

The Witch 191

Chapter 191: Versatile Ability

<You have acquired a tiny Realm Fragment with a thousand mana value>

<Calculating appropriate rewards...>

<...>

...

The system alerted him as Vaan forcefully held onto the Realm Fragment, despite suffering numerous wounds to his hand as if he was receiving thousands of skin-tearing lashes.

Without a doubt, acquiring the power of the Realm Fragment was not easy; it never was.

However, there was no gain without pain.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't find it surprising to learn that a single peanut-sized Realm Fragment possessed the same mana value as ten high-rank mana stones.

"Ten high-rank mana stones for a peanut-sized Realm Fragment, huh? Those palm-sized Realm Fragments from back then would have possessed countless times more mana value," Vaan mused.

Ding!

<Rewards have been calculated>

<Please select one of the following options>

<Option 1: Feed the Realm Fragment to the Heaven-Swallowing Space and expand the subspace>

<Note: There is a very high chance of awakening a new special ability or upgrading an existing one>

<Option 2: You may input your own improvement plan with clear instructions for the system to follow>

<Note: There is a high chance of sustaining serious injuries or even death if you try to assimilate the Realm Fragment with your body any other way besides the first option>

<Note 2: In the unlikelyhood that you succeed, you will experience a huge boost in your physical attributes>

...

'Unexpectedly, feeding the Heaven-Swallowing Space would be the first option this time. Whether it has the greatest benefit is still up for debate. However, it is definitely the safest option,' Vaan thought.

There was no need to consider his choice.

Ding!

<You have selected the first option>

Shortly after Vaan made his choice, the peanut-sized Realm Fragment seeped right through his bleeding hand, entering his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

Moments after it entered, it faded into the darkness of the Heaven-Swallowing Space as it was devoured and assimilated.

As that happened, Vaan sensed his Heaven-Swallowing Space expand by roughly the same size as a four-bedroom home.

At the same time, he felt some of his mental energy was restored—or rather, the upper limit of his mental power was increased; hence, he had some extra mental energy.

However, that was only the benefit of absorbing the mana inside the Realm Fragment, not the Realm Fragment itself.

Although he couldn't sense anything else happening inside his Heaven-Swallowing Space, he instinctively knew that something was definitely happening.

Something was changing inside his Heaven-Swallowing Space, but he was unable to perceive it.

Nevertheless, moments passed before Vaan could finally sense one of his sphere-shaped Specialized Magic changing. It was his Heat Manipulation.

The mana lines that formed the magic circuit of his Heat Manipulation reconfigured themselves, creating a new pattern.

Ding!

<Your Heaven-Swallowing Space has expanded>

<Your mental power's upper limit has been raised>

<Heat Manipulation has been upgraded to Kinetic Energy Manipulation>

<Heat Manipulation (Early-stage True Witch) → Kinetic Energy Manipulation (Early-stage Senior Witch)>

...

'Kinetic Energy Manipulation? Why don't I find this surprising?' Vaan slightly smiled at the result of his Specialized Magic upgrade.

Heat Manipulation was simply the ability to increase or reduce the kinetic energy in atoms, which, in turn, generate heat or coldness.

However, Kinetic Energy Manipulation wasn't just limited to increasing or decreasing kinetic energy in atoms.

Anything and everything in motion could be manipulated by him.

'This is an infinitely more powerful and versatile ability—if it isn't restricted to the Early-stage Senior Witch level,' Vaan contemplated.

Fortunately, he didn't lose any of his previous abilities and skills, even though Heat Manipulation changed to Kinetic Energy Manipulation.

After all, Kinetic Energy Manipulation encompassed everything that is Heat Manipulation and more.

Vaan could think of myriad ways to use his Kinetic Energy Manipulation and was itching to put it to the test.

However, he had to suppress his urge and excitement and focus on his objective.

That being said, Vaan couldn't help but wonder if the other pocket spaces also possessed Realm Fragments.

And if they did, what other secrets were hidden much deeper under the Red Goblin Mountains?

'I better check the other pocket spaces first,' Vaan decided.

But before he left the current pocket space, he harvested all the Gehenna plants, including their roots and rocky soil, and stored them inside his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

'Kyu!'

Topaz was released from his body. She flapped her small wings around, feeling excited due to the freedom she was granted.

At the same time, the pocket space was rich in earth elements, making her feel happy in general. Even so, the pocket space was still far inferior to her old home in the stalactite cave.

Nevertheless, Vaan had the Earth Spirit Body. Thus, she still picked him over the pocket space and the stalactite cave.

After flying around for only a short moment, she settled on Vaan's head and looked ahead.

Earth Manipulation!

Vaan used her earth magic to leave the pocket space, heading for the next underground pocket space shortly after.

Upon their arrival, he found the second pocket space similar to the last one. It was filled with Gehenna plants, heavy air, and some concentration of mana.

He took some time digging for the concentrated mana source before a familiar peanut-sized Realm Fragment was revealed, shining intense purple light throughout the pocket space.

'As I suspected, there's also a Realm Fragment!' Vaan's eyes brightened at once.

Shortly after touching the Realm Fragment, it cut his finger and underwent the exact change, turning from purple to blue as if it was adjusting to his world after receiving some blood.

Mana had a blue color in the human world. But in Gehenna, it was purple.

'Kyu!' Topaz suddenly cried.

She flew over to the Realm Fragment and stomped on it with her small feet as if to bully it back for hurting Vaan.

"Topaz, wait—!"

Vaan wanted to stop his earth spirit from hurting herself, but he quickly paused with widened eyes when the Realm Fragment easily assimilated with her body. It flew right into her body like a magnetic attraction when her foot got close.

As a result, she missed her target and fell to the ground.

'Kyu?'

Shortly after looking around, Topaz scratched her head with confusion, wondering where the villainous Realm Fragment had disappeared off to.

But it wasn't long before her tiny body started to shine...

Chapter 192: New Contracted Magic

At first, only a few rays of blue light shot out from Topaz's tiny body. But over time, more rays of blue light appeared until all the surface of her body was covered, causing her to shine like a blue star.

The brilliance of the blue light hurt Vaan's eyes, forcing him to look away.

However, Topaz's brilliance didn't last very long. After shining for a few breaths, the blue light was retracted back into her body, returning everything to normal as if nothing had ever happened.

Ding!

<Your contracted earth spirit has reached the upper limits for mid-rank earth spirits>

<You have acquired new contracted magic from your contracted earth spirit>

=====

«Contracted Spirit/s»

First Spirit: Topaz (Named Spirit) (Earth Spirit)

Spirit Rank: Early-Mid rank → Peak-Mid rank (Low-level Rank 3 → Peak-level Rank 3 equivalent)

Contracted Magic 1: [Telepathy (Only between you and your contracted earth spirit)]

Contracted Magic 2: [Earth Manipulation (Power Limit: Low-level Rank 2 → Peak-level Rank 2 (One rank lower than contracted spirit))]

Contracted Magic 3: [Earth Transmutation (Transmutation Limit: Peak-level Rank 2 materials (One rank lower than contracted spirit))]

Mana Capacity: 500/500

=====

'Kyu!'

