade a quick look. At the same instant they bark out a harsh shout, blood flaring dark around them, and launch themselves straight at Jared with reckless force.

The short halberds in their hands

erupt in a blinding black glare. The mess is clear even to Jared's

eyes if they can't win they Thatleast explode and rattle the whole manor.

"Stubborn fools."

Jared lets out a low snort. He does nothing more than sweep his sleeve through the air.

A weight without shape or sound slams down, as heavy as a mountain and just as final, crushing the path between him and the two men.

From where Jared stands he sees their charge jerk to a halt, as if an unseen peak had landed on their backs.

Bones creak loud enough to carry. Their chests cave, mouths open for

breath that will not come, and the

crimson fire licking their skin,

sputters and dies under the

pressure.

They strain, yet not even a fingertip twitches. Attack, shout, move-none of it is

possible for them now.

Jared keeps the sleeve raised,

feeling the pattern of the

Suppression Glyph Technique

woven out of raw chaotic force it is,

rough compared with a specialist's

work, but the shape is close enough.

With his depth of power, that makes subduing two wounded fourth-grade immortals a trivial task.

He steps in, taps each man between the brows, and pushes a thread of chaotic force inside. Their eyes roll back and they sink into a silent, bottomless sleep.

Jared sweeps a quick glance over the path.

Three bodies lie motionless; nothing else stirs.

The array's barrier still muffles air and sound, swallowing the earlier clash before it can leak any farther.

In the distance the pines continue to rustle, untouched.

He flicks his wrist, reclaiming the Crimson Jade Talisman, then kneels to search Quentin and the two guards with swift, practiced hands.

Storage pouches, personal tokens, anything that might track or identify—each item comes off, especially the badges and communicators hanging on Quentin's belt. "Luther, carry the guards. We leave the way we came. Move."

Still gripping the unconscious Grand Chamberlain by the collar, Jared issues the order as Luther's shadowed form steps into view.

"Yes."

Luther doesn't argue. He hooks each limp guard by the waist and lifts them like sacks of grain.

Jared sweeps the ground once more, erasing every lingering rune from the quick array with a wash of chaotic force.

Then the two men melt into the same pockets of shadow they used before and head

for the hidden tunnel in the abandoned garden.

The return trek rides on tighter nerves.

Three unconscious prisoners slow every step, and any stray patrol could still ruin the night.

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Luck favors Jared's route; every bend he picked lies outside the patrol patterns of the Jade Immortal Manor, and each time torches appear they slip past with inches to spare.

At last they reach the vine-choked corner wall. Jared cracks open the concealed hatch, and the group files inside before he seals the stones again.

The tunnel is damp and narrow; as they move through it, tension drains from Jared's shoulders in slow increments.

The hardest part, the snatch itself, is done.

Getting Quentin out of a locked-down city and prying the truth from his mouth will be another fight altogether.

Still, with the man in hand, the initiative now belongs to Jared.

They emerge in the hidden chamber where Lyza and the others relocated.

Even though the group prepared themselves, the sight of Jared lugging Quentin and Luther dragging the guards leaves them speechless.

A stunned breath escapes someone at the rear. "He... he actually did it."

And not just Quentin, the manor's Grand Chamberlain he grabbed the man's two trusted guards as well, all while the inner court was on full alert.

The speed and precision of the job borders on unbelievable.

"Senior... are you hurt?" Lyza asks, voice dry.

Her gaze flicks between Jared's calm face and the limp, half-dead Quentin dangling from his grip.

"I'm fine."

With a curt flick of his wrist, Jared let go of Quentin.

The Grand Chamberlain's body hit the stone floor with a dull thud, as if Jared had tossed out a sack of garbage.

Jared's voice stayed flat. "Pick the most hidden, sound-proof room you have. Wake him. I've questions. As for these two..."

Jared's eyes slid toward the unconscious guards Luther had dumped in the corner. "Hold them for now," he said, the words soft but final. "They might still be useful."

"Understood!" Panther blurted, straightening so fast his shoulders snapped back.

"Deepest level's got a custom interrogation cell, sir. Full array work. Nothing gets in or out."

Without waiting, Panther strode forward and caught Quentin under the arms.

Monkey grabbed the man's legs. Together they lifted the limp weight and started toward the stairwell that led below.

At Jared's side, Lyza drew a long breath, forcing the tremor out of her voice.

She turned on her heel, barking orders that kept the safehouse moving.

"Activate top-tier concealment," she called. "No one leaves."

She jabbed a finger at Panther on his return. "Circle the perimeter. Make sure we're clean."

"Monkey, team up with Master Luther. Deal with those two," she added, nodding at the guards.

Luther's silent tilt of the head signaled agreement.

The room split into motion. Boots scuffed, charms clicked, low voices traded confirmations.

In seconds each person had a task and a direction.

Watching them fan out, Jared felt the safehouse transform.

The ordinary walls became gears, every corridor a hidden spindle turning in perfect sync.

He pivoted toward the stairwell.

The dim passage yawned below, and he descended without hurry, Quentin's fate already written in his mind.

Step after step, Jared weighed the coming exchange.

Dragging answers from a man like Quentin would be work, not slaughter.

He doubted mere pain would crack the Grand Chamberlain.

Julian's wrath and the celestials' shadow likely terrified the man more than dying ever could.

But Sidney and Cadence deserved the truth, no matter how deep it lay buried. Quentin was the lock-and-the-key-standing between Jared and that truth. The underground interrogation chamber smelled of cold iron and wet stone.

Runes crawled over every surface, their dull glow reflecting off the metal chair bolted to the floor.

Quentin sat there, arms and ankles secured by Spirit-Suppressing Chains that hummed like angry insects.

Each link pulsed, draining his mana and pricking his soul with a steady needle-thin sting meant to keep him lucid yet weak.

Jared pulled a plain wooden chair across the floor and settled in face-to-face with the captive.

Behind him, Luther stood motionless, presence as heavy as a monument.

Lyza took position at the door, eyes narrowed, shoulders tense, ready to seal the room at the first sign of trouble.

Panther returned, hefting a bucket rimmed with frost.

He upended it without ceremony.

Ice-cold water slammed into Quentin's face and chest, scattering across the floor.

"Khh—cough—" The man gagged, head jerking against the restraints.

His eyelids fluttered, then fixed open, confusion giving way to dawning horror.

The freezing shock met the chain's soul-bite, ripping him fully back to awareness in a single cruel heartbeat.

Struggling to focus, he lifted his head.

The first thing he saw was Jared's calm, depthless stare—star-dark, merciless.

A hollow weight dropped in his chest, colder than the water still dripping from his hair.

