

A Warrior Undefeatable 6011-6020

A Warrior Undefeatable

At first she had listened with a tester's caution, yet sentence by sentence that caution melted.

Her eyes fixed on the radiant patterns, widening with surprise and then shining with unabashed delight.

The breadth of Mr. Chance's knowledge—and the angle of his insights—towered far above anything she had dared hope for.

Concepts that had knotted her mind for months loosened at a single pointer from him, and theories she had never heard before clicked neatly into place.

Neither of them noticed when the morning sun climbed high; their conversation had carried them from the pearl-gray dawn well past third hour.

Servants slipped in and out, refreshing the tea.

On the table the glowing diagrams shifted, faded, and reformed as new ideas rose.

Rania leaned forward, completely absorbed, a soft flush coloring her cheeks with every fresh discovery.

Across from her he spoke with confident ease, eyes bright, every gesture precise. Admiration, born earlier from looks alone, now grew richer, stronger.

The emotion simmering inside her became a tangled blend of respect, appreciation, and a shy, quickening fondness she barely recognized.

How long had it been since she met someone her own age who could speak to her like this—someone whose words did not force her to lower her standards?

In the manor the touted young talents either fawned, prattled emptily, or cultivated power while ignoring books.

And this Mr. Chance was — not incidentally — very pleasant to look at.

Her heartbeat picked up.

She caught herself noticing the slight part of his lips as he explained a point, the clean lines of his long fingers, the way his lashes dipped when he paused to listen.

"Ms. Rania?" Jared's gentle call cut through the haze.

The sound snapped her back to herself.

"Ah yes! Please continue, Mr. Chance. I'm listening."

Heat rushed into her cheeks. She ducked her head, raised the teacup, and sipped to disguise the smile that threatened to escape.

Across the table he watched her quietly.

Something unreadable flickered behind his composed eyes, gone before she could name it.

He seemed wholly at ease, as though the discussion were unfolding even better than he had expected.

He judged that Ms. Rania was bright, yet in some respects unexpectedly naive.

He already had her full attention; she could deny that no longer, though she shoved the realization into a quiet corner of her mind.

To Jared, it was the perfect opening.

He had to mind the distance.

Hold the attraction, yet never look rushed or slick.

Stay the earnest scholar, devoted to his studies, and let admiration for a bright woman surface only now and then-no further.

"It's getting late..."

Jared lifted his gaze to the paling sky and spoke with gentle care.

"These scripture secrets won't yield in a single sitting."

"If Ms. Rania wishes, I can remain in the manor for several days, ready whenever you would like to explore them. I hope I'm not imposing?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" Ms. Rania blurted.

The words flew out before she could catch them, and a flush bloomed across her cheeks. Her lashes dipped, voice shrinking to a murmur.

"I mean... Mr. Chance, your learning is vast. Having your guidance is exactly what I wished for."

"I'll have someone see to your rooms right away. Stay as long as you like!"

"Oh, and do you have any needs for the lodging? The Guest Reception Annex is quiet but perhaps too plain. Maybe we could..."

Jared noticed how easily she had begun thinking on his behalf.

He answered with the same easy humility.

"Thank you for the kindness, Ms. Rania. This courtyard suits me well, no need for further trouble. Only..."

He paused, letting just a sliver of uncertainty show.

"Grand Chamberlain Fay left so quickly that he never said when he would return."

"I was invited rather abruptly. Aside from discussing scripture with you, I wonder if the manor needs any other assistance?"

"If you have puzzles in the old texts, or require help sorting and verifying volumes, please say the word. I'd be happy to offer what small skill I have.

The phrasing struck the perfect balance-guest yet willing, respectful yet probing for a path into Jade Immortal Manor's deeper collections.

Ms. Rania, already glowing with goodwill, answered at once. "Mr. Chance, you're too modest! Staying to guide me is already a huge favor!"

"The Library Pavilion holds many fragmented scrolls-some even Father hasn't untangled. If you don't mind the tedium, I could take you there another day. We might uncover more together!"

Library Pavilion.

The words sparked inside him like a struck flint.

If he was lucky, that vault might hide clues about the celestials, the Soul-Refining

Crystal, or the manor's buried secrets.

"In that case, I'll gratefully accept, Ms. Rania."

He folded his hands and offered a shallow bow. The faint smile he held brushed over her like warm spring wind.

Her answering smile widened, bright enough to push any misgivings about Quentin far from her thoughts—at least that was how it looked to him.

She lingered a heartbeat longer, gaze drifting as though already strolling among shelves with him.

"Then... Mr. Chance, please rest. I'll come back later for more guidance."

Reluctance flickered in her eyes, yet she rose and left the Bamboo-Listening Courtyard, glancing back three times before the gate closed behind her.

Outside, she could not keep the smile from her face.

She turned to her maid. "Go tell the overseer of the Guest Reception Annex that Mr. Chance is my

honored guests serve him

elne

highest standard, spare no expense!"

"And inform the Library Pavilion that I'll be bringing Mr. Chance to consult texts in a few days. Have them prepare in advance."

"Yes, Ms. Rania," the maid answered with a dutiful bow.

Even so, a flicker of surprise crossed the girl's eyes; her mistress rarely fussed over new guests.

Rania walked back with a light step, already debating which knotty passage to bring up next—and which dress would best suit tomorrow's meeting.

Inside the courtyard, Jared watched her figure disappear down the path. The soft smile eased from his face, leaving calm stillness.

Phase one-win her trust-had gone smoothly.

Now he would use that trust to reach the manor's core, draw near Julian, and sniff out the secrets of the Soul-Refining Crystal and the celestials.

He returned to the stone table, lifted the cup of tea gone lukewarm, and took a slow sip.

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With a buoyant heart and a faint, sugary thrill, Rania left the Guest Reception Annex, her thoughts too full of Mr. Chance to wonder further about Quentin's hurried departure.

Meanwhile, deep within the Hall of Infinity, the air carried a very different charge.

Black-jade floors, white-jade pillars, and a domed ceiling studded with night-luminous pearls cast a cold glow across the vast chamber.

On a broad throne carved from a single slab of star-iron sat Julian, garbed in a purple-gold dragon robe and jade crown, his steady gaze alight with restrained power.

Julian sat tall on the star-iron throne. The skin at his temples stayed smooth, yet the set of his square jaw warned of four decades spent fighting for power.

With each slow blink, the faint reflection of shifting sun, moon, and distant stars seemed to glide across his dark eyes.

Breath slid from his chest like a tide drawn through deep caverns. The air around him thickened, folding throne, floor, and even the slabs beneath into one silent mass that rose and fell with his lungs.

He, Lord of Jade Immortal Manor, held the lofty seventh rank among upper immortals. Power this high should have meant perfect control. At the moment it did not feel that way.

A fresh Messaging Jade Slip dug into his palm. Its silver glow painted his knuckles while a chill, oily anger crept up his neck.

The first characters burned behind his eyes: "Turner brothers confirmed missing. No battle marks. No lingering force. Vanished." He read the line twice, hoping new meaning would appear. It did not.

Another section followed: "Unknown individuals searching the city for Soulfall Slope incident and the brothers' movements." The tidy script made the warning feel colder.

"Linked with high-price inquiries at the Knowledge Pavilion," the slip continued, "likely targeted revenge or cover-up. Suspect: expert level, excels at concealment and erasing traces."

"Useless, all of you useless!" The shout cracked from Julian's throat before he noticed he was standing.

His voice pulsed through vaulted stone. "Two fourth-rank executioners disappear inside their own quarters, and no one hears so much as a sigh?"

