

The Witch 271

Chapter 271: A Drop of Blood

With his hand firmly clutched on the Rank 4 Black Sword, Vaan used his other hand to claw at the wyrm with his sharpened nails.

Ka-cha!

The wyrm's hard scales ripped off under the extreme sharpness of Vaan's claws, which even surprised him.

He didn't expect his sharpened nails to possess such a high level of sharpness, even for a partial transformation.

It was an even better weapon than his Rank 4 Black Sword.

The bloodline of a Rank 6 being or higher could not be underestimated, not at all.

Ka-cha! Ka-cha!

Vaan cracked and ripped the wyrm's hard scales off one by one, exposing its softer and more vulnerable flesh underneath.

Nevertheless, damage done to the wyrm's tail end would be minimal. If he wanted to inflict fatal damage, Vaan had to aim for the wyrm's upper body or head.

Shortly after he stored away his Rank 4 Black Sword, Vaan clawed his way up on the wyrm's back while being hit by earthen fragments.

Nevertheless, the damage was insignificant thanks to his Earth Spirit Body and high earth affinity.

Before long, he reached the wyrm's upper body. He immediately started ripping off its hard scales and exposing its vulnerable flesh.

Roar!

The Magma Wyrms roared painfully.

It shrugged its body furiously in an attempt to shake Vaan off its body but to no avail. He stuck to its body like a splinter that wouldn't come out.

After he cleared a patch of hard scales, he didn't hesitate to dig into the wyrms' flesh with his claws and make his way inside its upper body.

Ding!

<You have been burned by lava>

<You have regenerated from your burns>

<You have been burned by lava>

<You have regenerated from your burns>

<Your flesh has been tempered>

<You have gained one point in defense>

...

The lava on the wyrms' body continuously burned Vaan, but his Peak-rank Regeneration, which his Lycan Transformation further enhanced, instantly healed all his wounds.

From time to time, he also received the 26% natural regeneration buff of his Earth Spirit Body.

Scorching-hot blood gushed out of the wyrms' open wound and also burned him, but like all other burns, they were instantly healed.

The constant damage and regeneration tempered his flesh and increased their defense.

Ba-dump! Ba-dump!

Nevertheless, Vaan ignored the improvements and went straight for the wyrm's heart, which wasn't hard to locate due to its powerful beating rhythm.

'Your rampage ends here,' Vaan's gaze glinted with sharpness.

In the next instant, he quickly tore up with wyrm's heart with his claws, causing large volumes of blood to gush out and soak his entire body.

His entire figure temporarily disappeared inside the sea of blood that poured out of the wyrm's heart.

Ding!

<You have burned by the Magma Wyrms' dragon blood essences>

<You have regenerated from your burns>

<Your flesh has been tempered>

<You have gained one point in defense>

...

Ding!

<You have obtained a drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence>

<Do you want to absorb it? Y/N>

<Note: Absorbing the drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence will cause your Immortal Lycan Bloodline to mutate and alter its bloodline awakening path>

...

Amid the string of system notifications, Vaan was surprised by one particular section.

'A drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence? No wonder the Magma Wyrms were so powerful...' Vaan thought.

But more importantly, where did the Magma Wyrms obtain the drop of Fire Dragon God's blood essence in the first place?

'An inheritance?' Vaan wondered.

Nevertheless, he quickly considered his options.

There was no doubt that the drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence was a priceless treasure. But whether it was useful to him was a different matter.

'Unless I acquire more blood from Balmodon the Undying, it will be difficult to further awaken the Immortal Lycan Bloodline. Although other options exist, they aren't exactly easier either,' Vaan mused.

'But I can't exactly keep following down the same path as the Balmodon the Undying to become an Immortal Lycan either. It has its cons.'

For example, there was a chance that Balmodon the Undying could track him in Gehenna due to him sharing the Great Devil's bloodline.

Furthermore, there was also a higher chance that he could be suppressed by the Balmodon the Undying, even if he somehow managed to reach the same level of power as the Great Devil one day.

After all, Balmodon the Undying was the primogenitor of the Immortal Lycan Bloodline.

On the other hand, dragons were a superior race of beasts that could date back to ancient times. Given their great strength and wisdom, plenty of benefits could be gained from assimilating their bloodline.

Furthermore, it was the bloodline of the Fire Dragon God, no less.

It was definitely a good thing if he could fuse the bloodline of the Fire Dragon God and the Immortal Lycan and create a new bloodline that was free from the restrictions of both sides.

Although he would be embarking on a new path, he was confident in his ability, knowledge, and the system.

That said, a single drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence wasn't enough for him to give up the pure Immortal Lycan Bloodline.

As such, Vaan refrained from making a hasty decision and kept the drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence stored inside his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

'If there's indeed an inheritance ground of the Fire Dragon God hidden in the Thousand Fog Mountains, offering more of its blood essence, then I will assimilate its bloodline,' Vaan decided.

Ding!

<You have been burned by lava>

<You have regenerated from your burns>

<Your flesh has been tempered>

<You have gained one point in defense>

...

The system continued to spam him with notifications.

However, after the Magma Wyrn had its heart destroyed, its movements eventually stopped, life faded from its eyes, and its temperature gradually dropped.

Eventually, the lava was cooled to the point that it could no longer hurt him; it only kept his body hot.

At the same time, his clothes had been reduced to ashes.

In other words, he was butt naked.

Step, step, step...

As Vaan climbed out of the wyrn's body, Astoria finally caught up to him with Topaz, only to realize the threat had been eliminated.

"Teacher Raphna, you... are you all right?"

As Astoria asked, she covered Topaz's eyes with one hand but not hers with the other.

She stared at his bare body from top to bottom twice.

Chapter 272: A Test

"You like what you see, Headmaster Astoria?" Vaan boldly asked without shame. Instead, an amused smile hung on his face.

Astoria blinked for a moment before she peeled her eyes away with a bit of embarrassment.

"Cover yourself up, Teacher Raphna. You'll taint Tia's eyes with your family jewels," Astoria stated.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't need her to tell him that. He quickly took out one of his spare outfits and changed into it.

Although the casual brown t-shirt and pants made him look like a poor commoner, they were comfortable and didn't restrict his movements.

Furthermore, they were expendable. Thus, they were quite suitable for traveling.

Shortly after, Astoria uncovered Topaz's eyes before the little earth fairy flew over to Vaan to check on his condition.

"Kyu?"

"I'm alright, Tia."

"Kyu, kyuu!"

After Topaz finished her inspection, she flew over to the Magma Wyrms' huge carcass and gave it a few kicks.

Of course, her kicks didn't inflict any damage. Heck, the carcass didn't even budge.

However, she did succeed in venting her feelings.

Topaz's antics amused Astoria, but she quickly shifted her attention back to Vaan after glancing at the Magma Wyrms' motionless carcass.

At that moment, Vaan had already returned to his original form as his long white furry hair became short black once more.

"How did you kill the Magma Wyrms, Teacher Raphna? Are you sure your body's all right?" Astoria inquired.

"You don't have to worry about it coming back to life, Headmaster Astoria. I've destroyed its heart after tearing my way inside, as you could have guessed from my loss of clothes," Vaan said before adding, "And I am all right. So you don't have to worry."

