

The Witch 181

Chapter 181: Sudden Disturbance

"In the past two days, more people, who we believed to be members of the Assembly of Silent Night, fled into the Red Goblin Mountains from the west, east, and north," the black-haired Senior Witch began her report after receiving the order.

"Inquisitor Rosedriah attempted to intercept one of their group before they could flee into the cursed region, but the enemy was stronger than we anticipated. Two of our people were killed, and Inquisitor Rosedriah was also injured in the clash."

"Inquisitor Rosedriah, a Peak-stage Senior Witch, couldn't stop a small group of wolf-men even when she had the advantage of surprise and the full might of her magic?" Helia furrowed her brows with surprise.

If the Inquisitor Rosedriah had fought the wolf-men inside the Red Goblin Mountains' cursed region, then she wouldn't have been surprised.

But to think that Inquisitor Rosedriah got injured outside of it...

The Assembly of Silent Night's members was far stronger than she had imagined.

If Inquisitor Rosedriah couldn't defeat a small group of wolf-men in an advantageous terrain, then how could she, another Peak-stage Senior Witch, defeat them inside the cursed region?

She would be killed.

"Are you getting cold feet, Lord Helia?" Ember teased with a smile and said, "We already know the doggies in the deeper parts of the kingdom are much stronger than those operating in the outer parts. Inquisitor Rosedriah must have encountered more than one Peak B-rank Witch Hunter."

"Anyway, this is why Headmaster Astoria's strength is crucial to our punitive expedition," Ember stated before she calmly turned to the survey team member. "You can continue the report."

"Yes, Grand Inquisitor," the black-haired Senior Witch complied with a nod.

"Although Inquisitor Rosedriah was injured, she still pursued the wolf-men into the mountains for some distance before she gave up the chase when it got too deep. However, that was also when we found something strange about the Red Goblin Mountains."

"The green goblins didn't attack the wolf-men; they actually let them flee into the deeper parts of the mountains as if they were welcoming them."

"What? How is that possible?" Helia exclaimed with a startled look, interrupting the survey team member's report again. "I've never heard of goblins serving humans or even working with them before..."

"Ahem, sorry," Helia apologized with a cough, recovered her composure, and calmly said, "Please continue."

The black-haired Senior Witch nodded.

"What we found stranger was that prior to that incident, we did find a trail of goblin corpses, which did suggest that an earlier group of wolf-men had fought the goblins when they fled into the mountains."

"However, the trail of goblin corpses abruptly ended along with all traces of battle at some point as if the wolf-men group had suddenly vanished or the goblins stopped fighting them. When Inquisitor Rosedriah paired the two incidents together, she did suggest that the wolf-men and the goblins may have reached some sort of agreement and teamed up."

"Or perhaps the wolf-men had somehow succeeded in bringing the goblins under their command," Ember thought aloud for everyone to hear.

"Considering the goblins are creatures of the darkness and low-level minions for demons, and the wolf-men possess darkness attributes after fusing with Fuhengir's blood, it might really be possible for them to control the goblins."

"What's the estimated number of wolf-men in the Red Goblin Mountains now?" Ember inquired shortly after with a frown.

"Answering the Grand Inquisitor, the survey team estimated the Assembly of Silent Night's members in the Red Goblin Mountains to be over fifty," the black-haired Senior Witch replied.

"Over fifty, huh?" Ember knitted her brows with a deep look before she said, "It seems we will have to change our plans."

"What kind of plan do you have in mind, Marquis Ember?" Helia asked.

"Didn't you want to conquer the Red Goblin Mountains? That's what we will do—No, we have to do it, Lord Helia," Ember stated decisively.

"If those doggies indeed have the ability to command the goblins, the Red Goblin Mountains will become a new Dark Zone if we let their power grow. As such, we must wipe out the goblins before we take on the wolf-men, even if it takes us time to do so."

"Right, it would be terrible if we cut straight into the depths of the mountains to face the wolf-men, only to be surrounded by an endless horde of goblins," Helia added.

...

After grasping the situation of the Red Goblin Mountains, Ember and Helia started to revise their battle plan. At the same time, they also apologized to Headmaster Astoria for delaying her from entering the mountains.

"After all is said and done, I am still allowed to enter the mountain to slay goblins," Astoria coolly said.

"We came to the Red Goblin Mountains with high momentum, but your spirit is wavering quickly, Marquis Ember. This is unlike you. The High Witch of Purgatory Flame that I know wouldn't be afraid of the enemy's strength or the Curse of the Purple Umbala. You would just burn everything away."

"The dangers and desperation we experienced in the Holy War were far greater than something like this," Astoria added impassively before she entered the mountains without hesitation.

However, at that point, neither Lord Helia nor Marquis Ember stopped her.

As they had decided on dragging out the battle as long as it was required of them to eliminate all the goblins on the Red Goblin Mountains, it was fine for Headmaster Astoria to hunt goblins as long as she returned and restored her strength before the main battle.

Nevertheless, Ember took Astoria's words to heart and could not help shaking her head with a self-deprecating smile.

She did feel some pressure when she thought about fighting powerful wolf-men in the cursed region. But Astoria reminded her who she was, the High Witch of Purgatory Flame.

There wouldn't be a problem if she burned away the Curse of Purple Umbala before it could affect her.

"Gather our troops. I will inform them of our battle plan," Ember instructed her subordinate.

But before the subordinate answered, a sudden disturbance from the Red Goblin Mountains caught everyone's attention.

Hundreds of black crows suddenly flapped their wings and took off from the trees in the mountains as if something caused all of them to flee...

Chapter 182: Surprised Ambush

"Ah-ah-ahhh—!"

Within the Red Goblin Mountains' cursed region, a Mid Rank 2 Aura Master's interrupted cry resounded briefly before becoming abruptly silent.

When other mercenaries in the area were drawn over to the source of the cry, they found an entire team of six Mid Rank 2 Aura Masters lying on the ground, skewered to death by poisoned arrows and darts. Their skin also quickly turned green and purple.

The mercenaries felt chilled and alarmed, causing them to quickly search the surroundings with sharp vigilant gazes.

Nothing could be found until a High Rank 2 Aura Master heard some scraping tree branches, leading the person to catch a glimpse of movement up in the trees roughly fifty yards away.

Upon seeing more than two dozen goblin archers and dart shooters camouflaged in the trees while loading up their next arrows and darts and aiming at them, the High Rank 2 Aura Master's expression abruptly changed.

"Goblin archers in the trees up ahead! Take cover behind trees!" the High Rank 2 Aura Master quickly warned the others.

Swish!

A volley of arrows and darts were shot, missing almost everyone. The Rank 2 Aura Masters easily dodged, while a few Senior Witches conjured mana shields to block.

However, the antimagic spores eroded their shields of mana, causing gaps to appear in them, allowing some arrows and darts to pass through.

A Senior Witch was struck on the neck with a poisoned dart before her entire body froze and fell to the ground, paralyzed.