"If you cannot tell me how, why do you exist?" Spittle flashed against torchlight as the words slammed out.

Below, elders of the Punishment Hall and captains of the Internal Guard pressed foreheads to marble. Damp patches spread between their shoulder blades.

"Search again!" Julian barked. "Widen the net. Every newcomer, every shadow of uncertain strength-sort them all."

"Double the men at Soulfall Slope. Raise the array to maximum alert. Without my seal, nothing living comes within a hundred miles!"

Orders rolled on, each colder than the last. "Fortify city walls. Shut every transit gate. Leave one emergency channel-under my hand only."

"Yes, Manor Lord!" Fear pushed their reply into a single ragged chorus.

"Where is Quentin? Bring him to me." The name of his trusted Grand Chamberlain surfaced like a blade.

A steward edged forward, voice nearly a whisper. "My Lord, Grand Chamberlain Fay... reported urgent private business last dusk. He registered a leave of several days. He is now outside the manor."

"What?" The single word struck like falling stone.

Julian's brows knotted. "He left yesterday? Did he state the matter? Direction? Expected return?"

"He only said it was pressing. No details. Promised three to five days, half a month at most," the steward managed.

The man's knees shook, but he forced the answer out all the same.

Julian's scowl deepened until the skin between his brows ached.

Quentin gone at this exact hour?

Gone while Julian tightened nets and chased the Turner mystery?

Unease slithered over his heart, cold and scaled.

The Turner brothers were Quentin's blades for dirty work at Soulfall Slope.

They vanish, and Quentin walks out the gate the same night?

Too neat. Far too neat.

Had misfortune seized Quentin as well?

Or did he learn something, panic, and flee?

Could the whole thing be a wider scheme aimed at Quentin, at Soulfall Slope, or at Julian himself?

Thoughts slammed together, sparks flying in the dark of his mind.

Caution had carried Julian to the Manor Lord's seat, and ruthlessness kept him ruling all of Jade Immortal City.

"Issue new orders..." His voice

orders

returned, soft yet glacial. "From this moment the manor stands at highest alert Outward calm, inward steel. All gates tighten screening. No stranger sets foot inside without my seal or Elder Council countersign."

"Guests now lodged in the Guest Reception Annex-verify every background. Full surveillance. Track Quentin's trail outside the walls Alive or dead want him found."

"One more thing..." He paused; light in his eyes sharpened to frost. "Inform my daughter: she remains at home. She will not roam, and she will not escort outsiders into

restricted zones without my

approval."

"Understood!" The officials bowed hard, shoes scraping stone as they scattered to obey.

He paused; ice flickered in his eyes.

"Tell Ms. Rania to remain at home for the next few days. Without my leave she is not to roam, much less bring any outsider into the inner court restricted zone!"

"Yes, sir!" they answered in unison, stiff with resolve, and hurried off to carry out the order.

The grand hall fell silent, leaving only Julian behind.

Julian pushed himself upright from the throne. The star-iron surface stayed cold against his palms a breath longer than he liked.

He paced to the arched window and clasped his hands behind him. Below, the vast courtyards of Jade Immortal Manor bristled with torchlight and pike tips, circles of guards overlapping like armored gears.

"Whoever you are," he muttered, voice almost lost in the hush of the hall, "you dare stir trouble in my manor, steal my people, covet my secrets..."

The words cut off on a thin hiss. Julian's eyes narrowed to a blade. "I will see to it you walk in—and never walk out." Each syllable landed heavy, final.

A tremor of misgiving slipped after the anger, as though the order had left his mouth a heartbeat too slow.

He pictured Rania's bright face, that stubborn tilt of her chin. She doted on curiosities more than rules. He might have trusted her obedience a shade too much.

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Guest Reception Annex, Room A-3

Jared sat cross-legged on the floorboards, breath thin and even. Lines of starlight logic from the afternoon still echoed behind his eyelids.

He sifted through each point Rania had offered, fitting them into new openings in his larger plan.

A ripple brushed the edge of his mind. Footsteps—all light, all hurry—crossed the garden stones. The scent signature was unmistakable: Rania.

Stranger presences usually trailed her. Tonight he felt only the single spark that was her own.

He opened one eye. This hour, courtyards should be silent. What drew her back?

The approaching aura fluttered, bright with excitement, jagged with haste. She wasn't merely visiting; she was almost running.

He smoothed his robe, straightening the collar with measured fingers. The polite scholar's smile slid back into place before he reached the latch.

"Mr. Chance!" Her voice burst in ahead of her body, full of breathless relief.

Rania stood in the doorway, cheeks pink, stray curls clinging near her temples. In her fingers gleamed two new jade slips.

"I— I found two more tricky passages," she said, half laughing at her own impatience. "Couldn't sleep until I asked you. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

The words insisted on study, yet her gaze clung to him, warm and shameless in its admiration.

Jared stepped aside. "Please, Ms. Rania, come in. Discussion is never a bother."

She crossed the threshold and slipped onto the chair by the low table as though the seat had always belonged to her.

He filled a cup, letting steam curl between them, and set it within her reach.

"Mr. Chance, look at this..." she urged, unrolling the first slip across the table.

She tapped two glowing segments. "And here. They feel linked to yesterday's Sky Pivot pull, but I can't see why."

Jared lifted the slip. Characters floated into alignment beneath his gaze. After a pause he nodded, admiration genuine. "Your instinct is sharp. These passages hide the principle of threefold resonance."

He pointed, sketching lines of light above the wood. "Match them with the hour when certain constellations peak, and you can open a temporary Star-Force Corridor—short hops, or a rapid body-tempering blast."

The web of symbols blossomed into a full diagram, each strand answering a doubt she hadn't voiced yet.

What had felt like scattered fragments now rested inside a seamless, ancient engine, alive under his fingertips.

Rania listened, breath caught somewhere between awe and delight. Every confident turn of his wrist added fresh color to her cheeks.

Light arced through the room, reflecting in his eyes. She felt her pulse drumming as if it might match the constellation he traced.

How could one man be this brilliant, she wondered, dazzled.

And this disarmingly handsome.

Without noticing, the two leaned closer, elbows almost touching, breaths mingling over the floating glyphs.

A subtle floral note from her sleeve

drifted across him. Her gaze lingered on the line of his jaw, then slid to the hollow of his throat.

He marked the moment like a merchant counting coins. The lure was set. Yet he eased back a respectful handspan, letting the star map dissolve.

He lifted his cup. "It's late, Ms. Rania. Better to rest and let the text settle."

Kindness in his tone warmed her further, even as the suggestion stung with reluctance.

"Mr. Chance..." She hesitated, brushing courage across her tongue.

Eyes bright, she asked, "Tomorrow could I take you to the Library Pavilion?"

"It keeps works even Father never unraveled. Together we might uncover something extraordinary." Hope rang clear in every syllable.

the line popped like a cork.

"The Library Pavilion!" Jared heard

the words roll through the room and felt the air tighten with possibility

The name struck him square in the chest. This was the gate he had been hunting since he set foot in the manor.

He pushed the rush of heat down behind a calm face.

"The Library Pavilion?" he said, letting a frown crease between his brows ve heard it is a restricted

of the miner count. I am only a
guest; I fear I may overstep."

"It's fine!" Rania cut in before he could say more, bright and certain.

"I'm the Manor Lord's daughter," she huffed, chin tipping up.

"What's wrong with taking a friend to the Library Pavilion? Those guards won't dare stop me!"

"And with your learning, you might even help us correct a few dusty scrolls. Father will be pleased when he hears."