"Just some superficial burns that have already been healed by my body's natural regeneration," Vaan added.

"I see..." Astoria uttered before falling into silence. Then, a few breaths later, she asked, "Are you a human or a demon?"

"Are you asking because of my Lycan Transformation? Well, that depends on what you view as a human and a demon. Do you see the members of the Assembly of Silent Night as demons or humans?" Vaan nonchalantly replied.

"They are natural humans," Astoria answered with a frown before adding, "However, the nature of their work makes them not much different from witches. At least, that is the case towards witches."

"Human by birth but demonic by nature, huh?" Vaan casually uttered.

"In other words, the evils committed toward witches is what makes one a demon?" Vaan shook his head with a soft snicker and said, "However, the evils committed against witches result from today's extreme matriarchal society. The witch supremacists and their discrimination against men have made them enemies."

"Nevertheless, I was born human but gained the power of demons and killed a witch. So by your standards, I am a demon," Vaan calmly stated.

"That's not the same, Teacher Raphna. The witch you killed deserved death, whereas the Assembly of Silent Night hunt witches for a living because they enjoy it." Astoria shook her head and said,

"Nevertheless, I still committed evil against a witch. Thus, that makes me a demon, does it? Those were your words. Evils committed against witches make one demonic." Vaan repeated.

"While I did say that, why are you emphasizing that point? You know what I mean, Teacher Raphna, or are you saying you are an evil person?"

"Well, I'm certainly not a good person," Vaan replied indifferently. "And there's a chance I could turn to the demon's side."

"Don't say that, Teacher Raphna. I don't want to be your enemy," Astoria stated.

"I don't want to be your enemy either, Headmaster Astoria. That's why I am being transparent with you," Vaan seriously said before adding, "If humanity doesn't turn their back on me, then I would have no reason to join the demons."

"Humanity won't; I won't," Astoria firmly stated.

"Then, it shouldn't matter what I am, right? You only need to know that I am on your side, Headmaster Astoria," Vaan said with a smile.

"That's true," Astoria nodded.

After much was said, the Astoria reaffirmed Vaan's stance. As long as they didn't give him a reason to be their enemy, he wouldn't be their enemy.

Simply as that.

"We should get going. The others should be waiting for us," Astoria said shortly after.

"Of course, but without this big guy," Vaan acknowledge with a nod before pointing to wurm's carcass. "This thing is a mountain of treasure."

"That's true. But I'm afraid that even I would have trouble fitting such a large carcass in my storage space," Astoria mentioned.

"You don't have to worry about that, Headmaster Astoria. I got this covered," Vaan claimed.

Shortly after Vaan placed his palm on the Magma Wurm's carcass, it was slowly sucked into his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

Although the carcass was much large than Vaan's palm, he didn't have a problem devouring the carcass due to the distortion of space.

From another person's perspective, it looked like the carcass was shrinking in his hand. It was quite a common phenomenon among spatial storage tools.

Nevertheless, Astoria was surprised, nonetheless.

After all, the wyrm was not small.

"You're full of surprises, Teacher Raphna. Just how many more secrets are you hiding?" Astoria casually asked with curiosity.

"Curious?" Vaan smiled before teasing her, "If you become my woman, I might consider sharing with you."

"Okay," Astoria uttered indifferently.

Vaan didn't expect such a response from her. Thus, he was mildly stunned by it.

Nevertheless, it was exactly the reaction she was looking for. Astoria's lips curved into a smile before she asked, "Surprised?"

"Well, I can't say I'm not," Vaan wryly smiled before saying, "It wasn't quite the response I was looking for."

"So, you're only joking? If you're serious, my answer would be serious too. However, the question is, do you dare?" Astoria narrowed her eyes with a sly smile.

Suddenly, his casual teasing had backfired and turned into a test. There were multiple meanings in Astoria's words.

Thus, he had to pick wisely.

Nevertheless, he could sense that he stood to lose more than he would gain if he truly committed to making her his woman.

"Let's not turn it into a business exchange," Vaan said wryly.

When Astoria heard that, she kept a calm smile. However, she felt relief inside her heart. In fact, she wasn't sure what she wanted.

She wanted to love but was also afraid of loving.

Perhaps she wasn't ready for love.

...

Nevertheless, sometime later, Vaan and Astoria took the path back to the surface and found Aeliana and Hester waiting for them by the earth tunnel.

At the same time, the Volcan Wolf's body could be seen beside them.

"It didn't make it?" Astoria asked.

Hester shook her head with a sad look.

"Let's give it a semi-burial. We can't bring with us nor return it to its kin, so we should bury it where it can't get eaten by wandering beasts. We can come back and return it to its kin later if we finish our objective," Vaan stated.

"Alright," Hester agreed.

Shortly after, Vaan telepathically instructed Topaz to make a new cave roughly six hundred yards away before he placed the Volcan Wolf inside.

Nevertheless, before he sealed the cave, Vaan glanced at the Volcan Wolf's warm yet lifeless carcass and paused in thought.

If one didn't look at the Volcan Wolf's pulse, they would think it was still sleeping.

"Teacher Raphna?" Astoria and the other glanced at him, wondering what was causing him to delay the burial.

Vaan didn't say anything and reached out his hand.

After his nails sharpened into claws, he made a cut on his finger and dripped a few blood drops into the Volcan Wolf's mouth.

As everyone wondered why he did what he did, Vaan casually said, "Just an offering."

"My blood also has strong regenerative powers, so it should keep the body from decaying and possessing a stench until we return to collect it," Vaan added.

However, he was actually just conducting a test.

"Alright, no more delays," Vaan stated a few breaths later.

After the cave was sealed, Astoria noticed Hester's gaze lingered on Vaan's hand and knew what she was thinking about.

"Teacher Raphna is not our enemy," Astoria stated.

"I know," Hester calmly uttered.

"Oh?" Astoria expressed her surprise before asking, "Then, what are you thinking about, Lady Hester?"

"I've never doubted Sir Vahn," Hester stated.

"However, his ability is quite strange. It seems like a product of assimilating Furehengir's bloodline like the members of the Assembly of Silent Night, but he seems to have complete control over it."

"I wonder if Sir Vahn acquired Furehengir's blood from the slain members of the dark organization during the punitive expedition?" Hester asked shortly after.

"You can say that," Vaan nodded.

He wasn't exactly lying.

After all, he did collect Fuhengir's blood from several slain wolf-men in order to awaken the Immortal Lycan Bloodline.

Nevertheless, when Astoria heard Hester's question, she felt ashamed of herself for suspecting he was a demon.

She should have realized that Vaan could have acquired Fuhengir's blood during the punitive expedition and tamed its power using his profound wisdom.

Alas, it seemed her faith in Vaan wasn't as strong as Hester's.

Little did Astoria know, Hester didn't care if Vaan was a demon or not; she couldn't live without him—or more precisely, his D.

She was completely addicted to it.

"Thanks to the Magma Wyrms' disturbance, we didn't get to rest," Vaan mentioned before seeking the party's opinions, "Shall we pitch a new camp and resume our rest or proceed ahead to the upper regions?"

Chapter 273: Entering the Upper Regions

Ultimately, the group decided to rest after they heard Vaan's question.

