

The Witch 301

Chapter 301: Learning the Dragon Tongue

"Even if that is true, you are still barking up the wrong tree. If you felt wronged, go and seek justice from the people that wronged you and your people, Lady Ophelia," Astoria calmly said.

"Also, you only thought about your people. You didn't consider the position of the seven witch kingdoms, Lady Ophelia," Vaan added before continuing, "The other countries wouldn't allow the seven witch kingdoms to continue their growth."

"If the Transcendent Witches wanted to encroach on another country's domain to save witches, they'll be risking an all-out war between the seven witch kingdoms and the rest of the continent. After all, the other countries wouldn't just sit still and watch."

"And the last thing we need is an all-out war between humans. There are no winners in this war except the demons who are hoping to conquer our world," Vaan calmly inputted.

"What do you know?" Ophelia glanced at Vaan with a frown and retorted condescendingly, "I bet you don't even know how many countries exist outside the seven witch kingdoms."

"It doesn't matter," Vaan replied indifferently.

"I am confident in my ability to grasp information and understand human nature. When humans fear something, they will band together to eliminate it if they can't control it."

"I'm sure a Fallen Witch such as yourself should be more aware of this than others, Lady Ophelia," Vaan mentioned.

The Witch Mother had no choice but to agree with Vaan.

As the founder of the Black Witch Society, with hundreds of Fallen Witches under her care, she knew exactly what it was like for Fallen Witches to be hunted because people feared them.

Ophelia wryly smiled.

"You're exactly right, Vaan," Ophelia admitted with a sigh and said, "Forgive me for ranting. Taking care of hundreds of ill-fated children and hearing about their terrible experiences builds up a lot of stress, you know? So I had to vent it all out."

"Well, it looks like you are all finished now," Lord Narvim mentioned after patiently listening through their rant.

"Although this Lord wishes to move onto the main topic, it will have to wait. The other Peak Lords have summoned this Lord for a meeting. This meeting will likely take some time, so this Lord will return you to the surface to rest first."

"Lady Ophelia, you will have to follow this Lord to the meeting. That's fine, right?" Lord Narvim asked shortly after.

"Of course, Your Excellency," Ophelia nodded and said, "I'm also interested in meeting the other Peak Lords."

Nevertheless, Vaan noticed the dragon lord's expression slightly stiffened upon hearing about the other Peak Lords.

He had the look of someone who had someone he didn't want to meet among the other Peak Lords.

That said, he didn't bring it up.

It wasn't too late to learn more about the True Dragons later. They had plenty of time while they stayed on the Ninth Peak.

Shortly after, the dragon lord gave everyone a ride on his back and dropped them off near the guest building. Then, the dragon lord took off for the middle peak, the First Peak, with Ophelia Tempest.

Feel free to tour Ninth Peak if you don't feel like resting – the dragon lord said to them before it left.

Nevertheless, before Vaan and the others could decide what to do with their spare time, True Dragons gathered around them.

The unfriendly older True Dragons stayed further back while the more curious young True Dragons came forward.

Roar!

(Hey, humans. What did you talk about with our Lord? Why is our Lord treating you all so well?)

(Why are you even talking to them in the dragon tongue? They won't understand anything you say.)

(Yeah, do you think humans are capable of learning our language when they know so little about us?)

(Eeeh? But it's more convenient to speak in the dragon tongue. The human language is so annoying to learn.)

(Then, do you prefer to learn the ancient language instead?)

(Eh? I guess I'll prefer the human language over the ancient language. Learning the ancient language hurts my head.)

The young dragons greeted Vaan's group before they ended up talking among themselves instead, as no one could communicate with them.

Little did they know, Vaan had been carefully studying their expressions and body language in his attempt to understand them.

He had been attempting to learn the dragon language since he was brought to Ninth Peak with the others.

Ding!

<Your understanding of the dragon language has increased>

<Your understanding of the dragon language has increased>

<Your dragon language has reached a preliminary level of understanding>

...

"Reow! (Hu-ah!)" Vaan growled at them.

The young dragons immediately paused their conversation and glanced at Vaan dumbfoundedly. They burst into fits of laughter in the next moment.

(Hahaha. Nice try, human.)

(Try again. You'll get it right next time.)

The young dragons gave Vaan encouraging looks, but in truth, they didn't believe in him at all. Instead, they were just making fun of him.

Ding!

<Your understanding of the dragon language has increased>

<Your understanding of the dragon language has increased>

"Ahem, that came out weird. Let me try again," Vaan cleared his throat before growling at them a second time, "Roar! (Hey!)"

Ding!

<Your dragon tongue proficiency has increased>

(...)

The young dragons fell silent with astonishment written all over their faces.

(Holy... This human got it right. Does that mean he understands us?)

(Maybe he also knows we are making fun of him... What if he reports us to the Lord? Are we going to get in trouble?)

(I think it's just a fluke. Mimicking our dragon tongue doesn't necessarily mean he understands what we are saying.)

The young dragons convinced themselves.

Nevertheless, Aeliana's eyes beamed when she saw the young dragons getting dumbfounded and astonished.

"That looks like fun. Let me try," Aeliana wanted to join in on the fun and started mimicking what she heard. "Roar, roar, roarr—!"

However, the mood suddenly became serious as the young dragons looked at her with silent rage building up in their eyes.

"Eh? What did I say?" Aeliana asked innocently without a clue.

"No idea," Vaan shrugged.

He hadn't reached a proficient level of understanding in the dragon tongue yet.

"Kukuku, you told them to take out their dragon toothpicks and poke each other's buttohole, human..." an older dragon chuckled with amusement.

Chapter 302: Treating Jergag

The corners of Vaan's lips twitched after he heard the older dragon's word.

At the same time, Aeliana was dumbfounded.

She would have been happy if she had made out even a single understandable word. But she didn't just succeed with a single word; she succeeded with an entire phrase!

However, it was a very insulting and offensive one!

(Bahahahahaha! Serves them right. The young ones need to learn that when they make fun of others, others can also make fun of them too!)

A bunch of old dragons buckled with laughter. Even a few that disliked humans couldn't help but smile with amusement.

It was something quite entertaining to watch.

(Haha, these humans are not bad. Quite interesting.)

(Hahaha, tell me about it. I haven't laughed like this in ages.)

The mood was quickly lifted among the older dragons, but the young ones were left fuming. Getting laughed at by the older dragons only fueled their anger.

Roar!

The young dragons roared at Aeliana, challenging her to a duel.

(Now, now, children. These humans are still the Lord's honored guests. Don't cause trouble. The young lady did not know what she was saying.)

(That's right. You all better quiet down as well. The young princess is resting in the building nearby. If you disturb her rest with your loud voice, this father will whoop all your asses.)

(But...)

(But what? Do you want a beating?)

After the older dragons scolded the young dragons, the young dragons had nowhere to vent their anger. They could only snort and storm off.

Even though some of the older dragons disliked humans, they still looked after Vaan's group as they were loyal to their Lord.

