

The Witch 611

Chapter 611: Vaan's Astonishment

The Blood Exchange Duel had become an awkward tradition in the history of the Great Ratholos Empire. Although it was a flawed law, the previous emperors didn't remove it, perhaps due to their pride.

As such, the Blood Exchange Duel had an awkward period where it existed, but no one dared to use it.

It was only during the last fifty years that the Blood Exchange Duel had deviated from its original purpose and became standardized for betting duels instead. Although it was still a duel of life or death, it was not as serious as when it was first introduced.

After all, fists and swords had no eyes.

No one could guarantee an accident wouldn't happen during an intense spar, especially with lucrative wagers involved. Warriors would go all-out to defeat their opponents and claim their prizes. As such, accidental deaths were unavoidable.

Furthermore, no one would be held responsible for the death of another in a Blood Exchange Duel since it was something both parties had agreed to before dueling.

Even the current emperor would turn a blind eye to most cases of the Blood Exchange Duels as long as it didn't get out of hand and disturbed him.

Vaan personally found the existence of the Blood Exchange Duel quite meaningless and impractical. Simply said, it was a mess. It depended too much on good faith.

However, who was he to judge how another country did things?

Although it seemed to be working fine in the Great Ratholos Empire now, Vaan was certain it would never work in another country. In fact, if it were introduced in another country, that country would likely fall into chaos and disorder.

"Under the imperial law, a Blood Exchange Duel cannot be refused... Haha," Vaan chuckled with derision before saying, "Perhaps an ignorant person might believe you, but I am not one of them."

"I can't refuse you? But I can still report you! Doesn't that also count as refusing you? Do you want to see who will be disadvantaged in court when I accuse you of exploiting people with the Blood Exchange Duel?" Vaan added thuggishly.

Bakram was immediately startled by Vaan's words.

He felt like he might have come off too strongly and gave the other person the wrong idea regarding the Blood Exchange Duel.

"T-This Little Brother... I'm not trying to fight you to the death, okay? No need to go that far. I can see that you are an unparalleled genius, so I just wanted to test your strength. Look, I've even prepared something amazing to wager. If you can beat me, you can have it," Bakram hurriedly said.

After he quickly took out the small sandalwood pillbox and showed the brown pill inside, it immediately grabbed Vaan's attention.

An incredible scent of life emanated from the brown pill, but it slowly dissipated as the brown pill was exposed to the outside. The sandalwood pillbox's interior was coated in a crystalline texture capable of preventing the pill's vital aura from dissipating.

"This is a Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill, capable of raising a Rank 4 Body Refiner's cultivation by a minor stage. It is priceless in the empire and has no supply. Only a few people can get their hands on it," Bakram felt pained in his heart as he introduced the heaven-defying pill.

Such a priceless treasure was in his hand, but it didn't belong to him. If the young man couldn't defeat him, he had to return the pill to his lord.

"A Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill, huh?" Vaan muttered thoughtfully.

Bakram had only revealed the pill for a short instant before closing the pillbox to conserve its potency. However, Vaan perfectly recalled its shape and smell in his mind.

The incredible scent of life that emanated from the pill resembled divine energy. But at the same time, the scent of life also differed from divine energy; it was weaker.

'This is spirit energy...?!' Vaan realized with astonishment.

This didn't mean the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill contained spirit energy within it. However, it did reveal the herbal ingredients used in its alchemic concoction were nurtured with spirit energy.

What did this mean?

There was actually a place in the Great Ratholos Empire with spirit energy! Moreover, the pill creator definitely knew how to prevent the spirit energy from disappearing!

Vaan became interested in studying the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill, but he was even more interested in learning more about the pill creator behind it.

Nevertheless, it wasn't hard for Vaan to figure out that Duke Zaahir had sent Bakram to test him. A mere guard was highly unlikely to possess the means to own such an invaluable pill.

As such, the one who actually interested him wasn't Bakram but the duke.

'I did plan to catch the attention of a big figure, but... to think I would also receive such an incredible gift,' Vaan mused intriguingly.

Since the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill was delivered to his doorstep, Vaan had zero intention of letting it slip back into Duke Zaahir's hands.

"That's an interesting wager you have there. However, even if I agree to fight you, I have nothing to match its value," Vaan casually said.

"And you don't need to." Bakram shook his head and seriously said, "You only need to fight me with everything you have – that is all I require. If you beat me, the pill is yours. If you can't, then you can forget about it."

"Fair enough. I accept your challenge," Vaan calmly agreed.

What else did he have to say? Since someone was trying so hard to gift him something incredibly precious, how could he refuse?

Meanwhile, Jihaad and the three brothers became super excited at once. They were about to witness an incredible battle between Rank 4 Body Refiners!

Without being told, they quickly retreated a safe distance to watch the fight.

"Come at me. I'll let you have the first three moves," Bakram generously gestured and said, "That's the least I can do. Otherwise, people will say I am bullying young people."

Vaan glanced at Bakram weirdly before asking, "Are you sure?"

"Definitely," Bakram replied without hesitation before his gaze flickered with slight disdain, thinking to himself, 'Do you think three moves is too little or too much?'

He might have introduced himself as a Mid-level Rank 4 Body Refiner, but he didn't specify he was only a slight step away from being a High-level Rank 4 Body Refiner. That was why he was chosen. The duke was confident in his ability.

Vaan shrugged and no longer dilly-dallied.

Afterward, the fight quickly started.

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Chapter 612: Bakram's Indignance

The Dukedom of Dragonmoor, Dragonchild Castle

The following morning, Duke Zaahir woke up feeling refreshed and amazing. Evidently, he had a great sleep.

The fact that he had handed a priceless pill like the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill to Bakram the previous day did not seem to have weighed down on his mind at all. Rather, his mood was lifted.

He had great expectations and highly anticipated Bakram would return with good news.

'I wonder how Bakram is doing? He should have found the person by now, right...? If his talent is as amazing as I imagined, I have to recruit him at all costs,' Duke Zaahir wondered with a deep look as he got out of bed and performed his morning routine.

"My Lord, Sir Bakram has returned from his trip a short while ago and has been waiting to see you since," a female servant quickly informed the moment Duke Zaahir stepped outside his bedchamber.