Shortly after advancing to the peak of Mid-rank Earth Spirit, Topaz was filled with energy.

She started flapping her wings and flying around the pocket space hyperactively.

At the same time, Vaan read through the changes and couldn't help but feel pleasantly surprised.

Seeing how energetically Topaz had become after assimilating the Realm Fragment, he was also relieved that nothing terrible happened to his contracted earth spirit.

"Earth Transmutation..." Vaan muttered thoughtfully.

Shortly after, he picked up an ordinary piece of rock and tested his new magical ability.

Earth Transmutation!

Mana quickly gathered into the rock, increasing its weight and density as it transformed into a piece of iron.

"Without any specific metal in mind, it transforms into iron, huh?" Vaan noted.

Afterward, he ran a few more tests with different pieces of rock. When he thought of steel, he created impure steel. When he thought of titanium, he got impure titanium.

The transmutation didn't give him pure steel or pure titanium. They were both mixed with random amounts of other metals.

Seeing those results, Vaan ran a different test, keeping the specific ratios of earthen elements in mind, before he finally produced pure steel through Earth Transmutation.

Following that, he also created pure titanium.

After completing his experiments, Vaan understood the gist of Earth Transmutation. Without a clear understanding of what he wanted to create, he would only produce a flawed version.

For example, steel was mainly made of iron and carbon. But without knowing the ratio, he will not get the right steel product.

Furthermore, he had to be specific about the amount. Otherwise, even a pure earth element like titanium would become impure when he doesn't completely transmute the object.

He couldn't transmute objects into something he didn't understand either.

As long as he had some partial knowledge about the element he wanted to transmute, he would have some success. But if he knew nothing at all, the Earth Transmutation would fail.

After understanding the conditions, Vaan shifted his focus on the limitation of Earth Transmutation.

'I will have to observe these transmuted products for some time to confirm whether these transmutations are permanent or temporary,' Vaan thought.

Nevertheless, he was more inclined to believe that the Earth Transmutation was only temporary. Even so, the acquisition of Earth Transmutation solved his biggest problem of getting gunpowder.

'The duration of Earth Transmutation won't matter too much for gunpowder as I can expedite its usage upon creation. But it would be a problem for other uses,' Vaan mused.

It could be a difference between life and death if he used an entirely Earth Transmutation-created weapon—only for it to suddenly revert to soil and stones mid-battle.

'Earth Transmutation, Kinetic Energy Manipulation, Earth Acceleration, and Earth Manipulation... It's hard to imagine the extent of bullet speed I can raise with these abilities...' Vaan wondered.

No doubt, the bullet would reach an unfathomable level of speed. But no matter how fast it could be, it would still be useless if it couldn't penetrate its target.

'Bullet strength is the problem now. I need to create bullets with stronger materials if I want their attack power to reach their full potential.'

Nevertheless, Vaan quickly settled aside his thoughts and moved to the next pocket space with his transmuted metals in hand after harvesting the Gehenna plants.

But after scouring the next pocket space, he failed to find another Realm Fragment.

Although there were new patches of Gehenna plants like the previous two pocket spaces, he found cracks all over the third one.

'Seems like someone or something else got hold of the Realm Fragment in this one,' Vaan concluded with furrowed brows.

It was already amazing that he managed to find two Realm Fragments. He shouldn't be greedy for more.

That said, he wouldn't ignore the chances either.

After rounding up the Gehenna plants, he moved to the fourth, fifth, and sixth pocket spaces. But like the third pocket space, the potential Realm Fragment was missing, seemingly already taken.

Even so, Vaan didn't give up hope and went to search every pocket space he could discover with Topaz.

On the fourteenth pocket space, his transmuted metals crumbled into earthen dust.

'About fifteen minutes, huh? A bit disappointing, but beggars can't be choosers. Fifteen minutes is still plenty of time to do things.'

Vaan figured out the effect duration of Earth Transmutation.

Shortly after, Vaan continued to search the remaining pocket spaces while collecting the Gehenna plants found inside them.

He had accumulated enough Gehenna plants to form a garden in the Heaven-Swallowing Space.

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After searching for some time, he finally found another peanut-sized Realm Fragment in his twenty-seventh pocket space.

Unfortunately, it was also the last pocket space he could detect in the underground region.

Several hundred feet further below from his present location, Vaan could sense an incomparably enormous open space.

Nevertheless, when Vaan found the third peanut-sized Realm Fragment, Topaz stared at it intently.

Chapter 193: Awakening Preparation

Although Topaz didn't express her desire to Vaan, he could tell she wanted the Realm Fragment.

After all, she had experienced the benefits of the Realm Fragment once, even though she was a little slow on the realization.

As such, she knew it was something good for her.

However, she also understood that Vaan had been searching for the Realm Fragments. Thus, she didn't want to take what he searched hard for.

Seeing how Topaz clearly wanted the Realm Fragment but was holding herself back, Vaan thought she was kind of cute.

He smiled slightly before tossing the Realm Fragment towards her, albeit suffering terrible cuts from touching it.

However, the wounds on his hand naturally healed themselves.

'Kyu...?'

Topaz slightly retreated from the Realm Fragment with a startled look as it landed on the ground in front of her and sunk into the ground. She glanced up at Vaan with uncertainty shortly after.

"Take it. It's yours," Vaan stated.

The last Realm Fragment may have been an accident. But this time, he willingly gave the Realm Fragment to his contracted earth spirit.

It didn't matter too much which of them received the Realm Fragment's power.

After all, Topaz was still a part of his power. The stronger she becomes, the stronger he becomes as well. More importantly, earth magic was much stronger in her hands than it was in his hands.

Her strength had already reached the same level of an earth-attribute Peak-stage Senior Witch.

If she could reach the next level, it would be no different from having a secret bodyguard at the High Witch rank.

"Kyu!"

After she received Vaan's permission to absorb the Realm Fragment, Topaz's eyes seemingly sprung to life as they brightened with excitement.

She flapped three laps around Vaan and rubbed against his cheeks excitedly before she flew back to the Realm Fragment to absorb it.

Shortly after, the same process occurred when she drew too close to the Realm Fragment as it was attracted to her body like a magnet.

Her body lit up with blue light before dimming after some time, returning to normal once more as if nothing had happened.

Just like before, she experienced no apparent changes to her appearance, but her existence underwent a major upgrade.

...

Ding!

<Your contracted earth spirit has successfully become a High-rank Earth Spirit>

<Your contracted magic has all been raised by a level>

=====

«Contracted Spirit/s»

First Spirit: Topaz (Named Spirit) (Earth Spirit)

Spirit Rank: Peak-Mid rank → Early-High rank (Peak-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 4 equivalent)

Contracted Magic 1: [Telepathy (You can commute with other earth spirits)]

Contracted Magic 2: [Earth Manipulation (Power Limit: Peak-level Rank 2 → Low-level Rank 3 (One rank lower than contracted spirit))]

Contracted Magic 3: [Earth Transmutation (Transmutation Limit: Peak-level Rank 2 → Low-level Rank 3 materials (One rank lower than contracted spirit))]

Mana Capacity: 600/600

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Looking through Topaz's changes, Vaan didn't find it surprising that her mana capacity did not increase as much as last time.

