

## The Witch 331

### Chapter 331: Final Preparation

Vaan glanced at everyone's expression and understood they each had something they wanted to say to him.

Nevertheless, he took the initiative to speak first.

"I have some news to share with you all," Vaan stated before suggesting, "However, let us head back to the guest building. We'll talk there."

"Alright."

Astoria and the others didn't have a problem with Vaan's suggestion, so they readily agreed without a complaint.

The group gathered around at a six-seated table in the main dining hall before the ladies focused on Vaan and waited for him to speak.

"First off, congratulations on successfully becoming a High Witch, Hester," Vaan congratulated, shifting the focus to her.

"Right. I was going to congratulate you earlier but found out you were asleep," Astoria mentioned, thanks to Vaan's reminder. "Congratulations, Lady Hester."

"Congratulations." Eniwse and Aeliana also expressed their good wills.

"Thank you, everyone." Hester received their blessings humbly and replied with a wry smile, "However, I couldn't have succeeded without Senior Jergag's timely help. I also wanted to thank him earlier, but he left before I could."

"Don't worry about that, Lady Hester. We'll most likely be staying here for an extended period, so you will definitely get your chance," Eniwse calmly stated before asking, "So, how does it feel to become a High Witch?"

"Awesome! I feel incredibly comfortable and brimming with power. It's such an exhilarating feeling that I could probably get drunk on it," Hester replied with bright eyes before they dulled shortly after. "Still, my improvement is nothing compared to Sir Vahn."

"Right..." Astoria and the others returned their attention to Vaan before she asked, "How did your strength increase so drastically and in such a short time, Teacher Raphna?"

Everyone's eyes glimmered with curiosity.

Vaan knew he couldn't avoid the topic, but he had already prepared an answer for them.

"This is also what I wanted to talk to you all about." Vaan briefly glanced at Eniwse before continuing, "I've received the blessings and protections of the ninth and eighth dragon lords."

"They will freely provide resources and knowledge to aid my growth and protect me from other dragons with ill intentions while I stay in their clan. Furthermore, I am free to leave the Thousand Fog Mountains without a memory wipe."

"However, these benefits are for only me, alone, to enjoy. Thus, I plan to conquer the Trial by Fire and grab the chance for us to all leave with our memories intact," Vaan declared.

"I can somewhat understand if it was just the ninth dragon lord, but the eighth dragon lord too?" Astoria was surprised before she wondered, "For what reason are they doing this? How does this benefit them?"

"The eighth dragon lord, Lord Khaleesi, is Lord Narvim's wife," Vaan explained.

"After Lord Khaleesi learned from Lord Narvim that I'm a Soul Master, she decided to invest in my growth. She believes I have what it takes to protect the dragon clan from the Gehenna Realm's Great Devils in the future."

"That's why they are pinning their hopes on me and investing in my growth," Vaan added.

Naturally, what he said wasn't the truth. But even though the two dragon lords didn't explicitly mention it, his lies weren't far from the truth either.

That said, he had to keep his promise. Thus, he couldn't tell the ladies the true reason, especially Eniwse.

Besides, there was no harm in a white lie.

"The two dragon lords believe Sir Vahn can protect them from the dragon clan from the Great Devils of Gehenna?" Hester frowned before raising her doubt, "I know Sir Vahn's talents are out of this world but aren't they expecting too much?"

"No matter what, the Great Devils are thought to be Rank 6 beings; their existences are akin to gods. Can humans even achieve such a level, let alone whether Sir Vahn can succeed within a fixed time before the Great Devils descend onto our world?"

"Furthermore, the Trial by Fire is too dangerous. Neither the dragon lords nor Her Majesty, Queen Henrietta, could pass the fourth stage. So how can you expect to conquer the Trial by Fire, Sir Vahn?" Hester asked.

"Lady Hester is right," Astoria agreed before voicing her worries, "No matter what the future holds, your life is still the most important. There's no need to push yourself into the pits of fire and take on such a huge risk."

"I am fine with losing my memories, Teacher Raphna," Astoria stated shortly after.

"You might be okay with it, but I'm not, Headmaster Astoria," Vaan coolly said before glancing at Eniwse and Aeliana. "Do you two also think the same as Headmaster Astoria?"

There was no doubt that memory-wiping magic would affect the soul.

Thus, it was hard to say what side effect it would have on the ladies' future potential, even if the dragon lords executed it perfectly.

If it restricted them from reaching greater heights, they would live to regret it.

Nevertheless, after Eniwse and Aeliana received Vaan's question, they glanced at each other before they shook their heads with a smile.

"No, we will follow whatever choice you make. We believe in you," Eniwse and Aeliana answered with complete faith.

Vaan nodded with approval.

"But—"

"No buts."

Vaan interrupted before Hester could argue.

"The dragon lords and Queen Henrietta couldn't conquer the Trial by Fire, but that doesn't mean I will fail," Vaan continued.

"After all, the most important factor in passing the trial's stages isn't one's strength but one's affinity to fire, and I have the best potential in that regard. Once I enter the Trial by Fire, my fire affinity will only continue to improve."

"Fate had led me here, and I believe a great destiny awaits me in the depths of the Trial by Fire. That's why I must at least challenge it, and no one can persuade me to change my mind," Vaan firmly stated.

"Alright, I will respect your wish," Astoria sighed.

Hester also conceded to his decision.

Vaan, more or less, knew what he was doing. He wouldn't take on such a huge risk unless he had absolute confidence in making it out alive, even if he were to fail the trial.

Thus, they shouldn't be too adamant about his choice.

"Great. I will challenge the Trial by Fire first thing in the morning." Vaan clapped his hands and wrapped up the matter before suddenly turning to Hester. "Would you like to be my dual-practice partner for tonight, Lady Hester?"

"Eh?" Hester was taken aback by Vaan's sudden question, but she wouldn't refuse such an opportunity. As such, she replied with delight shortly after, "I would gladly be your dual-practice partner, Sir Vahn!"

On the side, the corners of Astoria's eyes twitched while Eniwse and Aeliana pouted with some slight discontent. They supported Vaan's decision, but the opportunity still went to Hester.

"Don't worry." Vaan naturally didn't forget the two and assured them, "I will show you two plenty of love once I return from the trial."

Dual-practicing with High Witch Hester was his final preparation for the trial.

Crack...!

The corner of the wooden table where Astoria rested her hand suddenly cracked, causing everyone to glance over.

"Uh..." Astoria was stunned by the sudden attention before she quickly made an excuse and laughed nervously, "Oh, my... This table is quite fragile, huh? Haha... ha..."

Chapter 332: Into the Fiery Trial

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In the blink of an eye, an entire night went by. The sun's soft rays peered through the windows and cast its warm light over Hester's pristine body.