She spoke as if rules and orders were smoke on the wind, nowhere in sight.

In this moment her whole world narrowed to the thrill of showing him her favorite trove of wonders.

Watching the open eagerness in her eyes, Jared noted how quickly affection was dulling the caution of an otherwise clever girl.

Opportunity fell right into his palms, warm and weightless.

He lifted a grateful, gentle smile.

"If that is the case, Ms. Rania, I will gladly impose upon your kindness."

"It's settled! I'll come for you at first light," she chirped.

She hopped to her feet, light as a songbird. "Rest early, Mr. Chance. See you tomorrow!"

She headed out, glancing back once, twice, a third time, before the courtyard gate closed and her footsteps skipped away.

Jared shut the door. The pleasant mask slid off, leaving his eyes dark and remote. Everything was moving exactly where he had steered it.

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At dawn, Rania arrived right on schedule.

She wore a pale-yellow gown veiled in gauze; her hair was pinned perfectly, pearl blossoms trembling with each step.

When Jared opened the door, her eyes curved into bright crescents.

"Mr. Chance, let's be off!" she said, excitement bubbling.

They walked side by side toward the depths of the inner court and the Library Pavilion beyond.

Patrol squads and stewards they passed bowed to Rania with rigid courtesy.

Some eyes lingered on Jared, puzzled, yet the warmth between him and the young lady kept every question sealed behind their teeth.

Soon a grand, archaic seven-story tower loomed into view.

Its walls were laid with dark green stone carved in countless sigils, the summit lost inside a halo of thin spiritual mist.

This was the Library Pavilion of Jade Immortal Manor, cradle of scriptures, alchemy notes, formation blueprints, and histories untold.

Four guards, each at least third rank upper immortal, stood like iron statues at the doorway.

The gray-robed elder in front frowned, stepped forward, and saluted. "Ms. Rania."

"Elder Wood..." Rania sang, still in high spirits.

Elder Wood's stare sliced toward Jared.

"Ms. Rania, the Library Pavilion is restricted. Only core members or holders of the Manor Lord's or Elder Council's writ may enter. Though Mr. Chance is a guest, he

"Please, Ms. Rania, calm yourself. That was not my intention," he hastened to say. "And what, exactly?"

Her smile vanished; her small face hardened. "I'm the Manor Lord's daughter. Are you saying I can't escort a friend to read? Am I likely to leak secrets?"

"Mr. Fay trusts him. Do you doubt me, or do you doubt Mr. Fay?"

Spoiled fire sparked in her tone; for Jared's sake she wielded her status like a whip.

Elder Wood's jaw tightened; opposition would earn only trouble.

And Quentin Fay's name still carried weight.

Yet the Manor Lord had issued strict orders just yesterday.

He hunted for any hint about the celestials, Soul-Refining Crystal, Soulfall Slope, or forgotten secrets of Jade Immortal Manor.

He watched Elder Wood's throat tighten before the words came. "The Manor Lord issued orders yesterday. Security across the manor is on high alert, and the Library Pavilion is under the strictest control."

Then the elder dipped his head, eyes still sharp. "If Ms. Rania must enter with a companion," he asked, "may I at least inform the Manor Lord first?"

Rania's shoulders snapped back. "Inform him about what? My father is in secluded cultivation. You would disturb him over something this trivial?"

Her impatience flared. "I'm only stepping in for a moment to check a few books. Anything that happens is on me. Move aside!"

Before anyone could answer, she seized Jared's hand. Warm fingers closed around his wrist, and she tugged, intent on marching straight through the doorway.

Amusement flickered behind Jared's calm eyes, but he let only a faint, embarrassed smile show, the kind that apologized without using words.

He offered Elder Wood a respectful nod. "Elder, I come solely at Ms. Rania's invitation to examine a few troublesome passages. If my presence is improper I'm willing to wait outside."

The more modest he sounded, the deeper Rania's brows knitted toward the elder, her resolve hardening right in front of Jared's eyes.

"Mr. Chance, there's no need to stand back!" she insisted. "If I say you may enter, you may."

She shot Elder Wood a final daggered glance, then pulled Jared around the line of guards and crossed the Library Pavilion's threshold.

Behind them, the elder and the guards traded uneasy looks. A muted sigh rolled through the group, but none lifted a hand to block her.

They all understood the young lady's temper; provoking it served no one.

Each man could only hope the Manor Lord would not hold them accountable later.

A rush of paper-dust and faint sandalwood washed over Jared as they stepped inside, the scent settling deep in his lungs.

He froze a heartbeat, taking in the impossible vastness beyond the door-space- expansion runes made the interior stretch far wider than the tower's shell.

Tier upon tier of shelves, each several stories tall, marched in perfect columns, packed with jade slips, silk scrolls, bone fragments, even metal tomes that glimmered like dusk.

A thin veil of warding light drifted between cases, rippling whenever someone passed.

Rania moved with practiced ease, guiding him up the spiral stairs to the third level. "Most of the ancient miscellany-geographies, stray chronicles, odd star-charts— are stored here," she explained, excitement leaping into her voice.

She began to rummage, every so often plucking out a jade slip and pressing it into Jared's palm. "Look at this one... and this..."

While he discussed glyphs aloud, his spirit sense thinned into hair-fine threads, drifting over the nearby shelves one covert inch at a time.

Jared leaned closer, keeping his voice mild. "Something special?"

The pair sank into a steady rhythm of reading and debate; hours bled away without notice.

Every fresh insight from Jared drew a soft gasp from Rania; admiration shone openly in her eyes.

She inched ever nearer, and when her hair skimmed the back of his hand the touch left a prickle of warmth and perfume.

Jared kept his spine straight and his tone measured, never overstepping.

But now and then he let a glimmer of soft regard break through, and each time Rania's pulse visibly quickened.

Rania let out a quiet sigh. "Ugh, these celestials are so annoying."

Jared glanced over just in time to see her lips push into a pout as she read a record

of ancient clan strife, the complaint slipping out under her breath.

Keeping his tone mild, Jared followed her lead. "Why does Ms. Rania say that? Aren't the celestials said to be supreme, ruling level thirteen heavens?"

She scoffed. "Supreme? Hardly!"

"They're just human cultivators with better talent and an earlier start," she muttered, leaning closer so only he could hear. Yet they call themselves gods and look down on the rest of us

"They throw their weight around the Azure Firmament Immortal Continent, treating clans and sects like vassals and slaves. Even my? father she lowered her voice, has to tread lightly and obey thei every whim."

Resentment edged her words, and for a heartbeat her proud chin trembled.

Pride warred with frustration in her eyes; the celestials' condescension clearly grated on the manor's favored daughter.

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Jared nodded as though sympathizing. "Are the celestials' roots in the Azure Firmament really that deep? Do they maintain a foothold here?"

She glanced left and right, confirmed the floor was empty, then leaned so close her breath brushed his ear.

"Of course," she murmured. "At the border between the eastern and central regions they've built an immense Divine Punishment Hall one of their most important strongholds here."

"Five celestial venerables sit inside, their power bottomless. They oversee every faction, send emissaries with Divine Oracles, collect tributes... and something else, something unusual."

Jared leaned closer, keeping his voice mild. "Something special?"

A cold prickle spread beneath his ribs, yet he only let his brows lift in polite, almost boyish curiosity.

Rania pressed her lips together, a soft "Hmm..." slipping out while her eyes searched the ceiling.

She pinched the space between her brows, digging through half-forbidden memories. "I'm not really sure," she admitted. "Father told me prying into celestial business never ends well."