Those were the eyes from Pine-Whisper Path—the eyes that had torn through every defense and carried him here.

Recognition tightened his throat.

"Wh-who are you?" he croaked.

The words rasped out thin and broken, stretched over terror and exhaustion.

He reached inward for aura.

Nothing moved.

His core felt sealed in molten iron, his channels wound tight with cables of lead.

Even his mindspace lay under a lid he could not lift.

The realization hit like free fall; the

man who once commanded life.

death now sat powerless, nak

nake

beneath their gaze.

Jared ignored the question, letting silence stretch until Quentin's breathing turned ragged.

Then he spoke, voice low enough to make the chains vibrate:

"Sidney. Cadence. Soulfall Slope. Soul-Refining Crystal. A11-73."

Quentin's pupils shrank to pinpoints.

Color drained from his cheeks until his skin matched the gray walls.

The flash of terror was brief but bright enough for Jared and Lyza to see it clearly.

So Jared had guessed right.

Quentin knew.

And the revelation rattled him even harder than Jared had hoped.

Jared leaned in, elbows on his knees, voice slicing off any last refuge.

"Why did they die, Quentin?"

"Who ordered it?"

"What are you hiding?"

"Where is the crystal?"

"All of it-now."

"Answer, and I'll make your end swift," he added, each word deliberate.

Quentin shook so hard the chains rattled.

Fear tangled with calculation behind his eyes.

His lips parted, closed, parted again.

At last he clamped his jaw and dropped his gaze, the stubborn silence of a pig led to slaughter.

Quentin's gaze flickered toward the

floor, then the ceiling. The veins at his neck tightened, and the chains, as he tensed Jared

spot

rattled
frantic calculations behind those eyes before they froze.

He knew that if he spoke, death was certain, and even his soul would face unspeakable torment.

He understood better than anyone Julian's cruelty—and the dread power of the celestials backing him.

Yet Quentin looked back at Jared as if measuring whether this unfamiliar tormentor might still leave him a sliver of hope.

A desperate spark flashed—the look of a cornered beast grasping at hope. Maybe

the man was only bluffing?

"Not willing to talk?" Jared asked.

The words hung like frost. Cold bled into the room, and Quentin's next breath left in a ragged mist.

Jared stood and closed the distance. Gray light gathered at his fingertip, the cell's only glow-eerie and hungry.

"You can feel the power I left inside you," he said, voice steady.

"It can snuff out your body in an instant, or peel your soul grain by grain lower crueler than any, Soul Refining Crystal. And I can stretch that slow for a very, very long time."

Quentin's knees rattled against the chair. The alien chill inside him writhed, tasting him.

Every instinct screamed the threat was real; Jared saw it when Quentin's eyes rolled white for a heartbeat.

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"I...I don't know what you're talking about," Quentin stammered, teeth clicking.

"Sidney...Cadence...they broke the Divine Oracle, descended without leave—" His voice cracked, clinging to practiced lines.

The air popped, sharp as splitting ice.

Jared tapped Quentin's shoulder with that glowing fingertip.

Nothing burst, nothing splintered.

Instead, flesh, bone, and robe browned, cracked, and sifted away until a fist-sized hollow gaped at the joint.

It was as if that piece had never belonged to him.

"Aaaah!" The scream ripped from somewhere deeper than lungs.

The sound carried the pitch of a soul being carved.

The chaotic force gnawed at his life's core; Jared felt its sour hum against his palm.

Gray threads burrowed deeper, seeking the very spark that kept Quentin tethered to the chair.

"I'll talk! I'll talk!" he howled.

In the span of one breath, every wall inside him shattered.

Tears, mucus, pleas-everything poured out. "Spare me, senior, spare me! I'll say it all. Just stop, please, stop!"

Jared pulled his hand back. The gray creep halted at once.

A neat cavity remained, edges dull and bloodless, mirror-smooth and gray.

"Speak."

Jared sat again, calm as before.

Quentin sucked in wheezing gulps, terror shining wet in his eyes. Words spilled in a rasping rush.

"It was...the Manor Lord, Julian! A month and a half ago those two-Sidney and Cadence-slipped near the inner treasury. They tried to steal, or maybe scout, something vital."

"The wards caught a trace of their aura. They bolted, but a shred of it stayed behind."

"Julian himself followed that thread with a celestial gift and seized them alive." "And what were they after?" Jared pressed.

"I-I don't know the object itself!"

"When Julian summoned me later, his face was thunder. He said they'd glimpsed some grand secret about the celestials' plan for the Azure Firmament-something that must never leak."

"They had to die at once-Soulfall Slope, full Soul-Refining Grand Array-no rebirth, no escape. He ordered me to oversee it and keep the crystals sealed for the celestials."

Jared's eyes narrowed. "What layout? What secret?"

"I truly don't know any more!" Quentin sobbed.

Quentin's lower lip quivered. Under the lamplight his cheeks sagged, making him look decades older.

He croaked, "The Manor Lord never spelled it out. He said it's top-level secrecy. Even he treads carefully and only obeys the Divine Oracle."

Quentin swallowed hard, shoulders trembling.

"He put me in charge of the execution. I had to keep everything neat, and the Soul-Refining Crystals had to be stored safely, reinforced on schedule, until the celestial envoy came to take them..."

The tidbit hooked Jared's attention, yanking him forward in his chair.

"Take them? What do the celestials want with all these crystals?"

Behind him, Lyza's breath hitched; Jared felt the small surge of cold air at his back.

"Why would the celestials collect Soul-Refining Crystals on a schedule?"

The idea of a direct celestial hand shoved a chill through the room. Jared watched color drain from Lyza's face.

Whatever lay behind that order made Jared's lieutenant wrap her own arms tight, as if winter had slipped in.

Quentin drew a shaky breath, eyes flicking from Jared to the stone floor.

"I-I don't really know. It's part of the Oracle. All over the Azure Firmament Continent, whenever certain

prisoners are executed, the

Soul-Refining Grand Array is raised, the

crystals harvested, everything

handed over together."

"The Morse couple's crystal, label A11-73, sits... sits in the Profound Ice Chamber at the deepest point of the inner court's secret vault."

"The Manor Lord sealed it himself; I can only inspect and reinforce, never remove it."

Silence pulsed. Jared let the new pieces slide into place, one bleak click at a time.

Divine chessboards, top-secret vaults, scheduled pick-ups-everything stank of blood and conspiracy.

The Morse couple must have stumbled straight onto the board's black center and paid for it with their souls.

Jared leaned forward, voice low enough to scrape the cell walls.