Despite possessing no apparent physical changes, she appeared to be even more beautiful after becoming a High Witch.

It was her aura that changed.

Still, High Witch or not, she was no match for Vaan's bed skills and passed out early before Vaan could demonstrate a fraction of his pleasuring techniques.

That said, the benefits of dual-practicing with a High Witch were just as Vaan expected.

Ding!

<You have reached a 100% understanding of the Specialized Magic, Earth Reinforcement>

<You have comprehended the Specialized Magic, Earth Reinforcement>

<Earth Reinforcement (Mid-rank) has been generated and is ready to use>

...

...

Ding!

<Your body has been reinforced with the earth-attribute refined mana of a High Witch>

<Your defense has improved by 38 points>

<Your earth affinity has increased by 2%>

<Your Earth Spirit Body has slightly improved>

<Your earth blessing has slightly strengthened>

...

...

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### «Physical Attributes»

[487 → 525 Defense (↑38)] [High-level Rank 3 → Peak-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [24 → 26 Dragon Force (↑2)] [Total Defense: 761 → 801 (↑40) (Mid-level Rank 4)]

[601 Strength] [Mid-level Rank 3] [250 Aura Power] [60 Dragon Force] [Total Strength: 911 (Mid-level Rank 4)]

[225 Speed] [Peak-level Rank 2] [250 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 475 (High-level Rank 3)]

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### «Lycan State»

[Total Defense: 801 → 1063 (↑262) (Mid-level Rank 4 → Peak-level Rank 4)]

[Total Strength: 911 → 1211 (↑300) (Mid-level Rank 4 → Low-level Rank 5)]

[Total Speed: 475 → 587 (↑112) (High-level Rank 3 → Low-level Rank 4)]

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### «Elemental Affinity»

[Earth: 53% → 55% (↑2%)]

[Wind: 13%]

[Lightning: 12%]

[Light: 5%]

[Wood: 25%]

[Fire: 60%]

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After a night's worth of dual practice with Hester, Vaan successfully acquired her Earth Reinforcement magic and also improved his defense by a fair amount.

With that, he was prepared to challenge the Trial by Fire.

Vaan took out a fresh set of black clothes from the Heaven-Swallowing Space and donned them. The previous rags were no longer wearable after last night's passion.

After Vaan caught one last glance at Hester's comfortable sleeping face, he left the room quietly without waking her up.

He didn't intend to inform anyone and decided to head directly to the Land of Fire, considering he had already told the ladies last night.

However, Astoria, Eniwse, and Aeliana were already waiting for him outside the guest building. Even the ninth dragon lord was present.

"Well, everyone is up early," Vaan scratched the side of his cheeks with a wry smile.

Astoria rolled her eyes and grumpily said, "Couldn't sleep."



"Hahaha..." Vaan couldn't only laugh it off.

Considering how much Hester screamed and moaned in pleasure last night, it would be strange if anyone in the guest building could sleep in peace.

Of course, it wouldn't have been a problem if Astoria and the others had used noise-cancellation magic.

However, the influx of mana would still disturb them, which wasn't necessarily bad, considering they could absorb a portion of the mana for their own benefit.

Vaan guessed the ladies were just being considerate since he was going to take on a dangerous trial.

He noted their small act of kindness and made up his mind to repay them once he returned from the Trial by Fire.

"If you're ready, I can take you to the Trial by Fire anytime, Vahn," Lord Narvim offered to give Vaan a lift.

"I'm ready," Vaan nodded.

Shortly after he hopped on Narvim's back, Narvim flapped his large wings and carried Vaan into the sky in a short instant.

"Be careful." Astoria, Eniwse, and Aeliana reminded just before Vaan departed with Narvim.

Swoosh!

With another flap of his large wings, Narvim took Vaan to the ninth mountain's hollowed peak before performing a steep nose-dive into the Land of Fire.

The rapid speed produced strong wind pressure and hurt Vaan's eyes, but the fresh air of early morning was strangely invigorating despite its quickly increasing temperature.

The mana felt purer, and it wasn't just a feeling; it was purer.

It was the best time to train.

However, there were only a few dragons awake at this time for morning flights, and they were mostly senior dragons.

Lord Narvim must have also woken up early for morning flights.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't have time for idle chats with Narvim. Within moments, they arrived in the air just above the lava whirlpool, the entrance to Trial by Fire.

"Well then, I'll be sure to bring back a few goods, Lord Narvim."

"Yeah, sure. Do your best, but remember to be careful, Vahn."

Shortly after, Vaan jumped off Narvim's back and dived head-first into the whirlpool of scorching lava below without a shred of fear.

When he first arrived in the Land of Fire, the lava still posed some threat. But after reaching 60% fire affinity, the surface lava was no different from a warm bath in his eyes.

Only the deeper depths of the trial could benefit or harm him.

Splash!

Vaan's figure collided with the lava surface and quickly submerged under its fiery depths, causing his fresh set of clothes to evaporate instantly.

Narvim's eyes twitched at the sight.

Right after he had warned Vaan, the person still went ahead and descended into the trial with such speed. He couldn't help but worry for Vaan's safety.

The person certainly didn't give him peace of mind.

"Don't worry, Narvim." Khaleesi suddenly appeared beside Narvim before she said, "Vaan should be fine in the trial for a while."

"Although human flesh is weak beyond comparison to dragon scale, Vaan has both the Earth Spirit Body and the Fire Spirit Body. That's not something that usually appears in a single person. Still, since he has both physiques, his body's toughness shouldn't be much different from a red dragon's."

"It's likely that even the fiery temperature of the second stage will pose no harm to him. Though, it's a different story once he reaches the third stage," Khaleesi stated.

"Khaleesi, huh? So you also came to see him off," Narvim acknowledged his wife's presence before stating, "I'm aware of all that, but his speed of descent is still concerning. I just hope he doesn't overestimate himself down there."

"Unfortunately, it's out of our hands now. Trial takers aren't allowed to receive help from anyone. He can only rely on himself."

"Yeah..."

### Chapter 333: The First Trial Region

After Vaan descended into the depths of lava, he had various thoughts and expectations regarding the Trial by Fire's first stage.

However, the scene was completely different from what he had imagined, which took him by surprise.

The expected sea of lava was not there. Rather, it was found much deeper below, where another whirlpool of lava could be seen.

Most likely, the second lava whirlpool was the entrance to the next trial region, the second stage. At the same time, the whirlpools acted as funnels to channel air into each trial region.

More importantly, the overall surroundings were vast open spaces, which allowed dragons the freedom of flight.

Besides the vast open space, numerous lava pillars connected the first and second lava layers, and countless more geysers of blazing infernos erupted from the second lava layer.

Several rock islands could be found floating on the second lava layer surface, filled with countless growing fire-attribute magical plants.