"All I caught," she went on, "was Father and Mr. Fay whispering about certain special prisoners, some process that extracts... crystals, their word, not mine. The idea alone made my skin crawl."

A tremor chased up her arms, and she hugged herself as though the room had turned colder.

A weight dropped in Jared's gut, heavier than the stone shelves around them. Special prisoners. Crystal extraction. Soul-Refining Crystal—the name slammed against his thoughts with a metallic clang.

So, his hunch had been right all along.

Divine Punishment Hall—the name carried the stink of blood.

And five celestial venerables stationed inside, each one a mountain he had to climb.

Information like this wasn't just useful—it was a razor he could hold to their throats. He drew a breath, ready to pry deeper. Rania, however, shook her head, strands of hair brushing his sleeve. "That's everything. Father forbids talk about celestials. Let's drop it—it's bad luck."

So even Julian kept his own daughter in the dark; that told Jared just how deep the fear ran.

He let the subject die and lifted a new scroll, pointing out a delicate rune to steer them back toward talk of ancient arrays.

Rania's eyes sparked, the previous gloom washing off her face as she threw herself into their "academic exchange" once more.

Unnoticed hours rolled by. Outside, dusk bled across the sky, and inside the pavilion soft pearl-lamps blossomed between the shelves.

"Ah, it's already so late!" Rania gasped, startled back into the present.

Color stole up her cheeks, a smile tugging yet reluctant. She didn't want the night to end.

Jared noted the tiny disappointed crease at the corner of her mouth and silently agreed—time with a useful ally always moved too fast.

Jared offered a sincere bow of the head. "Many thanks, Ms. Rania. You've broadened my horizons."

She waved both hands, flustered. "Mr. Chance, you're the one helping me."

A gentle flush tinted her cheeks. "Discussing scholarship with you is the happiest I've ever been," she murmured.

She lifted her gaze; the lantern-light turned her eyes into shimmering pools, every blink sending another ripple of affection toward him.

Dim glow softened every line of her face, weaving dreamlike allure; the library lay hushed, broken only by their breathing and the thud of two quickening hearts.

An invisible thread stretched taut between them, trembling with a sweet, dangerous current.

Rania's pulse hammered so loudly Jared could almost see it fluttering at her throat, and her fingers tightened around the edge of the jade slip she still held.

She drank in the clean, cool scent clinging to him, the short distance between them now a furnace. Lightheaded, she hovered inches from his chest.

Sense whispered that she was racing ahead, casting her upbringing aside, yet the warning barely reached her burning cheeks.

But the brakes were gone; her heart, hands, every breath lunged toward him.

The man before her felt like a lodestone, pulling every shred of her will into his orbit.

His knowledge, his poise, the quiet warmth in his eyes—they blended into one impossible charm she couldn't name.

Soft and trembling, she whispered, "Mr. Chance..."

"I... I..." The rest tangled on her tongue, but yearning colored every shaky breath.

Jared caught the haze in her eyes, the way her blush deepened instead of fading, and the meaning rang clear.

He recognized the hour had come.

Without a word he lifted his hand and enclosed her smaller one, warmth spilling through the contact.

She startled, a shiver darting through her frame, yet she didn't pull away. A faint "Mm" slipped out as she folded herself against his chest.

Soft warmth pressed into Jared's arms; her delicate scent, half lotus, half ink, curled into his lungs, and her figure melted against him like silk.

Through the thin layers of cloth he felt every quiver in her shoulders, every drumbeat of her heart, each vibration echoing straight into his own.

Jared tipped his head down, the faint scent of sandalwood in her hair brushing his lips.

In a breath more warmth than sound, he murmured at her ear, "Rania, may I?"

He felt the single word strike like a pebble against a dam; tension inside her shattered and rushed away.

Her shoulders loosened, breath quivering, the last of her restraint giving way under the ripple he had started.

Her eyes stid shut, lashes trembling

A barely audible "mm" slipped out as

her arms looped around his neck pulling him close until nothing but shared breath fit between them.

Jared hesitated no longer. He angled his mouth down and caught her tender, damp lips in a slow, claiming kiss.

She answered the kiss awkwardly but eager, her body melting against his like spring water losing shape, surrendering to whatever he asked.

On the quiet third floor of the Library Pavilion, the mellow glow of spirit pearls pooled around their entwined figures.

Tall shelves threw long bars of shadow, hiding the blazing, forbidden scene from any wandering gaze.

Clothing loosened, layer after layer sliding away; ragged breaths thickened, mingling in the still air.

Somewhere under his fingertips he felt the last resistance of a bright, proud girl snap, emotion sweeping aside the clever caution that had shone in her eyes. She moved with wholehearted trust, offering the most guarded part of herself to a man she had known for barely two days yet already believed indispensable. Jared tasted eagerness and, behind it, the sweet certainty that every moment had unfolded exactly as he had arranged from the start.

He wondered whether she grasped that this surrender might ripple through the whole of Jade Immortal Manor, but her soft sigh against his throat said she suspected nothing.

To him, the tenderness was a tool-necessary, even delicate, but still a tool-for inching closer to his real goal.

Desire tangled with strategy; as her heartbeat echoed under his palm, he sensed another shutter inside the manor's secrets cracking open for him.

For a sliver of a second he pictured the moment she would discover the lie and wondered which would break first—her trust or her heart.

The night deepened; the heady hush

within the stacks finally ebbed, leaving only the faint pulse of spirit light and the slowing rhythm of two mingled breaths.

Afterward, Rania curled against his chest, cheeks still warm, drawing idle circles over his heart with one lazy fingertip.

A hesitant whisper drifted up: "Jared....."

Her voice, syrup-soft for the first time, sought promise. "You'll stay with me, won't you?"

Running his fingers through her silky hair, he answered gently, "So long as you never tire of me."

"How could I ever tire of you!" she blurted, lifting her head in earnest protest.

Eyes shining, Rania declared, "When Father finishes seclusion, I'll tell him I want to marry you. He adores me; he'll agree."

Jared answered with a gentle squeeze, yet his gaze slid past her to the window, fixing on the dense night beyond—deep, measuring, merciless.

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He pressed a light kiss to her forehead. "It's late; I should be heading back..."

Before withdrawing, he caught her lips in a lingering brush that carried the rest of his sentence.

"Don't go to the Guest Reception Annex," she pleaded, cheeks flushing. "Stay in my quarters. We can study the scrolls together anytime."

Color flooded her face as the words tumbled out, but she held his eyes, determination shining through the pink.

Jared chuckled, voice low. "Scrolls, hm? Or are we planning to research something a bit more personal?"

He gave her crimson cheek a playful pinch that made her squeak and bury her face again.

She hid against his chest, arms tightening. Jared felt the familiar shift-the way a woman, once surrendered, cleaved to the man who held her first.

Hard lessons collected from the mundane world, the secret realm, the Ethereal Realm, and even the celestial realm had etched that truth into him.

Dozens of liaisons had made him an expert, or so he liked to believe.

Over the following days, dawn often found them tangled in silken sheets inside her fragrant chambers, the outside world forgotten.

The ornate boudoir, all carved jade screens and drifting incense, became the secret realm for whispered laughter and unrestrained delight, night and day blurring together.

Having tasted passion, Rania clung to him with near constant devotion, unwilling to leave his side even for an hour.

She drank in every lesson he offered, eyes shining when arcane diagrams unfolded under his fingers, then darkening with heady bliss when their energies intertwined. Jared's motive reached beyond pleasure; each union drew strands of her umbral essence into his own chaotic force, tempering it, strengthening it.