"That was quite amusing to watch, Vaan. It can be dull around here sometimes. However, your presence has brought more life to this peak," an elder dragon spoke after stepping forward.

"Senior Jergag," Vaan respectfully greeted.

"Oh? You can recognize this old dragon right away?" Jergag expressed his surprise before mentioning, "You have a sharp eye, Vaan."

"You possess quite a unique disposition that makes you stand out among the dragons, Senior Jergag," Vaan casually replied with a smile before saying, "I was just thinking about looking for you to honor our promise."

"Our promise?" Jergag paused for a moment before shaking his head. "There's no need for that. Your group would have been fine, even if this old dragon didn't speak up for you all."

"Nevertheless, a promise is a promise. I intend to honor my word, Senior Jergag. If you think you don't deserve my treatment, just take it as an extension of my friendship," Vaan stated.

"Extension of your friendship. Very well, if you want to be friends with this old dragon, then this old dragon will not decline," Jergag acknowledged before suddenly sighing, "It's a pity that once you leave the peak, you will have your memory wiped and not remember anything about our friendship, though."

"That's not necessarily true, Senior Jergag," Vaan argued, "I heard that if we can overcome the Trial by Fire's second stage, we come and leave this place as we please without having our memories wiped."

"You intend to challenge the Trial by Fire?" Jergag was startled before he quickly dissuaded him, "Don't even think about it. The Trial by Fire wasn't designed for humans to overcome. Even us dragons find it difficult to overcome. You will lose your life."

"We can talk more about the Trial by Fire later, Senior Jergag. Let me treat you first," Vaan said.

"Fine," Jergag agreed with a nod before stubbornly saying, "But this old dragon won't change his mind. I truly wish you don't challenge the Trial by Fire and throw away your life."

Nevertheless, Vaan still intended to learn more about the Trial by Fire from the elderly dragon later.

A few moments later, Vaan left with the elderly dragon after informing the group he would be back once he settled his matter with the elderly dragon.

Shortly after that, older dragons approached Astoria, Hester, and Aeliana to satisfy their curiosity regarding the outside world.

...

Vaan arrived at Jergag's dragon cave before the elderly dragon cut to the chase.

"Alright, Vaan. How do you intend to cure this old dragon's ailment, something that even dragon medicine and magic can't?" Jergag asked.

"Wasn't that because Senior Jergag was too stubborn to see a dragon specialist in the field?" Vaan calmly replied, "If Senior Jergag didn't hide it, I'm sure someone with special ocular abilities could have seen the problem and resolved it for you."

"So exactly is my problem? Where does this chronic pain come from?" Jergag inquired with the intent to learn.

"As I've previously mentioned, Senior Jergag has suffered far too many wounds throughout your life. Furthermore, these aren't just light wounds but deep ones. Ordinary wounds and healing magic won't cut it," Vaan mentioned.

From what he could see with Omni-Sense, the elderly dragon must have lived through turbulent times or a battle maniac that fought countless battles for thousands of years.

"Even among recovery medicine and healing magic, there are subtle differences in properties that could turn into a major difference in the long run. For example, true Dragons might be highly regarded as a superior race. But from what I can see, True Dragons are still the same as humans; they are imperfect beings."

"We can recover from wounds with our body's natural regeneration ability or use our knowledge in medicine and magic. However, they aren't always perfect restoration. Since we are using new cells to patch up old ones, the memories aren't the same. So even if the wound is closed, the affected area isn't necessarily the same as it was prior to the wound. That's why it leaves scars."

"And even if the scars are removed, it's only removing the surface deformity and not the internal deformity. Thus, when one suffers as many wounds as Senior Jergag, the deformity is stacked, causing the body to diverge further and further from its original shape.

As for why these deformities exist, it's because of the microscopic shrapnel of magic and other impurities left behind that weren't properly removed during the wound's healing process."

"The accumulation of tiny mana shrapnel that can't be seen with normal eyesight is the cause of your chronic pain," Vaan explained as he treated the elderly dragon.

Chapter 303: Henrietta's Record

Although Vaan could see countless mana shrapnel and fragments embedded in the elderly dragon's body, which were the remains of magic attacks, they weren't life-threatening.

To begin with, the elderly dragon's chronic pain wasn't a severe issue—at least in regard to health. It just caused extreme discomfort and possibly hindered the elderly dragon from advancing to a higher rank.

That said, the mana shrapnel and fragments also form a layer of magic resistance that could help the elderly dragon resist other magic attacks to some degree.

Even so, it was still better to remove them.

It would improve Senior Jergag's mood and overall quality of life, not to mention the prospect of advancing to a higher rank.

An elderly dragon as advanced in age as he was did not need to be in consistent pain either.

"Mana shrapnel left behind by magic attacks, huh? That's something new," Jergag commented with surprise.

"Perhaps to you, Senior Jergag," Vaan replied before adding, "But any dragon well-versed in healing and treating many magic wounds would have noticed Senior's problem in a single diagnosis. If Senior wasn't stubborn in keeping this ailment to yourself, it could have been treated before reaching this stage."

"You didn't have to endure this kind of torment every night and day, Senior Jergag."

"Haiz, you don't understand, Vaan," Jergag sighed and said, "This old dragon is considered an old hero among the younger generation, having followed Lord Dragon God through many battles to earn a place in Chaos for the tribe."

"The younger generation looks up to this old dragon. Thus, this old dragon doesn't want them to see any of this old dragon's weak sides. Their hero should always be strong in their heart," Jergag stated.

"You're pretty funny, Senior Jergag. Even strong heroes can get hurt and grow old. If you're sick, go and get yourself treated. Senior Jergag having health issues won't change the hero in their hearts. Rather, it would let them understand reality. Heroes aren't invincible."

"I've done what I can. You need to see a specialist and have them remove the rest, Senior Jergag," Vaan stated shortly after removing earth-attribute and wood-attribute mana shrapnels from the elderly dragon's body.

"Your hand was quite warm. This old dragon feels a lot more comfortable." Jergag felt the changes in his body before changing the topic, "Hm, those hands are also quite dangerous. This old dragon advises you not to touch any female dragons with those hands. They can get addicted to the feeling."

"You don't have to mention that, Senior Jergag. I understand perfectly," Vaan wryly smiled before turning solemn again. "Go and get yourself treated, Senior. You might think the mana shrapnel in your body isn't a big deal after my treatment."

"But if you want to have any hopes of becoming a Rank 5 being, you better have all of them removed. They are hindering your body from improving," Vaan mentioned.

"This old dragon will keep that in mind. Thank you, young friend. This old dragon hasn't felt this comfortable in a while," Jergag stated.

Vaan smiled and didn't try to persuade the elderly dragon further. He had already said what he needed to say.

The elderly dragon seemed to have reasons for not wanting to become a Rank 5 being. Perhaps, he was waiting for death so he could join the Fire Dragon God.

"Can you tell me more about the Trial by Fire, Senior Jergag? How many stages are there? What are the stages like? Has any dragon in your tribe overcome all the stages in the Trial by Fire?" Vaan inquired.