"Where's Julian now, and when will the next celestial envoy arrive?"

Quentin blinked, trying to focus through tears.

"The Manor Lord... today he should be in the Hall of Infinity, either cultivating or handling paperwork."

"As for the envoy-the timing shifts, but usually once a year. They collect crystals, deliver new Oracle orders."

"Last visit was half a year ago, so... a few more months, I guess."

Jared rose and paced the cramped interrogation chamber, his footfalls echoing against the flagstones.

The knot was bigger, tighter than he'd expected.

Direct celestial interest meant every move from now on would sit beneath a god's magnifying

glass and Julian likely knew more than he'd shown.

Lyza's voice drifted in, soft but strained.

"Senior, what do we do now?"

"Quentin's gone; Julian will notice soon. When that happens-"

"He's told us enough."

Jared let his gaze rest on Quentin, slumped and gray, then turned to the others.

"As for Julian—he gave the order and holds the rest of the story. He's our next target."

Lyza's shoulders jerked; Luther's fingers tightened behind Jared's chair.

bu

Striking at the Jade Immortal Manor Lord—an upper celestial-class

cultivator backed by felt

like tossing

a torch

room. Content belongs to

It was insanity, plain and bright.

"Mr. Chance, Julian stands at upper-seventh tier, and the manor swarms with experts. We are no match."

"Going after him head-on is suicide, sir."

"Senior, we should plan this carefully."

No one in this room doubted Julian's reputation; every servant in the city whispered about his temper.

Jared's mouth curved, calm and almost playful.

"Relax. I'm not dumb enough to storm the manor gates. Lyza, didn't you mention Julian has a daughter?"

Lyza nodded once.

"Yes. Rania. She's fifth tier, famed across Jade Immortal City. Julian takes great pride in her."

She confirmed again with a sharper nod.

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"Then I'll start with his daughter first..."

"Senior, she almost never leaves the manor, and strangers can't get near her. How will you reach her?"

Her brow furrowed; the question hung between them.

"I can take Quentin's shape, walk into Jade Immortal Manor, then look for a window to approach Rania."

The room went still; even Luther's ever-cold eyes widened.

Posing as Quentin inside the manor's heart and dancing around the Manor Lord's darling—one wrong note and everything burned.

The proposal was both breathtakingly bold and razor-thin on margin.

If he slipped while wearing Quentin's face in the manor's core, no rescue would reach him.

"Senior, this..... this is far too reckless!" Lyza blurted, her voice cracking under the weight of alarm.

She stepped closer, speaking fast. "Quentin is Grand Chamberlain of the inner court. He deals with people all day, and plenty know every quirk he has."

"You can copy his face and aura, sure, but the tiny habits, the way he files reports, even who he greets first—any of that could give you away. And Rania—"

Lyza paused, lowered her tone. "Julian's only daughter may look carefree, yet her talent is frightening. Her mind is sharp as a blade."

"She knows music, arrays, old texts. Folks in the manor respect her. If you approach her as Quentin and she senses a flaw—"

Luther rumbled, "Mr. Chance, Lyza is right. Slipping into the enemy's nest while wearing a high-rank mask is a desperate play."

"Julian stands at seventh-grade Upper Immortal. His divine sense is razor-keen. One hint that something is off and we're finished. Let's rethink this."

Jared stayed unruffled, as if every danger they named had already run through his mind a dozen times.

"Danger is real," he admitted. "But this is still the best route to Julian, the Soul- Refining Crystal, and whatever secret the celestials are hiding."

"Breaking in by force would tip the whole manor and warn the celestials. Our chances of winning head-on are near zero."

He glanced at the limp, half-conscious Quentin on the floor, eyes cold. "And who said I need a perfect imitation?"

Quentin heard that and despair flickered inside his clouded gaze.

Jared walked to him, crouched, and asked softly, "Quentin, do you fear death?"

A rasp scraped out of Quentin's throat. He tried to beg, but his chaos-scarred body no longer obeyed.

Jared laid a palm on the man's crown. "Your memories, your reflexes, everything you are... I'll borrow them."

The words fell, and a surge of purer, vaster chaotic force, laced with Jared's overwhelming mind, flooded into Quentin's shattered sea of consciousness.

"Soulsearch Technique."

Among cultivators it was one of the harshest acts-tearing memories by force; the victim often ended as a simpleton, sometimes as drifting ash.

Quentin's limbs jerked uncontrollably. His eyes rolled white, a guttural croak spilling while pain twisted every feature beyond recognition.

Jared closed his own eyes, weaving through the torrent like a master loom, sorting, stripping, absorbing the tangled scraps that made up Quentin's life.

He saw the man's climb from obscurity, Julian's favor, and the dirty errands that bought him power inside Jade Immortal Manor.

Blueprints of the manor, guesses about Julian's moods, names tied to each inner hall-everything flickered past.

Workflows, signing habits, even the petty phrases Quentin muttered when nervous flowed in with equal clarity.

The flood kept coming, roaring into Jared's mind.

Were his spirit any weaker, the raw intake would have torn his thoughts apart or smeared them with Quentin's residue.

Soulsearch could not reach the deepest vaults of memory; it skimmed surface use. That limit stayed in place here.

And each dive risked the searcher. One slip, and borrowed fragments could overwrite the self.

Moments later Jared lifted his hand.

Quentin quit shaking, slumped, eyes empty, drool threading from slack lips. Nothing living remained behind them.

His soul had shattered under chaos and the Soulsearch storm.

"Dust to dust, earth to earth." Jared murmured the words.

Gray light pulsed from his palm, and Quentin's body crumbled into nothing, leaving not the slightest trace.

When the last mote vanished, Jared's own form began to shift.

He stretched a little taller; facial planes wavered like water, re-forming into Quentin's lean, hawk-like features.

His clothes morphed, dark green brocade settling just as Quentin's usual robe, every thread matching.

The aura around him sank, cold and deep, hovering at fifth-grade Upper Immortal—exactly what Quentin used to display.

Even his eyes narrowed, carrying that weighing, calculating glint and a faint, proud stiffness in the spine.

In the span of a few breaths, Jared had become another Quentin.

Face, aura, cultivation ripple—no difference a passerby could name.

Lyza and Luther stared, mouths parted, utterly stunned by the flawless disguise.

Lyza's breath caught. In the dim lamplight her pupils tightened, tracking every subtle ripple that finished sliding across Jared's borrowed skin.

A heartbeat age he had still looked like himself. Now the narrow face, the hollow cheeks, even the faint chill that rode the man's spiritual pressure belonged entirely to

Quenwn to the

For anyone to shift features and aura this fast barely-there hitch in Quentin's exhale-felt unreal. Lyza's shoulders prickled as if she were standing next to witch-fire.