Rising through the same rank was not the same as advancing to the next.

'Kyu, kyuu!'

Topaz happily flew back to Vaan and rubbed her face against his cheeks, showering him with affection as she shared her joy.

"Alright, you've become so strong now. So don't bully me in the future, okay?" Vaan casually said with a smile.

'Kyu, kyuu, kyuu!' Topaz quickly shook her head before she patted her chest pompously and proudly, expressing that she would protect him instead.

"Then you can start now."

Right after saying that, Vaan leaned against the wall and got some shut eyes to recover more mental energy.

An hour of deep sleep for him was equivalent to another person's night's worth.

Alas, he couldn't really enter deep sleep due to his senses picking up ripples of vibrations from above and below. But although he couldn't completely shut off his senses, he could relax his mind and blend with the background to rest his mind to some degree.

As such, some rest was still much better than none at all.

Topaz duly guarded his body as Vaan rested. She wasn't sure what she was guarding against, but she kept a careful watch as she sat on his head.

An hour later, Vaan's eyes snapped open.

'Kyu, kyuu!'

After sensing he was awake, Topaz happily chirped, saying how she didn't slack in her guard duty and kept his body safe.

"Thanks, Topaz," Vaan smiled.

He patted her head with one finger due to her tiny body size. At the same time, Topaz grabbed his finger and rubbed her cheeks against it.

Shortly after, Vaan cracked his slightly stiff neck before making a tub-shaped hole in the ground with Earth Manipulation and transmuting it into a smooth silver surface with Earth Transmutation.

'The Grand Inquisitor's magic tool can detect wolf bloodlines. But given its rank, its detection range should be limited. Moreover, since I've descended quite deep into the underground, I should be far out of its range,' Vaan mused.

In the next moment, he took out the four wolf-men corpses and drained all their blood into his tub-shaped hole.

He also added the small amount of Shadow Wolf Blood he had previously obtained.

Once Vaan completed those steps, he further added some magical herbs with blood-enriching properties, including some Gehenna flowers and grass with recognizable traits and properties.

Crimson Stoneflower was an especially good ingredient with blood-nourishing properties.

Nevertheless, he then heated the tub of blood and magical herbs by increasing their kinetic energy with Kinetic Energy Manipulation, bringing their temperatures to a boiling point.

Silver was always a great heat conductor.

'All preparations are done. Now, I only need to soak in it,' Vaan decided.

His chances weren't high when he only had the Rank 3 Shadow Wolf Blood. However, it was a different story now that he had also obtained Rank 5 Demon Wolf Blood.

As he was only using the wolf blood to stimulate the awakening of Immortal Lycan Bloodline, soaking in the enriched wolf blood was all he needed to do.

If he tried to absorb the various blood types in the tub, it would only dilute his Immortal Lycan Bloodline and make it more difficult to awaken in the future.

'Kyu?''

Topaz stared at Vaan's activity with growing curiosity.

Nevertheless, he didn't mind her watching what followed as it made no difference due to their spiritual link.

He stripped himself naked and entered the boiling blood tub without hesitation.

Chapter 194: Partial Awakening

Right after Vaan entered the blood bath, his skin felt warm and pleasant, like he was dipping into the hot springs.

Such boiling temperatures would have scalded normal people. But for Vaan, it was still far from damaging his skin. In fact, his skin absorbed the heat instead.

Possessing the Earth Spirit Body with high defense, Vaan's body was just like every other piece of metal; they were good heat conductors.

Alas, the blood in the tub was hardly enough for him to soak in it. At most, it was just enough for a light dipping. As such, he continuously scooped the boiling blood and poured them over his body like he was washing, except in blood instead of water.

Vaan made sure all the boiling blood touched every surface of his body.

'The temperature is still a bit low,' Vaan thought before he increased the kinetic energy in the boiling blood and silver tub.

In that instance, he felt his body absorbing even more heat—to the point that it started to feel very hot, even for him.

His body was like a piece of iron being smelted in a furnace. In a way, he was tempering his body while trying to stimulate the awakening of his Immortal Lycan Bloodline.

Ding!

<Your body's defense attribute has successfully increased through body tempering>

<Your body's defense attribute has successfully increased through body tempering>

...

Vaan's eyes brightened for a moment.

If his body could withstand the tempering of fire, he could increase his defense attributes even further. At the same time, a good flame could purify the impurities from his body.

Nevertheless, as he raised the temperature with Kinetic Energy Manipulation, the boiling blood gradually became a hot sticky substance.

When it turned into such a state, he plastered it all over his skin, completely covering his body. Over time, the sticky blood substance solidified, enclosing him like a blood cocoon.

At the same time, the blood within his own body was agitated by the inferior wolf bloodlines.

Ba-dump!

Vaan's heart started pounding harder.

The same heart that was punctured and reformed by the Immortal Lycan Blood hidden inside the Etherstone along with the system.

It could be said that most of the Immortal Lycan Blood he inherited were gathered in his heart.

Ba-dump! Ba-dump!

Vaan's heartbeat increased, pumping blood through his body faster and faster. Within moments, he felt hot in both flesh and blood—No, his entire being felt like it was on fire.

Ba-dump! Ba-dump! Ba-dump!

His heart was beating so fast that he felt like it would burst apart; it felt uncomfortable and painful.

At the same time, he felt a violent urge to destroy things. Over time, the feeling only grew stronger, as if a destructive power was growing inside his body and was dying to be unleashed.

Vaan tried to contain it with gritted teeth as the surface of his skin turned red.

Veins protruded on the surface of his skin, and his muscle masses seemingly bulged, causing several increasing cracks to appear on the blood cocoon.

Eventually, the destructive feeling in his heart burst.

"Rarghhh!" Vaan roared.

He quickly shot to his feet in the same instance, causing the blood cocoon burst into numerous flying fragments that smashed against the walls of the pocket space.

'Kyu!' Topaz cried as she dived behind a rock for cover.

Meanwhile, Vaan's pupils turned yellow, his nails sharpened, his body grew taller, his muscles more toned, and his black hair grew, turning silvery-white like the bright moon of the night.

Ding!

<You have successfully achieved a partial awakening in your Immortal Lycan Bloodline>

<Your physical attributes have significantly improved>

<Your sense of sight, hearing, and smell have improved>

<Regeneration (Mid-rank) → Regeneration (High-rank)>

<You unlocked a dormant ability, Lycan Transformation (Low-rank)>

=====

[Lycan Transformation (Low-rank)]

Overview: The unique ability of Balmodon the Undying to willfully inherit some of the powerful traits of the Evil Wolf God, Kezan, and enter a peak combat state.