"My Lady!" a Mid Rank 2 Aura Master quickly rushed over to pick up the Early-stage Senior Witch and carried her behind cover.

"Dammit, we need to get rid of those archers and dart-shooters!" another Rank 2 Aura Master rushed forward with several others.

At the same time, the other Senior Witches also fired their offensive magic at the goblin archers and dart-shooters in the distance.

[Fire Arrow]

[Wind Cutter]

[Rock Bullets]

However, some magic circles collapsed mid-activation, while others severely lost power before activation and only traveled a few yards before they dispersed into the air or fell to the ground.

"Kree-kikiki."

The goblin archers laughed at the Senior Witches' useless move before hopping from tree branches to tree branches, drawing distance from the Aura Masters chasing after them.

"Don't let them get away!"

"Don't chase them!"

Several Aura Masters chased furiously while others argued against them.

However, only a few managed to stop, while the remaining three Early Rank 2 Aura Masters continued to give chase. Seeing as they were about to catch up to the goblin archers and dart-shooters, they couldn't simply stop.

Alas, what awaited them were more traps.

Click!

One of the Early Rank 2 Aura Master's feet got caught in a low-tied roped, activating a spiked log to come swinging from the left.

However, such a low-level trap failed to slow the Early Rank 2 Aura Master, causing the spiked log to miss him. Another spiked log came from the right, which also missed him.

Unfortunately, the Early Rank 2 Aura Master ended up stepping onto a patch of fake ground. He fell into a spiked pit and got himself impaled to death.

Even the spikes were laced with poison.

When the other two hot-headed Early Rank 2 Aura Master saw what happened to the person ahead, they came to a grinding stop, and their heads quickly cooled with fear.

Swish! Swish!

Several Rock Bullets shot past them and struck down a few goblin archers in the distance before a Senior Witch exclaimed with surprise.

"Use your Specialized Magic! Specialized Magic isn't affected by the Curse of the Purple Umbala!"

"It's true! Specialized Magic works perfectly fine!"

Senior Witches in the area quickly tested their Specialized Magic and confirmed the truth of the matter.

...

Meanwhile, similar ambushes and traps simultaneously occurred in other parts of the cursed region, causing no minor casualties among the mercenaries.

Although few died, at least two dozen people were incapacitated by the goblin poison, whether it was an impaled wound or even a slight graze.

The goblin poison worked wonders, making it especially terrifying.

Nevertheless, after the initial surprise from the goblin's ambushes, several mercenary groups halted their advances and retreated to recuperate the injured and report their discoveries to the camp.

...

"What the hell is wrong with these goblins? Are they really Rank 1 Green Goblins!? Since when did they become so intelligent and organized?! Damned vermin, I can't believe I got injured by such weak creatures," a Mid Rank 2 Aura Master cursed while getting treated.

"If you have the energy to curse, then focus it on your recovery instead," a water-attribute Senior Witch said with a frown as she extracted the remnant goblin poison from the person's leg.

"Such a vicious poison..."

Ember and Helia furrowed their brows as they made a tour through the camp of injured mercenaries. They had received multiple reports from different groups beforehand.

"Goblins never resorted to such tactics before... As expected, someone is commanding them and teaching them new tactics. These dirty tactics are in line with the Assembly of Silent Night's nature of work. However, I feel like these tactics and traps weren't taught by those doggies," Ember muttered with a frown.

"What makes you say that, Marquis Ember?" Helia asked with a suspicious look, wondering if the Grand Inquisitor had the same doubts as her.

"No matter what, the goblins are monsters of lesser intelligence. They shouldn't have been able to pick up such tactics so quickly, even if those wolf-men are skilled in teaching. I'm more inclined to believe they had been trained by someone else for a much longer period or..."

"The goblins the mercenaries encountered in the cursed region were all part of an evolved group," Helia finished.

"It looks like Lord Helia also had the same thought," Ember nodded before she said, "It looks like this punitive expedition won't be smooth sailing. I'm starting to get an ominous feeling from the Red Goblin Mountains."

"Likewise, Marquis Ember," Helia replied with knitted brows.

As the two toured through the injured camp and listened to more reports from the wounded mercenaries and their affiliate groups, Ember's frown deepened.

"Unexpectedly, no one knows the reason behind the disturbance that caused hundreds of black crows to fly away from the Red Goblin Mountains..."

Chapter 183: Goblin Hunter

Somewhere in the depths of the cursed region, Vaan continued to advance when half of the hired mercenaries had already pulled back to the camp.

At that moment, there was no one else who had ventured as far as Vaan did. The closest mercenary group was more than four hundred and sixty yards behind him.

Swish!

Vaan's eyes sharpened as he weaved through a volley of poisoned arrows and darts before nimbly scaling up a random tree and stomping on its trunk with one foot to shoot forward with explosive speed.

Bang!

A very round crack appeared on the tree trunk as if it had been drilled while the tree itself shook heavily and the leaves rustled endlessly.

In the same instance that the round crack appeared, Vaan's body seemingly disappeared, closing a gap of fifty yards between him and the group of goblin archers ahead in a mere instance.

<[Total Speed: 185 → 360 (Mid-level Rank 2 → Mid-level Rank 3)]>

It was only for a brief instance, but Vaan's speed nearly doubled, reaching a level only achievable by Mid Rank 3 Aura Grandmasters.

Naturally, the group of two dozen goblin archers was caught off guard by his massive burst of speed. By the time they panicked and turned to flee, two dozen heads fell in the next several breaths.

The goblins may have learned a few tricks, but they couldn't overcome the absolute gap in strength between them.

Ding!

<You have successfully executed Earth Acceleration (Low rank) and Illusory Lightning Steps (Mid rank) simultaneously>

<You have created a new movement-type magic-martial skill, Extreme Lightning Flash Step (High-rank)>

...

'A movement skill with lightning in its name when it uses earth magic, huh?' Vaan thought comically at the irony.

Nevertheless, Earth Acceleration worked as he had theorized.

Although it could only be applied to objects with earth elements, his Earth Spirit Body could be listed under such a category.

Even so, the burden of using Earth Acceleration on his own body was especially great. He could barely withstand it without his organs rupturing, thanks to his high defense, which had reached Rank 3.

That said, he would most likely suffer some internal injuries if he used the skill consecutively within a short period.

'I need to increase my body's defense attributes to the Mid-level Rank 3 if I want to use this skill without side effects,' Vaan noted.

Even without the Mid-rank movement-type martial skill, just Earth Acceleration alone gave him 150 bonus points in speed.

...

After collecting the left ears from the goblins' heads, accumulating a total of eighty left goblin ears, Vaan continued to explore the depths of the cursed region.

Without anyone around, he could act more freely.

Earth Acceleration wasn't a Specialized Magic he would like to use on his Earth Spirit Body around others, even if they wouldn't be able to guess it was a Specialized Magic.

Instead, they would suspect that he had mastered a high or even peak-rank movement-type martial art.