Jared caught the way her pulse hammered at her throat and let the silence stretch.

Perfecting the mask had taken more

than spellcraft. Every twist of

muscle, every hidden meridian had answered his will without

resistance—a blunt reminder of how deeply the path of change already lived in his bones. Power and precision, fused until nothing slipped.

"S-senior..." Lyza's voice came out small. The rest of the sentence fell away because no words seemed large enough for what she had just witnessed.

He let Quentin's rasp roll from his stolen vocal cords. "I've skimmed most of his memories. Not flawless, but good enough for doorways and ledgers."

The tone scraped like gravel—exactly the shade of fatigue and distrust others expected from the Grand Chamberlain.

Still wearing that borrowed roughness, he added, "Luther, bring the two guards in." Luther inclined his head once and slipped into the corridor, boots soundless against stone.

Jared used the brief lull to replay

choice made earlier. He had kept those guards alive for this precise moment, gambling they would serve better as camouflage than corpses.

Moving through Jade Immortal Manor as Quentin without his shadows would draw questions. With them at his back, no one would look twice.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Footsteps returned. Luther guided two black-clad men into the room; both hung between waking and nothingness, heads lolling as though sleep had turned to stone.

They had followed Quentin for years, knives hidden under loyalty oaths. Every twitch of his eyebrows lived in their muscle memory.

Jared let his gaze settle on them, then spoke to Luther. "Use your Nether Heart Control Incantation. I'll weave a Chaotic Restriction Seal. Together they'll obey, and they won't remember how."

A cool shimmer crossed Luther's eyes.

He knelt beside the two guards, probing their pulses, then murmured, "Their spirits were wounded by my soul threads and already fragile. With your chaotic force sealing them, they will stay quiet for now."

"Their souls are already frayed," Luther murmured. "If I sink the incantation to the core and you lock away the memory threads, they'll hold for a short march."

"But this will not last," Luther added. "If they face a shock beyond their limit, the seal could loosen—or even backfire."

"It's enough for now," Jared nodded. "We only need them obedient until I return to Jade Immortal Manor and get past the first wave of questions."

"After we're inside the inner court, I'll find a proper chance to send them away-or dispose of them."

Moments stretched. Then both men jerked upright as if strings had yanked them toward a ceiling hook.

Their irises clouded, cleared, and focused on Jared-seeing Quentin. They bent at the waist. "Grand Chamberlain."

Luther formed a maze of hand seals while chanting harsh Ghost Clan syllables.

Strands of gray-black soul power slid like threads into the guards' brows.

At the same time Jared flicked two pinpoints of chaotic gray light into each guard's energy centers, linking with the earlier seal as double insurance.

A heartbeat later the guards shuddered and slowly opened their eyes.

Their gazes were dull, yet on spotting Jared they struggled upright and bowed. "Grand Chamberlain."

The salute sounded stiff, but nothing seemed amiss.

Jared nodded, satisfied.

He told Lyza and Luther, "I'm taking them back to Jade Immortal Manor. Wait here in concealment; without my signal, do nothing."

"Luther, stay on standby-I may need your cover."

"Yes, sir!" the two answered in unison.

The west side of Jade Immortal Manor lay ahead, hidden beneath a tangle of old vines.

Jared appeared at the base of that wall, summoned the half-forgotten sigil from Quentin's memory, and unlatched a mouth in the stone. The three men slipped inside; ivy fell back, erasing the scar.

As the trio's backs vanished down the passage, Lyza and Luther exchanged a look; shock and worry shone in both pairs of eyes.

"Senior Luther, do you think Mr. Chance can succeed?" Lyza whispered.

Luther stayed silent for a long breath, then said slowly, "Mr. Chance moves as though courting danger, yet every step is measured and far-sighted."

"Since he dares to go, he must hold some confidence.

We will wait for good news, but prepare for the worst and be ready to assist."

The two men answered in the same dull chorus, "Yes, Grand Chamberlain."

Jared let his shoulders square, dropped every stealth pretense, and started toward the pavilion at a measured, familiar pace.

Flowering avenues and watch posts peeled past. Soldiers and stewards bowed, greeting "Grand Chamberlain" without the faintest ripple of doubt.

Jared reappeared with the two guards, opened the hidden hatch the same way as before, and the three slipped inside; the stone closed behind them without a trace.

They avoided the main gate because Quentin had no departure record; marching in openly would have roused the sentries' suspicion.

Moving through the underground tunnel, Jared slowed his pace, sifting the torrent of Quentin's memories even as he walked.

He inclined his chin without looking back. Behind him the two black-clad

guards bowed and answered in perfect unison, "Yes,

rand

Chamberlain." Their voices were flat, almost hollow, exactly as the spell demanded.

The lifeless ring in their words told Jared the mind-locks still held; that small confirmation steadied the pulse in his throat.

He released the misty shroud that had masked them, cool daylight settling across his borrowed shoulders.

With the two silent shadows at his back, he strode openly toward the Tranquil Heart Pavilion in the inner court's central sector, every step copied from Quentin's measured pace.

As the path curved east, tiled roofs surfaced through the bamboo—the Tranquil Heart Pavilion, Quentin's usual workplace and bedchamber.

It appeared serene, but Jared already counted three watch posts and a web of sensing talismans glinting faintly in the morning light.

Barely fifty steps in, a squad of mailed sentries rounded the bend, followed by robed stewards reading from jade tablets. More patrols drifted in and out of sight, just as

Quentin's memory had promised.

At the sight of Quentin's silhouette, soldiers and stewards alike halted, lowered their heads, and saluted. "Grand Chamberlain," they chorused, armor rustling like dry reeds.

Jared offered only the slightest dip

of his chin, letting a trace of

Quentin's habitual impatience

roughen his voice. When a junior

steward lingered, he tossed out two

clipped instructions and kept

moving, never breaking stride.

The performance worked. The patrols resumed their routes without a backward glance, and no ripple of suspicion followed him down the path.

They entered a garden where spirit-fed blossoms glimmered, perfuming the mist. Jared had just marked the pavilion gate when a clear, girlish yet imperious voice sang out from the right.

"Mr. Fay! Where did you go? I've been looking for you!"

His next step faltered. A cold ripple threaded his gut before he smoothed his pace. Recognition struck—Rania, Julian's only daughter, the manor's fiercely guarded jewel.

Schooling Quentin's usual grave expression, he pivoted toward the side path and let his gaze seek the caller.

Between clumps of fox-glove lilies, a young woman glided into sight, every movement light as drifting silk.