Effect: Enhanced defense, strength, speed, senses, and regeneration.

Note: The degree of enhanced defense, strength, senses, and regeneration varies, depending on the user's state before entering Lycan Transformation.

Limitation: When you exit the Lycan Transformation, you will enter a weakened state equal to triple the time spent in the transformed state.

Limitation 2: If your transformed state exceeds six hours, you start to suffer severe internal damage or even death.

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«Physical Attributes»

[157 → 257 Defense (↑100)] [Mid-level Rank 2 → Low-level Rank 3] [100 Aura Power] [Total Defense: 357 (Mid-level Rank 3)]

[101 → 201 Strength (↑100)] [Low-level Rank 2 → High-level Rank 2] [100 Aura Power] [Total Strength: 301 (Low-level Rank 3)]

[85 → 185 Speed (↑100)] [High-level Rank 1 → Mid-level Rank 2] [100 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 285 (Low-level Rank 3)]

=====

<You are under the state of Lycan Transformation (Low-rank)>

<All physical attributes are raised 50%>

=====

«Lycan State»

[Total Defense: 357 → 485 (↑128) (Mid-rank Rank 3 → High-level Rank 3)]

[Total Strength: 301 → 401 (↑100) (Low-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 3)]

[Total Speed: 285 → 377 (↑92) (Low-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 3)]

=====

After sensing how strong he had become, the corners of Vaan's lips twitched.

Although he had anticipated explosive growth in his physical attributes, the significant improvement still left him speechless.

'Truly worthy of being a Divine-rank bloodline that belongs to a Rank 6 or higher being. Even a partial awakening could raise my abilities by this much...'

Vaan applauded in his heart.

In his present state, he didn't feel like he could lose to anyone below Rank 4. Heck, he felt like he could even challenge Low-level Rank 4 beings if he used everything he had.

His body was overflowing with power.

However, his heart was beating loudly like drums, continuously pumping his body with power. Like the system mentioned, the Lycan Transformation wasn't a state he could stay in indefinitely.

Vaan forcefully reduced the rate of his heartbeat before his body exited Lycan Transformation, reverting to his normal appearance as if time itself had been rewound.

'Kyu?''

Topaz peeked over her rock, checking if the onslaught of flying blood fragments had ended.

"Did I startle you, little one?"

'Kyu!'

After Vaan asked her with a wry smile, Topaz nodded her head vigorously for various reasons.

...

Chapter 195: The Cave Master's Identity

Boom! Boom! Boom!

On the surface of the Red Goblin Mountains, Headmaster Astoria and Marquis Ember continued their highly destructive battle with the goblins and B-rank hunters from the Assembly of Silent Night.

Throngs of goblins and hobgoblins were easily wiped out with every move that Astoria and Ember made, while the environment was completely devastated.

Not a single tree in the area was left intact; they were either broken or charred to crisps and ashes.

"Dammit! Just how much mana do these High Witches have?! How can they keep unleashing powerful attacks like this?!" a Peak B-rank hunter cursed.

He quickly dived out of the way as a big wave of crimson flames blew past him and wiped out hundreds of goblins along its path.

Silver Hawk and the other B-rank hunters felt heavy-hearted when the goblin horde was reduced to less than two thousand.

"We don't have many goblins left! We have to pull back!" a Peak B-rank hunter suggested.

"Pull back?! We have to press on! This is our only chance to kill the two High Witches! If we retreat now, they can recover their mana, while we can't recover our goblin forces!" Silver Hawk asserted with bloodshot eyes.

He had come across other High Witches before, but even those High Witches weren't as impressive as the two High Witches before him.

'Is this the power of the first generation of High Witches that ascended with the help of the Realm Fragments?' Silver Hawk gritted his teeth.

Surely, even if they are first-generation High Witches, their mana reserve couldn't be limitless.

'There has to be a limit!' Silver Hawk wanted to believe.

"We don't have a choice, Silver Hawk! We've already wasted too much time! The High Witches had far greater mana reserve than we could have anticipated!" another Peak B-rank hunter argued.

"Our battle should have long caught the others' attention by now!"

Perhaps they did have a chance.

However, it was undeniable that the present situation was disadvantageous for them, especially when they didn't know how much mana the two High Witches had left.

As if confirming their fears, Lord Helia arrived with all the abled troops she could gather. They numbered over two hundred.

"I've brought the troops to assist, Marquis Ember! Headmaster Astoria!" Helia loudly announced upon her arrival.

"Lord Helia, huh? You're a bit late to the party! Haha, we're almost finished here!" Ember laughed joyously as her grand presence dominated the battlefield.

As she decimated her foes with powerful flames, her excited expression made her look crazy.

...

"Pull back!" Silver Hawk immediately made the ultimate call to retreat upon seeing the enemy's reinforcements arrive. "We can no longer win this battle! We must retreat to the cave and seek the Cave Master's help!"

"About time!" the B-rank hunters all celebrated.

They quickly commanded the remaining goblin forces to cover their rears as they retreated from the devastated land.

"Where are you all going, doggies?! Come back and play!" Ember hollered as she pursued the enemy with Astoria.

Neither of them had any intention of letting the wolf-men escape.

"Fuck off, crazy woman! Who wants to fight a pyromaniac like you?! You're a goddammed lunatic!" one of the Peak B-rank hunters hurled curses as he retreated, venting all his frustration.

"Dark Blade, why are you trying to antagonize her?!" Silver Hawk reprimanded.

However, it was too late. What had been said could not be unsaid. Ember's expression turned solemn, and her eyes radiated with coldness and sharp killing intent.

Swoosh!

Ember's flames spread like wings before slapping against the ground, allowing her body to soar into the sky quickly. And with a kick against the air, a burst of flames thrust her body forward.

She shot toward the person called Dark Blade, closing the gap between them at an alarming rate.

"Fuck!" Dark Blade cursed.

He quickly commanded a few Rank 3 Goblin Shamans to sacrifice themselves to cover his retreat.

Although the Rank 3 Goblin Shamans were no match for Ember, it still succeeded in slowing her down with its magic.

"Watch out, Marquis Ember! Don't blindly charge ahead! You'll create openings that you'll end up regretting!" Astoria warned.

At the same time, she kept up with Ember from the ground and blasted a cloud of poison mist away with a swing of her greatsword, sending it back to the enemy.

In a short instance, dozens of goblins quickly breathed in the poison mist before they foamed with bubbly saliva and dropped dead.

As Astoria and Ember continued their pursuit with Helia and the other troops following behind, the remaining goblins were slowly hunted down to their last.

However, Silver Hawk and the rest of the wolf-men successfully fled to the cave entrances two-thirds up the mountains.

"Cave Master, we have failed! Please forgive our intrusion as we seek refuge in your territory!" Silver Hawk quickly pleaded for the Cave Master's understanding as he fled into the darkness of the cave with the others.

None of them dared to stop for even a moment as the High Witches were hot on their pursuit.

They had set out with more than fifty members, yet less than half of them managed to return to the cave entrance alive.

