

## **The Witch 601**

Chapter 601: Gravity Chamber Center

Suddenly, Vaan shook his head with a wry smile, feeling a little incredulous for being sentimental and having these weak thoughts. He had an extraordinary destiny and responsibility – something a normal person could not bear.

It should be expected that his path would be solitary; it differed from others. It was a path that only he could tread.

In the face of his destiny and pursuit of the truth, a thing like true friendship was trivial.

He didn't have it, but he didn't need it either.

He had his women, and they could also be considered his best friends. They would only help him and never betray him. They were also top-tier beauties.

Having male friends would only arouse jealousy and trouble.

Be that as it may, one could not help but lament if they learned about Vaan's thoughts and his destiny.

After all, he was someone who could lift up other people. But who could lift him up?

While Vaan had his thoughts, Jihaad was too happy thinking about their upcoming journey together to notice.

They eventually reached an enormous building that was equal to half the entire bazaar city. The Gravity Chamber Center was situated outside of Sunrock Bazaar. But because of its proximity, it was considered part of the city.

It was grand and luxurious.

It was the only place and building Vaan had seen since entering the Great Ratholos Empire that used a large amount of metal, or any metal at all, in its construction. The Gravity Chamber Center's walls were entirely made up of stainless steel.

Vaan and Jihaad walked through the front open entrance and immediately felt a drop in the temperature.

It was scorching hot under the sunlight outside but very cool inside.

Undoubtedly, the temperature was controlled for the purpose of limiting warriors' perspiration of sweat under high-intensity physical training within the Gravity Chambers. That, in turn, reduced the need for water to replenish their bodily fluids.

It went without saying that a country full of hot, dry, and desolate lands like the Great Ratholos Empire would consider water a valuable resource.

However, this consideration was also only limited to the western regions of the empire.

The eastern regions were closer to the Eastern Sea and, thus, had access to a limitless supply of water. Of course, this source of unlimited water was also supplied to the West. However, the cost of long-distance transportation would naturally create a significant price difference in the value of water.

In other words, the western regions weren't lacking in water; water was simply expensive.

Vaan wouldn't be surprised at all if the water-supplying businesses jacked up their prices to exploit the vulnerability of the western regions. After all, human greed was endless.

Vaan and Jihaad approached a female clerk after locating the front counter, which wasn't difficult to discover upon entry. Even so, they still took some time to reach it due to their appreciation and marvel at the interior designs.

Everything was neatly arranged and clean, including the various advanced magic tools installed. Each Gravity Chamber possessed a magic screen displaying its availability or unavailability. There were timers indicating the duration until each occupied Gravity Chamber would become available.

The display and dependence on advanced magic technology painted a picture of the interior design being far ahead of its time, like it came from the future. However, this illusion and thought were only created due to the primitiveness of everything else outside.

If one had been to the Freedom Federation, one would find such display and dependence on advanced magic tools to be quite normal.

"How can I help you today, Sir?" the pretty female Dunean clerk politely inquired.

After Vaan asked to reserve two Rank 1 Gravity Chambers for an hour each, he and Jihaad paid ten mid-rank mana stones each before being guided to their designated Gravity Chambers.

'Holy son of a...!'

Jihaad had sucked in a mouthful of cool air when he found out the standard price for using the Gravity Chambers.

It wasn't just expensive; it was extremely expensive!

Lady Latifa from Madam Morning Dew wasn't kidding when she previously told them the Gravity Chambers were costly to use. Even some physique-enhancing potions could be cheaper and more effective than the Gravity Chambers.

Jihaad couldn't even imagine how much it would cost him to reserve a Rank 2 Gravity Chamber or even a Rank 3 Gravity Chamber in other cities.

However, there was one matter he understood clearly – Gravity Chambers weren't meant for the poor!

That being the case, Vaan and Jihaad noticed more than half the hundred Rank 1 Gravity Chambers in the Gravity Chamber Center being occupied. Some warriors even reserved them for three days straight!

Jihaad found this baffling, but Vaan didn't.

Why would warriors still burn their money on Gravity Chambers if some potions and medicines in the empire were more effective and cheaper at improving their strength?

That was because the Gravity Chamber had one advantage that most available medicine and potions on the market couldn't compare to – the consolidation of the internal organs!

Consolidating the internal organs was the most difficult step in body refining. It was the Achilles's heels of Body Refiners. After all, no matter how powerful a Body Refiner's outer strength and defense were, they could still die from shock if they neglected to consolidate their internal organs.

An Aura User could still protect their internal organs with aura, but not a Body Refiner!

Body Refiners specialize in refining the body. If their bodies had mortal weaknesses, then they were not true Body Refiners!

The importance of consolidating the internal organs could not be stressed enough.

Nevertheless, the true value of consolidated internal organs could only be realized and tested when warriors challenge the Heavenly Steps and Eastern Sea. Those were the places where warriors experienced the most deaths due to negligence and overestimation of their capabilities.

After all, without well-consolidated internal organs, they would be crushed under the high water pressure of the ocean depths.

"What the f\*ck? This is a scam!"

Not long after Vaan and Jihaad entered their respective Gravity Chambers, Vaan suddenly heard Jihaad's surprise and angry cuss resounding throughout the Gravity Chamber Center.

The ten mid-rank mana stones only covered the cost of reserving the Gravity Chambers for an hour. The Gravity Chambers still required mana stone investments to power up and activate their functions.

Chapter 602: Lord Chaska

In the Great Ratholos Empire, every city and region had a governing lord. Sunrock Bazaar was no exception to this rule.

However, Sunrock Bazaar wasn't governed by just any lord. The one assigned to govern Sunrock Bazaar was a close relative of the great emperor – Chaska Armstrong. He was the third son of Emperor Varan's younger sister, Niabi Armstrong.

If the locals were asked where the lord's residence was, there wouldn't be a single person who didn't know.

That was because Chaska's residence could be easily found on the far east side of the market city, where only the tallest rock pillars were located. In fact, it used seven of the tallest rock pillars in the area for its foundation.

As a result, it also possessed a good overview of Sunrock Bazaar.

Although Chaska's residence looked like a giant treehouse or a wooden ship stranded on steep cliffs and lacked strong defenses, there wasn't anyone bold or vengeful enough to attack it.

After all, it was the lord's residence.

Moreover, Chaska was a kind lord who cared for his people. He had used money out of his own coffers for disaster relief to ease the people's suffering during famine and drought seasons on multiple occasions.

Naturally, this repeated selfless action severely depleted his wealth. However, in return, Chaska quickly earned the love of his people during the short time he was appointed as their lord.

Even if people bypass the residence's weak defense and security and sneak inside, there wouldn't be much for them to steal. On the other hand, if their actions were known, they would easily enrage the people.

However, the thieves would long be dead before the people could even act.

Chaska was kind because people had yet to see his brutal side. No matter what, he was still a lord and the great emperor's nephew. His strength would not be weak, given his background.