She wore a pale-yellow flowing gown, the hem embroidered with silver clouds that caught the sun and scattered it in shifting ripples.

Glossy black hair rose in a playful high knot, pinned by a jade step-shake; pearls gleamed at her ears, and tiny gold bells chimed at her wrists.

Her skin rivaled new snow, and her eyes—clear, wide, watchful—mirrored every petal around her. A steady fifth-tier immortal aura clasped her like a hush.

Just now she puckered her lips in a small, spoiled pout and hurried toward him, silks whispering across the gravel.

Two maids trailed at a respectful distance, heads lowered, hands folded around scent sachets.

No mistake—the approaching girl was Rania in the flesh.

Fragments from Quentin's mind flashed: her knack for arcane scores, her endless questions, Julian's blind pride. Quick, perceptive, dangerous in silk.

She treated Quentin like a favored uncle, forever dragging him to puzzle over dusty diagrams. He, in turn, played the helpful flatterer for Julian's favor.

"Greetings, Ms. Rania."

He bent at the waist, shoulders squared in Quentin's exact manner, and forced a polite, slightly wooden smile onto the borrowed face.

"I was handling a few minor duties, Ms. Rania. I fear I kept you waiting. What may this old servant do for you?"

A Warrior Undefeatable

Rania stepped so close he caught the faint scent of osmanthus in her hair. Her brows pinched.

"Mr. Fay, your complexion seems off. Are you overworking yourself with all these manor duties?"

The remark hit uncomfortably true; despite the disguise, a dull drag still haunted Quentin's borrowed limbs. Jared masked the sting with a slow exhale, noting how sharp her eye was.

He folded his hands inside his sleeves and let a weary sigh escape.

"Thank you for your concern, Ms. Rania. The City Lord requires tighter security, and minor clerks keep piling scrolls on my desk. The strain shows, I fear. What are your instructions?"

Her gaze softened; curiosity tilted into excitement as some private notion stirred behind her eyes.

She flicked her wrist, dismissing guards and maids to a polite distance.

Leaning in so only he could hear, she whispered, half thrilled, half troubled, "Mr. Fay, the other day I—well, borrowed—an ancient fragment scroll from Father's study."

"It supposedly came from a lost celestial ruin and speaks of full-cycle star force resonating with the earth-meridian spiritual pivot," she said, eyes sparkling.

"There's a passage as dense as fog. I have pored over it for two days and still can't unravel it. You're so well read—could you please take a look?"

She drew the jade slip from her storage bangle and offered it with both hands. Jared accepted, pressing the cool surface to his brow while a thread of consciousness slid inside.

Ancient characters nearly forgotten star-script-spiraled before his mind's eye, outlining orbits, ley lines, and tides of spiritual energy few libraries dared record.

With his own scholarship, the puzzle unfolded quickly, but he hid that ease behind a mask of deliberate effort.

A warning flared—Quentin was only middling with such lore; too much confidence would betray him.

He steadied himself, ready to employ Quentin's standard tactic: praise the lady's insight, request time to consult records, and promise a later answer.

Breathing once to anchor the role, he opened his mouth to recite the familiar lines.

Jared gathered the exact phrases Quentin would have used, preparing to copy them note for note.

Rania fixed her bright eyes on him, refusing to blink. "Mr. Fay, do you think the line 'the Sky Pivot guides the stars, the Earth Gate opens and closes' echoes a passage in the Secret Record of the Spiritual Pivot?"

"Constellations turn, hidden apertures awaken'-does that sound connected to you?"

She added, voice low but eager, "I suspect it hints at a lost Star Influx Body Tempering Technique, not just another geomantic array or mapping method."

Jared felt a thin chill ripple down his spine. Her question stabbed straight through the ornamental wording and hit the marrow of the tablet he had just scanned.

Quentin's habits surfaced in his mind. The old steward would first praise her insight, then hedge, claiming more research was required before offering conclusions.

He copied that cadence. "Ms. Rania is truly perceptive; the text is extraordinary. This humble servant cannot unravel it at a glance."

However, the Star Influx Body Tempering Technique was indeed rumored in ancient times. It was practiced by cultivators with special physiques or star-based arts, and it carried enormous risk; most manuals are now lost.

"Whether this passage conceals that method, however, will demand careful cross-checking with other works."

The words rolled out with deliberate caution. Inside, he judged the tone perfectly balanced—respectful, informative, but non-committal.

Rania's lashes fluttered. A faint, smoky doubt flickered behind her polite curiosity. She had sparred with Quentin over texts many times and knew every pause, sigh, and self-congratulating flourish in the steward's speech.

What she heard now sounded smooth-almost rehearsed-and lacked the tiny, anxious brag Quentin usually slipped in whenever he feared being wrong.

Maybe fatigue explained the difference? She weighed the thought without showing it.

Suspicion hovered, but she hid it under a bright-eyed smile.

Tilting her head, she suddenly piped, "Mr. Fay, any progress on that annotated

'Seven Tablets from the Cloud Register' you promised to find for me?"

"And I heard the West City Myriad Scroll Pavilion just acquired rubbings from an ancient battlefield. When will you escort me to browse them?"

Two neat traps-one recalling a promise, the other a fresh invitation-waited in her sweet voice.

An inner bell rang loud behind Jared's ribs.

He rifled through Quentin's memories at frantic speed.

Annotated 'Seven Tablets'? Yes-Quentin had promised to look half a month ago, no firm lead yet.

Quentin's memories confirmed the matter: about half a month ago Rania had mentioned it, and he had promised to keep an eye out but still had no solid news.

Regarding the newly acquired

fragment rubbings at the Myriad

Scroll Pavilion, however, there was

nothing in his memory, either Rania had just learned of them, or she was testing him.

He adopted a rueful expression. "Forgive me, Miss. I have inquiries out for the

annotated Tablets, but nothing definite has surfaced."

He put on an appropriately apologetic, helpless face. "Please forgive me, Ms. Rania. I have asked many contacts about the annotated SevenTablets from the Cloud Register,' but no definite information has surfaced yet."

A gentle, resigned smile followed. "These past days have buried me in duties, so the rumor escaped me. If it interests you I can dispatch

scouts at once and arrange a

Suitable time."

The answer owned the delay on one matter and offered diligence on the unknown, the safest path he could see.

The answer acknowledged the lack of progress on the annotated volume while showing ignorance of the new rubbings but a willingness to investigate altogether the safest response.

She clearly remembered mentioning the Pavilion three days earlier, when Quentin had nodded and promised to watch for news.

Even preoccupation should not erase memory so completely.