A new cave was quickly set up, and everyone went to rest without indulging in further activities. They had learned from the lesson and avoided the dual practice.

Five hours later, everyone was ready to climb the mountain and enter the upper regions.

"Everyone got enough rest?" Vaan casually asked before turning to Hester. "Especially you, Lady Hester? Are you good to go now?"

"Yes, Sir Vahn. Five hours gave me ample rest," Hester replied.

"Then, let's move," Vaan urged.

After the three ladies acknowledged his words, they quickly left the cave and returned to the surface.

Within several breaths, everyone faced the ninth mountain, ready to climb it.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't move immediately. Instead, Astoria and the other two ladies saw him scanning the surroundings.

Nothing could be found besides the thick fog obscuring most of the environment.

"Did you notice something, Teacher Raphna?" Astoria inquired.

"Not right now," Vaan replied before adding, "Earlier, during our rest, there were some movements in the area and disturbances further up the mountain. It may have been a battle."

"Could it be the Fallen Witches?" Aeliana's gaze sharpened before she furrowed her brows. "But the Fallen Witches have a spatial-attribute High Witch among them. Would they still be around here?"

"Possibly," Astoria uttered before mentioning, "The upper regions isn't a place anyone can enter, even for High Witches."

"Perhaps, the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon is giving them a hard time," she guessed shortly after.

Nevertheless, she was surprised by the extent of Vaan's senses. She did not notice anything during their five hours of rest underground.

It seemed Fuhengir's blood had also greatly enhanced his senses – Astoria thought.

"Anyway, if you noticed the disturbance, why didn't you inform us earlier, Teacher Raphna?" Astoria shifted the attention back to him. "We could have been in trouble if the Fallen Witches ambushed us."

"If we had been their targets, I would have naturally alerted everyone ahead of time," Vaan calmly said.

"Since we weren't their targets, there was no need to disturb everyone's rest again. It would only be more advantageous to us if everyone is rested and in peak conditions while our enemies are exhausted from attacking the upper regions."

"That makes sense. You already had everything thought out, right?" Astoria wondered with a casual glance.

Vaan slightly smiled in response before urging the group, "Let's move without light. We don't want to attract unwanted attention."

"Alright."

Shortly after getting everyone's agreement, the group followed his lead as they tread into the thick fog and up the mountain slope.

Along the way, Astoria glanced at Hester and signaled her to come closer with a hand gesture. "Lady Hester, a word, please. There's something I wish to talk about with you."

"What's the matter, Headmaster Astoria?" Hester raised an eyebrow in bewilderment, not expecting Astoria to take the initiative to start a conversation with her. "What do you need from me?"

"I can see that you have already reached the utmost limit of Peak-stage Senior Witch," Astoria mentioned before asking her question, "When do you plan to advance?"

"Given the natural abundance of mana in the depths of Thousand Fog Mountains, you won't find a better place than here to attempt the formation of your third circle. I believe you have a high chance of succeeding."

"I also feel like I have a high chance of succeeding if I attempt to form my third circle, Headmaster Astoria." Hester acknowledged before adding, "Especially if the surrounding mana reached the same concentration level as during Sir Vahn and Lord Aeliana's dual-practice session."

"However, I agreed to accompany Sir Vahn on this trip to assist him in completing his objectives here, not mine. I can't selfishly hold everyone back for my own benefit. Furthermore, the process of forming the third circle would also likely draw attention," Hester reasonably added.

"You have a point, Lady Hester." Astoria nodded in agreement before glancing at Vaan. "Only Teacher Raphna can decide."

She had also accompanied Vaan to assist him. She couldn't possibly ask him to delay their main objective for Hester's sake.

That said, an additional High Witch would improve the strength of their party.

"With everything said and recorded about the upper regions, I don't expect us to reach the mountain peak without obstacles or setbacks. We'll first scout the upper regions and search for the Fallen Witches' traces," Vaan impassively mentioned.

"If there's an opportunity after that, we can wait for Lady Hester to attempt her advancement to the High Witch rank."

"Thank you, Sir Vahn," Hester expressed her gratitude for his consideration.

Nevertheless, Vaan suddenly narrowed his eyes before he made a slight turn towards a slightly open area devoid of trees—or rather, the trees had been removed.

There were traces of a camp destroyed by a battle in the area and carried the stench of blood.

Several large beast carcasses lay scattered around the destroyed camp, including a few Magma Wurm. The blood was still somewhat fresh, indicating the events had occurred recently, at least within the last several hours.

Astoria and Hester didn't notice the destroyed camp until they grew closer and cleared the fog from the area.

"This is..." Astoria inspected the destroyed camp with focus.

"Most likely the Fallen Witches' camp. Looking at the traces left behind, they seemed to have been attacked during their rest around the same time as us," Vaan determined.

"Look at all these carcasses. The Fallen Witches are not weak for them to be able to take this many Fog Beasts and Magma Wyrms," Aeliana guessed before wondering, "Did Magma Wyrms attack them due to us?"

"That's a possibility," Vaan replied before focusing on the footsteps leading up the mountain. "Let us follow their tracks. We're near the midway point. They have stopped here to study a way past the upper regions."

"But they have a spatial-attribute High Witch among them. Why would they need to do that?" Hester wondered.

"Perhaps, they don't have a choice," Vaan uttered as they approached the midway point dividing the middle and upper regions. "The space ahead appears to be locked."

"A spatial lock?" Astoria's eyes quickly widened with surprise.

Chapter 274: Entering the Upper Regions (2)

"A spatial lock?" Hester appeared startled after hearing the term before she sought Astoria's confirmation, "Are you sure it's a spatial lock, Headmaster Astoria?"

"I don't know." Astoria shook her head and said, "I only thought about a spatial lock after hearing Teacher Raphna's words. Even I didn't know the space ahead had been locked down."

"How can you tell, Teacher Raphna? Do you have a close affinity with the spatial attribute?" Astoria inquired.

"You can say that," Vaan nodded.

Although he could definitely sense the spatial lock in the upper regions, it was also true that the system didn't record his spatial affinity.

Nevertheless, it was impossible not to have a spatial affinity.

After all, he had a spatial bloodline and the Heaven-Swallowing Physique, which was of the spatial attribute.

Thus, having a spatial physique and not a spatial affinity didn't make sense.

Nevertheless, before Vaan could ponder further, Hester suddenly uttered, "Hold on. I thought Sir Vahn had an earth affinity?"

"That's true," Astoria nodded after the reminder and glanced at him. "Teacher Raphna's earth affinity must be high to contract an Earth Spirit."

"However, a person can have more than one affinity, Lady Hester," Astoria mentioned.

"Then that means Sir Vahn has a dual affinity talent for earth and space... Sir Vahn's natural talents are a little too overwhelming, don't you all think so?" Hester said with a wry smile, feeling a little envious.

"Talent is relative. With the right resource and knowledge, one's talents can be changed and improved, Lady Hester. I wasn't born with earth affinity but later acquired it through a fortuitous encounter in the Blackmoon Region," Vaan calmly stated.

"People may have different starting points, but the height of one's achievement in life is what matters. Take yourself, for example. You were born with a humble background, but you reached Peak-stage Senior Witch with your efforts."