"You're still thinking about challenging the Trial by Fire, even though this old dragon advised you otherwise?" Jergag glanced at Vaan's insistence with a bit of helplessness before he said, "Fine. Maybe you'll change your mind once you learn how dangerous the Trial by Fire is."

"Before our Lord Dragon God became one with the land of fire, he set up a total of five stages to the Trial by Fire with the help of Lord Fire Spirit, his lifelong companion. Each stage is increasingly more difficult than the last."

"However, every stage has the same trial – the trial of fire. You just need to overcome the terrifying fire of each stage to pass them," Jergag explained.

"It sounds simple and straightforward enough," Vaan commented with a thoughtful look. A good fire was just what he needed to temper his body.

"Simple and straightforward?" Jergag glared at Vaan sternly before strictly speaking, "Sure, it's simple. You just need to endure the fire to pass the stages—but that's only if you can endure the scorching flames of each stage. Do you think the land of fire has ordinary flames, Vaan?"

"The best of us dragons who are born with natural high fire affinity could barely pass the second stage. The third stage is too far difficult, let alone the fourth and fifth stages. Even the Black Rose

Transcendent Witch narrowly passed the second stage with her magic, and she returned badly scorched and half-dead."

"It took us dragons three days to nurse her back to health. Do you think you can do better than a Transcendent Witch, Vaan?" Jergag asked shortly after.

"The Black Rose Transcendent Witch took three days to recover?" Vaan muttered with interest.

His eyes quickly flickered as he recalled reading about the kingdom's ruler going missing for four days straight and plunging the kingdom into chaos.

'Henrietta Rosegarden must have visited the dragon tribe and challenged the Trial by Fire at that time,' Vaan thought.

It was interesting to learn that even the Transcendent Witch had to challenge Trial by Fire.

'Was she not confident in challenging the dragons, or did she challenge the Trial by Fire to win their trust?' Vaan wondered.

He felt the latter was more likely to be the case.

Even so, even a Transcendent Witch could barely pass the second stage. He was even more interested in the Trial by Fire.

Meanwhile, Jergag was at his wit's end when he saw Vaan's lack of concern over the dangers of the Trial by Fire, even after everything he had said.

He began to wonder if Vaan had no fear of fire.

"Hmph, it seems like you won't understand how terrifying the Trial by Fire is until you experience its scorching heat," Jergag grumpily stated before suggesting, "Shall this old dragon take you there to give you a feel of the heat?"

Maybe Vaan will change his mind after feeling the heat of the first stage – the elderly dragon thought.

Chapter 304: The Land of Fire

"Alright," Vaan agreed with a nod before asking, "Shall we head there right away, Senior Jergag?"

"Hmph, let's go," Jergag snorted after seeing Vaan's eagerness.

Vaan responded to the snort with a slight smile.

Although the elderly dragon acted grumpy and annoying, Vaan knew the elderly dragon meant well. However, the elderly dragon didn't know his capabilities.

The elderly dragon was in for a surprise.

Nevertheless, there was truth in the elderly dragon's words. The Trial by Fire must be very difficult since even the Black Rose Transcendent Witch barely survived the second stage.

That said, the greater challenge, the greater the gain.

"Are there rewards for overcoming the Trial by Fire, Senior Jergag?" Vaan inquired as he rode on the elderly dragon's back toward the land of fire below the ninth mountain.

"Of course," Jergag confirmed before saying, "There's a one-time prize of one drop of Lord Dragon God's blood essence for passing the first stage, three drops for the second stage, and five drops for the third stage."

"The fourth and fifth stages are unknown, though. Besides Lord Dragon God's blood essence, enduring the scorching flames of each stage is also rewarding for raising one's fire affinity."

"Of course, only if you have an affinity with fire. Otherwise, it's a deathwish to challenge the trial," Jergag mentioned.

Nevertheless, Vaan was excited to hear about the Fire Dragon God's blood essence being the prize for overcoming the Trial by Fire's stages.

This was a god-sent opportunity.

He didn't doubt that the Fire Dragon God and Fire Spirit King sent up the Trial by Fire to nurture the red dragons. It wasn't designed for humans.

However...

'I'm sorry, but I'll be reaping the best rewards for myself since you've allowed humans to participate,' Vaan mused.

Nevertheless, he had a sudden thought.

"It seems that passing the second stage earns the dragon tribe's trust. But what happens if a human pass the third, fourth, or fifth stages, Senior Jergag?" Vaan inquired despite knowing his question might make him seem arrogant and disdainful.

Without surprise, Jergag snorted at his question.

"You really know how to dream, Vaan. Other dragons would be offended if they heard your questions. You're basically claiming humans can achieve something dragons can't, even though it was designed for them. That would be very humiliating," Jergag stated before saying, "Nevertheless, this old dragon will answer your question."

"If you pass the second stage, you will earn our trust and respect. If you pass the third stage, you will receive the same respect as a Peak Lord. If you pass the fourth stage, all dragons will respect you as they respect the current dragon leader."

"However, if you pass the fifth stage, you will have the allegiance of the entire dragon tribe. You will be the new Dragon God of our tribe. Every dragon will have to listen to you and follow your will. Your will would be the dragon tribe's will," Jergag explained.

'The dragon tribe's allegiance, huh?' Vaan thought.

Nevertheless, the elderly dragon swiftly descended into the land of fire with Vaan on his back, and the scorching-hot and suffocating air bombarded their faces.

At the same time, the entire region was brightly illuminated by fire and magma, as far as the eye could see.

There were also eight other entrances leading to the land of fire. No doubt, they belonged to the other eight inner mountains, ruled by the other eight dragon lords.

Although the land of fire was how Vaan imagined it to be, he was still taken aback by its grandness.

Having such an enormous hollow space underneath the mountains made quite the majestic and breathtaking spectacle.

"How is it, Vaan? Feeling a little hot yet?" Jergag asked as he flew over the surface of the fiery land filled with dragons and wyrms bathing in the magma.

It wouldn't be surprising if other Fire Spirits were also hidden in such a rich land of fire.

"No, this temperature is perfect, Senior Jergag," Vaan replied before pointing out to the magma whirlpool in the center of the land. "Is that the entrance to the Trial by Fire?"

"It is." Jergag affirmed and introduced the area, "Beneath the whirl is the five stages of the Trial by Fire, separated into layers. The deeper you sink, the closer you are to reaching the next stage."

"Lord Fire Spirit is watching over the entire land of fire. Thus, you don't have to worry about not receiving your first-time rewards from overcoming the trials," Jergag assured shortly after.

It was no wonder that the Black Rose Transcendent Witch barely survived the second stage.

Even if one had no fire affinity and relied on pure magic to charge their way through the Trial by Fire, they still need to conserve enough mana for the return trip.

Otherwise, the Trial by Fire would be their grave, even if they managed to charge all the way into the third, fourth, or fifth stages.

The only sure way of overcoming the Trial by Fire was to raise one's fire affinity.