Such a level of martial art was bound to attract attention and envy, even greed. And in a lawless place like the Red Goblin Mountains, it would only bring unwarranted problems.

Although Vaan didn't care about killing other humans, it didn't mean he had to bring unnecessary troubles upon himself.

Vaan's following step slowed by half a beat as his Omni-Sense picked up another group of goblins.

'Twelve on the tree branches, seventy-five yards ahead, six in the bushes behind the trees on the left, and another eight on the right, huh?'

In a short moment, Vaan locked onto their positions and numbers.

While the goblins did their best to hide, they failed to escape his detection. Their irregular breathing and movements were all picked up by him.

And as he got closer, even their heartbeats could be sensed.

When Vaan failed to pick up any other goblin group within his detection range, he immediately went in for the kill, coming from their left side.

The abrupt noise startled them.

When they quickly turned to look and spotted Vaan, who had already entered their proximity, a few froze while others felt intimidated.

The subtle difference in their emotions compared to the last group was noticed by him.

Nevertheless, Vaan slaughtered the twenty-four goblins, all the same, making quick work of them with his crude knives, blades, and swords he had picked up and added to his collection.

Ding!

<Your throwing mastery proficiency has increased>

<Your blade mastery proficiency has increased>

<Your sword mastery proficiency has increased>

...

<You have killed a hundred Rank 1 Green Goblins>

<Your Killing Intent (Low rank) has improved>

<Your Killing Intent (Low rank) has gained a special trait, Goblin Hunter>

=====

[Killing Intent (Low rank)]

Overview: When directing your killing intent at other living beings, there is a slight chance of inflicting fear to intimidate or break their fighting spirit.

Effect 1 [Normal]: 10% chance to inflict fear on Rank 1 beings or weaker.

Effect 2 [Goblin Hunter]: There's a 20% higher chance of inflicting fear on Rank 1 goblins or weaker.

=====

'Interesting...' Vaan thought.

He believed it was possible to inflict fear with killing intent by first growing the killing intent from killing other living beings.

However, he didn't believe it was as easy or quick as the system made it appear.

'Does the system have a way to reap the vengeful souls of those I killed and feed them to my killing intent?' Vaan suspected.

Alas, he hardly knew anything about the soul. It was a realm he was still far from grasping.

Boom...

While Vaan was collecting left goblin ears and his spoils of war from the goblin corpses, he felt a distant tremor.

Although it was picked up within his detection range, the actual source of the tremor was definitely, much further away, at least five miles.

Boom...! Boom...!

Vaan sensed the distant noises again.

The ground rumbled, trees shook, leaves rustled, and the wind swirled. At first, the disturbance came from behind him. But in a short time, it came from ahead.

Someone had passed him and ventured deeper.

However, the person was still far enough from his location that he didn't see the person as they passed him.

But with such a ruckus, he could only think of one person.

'That use of brute strength... That's Headmaster Astoria fighting, no doubt. Is she trying to scare all the birds away from the Red Goblin Mountains?' Vaan thought amusedly.

Chapter 184: Goblin Horde

'Judging by the direction of the sound, Headmaster Astoria should have passed the region I was at to investigate the ruckus I've previously caused,' Vaan thought.

Nevertheless, Headmaster Astoria didn't linger in the area for long and went on ahead to slaughter goblins.

If Vaan had traveled straight, Headmaster Astoria would have indeed run into him. Fortunately, he had chosen to veer off to the left path.

That being said, Vaan was a little surprised to see Headmaster Astoria enter the Red Goblin Mountains so soon.

'The Grand Inquisitor's original plan was to have the mercenaries clear a path for the main force... But the goblins in the inner region have proven themselves to be much more troublesome to deal with... If Headmaster Astoria entered the mountain, then that means the plan has been changed...' Vaan figured.

Nevertheless, he didn't find it too surprising.

After all, the goblins in the depths of the cursed region have shown to be skillfully trained, but not by the members of the Assembly of the Silent Night. They couldn't have trained the goblins so quickly even if they could control them.

'As expected, the ominous feeling continues to grow stronger. There's definitely something wrong with the Red Goblin Mountains,' Vaan figured.

With Headmaster Astoria joining the goblin cleanup, it was safe to assume that they were going to take their time with conquering the Red Goblin Mountains, which was a safe approach.

At the very least, it was much safer than simply charging into the heart of the mountain to eliminate the Assembly of Silent Night's members.

The Assembly of Silent Night's members and the goblins were unlikely to be the only threats to be found in the Red Goblin Mountains.

'If Headmaster Astoria continues to attract all the attention like this, she is likely to draw out some enemies. That could be my chance to sneak into the core region,' Vaan pondered.

However, he wasn't so confident in sneaking around undetected, especially not when the Plant-type Abomination's attention was on him.

That being said, he didn't quite understand the relationship between the Plant-type Abomination, the goblins, the members of the Assembly of the Silent Night, and the potential fourth unknown party.

Rumble...!

Vaan suddenly paused his movement and extended his senses to the ground, feeling numerous weak tremors through it. They were caused by the movements of a very large force.

His eyes flickered in the next moment.

"Seems like Headmaster Astoria already attracted a goblin horde from the core region. But these kinds of tremors... There must be at least thousands of goblins coming out," Vaan muttered thoughtfully.

Having traveled so deep into the mountain, he had yet to see any other wildlife besides birds.

Considering there were so many goblins living in the Red Goblin Mountains, they would have long starved to death—if they didn't have a food source to live on.

"Goblins are cave-dwellers, to begin with. There must be an entire world underneath the mountains. But getting inside has grown increasingly difficult over the years," Vaan thought.

At the very least, it wasn't as difficult during the year Lord Helia and Lady Aeliana ventured into the mountains in search of the magic flower.

The Red Goblin Mountains had experienced huge changes in the past three years.

Boom!

The ground suddenly shook, affected by an especially big impact in the distance, which was followed by several more big impacts.

Boom! Boom!

The clash between Headmaster Astoria and the goblin horde had started.

Before long, the endless cries and snarling laughter of goblins could be heard in Vaan's area, which was soon followed by hundreds of them entering his detection range.

Thousands of goblins should have been attracted to Headmaster Astoria, and yet there was a detached force of hundreds of goblins passing through his area.

Unexpectedly, the goblin horde was much larger than he imagined.

"Given this many goblins leaving the core region, the person in command of these goblins must have sent them all out to overwhelm their enemies," Vaan's eyes flickered, having understood what was going on.

While the Grand Inquisitor's side wanted to reduce the goblins' numbers a little at a time, the other side wasn't just going to sit around and let it happen.

They would rather send out all their goblin forces at once to destroy their enemies, forcing an all-out war.

Evidently, the person in command wasn't stupid.

There was no reason to be passive when they hold the advantage on their own turf, the region under the heavy influence of the Curse of the Purple Umbala.