Periodically, smaller rock boulders were lifted by the inferno geysers before they dropped with a big resonating splash, sending waves of scorching hot air and lava in all directions.

It was pure chaos.

The scorching hot air itself already possessed a higher temperature than the lava outside the trial region, but the splashing lava below was even greater than that.

Still, the first stage was not much different from a sauna; it was a level of heat Vaan could easily endure.

Vaan only took a few glances to capture the overall situation of the first trial region as he free-fell towards the second layer below.

Nevertheless, he manipulated the speed of his descent and softly landed on a small rock island filled with Rank 1 fire-attribute magical plants and a few Rank 2.

[First-time Trial Challengers may take one and only one magical plant per stage. Refusing to comply is punishable by death.]

[You may receive one drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence upon passing the first stage.]

A Fire Spirit's deep voice, filled with power and authority, resounded throughout the first trial region with booming intensity.

Space itself seemed to have trembled under the Fire Spirit's powerful voice, and Vaan's head rang for several breaths before it finally stopped.

'Is this the Lord Fire Spirit that Lord Narvim spoke? The Fire Dragon God's lifelong companion?' Vaan guessed with narrowed eyes.

The Fire Spirit's vocal power was so strong that it could affect space and suppress someone with his level of mentality.

There was even a vague sense of divinity in the Fire Spirit's presence.

'A Divine Fire Spirit?' Vaan immediately guessed but shook his head in the next moment, "No, that doesn't feel right. This Fire Spirit definitely feels stronger than Narvim and Khaleesi, but its aura of divinity is rather subtle and weak."

Although Vaan had never encountered a Rank 6 divine being, he possessed the bloodline of two Divine-rank beings.

Thus, he imagined Rank 6 divine beings to possess a much stronger aura of divinity than what the Lord Fire Spirit had revealed.

'A Fire Spirit that is stronger than Peak-level Rank, but not comparable to Rank 6 beings... A Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit?' Vaan guessed.

Due to the lack of information regarding Rank 5 and above, he could only come up with his own term to call the Fire Spirit by.

Nevertheless, the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit showed no interest in Vaan.

After it delivered the standard message to first-time trial challengers of the first stage, its presence disappeared.

At the same time, Vaan didn't dwell on the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit and focused on his objective. That said, he wasn't in a hurry to enter the second stage.

After Vaan fully explored the first trial region, he finally stepped into the sea of lava and submerged his body for body tempering.

The effects were limited, but if he wanted to pass all five stages of the Trial by Fire, he had to think strategically and act accordingly.

After all, resources and rewards were limited.

'If I want to guarantee the highest chance of passing all five stages, I must fully utilize the benefits of each stage,' Vaan figured.

The Trial by Fire was designed to find the successor to the Fire Dragon God. Thus, the resources and rewards of each stage must serve a purpose.

He had taken a look at all the fire-attribute magical plants growing in the first region earlier.

While the highest quality he found was Peak Rank 2, Vaan wouldn't find it surprising if the environment was suitable for growing Rank 3 fire-attribute magical plants.

Even True Dragons from the Red Dragon Clan had to be at least Rank 3 with some fire affinity to endure the heat of the first stage.

Thus, all the Rank 3 fire-attribute magic plants in the first stage must have been taken. Despite that, the first stage was still left as is.

In other words, the fire-attribute magic plants weren't the most important resource, nor was it the only resource in the first stage.

The fiery environment itself was also a type of resource.

He might be overthinking, but it was better to overestimate the Fire Dragon God's design for the Trial by Fire than to underestimate it.

Vaan decided to temper his body in the lava for an extended period.

It didn't matter if he had the wrong idea; it would only mean he wasted some time—time he could afford to lose.

It was a trivial setback, not a serious one.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained one point in defense>

<You have gained two points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

After soaking in the lava for five hours, Vaan managed to raise his fire affinity by 1%.

Although raising 1% in five hours was extremely slow, even by Vaan's standards, one must remember his fire affinity was already at a staggering 60%.

Even additional Peak-Rank 4 fire-attribute magical plants would have little effect on increasing his fire affinity.

Thus, there was something special about the lava sea in the first stage.

Although the process was slow, the gain was guaranteed, no matter how little it was. As such, Vaan didn't intend to leave until the tempering benefit was exhausted.

'My body has grown too swiftly recently. I don't know if this will impact my future cultivation, but I will just take this as a chance to solidify my foundations,' Vaan thought.

#### Chapter 334: Astoria's Concerns

In the blink of an eye, another ten hours went by before Vaan heard another notification from the system.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained one point in defense>

<You have gained two points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 62%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body has improved>

...

Although it took twice the time to raise his fire affinity by the same value, any improvement was still an improvement.

Vaan didn't care for the time.

As long as he sensed improvements in his body, he would continue to temper his body in the first stage.

At that moment, numerous dragons and magma wyrms had also entered the first stage to challenge the Trial by Fire.

At first, Vaan thought he would at least encounter one or two troublemakers. But contrary to his expectation, the dragons and magma wyrms all minded their own business.



They didn't have the spare energy to look for trouble, not when they could barely endure the scorching-high temperatures of the first stage.

On the other hand, the stronger magma wyrms and dragons had all descended to the second stage and beyond.

As such, Vaan was the only one who felt relaxed in the first stage.

Furthermore, the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit oversaw the entire Trial by Fire to carry out the late Fire Dragon God's will.

No one was allowed to help another in the trials. That also meant no one could sabotage another and prevent them from passing the trials.

Seeing how there weren't any conflicts in the first stage, it was that the dragons and magma wyrms were all repeated challengers.

They understood the consequences of causing trouble.

Van could only imagine the punishment.

Another twenty hours quickly passed, reaching thirty-five hours since Vaan entered the first stage before he received more notifications from the system.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained one point in defense>

<You have gained two points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 63%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body has improved>

...

After that, it took a whopping forty hours before Vaan heard the following strings of notifications from the system.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained one point in defense>

<You have gained two points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 64%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body has improved>

...

Nevertheless, Vaan no longer paid attention to the system notifications.

Having spent over three days tempering his body in the first stage of the Trial by Fire, Vaan gained a solid grasp of his body.

He could sense the micro-changes occurring inside his body, letting him know when his attributes were improving, even without the system's notifications.

At the same time, he felt like his mind and body were in complete sync, which allowed him to maneuver according to his will flawlessly without a margin of error.

Nevertheless, it would just remain a feeling until proven through the practice of some physically-straining martial arts.

'I guess this is what it meant by the benefits of meditation; there's a chance to experience spiritual enlightenment,' Vaan mused.

But achieving a state of emptiness in meditation while simultaneously undergoing a body-tempering process was extremely difficult.