At that moment, Lord Chaska was signing off some paperwork with an ink feather pen on the open deck while two female assistants quietly stood guard behind him.

The open deck was his office. The sky was his ceiling, and the afternoon warm breezes were his walls. The stacks of documents on his desk were all pressed down by stone slabs, which prevented them from flying away with the wind.

Such a spot for an office had its inconveniences, and Chaska's two assistants had suggested moving his office indoors on multiple occasions.

However, they were immediately silenced after listening to their lord's response on the matter.

'How could the dull mood of a confined room be compared to the wonderful atmosphere of an open space between heaven and earth?! Inside, I only see numbers and words on a piece of paper. But out here, I see living people and a forward-moving world!'

'The beauty and veracity of life must be seen with one's eyes, not blinded by one's imagination! How can my mind's sword remain sharp if I don't hone it in the fires of life but dull it in the solitary of confined space instead?'

'As a lord, how can I see my people as mere inanimate words on a piece of paper and dictate their lives so? As a warrior, how can my raging desire for self-improvement be shackled by stillness and silence?'

The grandeur in the lord's speech awed them into silence. But at the same time, they simply did not know how to reply to such statements.

They only understood that while the lord was eccentric, he truly cared for the people.

Suddenly, a blue-glowing paper crane flew over from a distance and landed on Chaska's desk before losing its luster and becoming inanimate. Chaska calmly picked it up without a hint of surprise and unfolded the origami.

At the same time, the two female assistants behind him subconsciously craned their necks forward to peek out of curiosity. It was a habit that their lord had long permitted.

There was only one place in Sunrock Bazaar that delivered messages with magic paper cranes. It was the hidden intelligence network operating behind Madam Morning Dew.

The messages delivered by Madam Morning Dew weren't necessarily confidential secrets. They could also be general news or unpopular rumors circulating in the city. In essence, any piece of interesting or suspicious information remaining was handed over to the lord after being filtered.

Even as Sunrock Bazaar's lord, Chaska couldn't demand every piece of information Madam Morning Dew had collected. The person backing it was a behemoth – someone too great that he couldn't afford to offend.

Neither his status as the emperor's nephew nor his strength as a Mid-level Rank 4 Body Refiner meant anything in front of that person.

"Hm?" Chaska immediately frowned upon reading the first line in the letter.

The content was about a person of interest called Vanderlin Pendragon, who supposedly won over twenty duels and remained undefeated since his entry. His cultivation was suspected to be around Peak-level Rank 3 Body Refiner, but battle power was Low-level Rank 4 or higher.

As for his aura cultivation, it was unconfirmed due to the current lack of information.

"Pendragon, huh? What a good... Pendragon!" Chaska uttered, gritting his teeth with a gloomy look. The two female assistants were astonished.

They had also finished reading the content, but they never expected their calm lord to have such a strong reaction.

Although they thought it was a little ridiculous that someone with a measly cultivation Rank 4 would carry the family name, Pendragon, that was the extent of it. They simply thought the person was unworthy of such a name. Nothing more, nothing less.

However, it seemed their lord was greatly offended by it, and they couldn't understand why. In fact, even the people working at Madam Morning Dew had no idea Lord Chaska would react so strongly to the information.

"Pen...dragon... Pen...dragon... Pendragon...!" Chaska continued gnashing his teeth as his grip tightened, deforming the letter.

The name didn't mean much to a normal person, but it was a different story for a member of the Blessed Golden Dragon Tribe's five ancient families.

Who dares to call himself a Pendragon before the Armstrong royal family?! Who the hell was this brazen and ignorant person? Does he even know the implication behind such a name?

Pen...dragon... Five dragons... Pendragon... King... Pendragon... King of five dragons... King of the Blessed Golden Dragon Tribe's five ancient families...!

Such insolence!

"I want to see who dares call himself a Pendragon in front of me!" Chaska slammed the table and sprung to his feet.

Chapter 603: Arranging Trouble

The two female assistants were shocked by Lord Chaska's violent outburst. It was the first time they had seen him so furious, let alone violent. They immediately felt the benevolent reputation he had built would be ruined if they let him be.

"My Lord, I don't know how that name offended you so, but you must not let anger consume you!"

"That's right, my Lord! Don't ruin your good image for a single nobody! At the very least, assign other warriors to teach that person a lesson for you! There's no need to dirty your own hands, my Lord!"

The two female assistants held Chaska's arms and pleaded with concern while fighting back their trembling fear.

They were afraid Chaska would vent his anger on them for stopping him. Even so, they couldn't watch their lord do something he might regret later. Given his great strength, he might end up beating the person to death!

Chaska was startled by his lovely assistants' strong insistence before he forcefully suppressed his agitated emotions, calming down.



"You're both right. I wasn't clear-headed just now. Sorry for scaring you two," Chaska apologized to his two assistants before reflecting on the matter.

It was something that required evaluation in greater depth.

'The Blessed Golden Dragon Tribe only has five ancient families that have survived to the present era...'

'Unless the family head of a previous generation in the other ancient families broke the tradition and educated all of their descendants on the forgotten history like our Armstrong family, there shouldn't be many people who know about the Blessed Golden Dragon Tribe's five ancient families...'

'This Vanderlin Pendragon might not be a descendant of the five ancient families and, therefore, might not know what Pendragon means to the five ancient families... In that case, he would just be an ignorant fool.'

'But if he is not using a fake name, that would also mean a Pendragon family exists. That is unacceptable,' Chaska frowned in thought.

Only the supreme chief of the Blessed Golden Dragon Tribe, who would lead the five ancient families, deserved the name 'Pendragon.' As such, no other Pendragon family was allowed to exist if they had meager power. It would diminish the prestige of the true Pendragon.

'However... this Vanderlin is said to look somewhere in his early 20s yet already possess such a solid cultivation. A normal household wouldn't be able to produce such a talent. Therefore, this person's background shouldn't be ordinary. And what could be a greater background than the five ancient families?'

'In that case, there's a higher chance he is someone from one of the other four ancient families. Did they send him over to provoke or challenge our Armstrong family? Am I overthinking and complicating a simple matter? But... if it's true, do they think he has the qualifications to lead the five ancient families? With his talent and strength? Shouldn't be...'

'Don't tell me this lad awakened the ancient bloodline?!' Chaska suddenly wondered with strong agitation, unable to remain calm.

But after a moment, he quickly realized how ridiculous his thought was.

It had been such a long time since someone from the five ancient families could awaken the legendary Golden Dragon Bloodline. In fact, it had been so long that it was regarded as a myth in the present era.

Furthermore, if someone had awakened the Golden Dragon Bloodline in one of the five ancient families, no one in their right mind would send them to the territory of another ancient family alone, especially when there had not been any contact between the five ancient families in many years.

Time had made their five ancient families distant.

Who knew if any of the five ancient families were still willing to honor their agreement before the tribe's dissolution?