Dual cultivating with Rania-a natural spirit body trained in Jade Immortal Manor's Umbral Cultivation Method-let energies fuse perfectly, fortifying his foundation and sharpening his power like a freshly whetted blade.

Under his guided techniques, her cultivation surged, a fact she sensed each time their breathing synced-driving her devotion to flare hotter, wilder, unstoppable.

Following Rania into the storeroom, he saw rows of sealed jade cases left unlocked. Spiritual energy thrummed against his skin, promising medicines, metals, and secrets he had previously only read about.

Whenever a steward passed, Jared displayed an ancient scroll, discussing script verification or lost elixirs. The pretext secured rare herbs, spirit ores, and even mid-level treasury manuals.

But every gain tasted faintly of urgency. The softness of Rania's chambers, the laughter, the free-flowing supplies-all of it felt like silk stretched over a blade. Sooner or later the silk would tear.

Julian would notice first; Jared pictured the manor lord's cold eyes narrowing. Other factions inside the manor would whisper next. Suspicion, once seeded, grew faster than weeds in spiritual soil.

He needed power before that whisper became a roar. Investigation, cultivation, escape routes everything had to move now, not tomorrow.

Hours later, after their bodies cooled, Rania lay draped across his chest.

Her hair brushed his ribs with every breath. She traced slow circles over the muscle there, eyelids half-closed, lips curved in a hazy smile.

Jared stroked her sleek back and said softly, "Rania, I've been studying an ancient art that requires absolute stillness. Your suite is lovely, yet maids wander and the aura feels chaotic."

Her head snapped up, worry chasing away the languor. "Then what should we do?"

"I'll ask Father to grant you the best seclusion chamber right now!"

Jared smiled, refusing the offer with a mild shake.

He turned his hand over. A miniature tower, ancient and solemn, surfaced in his palm, glowing faintly.

Neither metal nor jade, the little tower gleamed dark gold.

Layers of cryptic runes crawled over its walls, each stroke pulsing with the weight of heavens held at bay.

Jared rarely let anyone glimpse the Pentacarna Tower; trust, or calculated trust, had just redrawn that boundary.

Rania's breath hitched. 'This...' The half-formed question trembled between them.

Widened eyes drank in the artifact's aura; even without training she sensed a relic beyond ordinary grade.

'It's the Pentacarna Tower, a treasure I chanced upon,' Jared said, voice gentle. 'Inside is a universe of its own, and the flow of time shifts against the outside.'

'A hundred days of training within equal a single day out here. Activating it, however, drains me, and secrecy is vital.'

He met her gaze. 'Will you enter with me? We'll share more hours together and unravel those manuscripts faster.'

A hundred days inside, one outside the notion slammed into her like thunder.

Rania simply stared, lips parted, awe eclipsing every other expression.

Even among myths of level thirteen, treasures that bent time were whispers, never proofs.

That Jared possessed one-and offered to share-struck her like the sweetest vow. Color flooded her cheeks; moisture shimmered along her lashes as if gratitude had nowhere else to go.

She dove against his chest, voice catching. 'Jared... you're too good to me. I'll do anything, as long as we're together!'

He wrapped her close, letting silence carry what he chose not to say; his eyes remained dark, unreadable.

Yes, the

and tower would bind her faster

and temper his own growth, but lifting the lid for her also gamblee with one of his greatest cards

If conflict with Julian erupted, he'd need Rania planted firmly at his flank, not wavering in the middle.

'No one can learn about this, not even your father,' he said, weight filling each syllable.

"I understand! Our secret, just ours!" She nodded hard, eyes shining.

Rania's entire body answered the vow; she nodded once, slow and intent,

sweetness softening the resolve in her gaze.

Night dropped. Jared layered several isolation seals around the apartment until sound and light both lay flat.

Only then did he summon Pentacarna Tower.

The relic drank the air and stretched, rising to a three-story giant; misty light spilled from the open door at its base.

Hand in hand, they crossed the glowing threshold.

Expectation of cramped stone fell away.

Instead, a boundless void rolled out

beneath a phantom sun and comet

ridge lines, rivers embryonic seas drifted in newborn light.

The air here tasted crystalline, threaded with a rhythm that tugged at the marrow, urging comprehension of laws unsaid.

"Amazing..." Rania spun like a child in her first snowfall, wonder echoing against invisible walls.

Jared guided her toward a platform near the central altar, a zone he had carved out for cultivation.

Chaotic force seeped through the ground, merging with energy currents he had woven—perfect for the pair practice he intended.

Inside this realm, hours multiplied like rabbits; time felt almost lavish.

Seasons seemed to drift overhead while the outside world barely breathed.

Apart from brief rest and tender interludes, the two poured every moment into cultivation.

From the scrolls he had dissected earlier, Jared picked the most

compatible arts and explored them side by side with Rania, testing

side by

refining, perfecting

He knelt opposite Rania on the silver disk.

Each breath pulled her cool lunar current into his chest and pushed his searing solar

force back into her.

The currents spiraled faster, collided, then melted together until the air hummed around them.

Insight darted through his mind, bright and sharp, every clash sketching a fresh path toward the Dao.

Across from him, Rania's aura thickened by the hour.

The once-misty light along her spine condensed into a clear six-petaled star that beat with her heart.

She was brushing the sixth-tier threshold, a leap that should have taken decades outside the tower.

Yet the surge inside Jared felt even vaster.

Each breath left his limbs heavier with power, his thoughts razor-bright.

His chaotic force, once an untamed ocean, soaked up her dark-moon energy and settled into denser waves.

When he flexed a finger, the air rippled like stretched silk.

None of it would matter without supplies.

With Rania beside him, storerooms opened, herbs arrived, manuals surfaced the instant he asked.

He meant to pull every strand of value from that kindness.

Inside those stolen days, he polished every flaw in his seventh-tier core.

The moment the last imperfection vanished, the boundary shattered like thin ice, letting him stride into eighth tier.

Power kept rising until it jammed against the realm's upper edge and held fast.

Chapter 6017



He closed his eyes.

Inside, the chaotic force roared like a river yet lay as deep as a star-strewn gulf.

A breath later he sheathed its light.

On paper, Julian's upper-realm seventh grade should dwarf Jared's eighth-grade celestial rank.

But chaotic force's supremacy, welded to a lifetime of fights, made the gap feel bridgeable.

He felt ready to prove it.

Still, he knew every gain was bought with the tower's stretched hours.

Without that, time would tighten again.

Beyond the chamber, scarcely two days had slipped by.

At the third dawn, pale light brushed the curtains.

Jared shrank Pentacarna Tower to a thumb-sized relic and slid it under his sleeve.

Hand in hand, he and Rania stepped into the corridor, spirits bright.

Their breaths synced; each exhale touched the other's skin.

Servants saw nothing but a young couple in love, unaware of the fathomless strength hidden under their calm smiles.

A wave of cold fury swept in, harsh as a winter gale.

Pressure cinched Jared's ribs and prickled the back of his neck.

He tightened his grip on Rania's hand.

Frost filmed the railings.

Maids collapsed, foreheads to the floor, shaking so hard their bracelets clinked.

Julian stood at the threshold, purple-gold robe flowing, hands folded behind his back.

His face was iron-dark, his eyes cold lightning fixed on the pair.

The sight of Rania's glowing cheeks and her easy closeness to Jared made the air twitch with rage.

Jared caught a flash of grim understanding in the lord's stare; Elder Wood's report about Rania breaking into the Library Pavilion with a strange man had clearly reached him already.