It was hard to say how many people could replicate the same feat.

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Outside the Trial by Fire, Astoria stood edge of the ninth mountain's hollowed peak and glanced down into the Land of Fire with a face riddled with concerns.

If not for Lord Narvim periodically entering the Trial by Fire to check on Vaan, she would have already thought he experienced a mishap inside.

On the other hand, Eniwse and Aeliana were completely calm since they shared a special connection with Vaan.

They could vaguely sense his status and knew when he was in actual danger.

Nevertheless, despite their repeated reassurance, Astoria couldn't stop worrying. After all, she had heard it wasn't normal to spend three days in the first trial, even for first-stage repeaters.

"You worry too much, Headmaster Astoria. In fact, your level of concern isn't normal. Even lovers might not be as concerned as you are," Hester mentioned before asking, "Have you fallen for Sir Vahn's charms?"

"What? Of course, that's not true." Hester's question made Astoria's heart skip a beat, but she quickly denied it, "You're overthinking it, Lady Hester."

"In this day and age, love isn't even worth mentioning; people only dual-practice for benefits or to continue the lineage," Astoria calmly continued as if love was something trivial.

"However, all is meaningless if we don't even have the freedom to live. After learning just how big of a threat Gehenna poses to our world, I expected you to have a greater sense of urgency. Vaan is the only person in three hundred years I've seen with overflowing talent and knowledge."

"No one can even compare to him. With him around, we might actually have a chance to overcome the worldly crisis. But without him? Our future would be very grim," Astoria stated.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Hester casually replied. She was amused to see how desperate Headmaster Astoria was trying to defend herself.

"But as you said, Sir Vahn has overflowing talent. Neither man nor witch could compare to him. If we don't let him grow, he'll never reach the same heights as the Great Devils."

"Don't tell me that you think his knowledge, alone, can raise many witches to stand up to the Great Devils, Headmaster Astoria?" Hester cast a sidelong glance at Astoria.

In the past three days, Hester had thought about many things.

She had come to terms with the fact that even if she didn't want to fall behind, she had no way of catching up to Sir Vahn's improvement speed.

Once she came to that realization and accepted it, she felt like she had left behind a huge burden.

At the same time, she was no longer as nervous when facing a reputable High Witch like Headmaster Astoria, and could even joke with her.

"You can fool me, but you can't fool yourself, Headmaster Astoria. You like him."

"I..."

After being called out blatantly, Astoria's mind became a mess; she could not think.

Chapter 335: Perfect Clear

Meanwhile, Vaan continued to temper his body in the first stage wholeheartedly, oblivious to the outside world.

After the third day, the fourth and fifth days came.

Dragons and wyrms came and went, but only Vaan stayed behind in the first stage.

Many found it strange and felt he had no intention of leaving the first stage. As such, they all thought there was something wrong with his head.

After all, if he could endure for so long in the first stage, it was better to advance to the second stage for much faster and more significant gains.

However, unbeknownst to them, they all thought wrong.

After Vaan soaked his body in the first stage's lava for five consecutive days, achieving 64% fire affinity, it became progressively harder for him to stay in the lava pool.

It was like getting a tattoo.

Although the pain might be tolerable at first, it would become unbearable after extended periods, even when the pain level remained consistent throughout the process.

At Vaan's present level, the heat of the first stage shouldn't be able to harm him. And yet, he indeed started to feel pain all over his body.

However, the pain didn't encourage him to leave the lava pool, nor did he think something had gone wrong.

As the saying goes; no pain, no gain.

'To feel pain at this stage, it seems like I am close to uncovering the secret of the first trial,' Vaan silently thought.

Shortly after, he re-entered deep meditation and immersed himself in the tempering process.

Finally, on the seventh day, something happened.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained three points in defense>

<You have gained five points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 65%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body (Low-rank) has improved>

...

<The purity of your Fire Dragon God Bloodline (Divine-rank) has increased>

<Your Fire Dragon Physique (Low-rank) has improved>

<Your Dragon Force has been strengthened>

...

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

Effect: Passively increase your base strength by 12% and base defense by 6%.

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Ding!

<You have tempered your body to the absolute limit in the present environment>

<The present environment will no longer affect your body>

...

'So that was the reason,' Vaan understood the secret of the first trial.

The only reason he could still gain benefits in the first stage despite being far above the pre-requisite level was thanks to the blood essences of the Fire Dragon God.

Although he did not know how many drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence were diluted into the lava pool, he could confirm its presence.

After all, his Fire Dragon God Bloodline and Fire Dragon Physique would not have improved otherwise.

Since he had reaped all the benefits of the first trial, it was finally time to descend to the next stage.

Vaan hopped out of the lava pool and landed on the nearest rock island before turning toward the direction of the second whirlpool, which led to the second trial region.

[Why aren't you staying anymore?]

Just as Vaan was about to leap into the whirlpool, the ever-silent Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit took the initiative to contact him.

"I've already strengthened my dragon bloodline and physique. There's nothing more to be gained from staying here. That is why I am leaving," Vaan stated.

[You still haven't collected your quota of one fire-attribute magical plant.]

"I don't need it," Vaan replied after a short pause. "I rather come back when the fire-attribute magical plants have matured to Rank 3. I have no use for Rank 2 magical plants."

[Oh? Even though there's a chance that all the Rank 3 magical plants might get snatched up by others before you do?]

"If others get it before me, then that's their good luck. I don't really have much use for Rank 3 magical plants, anyway."

[I see. Very well, then. You may continue with the trial.]

Shortly after the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit spoke, Vaan nodded before he took a big leap into the second whirlpool of lava, entering the next trial region.

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The scenery of the second trial region did not differ much from the first trial region.

It was still the same vast open space, lava pillars, inferno geysers, and floating rock islands filled with fire-attribute magical plants.

However, there were twice as many fire pillars, the inferno geysers erupted more violently and frequently, and larger rock islands contained higher-quality fire-attribute magical plants.

More importantly, the scorching-hot air and overall temperature reached a frightening level and couldn't be compared to the first stage.

Only Rank 4 dragons with at least 30% fire affinity could endure this heat.

Anything weaker would be burned inside out.

Nevertheless, such a high level of temperature still wasn't a problem for Vaan. It was expected that only the third stage onward would pose a problem to his body.

After Vaan manipulated his rate of descent and softly landed on one of the larger rock islands below, the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit reached out to him again.

[Congratulations on passing the first stage perfectly. You will be awarded three drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.]

[Additionally, your magical plant quota for the second stage has been raised to two. Note: Exceeding your quota is still punishable by death. There is no leniency for greed.]

Shortly after the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit delivered its message, a miniature fire phoenix broke away from a nearby lava pillar and flew towards Vaan.