From hundreds of goblins, the number increased to over a thousand goblins in Vaan's area. He even spotted a few dozen Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins in their ranks.

"If there's already this many goblins in just my area alone, there must be at least tens of thousands in this goblin horde... Just how big is this underground world?" Vaan wondered.

Nevertheless, his gaze sharpened in the next instance.

Seeing the huge force of goblins making a clean sweep of the area, it was unlikely for him to sneak past them. They weren't leaving any gaps in their formation.

He could choose to retreat.

However, he didn't feel like he could lose. And if he could make it past this detached force of goblins, he would have no problem reaching the core region after as everyone else would be busy fighting.

'Well, this is fine. I'll just take this chance to test the effectiveness of my Goblin Hunter Killing Intent,' Vaan mused.

Roar!

Before the thousand-strong goblin force got close to Vaan, one of the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin's noses suddenly twitched before it roared in his location.

"Oh? The hobgoblins even have enhanced senses?" Vaan mused with a smile, feeling unaffected that his hidden location was exposed. Any new discovery at this point was unsurprising to him. "So the goblins weren't just trained but also enhanced."

Shortly after hopping down from the trees, he swapped out his White Unicorn Spear and crude weapons for his dual gunblades as he faced the large goblin force.

Against such a large goblin force, he couldn't fight casually as he did until now.

"Let's dance."

Chapter 185: Killing Frenzy

Roar!

As if sensing Vaan's provocation, the large Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins, standing over nine feet tall, beat their chests with one hand and roared while holding up their huge clubs with their other hands.

Kree! Kikiki!

The smaller Rank 1 Green Goblins also cried in response as if they were doing a war cry to raise their morale.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't wait for them to attack.

No, he made his move first.

Swish!

Vaan lunged forward toward the goblins.

As he closed the gap between them and directed his killing intent at the goblins ahead, a few dozens of the Rank 1 Green Goblins in the vanguard immediately felt intimidated by his gaze.

However, one of the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins snapped them out of their cowering state with a roar and pointed its club at him.

The vanguard quickly knelt and over two hundred goblin archers aimed their arrows at him.

Not only did the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins possess enhanced senses, but they were also capable of commanding the grunts under them, exhibiting greater intelligence than regular Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins.

Vaan's eyes flickered sharply.

He canceled his advancement and made a side dash for the cover of a big tree, which caused another Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin to roar and stop their grunts from wasting arrows.

Roar!

Under the other Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins' command, the Rank 1 Green Goblins spread out to encircle Vaan.

However, he didn't wait for that to happen.

He increased the heat in the blade of his gunblades with Heat Manipulation, then made several slashes at the thick trunk of the tree at very specific angles, following up with a strong body ram.

Creak!

The huge tree started to tilt forward towards the goblins and hobgoblins ahead.

As the huge tree fell towards them, one of the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins tried to hold up the tree to save a few dozen other goblins from getting crushed to death.

However, the tree far outweighed the strength the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin could endure. It ended up getting crushed to death along with the few dozen Rank 1 Green Goblins without smashing into any other trees in the area.

At the same time, Vaan had run up along the tree trunk as it was falling and hopped off the moment before the tree smashed against the ground.

Boom!

The ground shook under the weight of the impact while Vaan landed right in the middle of the large goblin group. The Rank 1 Green Goblins immediately panicked under his cold gaze as they awaited orders from their commanding hobgoblins.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Several dozen goblin heads quickly dropped in a flurry of quick slashes that drew black lines in the air. Each goblin head was cleanly cut with precision.

Roar!

The Rank 2 Green Hobgoblins tried to restore their formation by giving out commands to the Rank 1 Green Goblins.

While most of the Rank 1 Green Goblins moved as commanded of them, at least three dozen failed to follow. They were the ones at the front, facing Vaan directly.

Nevertheless, their numbers dropped drastically as Vaan lopped off their heads with his gunblades.

A Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin quickly stepped forward and swung down on him with its huge club, but he sidestepped it before he ran up its arm and...

Puchi!

Blood gushed out from the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin's neck after Vaan cut off its head with a cross slash in a single instance.

Roar!

Right after several hobgoblins roared, goblin archers fired their arrows at Vaan.

However, he quickly stowed away his gunblades and grabbed the huge headless hobgoblin by the leg, and hurled it around to block all the incoming projectiles.

Having hundreds of arrows fired at him, some were bound to get through with such a method of blocking. But strangely, the stone-tip arrows all froze as if they struck an invisible wall.

Vaan ended up blocking some arrows with Earth Manipulation and dodging the rest with skillful body maneuvers, all while still gripping onto the huge headless hobgoblin body dripping with blood.

He hurled the huge headless hobgoblin body at a group of goblins in the distance shortly after, collapsing rows of goblins as it smashed against them.

Ka-cha!

Numerous bones broke under the impact, and several goblins at the forefront of it died on the spot.

Nevertheless, following Vaan's toss, he withdrew his gunblades from the Heaven-Swallowing Space again, each loaded with ammunition, and rushed toward another group of goblins.

Although he never managed to procure gunpowder for them, it was not a problem.

He raised his gunblades and fired ahead by applying Earth Acceleration on his bullets, emptying his magazines in a couple of short breaths.

More than a dozen goblins collapsed amidst the goblins' ranks soundlessly with bullet holes in their foreheads from the short burst of fire.

There was no loud exploding noise of gunpowder, only the whistling noise of bullets cutting through the air.

Ding!

<You have created a new skill, Rapid Fire (Low rank)>

<Your firearm mastery proficiency has increased>

Click!

Vaan released the empty magazines from their handles, storing them in his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

At the same time, two new loaded magazines fell out before finding themselves slotted in their rightful places with another two clicks.

Kreuk!

The goblins ahead cried with fear as he dashed swiftly towards them.

His killing intent had grown with each kill and placed a greater effect on the Rank 1 Green Goblins, causing them to break formation as they cowered backward a few steps.

Roar!

The hobgoblin in charge of them roared furiously at them, but it proved to be less effective than before. Over twenty goblins were still under the effect of fear and intimidation.

As a result, Vaan easily reaped their lives and continued his killing frenzy.

The hobgoblin in the back of the goblin ranks was furious at the cowardly grunts under its command and shoved them aside.

It ended up throwing its heavy club at him with a powerful toss, intending to kill him under its weight.

However, Vaan easily evaded it with minimum movement and effort. Even if he didn't, the club force wouldn't have hurt his Low-level Rank 3 defense body.

In retaliation, he raised one of his gunblade and fired one shot back at the hobgoblin. The bullet pierced through its eye to get to its brain before killing it.

Chapter 186: Cave Master

Although Vaan easily killed the Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin with a single bullet through the eye, it would have been a different story if he tried to aim for its forehead.

Peng!

Vaan fired another bullet with Earth Acceleration at another Rank 2 Green Hobgoblin. And as expected, the bullet got stuck in the hobgoblin's forehead, failing to penetrate it thoroughly.