"Really?" Duke Zaahir's eyes lit up before he instructed the female servant, "Call Sir Bakram to the dining hall. We shall have breakfast together."

"As you will, my Lord," the female servant obeyed.

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Sometime later, Duke Zaahir arrived in the dining hall. Once he took his seat at the empty marble table, the servants quickly brought out the food they had prepped beforehand.

Moments later, the empty marble table was filled with food, and the rich aroma of herbs and spices invigorated Duke Zaahir with energy.

He could immediately tell it was going to be a great morning. The only thing missing was Bakram's report.

Creak...!

The main doors were pushed open, following Bakram's entry to the dining hall. Seeing the familiar figure in black leather armor approaching from the entrance brought a smile to Duke Zaahir's face.

But when Duke Zaahir saw the state of Bakram's face, his smile froze.

The person's face had been brutally bruised black and blue.

Furthermore, upon closer inspection, even Bakram's black leather armor appeared a little tattered, and this was only after it had been patched up a little earlier.

"Bakram, what happened to you? You look terrible," Duke Zaahir frowned before guessing, "Don't tell me you've been mugged and lost the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill?"

Bakram immediately dropped to his knees and pleaded, "Forgive me for failing to live up to your expectations, my Lord. I wasn't mugged, but I have indeed lost the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill."

Duke Zaahir's eyes flickered with a sharp glint, but it quickly faded the next moment.

Duke Zaahir was aware of Bakram's devoted loyalty. This person wouldn't try to steal his Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill for himself, even if he had the desire in his heart.

"You lost to the child?" Duke Zaahir asked with amazement.

Bakram nodded with a mixture of shame, embarrassment, and lingering confusion, causing Duke Zaahir to be even more astonished.

"Get up and take a seat," Duke Zaahir calmly gestured before saying, "You can slowly tell me what happened over breakfast."

"Thank you, my Lord," Bakram replied guiltily. Although he followed his lord's order, he didn't believe he was worthy of dining with his lord, especially not after failing his task.

The two silently ate their breakfast for some time before Duke Zaahir finally asked, "You can start from the beginning, Bakram."

"Yes, my Lord," Bakram answered.

"As you instructed, I went to find the person called Vanderlin Pendragon to challenge him. He wasn't interested in a normal challenge, so I proposed the Blood Exchange Duel and wagered the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill. Only then did the kid agree to fight me."

"I also gave the kid an advantage of three moves at the start, but he was unable to hurt me due to our difference in strength. It was just as the letter mentioned: this kid only looks to be around 22-24, but his strength is already at Low-level Rank 4 Body Refiner."

Duke Zaahir frowned with doubt and interrupted with a question, "If that child is only a Low-level Rank 4 Body Refiner, then how did he reduce you, someone who is almost a High-level Rank 4 Body Refiner, to such a pitiful state?"

"Hahaha..." Bakram could only chuckle bitterly and ruefully before replying, "I also didn't expect to end up like this, my Lord. At the start of the fight, I held the absolute advantage with my superior strength. However, I couldn't land a single solid blow. Moreover, I kept receiving that kid's blows instead!"

Bakram felt a little indignant as he recalled his fight with Vaan. It was the most frustrating battle he had ever fought. No matter how many attacks he threw at the lad, they all evaded or diverted. The person was slippery like an eel; he simply couldn't catch him.

"That kid's movement technique was just so bizarre; I have never seen anything like it. It was fast and unpredictable. Moreover, I was even more shocked by that kid's resourcefulness! He was fully aware of our overwhelming difference in strength and made full use of his surroundings to compensate for it."

"I lost count of how many times I fell for his tricks and almost got crushed by falling rock pillars! Our fight even attracted Steel-Beaked Eagles, and that kid used them to his advantage. Steel beaks, talons, and feathers... he used them all like flying daggers! I have never seen anyone more proficient at throwing projectiles than that kid!"

"Mother f*cker even threw rocks, sand, and the goddamned Steel-Beaked Eagles' butts at me! Who fights like this? Who?!" Bakram gritted his teeth and shook with mixed feelings.

As he recalled the fight in more vivid detail, he wanted to puke blood from anger and frustration.

Who was bullying who?

It certainly wasn't him doing the bullying! In fact, he was the one who got bullied instead! That Vanderlin Pendragon almost played him to death!

The most frustrating part of that battle was that no matter how dirty or annoying that kid fought, Bakram couldn't fault him! After all, he told the kid to fight with everything he had, and the kid literally fought with everything he had!

Who else could he blame for this other than himself?

Meanwhile, as Duke Zaahir listened to Bakram's ranting and complaints, he couldn't help but widen his eyes and drop his jaws in disbelief and amazement.

But suddenly, he noticed a doubtful detail in Bakram's story.

"Hold on. There's something I don't understand," Duke Zaahir mentioned before expressing his doubt, "No matter how great that child's throwing skill is, it shouldn't be enough to inflict such injuries on your face, no? How did he beat you to such a sorry state?"

When Bakram heard his lord's question, his face flushed with shame as he stammered to reply, "I... I... This... That's because of..."

Chapter 613: Zaahir's Speculation

"Haiz..." Bakram sighed in resignation, knowing his hesitation was draining his Lord's patience. He also understood the whole story had to be told eventually.

Bakram gritted his teeth before continuing, "Everything had been a distraction. Every attack, every move, and every provocation the kid deployed were only meant to distract me from the real attack."

"From the start, that kid had been secretly striking my mobility acupoints. Naturally, such strikes were no different from a mosquito bite and wouldn't hurt me at all. However, even a mosquito bite would start to sting if repeatedly targeted in the same spot hundreds to thousands of times."

"I only took notice of it once the pain started affecting my movements. But by that time, it was already too late. I don't know what kind of move that kid used, but his final move immobilized my entire body in an instant."

"After that, the result is as you see, my Lord. Haha..." Bakram chuckled bitterly and said, "I was too stubborn to admit my defeat in that situation. So that damn kid pounced on top of me and beat the living shit out of my face until I did..."

The corners of Duke Zaahir's lips twitched once he finished listening to Bakram's story.

No matter how strong Bakram was, he was still a Rank 4 Body Refiner like that child. Thus, attacks within the same power rank still did some damage, even if there was a significant gap between them.