Still, even if Quentin had been busy these few days, he should not have reacted as though he had never heard of it.

Could the trusted steward be compromised?

It was not his voice or face that troubled her, but a subtler shift in Quentin's unique aura and mental rhythm.

Still, she lacked proof and could not accuse the Grand Chamberlain on a hunch.

If he was an imposter or puppet, the implications were terrifying.

Yet she had no proof and could not accuse the Grand Chamberlain on mere intuition.

And if Mr. Fay has actually been impersonated or controlled, that would be truly frightening!

A Warrior Undefeatable

Rania's mind raced, but her face stayed calm. She lifted a sweet smile. "I see. Very well, I'll trouble you, Mr. Fay."

"By the way, I can't stop thinking about that ancient passage. Mr. Fay, don't you know a senior expert in old scripture and lost arts?"

"He lives in East City, doesn't he? Could you invite him to the manor right now to clear up my doubts? I can pay him."

As she spoke, she studied Jared's face for every subtle reaction.

He pictured the flip side at once. If the person standing here were only an impostor -if he were that impostor-one small slip over the scholar's name would tear the mask in two and expose everything.

That razor-thin moment of exposure hovered in the air like the tip of a needle, waiting for the first tremor of uncertainty to press flesh against steel.

An unvoiced curse burned across Jared's tongue. This girl was relentless-bright, courteous, and every inch a snare.

He rummaged through Quentin's borrowed memories. Yes, several freelance antiquarians drifted through those recollections, but their faces blurred, their addresses slid out of reach, and none fit sharply enough to seize.

Rania's request for an immediate invitation wasn't innocent at all; it was a probe aimed straight at the soft part of the disguise.

Agreeing outright would be suicide—he had no idea whom to summon, let alone how to reach the man on short notice.

Flat refusal, however, would shout louder than any confession.

Thoughts spun, collided, and locked into place. A middle road had to appear now, this breath, or never.

He let a troubled shadow crease his brow. "Ms. Rania, are you perhaps speaking of Mr. Moore? To be frank, he left Jade Immortal City a few days ago, and his return remains uncertain."

Jared offered a small sigh. "As for the others, one is still traveling, another has shut himself away. I'm afraid none can be persuaded this very night."

A spark flickered behind Rania's lashes, quick as the flash of a gem catching sun.

She tilted her head, voice light. "Mr. Moore left? Funny I heard someone spotted him in West City only three days ago."

The remark punched a cold dent in Jared's chest; he tasted the slip almost before she finished speaking.

He steadied the breath, lifted a rueful smile. "News must have outrun me, then. If Mr. Moore is already back, all the better."

"Still, it is late. Storming in on him tonight would be improper. Tomorrow at first light I'll ride to West City; if he is free, I'll escort him here myself. Would that suit you?"

The offer drew a clear path, buying hours he desperately needed while seeming eager to oblige.

Rania studied him for several heartbeats, then her smile blossomed—bright as spring sunshine, yet oddly chilling against his skin.

"Very well, Mr. Fay. We'll speak again tomorrow."

She slipped the jade slip away, then asked almost casually, "By the way, Father mentioned Soulfall Slope's formation this morning. You handled the maintenance, yes? He seems unusually concerned about it lately."

The name struck like a hammer on a bell.

Soul-Refining Crystal flashed across his mind before he could stop it.

His pulse lurched. This was bait-no question.

Did she know something, or was it a lucky hit?

He forced calm into his voice. "I inspected the array myself. It's working smoothly."

All soul-related matters are in order as well. The City Lord may rest easy.

He nearly said the crystal's name, caught himself, and smoothed the words instead.

Rania nodded once, letting the topic fall.

Then I'll leave you to your duties. I expect good news tomorrow." She waved silk sleeve trailing a soft fragrance, and turned away with her maids in tow.

Only when her figure vanished at the end of the flower path did Jared allow the breath to leak from his lungs. Sweat cooled against his spine.

Sharp, he thought. Razor sharp. Every question had been a needle, every smile a twist of that needle seeking blood.

The exchange looked harmless, yet danger threaded through every syllable. She was suspicious, no doubt about it.

Tomorrow's meeting might be a doorway—or a trap waiting to snap shut.

He couldn't keep dancing in Quentin's skin; the seams were already stretching.

A cold glint slid through Jared's eyes as a fresh strategy formed.

If Rania adored ancient lore and Quentin conveniently knew a brilliant specialist...

Why not let that very specialist walk through the gate in the flesh?

The notion swelled-bold, a little wicked, and deliciously theatrical—until it filled his mind with vivid, daring possibilities.

Since Rania was so fascinated by ancient lore and Quentin happened to know an expert in that field...

Why not have that expert appear in person?

A bolder, slightly risqué, and dramatic plan began to take shape in his mind.

The idea cut through Jared's mind:

get close to Rania, earn her favor

slide past her guard. Once she led

him to Julian, the path to the Sout Refining Crystal and the celestials' secrets would open.

That approach carried far more meaning than simply wearing Quentin's skin and striking at Rania from the shadows.

Yes, the risk climbed, yet if it worked, the payoff soared, and he—not anyone else— would hold the initiative.

Easing into the thought, Jared felt the corner of his mouth tug upward, a faint curve that vanished almost as soon as it formed.

With the charm he commanded, one meeting would be enough; Rania would tilt toward him before she realized it.

Once he had tasted Rania and secured his place as Jade Immortal Manor's future son-in-law, how could Julian keep him at arm's length?

Jared felt sure—Rania would surrender to him willingly.

That was the power of allure.

First, though, he had to remove Mr. Moore from West City—nudge the scholar away for a while.

Next, Quentin himself needed a tidy excuse to leave the manor, so any doubts

Rania nursed would have nothing solid to grasp.

Once Rania's gaze no longer pressed against his back, Jared veered away from the main path

instead of returning to the Tranquil

Heart Pavilion

He angled toward a quiet garden that sat on the seam between the inner and outer courts.

He needed to reach Lyza as soon as possible.

In the far corner, an unremarkable ancient locust tree stood with a hollowed trunk.

He slipped a hand inside the cavity. With pinpoint finger force, he etched a cluster of strange glyphs into the inner bark.

As the grooves bled sap, he recalled the code they had agreed on; it flagged an urgent request for aid.

He added one more line beside it, a timetable Lyza would recognize: 'West City, Mr. Moore, leave fast, no trace.'

He smoothed his robes, let the hint of Quentin's habitual gloom settle over his features again, and set off toward the Guest Reception Annex.

A Warrior Undefeatable

This wing of Jade Immortal Manor served as lodging for visitors.

Jared traded a few brisk words with the sentry, then slipped away.