"Once you form your third circle and become a High Witch, you would have achieved what many noble heirs born with silver spoons failed to achieve. Thus, you don't need to feel envious. The world is cruel, but it has its beauty," Vaan stated.

"I see." Hester's heart cleared up before she expressed her gratitude, "Thank you for your words of wisdom, Sir Vahn. I have been enlightened."

"Of course, Lord Vahn's talents shouldn't be compared to others as well. It will only make others depressed," Aeliana commented.

Moving forward, the group gradually shifted their attention back to the main topic.

"The Thousand Fog Mountains always had its secrets. But the more you learn, the more mysterious it becomes. It's one secret on top of another," Astoria mentioned.

"I feel the same way, Headmaster Astoria," Hester agreed with her opinion and added, "It makes one wonder how mighty the dragons hiding in the Thousand Fog Mountains are."

"The grand spell for the fog, the spatial lock, and even the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon. It's hard to imagine a single being could have set them all up. I don't want to discredit the Transcendent Witches, but if this is something any of them could have achieved," Hester added.

"I'm more interested in the deal made between Her Majesty, Henrietta Rosegarden, and the dragons," Vaan rubbed his chin with a curious look, surprising the others.

"Her Majesty... made a deal with the dragons, Lord Vahn?" Aeliana wondered.

"Think about it. The Thousand Fog Mountains occupy a vast amount of land and have beasts strong enough to threaten the stability of the Black Rose Kingdom," Vaan mentioned.

"There's no way Her Majesty would have ignored the dangers of the Thousand Fog Mountains, given her status and power. Thus, she must have made contact with the dragons hidden within. And despite that, all information has been kept secret from the public."

"So, if we take everything into account, Her Majesty must have made a deal with the dragons," Vaan concluded.

The astonishment couldn't be hidden from everyone's faces after they heard his bold claim. Even so, he had made valid reasons and sounded very convincing.

"But for what reason would she have chosen to keep silent about the dragons in the Thousand Fog Mountains, Sir Vahn?" Hester wondered.

"That's hard to say," Vaan peered into the distance thoughtfully.

"I don't know what kind of person Her Majesty is. Perhaps, she reached a compromise with the dragons because she encountered a being even she could not handle, or she showed benevolence to the dragons and spared them in exchange for them not leaving the Thousand Fog Mountains."

"It could be for any reason, really. Only the parties involved know the exact answer to that question," Vaan stated.

"By the way, why didn't we take the Magma Wyrms' carcasses with us?" Aeliana mentioned before adding, "Even if we can't take everything, we could still chop them up into parts that can be stored. After all, they are full of valuable parts."

Astoria glanced at Vaan and smiled before explaining to Aeliana, "There's a chance that the Fallen Witches might return to their camp, seeing how they have left the camping equipment behind."

"If we took the Magma Wyrms' carcasses, it would expose us to the Fallen Witches when they return. So while we still don't know their exact strength, it's better to remain unknown."

"It's as Headmaster Astoria said," Vaan acknowledged with a nod.

More importantly, he had checked the wounds on the Magma Wyrms prior to leaving the Fallen Witches' camp.

They had all suffered many wounds.

However, the most prominent wound was a single hole in their upper bodies. Each of their hearts had been dug out.

Thus, even if those Magma Wyrms had any drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence, it would have already been taken.

Without the drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence, Vaan lost most of his interest in the Magma Wyrms' carcasses.

"We should have already entered the upper regions," Vaan informed the group before adding, "Be on your guard, everyone."

"Understood."

Astoria and the other two ladies quickly agreed, preparing their weapons and magic to be used at a moment's notice.

Nevertheless, it didn't take long before they discovered more tracks from the Fallen Witches on the upper half of the ninth mountain.

"There are traces of battle here, but no corpses or beasts, except..."

Vaan inspected the area before fixing his gaze on a pile of large shadow fragments that seemed to form a True Dragon when pieced together.

Nevertheless, the shadow fragments weren't fixed; they intermittently changed between shadow and normal white fog.

"Is this broken shadow what you call the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon?"

"Unbelievable... They even defeated the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon..."

Chapter 275: Speculating Background

Everyone besides Vaan was shocked to a different extent regarding the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon being in shambles.

The Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon, said to be immune to both physical and magical attacks, was defeated by the Fallen Witches.

It proved the Fallen Witches' strength was extraordinary.

"I'm afraid ordinary High Witches won't be the Fallen Witches' match, let alone Peak-stage Senior Witches," Astoria said solemnly.

Nevertheless, Aeliana didn't listen to her words as she was distracted by another matter.

"I can smell her; that bitch, Fallen Witch Elvira, had been here," Aeliana's gaze quickly sharpened upon picking up Elvira's stench.

She wouldn't forget the person's smell, not after she had been tormented, cut up, and experimented on by such a person with a foul body odor for three years.

"Fallen Witch Elvira is with the spatial-attribute High Witch, huh?" Astoria muttered with a frown. "That could be a problem; it means the other Fallen Witch could also be at least Mid-stage High Witch."

"Worse," Vaan calmly added while studying the traces left behind in the area. "According to these tracks, there should be around six people in their group."

"Six people?" Hester furrowed her brows and said, "But according to the townspeople, there were only two Fallen Witches when they arrived."

"Yes, but that was days ago. Yet, we could still catch up to them despite having such a time gap advantage due to their convenient ability to travel," Vaan mentioned as he continued to study the area.

"If we consider the spatial lock on this region, the spatial-attribute High Witch must have encountered trouble here. People won't be able to use Spatial Magic in this place, and their coordinates would also be distorted upon entry."

"Adding their camp we came across earlier, they must have brought people who could help them tackle the upper regions' obstacles," Vaan speculated.

"If spatial-attribute High Witch and a Mid-stage High Witch couldn't handle the upper regions on their own, then I'm afraid the addition four people could be around their level or even stronger," Astoria mentioned with a grave look. "As we are now, we won't be able to handle the Fallen Witches if we encounter them."

"At the very least, we can expect casualties on our side if we were to fight them," she added.

"You're right, Headmaster Astoria," Vaan agreed with her opinion.

"Although I want to save Eniwse, I can't risk losing all of you to the Fallen Witches. Thus, if possible, we may have to avoid getting discovered and clashing with the Fallen Witch while carrying out our objective."

"Let us gather more clues around here, then retreat to revise our plan. At the same time, we will need Lady Hester to ascend to the High Witch rank," Vaan stated.

Aeliana had no problem with Vaan's decision. Everything he said was the law.

On the other hand, Astoria and Hester briefly contemplated before they nodded in agreement.

"Alright. Let us do that, Teacher Raphna," Astoria replied.

Shortly after, the group continued to look around the wreckage of the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon for clues that may give them a better understanding of the Fallen Witches' strengths.

Nevertheless, Vaan thought it was strange that a group of two Fallen Witches suddenly increased to six people.

If the Fallen Witches readily had anyone willing to assist them, it would most likely be other Fallen Witches.

However, that in and of itself was a huge problem.

'Fallen Witches are rare sights in the Black Rose Kingdom, but it might be the complete opposite outside,' Vaan thought.

A few moments later, Vaan glanced at Astoria's calm and beautiful face.

"What do you think the chances of the other four people with the two Fallen Witches being Fallen Witches as well, Headmaster Astoria?" Vaan asked.