'No surprise there. Right now, my bullet's firepower is solely reliant on Earth Acceleration... Which should be enough to kill ordinary Mid-level Rank 2 monsters and below...' Vaan mused while slashing off goblin heads around him.

'These enhanced hobgoblins are at least High-level Rank 2 or Peak-level Rank 2. If normal accelerated bullets don't work, then...'

Vaan's eyes sharpened in the next instance.

He targeted the same hobgoblin and applied Heat Manipulation and Earth Acceleration to his next bullet.

Swoosh!

A red-hot bullet flew out from one of his gunblade's barrels with a fast spinning force like the previous shots, thanks to the spiral grooves found inside the gunblade barrels.

Nevertheless, unlike the last bullet, the red-hot bullet drilled right through the hobgoblin's head and killed it.

Vaan didn't simply apply Heat Manipulation to the entire bullet, only its outermost layer. As such, it was able to retain most of its structural firmness.

Ding!

<You have created a new skill, Hot Shot (Low rank)>

Following the skill creation of [Hot Shot] from the application of [Heat Manipulation] and [Earth Acceleration], Vaan tested different combinations such as [Earth Manipulation] and [Earth Acceleration] to shoot with more spin.

And finally, he tested the simultaneous application of [Heat Manipulation], [Earth Manipulation], and [Earth Acceleration], giving his bullet more power and spin on top of its speed.

Ding!

<You have created a new skill, Enhanced Shot (Low rank)>

<You have created a new skill, Enhanced Hot Shot (Mid rank)>

'Enhanced Hot Shot... I can break the defense of a Low-level Rank 3 monster with this kind of attack power. I'd best conserve my bullets,' Vaan decided.

Vaan started throwing his crude knives, blades, swords, and spears as his killing spree continued. Every weapon he had collected from the goblins was used as projectiles in place of his bullets.

In a short eight minutes, he slaughtered nearly half the thousand-strong goblin force, almost achieving a kill rate of one goblin per second.

Despite the high-intensity fight, Vaan was still far from feeling exhaustion.

Kreuk!

The remaining five hundred goblins and hobgoblins started to waver, terrified by his ever-growing killing intent, and retreated a few steps to create distance from him.

As if those steps weren't enough, they backed further away from the blood-soaked area of headless corpses.

However, they suddenly stopped at a certain point and gritted their teeth, seemingly struggling with an internal decision.

Roar!

Sometime later, the hobgoblins growled at Vaan and commanded all the goblins to attack him at once from every direction.

"So the goblins fear the being behind them more than they fear me, huh? Alright, come! I'll send you all to an early grave!" Vaan welcomed the goblins' charge.

...

...

...

In the core region of the Red Goblin Mountains, near one of the mountain peaks, several large cave entrances could be found, each leading deep underground.

Outside one particularly larger cave entrance, a group of fifty-six wolf-men from the Assembly of Silent Night all gathered around the campfires in their small camp with weary expressions, uncertain of their future.

Suddenly, one wolf-man reached out and grabbed one of the cooked birds roasted over the campfires to eat. But after taking the first bite, he spat the meat out in the next instance.

"Ptui! Absolutely disgusting. How are we supposed to continue living like this?" the wolf-man spat.

"Just be grateful that you are even alive," Silver Hawk coolly stated.

"If it weren't for the Cave Master letting us through, we would still be hanging around the middle region, hiding away from both the goblins and witches."

"Heh, I wouldn't call this living. We are just living on borrowed time," Blood Knife snickered before he added, "Who knows when we will become food for the goblins? We haven't even seen a trace of this Cave Master, only heard his voice. But considering he can command all the goblins in the Red Goblin Mountains, he is most likely the Goblin King—or so I would like to say, but..."

"...Kekeke, what an idle lot you all are..."

A ghastly female voice suddenly sounded from the depths of the cave, causing all the wolf-men to become alert and nervous.

The ghastly female voice precisely belonged to the suspected Goblin King.

"I let you all into my mountains when you lot had nowhere else to go, and this is how you repay me? By talking behind my back? Perhaps, making you all food for my lovely goblins isn't such a bad idea."

"Please ease your anger, Cave Master. Blood Knife does not speak for the rest of us. If you must punish someone, please punish the offender alone," Silver Hawk pleaded, decisively and coldly sacrificing Blood Knife to save the rest of the group.

"Kekeke, look how frightened you all are. Of course, I was just joking," the ghastly female voice laughed sinisterly.

"On a more serious note, the enemy is already at our door. I've already sent out my lovely goblins to confront, but they alone are not enough to stop the enemies. So it's time for all of you to go out and prove your usefulness."

"There are some troublesome flies in the cursed region. I don't need to tell all of you how to deal with them, no?" the ghastly female voice mentioned.

"Not at all, Cave Master. We know exactly what to do. The cursed region is practically our turf. Those witches from the kingdom won't stand a chance against us," Silver Hawk solemnly stated.

"Then, get moving. The longer you delay, the fewer cannon fodders you will have to deal with the enemy."

"Understood, Cave Master."

Silver Hawk and the rest of the wolf-men obeyed the ghastly female voice's will. They had no choice but to do so.

No one knew how strong the Cave Master was, but her ability to instill fear with just her voice spoke volumes of her power.

"Oh, yes. The Battle Maiden of Holy Light, Astoria Braveheart, is fighting at the forefront," the ghastly female voice suddenly added.

The Silver Hawk and the others paused their steps briefly with heavy expressions after hearing those words.

Chapter 187: Astoria's Battle

Boom! Boom!

Over on Astoria's side, huge masses of the earth were sent flying along with powerful gusts of wind that carried dozens of goblins along with it, one after the other.

Astoria had the power to uproot the earth with each swing of her massive greatsword.

However, the force of her sword swing wasn't wholly comprised of raw physical strength. She had injected light-attribute mana into her sword to produce something similar to Aura Users' martial arts, one powered by mana instead of aura.

As such, the force generated by her sword swings looked like an enormous beam of light with a whirling storm of wind around it.

[Sword Blast]

Astoria made an upward swing with her massive greatsword using both hands, sending out another blast of violent gusts of wind, uprooting the earth and blowing away dozens of goblins with their bones and organs crushed.

[Grand Sword Wave]

Seeing that she was slowly getting surrounded by thousands of goblins and hobgoblins, she followed up with a horizontal slash, which sent out a large crescent sword wave of light.

Hundreds of goblins were sliced in half while two dozen hobgoblins lost their legs without exception.

Unlike the crushing force of her last sword skill, her second sword skill, Grand Sword Wave, possessed extreme sharpness.

[Grand Sword Wave]

Her eyes flickered with glints of red and golden light before she sent out another sharp sword wave with her greatsword, felling several hundreds of goblins more and dozens of hobgoblins.

Despite her overwhelming battle prowess and ocean-like killing intent that suffocated the whole area, the goblins and hobgoblins continued to throw themselves at her without a care for their lives.