"Since you find the current temperature perfect, this old dragon doubts you will be able to endure the first stage. After all, the first stage is much hotter than here. So if you can't even take a dip in the magma here, you won't be able to get very far through the first stage in the Trial by Fire," Jergag stated.

Surprisingly, Vaan did not refute and even agreed with him.

"It is as you say, Senior Jergag. As I am now, it's still too early to challenge the Trial by Fire. Thus, I would like to spend some time adapting to the heat here first," Vaan mentioned before requesting, "Can you put down over there, Senior Jergag?"

Vaan pointed to a scorching-hot but solid rock platform by the magma surface.

"Is that so? Alright," Jergag agreed.

He was relieved that Vaan didn't insist on challenging the Trial by Fire blindly. That said, he still hasn't given up on it.

Vaan seemed determined to overcome the Trial by Fire's second stage, but he won't recklessly challenge it.

In other words, Vaan might be staying with them for a long time.

"It's good that you have some awareness," Jergag commented as Vaan hopped off his back and landed on the scorching-hot rock platform. "Let's see how long you can endure the heat here before you beg me to take you back."

The elderly dragon intended to watch over him.

"Alright," Vaan smiled mysteriously.

Chapter 305: Body Tempering

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«Physical Attributes»

[306 → 332 Defense (↑26)] [Low-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [Total Defense: 582 (Low-level Rank 4)]

[217 → 221 Strength (↑4)] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Strength: 471 (High-level Rank 3)]

[215 → 217 Speed (↑2)] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 467 (High-level Rank 3)]

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Vaan quickly checked his physical attributes and noticed a fair bit of increase in his defense since the last time he checked.

Undoubtedly, most of the gain resulted from getting burned by the Magma Wyrms' lava and blood.

Nevertheless, Vaan shifted his attention to the heat under his feet. It was burning hot, definitely suitable for tempering his body.

However, the tempering wouldn't be uniform throughout his body.

If he wanted his body tempering to be balanced, he had to submerge his body in the magma completely. That way, the heat would cover all the surface of his body.

"What are you doing, Vaan?" Jergag asked after he suddenly saw Vaan stripping himself.

"I can't take a bath in the magma with my clothes, can I? I've only brought so many sets of clothes with me. If I keep destroying them, I'm bound to run out," Vaan casually replied.

"This old dragon isn't trying to discourage you, but the bodies of dragons are built differently from humans. You're going to lose your legs to the magma, you know?" Jergag said.

As the elderly dragon spoke, he soaked himself in the magma and glanced back at Vaan, who stood on the hot rock, preparing to enter the sea of magma.

"You underestimate me too much, Senior Jergag," Vaan smiled and said, "My body is like a piece of iron. And iron has a higher melting point than normal rocks. I can be burned, but I won't melt."

Furthermore, he still had his Peak-rank regeneration.

Ding!

<You are suffering severe burns from magma>

<Your severe burns are being regenerated>

<Your body has been tempered>

<You have gained one point in defense>

...

As Vaan soaked in the magma, he received a continuous stream of system notifications about his improvement.

Not only did the scorching magma temper his body, but it also cleansed the impurities in his pores.

Of course, his eyelashes, eyebrows, and hair all burned without a trace. He lost all forms of body hair and became naked in the truest sense.

Fortunately, he could quickly grow them back.

The elderly dragon didn't have high expectations for Vaan. He assumed Vaan would get out of the magma sea quickly.

However, he was proven wrong.

Five minutes quickly passed, and Vaan showed no such sign, nor did he express any pain despite being burned alive.

'Interesting,' Jergag thought as he watched Vaan calmly submerged in the magma sea.

Vaan would only surface occasionally for air before submerging back into the magma to continue his body tempering.

'It seems it wasn't just luck that let Vaan contract an Earth Spirit. He must have a very high earth affinity. An Earth Spirit Body, huh?' Jergag quickly understood Vaan's physique. "However, it will take more than an Earth Spirit Body and high-rank regeneration to overcome the Trial by Fire."

Although the elderly dragon was impressed by the discovery, his opinion still hasn't changed regarding Vaan's chance in the Trial by Fire.

High earth affinity could lessen the difficulty of the trial's stages to some degree, but it was ultimately a trial that relied on one's fire affinity to overcome.

'It's still not enough. A higher defense won't get him through the Trial by Fire. Vaan will need to raise his Earth Spirit Body to the Earth Spirit King Body at least to stand a chance of overcoming the first two stages in the Trial by Fire,' Jergag silently thought.

'However, an Earth Spirit King Body isn't a physique an ordinary human can possess. At least in Chaos, the number of humans that manage to acquire a Spirit King-rank physique before achieving divinity is extremely few.'

'Hm?' Jergag suddenly frowned upon sensing Magma Wyrms attracted to Vaan's location.

Roar!

(Get lost!)

Jergag issued a powerful dragon roar before the Magma Wyrms that came to scout the area for food fled in a panic.

The elderly dragon snorted shortly after.

With the elderly dragon looking over Vaan, others can only dream of disturbing his body tempering session.

Half an hour quickly passed before Vaan surfaced from the magma and climbed onto solid land to take a break from his body tempering session.

He might have Peak-rank regeneration, but he wasn't immortal. Regeneration relied on blood energy to operate.

Thus, after soaking in the magma for roughly forty minutes, Vaan felt somewhat fatigued and famished. He needed food with lots of meat to replenish his body's needs.

Nevertheless, Vaan had no intention of leaving just yet. He could still push his body a little further.

Ding!

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«Physical Attributes»

[332 → 387 Defense (↑55)] [Low-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [Total Defense: 582 → 637 (Low-level Rank 4)]

[221 → 230 Strength (↑9)] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Strength: 471 → 480 (High-level Rank 3)]

[217 Speed] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 467 (High-level Rank 3)]

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<<Elemental Affinity>>

[Earth: 53%]

[Wind: 13%]

[Lightning: 12%]

[Light: 5%]

[Wood: 25%]

[Fire: 0 → 1%]

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Looking at his improvement, it was clear that tempering his body in the magma was very effective. He raised his defense by fifty-five points in less than an hour.

Alas, the more effective it was, the less he could enjoy it. It was exhausting as it was effective.

Nevertheless, his strength and fire affinity also increased, albeit not as much.

'If I keep this up daily, my defense might reach a staggering level. However, the effectiveness is bound to decrease with every improvement. More importantly, raising my defense alone won't allow me to overcome the Trial by Fire. I need to raise my fire affinity,' Vaan mused.

He knew what he needed to focus on.

'Fortunately, the land of fire is very rich in the fire element. However, I am not satisfied with my fire affinity's rate of improvement.' Vaan's eyes flickered before he decided, 'I guess it's time to use that thing.'

The drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence was taken out shortly after.

Chapter 306: Great Gains

Considering that the Fire Dragon God and the Fire Spirit King designed the Trial by Fire to raise one's fire affinity, Vaan didn't doubt the Fire Dragon God's blood essence had such an effect.

The blood essence of a Rank 6 being should be full of wonders.

Of course, if he had a high fire affinity talent, the best way to maximize the Fire Dragon God's blood essence would be to temper his body in magma until his natural fire affinity couldn't be raised any further.