The nightly whispers about Jared sharing Rania's room clearly fueled that storm.

In Julian's eyes Jared must be the thief who slipped through every guard and stole the manor's treasure.

Humiliation blazed behind that glare, hotter than any fire.

Rules and pride lay shattered at the man's feet, and every shard was aimed at Jared.

Julian's gaze swept over Rania as though weighing changes only a master could read.

His face tightened when he sensed her lost virgin energy and the unnaturally rapid surge in her cultivation.

He flicked back to Jared, eyebrows lifting at the mere eighth-grade aura he sensed.

Confusion knitted his brow; the numbers refused to match the threat he felt.

Unspoken questions churned behind the older man's eyes.

"Father?" Rania's voice cracked the hush.

She stepped in front of Jared, shoulders taut, as if her slight frame could shield him.

A vein pulsed at Julian's temple as his jaw locked.

"Rania," Julian said, voice like iced steel. "Come here."

"Father, this is Mr. Chance-Jared Mr. Fay invited him to help with the texts. He's been invaluable to me..."

Her explanation faded, courage draining from her tone.

"I said, come here!"

The words slammed outward, making the marble beneath their feet groan.

A mountain's weight barreled straight at Jared.

Its purpose was plain: kneel, bleed, learn fear.

The blow hit emptiness.

Jared didn't sway; he merely straightened his cuffs.

The crushing force vanished inside him; only the pale hem of his robe fluttered.

He lifted his head and let lamplight strike his face. Julian's icy stare met him, but Jared breathed steady and saluted. "Junior Jared greets Manor Lord Jade."

His spine stayed straight; no challenge, no submission, only calm readiness in the set of his shoulders.

Across that silence, Jared caught the tiny moment Julian's pupils tightened, like blades focusing.

The Manor Lord's fingers paused mid-air, suspicion flashing behind the hard glare.

Still, no extra weight pressed down; the man's brow creased, as if wondering why his aura had slipped off Jared like rain off oiled cloth.

Julian's gaze swept Jared from boots to hair, measuring, recalculating, hunting for a flaw.

The stare lingered on Jared's sleeves, on the faint gray shimmer still fading there, as though trying to match it to a name.

"Father, what are you doing!" Rania's voice cracked through the tense air, sharp and frightened.

Before Jared could answer, she

flung her arms wide and planted herself in front of him every silk fold trembling. Jared is my guest! You can't treat him like this!"

"Guest?" The Manor Lord let the word drag, thick with disbelief.

Julian's finger stabbed the air between them.

"An unknown impostor, masking his realm, seducing my daughter, committing unspeakable

indecencies such trash call

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himself a guest here?" The accusation rang off the beams.

"Rania, step aside! Tonight I will rid the world of this lecher!" The final word cracked

like thunder.

The sentence had barely ended before Julian moved.

His cloak snapped, his presence surging-no warning, only lethal resolve.

Two fingers shaped a blade; he carved through empty space in a swift downward

arc.

A strip of dark-gold light, edges tearing the very air, screamed toward Jared's face in

a blink.

The strike carried the Manor Lord's rage, laced with law of metal at close to full force.

"No!" Rania's scream ripped out, raw and breaking.

Without thinking, she spun and hurled herself toward Jared, arms spread, ready to take the blow herself.

A cold spark cut through Jared's eyes, ice against iron.

He had expected fury, not an immediate kill stroke; the speed of the attack sketched new lines across his plan.

His left arm hooked around Rania's waist, swinging her behind him as his right hand rose, fingers together.

Gray chaos light gathered at the tips; he held his ground and met the onrushing blade with a single tap.

Chi! The tiny sound was thin, almost polite.

Not even a rumble followed; the chamber stayed eerily quiet.

The dark-gold blade rippled, edges sagging like wax under noon sun.

In a heartbeat it was gone, no light, no echo.

Color drained from Julian's face, leaving marble veins at his temples.

His lips parted, disbelief flickering as he re-balanced he had used seven-tenths of

his strength, yet the blow had been dispelled so easily?

He stared at the fading gray afterglow, as though seeing something that shouldn't

exist.

That unknown light had just eaten Celestial Metal energy whole.

Jared lowered his hand, keeping Rania shielded behind him. His voice stayed level. "Manor Lord Jade MS.

Ranja and share genuine

affection-hardly some sordid trick."

"To kill first and question later seems an odd definition of propriety."

A Warrior Undefeatable

"Mutual affection? Ha!" Julian's laugh slammed against the rafters, brittle and furious.

"My daughter is young and foolish-you fooled her with sweet words!" he barked.

Why did you sneak into Jade Immortal Manor and cozy up to Rania? What are you after? And Quentin's sudden disappearance was that your doing as well? Speak!

His thoughts spun. In his head, Quentin's strange disappearance, the Turner brothers' eerie deaths, and this sudden, enigmatic Jared fused into one story.

A vast shadow of conspiracy and imminent danger closed over him.

"Father, Jared isn't a villain! He's been wonderful to me he even shares his most precious treasures! He means every word he says to me!"

Rania's nails bit through Jared's sleeve as she clung to him, tears sliding down her face.

She faced her father and shouted, "I chose this! If you want him dead, kill me first!" Julian's voice cracked with fury. "You... unfilial girl!"

Jared saw the older man's shoulders tremble, rage and disbelief twisting that stern face because his daughter had just turned her blade on him.

Words clung in Julian's throat, too thick for speech.

Beneath the storm Jared caught a flicker-fear, maybe love-because Julian had only that one cherished daughter. The tension in the man's clenched fists loosened by a hair.

Then the killing light returned, swirling in Julian's eyes like dark fire, hot enough that Jared felt the air tighten against his skin.

The manor lord's gaze locked on Jared, cold and fixed, as though measuring where to strike first. No doubt remained the man meant to erase him.

Yet Julian's eyes flicked toward Rania, lingered, then snapped back. That heartbeat of wavering told Jared where the leverage lay.

Jared felt the killing pressure bearing down. A humorless breath brushed his throat, but outwardly he sighed.

He lowered his voice for Rania. "Rania, don't do this. He is still your father."

Jared turned toward the manor lord and met the frigid stare. "Manor Lord, my feelings for Ms. Rania are genuine."

"Grand Chamberlain Fay invited me here to help her study the old texts. I have no idea why he left the manor."

"If you mistrust me, I will depart at once and never set foot in Jade Immortal Manor again. Just, please, do not blame her."

Inside, Jared let the words fall like bait, hoping retreat would buy him room to maneuver.

A direct clash now, he knew, would waste strength he still needed elsewhere.

His true hunt lay with the celestials and the old vendetta-goals that demanded patience, not a brawl in the front yard.

For now, Rania was both ally and armor; he had no reason to discard the cover she offered.

Julian barked a laugh, sharp as splitting wood. "Leave? Dream on!"

"Speak your real name and purpose," the manor lord warned, voice dropping to a lethal hush, "or you won't leave this place alive."

His eyes dismissed every word Jared had offered, branding it a lie before it fully left his mouth.

"Father, touch him and I'll die right here!" Rania cried.

She tore the silver hairpin from her bun; the razor tip pressed into her pale throat, and a bright bead of blood blossomed.

Tears blurred her gaze, but the resolve in it chilled Jared more than steel. "I mean it!" she said, voice breaking.

"Rania! Put the pin down!" Julian's roar cracked across the courtyard.

Horror chased the fury from his features; he finally saw the madness in his daughter's eyes.

Jared believed it too; love and panic can push a girl past reason.

Steel hung in the air, no one daring to breathe.