Just by looking at their eyes, it was clear that the goblins and hobgoblins weren't in their right state of mind. They were being manipulated.

If the goblins and hobgoblins weren't affected by some mental effects, causing them to fight fearlessly without any regard for their lives, they would have long fled from her.

Astoria's eyes sharpened as she scanned through the massive horde of goblins while under the heavy fire of arrows.

However, none of the goblins' poisoned arrows succeeded in reaching her. They were all blocked by a skin-tight light barrier that wasn't affected by the Curse of the Purple Umbala.

[Light Fortification]

The light barrier was Astoria's unique Specialized Magic, which allows her to condense and solidify light to form powerful protective shields.

Although it was mainly used to protect her body, it wasn't limited to such use. She could create any form she wanted as long as she willed it so.

Thus, if the goblins were in their normal state of mind, they would have still fled in the absence of her killing intent. They were creatures that mostly lurked in the darkness and feared powerful light.

As Astoria scanned the horde, she eventually narrowed her eyes on a single goblin that differed from the rest. It had red skin and held a staff.

'A Rank 3 Goblin Shaman,' Astoria determined.

She immediately understood the Rank 3 Goblin Shaman was casting abnormal mental spells on the goblins and hobgoblins to force them to fight.

After sending out another two Grand Sword Wave, Astoria raised the massive greatsword above her with both hands and struck down at the ground.

[Great Heaven Decimating Earth]

Boom!

Astoria split the ground apart with her powerful downward slash, creating an enormous fissure that stretched more than a hundred yards ahead and reached deep into the earth.

Hundreds of goblins along the fissure line fell inside, including the Rank 3 Goblin Shaman.

...

Some distance away from the battlefield, Silver Hawk and the other members of the Assembly of Silent Night rushed towards Headmaster Astoria's location when the powerful tremor made them pause their steps.

"That was just made by the Battle Maiden's sword slash? Truly a monster of a being," Black Crow gasped with shock.

"The Battle Maiden is our greatest foe. If we can take her out, victory will be ours," Silver Hawk solemnly said with a big frown before he added, "All B-rank hunters will join forces to kill her. The rest of you will deal with the other stragglers in the cursed region."

"Understood!"

...

...

...

[Sword Blast]

After creating the enormous fissure with Great Heaven Decimating Earth, Astoria followed up with another attack by firing her Sword Blast into the earthen crack to crush all the goblins trapped inside to death, including the Rank 3 Goblin Shaman.

Right after she used her Sword Blast, she suddenly felt several figures closing the distance on her from multiple directions with terrifying speed.

Her eyes flickered, sensing the danger the newcomers brought her in that instance.

But in the next instance, she felt a scorching-hot wave of fire rushing over from behind her with an even greater speed.

Swish!

A wall of crimson flames covered her right flank in a flash, obstructing several B-rank hunters from attacking her from the right side.

Having one of her sides covered, Astoria immediately focused on fending off the attackers on her left and front sides.

[Great Sword Wave]

"Dodge it!" Silver Hawk cried.

Shinggg—!

The horizontal crescent sword wave sliced through hundreds of goblins and hobgoblins without mercy while the B-rank hunters from the Assembly of Silent Night jumped out of the way.

Some succeeded in evading the attack, while others barely dodged it, just scraping it. Some lost a few strands of hair while others had parts of their clothes torn.

Silver Hawk and the others immediately felt cold sweat while facing Astoria.

Even among High Witches, the Battle Maiden of Holy Light ranked within the top three strongest in the Kingdom of Black Rose. Heck, she might even be the strongest.

Meanwhile, Ember casually approached Astoria, cloaked in purgatory flames that burned away all the tiny antimagic spores in the area, and stopped beside her.

"My, my, what should I do with you, Headmaster Astoria? Even if we make plans, what's the point if you don't follow them? You charged so deep into enemy territory and attracted all of their attention," Ember commented with a rueful smile.

Nevertheless, her eyes were sharp and burning with fighting spirit. She didn't shy away from the battle before them.

Chapter 188: Goblin Slayer

"In the end, you came to help me anyway, Marquis Ember," Astoria casually said, her lips curved into a slight smile.

"It was originally my job to clean up these dogs, to begin with. What would I do if you get yourself killed?" Ember coolly replied before she furrowed her brows. "Nevertheless, it's true that the Curse of the Purple Umbala does not affect Specialized Magic."

"Perhaps it has something to do with the cohesiveness of mana in Specialized Magic," Astoria guessed.

"I've tested it earlier, but it seems like the Curse of the Purple Umbala has a weak dismantling effect. Mana gets pulled apart when it is exposed to the Curse of the Purple Umbala in the air—"

[Great Sword Wave]

Astoria cleaved away the goblins and hobgoblins as they charged at her. They had no interest in listening to her talk with Marquis Ember.

At the same time, the B-rank hunters from the Assembly of Silent Night hid within the goblin horde, awaiting their next chance to strike.

However, Astoria's monstrous strength kept them from getting close.

"How rude of them to interrupt you, Headmaster Astoria. Well, I guess I can't expect much from these primitive creatures of lesser intelligence," Ember coolly said as she took a few steps forward and stared at them with disdain and disgust. "Such ugly creatures should disappear."

Vroosh!

With a wave of her hand, a violent storm of purgatory flames surged from her body to towering heights, erasing everything in its path.

Tree branches and leaves it touched quickly disintegrated into black ashes under its scorching-hot temperatures.

Kreuk!

Countless goblins and hobgoblins cried as they were set ablaze.

The terrible heat tormented their minds and broke their abnormal mental states, causing pure chaos in their ranks.

However, the goblins and hobgoblins only struggled for a few breaths before becoming motionless, blackened corpses that crumbled into ashes when the wind blew over them.

In a short instance, a huge area of land and trees turned black, including more than two thousand goblins and a hundred hobgoblins.

Nevertheless, the B-rank hunters from the Assembly of Silent Night were smart enough to flee before the terrifying flames could reach them.

Even so, the destructiveness of Ember's purgatory flames could not be denied. However, her mana consumption was equally great.

"Are you trying to burn all your mana in one go, Marquis Ember?" Astoria slightly frowned at Ember's extravagant usage of mana. "You'll be vulnerable once you deplete all your mana."

"You don't need to worry, Headmaster Astoria. I've stocked plenty of excess mana and Mana Restoration Potions in my Magic Domain, solely for this expedition," Ember coolly assured.

Shortly after, she sent another terrifying huge wave of fire to burn her enemies.

However, her second attack wasn't as effective as the first time. Several magic barriers were conjured by Rank 3 Goblin Shamans to block it.

As a result, only several hundred goblins and dozens of hobgoblins died instead.

"Oh? There are quite a few Rank 3 Goblin Shamans in this goblin horde. Could there be Peak Rank 3 Goblin Chiefs or even a Goblin King?" Ember uttered with surprise.

...

Meanwhile, Silver Hawk and his people retreated a great distance from the goblin horde and the two High Witches with lingering fears.