After all, the current head of the Armstrong family, Varan Armstrong, was the emperor of the Great Ratholos Empire. He ruled over vast lands and stood above millions of lives.

How could he and the Armstrong family behind him easily bow their heads to someone else?

Nevertheless, after Chaska thought that far, he was confident Vanderlin wasn't someone who had awakened the Golden Dragon Bloodline. Even so, he still couldn't tell if the person was at least a member sent by one of the other ancient families.

'I have to ascertain his identity, but I don't have the resources nor the spare manpower to do so discreetly,' Chaska frowned.

After pondering for a moment, he immediately sat back down and wrote two new letters. Once he finished, he folded them in half and sealed them in envelopes before handing them to his assistants.

"Send this to the manager at Madam Morning Dew, Fatina. As for this one, hand it to Sir Deiahmar, Aliyah," Chaska instructed his two assistants.

"Yes, my Lord."

Fatina obeyed the lord's instruction without hesitation. On the other hand, Aliyah glanced at the name addressed on the letter handed to her before she became startled.

Although she didn't get to read the content of the letter, she knew it was definitely related to the person called 'Vanderlin Pendragon.' The name made the lord so furious and violent. It would be strange if it weren't related to that person.

"Do you really have to trouble the duke for this matter, my Lord?" Aliyah asked with surprise.

The letter was precisely addressed to Duke Zaahid, Chaska's fourth uncle and one of the emperor's younger brothers.

Although Aliyah couldn't understand her lord would make a big deal out of nothing, she could faintly guess her lord's intention.

After all, Duke Zaahid ruled a vast stretch of land northeast of Sunrock Bazaar. If the person of interest had any intention of visiting the Martial Hall and Heavenly Steps, they would definitely travel through Duke Zaahid's territory.

Nevertheless, facing Aliyah's question, Chaska calmly linked his hands behind his back and glanced into the distant land.

"There's a high chance Vanderlin is using a fake family name to draw attention," Chaska stated.

"Although I don't know his background, I can feel his ambition to become a prominent figure in our empire after overcoming various challenges. In other words, since he is looking for trouble, it wouldn't be right if I didn't ask Royal Fourth Uncle to send trouble his way and test."

"Perhaps we can learn his origins after forcing him to use some unique martial arts," Chaska added as his gaze sharpened.

"I... I understand, my Lord," Aliyah lowered her head in compliance and did not question her lord any further.

Meanwhile, Vaan and Jihaad continued to explore and study the various benefits their Gravity Chambers had to offer, unaware of the events that transpired at the local lord's residence.

## Chapter 604: Startling Discovery

Sunrock Bazaar, Gravity Chamber Center

"Thirty mid-rank mana stones...!" Jihaad gritted his teeth with red eyes as he performed high-intensity physical exercises under twofold gravity. He felt extremely indignant with the cost but didn't dare idle inside his Gravity Chamber.

It had actually cost him an extra twenty mid-rank mana stones to power the Rank 1 Gravity Chamber for an hour...!

He thought he had brought quite a fair bit of wealth, but he didn't expect an alarming portion to disappear on a mere Rank 1 Gravity Chamber. That said, he had no choice but to admit that even a mere Rank 1 Gravity Chamber was surprisingly effective for his training.

Only fifteen minutes had passed since the start of his training, but his whole body was drenched in sweat. There wasn't a spot within his body that didn't burn like it was on fire. He felt encumbered with heat and exhaustion.

Normally, he would only reach such a state of exhaustion after performing his clan's high-rank physical exercise for a whole hour. However, the reality was that he had achieved it in fifteen minutes under the effect of the Gravity Chamber.

The twofold gravitational pressure didn't merely improve his training efficiency twofold but actually fourfold!

He had saved three-quarters of an hour in training!

Nevertheless, reaching the state of extreme exhaustion was only the real starting point of body refining. Only by pushing the body to the limit would one have hopes of surpassing their physical limitations and improving.

Jihaad didn't expect much from a Rank 1 Gravity Chamber at his level of cultivation. However, the truth surprised him. When he pondered why that was the case, he realized it was due to his internal organs!

They weren't used to the pressure. Thus, the burden on them was the greatest! The sense of exhaustion came from them! Not his limbs!

The actual feeling was hard to describe.

The exhaustion of his internal organs felt different from the exhaustion in his muscles. It was like his heart itself was doing situps nonstop; even if it felt extremely tired, it couldn't stop pumping in overdrive.

Such a situation actually gave Jihaad a sense of trepidation and fear. He felt like his heart would burst if he pushed himself too hard.

Nevertheless, Jihaad himself was addicted to this sense of danger. It was exciting and thrilling.

Even though his physical strength wasn't improving, his internal organs were consolidating, becoming sturdier and more resilient. The benefits of consolidating one's internal organs were more than just enhancing endurance.

After half an hour of training, Jihaad felt his aura becoming smoother and easier to control. Consolidating internal organs made it easier to compress his aura. As such, it also allowed him to produce strong aura-powered attacks faster.

Just by having better consolidated internal organs, Jihaad felt like he was stronger than aura users of the same level.

More importantly, the bottleneck preventing him from becoming an Aura Grandmaster also seemed to be loosening.

'The quality of one's internal organs determines one's achievements in aura cultivation!' Jihaad seemed to have comprehended something great as his eyes lit up brightly.

Nevertheless, his arms and feet never stopped moving as he threw out unnatural punches and kicks. But despite the unnatural movements, there was also a sense of smooth, natural flow in them.

It was quite puzzling and contradictory to a normal person, but there was also beauty in it.

A regular person wouldn't understand.

...

As Jihaad wholeheartedly trained, making full use of his time in the Gravity Chamber, Vaan's situation was the complete opposite.

Vaan was physically idle as he studied how the magic circuits and arrays hidden in the center panel generated omnidirectional gravitational pressure. At his level, the twofold gravitational pressure had absolutely no effect on his body, not even his internal organs.

His entire body was firm and seemingly indestructible. It would never bend to such meager gravitational pressure.

As such, Vaan would rather use his time to acquire new knowledge. The Great Ratholos Empire's Gravity Chambers would surely benefit him if he wanted to raise his own army of Body Refiners.

Nevertheless, Vaan realized the magic circuits and arrays in the Gravity Chambers didn't work together to produce their own gravitational pressure. The core of the Gravity Chamber's gravitational pressure came from a piece of star iron.

However, it wasn't just any regular star iron either; it was star iron from the Black Mountain.

Such star iron must have originated from an especially powerful star in the vast sea of stars. As such, its quality was incomparable to the star iron commonly found in Pangea.

'These circuits and arrays don't produce gravitational pressure; they only amplify the gravitational pressure that already exists within the star iron,' Vaan understood.

Although the truth was a little disappointing, the knowledge was useful nonetheless.

More importantly, Vaan made a startling discovery when he powered the Gravity Chamber with twenty mid-rank mana stones.