That said, Duke Zaahir couldn't imagine how many blows Bakram took to the face for it to be swollen to such a state.

'It must have been at least several thousand punches, right? How stubborn...!' Duke Zaahir thought.

Nevertheless, after his initial bewilderment and astonishment, Duke Zaahir was only left with sheer shock. He felt a sense of loss for not being able to witness such a fight himself. But at the same time, Vanderlin's overwhelming talent only made him desire the person even more.

"Based on your experience fighting that child, do you think he was hiding any other strengths, Bakram?" Duke Zaahir asked with expectations.

"I would like to say no, but I cannot be sure since that kid did defeat me, my Lord," Bakram replied dispiritedly before adding, "However, this Darkan young man's build is quite thin compared to pure Body Refiners."

"Furthermore, although he isn't the most handsome among the male witch descendants I've seen, he is still better looking than ordinary men. Thus, the chances of him being a witch's descendant is quite high," Bakram mentioned with some suspicion.

After all, being a male witch descendant implied having a body that could cultivate aura.

If Vanderlin was a dual cultivator of both body and aura, Bakram couldn't imagine just how high his strength had reached.

Moreover, how could there be such a heaven-defying genius in the world?

"So there's a possibility of him also possessing aura, huh? I want this child more or more..." Duke Zaahir muttered before his eyes suddenly flickered with a thought, "What about this child's origins? Do you have any idea if he has a powerful background?"

Bakram frowned for a moment before shaking his head.

"I'm afraid not, my Lord," Bakram replied apologetically before pondering harder with a deeper frown, "However... this kid's skills are rather uncommon."

"I don't think there are many houses that could nurture such a talent yet also possess such peerless throwing skills and a comprehensive understanding of the human body, if there is one. Furthermore, they might also specialize in medicine and assassination."

"Unfortunately, I can't think of any houses that fit all of these criteria," Bakram said.

"Darkan young man... heaven-defying talent... peerless throwing skills... has a comprehensive understanding of the human body... possibly proficient in medicine and trained in assassination..."

Duke Zaahir pondered over the key points with a deep look before a single house came to mind.

"Could it be the Evermore family?" Duke Zaahir guessed, but he couldn't be confident.

Nevertheless, Bakram was even more baffled after hearing the name. Although he knew of a few Evermore families, he was never aware of any of them being that powerful. That said, it was not like he knew every powerful family in Pangea either.

"Which Evermore family, my Lord? How come I haven't heard of any being that powerful?" Bakram asked with surprise.

"This..." Duke Zaahir glanced at his close subordinate before saying, "You don't need to know too much about this. You only need to know even the Armstrong imperial family would treat the real Evermore family as their equal."

"So that's that. If you ever run into a member of the Evermore family, never look down on them and always treat them with equal respect. That might save your life one day," Duke Zaahir advised.

No matter what, Bakram was still one of his best guards. It would be a waste if Bakram accidentally got himself killed for such a stupid reason.

Nevertheless, the Evermore family had always been the most reclusive among the five ancient families. Even the head of the family might not know where the Evermore family had settled since the Blessed Golden Dragon Tribe's dissolution.

'Did the Evermore family finally decide to emerge?' Duke Zaahir wondered.

In his heart, Duke Zaahir hoped Vanderlin wasn't affiliated with any of the other four ancient families. After all, he still wanted to recruit the person.

While Duke Zaahir had his thoughts, Bakram couldn't help but be dumbfounded by what he heard.

'The imperial family's equal...?' Bakram found it hard to believe.

There weren't many families in Pangea that would dare claim to be the Armstrong imperial family's equal. The Braveheart imperial family of the Holy Knight Empire was one, and the Weissman family of the Freedom Federation was another.

But the Evermore family? What kind of power did it have for his Lord to recognize it as the Armstrong imperial family's equal?

"Oh, right," Duke Zaahir suddenly uttered, breaking Bakram's chain of thoughts. "Where is that child now? He should have entered my city by now, right?"

"That should be so, my Lord," Bakram nodded with a slight frown.

"Great! I will have to trouble you to find him again and invite him to my castle, Bakram. I want to meet this incredible talent myself."

"This... Can you send for someone else, my Lord?" Bakram groaned, feeling a little unwilling.

"Why? Do you object?" Duke Zaahir was slightly taken aback before saying sternly, "You're the only person who has actually seen and exchanged pointers with the child. Naturally, I could only rely on you to deliver my invitation."

"Understood, my Lord," Bakram helplessly agreed since his lord had said so much.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but smile bitterly and wryly in his heart, 'Getting my ass kicked is still considered an exchange of pointers?'

Sigh...

Chapter 614: Water Shortage

At the northeastern edge of the Thundering Highlands, Vaan's group made it through the last stretch of steep hills and rocky pillars before a vast, open land filled with crops and vegetation appeared.

The sheer contrast between the flourishing landscape before them and the barren lands behind them left Jihaad and the three brothers in amazement as they took in the breathtaking view—especially the plethora of purple heaths growing on the outskirts of the land.

It was simply a beautiful sight – one that most people would not expect to find in a barren land of rocks and sand.

They didn't expect the Dukedom of Dragonmoor to be so beautiful; it was an oasis in the middle of a desert.

It showed the tenacity of life to prosper even in the harshest of environments.

"So this is the Dukedom of Dragonmoor... It is indeed full of farmlands..." Vaan casually commented with a thoughtful look.

The Dukedom of Dragonmoor certainly lived up to its reputation as the biggest food supply of the western region; the scale of its farmland was on a whole different scale to others.

However... many of its people still lived in poverty.

As Vaan and the others took the main road leading to Dragonmoor City, they saw many farmers on the way.

None of these farmers looked healthy; they were all thin and slightly malnourished, like they had never eaten until they had a full stomach and only had enough to get by each day.

Food was life to the common people, and this region's farmland was also considered the heart of the West. If the ruling lord wasn't a fool, there was no way he would mistreat the farmers who cultivated his precious farmlands with their blood and sweat.

'If the conditions of the farmers are already like this, then the people living in the city should be even worse... It seems the Dukedom of Dragonmoor is not doing too well these days,' Vaan mused.

Suddenly, a male farmer in his 60s collapsed a short distance ahead while tending to the crops.