"Quite high, Teacher Raphna. In fact, I almost certain they are," Astoria replied before adding, "It's unlikely for anyone to help Fallen Witches besides Fallen Witches themselves."

Even outside the seven witch kingdoms, the Fallen Witches were both hated and notorious among many countries.

"I see," Vaan uttered thoughtfully before asking, "But it also seems that Headmaster Astoria has an idea regarding who they are, right?"

"Oh? What makes you think that, Teacher Raphna?" Astoria responded with a smile.

"Nearly all information regarding other countries outside the seven witch kingdoms has been withheld from the public. But someone with your status would definitely have information to such information, no?" Vaan mentioned.

"If you say you don't know any large groups of Fallen Witches prospering outside of the kingdom, I would find it very hard to believe, Headmaster Astoria."

"It doesn't seem I can hide anything from you, Teacher Raphna." Astoria wryly smiled before confessing, "I do have a rough idea, but I can't be sure."

"Outside the seven witch kingdoms, there are indeed multiple groups of Fallen Witches, both large and small. The most prominent group would be the Black Witch Society, but the most active near us would be the Darkwind Society," Astoria explained.

"Darkwind Society and Black Witch Society, huh?" Vaan rubbed his chin thoughtfully before he asked, "Which of these two groups do you think the Fallen Witches belong to, Headmaster Astoria?"

"I would say Darkwind Society, but Black Witch Society seems to be the more likely answer," Astoria replied.

"Although no one knows their exact numbers, they have many more members than the other Fallen Witch groups. If they have someone like the spatial-attribute High Witch on their side, increasing their members wouldn't be difficult."

"However, Fallen Witch Elvira didn't escape that long ago, yet she is already a part of a Fallen Witch group. So, unless the Black Witch Society has someone with seer-like abilities to compliment their spatial ability, Elvira is more likely to be a part of Darkwind Society," Aeliana inputted her opinion.

Astoria immediately lapsed into deep thoughts before she muttered, "That might actually be the case, Lord Aeliana."

"No, it has to be. Otherwise, there's no way to explain the Black Witch Society's swift rise to prominence," Astoria added, becoming more certain the more she thought about it.

The Black Witch Society wasn't one earliest Fallen Witch groups to be formed, but it had the most rapid growth.

Chapter 276: Powerful Roar

"If you are so sure, let's leave it at that, Headmaster Astoria," Aeliana wasn't interested in arguing with her.

It didn't matter where the Fallen Witches came from or who was backing Elvira; she still had to die.

"Right, come and look at these shadow fragments of the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon," Vaan called them over.

Shortly after the three ladies gathered at his location, Astoria made her inquiry. "Did you discover something, Teacher Raphna?"

"I've simulated the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon's reconstruction in my mind and came up with an appearance similar to the red dragon we've seen from a distance back outside Misty Leaf Town," Vaan mentioned.

"However, what's important is that I've compared Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon's shadow fragments to the Fog beasts' carcass, but they are nothing alike on a fundamental level. Fog Beasts' carcasses still have material flesh after death, but Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon is completely comprised of mana."

"In other words?" Hester urged Vaan to continue.

"In other words, the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon isn't a Fog Beast at all. It's just an illusion spell. A very intricately constructed illusion spell," Vaan claimed.

"But illusion spells have no offensive power whatsoever." Astoria frowned before she asked, "How did the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon manage to scare Headmaster Tabitha off the upper regions if it doesn't pose any threat?"

"Although there are no records of it, I'm assuming it's not just a pure illusion spell, but a hybrid illusion-attack spell. If it's the dragons of old, they should have the wisdom to create such a powerful spell," Vaan guessed.

Shortly after, he pointed out several destroyed magic circles engraved on the surrounding trees in the area.

Astoria, Hester, and Aeliana all went up to inspect the magic circles they had overlooked on the trees.

"Although the magic circles have been destroyed, I can still make out some of the patterns and symbols on them. These patterns and symbols are indeed part of several illusion and attack spells," Astoria confirmed.

"So what can we learn from this?" Aeliana asked.

"Not much, actually. But something is still better than nothing," Astoria casually replied before adding, "While these clues don't tell us much about the Fallen Witches' strengths, at least we know they have an illusion expert within their group."

"I see," Aeliana uttered.

Nevertheless, after looking around for a bit longer, they quickly concluded that there was nothing left that they could learn from the traces left behind by the Fallen Witches.

"Let us head back for now and plan our next steps," Vaan urged after devouring the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon's shadow fragments.

Although it was a broken attack-illusion spell, it was still full of concentrated mana. As such, the shadow fragments were useful for expanding the Heaven-Swallowing Space.

"Alright," the group quickly agreed to leave.

However, things don't always go according to plan when exploring the unknown.

Roar!

An extremely mighty dragon roar suddenly shook the entirely ninth mountain.

Although the source appeared far away, it was powerful enough to affect everyone on the ninth mountain.

No one was spared from the mighty dragon roar, which seemed to be filled with fury. Their sense of balance was shifted, and while their eardrums rang, they didn't hurt.

Even so, the dragon's roar shook them to the core like a soul attack, causing their heart to palpitate with instinctual fears.

It made them feel like a behemoth dragon as large as the mountain itself just gazed directly into their souls and suppressed them like how a superior being would look at lesser beings it could crush at any time.

The dragon roar was none like any other dragon roars they have heard. It was on a whole different level of impact and grandness.

Everyone who heard the dragon roar was briefly stunned for some time.

Vaan was the quickest to recover, followed by Astoria, then Aeliana. Hester only regained her sense and movements after two breaths passed.

"What kind of roar was that? It was nothing compared to the red dragon's roar we've heard back at Misty Leaf Town," Hester exclaimed with shock.

"Maybe because the red dragon's roar wasn't directed at us. However, this time, it targeted everyone on the mountain, and it was filled with fury," Astoria said with a solemn look. "I think the Fallen Witches may have angered the dragon."

"And not just any dragon either. Its roar stunned someone at my level for a whole breath of time. I should be at least a Peak-level Rank 4 being, if not a Rank 5 being," Astoria added gravely.

"That's not a being we can handle, even with our strengths combined," Vaan commented before urging everyone, "We better leave quickly before we get involved in the Fallen Witches' mess."

Although everyone agreed, they only managed to take several steps before it was too late.

Swoosh!

The thick fog in the area revolved like a hurricane and revealed the clear skies above before several huge shadows descended.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ground rumbled as each shadow landed and occupied a corner, surrounding Vaan's group at the center.

"R-Red dragons!" Hester's eyes widened with disbelief.

Everyone immediately felt unprecedented danger, dread, and pressure emanating from the four huge True Dragons gazing down at them.

They were only separated by thirty yards, and everyone could feel the True Dragons' immense strength and mana pool; the four True Dragons were at least Peak-level Rank 4 or higher.

That said, they weren't strong enough to gauge the True Dragons' strength accurately; they could only make rough guesses silently.

Nevertheless, while there were significant gaps between each True Dragon, there was no opening at all. If they make any attempt to escape, they will most likely die much faster.

"Humans! You have intruded on our sacred mountain, brought destruction to land, and killed our subjects! Normally, such transgression against our Dragon Tribe warrants death on the spot! However, our benevolent Lord of the Ninth Peak permitted you all to be taken in for a trial!" one of the red dragons spoke in a middle-aged man's voice.