The Gravity Chamber was just one of many Gravity Chambers in Sunrock Bazaar. There were far more throughout the Great Ratholos Empire. Furthermore, the Gravity Chambers in other regions of the empire were of higher quality as well.

In other words, the demand for mana stones would be astronomical.

If other Gravity Chamber Centers in the empire were also as busy as Sunrock Bazaar's, the daily consumption of mana stones would be unimaginable.

However, the witch kingdoms occupied the best lands and monopolized the abundance of mana spilling out from Gehenna. Even if the Great Ratholos Empire received a great import of mana stones from other countries, how could it possibly keep up with the daily demand?

Mana stones were used for many things, not just Gravity Chambers.

The total consumption of mana stones in the Great Ratholos Empire should have plunged it into a severe mana stone shortage long ago.

However, there was news regarding such a matter.

So what did this imply?

It implied that there was still a steady circulation of mana stones in the Great Ratholos Empire. It was not short on mana stones. Based on that fact alone, the Great Ratholos Empire was by far wealthier than the Holy Knight Empire.

Where and how did the Great Ratholos Empire acquire all these mana stones to keep up with its consumption?

Chapter 605: Thundering Highlands

'The Eastern Sea...' Vaan mused with growing interest.

All answers pointed to the Eastern Sea. It was an entirely new frontier waiting to be explored by him. The Eastern Sea was full of secrets, unknown dangers, and opportunities.

Vaan had only been to a small part of the Great Ratholos Empire but had already caught a glimpse of its immense wealth. And with such enormous wealth, its development and strength wouldn't be weak at all.

He wouldn't be surprised if the Great Ratholos Empire's military completely eclipsed that of the Holy Knight Empire.

It was no wonder the Great Ratholos Empire was never interested in conquering other countries. With an endless frontier to explore, like the Eastern Sea, which reaped immense wealth, the benefits of subjugating other nations weren't even worth mentioning.

The Great Ratholos Empire was completely focused on internal stability and development. That was why it never invaded another country, nor could it be invaded.

However, this wasn't a permanent status.

If the Great Ratholos Empire didn't suffer any major regression and continued its stable development for the years to come, it would eventually reach a point where it would be forced to expand its territory.

Otherwise, its development would stagnate.

However, such a situation was far in the distant future when it faced the problem of overpopulation. That said, given the threat posed by Gehenna, it may never reach such a future.

...

Sometime later, the allotted time expired before Vaan exited the Gravity Chamber in a calm, casual demeanor, completely absent of any signs that would suggest he had undergone strenuous training.

On the other hand, Jihaad came out looking dead as a doornail and sweating like a pig under the summer heat. His movements were slow, sluggish, and burdensome. But although he seemed drained of energy and his mental strength was depleted, the glimmer in his eyes remained spirited and unyielding.

"It seems you have benefited much from training inside the Gravity Chamber."



"Definitely! But... alas, this kind of special training is too expensive!" Jihaad glanced back at his Gravity Chamber and sighed, feeling slightly depressed.

He didn't expect to experience what it was like to be a poor man. Although he could continue to train in the Gravity Chamber for a few more hours, he also didn't want to be left behind by Vaan. Thus, even though he was reluctant, he had to leave.

He understood it was better to save his remaining mana stones for the trip to the capital. It wouldn't be too late to train in the Gravity Chambers again once he earned more mana stones.

While Jihaad's head hung down to catch his breath, he suddenly noticed Vaan's shadow moving away. He immediately realized Vaan was already leaving without any notice.

"Thank you for your patronage, Sir. Please visit us again," the female Dunean clerk said as Vaan passed the front counter to leave the Gravity Chamber Center. He didn't look back as he did.

"H-Hey, wait...! Wait for me, Sir Pendragon!" Jihaad cried.

Unfortunately, despite having heard Jihaad's request, Vaan didn't pause his steps. He kept walking until he left the building and was gone from sight. He didn't need to delay his journey because of Jihaad.

Given Jihaad's cultivation, he could catch up after some rest—as long as Vaan didn't suddenly decide to travel at high speed and leave him in the dust.

Jihaad could only chuckle bitterly after seeing Vaan's disappearing back. After shaking his head, he quickly uncorked a green-colored potion and emptied it down his throat.

It was just a normal stamina-replenishing potion commonly sold in the market back in his hometown. It had the benefit of speeding up his recovery. Even so, it would still take time for a full recovery of his stamina.

Unfortunately, he couldn't wait until then as he feared losing Vaan's trail. As such, he had no choice but to drag his tired body out and force himself to catch up.

Seeing that, Jihaad had no choice but to drag his body and force himself to catch up.

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Since Sunrock Bazaar didn't have much value after Vaan experienced the Gravity Chambers, he decisively left the city for the next after buying a general map for a single low-rank mana stone. The general store owner had thanked him graciously for his generosity.

Although Vaan already had some maps of the Great Ratholos Empire in his memory bank, he still wanted to compare the maps and verify his knowledge. After all, the information acquired from books wasn't necessarily always the truth.

Blind faith could have regrettable and unbearable consequences.

Nevertheless, Vaan found out there weren't any discrepancies in the information. Thus, his effort and mana stone had been wasted. Even so, it was always better to be safe than sorry.

The Great Ratholos Empire was unlike any other country. It did not put any effort into conquering its Perilous Lands for human habitation. As such, all kinds of beasts and plants were growing in such regions.

Unless one were behind the walls of a human settlement, there would always be dangers lurking about in the lands of the Great Ratholos Empire.

A strong nation of warriors could not be built if warriors lacked trials – this was the idea behind the founding emperor of the Great Ratholos Empire.

Although Vaan didn't believe there was anything in the Great Ratholos Emperor that could pose a threat to him, he didn't want to grow complacent due to his great strength. Such complacency could become habitual, and such habits were poisonous, whether it was to his survival or growth.

How could a man aspiring for the sky wallow in the comfort of the earth?

As such, Vaan wanted to avoid relying on his strength to cross the Perilous Lands as much as possible and only use his wits. For that reason, he was also traveling somewhat slowly.

Since he was on a training journey, how could he skip any challenges along the way?

Although the possibility wasn't high, he still had a chance of stumbling across some rare plants or materials he might find useful.

...

After traveling twenty-five kilometers northeast of Sunrock Bazaar with Jihaad lagging a short distance behind him, Vaan entered the Thundering Highlands, home to the Steel-Beaked Eagles.

Chapter 606: Mercy

Steel-Beaked Eagles...

These grey-winged creatures with metallic features weren't considered powerful beasts in Pangea but weren't too weak either. The majority of them could only reach Rank 2 upon adulthood. Only a few exceptions make it to Rank 3 in their lifetimes.

Such a level of strength posed no threat to Vaan.

Even Jihaad could safely cross their territory as long as he didn't go out of his way to provoke their entire group. As for the regular warriors, they had to execute much more caution when crossing the Thundering Highlands; they had to make use of the rock pillars as covers to stay out of sight.