In the same timespan when Vaan furrowed his brows, Jihaad had already rushed ahead to assess the farmer's situation. Dahr, Dink, and Dunny didn't follow to help either. They stuck close to Vaan and observed the situation from afar.

"Old man, are you alright? What's wrong with you?"

"Wa... Water... I'm too thirsty..."

Once Jihaad understood the old farmer's needs, he quickly pulled out his wineskin of water and helped the old farmer quench his thirst.

"Thank you..." the old farmer said gratefully after his body was invigorated and felt alive, but his eyes briefly glimmered with guilt.

However, Jihaad didn't notice it. He helped the old farmer back on his feet before rejoining Vaan and the three brothers. Along the way, Jihaad helped another six farmers in similar situations before he ran out of water and felt a little frustrated.

He didn't expect Vaan and the three brothers to be so cold-hearted for ignoring people in need.

When Jihaad raised this problem, Vaan replied, "If you can't help them all, you shouldn't help them at all."

"Why?" Jihaad frowned.

However, he couldn't wait for Vaan's answer before rushing ahead to help another collapsed farmer near the main road. Unfortunately, the 'collapsed' farmer was also too thirsty, but Jihaad no longer had any water to give.

"I'm sorry, I ran out of water..."

"What? Why don't you have any water? You had water to give others, but you don't have any to give me? Why?"

"This..."

Jihaad frowned at the farmer's attitude and found himself retreating from the person. The person was giving him a resentful and angry look – that was not the look someone would have when seeking others for help.

In that instant, Jihaad realized the farmers had been faking their collapse to receive free water from passing travelers.

Once the truth became clear to him, Jihaad decisively abandoned the farmer and returned to Vaan with a gloomy look. At the same time, the farmer did not dare to pursue him and press the issue. Jihaad's oppressive pressure had terrified him.

"Now you know why," Vaan calmly said before adding, "If you can give them water, then they will naturally feel grateful to you. But if you can't, then not only will they not feel grateful to you, but they will even resent you."

"How can people be like this?" Jihaad had a conflicted look as he frowned with mixed feelings. "If I don't have any water left, then I don't have any water left. Why the hell would they resent me for something I can't control?"

Vaan glanced at Jihaad silently before saying, "You must be from a pretty well-off family. You don't understand the desperation of the poor. They don't actually resent you; they only resent the fact that your water was already given to someone else and couldn't be given to them."

"Since they were too helpless to change their situation, you unluckily became their target, an outlet for venting their negative feelings," Vaan stated.

Jihaad sighed, feeling a little depressed.

A few moments later, he glanced at the three brothers and asked, "Did you three also realize the farmers were tricking me for water?"

"Not at all, Sir Jihaad. We didn't think that far," Dahr quickly shook his head and said, "We just noticed everyone was parched and in need of water and figured the Dukedom of Dragonmoor was experiencing a water shortage."

"Right. We didn't want to give away our precious water if water is scarce and costly around here. That would be like helping others at the expense of ourselves. We aren't that selfless," Dink added truthfully.

Jihaad's eyes twitched at the thought that he might not be able to acquire any drinking water even if he reached Dragonmoor City.

However, he suddenly had another doubt, "Hold on. If the Dukedom of Dragonmoor is experiencing such a severe water shortage, how can the farmers maintain their crops?"

"That's a funny thing to say, Jihaad," Vaan commented.

"It's precisely because they are maintaining such a large farmland that they are suffering from a water shortage. However, the Dukedom of Dragonmoor has no choice but to do it. The livelihood of the western region is dependent on the food produced here."

"If the crops die, then there will be a long period of famine. After all, water is easy to obtain, but crops take time to grow," Vaan calmly explained.

Chapter 615: Dragonmoor City

"This... Is there nothing we can do for these people?" Jihaad couldn't help but ask before frowning, "Just because we can't help these people, it doesn't mean we shouldn't at least try."

"If you can only help the people you come across and not every one of them, you are not helping them. You are only satisfying your self-righteous heart to not feel mentally burdened," Vaan nonchalantly stated.

"Just by looking at the signs, it's clear this water problem has been going on for a few years. And yet, the crops are still well, and the farmers are still around. In other words, the people here are at least drinking the minimum amount of water to survive. Exceeding that daily quantity is a luxury to them."

"And when some people acquire this luxury while others don't, what do you think happens? Others will become jealous, and the people will only suffer. Perhaps the next time they receive their daily water quota, they will have less because of their jealous superiors. And then, instead of blaming them, they will blame you instead."

"That would be ridiculous!" Jihaad uttered

"Ridiculous?" Vaan glanced at Jihaad and acknowledged, "Perhaps so. But that's human nature. They don't dare blame their superiors because they know they would only suffer more."

"But what about you? They don't know you and have nothing to do with you. Moreover, you were kind enough to help them. As such, they believe they wouldn't suffer any consequences even if they blame you."

Jihaad fell silent, feeling depressed at the fact that people could repay his kindness with ingratitude. Humans could be quite unsightly.

However, Jihaad's heart was suddenly at peace, as if he had just achieved enlightenment. He became quite accepting of the situation explained by Vaan.

In the face of life or death, right and wrong became irrelevant; only one's survival mattered.

When other races threatened humanity's existence, humans wouldn't hesitate to unite their strength to overcome the crisis. However, if humans were threatened by other humans, they also wouldn't hesitate to slaughter each other for a chance of survival.

Right and wrong was a luxury people could only discuss when they were alive. If they were going to die, why would right and wrong matter?

"If you want to help everyone, you have to solve the water problem at its root," Vaan calmly stated.

"And how do we do that, Sir Pendragon?" Jihaad sincerely asked with high expectations from Vaan.

Vaan's fight with Bakram had made Jihaad realize Vaan wasn't only peerlessly skilled in martial arts and cultivation but also exceptionally intelligent.

As such, Jihaad started worshipping Vaan as his idol.

"This isn't a problem for people of our status to solve. We are nobodies in this country," Vaan clearly stated. But after a short pause, he continued, "However, if you really want to know, you have to enter the city and observe the situation first."

"I understand, Sir Pendragon," Jihaad replied with some disappointment. He wasn't satisfied with Vaan's vague answer since he didn't provide a solution.

However, it was the only answer Vaan could give at the time. He wasn't omniscient. Without relevant information regarding the root problem, how could he determine a solution?