When he returned to the Tranquil Heart Pavilion, the two enslaved guards still stood like posts in the courtyard.

He cast them a single glance, his eyes stripped of warmth.

They could not be left alive.

The Heart Control Incantation Luther used and the Chaotic Restriction Seal would both weaken with time; if anyone noticed, the risk would land on Jared.

"Follow me to the study."

He issued the order in a tone flat as still water.

They fell in behind him without a word.

He led them deep into the pavilion, into Quentin's private study layered with isolation arrays.

Jared swung the heavy stone door shut and triggered every muting and barrier seal. Only three bodies now occupied the room.

Jared turned to the two guards, their eyes still cloudy from the spell, and let out a faint sigh.

"You served Quentin for years and did your duty. Time and fate are cruel."

The words had barely faded when his gaze sharpened. Two fingers snapped together, releasing twin lances of concentrated gray chaos that stabbed into each guard's brow like lightning.

No scream, no struggle followed.

Both bodies jerked once; the last glimmer behind their eyes went out.

From the inside out they unraveled, silent as erased graphite, turning into the finest gray dust that drifted down. Clothing and gear dissolved with them.

The potential threat was gone for good.

Jared summoned a steward, issued a few curt instructions, and dismissed him.

As soon as the man left, Jared closed his eyes. Light rippled over his body; stature, face, even aura began to shift at speed.

His once-tall Quentin frame compressed, regaining his own balanced, athletic proportions.

The gaunt, brooding mask melted like a ripple, revealing Jared's youthful, clear-cut features.

He feels the fabric around his shoulders loosen, threads of teal silk rippling with faint light. When the glow settles, the weight becomes a refined moon-white tunic—soft, expensive, yet quiet against the skin.

Within three slow breaths the stiffness he borrowed for Quentin leaks out. The study holds only Jared now, eyes clear, posture unburdened.

He rolls his neck until a faint pop releases hidden tension, savoring the unguarded freedom of his own bones.

Posing as a man like Quentin—always weighing words, watching for traps—had stretched his thoughts taut as piano wire.

Time for a new name and an open doorway back into Jade Immortal Manor.

After one quiet breath he crosses to the bookshelf lining the right wall.

He slides heavy volumes aside, fingers choosing the precise spines Quentin once favored, until a hidden recess exposes itself in the plaster.

Inside rest several spare guest-elder tokens, blank talisman sheets, and packets of disguise dust-low

clearance, but enough for hate?

inner court.

Quentin had stashed these contingencies for himself; Jared now claims them.

He plucks a jade-green token, then lifts a stack of blank slips and a pouch of powders.

The token settles at his belt. Facing the huge water mirror, he starts adjusting the face that looks back.

No sweeping change—just softening sharp angles, letting the scholar beneath the soldier breathe.

A touch of powder pales his skin, like someone who lives among scrolls, not sunlight.

He crafts thinner brows and tucks the blade of his gaze behind a calm, curious sheen.

Soon the mirror shows a refined young cultivator, maybe twenty-seven, the kind who would lose himself in footnotes.

Jared nods, satisfied.

This look should match Rania's idea of a reclusive expert, and the youth won't hurt his chances with her.

One last sweep—no telltale threads, no lingering aura from the night's work.

He steps toward the window on the opposite wall.

Behind the shutters lies a private passage—Quentin's secret lane, running to a lonely path behind Tranquil Heart Pavilion.

He unlatches the frame and glides out like a leaf, swallowing into the night and following that path beyond the pavilion's wards.

He keeps to shadow, circles wide, and finally drifts down near the outer fence of the Guest Reception Annex.

Midnight air hangs still. The gate is guarded, but the watch is thinner than in the inner court central sector.

He smooths his sleeves, shaping a newcomer's restraint and open curiosity, then walks toward the gate.

"Halt. Identify yourself. Pass?" The guard bars the way.

He raises the jade-green token, voice gentle. "Jared Chance, invited by Grand Chamberlain Quentin Fay to assist with manuscript verification."

His tone is clear, calm, the cadence of someone certain of welcome.

The guard checks the token, notes Jared's bearing and cultivation, then relaxes. "Mr. Chance, the

chamberlain assigned your even

AS.

This way content

Jared had already primed the roster through earlier channels; the guard's response lands exactly as planned.

He inclines his head with a small smile. "Much obliged.

Moments later he enters the annex openly, a guest elder on official record.

He selects a courtyard ringed by bamboo-quiet enough for study, believable for the persona he wears.

Once inside, he sweeps the room for

sigils or hidden eyes, then sits

cross-legged, steadying breath while

ming races through tomorrows possible encounters.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Deep night cloaks the West District as Lyza steps from darkness to the wall of a tasteful compound.

She manifests like the afterimage of a vanished candle, no crunch of gravel, only the hush of fabric.

Night-clothes absorb stray moonlight; her aura sinks to dust level as she scans every branch, every tiled ridge.

Jared's coded glyphs said the reclusive scholar Mr. Moore sleeps inside these walls.

Her task: remove him without harm; the man bears no grudge, but he blocks Jared's path.

The night air lay unmoving around the Rain-Listening Pavilion perimeter.

Lyza crouched atop the tiled roof of a side corridor and let her breath settle. She had no intention of barging in and setting off someone else's alarm.

She dropped to the shadow of a cypress and moved, silent as ink, around the low courtyard walls.

Every few steps she pressed two fingers against the stone, drawing in the ripple of spiritual currents the way others test wind.

Inside, only one flicker of life answered her sweep-faint, unstable, second tier at best. No defensive array hummed beneath the floor; the silence here was ordinary, the kind broken by crickets, not by runic teeth.

From her sleeve she slid a slim bamboo tube no longer than a finger joint.

She set the reed to her lips, let one steady breath slip through, and watched a ribbon of colorless smoke wriggle toward the wooden door.

It seeped into the cracks, eager as a ghost invited home.

The mix carried no scent, yet she could almost taste the bitter herb on memory- last time it flattened three border sentries before they finished a yawn.

Anyone beneath master rank would drift off in a breath or two, slipping into a night so dark even dreams forgot them.

She waited until the glow of a single lamp dulled and went black.

Then she sprang, light on curved roof tile, palms catching the ridge before her feet ever touched the wall top. A silent roll, a measured drop, and she crossed the courtyard on cat shadows.

The main house door stood ajar; she slipped through without brushing the frame.

On the low wooden bed lay an elderly scholar, hair and beard the color of frost, cheeks sunken from years bent over scrolls.

His chest rose once, fell slow, then settled into the thick hush her powder loved. Mr. Moore would remember nothing of tonight.