After all, they were not necessarily strong enough to ensure a swift kill once a Steel-Beaked Eagle spotted them.

If they couldn't kill a Steel-Beaked Eagle before it summoned its kin, they could only await death.

The Steel-Beaked Eagles usually hunted alone, but they would always call out for their kin once they felt threatened. Because of their rallying power, the Steel-Beaked Eagles were considered quite a big threat to those below Rank 3 Body Refiner.

Nevertheless, the rallying power of their cries wasn't the most threatening aspect of Steel-Beaked Eagles.

The most threatening aspect was their ability to store lightning in their bodies. They could paralyze their prey with electrical discharges. In a battle of life and death, even a split-second immobility could prove fatal.

As such, Rank 2 Body Refiners and below were quite wary of Steel-Beaked Eagles.

It was also believed that the frequent lightning storms above Thundering Highlands were all caused by the Steel-Beaked Eagles.

Their main diet consisted of giant sandworms, most plants native to the land... and occasionally humans.

...

As Vaan passed through the Thundering Highlands with Jihaad in tow, he occasionally stopped to harvest valuable plants and minerals such as Lightning Grass, Thunder Root, and Shock Crystals.

Although Vaan deemed them valuable due to their variety of uses, these items appeared quite common in the Thundering Highlands.

Nevertheless, each time Vaan stopped to harvest them, Jihaad was given a chance to catch his breath. Furthermore, Vaan had also been delayed by a number of challengers who had followed him outside of Sunrock Bazaar.

On the other hand, despite traveling more than thirty kilometers from Sunrock Bazaar, Jihaad had not fully recovered from his exhaustion.

Even Jihaad himself found it surprising. Normal travels would not exhaust a Body Refiner. Thus, in most cases, three hours should have been more than enough time to recover from his sense of exhaustion.

However, it had become clear to Jihaad that he had underestimated the stress he had put on his internal organs during training under gravitational pressure.

Even at that moment, his heart was still pounding loudly inside his chest.

Kewee! Kewee! Kewee!

Following the high-pitched cries of a Steel-Beaked Eagle, Jihaad's tired expression abruptly turned serious with wariness as he looked to the skies. A Steel-Beaked Eagle was swooping down towards them from a high altitude.

They had been discovered by a Steel-Beaked Eagle!

Fortunately, there was only one!

Jihaad became vigilant as he prepared for battle. However, he soon relaxed after realizing he wasn't the Steel-Beaked Eagle's target.

Someone as strong as Sir Pendragon would have no trouble dealing with a Steel-Beaked Eagle.

Kewee! Kuwee—?!

The Steel-Beaked Eagle's sharp and mighty steel talons descended on Vaan—only for the latter to grab. Following a powerful yank, the Steel-Beaked Eagle pulled from the air and slammed into the ground.

Boom!

A small crater was formed under the strong impact, knocking out the Steel-Beaked Eagle. It was incapacitated with a single blow.

The corners of Jihaad's lips twitched at the sight.

The Steel-Beaked Eagle's main body alone was easily five times his body mass. Only adult Steel-Beaked Eagles were that big. Furthermore, its body was riddled with an alarming number of scars. That showed it had quite a long history.

Based on these observations, Jihaad estimated the Steel-Beaked Eagle's strength was around Peak-level Rank 2. And yet, it was dealt with so casually by Vaan.

Jihaad knew he was strong, but the result still surprised him.

"You're not going to kill it, Sir Pendragon?" Jihaad asked with surprise after seeing Vaan ignore the incapacitated Steel-Beaked Eagle, leaving it behind.

"In the Great Ratholos Empire, it is a crime to kill beasts in the wilderness if we aren't going to eat its meat and sell its body parts. We've only just started crossing the Thundering Highlands and still have a long way to go before reaching the next city. It's inconvenient to carry such a large body around," Vaan replied nonchalantly.

"I see... That's true," Jihaad casually agreed with Vaan's reason before suddenly pausing in thought.

He had already seen Vaan stowing away many plants and minerals in his leather backpack. It was impossible for so many items to fit in there unless it was an interspatial storage tool.

As such, Vaan's reasoning was just a random excuse.

In truth, Jihaad had guessed correctly.

Vaan noticed the Steel-Beaked Eagle had far too many scars and recognized its life hadn't been easy. As such, he had arbitrarily decided to spare it out of the goodness of his heart.

Nevertheless, Jihaad decided to drop the matter despite his doubts.

The skies slowly darkened as Vaan and Jihaad made it halfway through the Thundering Highlands. During this 120-kilometer trek, Vaan had looted a surprising amount of plants and minerals. His slow journey could be considered fruitful.

Based on the traces left by pressing travelers, Vaan knew many people had used the same path. And yet, so many valuable plants and minerals were ignored. He was quite speechless by this discovery.

Some people just don't know a treasure when they see one. But as the saying always went – one man's trash was another man's treasure.

When Vaan thought of this popular phrase, he didn't know whether to feel happy or terrible.

Rumble...!

Jihaad's stomach suddenly grumbled like the angry roar of a grizzly bear, prompting Vaan to glance back with a look of wonder.

It was the first time he had seen such a loud stomach rumble.

"Haha... It must be a result of the training back at the Gravity Chamber Center..." Jihaad guessed with a wry laugh, feeling slightly embarrassed by the sudden attention.

Chapter 607: A Heaven-Defying Pill

Beyond the Thundering Highlands, a stretch of flat land could be found from the east, reaching to the north.

In the past, this stretch of flat land used to be filled with rocky hills. However, it had been leveled for human settlements and agriculture. In fact, this stretch of flat land possessed the largest farmland in the western region.

And it all belonged to one person – Zaahid Armstrong.

Zaahid Armstrong was the Duke of Dragonmoor and the current reigning emperor's third younger brother. He was also one of the few legendary figures in the empire to have transcended human limits and reached Rank 5 Body Refiner.

In honor of his achievement, he was bestowed the name 'Dragonchild' by the previous emperor. As such, he was mostly known as Zaahid Dragonchild or Duke Dragonchild.

At that moment, Zaahid was watching the farmlands, which lay beyond the city of stone, from the balcony of his castle on the fifth floor with a proud look. It was his habit to do so during this specific time of the day.

Only when the sun was setting could he see the splendor and beauty of his life's achievements – the farmlands.

The land used to be barren; there was nothing more than rocks and sand as far as the eye could see. Naturally, it wasn't a place fit for humans to live. It was he who, with the help of his people's blood, sweat, and tears, transformed it into a land of vegetation and life suitable for human habitation.

It might have taken half his life to achieve, but it was still his proudest work.

"Hm?"

Zaahid furrowed his brows upon discovering a shadowy figure in the distant sky, approaching from the direction of Sunrock Bazaar. As it drew closer, he recognized it to be a Wyvern Rider.

'A Wyvern Rider from Sunrock Bazaar? I wonder if my nephew is asking me for food supplies again...' Zaahid muttered to himself.