For that matter, Vaan had already secretly instructed his dragon subordinates to investigate the situation in the Dukedom of Dragonmoor.

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After crossing eighty kilometers of farmland, Vaan's group eventually reached Dragonmoor City, the city of stone.

Unlike Sunrock Bazaar, Dragonmoor City did not build their homes around or on top of rock pillars. Instead, all the rock pillars that once existed in the region had been completely cut up into stone slabs of varying sizes and used as building blocks for the city.

As such, Dragonmoor City looked like one enormous yet complicated stone puzzle that had been fitted together perfectly.

Just by looking at the stone, one could see how stone slabs of different shapes and sizes fit together perfectly without a single gap in between.

It was nothing short of impressive craftsmanship.

Dragonmoor City was twice as populated as Blackthorn City but not as large. In fact, Dragonmoor City was not even a third of Blackthorn City. However, this wasn't surprising and was considered normal in most countries outside the Seven Witch Kingdoms.

Most residents lived in close communities and didn't own any large private land like the witch matriarchs from the Seven Witch Kingdoms. After all, they didn't build any magic towers, let alone need room for their magic towers to breathe in the world's mana.

Nevertheless, such a heavily populated city would have been unthinkable in the distant past. It was only made possible due to the promotion of strength and the convenience of magic.

Vaan and the others didn't encounter any issues entering the city. They only needed to show their identity cards to the guards to pass. As such, it could be said that the city had rather lax security.

Dahr, Dink, and Dunny bid farewell to Vaan and Jihaad before going their separate way. They had other plans, so they did not need to stick together.

Nevertheless, Vaan knew the three brothers intended to sell off their share of the Steel-Beaked Eagles and earn some mana stones. After that, they would most likely look into the price of water and procure as much as possible before continuing eastward.

The Great Ratholos Empire's eastern region was much more prosperous and wealthy. As such, the living conditions there were also much better than in the western regions.

It was common for visiting warriors to travel to the empire's eastern regions sooner rather than later.

"I guess it's back to us two..." Jihaad commented with some disappointment.

Jihaad thought it was unfortunate to part ways with the three brothers when they had grown somewhat close traveling together. In truth, Jihaad simply missed the three brothers' cooking.

"Where are we headed now, Sir Pendragon?"

"Let's find a bar and collect some information."

"Alright."

Jihaad did not even ask if it was okay for him to keep following Vaan. In his mind, he was already part of Vaan's group.

As such, why would he need to ask if it was okay?

Nevertheless, the streets of Dragonmoor City were incredibly crowded and busy. People frequently bumped shoulders as they tried passing each other. Since traffic was heavily congested, reaching their destination took longer.

Originally, Jihaad suggested visiting Dragonmoor City's most popular bar, Rowdy Seals Pub. However, Vaan quickly denied it without a second thought.

There was no doubt the most popular bar in Dragonmoor City would have the best information. But no matter how good the information was there, it only remained good if they could get their hands on it.

Given the traffic congestion throughout the city, the most popular bar would be overcrowded with a long queue outside, especially during peak hours.

Vaan didn't want to be delayed by hours in getting information he could acquire elsewhere.

"The city's condition is worse than I thought. The people here are all parched and dressed in dirty rags. It's hard to tell when they last washed. Furthermore, there are even more beggars and people pickpocketing going around."

"You should be care—"

Jihaad intended to remind Vaan to watch his wealth, but he quickly recalled the fate that awaited everyone who had ever tried to steal from him.

This young man wasn't willing to suffer losses in silence.

"Do you think the wealthy and poor would live in the same area and use the same streets?" Vaan said to Jihaad with a speechless look.

Jihaad opened his mouth, but no words came out. He could only chuckle awkwardly. He had spoken without thinking.

"Kind Sir, can you spare me a few coins or stones?"

"Hello, Sir. Do you have too many coins or stones? Hehe, I can take some off to lighten your load..."

"How are you doing, handsome? Did you arrive today? Do you need a woman to help you destress from your long trip?"

As Vaan and Jihaad made their way through the crowded street, they encountered all types of people begging or offering their services. Some were desperate, and others were simply shameless.

However, Vaan ignored them all; he didn't even spare them a glance.

The best way to reject these people was to pretend they didn't even exist. After all, the moment he gave them some attention, they would not stop harassing him for his money.

He didn't need the delay nor the inconvenience.

Unfortunately, Vaan didn't travel alone. He had a being of lesser intelligence beside him – Jihaad. As such, they ended up getting harassed by a group of prostitutes after Jihaad tried to reject one of them while blushing.

No doubt, these experienced women could practically smell the virgin in Jihaad.

Nevertheless, Vaan got impatient and exerted his oppressive pressure with a harrumph, causing everyone to run away in fear and no longer bug them.

Even a small path was cleared for them with incredible efficiency and order.

Evidently, the people in the slums were used to taking advantage of kind travelers and fleeing the moment they annoyed them. It was fine to be desperate, but some of them were even greedy, trying to charge more than their services were worth.

Even beggars asked for mana stones – a higher-end currency, no matter where in Pangea.

Amidst the fearful crowd on the busy street, a little boy bit his lips and mustered up his courage before stepping out of the crowd to meet Vaan and Jihaad.

"N-Noble Sir, d-do you need a guide?" a little boy hesitantly offered his service despite shaking with fear.

This time, Vaan chose not to ignore and gave the little boy a long glance as if he was trying to see through the little guy's character.

"Sure, how much?" Vaan calmly asked.

Chapter 616: Dragonmoor City (2)

The little boy's mind immediately went blank following Vaan's question.

He was only trying his luck and didn't expect Vaan to actually be interested in hiring his service. After all, there were many guides who were more experienced and reliable than him. He didn't understand why he was chosen.

"O-one... one low-rank mana stone for the day, N-Noble Sir," the little boy answered a little bravely but immediately felt regret and guilt shortly after. He was afraid of charging too high.

"Alright," Vaan agreed indifferently.

The surrounding people were immediately surprised by Vaan's sudden change of mind. At the same time, they wondered if his oppressive pressure was a sort of test for them.

As such, a few people mustered up their courage and took a step forward. But the moment they did, Vaan's oppressive pressure intensified. These people immediately paled and retreated in fear. The last bit of their hopes were quickly dashed.