Lyza knelt beside him, thumb checking his pulse for rhythm.

Satisfied, she pressed a thumb-sized charm against the mattress.

The fabric dissolved into shimmering glyphs, opening a storage satchel that swallowed man and bedding alike without a sound.

She brushed stray footprints from the floorboards, nudged the oil lamp upright, and breathed once across the latch so the faint dust resettled smooth.

When she slipped back into the courtyard, the room behind her looked untouched by night.

The sack hung light across her back as she vaulted from roof to roof, keeping to the blind angles of patrol torches.

Before the eastern watch bell rang twice, she had glided past the outer wall breach, threaded through cedar groves, and reached a limestone cliff pocked with a single narrow throat.

She set the satchel inside the cave, wove a barrier seal that muffled breath and spirit alike, and stepped back into the wind.

Only after the final rune settled did she allow her shoulders to drop.

The mission was clean; no death, no residue. Now she needed distance.

Turning north, she raced across the treetops, mind already ticking toward the hidden rendezvous where Jared's next order would find her.

Morning arrived bright and cloudless, sunlight rinsing Jade Immortal City in pale gold.

Rania kept her stride light as she crossed the stone bridge toward the Tranquil Heart Pavilion.

The new sea-green gown skimmed her ankles, its cool hue setting off the warmth in her skin. A faint breeze lifted the hem, carrying the scent of dew-heavy jasmine into her sleeves.

She had spent an extra moment on her hair, coiling it high and fastening it with a trembling pearl pin that caught every shaft of light.

The tiny motion of the ornament echoed the cautious excitement fluttering in her chest.

Minutes stretched. Quentin did not appear.

Instead, a low-rank steward shuffled in, both hands shaking around a porcelain cup he set before her.

She lowered the cup untouched. "Where is Mr. Fay? Has he not risen yet?"

"M-my... Ms. Rania," the steward's voice cracked.

Sweat beaded at his hairline. "The Grand Chamberlain left the estate last night. He said urgent business would keep him away for several days."

Before departing, he instructed us to invite a scholar versed in archaic scripture. The gentleman is waiting in the Guest Reception Annex. The Chamberlain said you may go to him directly.

"Left? For several days?" Her brows lifted.

A faint crease formed between her brows.

Quentin had agreed only yesterday to fetch Mr. Moore today; why disappear himself overnight?

And summon someone else in his place?

The move felt sloppy, not like Quentin's usual watertight habits-more like haste showing through a crack.

Had her probing yesterday unsettled him?

Or was the emergency real?

Doubts lingered, yet curiosity about the invited scholar grew louder.

Quentin might be dubious, but the man he hired could still be worth meeting.

"Lead the way." Rania rose, decision snapping into place.

Guest Reception Annex

Through the open gateway Rania spotted a white-robed guest preparing tea at a stone table set beside a stand of emerald bamboo.

Steam curled over his hands in delicate threads, more mist than heat.

Morning light filtered through the bamboo leaves, spilling dapples across his moon- white robe and the calm set of his profile.

The fragrance of brewed leaves drifted with the green scent of stalk and dew, weaving a hush that felt almost private.

Guided by the steward, Rania stepped inside and met exactly that scene.

Her steps softened without thought, as if noise might fracture the stillness.

The young man's posture was straight, presence gentle, his refined profile it by shifting shades of green nothing like the gray-harred, dusty

scholars she had pictured

As though sensing her arrival, he lifted his head and turned toward the gate.

Their gazes met.

A small, bright thump touched her heart.

His eyes were clear yet deep, autumn-lake still, holding a space where her own

reflection seemed suddenly honest.

The look he offered was open, mild, and simply questioning-no flash of flattery, no hungry admiration.

"Are you Ms. Rania?"

Jared set the slender teapot down and rose. Light brushed the sleeve of his moon- white robe.

He brought his hands together in a courteous salute.

"I am Jared," he said, voice steady.

"By order of Grand Chamberlain Fay I have waited here. He says Ms. Rania is gifted in ancient scripture and hopes I might explore a difficulty with you."

His tone carried a calm warmth, each word measured just enough to be clear without pressing.

The sound settled over her like fresh spring water, easy to breathe.

Rania blinked back to the moment and returned the salute, a small smile tugging at her lips before she noticed it.

"Mr. Chance is too polite. Mr. Fay mentioned the idea only yesterday and you are here already. Forgive me, but are you acquainted with Mr. Moore from West City?"

"Mr. Moore and I go back many years," Jared answered without pause.

"His learning is profound, and I often seek his counsel."

Jared's smile lightened an inch.

"Mr. Moore set out a month ago to visit friends, and his return is uncertain."

"Grand Chamberlain Fay heard I was journeying nearby and dabbling in ancient star-force ley lines, so he invited me."

"If my sudden arrival offends, Ms. Rania, I beg your pardon."

His answer fit together so neatly that Rania could find no seam to tug at, and his manner remained neither self-abasing nor proud.

Some of the mist of doubt inside her thinned.

She pictured Mr. Fay searching for Mr. Moore, discovering the vacancy, and turning to this younger scholar at the last minute.

It felt plausible.

The poise in Mr. Chance's bearing and the quiet precision of his words left little room for the usual charlatan's tricks.

"Mr. Chance, you are too modest. It is my good fortune to learn from you."

She drew the chair across from him and settled, placing the jade slip that held the ancient text on the stone tabletop.

"Yesterday Mr. Fay and I puzzled over this passage. The line 'the Sky

Pivot draws the stars, the Earth Gate

opens and shuts' refuses to yield. What is your View, sir?

While she spoke she kept her gaze on his face, searching for the smallest flicker of uncertainty or pretense.

He lifted the slip between finger and thumb.

A faint energy shimmered in his eyes as his spirit sense brushed the script. His brows pinched, then softened with a spark of comprehension and admiration. "Your eye is keen indeed, Ms. Rania. You have gone straight to the heart of the matter."

He set the slip down and traced a glowing line across the tabletop. Threads of azure light spread into a

simple star map, then sank to show the shifting veins beneath the earth.

"This phrase is not ordinary geomancy," he said.

"Here, 'Sky Pivot' is likely a specific conduit — a draw point in the full-cycle star force rather than the single star you find in common charts."

"Likewise, 'Earth Gate' is not simply a tear in a ley line. It names the matching threshold in land or body that answers the Sky Pivot."

He wove references from half-forgotten classics with practical diagrams, each idea building on the last until the once-opaque sentence stood clear and logical.

Not only did he solve her riddle, he sketched three distinct methods to harness the principle for cultivation or formation work, each supported by text and example.