Upon reaching him, the miniature fire phoenix's entire body of flames dispersed into thin air, dropping a small ceramic bottle right into Vaan's hands.

After Vaan opened the ceramic bottle's cap, he noticed it contained precisely three drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

'Interesting,' Vaan thought.

Fortunately, he had chosen not to pick a fire-attribute magical plant from the first stage. Just because he could didn't mean he should.

As a result, his quota increased to two for the second stage.

That said, Vaan had no intention of picking up any fire-attribute magical plants from the second stage either.

If he could, he would save his quotas until he reached the last stage.

Perhaps he might really need it then.

And if not, he could use his spare quotas to repay Khaleesi for the Peak-Rank 4 Bloodvein Ganoderma he consumed.

#### Chapter 336: Disqualifying Challengers

After Vaan stored the bottle of blood essence inside his Heaven-Swallowing Space, he entered the lava pool and continued with his body tempering.

The Fire Dragon God's blood essences contained unbelievable power and benefits, but the means to acquire them were limited.

Considering the Fire Dragon God Bloodline would also interfere with his Immortal Lycan Bloodline, it was better to save the Fire Dragon God's blood essence for when he hit a bottleneck.

That said, the bottle of blood essence did not go to Vaan unnoticed.

The second stage had over three dozen Rank 4 True Dragons, and they were particularly sensitive to the Fire Dragon God's bloodline.

As such, they noticed Vaan's bottle contained more than just a single drop of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

Although they didn't know how Vaan acquired more blood essence, they all revealed covetous gazes.

They were the true descendants of the Fire Dragon God. Thus, logically, only they can fully use the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

How can they leave the precious blood essence of the Fire Dragon God in the hands of a human and let the person waste it?

Over a dozen Rank 4 True Dragons of the Red Dragon Clan were quickly consumed by greed and wickedness.

They thought it would be easy to steal the Fire Dragon God's blood essence from Vaan.

However, they were immediately disqualified from the trial the moment they decided to approach Vaan with ill intentions.

[Offsprings of Kyrssiss, Joranth, Nendrunty, Qierdor, Brembit, Teoryna...!]

[Henceforth, your trial qualifications have been revoked. You are all forbidden from entering the Trial by Fire again. Leave now!]

[If you fail to comply, your bodies and sins shall be purified by the divine flames!]

The Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit easily listed over a dozen names, shaking the second trial regions with its mighty voice.

The dozen-odd Rank 4 True Dragons immediately woke up from their greed with shock, fear, and regret and left the Trial by Fire without a complaint.

They did not doubt the Lord Fire Spirit's words nor its capabilities.

After all, it was the most powerful existence in the Red Dragon Clan, second only to the late Fire Dragon God.

Meanwhile, the other two dozen dragons remaining in the second trial region felt cold shivers run up their spines.

Luckily, they had more self-control. Otherwise, they would have all ended up in the same situation.

Even so, it was crazy how easily they could lose themselves at the sight of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.

It was clear that they lacked spiritual training.

Meanwhile, Vaan continued to train his body inside the lava pool wholeheartedly. He didn't need to keep both eyes open to understand the situation in his surroundings.

'Interesting,' Vaan thought.

Although he had expected the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit to act whenever a problem appeared in the trial, he was still surprised to see it act so swiftly.

The banished dragons did not even manage to get close to him. No, they didn't even take a second step before the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit interfered.

As such, Vaan grasped a better understanding of the Trial by Fire.

The moment they act on their impulse to harm other challengers, they will immediately lose their qualifications to challenge the Trial by Fire.

'The Trial by Fire is a great training ground, but it is ultimately a place to find the successor to the Fire Dragon God. And from what I've comprehended in the first stage, the successor must be diligent,' Vaan mused.

Seeking shortcuts at the cost of others was the quickest way to lose one's trial qualifications.

'However, diligence alone isn't enough to become the Fire Dragon God's successor. Talent is ultimately still more important,' Vaan thought.

If one had talent but no diligence, they could at least achieve something in the Trial by Fire. On the other hand, no diligence would be enough to clear the trial if one lacked talent.

It had taken him a whole week to pass the first stage perfectly. But while this might not seem very impressive and complicated, very few could actually replicate his feat.

After all, without his talent, others would take much longer than a mere week to temper their bodies to the absolute limit permissible by the first stage.

Vaan wouldn't even find it surprising if the dragons had to take up to three months to achieve the same feat in the first stage.

That said, it was still weird that the dragons hadn't figured out the Trial by Fire's conditions. After all, they weren't stupid.

'The dragon lords would have at least figured out the perfect clear condition in the later stages. It is also likely that they have already gone back to the previous stage to achieve perfect clears after realizing,' Vaan thought.

And yet, there was no information about it. Narvim and Khaleesi didn't inform him either.

'That means... Trial challengers aren't allowed to share the information because it's considered helping other challengers in the trial,' Vaan guessed.

The one giving information would be disqualified, but there's a chance that the one receiving the information would also be disqualified.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't dwell on the matter. He didn't plan on helping or receiving help from anyone. Thus, it had nothing to do with him.

He only needed to rely on himself.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained two points in defense>

<You have gained four points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 66%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body (Low-rank) has improved>

...

It took three hours before Vaan was notified.

The effects of tempering the body in the second stage's lava pool were evidently more potent than in the first stage.

Not only did it take a short time to raise his fire affinity, but his physical improvement was also greater.

His subsequent notification came after an extra six hours of tempering.

Ding!

<Your Fire Spirit Body (Low-rank) has improved>

<Your fire affinity has reached 67%>

...

After that, it took another twelve hours for Vaan to reach 68% fire affinity.

Before long, an entire day went by since Vaan started tempering his body in the second trial region.

Although the remaining Rank 4 True Dragons didn't look for trouble, they became very conscious of Vaan's presence.

At the same time, they didn't want to leave before he did.

#### Chapter 337: Fire Authority

In the past day, a number of dragons had left the second trial region while new arrivals replaced them.

But no matter how long they had stayed in the second stage, they all gradually became conscious of Vaan's presence and refused to leave in accordance with their usual training schedule.

Vaan's presence naturally attracted their attention, while his diligence awakened their competitive spirits.

They did not want to lose to a human.

(Dammit, that human has been here for a whole day! You guys can leave, but I won't be! Not before he does!)

(Leave? Hmph! Who said anything about leaving? There's no way I'm going to quit before a human! How can a dragon like me lose to a human in terms of fire resistance? I'd be too ashamed to show my face outside!)

(Hey, are you guys competing? That sounds like fun! Count me in!)

(However, it's boring if everyone only competes against a single human. Let me make this more interesting; the first one to leave has a small PP!)

(...)

(Bloody hell! Grow up, Zodreg! You're already 312 years old! I'm not interested in entertaining your immature ideas! The Trial by Fire is no playground!)