They recognized the opportunity solely belonged to the brave little boy, who was only six or seven years old.

Meanwhile, the little boy was ecstatic and heaved a sigh of relief as if a huge burden had been lifted off his back. Shortly after, he clasped his hands together and asked, "Where would you like to go or what would you like to know, Noble Sir?"

"I might not look like much, but I am quite familiar with this city and know a lot of matters, whether they are casual gossip or important issues," the little boy quickly claimed.

Jihaad somewhat doubted the little boy as he did not seem very reliable at all. He also wondered if Vaan chose the little boy because he pitied him. But that didn't seem right either, considering what Vaan previously talked about.

Even so, what did a little boy know? How could he know important issues about the city?

However, Vaan thought differently.

Even if these people were part of the lowest class of society, how could they not know the reason behind why they had to suffer?

Thus, the little boy definitely knew important issues related to the city. But what he knew should also be something everyone knew. He was simply chosen because he was the only one Vaan found likable among the people offering their services.

"Firstly, what is your name?"

"M-my name? My mother calls me Theo, Noble Sir."

"Alright then, Theo. Can you show the way to the Grand Well?"

"We aren't finding a bar anymore, Sir Pendragon?"

"Why do we still need to go to a bar if we have a guide?"

Once Vaan said that much, Jihaad's doubts were quickly cleared. On the other hand, the little boy, Theo, wore a difficult expression to Vaan's request.

"The Grand Well...? I can point you in the right direction, but I won't be able to follow you, Noble Sir. The Grand Well is located in the middle-class district. People from the lower-class districts like me aren't allowed to go there."

"Oh. Then, just take us to one of the normal wells in the lower-class district, preferably one that isn't crowded with people."

"O-Of course, Noble Sir! I can do that. Please follow me."

Shortly after, Vaan and Jihaad followed little Theo through the streets.

Along the way, little Theo wore a solemn look as he took his job seriously, even though it was difficult for him to see ahead due to the tall adults. Even so, he was very familiar with the streets and followed according to his memories.

At the same time, little Theo also explained about their destination and the distance to reach it. In addition, he also introduced the passing stores, listing their pros and cons. The information he revealed wasn't something a normal six-to-seven-year-old kid would know.

As such, Vaan and Jihaad were both surprised to a varying degree. Naturally, Jihaad was the most surprised of the two.

On the other hand, Vaan had an 'as expected' look despite his slight surprise. He had vaguely guessed the little boy to be gifted with a strong memory. Perhaps he was sensitive to others with special memory, which was why he knew.

Nevertheless, the little boy couldn't have learned all the information on his own. Someone must have taught him.

Vaan and Jihaad eventually learned that someone was the little boy's mother as they chatted idly along the way. Little Theo's mother used to carry him around everywhere as she worked as a guide. As such, little Theo passively absorbed the information.

Unfortunately, little Theo's mother became bedridden with an illness, which led to little Theo deciding to find work and earn some money to buy medicine and water for his mother.

While it was also unfortunate that little Theo had to work and support his family at a young age, he was still considered more fortunate than some children.

After Vaan's Omni-Sense scanned half the western lower-class district, he had already found hundreds of cases of orphan children begging for money on the streets. Moreover, these children were forcefully employed by street thugs.

Thus, even if these children earned money, it didn't belong to them. They would get taken away by the street thugs, who were exploiting their young age to garner pity from the travelers.

It was hard to say how many more children were like them in the city if there were already hundreds in a half-district.

Jihaad found this situation unacceptable, but he also knew there wasn't much he could do to fix it.

After all, even if he went around beating up all the street thugs, it wouldn't resolve the problem at its roots. Many orphan children would still be homeless and begging on the streets. They would just be suffering less from the street thugs exploiting them.

And even then, it was only temporarily.

Once Jihaad left for another city, perhaps the street thugs would even take their anger out on the orphan children and inflict disabilities that would make them even more pitiful.

Little Theo eventually guided Vaan and Jihaad to a small square where one of the western lower-class district's wells was located. Some kids were using the open space to play tag, but no one was seen drawing water from the well.

That was because there was no water in the well.

"Most of the groundwater reserve had been depleted from excessive usage. So, many abandoned wells like this one exist in the lower-class districts," Theo mentioned.

Chapter 617: Dragonmoor City (3)

"What about the middle-class districts and the upper-class districts?" Vaan casually asked, curious whether little Theo also knew about their situation.

"I haven't seen the wells there myself, Noble Sir. So I can't give you a definite answer," Theo shook his head with an apologetic look before saying, "However, I heard the condition of the wells there is a little better than the lower-class districts'

"Supposedly, Duke Dragonchild hired noble mages to replenish the wells with their water arts. However, the replenishing amount is unable to keep up with the daily demand," Theo added.

"Aren't you a knowledgeable one? I have never seen a kid as informative as you," Jihaad praised while ruffling Theo's hair with affection.

Unfortunately, Theo's weak body couldn't cope with Jihaad's already limited strength. Jihaad retracted his hand apologetically and awkwardly after seeing Theo fall to the ground.

Surprisingly, Theo got back up calmly without any complaint.

However, such an action only made Jihaad feel worse. He could guess the little boy was used to suffering rough treatments.

"I don't have much to boast about, Noble Sir. However, I am at least proud of my hearing and memory," Theo stated before Jihaad could say something else.

Jihaad missed his chance to apologize and compensate the boy as the conversation moved forward.

"This city is facing a serious water shortage, but the depletion of the groundwater reserve shouldn't be the sole reason for it to reach today's level of severity, right? What do you think are the other problems, Theo?" Vaan asked thoughtfully.

"The biggest problem would be the water imports from the eastern regions, Noble Sir," Theo frowned with a hint of hatred and anger.

"I suspected as much..." Vaan uttered.

When he first noticed the water crisis in the Dukedom of Dragonmoor, he had already suspected the problem to be related to the eastern region's water-distributing businesses.

After all, the Eastern Sea had boundless water. As long as it was supplied to the western region, the West would never be short of water. But since that wasn't the case, some conflict of interest must be involved between the two regions.

"The eastern region's water suppliers are all selfish villains, Noble Sir. They don't care about the countless lives living in the western region. They only care about their profits. Since there are private-owned businesses, they have been selling their water to the western region at a sky-high price."