Everyone below the B-rank had seemingly died or gone missing while hunting the other witches and aura users in the cursed region.

"Useless! Not only did you fail to eliminate the intruders, but you also got all my minions killed! And yet you all still have the gall to come back alive?!"

The Cave Master's ghastly female voice echoed out from the depths of the cave.

Even so, the unknown being didn't take any actions against Silver Hawk and the other wolf-men, allowing them to flee deeper into the dark cave.

At the same time, Astoria and Ember quickly halted their steps outside the cave. They were alarmed by the ghastly female voice.

"I thought something was off when I heard those dog-men mentioned a Cave Master... But I didn't expect the so-called Cave Master to possess such a familiar ghastly voice!"

Ember knitted her brows as she stared at the cave entrance with a solemn.

"Right," Astoria nodded with an equal solemn expression and said, "Who would have thought that a Fallen Witch was hiding in these mountains?"

Chapter 196: The Cave Master's Identity (2)

Sometime after Astoria and Ember stopped in front of the cave entrance with wary expressions, Helia and the others caught up.

"What's the matter? Is there something wrong with—"

"Leave now, and you may be spared. Otherwise, enter and die!"

Helia's question was quickly interrupted by the Fallen Witch's ghastly voice that echoed out from the depths of the cave.

"Oh. That's the problem," Helia uttered with surprise upon realization.

Just like Astoria and Ember, her expression quickly turned solemn as she stared into the darkness of the cave entrance.

A Fallen Witch was not necessarily strong, but even High Witches could be harmed or killed by them through curses and other dark magic, which were very troublesome to handle and treat.

"But this voice is a little familiar..." Helia softly muttered with furrowed brows shortly after, causing Astoria and Ember to turn their attention to her.

"You recognize who the voice belongs to, Lord Helia?" Ember quickly before she suddenly paused and recalled something.

"Now that I think about it, didn't you enter these caves with Lord Aeliana a few years back? Have you known about this Fallen Witch since the incident with Lord Aeliana?"

"You know, it's a grave crime to shield a Fallen Witch instead of reporting them upon discovery, Lord Helia," Ember mentioned solemnly.

However, Helia quickly denied Ember's suspicions with a shake of her head, "Absolutely not, Marquis Ember. If I had known there was a Fallen Witch here, would I still be surprised like you?"

"However, it is also true that I kind of recognize this Fallen Witch's voice, no matter how ghastly it became," Helia openly added shortly after.

"Who is it? It shouldn't be Lord Aeliana, right?" Ember guessed before casually adding, "After all, she turned into a Plant-type Abomination and was executed by her mother a few years back."

"You don't actually believe that, do you, Marquis Ember?" Helia made a forced smile and said, "If Lady Solana truly killed her daughter back then, the Curse of the Purple Umbala wouldn't still be around."

"Lady Solana may have fooled everyone for a year. But after three years? Anyone would start to suspect that the Plant-type Abomination was still alive, even possibly roaming freely in these mountains."

"But it's unheard of for an Abomination to recover their minds and become a Fallen Witch," Astoria mentioned.

"I never said that familiar voice belonged to Lord Aeliana," Helia stated.

"That said, I won't deny the possibility that Abominations can recover their intelligence and become Fallen Witches. After all, we have to assume anything is possible when it involves magic."

"However, this Fallen Witch's voice isn't Lord Aeliana's," Helia conclusively stated, yet at the same time, seemingly avoiding the main question.

Nevertheless, Ember wasn't going to let her go until she gave her an answer.

"Then who is it? You have to give me an answer, Lord Helia," Ember interrogated with a firm tone before adding a threat, "Otherwise, I will have to suspect that you are colluding with a Fallen Witch to bring harm to the kingdom."

"It's... my elder sister, whom I thought had passed away for thirty years now," Helia said with a sigh.

"Your... elder sister?" Astoria glanced at Helia with surprise.

At the same time, she quickly understood the reason for Helia's hesitation.

Lord Helia wasn't always the Lord of Redpine City; the position of Lord of Redpine City originally belonged to her elder sister, Elvira Ashenborn.

During the Holy War, Elvira Ashenborn burned away much of lifeforce to slay many demons and protect her young sister at the same time.

As such, the discovery of Elvira Ashenborn being alive must have weighed on Lord Helia's mind.

"You should understand that even if Elvira Ashenborn is alive, she is no longer your elder sister. She has become a Fallen Witch, someone who has delved into forbidden magic, corrupted her soul, and joined the dark side. She is now an enemy of all witches and humans," Astoria mentioned.

"Abominations can still be spared for research, but Fallen Witches have to be killed on sight," Ember firmly stated.

"I will be adjusting this expedition's objective. Hunting the remnant members of the Assembly of Silent Night is secondary. Slaying the Fallen Witch is our primary objective. Nevertheless, nothing is more dangerous than blindly entering an evil witch's lair."

"Those who want to stay, stay. As for those who want to leave, now is the time for you to fuck off," Ember stated harshly, leaving no face for any cowards that may want to go.

At the same time, her words served as some mental pressure that prevented people from quitting. People can leave, but not without being shamed.

Even so, fifty hired mercenaries still left, leaving behind only a hundred and fifty Senior Witches and Aura Masters, who were mostly part of Lord Helia's private troops or Ember's expedition force.

Only a few hired mercenaries remained, and they were all Aura Grandmasters.

The rest were either part of the group that just left, killed along the way by the other wolf-men, or still recuperating from their wounds in the camp.

Shortly after, Ember increased her fire output, shooting a huge ball of blazing flames in the sky before it scattered into different directions.

All the trees in the area were quickly reduced to ashes along with the minuscule antimagic spores in the air, creating a cursed-free zone.

"Rest up and restore your strength. It will be needed for what we may have to face inside," Ember instructed the remaining people that stayed behind.

Shortly after, she turned to Astoria and Helia.

"We need to figure out how we want to deal with this Fallen Witch," Ember said objectively.

"Right..." Astoria nodded before inputting her opinion, "The Fallen Witch must have orchestrated Lord Aeliana's tragedy. But for the Fallen Witch to only reveal herself now, it must mean she has some confidence in dealing with all of us."

"I am of the same opinion, Headmaster Astoria. Lady Elvira disappeared thirty years ago. Thirty years is a lot of time for a Fallen Witch to grow. I'm afraid the Fallen Witch has grown extremely powerful by now," Ember mentioned before turning to Helia. "What do you think, Lord Helia?"

"I... I have the same thoughts," Helia replied, but her mind was seemingly elsewhere.

Chapter 197: Pocket Realm

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Back in the pocket space, after Vaan's body was cleansed, he wore his black outfit before he glanced at the four wolf-men corpses.

'Assembly of Silent Night and goblins...' Vaan thought about the relationship between the two.

Although the small group of wolf-men he had encountered didn't show any sign of working with the goblins, they wouldn't have anywhere to go if they didn't at least have a non-hostile relationship.