(So you're just going to leave, Small Dick? I might be 312 years old, but I am still the youngest one around here. So what if I am a little immature? I chose to be! Is it too much excitement for you, Eimbess? Well, they say dragons with small PPs are all edgy!)

(Goddamit—!!! How am I supposed to leave after hearing that?!! You're dead once we leave, Zodreg! You hear me? You're dead!)

...

Ding!

<+574 proficiency in the dragon language>

<Your understanding of the Dragon Tongue has increased>

<You have learned the Dragon Tongue (Low-rank)>

...

=====

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

Overview: You can speak and understand the language of dragons at a basic level. You can have casual conversations with dragons. Even if you don't know a word, dragons will understand what you want to convey by reading your expressions.



Specialty: Curse words – You have mastered the art of cussing in the Dragon Tongue.

Proficiency: Low-rank (732/5000)

=====

Vaan significantly increased his understanding of the Dragon Tongue over the course of thirty hours simply by eavesdropping on the dragons' active conversations.

Being able to learn the dragon's language and temper his body at the same time was like killing two birds with one stone.

Vaan had no complaints, even though the dragons were quite rowdy.

Nevertheless, three days quickly went by before all the dragons left, one after the other.

Surprisingly, Zodreg, the youngest dragon of that group, was the last of the group to leave the second stage.

However, Zodreg didn't leave the Trial by Fire. On the contrary, he descended to the third stage.

The fiery flames of the second stage were a bit too hot for most Rank 4 dragons besides those that stand at the peak of the rank.

That said, there wasn't a single Peak-level Rank 4 to be seen in the second stage, except from time to time for a brief moment.

Zodreg was the only exception. He was a genius among the dragons, no doubt.

Most Peak-level Rank 4 dragons were only interested in staying on the third stage, even if they couldn't last long there.

The third stage's benefits were on a different level compared to the second stage.

Nevertheless, Vaan was patient and didn't rush ahead like every other dragon. He had yet to temper his body to the limit permissible by the current stage.

That said, it didn't take him as long as the first stage. By the time the fourth day came, he had already achieved his goal.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained four points in defense>

<You have gained eight points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 70%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body (Low-rank) has improved to the next rank>

<Fire Spirit Body (Low-rank) → Fire Spirit Body (Mid-rank)>

...

<The purity of your Fire Dragon God Bloodline (Divine-rank) has increased>

<Your Fire Dragon Physique (Low-rank) has improved>

<Your Dragon Force has been strengthened>

...

=====

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

Effect: Passively increase your base strength by 14% (↑2%) and base defense by 7% (↑1%).

=====

[Fire Spirit Body (Mid-rank)]

Overview: the Fire Spirit Body is a special physique blessed by fire and loved by the Fire Spirits. By possessing the Fire Spirit Body, you have become an existence closer to the source of true fire.

Effect 1: When Mid-rank Fire Spirits or lower are nearby, they will immediately notice your existence.

Sub-effect 1.1: There is a chance that Mid-rank Fire Spirits or lower will actively communicate with you.

Sub-effect 1.2: There is a slight chance that Mid-rank Fire Spirits or lower will willingly establish a contract with you.

Effect 2: When you are in contact with natural flames, your base strength can increase up to 60%, while stamina and vitality can recover up to 60% faster.

Note: the effect is subject to change depending on the quality of the natural flames and your body's condition.

Effect 3: Fire-attribute medicine has up to 60% increase in effectiveness when consumed.

Effect 4 (New): Fire Authority.

=====

[Fire Authority (Law) (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)]

Overview: The ability to perceive, interfere, and manipulate all fire-related objects, magic, and law present in the area with just your will. It does not consume mana or mental power.

Restriction: The effects are severely limited due to your low level of authority.

Note: Comprehending the Fire Law or blessings of a Fire Spirit King or higher can raise your level of authority.

=====

Ding!

<You have tempered your body to the absolute limit in the present environment>

<The present environment will no longer affect your body>

...

Upon achieving 70% fire affinity, Vaan's body underwent a significant transformation. Although nothing seemingly changed, he felt vastly different.

However, it wasn't just his body that felt vastly different, but also the world around him.

He sensed something different about all the flames and fire-attribute mana around him. It was like they were connected to him, like they were his hands, feet, and eyes.

Even Earth Manipulation didn't give him such an intimate feeling with the earth.

'This must be Fire Authority...' Vaan's eyes flickered.

### Chapter 338: The Fire Spirit's Interest

Like a kid that just got a new toy, Vaan began to play around with his Fire Authority, conducting various tests with its application.

However, the system wasn't kidding when it said his Fire Authority was severely limited.

He could only assert his authority on fire-related objects, magic, and law within a meter of him, and the power he could generate was too weak to be applicable in battle.

That said, Vaan did not underestimate this new ability.

The fact that Fire Authority allowed him to perceive, interfere, and manipulate everything related to fire proved that it had limitless potential.

It might be weak now, but there was a lot he could do once his level of authority was higher.

'Although this Fire Authority is still very weak, it still grants two amazing benefits straight from the start. Firstly, I can perceive the Fire Law,' Vaan mused.

The Fire Law was ever-present and all-encompassing. It was one of the universal laws governing the world.

To control the Fire Law was equivalent to possessing a near-infinite source of power to manipulate fire.

It was definitely a god-like ability.

'Secondly, my current level of authority grants some immunity to fire damage. It's not much, but some fire immunity is still fire immunity,' Vaan thought.

Fire immunity was on a whole different level from fire resistance.

After all, fire resistance was only the ability to resist burn damage. On the other hand, fire immunity is the ability to negate burn damage completely.

The two were not the same.

If Vaan could raise his fire immunity to completion, he would not be harmed even if he was struck by the fire attack of a higher-level being.

[Congratulations. You have raised your Fire Spirit Body to the middle rank and even awakened the divine authority of fire.]

[It is rare to see someone awaken the divine authority of fire upon acquiring the Mid-rank Fire Spirit Body. That usually doesn't happen until you raise your Fire Spirit Body to the king rank.]

[This Lord is very impressed. It seems it's only a matter of time before you reach the last stage in the Trial by Fire.]

The Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit actively spoke to Vaan, feeling much more approachable despite being aloof previously.

'It seems my talent and potential have finally caught the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit's attention and interest. I was beginning to think the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit was indifferent to everyone,' Vaan mused with a smile.

"Did I clear the second stage, Lord Fire Spirit?" Vaan casually asked.

[Cleared, cleared perfectly again, of course. I suppose you are also saving your quotas again. Still, I can't give you the stage rewards until you enter the next stage.]

"That's only fair," Vaan acknowledged with a nod.

It was clear that while the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit had shown interest in his talents and potential, the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit wouldn't break the rule for him.