Nevertheless, despite recognizing the Wyvern Rider coming from Sunrock Bazaar, he did not prepare to receive the guest. Instead, he continued to enjoy his view freely and calmly without concern.

"My Lord, Lord Chaska sent Sir Deiahmar to deliver a letter addressed to you," a female servant shortly informed. She held a wooden tray and extended it forward with her head lowered.

Zaahid picked up the single letter from the wooden tray without much thought and read it. But as he read it, he raised an eyebrow with a more serious look. By the end of the letter, his expression was surprisingly calm.

Zaahid did not react the same way as his nephew Chaska. In truth, there was a moment when he did reveal some anger in his eyes while reading.

However, it was quickly replaced by calmness and interest the further he read.

After some thought, Zaahid ordered his servant to go and summon one of his best guards – Bakram, a Mid-level Rank 4 Body Refiner, to his study room.

"You called for me, my Lord?" asked a sturdy Dunean Warrior in black leather armor after entering the study room with heavy steps.



Zaahid didn't say anything and simply handed his nephew's letter to him. Although Bakram was taken aback, he quickly understood his lord's intention and accepted the letter.

"This..."

After reading the letter, Bakram frowned. He felt uncomfortable— but for a different reason from Chaska and Zaahid.

'How bold of this person to claim the name 'Pendragon' for himself... What qualifications does he have to own such a name? If anyone deserves to be called Pendragon, it should be my lord!' Bakram thought.

"Since you have finished reading, I want you to find this person and test him, Bakram. It would be best if you could force him to reveal his full strength," Zaahir instructed as he opened a drawer to fetch an item.

"If the person refuses a normal challenge, you may use this as a wager for a Blood Exchange. The value of this item should provide enough temptation." Zaahir casually handed a fist-sized sandalwood box to Bakram.

"T-This...!" Bakram's eyes bulged in shock the moment he peaked inside the sandalwood box. His hands couldn't help but tremble nervously as if they were suddenly holding a large chest of high-rank mana stones.

"Are you sure you want me to use such a valuable item just to test some random young warrior, my Lord?" Bakram asked carefully

"Why? Are you not confident in winning?" Zaahir grinned with amusement.

Bakram kept his mouth shut instantly. His eyes suddenly glazed with determination before he swore to carry out his lord's task.

The sandalwood box only contained a single pill. However, it was also precisely this pill that was worth thousands of high-rank mana stones. It had a high demand but no stable supply. It wasn't something one could buy with wealth alone.

It was a Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill.

The Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill could easily elevate the strength of a Rank 4 Body Refiner by a minor stage. If a normal Rank 3 Body Refiner took it, their strength would be promoted to the peak of Rank 3 Body Refiner or possibly breakthrough to Rank 4 Body Refiner.

But at the same time, if a normal Rank 3 Body Refiner with weak foundations ingested such a heaven-defying pill, the violent potency could easily kill them.

Nevertheless, such dangers didn't make the pill any less desirable.

Bakram couldn't help but feel envious as he left the study room with the pill box. He wondered why his lord would take out such a precious pill for some unknown warrior.

...

After Bakram left, Zaahir returned to his balcony and peered into the distant dark clouds in the sky with a thoughtful look.

A Rank 4 Body Refiner who was only in his twenties was a talent that couldn't be found even if one searched the entire empire.

'I wonder if this child will be the impending storm that will change this nation like the Black Rose Kingdom and Holy Knight Empire... Will he bring good fortunes or a great disaster? I hope he doesn't disappoint me...'  
Zaahir mused.

Chapter 608: Jihaad's Cries

Thundering Highlands, central region

The explosive stomach rumble that came with the setting sun was something Jihaad had not anticipated. The sense of extreme hunger came without warning. It was like his internal organs suddenly drained all his energy reserve.

But rather than thinking of food, Jihaad thought about training. It was easier to improve his strength if he practiced physical exercises in such a state.

However, there was also a catch.

He couldn't train in such a state for longer than two hours. If he failed to replenish his body with food within that time, his efforts would have a detrimental effect on his body instead. At least, that was what he had been taught.

Jihaad glanced up at the skies, hoping to catch the sight of a Steel-Beaked Eagle, which could potentially become his next meal. Even if he wanted to train, he had to secure his food source first.

Naturally, he had brought along rations and water for the trip. However, he was confident they wouldn't be enough to satisfy his terrible hunger.

Rumble...!

Jihaad's stomach grumbled again, and with it came a stronger sense of hunger. Jihaad felt lethargic as strength left his body. His steps became slower and more sluggish, causing him to lag further and further behind Vaan.

Jihaad thought he was knowledgeable in body refining, but it was the first time he had encountered such a situation. It appeared he had greatly underestimated his hunger level.

'Is this a side effect of intense training under gravitational pressure?'

When Jihaad had that thought, he suddenly recalled the Gravity Chamber Center's manual did mention it was recommended to have a big meal one to two hours after using their Gravity Chambers.

After finding out the hard way as to why it was recommended, Jihaad could only blame himself for forgetting.

Whoosh—!

As Jihaad searched the vast skies for his meal, a large shadow shot through his field of vision. The large shadow was only gliding low over the rock pillars and small hills, but its speed was still incredible.

Jihaad almost wanted to chase after it and hunt it down—until he quickly realized it was an adult wyvern. Furthermore, it was equipped with a harness!

Although he failed to see if someone was riding the wyvern, a wyvern equipped with a harness couldn't possibly be a wild one!

All Wyvern Riders were considered elites in the Great Ratholos Empire.

As such, Jihaad quickly gave up.

He wasn't confident he could beat the wyvern rider, not to mention wyverns were national beasts. It was a crime to kill wyverns, let alone eat them.

Suddenly, Jihaad found himself forgetting about his hunger as he felt envious of the passing Wyvern Rider instead.

"Sigh! It must be nice flying on the back of a wyvern... I wish I could also fly," Jihaad lamented enviously.

Witches and Wizards could fly with their magic, but Body Refiners and Aura Users couldn't. They didn't have the support of magic like Witches and Wizards did. As such, riding on the back of flying beasts was the next best alternative to flying.

"Hm?" Jihaad glanced up at Vaan with surprise.

Jihaad had unexpectedly caught up to Vaan. The latter had paused his steps after hearing his comment.

Rumble...!

Jihaad's stomach grumbled again, causing Jihaad to clutch his stomach with an embarrassed yet wry smile.

"Is something the matter, Sir Pendragon?"

"You wished you could fly?"

"Y-Yes...? Who doesn't? Haha..."

"I can help."

"Huh? You can... what? How?"

The exchange was brief, and Jihaad couldn't determine Vaan's intentions or where he was leading the conversation. However, he immediately regretted asking in the next moment.

"S-Sir Pendragon...?!"

Jihaad's shoulders were abruptly grabbed by Vaan before he was launched five meters up into the air. As his body descended, he felt his ankles caught by firm grips. In that instant, a faint premonition of danger sprouted in his heart.