"Such terrifying flames and destructiveness! How are we supposed to defeat two High Witches at once? They don't seem to be affected by the Curse of the Purple Umbala at all!" a Peak B-rank hunter with a completely transformed wolf head exclaimed.

"We've miscalculated the effectiveness of the Curse of the Purple Umbala. It doesn't work against the witches' Specialize Magic," Silver Hawk uttered with a serious look.

"However, their mana isn't endless. We'll have our chance once they completely exhaust their mana. Even if we have to sacrifice the entire goblin horde, we have to make it happen! We can't let them regroup with the others!"

"Definitely not!" the other B-rank hunters quickly agreed.

Although they had to face two High Witches at once, they couldn't have hoped for a better situation. It was much better than facing the entire punitive expedition force.

Shortly after, the B-rank hunters assumed command of the goblin horde and had them circle to the rear of Headmaster Astoria and Marquis Ember, cutting off their path of retreat.

"As expected, these dogs indeed have the ability to command the goblins. It looks like they really don't want us to regroup with our troops," Ember uttered before her lips curved into a disdainful smile. "Unfortunately, it takes more than numbers to stop us."

Vroosh!

Ember summoned another violent wave of purgatory flames with her hands and reduced hundreds of goblins into scorched-black corpses without a care for the environment.

...

...

...

Ding!

<You have killed a thousand Rank 1 goblin-type monsters>

<Your Killing Intent (Low rank) has improved>

<Killing Intent (Low rank) → Killing Intent (Mid rank)>

<Your Killing Intent's special trait, Goblin Hunter, has upgraded to Goblin Slayer>

=====

[Killing Intent (Mid rank)]

Overview: When directing your killing intent at other living beings, there is a slight chance of inflicting fear to intimidate or break their fighting spirit.

Effect 1 [Normal]: 10% chance to inflict fear on Rank 2 beings. The chance increases by onefold on weaker beings for each rank difference.

Effect 2 [Goblin Slayer]: There's a 40% higher chance of inflicting fear on Rank 2 goblin-type monsters or weaker.

=====

A series of system notifications appeared after Vaan decimated the thousand-strong goblin force.

Countless headless goblin corpses scattered across the area, and their blood soaked the ground, filling the region with a pungent stench.

Vaan stood in the middle of it all.

Shortly after casually swiping his gunblades at the empty air to clean the goblin blood off them, his calm eyes suddenly flickered with sharpness.

"You can stop watching and come out now," Vaan stated.

Moments later, several other men with wolf-like features stepped out from behind their trees in the distance. They were all Peak C-rank hunters.

Clap, clap, clap!

"Very impressive senses you have," Black Crow casually clapped his hands and boldly approached Vaan.

"But what's more impressive is your killing method; no wasted movement, and each strike are aimed to kill."

"What do you want?"

Chapter 189: Vaan's Answer

"Join us," Black Crow stated his intention with bright eyes. "People with skills like yours are just what our organization needs."

"But do I need an organization like yours?" Vaan coolly retorted while giving Black Crow a ridiculous look. "Your head must have been kicked by a donkey or something. Why on earth would I join the losing side? Your joke is not funny at all."

Right after Vaan spoke, the other Peak C-rank hunters looked like they wanted to attack him immediately.

However, Black Crow stopped them calmly, seemingly unaffected by Vaan's insulting and provocative words.

"Do you think we are losing because the witches have us cornered on this mountain?" Black Crow calmly asked as he shook his head. "You can't be more wrong. It is true that we had nowhere else to run, but that doesn't mean we are trapped. On the contrary, we wanted you all to come here."

"Do you think the witches can win against our Peak B-rank hunters when they can't use magic within this region affected by the Curse of the Purple Umbala?" Black Crow asked.

"This is why your side will lose; arrogance, excessive self-confidence, and sheer ignorance," Vaan shook his head and also chuckled. "You only know the Curse of Purple Umbala affects witches' magic and aura users' aura; you know nothing about their specific nature."

As he spoke, he played with his gunblade, allowing it to hover above his hand weightlessly.

At first, he had thought that his Specialized Magic could be used in the cursed region because he used mental power for them like a psychic ability.

But after sensing mana fluctuations of magic from Headmaster Astoria and the Grand Inquisitor far away, he realized other witches could also use their Specialized Magic without a problem.

"You... You can use magic?" Black Crow and the other three wolf-men with him revealed their surprises.

"Why? Does it surprise you that much to see a man use magic?" Vaan casually asked while secretly prying for information that might only exist outside the seven witch kingdoms.

"So you were a Wizard from the Wizard Association. Even more reason for you to join us and rise up against this disgusting matriarchal society built by the witches that enslaved men. You should know that the rest of the world is ruled by..."

Black Crow stubbornly tried to persuade Vaan when he paused at a sudden realization.

"No, wait a minute... Even if you can use magic as a Wizard, you shouldn't be able to use magic at all in the cursed region!"

"As I expected, there are Wizards out there, huh?" Vaan muttered thoughtfully before he shook his head with a wry smile. "Unfortunately, I am not interested in sacrificing my little brother for magic."

He had always wondered why women could become witches and use magic while men could not.

Black Crow's expression, which seemed to say that he even knew about the secret to becoming a wizard, further strengthened his theory.

Although he had yet to understand why testosterone was incompatible with mana, it was indeed the reason why men couldn't use magic.

Men had thirty times more testosterone than women pre-puberty, which is then reduced to around fifteen times that of women post-puberty.

The reduced testosterone level is what gave birth to men's next best option to become strong, aura training.

But even though Vaan could finally confirm it through Black Crow, he would never sacrifice his little brother to become a wizard.

"Whatever you are thinking now is right. This isn't regular magic. Unfortunately, you'll only know what it is unless you ask the god of death when you meet him."

Vaan's eyes suddenly flickered with heavy killing intent, causing Black Crow's expression to change abruptly.

"Watch out!" Black Crow immediately warned.

However, he and the rest of his team had sorely underestimated Vaan's capability despite watching him kill the goblins for some time.

That was because Vaan had purposely shown less of his strength and abilities after they entered his detection range.

Extreme Lightning Flash Step!

Vaan's figure disappeared, closing the gap between him and a Peak C-rank hunter in a flash before he swung his gunblade and cut off the person's head.

Pfft!

Blood sprayed from the person's neck.

"Poison Claw!" Black Crow bellowed with regret.

Throughout their exchange of words, Vaan had purposely revealed some of his abilities and knowledge in order to fish in new information and, at the same time, buy time to recover his stamina.

Shortly after, killing one Peak C-rank hunter, Vaan flashed to his next target.

His opponents were only around Peak-level Rank 2, but they were skilled. Thus, he couldn't afford to go easy on them.

Puchi!

Blood sprayed another Peak C-rank hunter's body when the person tried to receive Vaan's attack—only for his gunblade to suddenly disappear, replaced by his Rank 4 Purple Sword, which directly sliced through the person's black dagger, body, and all.