There was no special treatment.

That said, the opportunity to converse with the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit could be considered a type of special treatment.

The fact that none of the dragons in the second stage reacted to Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit's voice proved that it was only meant for Vaan to hear.

Since Vaan had gained all the benefits of the second stage, he didn't stay any longer and moved towards the lava whirlpool to enter the third stage.

The second stage was filled with Rank 3 fire-attribute magical plants, but Vaan had no interest in them.

...

Swoosh!

After Vaan dived into the whirlpool and fell into the third stage, the intense heat immediately assaulted his face and lungs, warming up his body.

The scorching-hot air felt so thick and suffocating that it slowed down his rate of descent to some degree.

Vaan took the chance to study the third trial region.

It was much different from the first and second trial regions besides its higher-quality fire-attribute magical plants and blazing hot temperatures that reached an extreme level.

It wasn't hard to spot all the Peak-level Rank 4 dragons training in the third trial region.

They were all flying in the air, sticking close to the third trial's ceiling of lava. Unfortunately, the lava sea below was far too hot for them to endure.

However, Vaan didn't find that surprising at all.

After all, the third stage's lava pool was where the Peak-level Rank 5 dragon lords trained since they couldn't enter the fourth level. It would be strange if Peak-level Rank 4 dragons could endure the same heat level as them.

Even Vaan felt he should take things slow and not rush into the lava pool.

Nevertheless, while Vaan slowly descended, he noticed that Zodreg and the other Peak-level Rank 4 dragons weren't purely evading the eruption of flames and spitting lava from below.

Sometimes, they would purposely take a hit, even if they got severely burned by it. That was how they temper their body in the third stage.

That said, it was not a very effective method of tempering their bodies.

After all, they could only temper one part of their body at a time. On the other hand, the lava pool would temper their entire body if they were immersed in it.

As such, Vaan continued his descent despite the rapidly increasing temperatures as he drew closer to the lava pool at the bottom.

If the lava pool was too hot to endure, he just had to use special means to lower the difficulty, even if it was only for a short period.

Tempering the body one part at a time, like the Peak-level Rank 4 dragons, was just too tedious and inefficient.

That said, Vaan underestimated himself.

Even after he reached the lava pool and submerged himself in it, he didn't need to lower the temperature with his special means.

Although his body suffered burns in the lava pool, it was only at the same level as when he first arrived at the Land of Fire to train.



Evidently, he had his Mid-rank Fire Spirit Body and Fire Authority to thank for this achievement.

At the same time, no dragon lords were present in the third stage. Thus, Vaan enjoyed the benefits of the lava pool to himself.

[Once again, congratulations on perfectly clearing the second stage. You will receive five drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.]

[Additionally, your magical plant quota for the third stage has been raised to three.]

The Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit's voice resounded, but only Vaan heard it.

### Chapter 339: Zodreg's Dream

[Note: Exceeding your quota is still punishable by death. There is no leniency for greed.]

Vaan heard the latter part of the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit's message and understood that even with his potential to clear the Trial by Fire, he had to adhere to the rules.

Being the most diligent and talented was the prerequisite to becoming the Fire Dragon God's successor.

However, they weren't the only traits the Fire Dragon God sought in its successor.

'The Fire Dragon God doesn't want someone selfish and greedy to inherit its legacy. A selfish and greedy successor would become a tyrant and possibly bring ruin to the Red Dragon Clan rather than lead it to prosperity,' Vaan thought.

Meanwhile, another fiery phoenix spirit branched out from one of the nearby lava pillars. It flew over to deliver the ceramic bottle of blood essence to Vaan just like the first time.

Also, like the first time, other dragons witnessed the scene.

However, Zodreg and the other Peak-level Rank 4 dragons didn't entertain the thought of stealing the Fire Dragon God's blood essence from Vaan.

They didn't have such luxuries of being distracted, nor did they have the capability to reach him.

The fact that Vaan could bathe in the third trial region's lava pool implied his talents and potential were on the same level as the dragon lords, if not greater.

Although they found it hard to believe a human could advance so far in the Fire Dragon God's Trial by Fire, nothing slapped harder than the reality they saw before their eyes.

'A change is coming to the Red Dragon Clan,' Zodreg silently thought from the sky.

He believed he was the greatest genius of the Red Dragon Clan, the one with the highest chance to overcome the Trial by Fire and inherit the Fire Dragon God's legacy.

However, there was always a sky beyond the sky.

'Heh. To think I would lose to a human who hasn't even lived for half a century and in a trial designed for the Red Dragon Clan, no less. I completely concede,' Zodreg thought self-deprecatingly.

After recognizing his inferior talents and potential, Zodreg felt like a huge burden was lifted off his back. He didn't have any ill will towards the human and even felt grateful.

Because the other dragons all recognized him as the greatest genius in the clan, he always felt burdened by expectations and responsibilities.

Overcoming the Trial by Fire and becoming the Fire Dragon God's successor wasn't a dream he decided for himself but was given by others.

Now that an even greater genius had appeared, Zodreg felt liberated. He did not mind if that person was a human. He was not narrow-minded like some dragons.

No rule stated that a human could not challenge the Trial by Fire or succeed the Fire Dragon God to lead the clan.

Lord Fire Spirit would have been the first to act if it wasn't permitted.

[Zodreg, youngest son of Astarot.]

Zodreg's expression changed sharply upon hearing the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit's voice.

It was rare for the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit to commute with the trial challengers. Thus, every chance to converse with Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit was a great opportunity.

Zodreg immediately used magic to ward off the surrounding flames before humbly greeting the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit with respect.

"Lord Fire Spirit."

[Aren't you relieved, child? You don't have to work so hard anymore. You can finally start chasing your own dream soon.]

"Chase my own dream?" Zodreg muttered with a blank look.

Did he even have one?

No, he definitely had one when the clan moved from Chaos. But it was so long that he had forgotten about it already.

What was it again?

'Ah, that's right. I wanted to roam the vast sky and explore the world,' Zodreg gradually recalled his dream of exploration and adventure.

However, it wasn't a dream he could realize. After all, no dragons were permitted to leave the Thousand Fog Mountains.

No...

Lord Fire Spirit wouldn't have thoughtlessly mentioned dreams without reason. It seemed even Lord Fire Spirit acknowledged the human's talent and potential.

Zodreg quickly realized the human would become the Fire Dragon God's successor much sooner than he anticipated.

'Such envious talents...' Zodreg couldn't help but glance down at the human in the lava pool.

...

Meanwhile, Vaan wholeheartedly focused on the improvement of his body, completely oblivious and uninterested in the thoughts of others around him.

The temperature at the bottom of the third stage was incredibly terrifying, easily reaching triple the heat level of the second stage.