Vaan spun three full revolutions and hurled Jihaad into the sky with great force, sending the latter flying a couple hundred meters through the air.

"Ahhh—!!!"

Jihaad's cry caused a group of warriors tailing a short distance behind them to shiver with dread and apprehension.

The strongest within this group of warriors was only a Mid-level Rank 2 Body Refiner. They had followed Vaan and Jihaad because they thought they could have a safe passage through the Thundering Highlands if they did.

After all, it was the shortest path to reaching the Dukedom of Dragonmoor.

Although they didn't know why the two people ahead of them had fallen out, they quickly increased their pace when they saw Vaan rushing forward.

They didn't want to fall too far behind and lose their protection.

"Ahhh—!!" Jihaad's loud cry continued resounding through the air.

Although crashing at such height and speed wasn't fatal to Jihaad, so long as he braced himself with aura, he had been caught off guard by Vaan's brutal throw. As such, his cry was involuntary due to surprise.

If he had been mentally prepared, he would have been exhilarated while enjoying the sense of flight.

Nevertheless, when Jihaad had time to reflect on his situation, he was shocked by the force applied behind Vaan's powerful toss.

'I thought this person was a Peak-level Rank 3 Body Refiner, but his strength actually surpassed that! Moreover, he looks younger than me! What a monster!' Jihaad was flabbergasted by Vaan's overwhelming talent.

"Huh?"

Jihaad caught sight of Vaan's figure matching his pace while his body slowly lost altitude and dropped toward the ground.

A sudden thought caused his face to pale.

"Don't tell me you're going to..."

Boom!

With a powerful step, Vaan launched himself toward Jihaad, grabbed both his ankles, spun another three times, and then hurled him even higher into the sky!

"Are you f\*cking kidding—?!" Jihaad's indignant cry resounded in the distance.

This time, he was truly scared of the height! If he didn't have anyone to break his fall, he would be seriously injured or even die!

Kewee! Kewee!

A Steel-Beaked Eagle's distant cry from higher up in the sky was heard shortly after Jihaad's own cry. In that instant, Jihaad's fear disappeared. His heart became calm and full of trust.

He suddenly realized Vaan's intention.

'So you wanted to let me experience flight and attract a Steel-Beaked Eagle over simultaneously...'

'This is certainly killing two birds with one stone. I wouldn't have any problem with this plan, but... Dammit, couldn't you have at least consulted me first?!

Jihaad felt aggrieved and wanted to cry.

He wondered if every powerful person and monstrous genius was such an eccentric as Vaan.

Chapter 609: Encounter

Kewee! Kewee!

The Steel-Beaked Eagles' distant cries resounded again as two large, shadowy figures dropped out from the dark clouds that hung in the high skies.

Jihaad's scream had not attracted one but two adult Steel-Beaked Eagles!

Furthermore, they appeared to be a pair.

The two Steel-Beaked Eagles stuck close to each other, almost like they were embracing each other, as they dived with coordinated rotation. With their sharp steel beaks and mighty wings, they drilled through the air with high speed.

Without a doubt, Jihaad was their prey.

In normal cases, Jihaad wouldn't fear the adult Steel-Beaked Eagles, even if they came at him in pairs. However, the sky was their domain. On the other hand, his maneuverability was severely limited as he was free-falling.

Under such a situation, he could only brace himself and receive the Steel-Beaked Eagles' attacks head-on.

However, as the Steel-Beaked Eagles closed the distance with their sharp beaks ready to penetrate through Jihaad's aura-enhanced body, two stones ripped through the air with extraordinary precision and speed.

Naturally, these small stones had been flicked by Vaan.

Puchi! Puchi!

The small stones struck the Steel-Beaked Eagles dead in the eyes, piercing their brains before shattering into pieces and exacerbating the internal damage.

In that instant, the Steel-Beaked Eagles lost all strength and life. Their drill-like attack lost its coordination as their bodies bumped into each other and separated. In the end, they plummeted past Jihaad, narrowly missing him.

Jihaad couldn't help but break into cold sweats at the close meeting with death.

But after overcoming the dreadful experience, Jihaad couldn't help but feel even more shocked by Vaan's precision.

Given the swiftness of the Steel-Beaked Eagles, simply striking their bodies with projectiles was already considered impressive. However, not only did Vaan hit their bodies, but he had also struck their weakest points with impeccable timing, leaving them no chance to react and defend!



The precision of the attack was impressive, but the timing was even more so!

Jihaad wondered whether he could have replicated such a result with his own skills. However, he could only shake his head in shame. The difference between them was like comparing heaven and earth; it wasn't even worth considering!

However, Jihaad wasn't disheartened by the gap that existed between them. Instead, it only fueled his motivation to strive for a higher peak.

Jihaad's eyes glowed with determination.

'Sir Pendragon is a master who has honed his throwing skill to the zenith! Just how exactly did he train to reach such a level of skill?' Jihaad wondered.

Improving one's cultivation only needed hard work, but mastering one's skills required talent!

Jihaad became obsessed with self-improvement as he replayed the scene repeatedly in his mind. He thought he could acquire Vaan's skill if he kept studying it.

Even after landing safely on the ground with Vaan's help, he kept pondering the matter. Before he knew it, the appetizing scent of cooked meat brought him back to reality.

The two bodies of the Steel-Beaked Eagles had already been salvaged and separated into three main piles: forging materials, potion ingredients, and edible meat.

The eagle meat alone weighed over a thousand kilograms, enough to feed a hundred ordinary humans for almost two months straight. Even if Vaan and Jihaad ate twenty people's worth of portion in a single sitting, it was still too much meat for them.

As such, Vaan had invited the nearby group of warriors to join them for dinner.

On the surface, it seemed like Vaan was being kind for sharing his food with these strangers. But in truth, he was using food to entrap them and acquire free labor.

"That smells great," Jihaad praised after getting a whiff of the aromatic spices that blended with the sizzling eagle meat.

The three warriors roasting eagle meat with Vaan's utensils and spices could only smile wryly and thank Jihaad for his praise before peeking at Vaan with apprehension. They were afraid of offending this great warrior. Thus, they were very mindful of their behaviors.

Although Vaan had not done anything that would make him seem unreasonable and easily offended, he did watch them cook for him with folded arms.

He was only studying their cooking method, but his attention put great pressure on them.

Nevertheless, after everyone ate their fill, they continued their travel together. Vaan and Jihaad gradually learned the names of the three warriors – Dahr, Dink, and Dunny. They were actually brothers who shared the same mother.

The remains of the two Steel-Beaked Eagles were also divided between the five people. However, Vaan took the lion's share.

Of course, Vaan could have taken everything for himself since he killed the Steel-Beaked Eagles.

However, Jihaad contributed by acting as the bait, even though he wasn't aware of it then. On the other hand, dismantling the two large birds had been the three brothers' efforts. As such, they all deserved some share of the loot.