"They are practically draining the life out of the western region just to maximize their benefits!" Theo stated emotionally with his small fists clenched.

"And the emperor has nothing to mediate the issue?" Vaan calmly asked.

"None, Sir!" Theo firmly stated, feeling even more upset about the matter.

In Theo's mind, he viewed the emperor to be just as bad as the water suppliers for doing nothing. It was like the emperor did not care about the people in the western region and had abandoned them.

Vaan's eyes flickered with understanding after hearing little Theo's firm answer.

While Theo was intellectually gifted, he was still very young. There were still many things he had yet to learn and understand.

On the other hand, Vaan already understood the heart of the problem. The eastern region's water suppliers setting unreasonably high prices for their water was only the surface problem. The core of the problem involved politics.

Nevertheless, Vaan continued to ask Theo questions casually, and the latter answered everything to the best of his knowledge.

Eventually, Vaan and Jihaad also learned the western region lacked mages, mostly ones proficient in water spells.

Many mages had moved to the eastern region.

If Vaan couldn't even tell this was a huge conspiracy after learning this much, then he was not Vaan Raphna. It was clear as day that the eastern region's powerful figures were suppressing the western region's development.

Nevertheless, after Vaan had nothing left to learn from Theo, he patted the little boy's shoulders and told him to beat it. His action not only stunned the little boy but also Jihaad.

Jihaad simply couldn't believe Vaan was such a bastard for using the little boy's service and not wanting to pay him.

It was only one low-rank mana stone!

One!

"Didn't you hear me? I'm done with you, and I'm also not paying you. Scram," Vaan urged impatiently.

"I... I understand, Sir. Have a good day," Theo's eyes turned watery, but he quickly accepted the situation. He could only consider himself unlucky. He turned away and walked off with his head down as he tried to hold back his tears.

"If the opportunity arises, we'll see each other again," Vaan casually said, almost like he was adding salt to the kid's open wound.

Theo almost burst into tears on the spot. This bullying was too much.

"I can't believe you would take advantage of a little kid who has already suffered enough, Sir Pendragon. You're completely heartless!" Jihaad criticized furiously as his good impression of Vaan shattered into pieces.

Just when Jihaad was prepared to catch up to Theo and pay him the one low-rank mana stone that was owed, Vaan stopped him.

"Are you trying to get that little boy killed, Jihaad?" Vaan whispered in a low, solemn tone.

Jihaad immediately froze before glancing back at Vaan with a startled look, asking, "What do you mean by that, Sir Pendragon?"

"You think a powerless little boy can keep his mana stone even if you give one to him? There are hungry wolves watching. Furthermore, while that little boy is intellectually gifted, he holds a lot of resentment. Do you think he will just let others rob his hard-earned mana stone? Vaan mentioned.

Jihaad's mind went blank for a moment before he imagined Theo retaliating and getting beaten to death in anger.

"So am I supposed to watch the kid walk away all heartbroken like that? Is there no justice in this world? Is there no fairness? How can I call myself a true warrior if I turn a blind eye to this?" Jihaad gritted his teeth.

"If you want to help him, then help him all the way. Otherwise, your kindness will only harm him," Vaan coolly replied before adding, "Anyway, I'm not so free. I have a guest."

In the distance, Bakram could be spotted heading towards them. Evidently, the person had business with Vaan and was most likely on the duke's orders again.

"Alright, let's meet again if the opportunity allows it," Jihaad decisively stated, deciding to part ways with Vaan to look for little Theo.

...

Meanwhile, Theo walked home while he held back his tears with trembling shoulders.

He originally enjoyed the time guiding Vaan and Jihaad, but Vaan's action made his young heart turn cold. He was disillusioned for expecting there to be some good people in this heartless world.

The people secretly watching Theo walk away suddenly felt bad for him, even though they originally intended to rob him if he had gotten his hands on some mana stones.

Nevertheless, Theo hadn't walked very far when something rough suddenly rolled down within his ragged clothes and got caught in the area above his waist strap.

The discomfort produced by the foreign objects rubbing against his skin when he walked prompted him to remove them and see what they were. However, his mind immediately went blank when he placed his hand inside his ragged shirt to grab them.

Unexpectedly, there were five low-rank mana stones inside his ragged shirt.

Chapter 618: Meeting

Once Theo discovered the five low-rank mana stones in his clothes, his hand suddenly trembled as if it held something heavy. At the same time, his sadness disappeared in an instant.

It didn't take a genius to guess where the mana stones came from.

As such, Theo felt endless gratitude toward Vaan. The person didn't just pay him more than the agreed price for even less time; the person also took the extra step to pay him without letting anyone know he had precious mana stones on him.

This would help him avoid a troublesome and dangerous situation.

'Five low-rank mana stones are plenty for mum's medicine. The remaining will also support us for a while,' Theo thought.

The little boy suddenly felt bad for misunderstanding Vaan's intention.

"Hey, kid. Where's your home? I'll walk you home and also pay you the one low-rank mana stone owed to you."

Jihaad's voice abruptly sounded behind Theo, causing the little boy to jump in fright. Afterward, Theo glanced back at Jihaad vigilantly with doubt.

Why was this person so nice to him? What could he gain from this? A clear conscience?

Theo had just comprehended that a seemingly cold and heartless person could actually be good while an apparently kind and generous person could actually be bad. Not everything was as it seemed on the surface, and a person's true heart could only be determined with time.

Meanwhile, Jihaad was startled by the little boy's apprehensive look. This was not the look of someone happy to receive help and protection.

Why would the little boy be on guard against him?

Nevertheless, Jihaad wasn't beyond saving and only took a moment to notice why the little boy was wary of him; he was afraid of getting robbed by him.

But what did the little boy have to be afraid of getting robbed?

Once Jihaad thought that far, he immediately understood Sir Pendragon had, in truth, paid the little kid. He just did it in a way that no one would know in order to protect him.

Jihaad suddenly wanted to bash himself for misunderstanding his idol. He should have thought about this when his idol explained the dangers of paying the little kid openly in front of hungry wolves.

After all, he had already witnessed his idol's unfathomable sleight of hand.

If his idol could even steal from thieves without them knowing, how difficult could it be to slip some mana stones inside a little kid's clothes without anyone knowing?