Vaan initially intended to save the Fire Dragon God's blood essence for the last stage.

But considering how high the fiery temperature grew with each subsequent stage, he would likely have to use the Fire Dragon God's blood essence in the fourth stage.

That said, he was starting to question the trial's difficulty.

'Even Peak-level Rank 5 dragons with affinity to fire couldn't get past the third stage. Does the trial require the challengers to become Rank 6 to get the Fire Dragon God's inheritance?' Vaan wondered.

However, it didn't make much sense.

The Fire Dragon God's inheritance might be attractive to beings below Rank 6, but the same cannot be said for Rank 6 beings and above.

Much of the appeal would be diminished due to limited use.

Nevertheless, Vaan couldn't be certain what awaited him in the fourth and fifth stages. Thus, blindly guessing didn't benefit him in any way.

He could only make the most of the third stage and prepare himself as much as possible.

While enduring the sizzling burns in the lava pool, Vaan's body naturally regenerated, undergoing a continuous cycle of destruction and creation.

Although the painful process tormented him, his suffering wasn't fruitless.

It was common knowledge that the higher one's level, the harder it was to improve. But, despite that, Vaan could sense that his body's rate of improvement was even faster than in the second stage.

Within an hour, the system's notification sounded.

Ding!

<Your body has been tempered by fire>

<You have gained five points in defense>

<You have gained ten points in strength>

<Your fire affinity has increased>

...

<Your fire affinity has reached 71%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body (Mid-rank) has improved>

...

Chapter 340: A Leap of Faith

After the first hour of tempering, the following fire affinity improvement came two hours later, then four hours, and so on.

Ding!

<Your fire affinity has reached 75%>

<Your Fire Spirit Body (Mid-rank) has improved>

...

<The purity of your Fire Dragon God Bloodline (Divine-rank) has increased>

<Your Fire Dragon Physique (Low-rank) has improved>

<Your Dragon Force has been strengthened>

...

=====

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

Effect: Passively increase your base strength by 16% (↑2%) and base defense by 8% (↑1%).

=====

Ding!

<You have tempered your body to the absolute limit in the present environment>

<The present environment will no longer affect your body>

...

It only took Vaan roughly thirty hours to reach the maximum benefits permissible by the third stage's lava pool.

The rate of improvement was vastly superior to the first and second stages.

It was no wonder that the higher-ranking dragons aimed for the latter stages and challenged their limits.

However, Vaan gradually realized the higher-ranking dragons also had other reasons for doing so.

By challenging stages appropriate for their level, they could leave the benefits of the earlier stages to their lower-ranking clan members.

The Fire Dragon God must have taken the mindset of its descendants into account when the Trial by Fire was designed.

That's why most dragons haven't been able to maximize their benefits in the Trial by Fire.

The Trial by Fire was purposely designed against them to raise the difficulty. Ultimately, it worked in Vaan's favor.

If the Fire Dragon God didn't make the Trial by Fire difficult to find the best successor, he wouldn't have gotten the chance to fight for the inheritance.

Shortly after Vaan stepped out of the lava pool, he adjusted his breathing and mental state before moving toward the entrance to the fourth stage.

It was still a lava whirlpool.

As such, the dragon lords could have entered the fourth stage if they truly wanted to. Even if they couldn't withstand the heat with their bodies, he figured they could still protect themselves with magic and catch a glimpse of the fourth stage.

—Or so he thought.

However, upon reaching the lava whirlpool, Vaan quickly discovered why the dragon lords failed to enter the fourth stage.

An overwhelming sense of death emanated from the lava whirlpool.

Just by looking at the lava whirlpool up close, Vaan felt his body screaming danger. And if he tried to shorten the distance between him and the lava whirlpool, he would hair-raising chill all over his body.

Every step closer to the lava whirlpool was like one step closer to death.

"So, this is the problem all dragon lords face," Vaan muttered while staring at the lava whirlpool up ahead.

Rather than a whirlpool of lava, a whirlpool of death seemed more fitting.

Vaan couldn't imagine how much higher the difficulty had to be for the fourth stage's entrance to emanate such a threatening sense of danger and death.

It didn't seem possible for mortals to survive the fourth stage.

However, it also didn't make sense for the Fire Dragon God to set up such an impossible trial if it was looking for a successor to succeed it.

Vaan started to question the real purpose of the Trial by Fire.

Perhaps it wasn't meant to be a trial and training ground to raise the Fire Dragon God's successor.

Maybe it was just the Fire Dragon God's resting place, and preventative measures were set up to prevent others from disturbing the Fire Dragon God's rest.



Nevertheless, Vaan quickly scratched the thought the moment it appeared.

It made even less sense.

[You still have three unused quotas. Will you not use it on this stage as well, challenger?]

The Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit's voice was suddenly heard.

"No," Vaan shook his head.

Although the third trial region was filled with Rank 4 fire-attribute magical plants, they weren't particularly useful to him.

Of course, it would be a different story for Rank 5 fire-attribute magical plants. As such, he still intended to save his quotas.

[Very well. You have passed the third stage perfectly and will receive seven drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence.]

Shortly after the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit spoke, another fiery fire phoenix delivered the bottle of blood essence to Vaan.

The situation equally baffled and surprised him.

"Wasn't I meant to receive the reward only after I entered the next stage?" Vaan asked, knowing the Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit was unbiased and strictly adhered to the rules.

[The third stage is different from the previous two stages. The rewards are handed out early due to the difficulty of the fourth stage onwards.]

"I see..." Vaan frowned with a deep look.

After accepting the bottle of blood essence, he acquired fifteen drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence in total.

However, his mind was preoccupied with the fourth stage.

He already found it strange that the fourth stage's difficulty would be so high that it would bar everyone from entering it.

Receiving his stage reward early only made this point more suspicious rather than reinforcing it.

It was like the Fire Dragon God was desperately trying to convey the message, "you can't survive the fourth stage unless you receive your third stage rewards early," as if it wasn't obvious enough.

After pondering for some time, Vaan thought of something and shook his head with self-ridiculing laughter.

"Hahaha... Well, fuck." Vaan's short laughter quickly died, replaced by a solemn expression.

"I told myself I wouldn't take any unnecessary risk and gamble with my life. However, sometimes, great things can't be achieved without a leap of faith."

"Here goes nothing." Vaan's eyes suddenly gleamed with determination and ruthlessness.

In the next moment, he threw himself into the ominous whirlpool of lava, screaming with danger like he was jumping into the jaws of death.

The threatening sense of danger and death was drastically amplified in an instant, enough to make even brave men cower.

However, Vaan was already determined to take a leap of faith into the fourth stage, even if it was a gateway to the underworld.

Thus, he did not have second thoughts and falter, especially not when a moment of hesitation could decide life and death.