"You speak our language?" Aeliana raised an eyebrow in surprise, overshadowed by her tense mood.

Chapter 277: An Opportunity

Although everyone heard the True Dragon's voice, it couldn't be said to have spoken since it did not open its mouth at all.

It did not have the vocal cord to speak in the human tongue.

Instead, it had used magic to convert its inner thoughts into sound to communicate with them in their native language.

Even so, it still required an understanding of their language.

"The language of you humans isn't difficult to learn. On the contrary, it's unencumbered, simple, and primitive, not that it's a bad thing. After all, smooth communication makes sharing ideas and knowledge easier and is the key to a flourishing civilization," the True Dragon spoke.

Vaan's eyes quickly flickered after listening to it.

'Unencumbered, simple, and primitive, huh? In other words, the dragons' language is cumbersome, complex, and advanced?' Vaan silently mused.

Before the appearance of mana, speaking was the most direct method of expressing one's will and intention, even if others may or may not obey them.

'If one could infuse mana into one's words, could it reinforce the will in one's words?' Vaan wondered.

He recalled the dragon roar that shook the mountain and stunned everyone, regardless of who they were. Even he, who has high mental faculty, couldn't resist the effect.

He couldn't imagine how powerful the effect could have been if the dragon's roar only had a single target in mind.

"Follow us back obediently. It would be unwise to resist," another True Dragon spoke with the voice of a middle-aged woman.

Vaan glanced at the others and reached a tacit understanding before he replied, "We will follow you."

"Good," the female True Dragon uttered.

Shortly after, the group witnessed the True Dragons casually clearing the fog and creating a straight path towards the ninth mountain's peak.

"We're in deep trouble, aren't we?" Hester quietly whispered in a shaky voice.

"The situation might not be as grim as it seems. At the very least, the True Dragons are intelligent and are willing to converse with us; they appear reasonable. So if we play our cards right, we may agree to let us off," Vaan softly replied.

Furthermore, the True Dragons seemed to be taking them straight to the ninth mountain's peak, their destination.

If the True Dragons had seen Eniwse, it would even make finding her much easier.

Nevertheless, while the True Dragons slowly escorted the group up the mountain, one of them casually glanced at Vaan before it looked back at him again.

"You're a Spirit Contractor? And of a High-rank Earth Spirit, no less?" one of the other two True Dragons in the back spoke in a more elderly male voice. "There aren't many capable of contracting a High-rank Spirit."

The elderly True Dragon appeared to be able to see the Earth Spirit hidden in Vaan's body directly.

At the same time, the elderly True Dragon seemed a bit more accommodating after learning he was a Spirit Contractor of a High-rank Earth Spirit.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't express any surprise or panic.

Instead, he took it as an opportunity to converse with the elderly True Dragon, increase their favorability, gather information, and avoid the death sentence.

"Yes, I raised her myself," Vaan calmly summoned Topaz, attracting the attention of the other three True Dragons. "She was only a Low-rank Earth Spirit when we made the contract."

"Kyu?" Topaz glanced around curiously.

Upon seeing the four towering True Dragons around her exerting tremendous, she was immediately startled.

She quickly flew onto Vaan's head and hid in his hair without her head poking back out.

"You did, huh? That's not an easy feat. I find it hard to believe that a mere human is that capable," the elderly True Dragon stated but sounded condescending to the human race.

Nevertheless, Vaan wasn't just a mere human. After all, he possessed the bloodline and a divine ability of a Rank 6 being or higher.

Even so, it was primarily attributed to luck that Topaz quickly became a High-rank Earth Spirit.

"What can I say? Tia is blessed with heaven-defying luck," Vaan commented with a slight smile, but he was thinking about his rewritten destiny.

"May I be so bold as to ask exactly what we've done wrong? Something must have triggered Your Excellency to show up now, right?" Vaan asked shortly after.

The elderly True Dragon glanced at him before it explained, "A young offspring from our Ninth Peak had been slain. A noble, you could say."

"And if I may add, Your Excellency, I dare say that young offspring wasn't a Magma Wurm, right?" Vaan sought further confirmation.

"A Magma Wurm, you say? What utter nonsense. That should be obvious!" the elderly True Dragon snorted with discontent and said, "The death of a lesser dragon wouldn't attract the Lord's attention unless the leader of the Magma Wyrms appealed for justice!"

"In that case, we seem to be unrelated to this matter, Your Excellency. Beside intruding on your sacred ground, we've committed no other crimes," Vaan calmly stated.

"Heh," the other male True Dragon snickered after overhearing their conversation and said, "Save your words for the Lord's ears, Human. Only the Lord can decide whether your group is guilty or not. We've only been ordered to bring in all the intruders."

"It is as Rirvedes said. Flattering us won't help you. Besides, we have nothing to gain from helping you either," the elderly True Dragon added.

"I beg to differ, Your Excellency. I'm sure we can learn a lot from each other," Vaan confidently argued with a smile before mentioning, "For instance, I can see that your body has suffered countless wounds over your long years."

"Although they have all been healed, they have left behind ailments that trouble your mind at night. You haven't slept well for quite a long time now, right?"

"Is that true, Senior Jergag?" the other three True Dragons glanced over with surprise, evidently hearing about it for the first time.

"Why haven't we heard about this? My aunt is the best healer on Ninth Peak. I could have asked her to take a look for you, Senior Jergag," Rirvedes spoke.

"Enough," Jergag silenced them before retorting, "If my ailment was something that could be treated with magic or medicine, would I still have this issue?"

Rirvedes and the other two True Dragons were immediately at a loss for words.

Jergag was the most senior among them. Even among their Ninth Peak, he was considered one of the oldest living True Dragon.

Few were more knowledgeable than him on the Ninth Peak.

If there was an ailment that couldn't be solved by him, then it was unlikely for anyone else on the Ninth Peak to resolve it.

Nevertheless, Jergag also had his own pride. He wouldn't seek help from a younger dragon. Thus, he kept the issue to himself.

However, the other True Dragons have now become aware of it thanks to Vaan's blabbermouth.

Although Jergag was displeased with the situation, he didn't punish Vaan for it. Instead, he gave him a stern look for some time before he asked, "Can you treat it?"

"I can't guarantee it. But since I could see through your ailment at a glance, I believe I have a good chance after a more in-depth diagnosis, Your Excellency," Vaan claimed.

After Jergag heard that, he continued to stare at Vaan in silence. After some time, he promised, "I can put in a good word if it's required. However, the final decider of your fates is still the Lord."

"Thank you, Your Excellency," Vaan smiled.

As long as they were given the opportunity to negotiate, there was a chance to sway the Lord's decision with persuasion.

"It seems I won't be required to speak. Teacher Raphna has handled it well," Astoria quietly said with a wry yet stiff smile.

"You can't say that for sure, Headmaster Astoria. Perhaps, your assistance will be required once we meet the lord of the ninth mountain," Vaan argued before adding, "After all, we are not out of the woods yet."

"That's true." Astoria nodded and said, "Let us hope the Lord of the Ninth Peak is benevolent like they claimed."

As the group continued to be escorted up the mountain by the four True Dragons, they spotted bright light at the other end of the clear path.