If he took the Fire Dragon God's blood essence at that point, it would likely boost his fire affinity beyond the bottleneck.

However, the reality is that his body had no talent for fire affinity since he had acquired the Earth Spirit Body. The Earth Spirit Body made it more difficult for him to raise his fire affinity.

That's why he had to absorb the Fire Dragon God's blood essence early to develop his fire affinity talent.

"Isn't that..." Jergag glanced at the floating drop of blood essence in Vaan's hand with surprise, not expecting him to possess such a valuable item. "A drop of Lord Dragon God's blood essence..."

"How did you get your hands on something like that, Vaan?" Jergag asked with astonishment shortly after.

The blood essence of a Rank 6 Fire Dragon God was simply too outstanding. Only a fool wouldn't recognize the divine blood instantly.

After all, the drop of blood in Vaan's hand glowed with a divine crimson aura and seemed extremely potent at a glance.

"I obtained it from the body of Magma Wyrms that attacked my group while we were still around the foot of the mountain," Vaan casually replied.

The Fire Dragon God's blood essence was too precious.

Even the elderly dragon's eyes flashed with desire for a moment before the feeling was suppressed with reasoning.

"A Magma Wyrn attacked your group near the foot of the mountain? That's strange... They usually don't leave the land of fire without reason..." Jergag was baffled before he shook his head. "No, that's not important."

"It seems like you are planning to absorb that blood essence. I can watch over you, but make it quick. It's drawing too much attention," Jergag stated.

"Thank you, Senior Jergag," Vaan nodded.

Ding!

<You have absorbed the Fire Dragon God's blood essence>

<Changes will be taking place in your body>

Shortly after the system notified him, Vaan felt a burning fire spreading throughout his body. It was only a single drop of blood essence, but it affected his whole body.

The Fire Dragon God's blood essence caused his blood to boil and his internal organs to burn, inflicting immeasurable pain like he was suffering the purgatory of hellfire as his body underwent minor reformation.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't have to endure the torment for very long. With the help of the system, the blood absorption process finished within fifteen minutes.

Although no changes seemed to have occurred on the surface, his internal structure had been purified and reinforced.

Ding!

<Your fire affinity has been raised by 12%>

<[Fire: 1% → 13% (↑12)]>

<Body reformation has altered your fire affinity talent>

<Increasing fire affinity has become 200% more effective>

<Your body has gained the Fire Dragon God Bloodline (Divine-rank)>

<You have acquired the Fire Dragon Physique>

<You have acquired a new talent, Dragon Force>

...

=====

[Fire Dragon Physique (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)]

Overview: The physique of a fire dragon. Your body can absorb the power of fire and temper itself, increasing your body's strength and defense.

=====

[Dragon Force (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)]

Passive Effect: Increase your base strength by 10% and base defense by 5%

=====

«Physical Attributes»

[387 Defense] [Mid-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [0 → 19 Dragon Force] [Total Defense: 637 → 656 (Low-level Rank 4)]

[230 Strength] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [0 → 23 Dragon Force] [Total Strength: 480 → 503 (High-level Rank 3)]

[217 Speed] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 467 (High-level Rank 3)]

=====

Ding!

<[Warning]: The acquisition of the Fire Dragon God's Bloodline has affected your Immortal Lycan Bloodline>

<Strengthening your Fire Dragon God Bloodline further may result in the weakening of the Immortal Lycan Bloodline and inability to undergo Lycan Transformation>

<[Suggestion]: Fusing the two Divine-rank bloodlines may stop the clashing bloodlines and loss of abilities>

<Note: Your Fire Dragon God Bloodline is too weak. Perfect bloodline fusion is presently unavailable>

...

After Vaan finished absorbing the Fire Dragon God's blood essence, he received a lot of benefits along with a warning.

However, he wasn't surprised by the warning in the least.

It was to be expected.

'There's no going back now. I've already embarked on this path,' Vaan silently mused. He was committed to strengthening the Fire Dragon God Bloodline.

"You've already finished absorbing Lord Dragon God's blood essence, Vaan? How do you feel?" Jergag inquired with some doubts, not expecting the process to be so quick.

But at the same time, the elderly dragon wouldn't find it surprising if Vaan's human body was incompatible with the Fire Dragon God's blood essence, which would result in a large loss of its potency.

It would also explain the swift process.

Alternatively, the compatibility could have been so great that Vaan's body swiftly absorbed all the potency from the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

However, it was unlikely for humans to be so compatible with dragon bloodlines.

"I feel great, Senior Jergag." Vaan smiled and said, "I feel like my body is full of strength, and I can temper my body in the magma for much longer now."

"There's no need to brag. Lord Dragon God's blood essence usually gives people that feeling. However, your actual improvement might not be much," Jergag commented.

However, Vaan already knew how much he had gained and improved.

Thus, he simply responded with a slight smile.

Although the increased fire affinity also raised his fire resistance, which, in turn, reduced the effectiveness of tempering his Earth Spirit body, he had acquired the Fire Dragon Physique to make up for it.

Thus, not only could he still increase his defense, but he could also increase his strength.

He had gained a lot from a single drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

'Time to continue,' Vaan decided.

Shortly after, he hopped back into the sea of magma to continue training his newly-reformed body and experience the effects of the Fire Dragon Physique.

Chapter 307: Ophelia's Reason

First Peak, Dragon Summit

The ninth dragon lord and the Witch Mother arrived on the small floating island hidden among the clouds above First Peak, where the dragon lords usually hold their meetings.

"You've come with the black witch, Lord Narvim," another Rank 5 True Dragon calmly greeted before urging him, "Take your seat. The meeting will begin right away."

"Alright, Lord Kemun," Lord Narvim acknowledged.

Shortly after, the ninth dragon lord left the Witch Mother's side and took his seat on the leftmost dragon throne made of igneous stones.

There were eight other dragon thrones of the same design and material, but they were all occupied by the other dragon lords.

Together, the nine dragon thrones formed an arc with a round platform in front of them.

After the ninth dragon lord took his seat, he glanced over to the dragon throne next to him. However, the eighth dragon lord, a female dragon, snorted and gave him cold shoulders.

'As expected,' Lord Narvim thought with a sad sigh.

"Step into the center, black witch," the first dragon lord seated in the middle dragon throne ordered in a strict tone shortly after.

Ophelia immediately frowned with a more serious look.

It wasn't hard to guess that the meeting mainly concerned her, and the way dragon lords glanced at her also made it look like they were conducting an interrogation.

Nevertheless, she didn't want to cause trouble in the presence of nine Rank 5 beings. Thus, she complied despite being inwardly discontent.

Shortly after Ophelia stepped into the center before the nine dragon lords, the first dragon lord raised his first question.

However, it wasn't directed at her.

"Do you know what you've done, Lord Narvim?" the first dragon lord asked before saying, "Humans may come and stay if they overcome the challenge of the mountains. However, you not only had visitors that escaped unpunished, but you also willingly brought in a black witch from the outside."