Julian's chest rose and fell in ragged bursts, murder and worry tearing at the same rib cage.

His gaze bounced from Jared to the glinting blood on Rania's throat; the towering fury sank, strangled by fear for her.

"Fine... fine!" Julian grated, teeth clenched so hard the words barely slipped out. "Boy," he hissed, "for her sake I spare you today."

The manor lord's tone dropped to ice. "From now on you stay here. One step outside without my leave, and you die."

"Guards will watch night and day. Harm her, or scheme in any way, and I will tear your soul apart forever."

Even as he said it, Jared heard the bitter taste of concession behind the threat.

The father would not gamble his only child's life.

Jared bowed lightly. "Thank you, Manor Lord." He let a relieved breath spill, calculated to be heard.

Rania lowered the pin, then collapsed against Jared's chest, sobbing from fear and injustice alike.

Julian watched them, emotions knotting his brow until even Jared couldn't name them all.

Rage, doubt, vigilance and something darker-smoldered behind the man's eyes. Jared could feel it: to Julian he was a buried thorn, painful and impossible to ignore.

With a final huff, the manor lord whipped his sleeve and vanished, presence fading like a storm rolling off the hill.

Yet the chill of unseen eyes settled over Grace Pavilion, clamping down harder than any chain.

The air inside Grace Pavilion finally loosened once Julian disappeared, yet the echo of his killing intent still clung to the beams.

Jared felt the pause like a held

breath before thunder-relief, but it

only the fragile kind that warns a greater tempest is already turning on the horizon.

He slid one palm in slow circles across Rania's trembling back, matching his breaths to hers until the quiver eased.

Over the curve of her shoulder his gaze tracked the corridor Julian had taken, the line of his sight hard and chill as a drawn blade.

House arrest that was the phrase Julian had tossed like a rusted shackle.

Jared tasted the iron of it on his tongue, weighing limits against opportunity. And the watchers outside—eyes without faces—meant constant scrutiny. Chains could be made of silence just as well as steel.

Still, a cage offered walls for others more than for him.

Under Julian's own order he could linger beside Rania openly, sift

through Manor records, and peel

one

would question why he remained.

Boots scraped stone beyond the lattice doors.

Jared leaned an inch to the side; in the courtyard a ring of inner court guards reach at least

upper-immortal third gradend

statue-still, armor dulled to shadow.

Even maids carried written tokens just to cross a threshold.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Inside, warm lamplight softened carved beams, banishing the martial chill that ruled the courtyard.

The room breathed of incense and quiet heartbeat instead of drawn blades.

Rania's first sobs had dried; rose flush returned to her cheeks as she drifted in the safety of Jared's arm.

The earlier terror already read like a distant rumor to her.

To her mind Julian's retreat proved everything; fathers, like storms, growl and pass.

Love, she believed, had won its first skirmish.

That conviction brightened her smile until it hurt to look at directly.

Rania lifted her head, voice low, "Jared, don't be scared. With me here, Father won't truly harm you."

Nestling closer, her slender fingers traced the faint crease between his brows, smoothing it as though erasing worry.

"When his anger fades, I'll beg him to acknowledge you," she promised, eyes shining.

"You're brilliant; he has to see it."

Jared angled his hand to clasp hers, letting gratitude soften his face. "You shoulder the burden, Rania. Because of me you and your father—"

Her palm covered his mouth before the sentence could finish. "Hush. Don't speak like that."

She drew back just enough to meet his gaze. Tears refracted lamplight, but her voice steadied. "For you I'd do anything. And... Father—these years have weighed on him."

"Whenever the celestial envoy arrives, he has to tread on eggshells. I can tell it makes him miserable."

The repeated mention of the celestials rang like a chime in Jared's ear, hint he refused to miss.

He tilted his head, letting curiosity soften his tone. "Are the celestials truly that dreadful? Even a power like Jade Immortal Manor bows to them?"

Rania sighed, shoulders drooping. "More than bow..." she murmured, darkness clouding her eyes. "Father may wear the title of Manor Lord, but countless matters are decreed by the celestials."

"Each time the envoy visits he floats above us, and Father, the elders, everyone stands with heads lowered."

"They demand tributes, issue commands."

"The moment someone hesitates, their rage falls like lightning," she whispered.

"I once heard of several mid-tier clans wiped out in one night by Purging Enforcers for refusing."

"Not even dogs were spared."

She laid her cheek to Jared's chest, voice muffled. "Sometimes I wish Father were like the legends-free, answerable to no one..."

But the celestials are simply too strong.

Just the four venerables stationed at the Eastern Region Divine Punishment Hall— they say each is top tier level seven. Together, no one on the Azure Firmament Immortal Continent can face them. Father is only one man...

Jared answered with another calming rub across her back, but a colder light gathered in his eyes.

Four level-seven giants-breath-stealing power.

The thought tightened the air, yet it sharpened his resolve.

"But every mountain has a fault line," Jared mused, sensing the familiar thrum of chaotic force in his core.

Cards remained hidden up his sleeve, each forged from chaotic force and the climbs he had made; perhaps enough to test the so-called invincibles.

Besides, the greater the foe, the more crucial the secret the Morse couple had uncovered and the sweeter the coming reckoning.

The next dawn found Jared and Rania hunched over a silk scroll, ink staining their sleeves while verses flowed between them like playful sparring.

By afternoon he guided her through a breathing cycle, twin streams of essence spiraling until insights flared behind their closed lids.

At night, under curtained moonlight, they blended energies again—cultivation disguised as lovers' whisper.

Now and then he asked for modest herbs or jade slips; with her token the storeroom opened easily.

Through it all, Jared let occasional laughter leak past the shutters, careful to keep every exchange tender, harmless.

He felt the probing auras drift by, pause, then move on, satisfied with the image of two besotted youths.

Once, a distant rumble of shattered stone rolled from the Manor's core; Jared raised an eyebrow, guessing Julian's temper had found a wall to break.

Hall of Infinity secret chamber

Lantern-flames flickered against the black-iron walls while Julian sat rigid upon the star-steel throne, each report from his confidants dropping like cold water into a forge.

The intelligence elder finished his bow. "We scoured every ascension log and level thirteen registry for a Jared matching that description—nothing."

The words hung, heavy with implication.

"Which means," the elder added, "he slipped up from the lower worlds by unsanctioned routes, recently."

A ripple of unease circled the chamber.

His graveled voice carried the weight of certainty that chilled even the torchlight.

A second elder stepped forward, brow knit. "How could a mere level-eight heaven cultivator breach those layers, slip past the Sky-Patrol Envoys, and land in our courtyard?"

"That," the intelligence elder conceded, "is exactly the puzzle."

The intelligence elder cleared his throat. "Based on what Elder Wood saw that day and our covert watch afterward that young man's true Strength is far above the heavenly-immortal realm."

He lowered his voice. "He brushed off the Manor Lord's pressure and took his strike like nothing. I fear his true level is no lower than a sixth-grade upper immortal."

A hard silence settled over the chamber. Julian felt every elder's gaze hang in the cold lamplight while the words echoed in his ears.

Prodigies who punched above their level existed, but an entire major realm? Julian's fingertips tingled; even he had never heard of such a gap being crossed so calmly.

Another elder leaned in, worry creasing his brow. "His technique and the energy he wields are strange—nothing we can identify."

A third elder chimed in.

"It's gray, laced with annihilation, as

if it can dissolve anything. We've

scoured countless tomes yet found

no match someone might behind him, or he gained a world-shaking legacy."