Once they arrived at the end, a whole new world was revealed to them.

The nine mountain peaks were revealed, True Dragons roamed the clear skies, and thick white fog covered the surface like a sea of clouds.

With the sun high in the sky, shining over the land, it looked like Heaven had descended on earth.

If the group could see the center of each mountain peak, they would have realized they were all hollow with a steep hole that descends all the way down to the land of fire.

Along the way were rows after rows of dragon caves, making them look like colosseums.

"I didn't expect the top to be so beautiful," Astoria uttered with awe.

If people arrived without prior knowledge of their location, they could mistake the nine peaks of the Thousand Fog Mountains for the land of gods.

"The Lord will be seeing you all further up ahead," the female True Dragon urged them to continue moving.

"Of course, Your Excellency," Astoria complied.

As the Fallen Witches were captured and escorted ahead of them, a clear path was already formed, with True Dragons gathering and forming rows on either side of it to observe the intruders passing through.

Some had curious gazes, while others appeared more unwelcomed.

All of them were red dragons.

They seemed to have stumble upon the land of a fire dragon tribe.

Nevertheless, right before the entrance to the Ninth Peak, Vaan and the others had passed an area with a lingering stench of blood but no body.

Evidently, the body of the young offspring that had been killed by the Fallen Witches was moved, and the area was mostly cleaned up.

"Try to make a good impression on the True Dragons. It may help us later," Vaan softly whispered to the three ladies.

Shortly after, he gave a friendly smile to young red dragon staring at him curiously before a much larger red dragon stood in front to shield it and snorted at him.

Vaan wryly smiled.

He could tell it was the parent stepping in to protect its young from him, the predator who might prey on its young.

After giving the parent a harmless smile, he shifted his attention to another curious True Dragon to leave an impression.

Nevertheless, the group eventually reached a gathering circle further up ahead a short while later, where a much large red dragon awaited them.

It was almost larger than the Peak-level Rank 4 True Dragons by a third, and the pressure emanating from it was no joke.

'Rank 5 being!' Vaan and the others quietly guessed.

When they glanced in to the Rank 5 True Dragon's eyes, they felt like it was peering directly into their souls with a penetrative gaze.

Vaan gradually shifted his attention down to the Fallen Witches standing in the circle before the Rank 5 True Dragon, but only managed to spot four people.

Two people were missing from their group.

"Did two of them manage to escape? From these True Dragons?" Vaan silently wondered with furrowed brows.

Although he was more inclined to believe two of them had been killed for resisting, he didn't rule out the possibility.

Either way, he was going to find out soon enough.

At the same time, Aeliana spotted Elvira among the four Fallen Witches gathered, and her gaze glinted with killing intent.

"All of the intruders have been brought before you, Lord Narvim," Rirvedes informed the Lord of the Ninth Peak.

"Thank you, Rirvedes. You and the other dragons can be excused if none of you wish to witness the trial," the Rank 5 True Dragon named Narvim spoke in its dragon tongue.

Its voice was croaky but also booming and filled with authority.

"Yes, Lord Narvim! We will stand witness to the trial of these human intruders," Rirvedes stated his intention before his group joined the crowd of True Dragons.

Shortly after, Lord Narvim turned his gaze back on the two groups of intruders before they felt the pressure on them intensify.

"State your affiliations!"

Chapter 279: Fiery Gaze

The dragon lord's voice wasn't particularly loud to the ears, but it rang like thunder in everyone's minds, shocking them to the core.

And along with the dragon lord's thunder voice, which demanded nothing but truthful answers, an incomparably powerful pressure descended upon them to coerce them into obeying his will.

Without a doubt, dragons were able to infuse mana into their words to amplify their will over others.

Vaan had only suspected it earlier. But after experiencing it first hand, it became a certainty.

Nevertheless, after hearing the dragon lord's question, Vaan knew they had a chance of surviving. After all, the dragon lord did not outright sentence them to death but inquired about their background.

"We are from the Black Rose Kingdom, Your Excellency," Elvira answered with difficulty.

"Bullshit!" Aeliana immediately refuted and said, "Don't listen to her, Your Excellency. She may have originally belonged to the Black Rose Kingdom, but now she is hunted by the Black Rose Kingdom after becoming a Fallen Witch!"

"As for the rest of her Fallen Witch comrades, they aren't from our kingdom!" Aeliana added.

"How do you know we are not from the Black Rose Kingdom? Do you know everyone that lives in the Black Rose Kingdom?" one of the other three Fallen Witches beside Elvira retorted. "So what if we are Fallen Witches? Fallen Witches can still originate from the Black Rose Kingdom!"

"The Black Rose Kingdom has no place for witches who have turned to the dark side," Astoria coldly stated.

"That wasn't the questions—"

Roar!

(Silence!)

Lord Narvim demanded silence with a thunderous dragon roar that immediately compelled everyone to shut their mouths, regardless of who they were.

No one could resist the dragon lord's oppressive roar.

Even the others who weren't speaking felt their lips tighten together subconsciously as if their bodies were obeying a heavenly mandate imposed upon them.

"I demand the truth and nothing but the truth! The next to lie shall bear my wrath! Keep that in mind, humans!" Lord Narvim thundered before saying, "Now, let us start over. Where are you all from?"

One of the Fallen Witches' faces contorted upon meeting the dragon lord's direct gaze as if she was using all her mental faculty to resist his will.

"Grr," the Fallen Witch gritted her and said, "As Elvira said earlier, we are from the Black Rose Kingdom, Your—"

Before the Fallen Witch could finish speaking, her body combusted into flames after the dragon lord's eyes emitted a fiery glow.

"Arghhhh—!" the Fallen Witch wailed with pain.

But at the same time, the pain helped her break free from the dragon lord's oppressive aura. Thus, she attempted to save herself with magic.

However, the burning flames did not die out, no matter how many water spells she cast upon herself.

"Nooo—!" the Fallen Witch cried with despair.

The undying crimson flames couldn't be extinguished. As such, the Fallen Witch's struggle gradually died down to a complete stop.

Only a charred corpse was left behind before the crimson flames finally dissipated.

"Foolish human. Don't think this Lord can't tell when a lie is being spoken," Lord Narvim coolly stated before warning the rest of them, "You all better wise up and answer my questions truthfully. Otherwise, you will join this black witch in death."

Everyone felt their hearts turn cold and heavy.

Shortly after, Lord Narvim shifted his gaze to Elvira, prompting her to answer his question.

"I..." Elvira hesitated.

"Whatever you do, you can't tell them the truth, Elvira. You can't—Arghhhhh!" another Fallen Witch quickly combusted into flames under Lord Narvim's fiery gaze.

Several moments later, another charred corpse joined the circle.

"It's not a hard question. Why choose death?" Lord Narvim nonchalantly commented, but everyone vaguely felt the dragon lord gloating with amusement.

The dragon lord had the power to compel them into speaking the truth. But instead of doing so, he gave them the option to lie.

Lord Narvim wanted a reason to kill them for defying his demand.

'This is no trial; it's more like a game. The dragons didn't have any intention of sparing those who killed one of their own,' Vaan's eyes flickered in silence.

Shortly after, he quietly informed his group, "When it's our turn, speak the truth. We have no reason to lie."