"You better have a good reason for this, Lord Narvim," the first dragon lord added with a stern look.

"Naturally, I understand the rules, Lord Astarot," Lord Narvim calmly replied before saying, "However, the black witch before you is someone this Lord has deemed worthy of befriending and has already entered an alliance with."

"As for who she is, it is better if she introduces herself. However, this Lord can vouch that she will be a valuable ally against the threats of Gehenna," Lord Narvim stated.

"Is that so?" Lord Astarot hummed before glancing at the Witch Mother curiously, along with the other seven dragon lords present. "Go on then, black witch. Who are you? Why does Lord Narvim speak so highly of you?"

"Greetings, Your Excellencies," the Witch Mother greeted the dragon lords before introducing herself, "I am Ophelia Tempest, one of the Storm Calamity Witch's close retainers back in the Nightmare Realm. Or should I say I was since I've been reincarnated?"

"Is that enough for an introduction, Your Excellency?" Ophelia asked shortly after with a sly and mischievous smile.

Lord Astarot and the other dragon lords were all silenced with stiffened expressions when they heard she was a close retainer of the Storm Calamity Witch.

Considering Lord Narvim knew what that entailed, they were also naturally aware.

"Let's skip the formalities, Lady Ophelia. I wouldn't dare accept my weight around an ex-Rank 6 being such as yourself," Lord Astarot stated before asking, "Is Nightmare at war with another great realm?"

"No, Lord Astarot. I willingly ended my own life and entered the cycle of reincarnation," Ophelia calmly replied before adding, "Of course, there was no telling that I would succeed in reincarnating after death, nor which era and place I would end up in."

"Thus, it was quite the risk to take," Ophelia added.

Lord Astarot and the dragon lords immediately frowned with doubt, except for Lord Narvim, who had already heard the answer from her.

"Why would you give up everything you have and take such a risk, Lady Ophelia? Many denizens of Chaos would envy your status and power as the Storm Calamity Witch's close retainer," Lord Astarot wondered.

"Indeed, becoming a Rank 6 being that serves a Rank 7 being might be the dream for many. But for me, it's not enough," Lady Ophelia coolly stated before mentioning, "However, I was doomed to be stuck at Rank 6 forever, never achieving anything greater."

"That's why I took a great risk to enter the cycle of reincarnation to be reborn with different talents and a new starting point. And by the looks of it, I succeeded," Ophelia stated. "Not only was I reborn with better talents; I also landed the jackpot of reincarnating in the material world."

"Why is reincarnating in the material world considered a jackpot?" Lord Astarot inquired with a frown.

"According to Lady Ophelia, beings born in Chaos have fixed potential while those born in the material have no limits. Even if they have low talents, as long as they have luck and opportunities, they can still achieve greater heights than a denizen of Chaos," Lord Narvim explained.

"And where did Lady Ophelia obtain such information?" the fifth dragon lord asked.

"Where? Well, that's a secret I don't want to share," Ophelia casually stated before saying, "You're free to believe it or not."

"Well then, Lady Ophelia. Let me ask you another question. Do you have any means of contacting the Storm Calamity Witch in Nightmare?" Lord Astarot asked.

"No, I don't, Lord Astarot. Since I've reincarnated, I've lost all my abilities and artifacts as a Rank 6 being. You should have expected that, Lord Astarot," Ophelia replied.

"I see." Lord Astarot acknowledged with a nod before turning to the ninth dragon lord. "Well then, Lord Narvim. I fail to see how this alliance with Lady Ophelia will help us against Gehenna's Great Devils."

"Lady Ophelia has no means of contacting the Calamity Witches of Nightmare. And even if Lady Ophelia returns to her former peak power, we will only have one Rank 6 on our side. It's not enough to repel all the Great Devils when they descend."

"I did say Lady Ophelia can help us, not that she can resolve our problem," Lord Narvim responded with a bit of speechlessness.

"I see..." Lord Astarot scratched his head awkwardly before changing the topic. "Ahem. Anyhow, welcome to our Fire Dragon Tribe, Lady Ophelia. Now, onto our next agenda..."

Chapter 308: Swift Improvement

While the dragon lords had their meeting, Vaan continued to train in the land of fire, raising his fire affinity, defense, and strength.

Thanks to the Fire Dragon Physique, he no longer needed to dual-practice with fire-attribute witches for their mana; he just needed a suitable fiery environment like the land of fire.

Ding!

<Your body has successfully absorbed the fire-attribute mana in the magma>

<Your strength has improved by 2 points>

<Your defense has improved by 1 point>

<Your fire affinity has improved by 1%>

...

Two hours passed within the blink of an eye, but Vaan showed no sign of reaching his limits despite barely holding on for an hour prior to absorbing the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

At the same time, Jergag watched over him without a hint of boredom; only increasing astonishment could be found on his face.

The elderly dragon wasn't blind.

He could see the significant change from before and after Vaan absorbed the Fire Dragon God's blood essence into his body.

A single drop of blood essence was generally far too little to produce any significant result.

However, it was clear to him that Vaan's body could absorb the fire-attribute mana in the magma and turn it into his strength.

Even though Vaan's body was still getting burned by magma, it was no longer as bad as before. Thus, his regeneration had little work to do.

'The Fire Dragon Physique. Vaan had perfect compatibility with Lord Dragon God's blood essence! He absorbed its full potency and acquired the Fire Dragon Physique!' Jergag concluded with wide eyes.

Even though the truth was before him, the elderly dragon still found it hard to believe, as seen by the disbelief in his eyes.

'How is that possible? A human is perfectly compatible with Lord Dragon God's blood essence... Even the nine dragon lords with the highest strength in the tribe don't have such compatibility...' Jergag recalled with shock.

'A single drop of blood essence granted such overwhelming benefits... If Vaan also absorbs the blood essence rewards from the first and second stages of the trial, then...' Jergag thought.

The elderly dragon couldn't imagine it, but he was strangely very excited by the prospect; it had his blood boiling with anticipation.

He felt like Lord Dragon God had chosen the inheritor of his legacy.

'Alas, Vaan is human. Not every dragon will agree if he tries to take Lord Dragon God's inheritance from them; they wouldn't allow it. However, they can't do anything if Vaan obtains the inheritance before they discover his potential,' Jergag mused.

In other words, his best course of action was to keep silent and let Vaan continue to grow.

Although the elderly dragon also felt a little disappointed that the person with perfect compatibility wasn't a dragon, he could still accept it.

After all, if the Fire Dragon God's inheritance wasn't meant for them, they couldn't have it even if they wanted it.

No dragon had been able to come close to overcoming all of the Trial by Fire's stages.

Now that someone with the potential to succeed appeared, they shouldn't stop the person but encourage him.

Nevertheless, while Jergag's imagination was running wild, Vaan remained oblivious to the matter. He was completely focused on his training.

Ding!

<Your body has successfully absorbed the fire-attribute mana in the magma>

<Your strength has improved by 2 points>

<Your defense has improved by 1 point>

<Your fire affinity has improved by 1%>

...