'Considering the goblins were trained and enhanced, these wolf-men were unlikely to be the cause of it,' Vaan contemplated.

Of course, the fact that the wolf-men decided to retreat to the Red Goblin Mountains could also suggest that the Assembly of Silent Night had a base in the mountains and had been experimenting on the goblins for many years.

However, the odds were unlikely, considering goblins are only known to follow the commands of higher-rank goblins or an even higher-ranking demon.

'A mutual understanding between the wolf-men and a higher-ranking being that commands the goblin?' Vaan speculated.

'Well, the wolf-men are no longer of interest to me. Now that I used the Rank 5 Demon Wolf Blood that they possessed to stimulate the awakening of my Immortal Lycan Bloodline, it's no longer effective if I want to achieve a greater awakening.'

He didn't come to the Red Goblin Mountains to deal with the wolf-men. To begin with, their misfortune had stemmed from him.

As such, he wouldn't go out of his way to uproot their dark organization.

The hints and clues he gathered did suggest that the Assembly of Silent Night had a much greater influence outside the seven witch kingdoms.

Perhaps, he would have a use for the Assembly of Silent Night when he ventures outside the seven witch kingdoms one day.

'I should make use of these corpses,' Vaan thought back to the four wolf-men bodies in front of him.

Shortly after, he searched the four corpses for anything useful or even remotely valuable on their bodies. He took their weapons, tools, equipment, and even their clothes.

After he stripped their bodies bare and tossed everything into the Heaven-Swallowing Space, he chopped the four corpses into pieces.

Afterward, he threw them all into the silver tub along with the scattered blood fragments before he fired up the heat with Kinetic Energy Manipulation, cooking everything.

'Kyu...'

Topaz stared at the sizzling half-human meat in the silver tub with a disgusted look, wondering if Vaan was going to eat them.

Nevertheless, Vaan packed everything away after he finished cooking the chopped-up corpses.

A few moments later, he took out his gunblade ammunition and filled the empty cartridge cases with rock powder before fixing the bullets in place, making the cartridges whole.

Afterward, he packed them into their magazines and stored them away before he turned his attention to contracted earth spirit.

"Time to go back inside, Topaz."

'Kyu...'

Topaz flapped her wings as she flew back inside Vaan's body, albeit with some reluctance.

Earth Manipulation!

After he collected everything he needed from the pocket space and wore his human mask, Vaan drilled his way down towards the enormous open region he sensed deeper below the earth.

The earth quickly split apart as he descended over three hundred feet.

His body immediately plummeted when he broke through the last layer of the earth and reached the enormous open space.

In that instance, he quickly broke off a large piece of rock from the ceiling with Earth Manipulation and threw it under his feet to break his fall, achieving geo-kinetic flight.

At the same time, he was greeted by soft purple-glowing light from glowworms and purple moss that could be found throughout the enormous open space.

Whether it was on the ceiling, the ground, or the numerous towering pillars supporting the top from collapsing, the glowworms and purple moss could be seen everywhere.

Even the edge of the enormous open space could not be seen; it felt boundless.

Coupled with the heavy air and surreal environment, he felt like he had left the human world and entered someplace in Gehenna.

"A world like this was hidden right underneath the Red Goblin Mountains?" Vaan quietly muttered as his eyes widened, showing a rare human emotion of surprise.

Even when he suspected the underground space beneath the Red Goblin Mountains to be big, the scope had far exceeded his imagination.

It was more than just an enormous cave; it was a pocket realm.

'Was this pocket realm formed by a large Realm Fragment?' Vaan speculated.

Nevertheless, he quickly descended roughly seven hundred feet before he reached the ground level within the pocket realm.

Staying in the air left him in the open.

The pocket realm was a place he knew little about. It was hard to say what kind of creatures, monsters, or possibly even demons lurked in it.

Ding!

<Antimagic spores have entered your body>

<Antimagic spores have been removed from your body>

Seeing the system notification, Vaan understood the antimagic spores had also spread throughout the pocket realm.

At the same time, there was a chance that the Plant-type Abomination could be somewhere inside the pocket realm.

The problem was finding the right direction to it.

Nevertheless, Vaan used Magic Vision to determine where mana was the most concentrated to determine his direction.

'It's leading me in the opposite direction of the mountain peak,' Vaan narrowed his eyes.

The punitive expedition had entered the Red Goblin Mountains from the northern side and headed south to climb the mountains.

However, the most concentrated mana pointed north.

'If the entrance to this pocket realm is somewhere up the mountains, then heading south would bring me back to the surface, while heading north leads deeper inside the pocket realm,' Vaan mused.

Suddenly, his eyes flickered as he picked up several pairs of footsteps moving within his detection range.

He quickly hid behind a large boulder and lay in wait as the sound of footsteps drew closer.

'A group of goblin patrols?' Vaan furrowed his brows after determining the source of the footsteps, which belonged to a group of six goblins.

But unlike the other Rank 1 Green Goblins, the ones before him were well-equipped and moved together with trained discipline.

'Of course, given the sheer size of this pocket realm, there should be many goblins than what was seen on the surface,' Vaan silently thought.

Chapter 198: Chimera Insects

Nevertheless, Vaan had never seen well-equipped goblins before.

Not only did the Rank 1 Green Goblins wear full-body black leather armor, one of them even wore a set of full black iron armor.

Furthermore, their black iron spears appeared to be around rank 2 in quality.

'These armored goblins look stronger than the normal Rank 1 Green Goblins...' Vaan silently thought as he observed the goblin patrols with Omni-Sense.

Kreuk!

Suddenly, the leading black iron armored goblin stopped and glanced around as if it had detected something with its nose.

Shortly after, it fixed its gaze in Vaan's direction and approached the huge boulder he was hiding behind to investigate with the other goblins.

Vaan's eyes glinted.

In that instance, he quickly determined the goblin had somehow smelt his scent despite it being erased beforehand.

The moment the goblins drew close, he immediately shot out from behind the huge boulder like a blurred shadow and swiftly slashed each of their necks with his gunblades.

Keuk!

All six goblins were quickly felled in a short instance.

No matter how well-equipped they were, they couldn't make up for the absolute difference in power between him and them.

Even so, the goblins had revealed much sharper senses and faster reactions than the average Rank 1 Green Goblins.

Just like hobgoblins, they had been enhanced or evolved, but to an even greater degree than the hobgoblins.

'This pocket realm is hiding many secrets,' Vaan mused.

Shortly after checking the goblins' equipment, he tossed everything into the Heaven-Swallowing Space, their corpses included.

Furthermore, he also eliminated the traces of their blood, burying everything under patches of red soil with Earth Manipulation.

Vaan quickly left the area shortly after, heading north.

Along the way, he found the pocket realm's environment to be quite unique, unlike anything he had seen in the human world.

There was no consistency in the formation of its land. While there were barren areas, there were also thriving plants from both the human world and Gehenna in one place. Some grew on the ground, while others grew over rocks and boulders.

Overall, it painted a rather surreal and unnatural scene.