"That's right. Lying will only get us killed," Astoria agreed.

Nevertheless, Lord Narvim eventually returned his attention to Elvira for a second time and awaited her answer.

At that point, it was only her, and one other Fallen Witch left.

Claudette, their spatial-ability witch and ticket out of the Thousand Fog Mountains, had slipped with another Fallen Witch when they were just brought to Ninth Peak.

Evidently, the spatial lock was slightly different on Ninth Peak. Otherwise, Claudette wouldn't have such a chance.

"We're from the Black Witch Society; our headquarters is located in the Principality of Dainsleif that is a part of the Freedom Federation," Elvira confessed.

She was still new to the Black Witch Society. Thus, she hadn't developed a strong attachment and loyalty to it.

Nevertheless, the other Fallen Witch sighed with sadness after she sold out their society's general location.

"It's as Elvira said. I am also part of the Black Witch Society," the Fallen Witch also confessed, seeing no point in hiding an exposed secret.

Several True Dragons in the crowd clicked their tongues with disappointment.

"What is your purpose for coming to our land? And why did you kill one of my kind, witch?" Lord Narvim interrogated.

"We were investigating the rumors of the dragons and tracking the whereabouts of a Wyvern-type Abomination," Elvira answered.

"Upon finding a lone dragon playing in the fog, I couldn't help but want to catch it for research purposes. But, alas, I overestimated its strength and accidentally killed it with a single spell."

"If I knew there were so many more powerful True Dragons just a little further beyond the fog, I wouldn't have acted rashly," Elvira added.

True Dragons weren't as rare as they thought, just secluded from the world.

"With everything said and done, do you think I should spare you?" Lord Narvim asked coolly.

Chapter 280: Trial by Fire

"What I think is irrelevant. The world has its victors and losers. I, naturally, want to live. However, it's not up to me to decide. That power rests with you. That said, if I were given a chance to live, I would even grovel in the dirt if that is what it takes," Elvira stated.

She had accepted her present predicament.

"Interesting," Lord Narvim uttered thoughtfully.

The dragon lord decided to put the two Fallen Witches' judgment on hold and deal with the other human group first.

After turning his gaze to Astoria's side, he asked, "And what about you humans? Where do you come from? And why are you here?"

"I am Astoria Braveheart, the Battle Maiden of Holy Light and the headmaster of Blackmoon Academy in the Kingdom of Black Rose... This is Aeliana Leclair, Lord of Sunpeak Town in the Kingdom of Black Rose... This is Hester Thornton, a retainer of Lord Helia of Redpine City in the same kingdom... And this is Vaan Raphna, a rising star in our kingdom and someone I consider as my teacher..."

Astoria introduced everyone one by one to reveal their importance in the Kingdom of Black Rose before stating their objective, "We came looking for the Wyvern-type Abomination to save her."

"Hmm..." Lord Narvim hummed in thought.

The red dragon tribe wasn't completely cut off from the outside world. They had their own means of collecting information about the events outside.

As such, the dragon lord possessed some knowledge about Astoria.

A black-armored Astoria didn't quite fit the description of the Battle Maiden of Holy Light. However, he didn't sense any falsehood in her words, which implied she was speaking the truth.

He was simply behind on the news.

"Save the Wyvern-type Abomination? How kind of you to put it like that when all you're actually going to do is kill her," Lord Narvim snickered with contempt shortly after.

However, Vaan shook his head and refuted the dragon lord, "You're wrong, Your Excellency."

"We truly came with the sincere intention of saving the Wyvern-type Abomination. I've cured someone from the Abomination state before, and I can do it again. These three ladies have come at my behest," Vaan boldly claimed.

Shortly after the dragon lord glanced at him, he showed a little more interest.

"Or so you, and also appears to be the truth..." Lord Narvim confirmed before commenting offtopic, "The shape of your soul is quite unique and interesting. Are you really human?"

Just as the dragon lord wanted to study Vaan's soul form further, Topaz popped her head out from Vaan's head and glared back defensively.

"Kyu!"

"A Spirit Contractor of a High-rank Earth Spirit, huh? My, where are my manners? I suppose it's a little rude to peer into one's source without permission," Lord Narvim's gaze subtly changed before saying, "You seem like someone who can hold a conversation with this Lord."

Out of all the humans present, Vaan appeared least strained by his oppressive aura.

"Unfortunately, this isn't quite the appropriate situation and position for one, Your Excellency. More importantly, how do you plan to deal with us?" Vaan calmly asked.

There was no need to mention whether they were uninvolved in the young dragon's death; the dragon lord knew who was guilty and who wasn't.

"My Lord, if I may be permitted to speak, I hope you can be lenient in your judgment for this group of humans. I believe we have much to gain from them. On the other hand, I don't care how you deal with the other two black witches," Jergag suddenly spoke up from the crowd.

As per their agreement, the elderly True Dragon had put in a good word before the dragon lord made his decision, even if it meant interrupting the dragon lord's trial.

Although a few True Dragons were disgruntled, the dragon lord himself didn't mind Jergag's interference.

"If Uncle Jergag speaks so favorably of these humans, how can this Lord not consider your suggestion?" Lord Narvim stated his stance, revealing his close relationship with the elderly True Dragon.

Although Vaan had noticed the elderly True Dragon had the high status and seniority out of the four True Dragons that escorted them to Ninth Peak, even he didn't expect the dragon lord to call the elderly True Dragon uncle.

"That said, I'm a little disappointed, Uncle Jergag. Was I such an unreasonable lord in your eyes? I wasn't planning on killing them. This Lord still knows how to distinguish the innocent from the guilty and deliver appropriate punishment where it is required," Lord Narvim claimed.

"It seems I have spoken unnecessarily, my Lord," Jergag retreated with a wry look.

"Not at all, Uncle Jergag," Lord Narvim argued before expressing his interest, "It's rare for you to speak out for someone, let alone a human. Now, this Lord is even more curious about this human."

"Nevertheless, this Lord shouldn't keep everyone waiting. My decision has been made. Killing our kin is a crime punishable by death, but making it to our land is a commendable feat," Lord Narvim stated.

Shortly after, he glanced at the Fallen Witch beside Elvira first.

"Since you weren't the one who directly killed our kin, I will give you a chance. If even one dragon pleads for you, I will allow you to descend the mountain after wiping your memories. Alternatively,

you can participate in our Trial by Fire. If you overcome the second stage, you can visit and leave our land as you please, and this Lord won't wipe your memories."

"As for you." Lord Narvim turned to Elvira and said, "You may also choose to participate in Trial by Fire for a chance to live. Alternatively, I can offer you a swift death and spare you from the needless suffering."

Shortly after the Trial by Fire was mentioned, the crowd of True Dragon immediately buzzed with discussions in their dragon tongue.

(The Trial by Fire is a sacred training ground for tempering our dragonkin. How can the Lord allow outsiders to participate in it?)

(Right? Those black witches will taint our sacred land. And what if they succeed? Do we really have to let those black witches go?)

(You worry too much, Friatus. To us, red dragons, the Trial by Fire is indeed a great training ground used for improving ourselves. But for humans? That place is no different from infernal purgatory. Accepting the Trial by Fire will only prolong their suffering before death.)