As Vaan's body kept improving, another three hours passed before he finally decided to take a break from his training.

Blackthorn wasn't built in one day.

'Stats!' Vaan willed.

Ding!

=====

«Physical Attributes»

[387 → 453 Defense (↑66)] [Mid-level Rank 3 → High-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [19 → 22 Dragon Force (↑3)] [Total Defense: 656 → 725 (Low-level Rank 4)]

[230 → 351 Strength (↑121)] [High-level Rank 2 → Mid-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [23 → 35 Dragon Force (↑12)] [Total Strength: 503 → 636 (High-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 4)]

[217 Speed] [High-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 467 (High-level Rank 3)]

=====

«Lycan State»

[Total Defense: 725 → 951 (↑226) (Low-level Rank 4 → High-level Rank 4)]

[Total Strength: 636 → 811 (↑175) (Low-level Rank 4 → Mid-level Rank 4)]

[Total Speed: 467 → 575 (↑108) (High-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 4)]

=====

«Elemental Affinity»

[Earth: 53%]

[Wind: 13%]

[Lightning: 12%]

[Light: 5%]

[Wood: 25%]

[Fire: 13% → 21% (↑8)]

=====

Vaan's lips twitched when he glanced at his improvement.

Without a doubt, he had improved significantly within a short time. Even so, it wasn't a rate of improvement that anyone else could copy either.

Unless the person also had the system and Peak-rank regeneration like him, their body would likely break down from the rapid changes.

Possessing two Divine-rank bloodlines truly separated him from the mass.

'I've finally become somewhat powerful now,' Vaan reflected.

Although he was still no match for Rank 5 beings, he could stand his ground against High-level Rank 4 beings.

After all, if he entered Lycan Transformation and further enhanced his defense with the blessings of the earth, his defense points would exceed four digits.

His defense was simply too high.

The High Witches in the Black Rose Kingdom could no longer hurt him—if the information regarding their strength was still accurate, that is.

"Done?" Jergag asked.

Vaan nodded.

"You're full of surprises, you know that?" Jergag commented before adding, "I assume the amount of improvement you've gained from a simple bath in the magma sea isn't small. It's hard to imagine how much you would gain from the Trial by Fire."

"Even I didn't expect my improvement to be so swift and smooth, Senior Jergag." Vaan casually replied, "It feels a little surreal, almost like something bad is bound to happen soon."

"Don't be such an alarmist, Vaan. Your talent is simply too shocking. Furthermore, this land of fire was blessed by Lord Dragon God's divine body, so your improvement is somewhat expected but still shocking nonetheless," Jergag stated.

Seeing the elderly dragon didn't take his words too seriously, Vaan simply smiled in response.

Nevertheless, he was still bothered by the nagging feeling in his heart.

Chapter 309: Proud Dragons

The feeling was new to him, but Vaan felt he could trust it. It was similar to sensing danger with one's instincts.

However, danger didn't seem to be quite it; it was more like foresight of an upcoming event.

Nevertheless, Vaan's hunch was on the mark. Just as he took out a fresh set of black clothes to wear, a group of True Dragons approached him.

With a single glance, he could immediately tell that they came looking for trouble; it didn't take a genius to guess.

"Hm?" Jergag frowned at the group of twenty True Dragons before he asked them, "What do you all want?"

"Step aside, Senior Jergag. We don't have business with you. It's the human we have business with," the leading True Dragon spoke before turning to Vaan. "Get out of our land, human. You're not welcome here! Your presence here has made many dragons feel uncomfortable."

"Our sacred land isn't yours to enjoy!" the leading True Dragon spoke with a middle-aged man's voice.

"Whether Vaan is welcome here isn't for you to decide, Grymre," Jergag stated with a gloomy look before mentioning, "He is currently Lord Narvim's esteemed guest. You have no right to shoo this human away."

"Lord Narvim's esteemed?" the leading True Dragon, Gryme, uttered, but he didn't show the slightest respect at the mention of the ninth dragon lord. Instead, he smirked and said, "All the more reason why this human should leave."

"Lord Eighth has no respect for Lord Ninth. Thus, there is no reason for us dragons of Eighth Peak to show respect to Lord Ninth's guests," Gryme stated.

Although the other True Dragons in the group didn't dare to voice their opposition like Gryme, they stood behind him, expressing their stance.

"Leave, human. I won't repeat myself again," Gryme directed his attention to Vaan again and sternly said, "A mere human has no right to step foot in this sacred land."

The group of True Dragons wasn't weak, nor were they young. But they were still juniors to Senior Jergag.

Although Vaan couldn't tell much from the rest of the group, he guessed the leading True Dragon was at least from the second generation.

'This lot should be around Mid-level to High-level Rank 4 or so,' Vaan gauged Gryme and the other True Dragons as they exerted pressure on him.

Nevertheless, he faced them calmly, standing his ground.

"Oh? I was beginning to think there weren't any overly arrogant and prideful dragons around because I've only interacted with reasonable and wise dragons so far. However, you have changed my mind," Vaan replied before adding, "Gryme, was it? You're a bold one."

"Silence, human! This dragon's noble name isn't something the likes of a mere human like you can speak thoughtlessly!" Gryme barked.

"Get out of here!"

"You are not welcome here, human!"

Several True Dragons chimed.

Although they didn't dare speak up in front of Jergag, they had no problem doing so in front of Vaan, who was an outsider and a 'mere' human.

"Do my words carry no weight anymore?" Jergag asked gloomily before adding, "Not only is Vaan an esteemed guest of Lord Narvim, but he is also this old dragon's friend!"

"Allow me to speak with them, Senior Jergag. There's no need for you to shield me. It's me they want," Vaan calmly said before turning back to Gryme and the other True Dragons. "You called me a 'mere' human, but if you can't even defeat this 'mere' human, what does that make you?"

"Are you trying to challenge me, human?" Gryme glanced at Vaan with disdain.

"Challenge you?" Vaan snickered before shaking his head. "No, no, no. You got it all wrong. It's not me trying to challenge you; I'm trying to teach you a lesson. Anyone can run their mouth, but the real question is do you have the strength to back it up?"

"Do you think you have the strength to contend with me, human?" Gryme's expression turned colder, but he remained disdainful as if fighting Vaan wasn't worth his time. "You might be somewhat strong for a human, but that is all there is to it. Even if we were on the same level of strength, we still wouldn't be the same."

"However, you don't have to blame your inferior strength. Us, dragons, are simply born superior to you humans," Gryme boasted.

"Is that so?" Vaan coolly smiled and said, "But if I recall correctly, the Lord of Chaos is also a human. Thus, in my opinion, there is no superior race, only a superior being. Only strength matters, and I believe I have that strength—at least, compared to you."

"Your opinion doesn't mean shit, human. Human ignorance is both a blessing and a disaster. Since you can't listen, you can only learn the hard way," Gryme grimly stated before instructing a True Dragon beside him, "Go and teach that foolish human the difference between humans and dragons, Hedwig."

"Alright," Hedwig grinned.