'If this environment was artificially cultivated, then was it actually a result of the two worlds colliding?' Vaan wondered.

As he ventured further north, he also found some small insects that thrived on the flowers of Gehenna.

However, the insects didn't seem recognizable—or rather, they possessed multiple recognizable traits of different monsters, beasts, and insects, all mixed together.

None of the monster, beast, or insect books he had read in the libraries had recorded such a kind of creature.

For example, the insect in front of him looked like a honey bee. But besides its head, which was the only thing that looked like a honey bee, it had sharp scythe-like arms of a praying mantis for its legs, wings of a black bat, and a scorpion tail-like stinger.

Failing to find a name that matched the description in his memories, he could only call it a chimera bee.

As if Vaan had got too close, he had attracted the chimera bee's attention.

The moment it spotted him, it immediately revealed its highly hostile and aggressive nature as it flew at him with its stinger out.

Vaan's brow furrowed.

In the same instance, he picked up a pebble on the ground with Earth Manipulation and flicked it at the attacking chimera bee, easily splattering it upon impact.

Chimera bee was extremely weak, around the lowest level of Rank 0 beings. Even ordinary humans could have killed it with a regular fly swatter.

But when the chimera bee's green blood splattered on the ground, it easily eroded some of the soil.

Even the pebble he used to kill the chimera bee had lost half its shape before it struck a boulder and scattered into countless tinier fragments.

'Such corrosive power!' Vaan frowned as doubt sprouted in his heart.

As he continued forward, he found more chimera insects. And like the chimera bee, they were all highly aggressive when he entered their line of sight.

A stronger feeling of doubt sprouted in his heart.

Sometime later, Vaan encountered another group of goblins patrols. However, they were too preoccupied with hunting down another group of chimera insects to notice him.

None of the chimera insects he had seen were bigger than the size of two fingers. They were all small and weak, yet highly dangerous at the same time.

Vaan quickly understood the reason for his suspicions.

While the unnatural environment itself could be said to be naturally formed from the collision of the human world and Gehenna, the chimera insects were not native creatures of said environment.

'These chimera insects are the products of body transmutation experiments!' Vaan quickly realized.

However, body transmutation experiments were considered forbidden research as they tampered with life and created horrid existences.

It was especially forbidden from being conducted on humans as the Transcendent Witches did not want the purity of the human race from mixing with other creatures in the pursuit of power.

If they had allowed such a trend to grow, a day would come when no one could be considered fully human.

'I smell an evil witch's lair,' Vaan thought.

Once he came to that conclusion, many things became clear to him. But, at the same time, it also gave him more questions.

From the changes in the goblins' intelligence and basic abilities to their disciplined training and equipment, even the existence of the chimera insects, it could all be explained as the work of a Fallen Witch.

The undiscovered pocket realm provided the perfect environment for the Fallen Witch's experiments.

However, it would still be difficult for a Fallen Witch to command hordes of goblins on her own.

'Is the Fallen Witch working with a higher-ranking goblin blessed with greater intelligence? Or has the Fallen Witch conducted body transmutation experiments on herself and fused with a high-ranking goblin to become one of them?' Vaan speculated.

He wouldn't be surprised if it were the latter, as Fallen Witches have abandoned their humanity.

However, blind speculations wouldn't get him anywhere.

'I need to investigate further,' Vaan decided.

If it was the evil lair of a powerful Fallen Witch, there was a good chance that even the Plant-type Abomination may have been captured and held captive somewhere for research purposes.

Chapter 199: Rank 3 Goblin Champion

Sometime later, the six goblin patrols finished wiping out the chimera insects that had seemingly escaped, spilling their corrosive green blood over the ground.

Several black, red, and purple Gehenna plants quickly withered into nothing under the terrible corrosiveness of the chimera insects' blood.

Nevertheless, the six goblin patrols didn't bother with the clean-up process; they showed no care for the environment.

They were prepared to continue their patrol of the area for more chimera insects when the leading goblin in black iron armor suddenly paused its steps.

Its nose twitched like a Porcean.

Porcean was a race of humanoid pig monsters often depicted as orcs in some stories. In the seven witch kingdoms, the folks commonly referred to them as P'orcs.

Sensing the black armored goblin turning in his direction, Vaan understood his presence had been exposed again.

Nevertheless, he patiently waited for the goblin patrols to approach his hidden location.

The moment they entered his range, he immediately shot out and took them by surprise, making quick work of them before they could resist or draw attention.

Six goblin heads fell to the ground within several breaths.

Shortly after Vaan cleaned up all their traces in the area, he sprinkled more scent-erasing powder on himself.

'This quality of scent-erasing powder doesn't seem very effective for some reason,' Vaan furrowed his brows in thought.

Despite using the scent-erasing powder, the goblins were still able to detect his smell.

'It seems like these black armored goblins can smell other things on my body. They do look different from the other five goblins,' Vaan mused.

As he recalled the black armored goblin's facial features, its nose did resemble a P'orc's to a certain degree.

Thus, there was a chance that the black armored goblin had been enhanced with some P'orc abilities through body transmutation.

However, it wasn't just any normal P'orc either; it was a special type of Winter P'orc.

'Winter P'orcs can smell other edible beings, or in other words, food. Regardless if I have a scent or not, Winter P'orcs would be able to smell me,' Vaan rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Because Winter P'orcs' noses were hypersensitive to temperature, allowing them to smell the heat in a person, not just the person's scent.

Nevertheless, since Vaan figured out the problem, he just had to resolve it.

Kinetic Energy Manipulation!

Vaan reduced his heartbeat, blood flow, and overall body temperature, making him feel rather cold.

He had no problem enduring the heat, but he was evidently weak against the cold, which was contradictory to his season preference.

In the past, he preferred cold seasons over hot ones.

However, his body was attuned to the earth after he achieved the Earth Spirit Body. As such, his strength and weakness became clear, just like how metal could be purified and refined into a stronger metal through heat but becomes brittle when exposed to coldness.

That said, he only lowered his body temperature by a few degrees.

After encountering another group of goblin patrols, the black iron armored goblin failed to detect him despite entering within a similar range as the past two goblin patrol groups.

Nevertheless, Vaan still chose to eliminate the goblin patrol group.

After swiftly slaying the six goblin patrols, he collected their equipment and eliminated their traces from the area.

The goblins did not know who or what killed them, even as they died from decapitation.

'From the positioning of these last three goblin patrol groups, their base should be located somewhere northwest of here,' Vaan thought before adjusting his direction of travel.

The present terrain was like a multi-layered maze, filled with low and high grounds with various rock formations.

It was difficult to see far unless he had the high ground or flew overhead.

However, doing so would expose him to unnecessary risks that he wasn't willing to take, especially when he didn't know who and what he could be dealing with.

After all, it was an evil witch's lair.

Attracting all of the enemy's attention wouldn't do him any good. A massive improvement in power was by no means a reason for him to become arrogant and complacent.

People who flaunt their strength and backgrounds were the type of people to get themselves killed.