The value of the two Steel-Beaked Eagles wasn't worth much in Vaan's eyes anyway.

At most, the salvaged materials, ingredients, and meat could only be traded for sixty low-rank mana stones. Such a meager amount was only enough to support normal living in the empire; it wasn't enough to support cultivation.

"Dahr, the roast meat cooked by you three brothers was not bad at all. You three brothers should keep cooking until we reach the Dukedom of Dragonmoor," Jihaad seriously suggested.

Prior to leaving his home, Jihaad had never cooked in his life. And even then, his own cooking had been terribly bland or inedible.

"Haha... Thank you for appreciating our cooking, Sir Jihaad," Dahr, the eldest brother of the three, replied with a forced smile before thinking to himself, 'Our cooking is nothing compared to real master chefs. However, we can still be regarded as food saints among amateurs, huh?'

Did Vaan know how to cook?

Of course, he did. In fact, his cooking proficiency was the highest in the group. He just didn't want to cook for everyone.

Why should he cook when he could get someone else to do it?

Suddenly, Vaan paused his steps, prompting the rest of the group to halt. Everyone quickly discovered a man in black leather armor blocking the path ahead.

Actually, the person wasn't trying to block their path. He was just using the same path from the opposite direction. However, he exerted such strong, intimidating pressure that it seemed like it was impossible to get past him.

"Is there a Vanderlin Pendragon among you?" Bakram tiredly asked with an imposing yet aloof tone, having repeated the same questions over a hundred times.

Everyone subconsciously glanced at Vaan.

Chapter 610: Blood Exchange

Although Jihaad and the three brothers didn't say anything, their subconscious action was as good as confessing Vaan's identity. As such, Bakram's dull eyes immediately lit up.

"You're Vanderlin Pendragon?" Bakram asked as he started sizing up Vaan to determine if there was anything special about him.

"And if I am?" Vaan indirectly admitted before casually asking, "Who are you? And what business do you have with me?"

"I am Duke Dragonchild's guard, Sir Bakram," Bakram introduced himself before continuing, "I believe it should be obvious what business I have with you, Sir Vanderlin. News of your feats on the

way to Sunrock Bazaar has reached the Dukedom of Dragonmoor. I am interested in challenging you."

"But I am not interested in fighting you?"

Vaan's nonchalant reply immediately surprised not only Bakram but also Jihaad and the three brothers. After all, he had not refused a single challenge until now and defeated all his opponents with a single blow.

What changed?

"Oh? Can I ask why?" Bakram asked patiently, intrigued by the change.

"I have accepted many challenges until now, and they have been nothing but a waste of time. I gain nothing from these meaningless battles, so why should I keep accepting them? Why should I keep wasting my time?" Vaan coolly replied.

"That's true..." Bakram acknowledged, much to Jihaad's surprise.

"I've heard your opponents were no stronger than a Rank 3 Body Refiner. For someone as strong as you, opponents with this level of strength are indeed a little too weak to be worth your while," Bakram continued before asking with a confident smirk, "But what about a Mid-level Rank 4 Body Refiner like me? Have I aroused your interest yet?"

"No," Vaan flatly replied.

"No?" Bakram repeated with a dumbfounded look.

He didn't think it was possible for the young man in front of him to give such an answer. He had been completely confident the person would say 'yes.' Alas, the reality proved otherwise.

Nevertheless, Bakram was only momentarily taken aback before his impression of Vaan dropped to rock bottom.

'This young man accepts challenges when his opponents are weak but immediately refuses when his opponent is someone strong... Did he refuse to challenge me because he doesn't want me to break his undefeated record?' Bakram wondered.

As he arrived at that thought, he became gloomy and disappointed. At the same time, his depressive mood caused his intimidating pressure to become more oppressive.

'Hmph! Even if this young man is a peerless genius with heaven-defying talents, his character is too rotten! His heart is weak, and his eyes are blinded by vanity! How could such a rare genius be like this?! This is simply a waste of heaven's gifts!'

Bakram felt indignant and immediately believed it was his responsibility to teach the young man a lesson and correct his ways. Thus, even if his lord had not ordered him to do so, he would have sought the young man out himself.

In the great journey of body refining, talent was undoubtedly important. However, a firm heart and indomitable spirit were even more important! A talented genius that doesn't want to work hard was a useless genius!

How could he let such a heavenly talent become wasted by chasing empty fame? – Bakram thought.

Meanwhile, Jihaad and the three brothers immediately broke into cold sweats under Bakram's oppressive pressure. They were a little concerned for Vaan's situation but even more so for themselves.

They weren't sure if they would be implicated because they were traveling with Vaan.

But at the same time, there was also a little bit of anticipation and hope rising in their hearts. A battle between Rank 4 Body Refiners... It was a rare opportunity. They would like to witness it.

"Hmph!" Bakram snorted at Vaan before saying, "Even if you are uninterested, you have no choice but to accept my challenge! And that's because I am challenging you to a Blood Exchange Duel! Under the imperial law, a Blood Exchange Duel cannot be refused!"

"Oh? A Blood Exchange Duel, huh?" Vaan smiled with interest, but his gaze became slightly chilly.

Before coming to the Great Ratholos Empire, he had naturally learned about its laws. That included matters related to the Blood Exchange Duel.

In the Great Ratholos Empire, it was normal for there to be a lot of competition between rivaling families and warriors. However, it was also inevitable that some intense competition would get out of hand and turn into irreconcilable hatred.

As such, the Blood Exchange Duel was introduced to settle all blood debts and hatred between two sides in a life-or-death battle. Both sides were permitted to put forward conditions or wagers before the duel.

Regardless of who won, the loser had to honor the conditions put forward by the victor, even if they were lifelong conditions. If they refused or broke the agreement, their entire family would be exterminated by the imperial family.

Consequently, such a flawed law had loopholes and could easily be abused by the powerful to acquire more power and wealth from those weaker than them. In the early years since the Blood Exchange Duel was introduced, many powerful families had indeed attempted to exploit it for their self-interest.

However, such acts had enraged the ruling emperor of that period, and the entire empire was awash with the blood of all the fools who sought to take advantage of his new law for resolving grievances.

Since then, no one dared to take advantage of the Blood Exchange Duel when they didn't have any irreconcilable grudge again. After all, it was equivalent to slapping the emperor in the face – a capital offense that deserved the extermination of the whole family.

The authority of the imperial family could not be challenged nor insulted.

Despite the Blood Exchange Duel having such a history, it was still frequently and surprisingly used in the present era—but only for wagers.

Since Bakram dared to propose the Blood Exchange Duel, Vaan was quite interested in his wager.

After all, no one had the courage to propose a Blood Exchange Duel in the present era when they didn't have any irreconcilable grudge. They would be more afraid of the other party reporting them to the authorities for trying to use the Blood Exchange Duel for exploitative intentions instead.

The only exception was if someone was completely confident they could tempt the other party with their wager.

In other words, their wager had to be of incredible value!