Julian's index finger tapped the star-iron armrest—steady, deliberate. The faint thunk-thunk cut through the hush.

Behind the calm mask his thoughts spun, each loop faster than the last.

A stranger from below, armed with bizarre strength, priceless secrets, and a clear reason to cozy up to his daughter—every detail lined up like a row of knives.

Quentin's disappearance, the Turner brothers' gruesome end—Julian could almost see Jared's shadow stitched through both events.

Was the boy aiming at Jade Immortal Manor itself?

Or did he want the secret buried under Soulfall Slope?

Or, worse, was he after the celestials?

If it was the manor, the game was simple—blood debt or profit.

If it was the slope or the celestials, the ripples could swallow cities.

Deep inside, Julian tasted his own fear of the celestials, mixed with a resentment he never dared voice.

Years of building Jade Immortal City, bending knee, paying tribute, and even handing over the finest soul crystals just to punish petty criminals—none of that was what he'd envisioned for himself.

He'd once dreamed bigger of shaking their chains off and ruling outright.

Yet the celestials' power hovered like a sword over his skull, daring him to twitch. He had seen those four celestial venerables in person; their depth felt bottomless. Next to them, Jade Immortal Manor glimmered like a firefly under a harvest moon. Now Jared had cannonballed into the still pond, sending rings outward that no one could stop.

That eerie strength, that terrifying potential—Julian saw, for the first time in years, a genuine variable.

What if Jared—or whoever stood behind him—could really stand toe-to-toe with the celestials?

Even the faintest chance was worth watching... maybe even nudging.

Once born, the thought spread through him like wildfire.

Calling this council was less about crushing Jared than about weighing these elders and scouting the road ahead.

A Warrior Undefeatable

Julian let his voice roll across the stone walls. "Gentlemen," he said, the single word sharp as a bell.

He told them Jared would stay contained in Grace Pavilion—watched, unharmed. Then he shifted. A colder current settled in his tone. There was something more urgent on the table.

He paused, a cold glint in his eyes. "The celestial envoy will arrive in three days, as usual, to collect this season's tribute and soul crystals."

At the mention of soul crystals, a faint unease pinched every elder's face.

They all knew what those crystals were, and exactly where they came from.

Quentin and the Turner brothers had done the dirty work, but the seal on the order bore Julian's own hand. None of them were blind.

The treasury elder wetted his lips. "Manor Lord, about the soul crystals..." His voice faded.

That newest Soul-Refining Crystal, the A11-73 Box, still sat locked inside the secret vault-untouched, waiting.

Julian's eyes narrowed, a cool gleam surfacing.

After a pause he said, "Treat the envoy with our highest honors."

"As for the soul crystals, tell him the formation faltered after the last harvest, so their quality is unstable. We need a short delay to refine them."

Delay? The single word hung in the lantern smoke.

Elders traded uneasy looks. Nothing like this had ever happened.

The celestials kept strict clocks and stricter standards. Asking for time was the same as poking their rules with a knife.

The thought sliced through the chamber: the celestial envoy would never simply let it slide.

Julian felt the weight of that certainty settle between his ribs, cold as unfinished steel.

"Manor Lord, this... it could anger the envoy." The elder's voice quavered despite his effort to steady it.

Sweat glimmered at the man's temples, the scent of nervous salt leaking into the still air.

"Infuriate them?" Julian let the question hang, a thin layer of frost on every syllable. A dry laugh slipped from his throat. "For nearly a century, has Jade Immortal Manor ever shorted them a single shard of soul crystal?"

"One unexpected delay," he continued, voice low but sharp, "a proper explanation, a token compensation-would they really burn my manor to the ground for that?"

"It gives us the perfect chance to feel out their limits, to see how they twitch when pressed."

He paused, letting the silence tighten.

His gaze slid across the elders. "Pass the word. When the envoy arrives in three days, the guards around Grace Pavilion can relax a touch. Especially the hidden patrol routes leading toward the treasury district-adjust their timing."

The words hit like cold water.

Several elders blinked, blank for a heartbeat, then realization struck, draining color from their faces.

They understood: the Manor Lord meant to hand Jared a doorway straight to the celestial envoy.

Maybe more than a doorway-maybe tacit permission for violence.

Playing with fire, nothing less.

No-dancing on the cliff's edge.

If the celestials sensed Jade Immortal Manor was colluding against their envoy, annihilation would follow.

"Manor Lord, think twice!" several elders blurted, almost in unison.

"My mind is set."

Julian flicked his sleeve, cutting their protests short.

A gambler's heat flushed his eyes. "Desperate days demand desperate moves. Jared might be a curse—or a catalyst. Let's see how high a wave he can raise."

"If he truly has the skill to maim—or even keep the celestial envoy, then perhaps Jade Immortal Manor's path shifts for good."

His gaze drifted toward Grace Pavilion, unreadable currents swirling behind it.

Daughter, this time your sweetheart—and the entire manor become my stake in a towering gamble.

Win, and the horizon blows open; lose, and ashes are all that remain.

Silence pooled, thick and absolute.

Three days flicked past in a blink.

Lanterns and banners lit the manor, but an odd tautness tugged at every smile.

Julian threw the gates wide and stood outside with his core elders, backs straight as pikes.

By late morning, a clear phoenix cry rang across the sky.

A jeweled carriage, hauled by three snow-white Jade Phoenixes and ringed by silver armored celestial guards, broke through the clouds and drifted to the manor gate.

The curtain lifted. A young man in a moon-white star-embroidered robe stepped down, handsome yet edged with arrogant shadow.

He looked barely twenty, yet the pressure rolling off him screamed sixth-grade upper immortal.

A pale nimbus haloed his form; his gaze skimmed over the crowd like a king sizing up insects.

This was Clive, the celestial envoy here for tribute.

"Welcome, Mr. Clive!" voices rose in practiced harmony.

Julian stepped forward, hands cupped, every movement steeped in courtesy.

Clive answered with a curt grunt, swept his eyes over them, then strolled inside as if returning to his own courtyard.

"Manor Lord Jade, my time is short. Are the offerings and soul crystals prepared or not?"

Julian hurried after him, a smile pinned in place. "The journey must have been taxing. The banquet is set, and the offerings await your inspection."

"Only the soul crystals... suffered a small mishap."

"Hm?" Clive's tone sharpened like a drawn blade.

He halted, turned his head, eyes cooling. "A mishap?"

"After the last collection, the array at Soulfall Slope flickered. The condensation process grew unstable."

"To guarantee quality, we're reinforcing the crystals."

"A few more days, Envoy, and I will personally deliver them to Divine Punishment Hall and beg the venerable ones' pardon."

Clive studied him for several breaths, then smiled—a dead thing wearing lips. "Manor Lord Jade, you've ruled Jade Immortal City for years with prudence. This... truly catches me off guard."

"Fine. Since there's a cause, a short delay is acceptable. But spare me the feast I must head to the next manor. Count the tribute, hand it over, and I'll leave at once."

Julian watched the envoy's half-smile. Inside the man's pale eyes flicked a thin, chilly doubt that belied his easy tone.

Julian could tell the man took the words only halfway, the flicker behind his gaze made that plain.

Even so, the envoy clearly meant to avoid a scene while he stood inside Jade Immortal Manor.

He seemed intent on grabbing the tribute, quitting the grounds, and letting his people dig into the crystal issue afterward.

"Yes, yes. The tribute is ready in the treasury. Please, envoy, come verify it."

A cool prickle slid along Julian's spine; the envoy was not so easily fooled, yet he kept his face deferential.

He led the party toward the treasury wing.