Boom... Boom...

As Vaan made his way northwest through a canyon of rock pillars, he suddenly felt the ground steadily tremble from the footsteps of a rather big or heavy being.

When he got closer to the source, he found out the footsteps belonged to a fifteen-foot goblin filled with scars and bulging large muscles.

'A Rank 3 Goblin Champion that had been enhanced...' Vaan's eyes flickered, noticing the goblin champion's peculiarities.

It wasn't just big and packed with muscle power; it was also red-skinned and had one arm incomparably larger than the other. It was extremely lop-sided.

'No wonder the Fallen Witch didn't send any of these goblins outside. Anyone would have been able to tell they had undergone body transmutation. This one has the right arm of a Cyclops and the nose of a Winter P'orc... There are also dragon scales and the ears of a Nightmare Bat... Wait, ears of a Nightmare Bat?'

Roar!

The enhanced Rank 3 Goblin Champion suddenly made a mighty roar before raising a giant stone club with its big arm.

In the next moment, it swung down in Vaan's direction.

Boom!

The ground split apart like an earthquake, and dozens of rock pillars in the area collapsed, exposing Vaan's location over a hundred yards away behind one of the collapsed rock pillars.

Its power was unreal, almost at the level of a Rank 4 being.

However, the Rank 3 Goblin Champion did not get the chance to see him as it fell forward under the weight and force of its giant right arm during the swing.

In the same instance, Vaan immediately charged toward it as he withdrew his Rank 4 Purple Sword and underwent Lycan Transformation.

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«Lycan State»

[Total Defense: 357 → 485 (↑128) (Mid-level Rank 3 → High-level Rank 3)]

[Total Strength: 301 → 401 (↑100) (Low-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 3)]

[Total Speed: 285 → 377 (↑92) (Low-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 3)]

=====

"Ro—!"

Chapter 200: Evil Lair

Shinggg!

Vaan closed the hundred-yard gap and hacked off the goblin champion's head in a silver flash with lightning-fast speed before it could cause another loud commotion.

A Peak Rank 3 monster was slain in an instance.

However, its earlier roar and attack were more than enough to be heard by every being within several miles of it.

"What an unpleasant creation. But this is just one of the possibly many abominable creations in this place," Vaan muttered.

=====

«Normal State»

[Total Defense: 485 → 357 (↓128) (High-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 3)]

[Total Strength: 401 → 301 (↓100) (Mid-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 3)]

[Total Speed: 377 → 285 (↓92) (Mid-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 3)]

=====

After he exited the Lycan Transformation, he immediately felt a sense of weakness that only lasted a few breaths before it disappeared.

Shortly after, Vaan quickly left the area without hesitation.

Although the loud commotion was unlikely to attract the attention of every creature that overheard it, there would still be quite a number of monsters drawn to the area.

...

Sometime later, Vaan was already more than six hundred yards from the area, hiding in the gap between two closely positioned rock pillars.

He kept perfectly still without moving a muscle, his breath so faint it was uncertain whether he was breathing, and his heartbeat slowed by several paces, allowing him to blend into the background.

At the same time, his eyes were closed, only relying on his other senses to detect the number of enemies rushing over to the goblin champion's location.

From several goblins passing by, their numbers increased to the dozens. But within the next while, the number of goblins passing by spiked into the hundreds.

Sensing so many goblins passing through from the northwestern direction, Vaan confirmed with certainty that he was heading in the right direction.

'However, there are still so many goblins in this pocket realm, not to mention all the other kinds of abominable creatures the Fallen Witch had created in this place. It'll be difficult to get close to the evil witch's lair,' Vaan contemplated.

Hunting the monsters in small groups would take too much time while slaying them in large numbers would draw too much attention.

'I will be in trouble if the Fallen Witch had managed to create many nasty Rank 4 beings through her body transmutation experiments,' Vaan understood.

Furthermore, he also had to consider the Fallen Witch's own power and not just her creations.

'The dangers of the Red Goblin Mountains had only noticeably increased in the past several years while the goblin caves had been known for a much longer period. Yet, no one discovered such a large pocket realm until now?'

Vaan pondered for a moment before he realized his entry into the pocket realm might have put him in a different region from the cave entrance.

Given that magic could fundamentally do anything, it wouldn't be difficult to create an artificial rock wall to seal off the rest of the pocket realm from the main goblin cave area.

However, there was also the possibility that the first and second stratum had been separated from the start, meaning the pocket realm had always been cut off from the rest of the goblin cave.

'Then did the Fallen Witch stumble into the pocket realm by luck?' Vaan wondered.

More importantly, how long had it been since the Fallen Witch became one and was allowed to freely conduct her forbidden research and experiments in the pocket realm?

Time was a good measure of Fallen Witch's growth.

Nevertheless, while Vaan was idly pondering about the Fallen Witch's strength and origins, the goblin movements in the area ended, allowing him to move on from his hidden location.

'If I want to get close to the evil lair, I need to bait away the monsters guarding around it,' Vaan mused.

Fortunately, he had prepared something of that sort.

After traveling four miles further, Vaan located a relatively large rock mountain in the distance, surrounded by a flat field with countless large metal cages in place.

Each of the large cages contained a different species of monsters and beasts.

'These creatures are all captured and reared for the Fallen Witch's experiments...' Vaan concluded after briefly observing the region from a distance.

Goblins were considered one of the weakest monster races. And yet, goblins freely roamed the region while stronger monsters like cyclops and wyverns were held in captivity.

Most likely, it was because the goblins were easier to control than the other monsters.

Nevertheless, Vaan slowly shifted his attention to another area further south of the rock mountain lair and flat fields.

It looked like a city.

And just looking at the countless structures of primitive designs within the city, he could tell they were the goblins' dwellings.

However, the sheer number of dwellings in the region looked like it could accommodate at least thirty thousand, and this was just a rough estimation from a glance.

The difference could be much greater.

That being said, he did not see many goblins, whether they were inside the goblin city or patrolling around the fields and lair.

'The security around the lair is much looser than I expected. Is it because the Fallen Witch wasn't expecting an intruder? Or did the Fallen Witch already send out her main force to deal with the punitive expedition group?' Vaan speculated.

Either way, he had the initiative and advantage while he was still in the dark.

'But where is the Plant-type Abomination—No, Lady Aeliana being held?' Vaan scanned the field of caged monsters with his enhanced eyesight.

However, he failed to spot any creature that looked remotely close to a Plant-type Abomination.

Shortly after, he activated his Magic Vision and saw large amounts of mana being drawn towards the rock mountain lair.

At the same time, he could tell the antimagic spores were denser in the area from the ongoing system notifications in the background.

For a brief moment, the possibility of Lady Aeliana being the Fallen Witch crossed his mind.

However, he immediately ruled out the possibility.

Lady Aeliana couldn't be the Fallen Witch. There were too many factors that denied it.

It had only been three years since she turned, whereas all the clues he collected on the Fallen Witch's experiments suggested that the Fallen Witch had been around for far, far longer.