The Mid-level Rank 4 True Dragon called Hedwig stepped forward and cracked his stiff neck as he prepared himself for some action.

However, Jergag also stepped forward and snarled, "Who dares misbehave in this old dragon's presence?!"

"It's clear that they don't respect you, Senior Jergag. Old heroes are forgotten, and new ones are born. Thus, you shouldn't be stubborn either and go get yourself completely cured for a chance to

advance. Only strength matters," Vaan stated as he stepped out from behind the elderly dragon to face True Dragon Hedwig.

"I appreciate the fact that you are looking out for me, but allow me to handle this one, Senior Jergag. After such big improvements, I do need some exercise to adapt to my newfound strength. And these arrogant dragons seem well-suited for the task."

"I can also teach them a lesson for you," Vaan added.

"Alright. If you think you can handle them, Vaan," Jergag slowly agreed with a nod before warning, "Be careful, though."

"I will, Senior Jergag. One question, though. Will there be complications if I beat them up?" Vaan asked.

"Scruffles among dragons happen way more often than you think, Vaan," Jergag mentioned before saying, "As long as no one dies, it doesn't matter how badly you beat them or what methods you deploy."

"Great! That's just what I wanted to hear," Vaan grinned.

Chapter 310: Vaan vs Hedwig

When Gryme and the other True Dragons saw Vaan's confident look, they were immediately displeased.

They did not like the fact that a human they looked down on truly believed he stood a fighting chance against them, the noble dragons.

"Do not go easy on him, Hedwig. Teach that foolish and arrogant human a hard lesson that he will never forget for life!" True Dragon Gryme strictly instructed with a harsh look.

"Heh," Hedwig snickered with a cruel smile and said, "You don't need to tell me twice, Gryme. I plan to!"

Nevertheless, Jergag and Gryme's group distanced themselves, making room and forming a large battle ring for Vaan and Hedwig to fight within.

Vaan stood upright and tall on a hot rock platform surrounded by magma, but his presence paled in comparison to the huge dragon fifteen yards away from him.

Even so, it was only a size difference between them; the strength difference was a completely different matter entirely.

"So you'll be my first opponent," Vaan calmly acknowledged before casually saying, "Alright, giant winged lizard. As the stronger one, I'll be gracious and let you have the first strike."

"Give me your best shot, big guy," Vaan gestured provocatively with his fingers.

He was not afraid of Gryme's group, even if they did possess greater strength than his.

He could see they were still afraid of trouble from the higher-ranking dragons. Thus, they didn't dare to kill him. At most, they would beat him up badly—if they could, that is.

Nevertheless, that much information told him they were just big bullies, and he could fight them to his heart's content.

"How audacious! Do you really think this dragon is weaker than you, human?!" Hedwig was quickly enraged by Vaan's insult and roared furiously, "Know your place, human!"

In the next instant, Hedwig slammed down on Vaan with one of his front legs, intending to crush him with immense brute force and weight.

Boom!

Vaan's figure disappeared under the magma as the rock platform under his feet failed to withstand immense force and shattered, sinking a dozen feet while a column of magma rose, followed by a splash shortly after.

"Dammit, Hedwig! I told you to teach the foolish human a hard lesson, not kill him!" Gryme scolded with a change in expression. "How will he know the power difference between us if he dies instantly?"

"I... No, something didn't feel right, Gryme," Hedwig quickly said with a frown.

He quickly retracted his front leg before Vaan reappeared underneath it. Although Vaan lost his fresh set of black clothes to the magma, he appeared completely fine otherwise.

"Haiz, there goes one set of new clothes," Vaan sighed nonchalantly as if he cared more about his clothes than he did with Hedwig's attack.

"You... How are you completely fine, human?" Hedwig asked with surprise.

"How, you ask? Isn't that obvious? It's because you are weak. But of course, you already know that. Otherwise, why else would you take the first strike I graciously granted?" Vaan replied with a sly smile.

Ding!

<You are no longer in contact with the earth>

<You have lost the blessing of the earth>

<[570 → 453 Defense (↓117 (26% Earth Blessing))] [High-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [22 Dragon Force] [Total Defense: 842 → 725 (Mid-level Rank 4 → Low-level Rank 4)]>

After his solid ground was destroyed, Vaan's defense dropped back to its original value.

"I've underestimated you, human. We all did. Your body is surprisingly sturdy for a human. I give you that much," Hedwig commented gloomily before saying, "However, if you think you are stronger than me just because you managed to withstand one of my attacks, you can't be further from the truth!"

"A dragon is strongest when it augments its already strong body with magic!" Hedwig roared as his huge dragon body glowed with fire-attribute red mana.

The mana quickly condensed into glowing runes that stuck to his body and augmented his dragon body's physical prowess.

In a short instant, Hedwig's combat power rose to High-level Rank 4.

"Is that so? Well, I guess I should also be serious," Vaan casually said. He sensed the threat from Hedwig and decided not to underestimate him.

Ba-dump! Ba-dump!

Vaan increased his heartbeat and entered his Lycan state as his eyes turned yellow, white hair grew out, nails sharpened, and his muscles slightly bulged with power.

...

=====

«Lycan State»

[Total Defense: 725 → 951 (↑226) (Low-level Rank 4 → High-level Rank 4)]

[Total Strength: 636 → 811 (↑175) (Low-level Rank 4 → Mid-level Rank 4)]

[Total Speed: 467 → 575 (↑108) (High-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 4)]

=====

Vaan's Lycan form surprised every dragon present, even Hedwig. However, he did not wait for his opponent to recover from his shock.

He quickly kicked himself out of the magma sea, lunging straight at Hedwig's stomach like a cannonball.

Bam!

Although he rammed straight into Hedwig's stomach, his strength was insufficient to cause significant damage.

It only managed to snap Hedwig out of his shock before the dragon glanced down at him with disdain in his eyes.

"Was that your best shot after getting serious?" Hedwig snickered and said, "I must admit that your form surprised me, but this is the difference between us. You cannot hurt me, Hu—Uwarghhh!"

Before Hedwig could finish speaking, Vaan rained punches on the exact same spot on the dragon's stomach with accelerating speed due to increased kinetic energy in his arms.

His fists became so fast that they struck like bullets flying from a machine gun and roared like thunder upon impact.

"Bleurgh!" Hedwig gagged as Vaan's last fist broke through his defense and winded him.

"What the hell are you doing, Hedwig?! Hurry the fuck up and teach that arrogant human a lesson! Stop showing off and making a fool out of yourself! You're embarrassing us dragons!" Gryme reprimanded from a distance.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Gryme!" Hedwig snapped back as he wiped some saliva off the corners of his mouth with a grin of excitement. "We're in the middle of a gentleman's duel now! No one is allowed to interfere!"

"Vaan, was it? I was wrong about you. I'm sorry, so let us keep going all out!" Hedwig roared excitedly, forgetting his former objective after Vaan ignited his fighting spirit.

At the same time, he viewed Vaan as a worthy rival and opponent, deserving of his respect.

"Oh?" Vaan smiled with surprise.