"Silent Feather!" Black Crow cried before cursing, "Dammit! He's too strong, Blood Knife! We have to get away from here quickly!"

"No shit!" Blood Knife cursed back.

Neither of them cared about Vaan revealing his potential spatial storage, which was not that rare to begin with. They just wanted to get out alive.

The two immediately fled in two different directions.

However, Vaan took out both his gunblades and emptied entire magazines on each of them, striking their legs, body, and unluckily for Blood Knife, his head.

Rapid Fire! Enhanced Hot Shot!

Ding!

<You have created a new skill, Enhanced Hot Rapid Fire (Mid rank)>

...

"Dammit!" Black Crow fell to the ground with high momentum, dragging his face along it. His legs were shot, his heart was punctured, and even a major artery on his neck was nicked.

Although he barely evaded a headshot, he wasn't far from death. His passive regeneration ability could save his life, but of course, his enemy wasn't going to let him live.

Black Crow dragged his body to rest against a tree, stopped the bleeding on his neck with one hand, and stared back at Vaan.

"I don't get it..." Black Crow coughed up blood and said, "With such abilities, why do you continue to live under the oppression and reign of witches? Why can't you help us restore the reign of men?"

"I don't care about the reign of witches, nor the reign of men," Vaan replied indifferently as he approached Black Crow, step by step.

Black Crow gritted his teeth and snappishly asked, "Then what do you care about?!"

"My reign," Vaan coolly replied.

As Black Crow's eyes slowly widened, Vaan cut off his head with a single slash, ending the dwindling remainder of his life.

Chapter 190: Realm Fragment

Shortly after killing Black Crow, Vaan sensed some movement from the other Peak C-rank hunter called Blood Knife.

Despite taking a bullet through the head, the wolf-man was surprisingly still alive, albeit paralyzed. But even though the wolf-man couldn't move, it was just a matter of time before he could.

"This is the regeneration ability of the Rank 5 Demon Wolf, Fuhengir, huh?" Vaan softly muttered before he cut off the wolf-man's head.

Shortly after putting his weapons away, he quickly gathered the bodies of the four wolf-men and stopped their bleeding by sealing their open wounds with Heat Manipulation, which heated their flesh to a level that melted.

However, Vaan staggered shortly after, feeling a sudden rush of weakness.

Having skipped out on days of sleep and further depleting his mental energy to use his Specialize Magic and abilities, he had accumulated quite a fair bit of mental fatigue and required some rest.

But despite feeling a bit of mental fatigue, Vaan also felt very relaxed. In fact, he felt great, as if the battle had helped him release a lot of accumulated stress.

"It sure feels good to let loose once in a while," Vaan softly muttered with a wry smile before he did some self-reflection. "However, showing off too much of my abilities is not a good thing... Did all the killing affect my judgment?"

That said, there were no witnesses if everyone was dead.

'Whatever. There's no use thinking about it now. A good witness is a dead one,' Vaan shook his head with a wry smile.

After he tossed the four bodies into his Heaven-Swallowing Space, he collected his scattered bullets with Earth Manipulation, which, fortunately, uses his earth spirit's mana instead his mental energy.

In a short instance, numerous bullets sprung out from the goblin corpses and gathered in his hand before he stored them away in his innate storage space.

'Contract magic from my earth spirit isn't affected by the antimagic spores either,' Vaan briefly analyzed while he was on the move, leaving the area filled with blood and goblin corpses.

However, he didn't advance up the mountain. Instead, he traveled further left to the east before he found himself a good spot to hide.

Earth Manipulation!

The ground split apart as Vaan burrowed himself underneath to hide away from the prying eyes on the surface. Furthermore, he also removed the traces of the burrowed earth as he descended.

During his battles in the cursed region, he had noticed many pocket spaces underneath the mountain.

Considering they appeared to be separate from the underground world that lies deeper underneath, the pocket spaces were great spots to hide and recover his energy and strength.

However, he wasn't sure if there was enough air in these pocket spaces. As such, he stored a large amount of air in his Heaven-Swallowing Space beforehand.

"Hm?"

As Vaan got close to one of the pocket spaces, which was only the size of a normal bedroom, he noticed it was filled with mana when he casually used his Magic Vision.

After glancing at the other pocket spaces separated by heavy earthen soil and rocks, he also noticed they were concentrated with mana.

For a moment, he thought about the possibility of discovering a new earthen treasure, but the concentration of mana was insignificant compared to the stalactite cave.

Right after Vaan broke into the pocket space, he was greeted with a soft purplish glowing light coming from patches of purple, black, and red grass and flowers, which weren't native plants of the world.

They came from the Gehenna Realm.

Nevertheless, thanks to these plants, there was breathable air in the pocket space.

Even so, the air was thicker and heavier, just like the air in the Gehenna Realm—or at very least, that was how it was described according to the knowledge he acquired from one of the books on the Gehenna Realm.

"Why are there Gehenna plants in this place?" Vaan wondered with astonishment.

As far as he knew, such plants were primarily found in the great Ashenwood Forest in the north, where the two worlds intersected, or anywhere else in Gehenna.

Of course, Gehenna plants also exist outside of these two main places, but such Gehenna plants were mostly imported or self-cultivated.

'Did Lady Aeliana give birth to these plants after becoming a Plant-type Abomination?' Vaan wondered.

However, there weren't any antimagic spores found in pocket space.

Vaan had overlooked another possibility because it seemed unlikely. But thinking back at it again, it also seemed like the most likely reason for the change.

His eyes quickly brightened as he scanned every corner of the pocket space with his Magic Vision before settling on the rocky ground just under him, where the mana was most concentrated.

Earth Manipulation!

The rocky surface quickly split open, revealing a peanut-size object that looked like a purple glass fragment, which immediately shone with intense purple light.

Bzzt!

The moment Vaan touched it, his finger was easily cut. A drop of blood dripped on the purple glass fragment as he quickly retracted his hand.

In the same instance, the purple glass fragment turned blue along with the light it emitted.

"I can't believe it... It's actually a realm fragment..." Vaan uttered, feeling more pleasantly surprised by the moment.

Realm fragments first appeared in the world when the Gehenna Realm descended on the human world, causing the two worlds to clash and shatter the dimensional wall that separated the two planes of existence.

"The realm fragments were shards of the dimensional wall. Every piece, no matter how big or small was extremely precious. They weren't just filled with mana; they also have the ability to awaken special abilities," Vaan softly recalled.

Although mana gave birth to the witches, the very first witch was awakened by a realm fragment.

"There were some theories about the seven Transcendent Witches snatching up all the realm fragments when they first appeared to acquire their current level of power... but no one could actually prove it."

Realm fragments were extremely sharp, possibly one of the sharpest existence in the world.

Assimilating its power involved a high risk of death, and not a single witch was officially recorded to have absorbed more than three palm-sized realm fragments.

Ding!