'But if Sir Pendragon had already thought that far, why didn't he say anything to stop me from leaving?' Jihaad's lips twitched.

Suddenly, he realized he had also unwittingly become part of his idol's plan. Even though his idol took the extra precaution to pay the kid without anyone knowing, it wasn't guaranteed that the little kid wouldn't be in danger.

As such, he ended up becoming the insurance that would help the little kid avoid life-threatening danger.

Everything had gone according to his idol's plan.

'Truly worthy of being my idol. Not only does Sir Pendragon have unparalleled martial talent and wisdom, but he also has an excellent character. He is a role model for all warriors. I shouldn't have doubted his morals,' Jihaad thought.

Nevertheless, after Jihaad took time to convince Theo he had come with good intentions, the two finally went on their way.

...

Meanwhile, Vaan followed Bakram after hearing about Duke Zaahir's invitation and arrived at Dragonchild Castle.

The castle was grand but fancy. After all, it was still a castle made of stone. There wasn't a single valuable material used in its construction. It just had to be large enough to display the authority of the Dragonchild Duke.

With Bakram to lead the way, all the castle guards respectfully stepped aside and gave him clear passage.

Vaan arrived in the Great Hall without an issue.

"You must be Vanderlin Pendragon. You look exactly as I imagined based on the news: young, heroic, and overflowing with talent. Welcome to my castle," Duke Zaahir greeted from his black throne before gesturing to the guest chairs on the side, "Please, take a seat wherever you like."

Vaan nodded and calmly took his seat without a word in response, which could be seen as arrogant and disrespectful to the duke.

However, Vaan didn't care because there was something the duke wanted from him and not the other way around. There was no need for him to stand on ceremony until he determined what that something was.

After all, why did he need to be nice to someone with whom he might not reach an agreement and even become hostile? Wouldn't that be a waste of time and effort?

On another note, Vaan was also testing the other party's attitude and gauging his value in their eyes.

While Bakram frowned at Vaan's impolite behavior, Duke Zaahir simply smiled before asking, "Do you know why I invited you here?"

"Surely, it wasn't to ask for the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill back," Vaan softly chuckled with an unconcerned look.

Duke Zaahir's smile immediately became a little forced and awkward in response to Vaan's joke.

Naturally, Duke Zaahir wouldn't take back something that had been earned through the Blood Exchange Duel. However, it was, after all, a valuable Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill. Even he would feel a little pained to part with it despite being prepared for the risk when he took it out.

It could be said that Vaan's talent had exceeded Duke Zaahir's expectations.

The Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill was only meant for bait. But since it was already lost, Duke Zaahir could only think of another incentive to recruit Vaan.

"Ahem, of course not," Duke Zaahir denied before saying, "But since we are on that topic, may I ask what you think of the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill?"

"The Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill is incredible. However, I am more interested in the one who created it and where to acquire the ingredients. Duke Zaahir, let's not beat around the bush. Just tell me what you want, and I will tell you what I want," Vaan stated straightforwardly.

"How audacious!" Bakram suddenly barked.

Chapter 619: Duke Zaahir's Offer

Bakram had reached the limit of his patience as he witnessed how Vaan treated Duke Zaahir.

Even the hall guards had unsavory expressions regarding Vaan's attitude. However, their status was too low for them to have any right to voice their complaints.

If their lord hadn't shown the slightest displeasure, how could they even begin to criticize their lord's invited guest?

Only Bakram, one of Duke Zaahir's best men, would have the courage to voice his discontent.

"You are in the presence of Duke Dragonchild, Lord of Dragonmoor. Show some respect, young man!" Bakram loudly criticized Vaan. It also seemed like he was venting his lingering indignance from their last duel.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't pay Bakram a single glance and kept his calm gaze on Duke Zaahir.

"Duke Zaahir, your men's discipline is rather poor. I didn't think your authority was so low that even a mere subordinate could interrupt his lord's discussion with his invited guest."

In a few words, Vaan immediately put Bakram in a position of undermining his lord's authority. Bakram paled at once. It was a serious accusation.

After all, it was even more disrespectful than Vaan's current attitude.

"My Lord, I... I wasn't trying...!" Bakram quickly tried to explain himself to Duke Zaahir.

"Sigh..." Duke Zaahir glanced at Bakram and the hall guards before saying, "You can leave us, Bakram. The rest of you can also leave if you think you will interrupt us again."

Bakram opened his mouth, but no words came out. He wanted to object, but he feared it would be seen as a further example of him undermining his lord's authority.

Even if his lord knew it wasn't the case, his lord would still be displeased if others thought so.

"I understand, my Lord," Bakram complied after a sigh. He left the Great Hall with his head hanging down dejectedly.

On the other hand, the hall guards remained behind without a sound. They were well aware of their positions. Unless their lord instructed them otherwise, they would continue to guard the hall in silence.

In truth, the hall guards did not need to guard the Great Hall.

Their main duty was to protect their lord. However, their presence was nothing more than a false sense of security. After all, there was nothing they could do to change the outcome with their meager strength if the threat was something even their powerful lord couldn't handle.

"Hahaha, please excuse Bakram's poor manners, Young Master Vanderlin," Duke Zaahir softly chuckled to lighten the tension as he continued, "I've heard everything about the duel between you. He must still feel resentful regarding the unorthodox tactics you deployed to defeat him but don't let that mind you."

"It is also true that Bakram overstepped his boundaries in my stead, so I will make sure to discipline him later. I hope Young Master Vanderlin won't hold a grudge over his harsh words just now," Duke Zaahir expressed.

"If Duke Zaahir doesn't mind it, then I won't either," Vaan casually said with a smile.

"Hahaha, good!" Duke Zaahir exclaimed, seemingly delighted, before boldly stating, "Since Young Master Vanderlin is so straightforward, I shall be blunt as well. I want you to participate in the upcoming Ten-Year Glory Evaluation as a guest fighter of my faction and win the championship."

"Oh?" Vaan slightly smiled before asking, "You don't want to ask me to pledge my loyalty to you?"

"Surely you jest, Young Master Vanderlin," Duke Zaahir smiled wryly and said, "If you could be persuaded to pledge your loyalty to me, I would have already tried. However, an impressive young man like you dislikes being under another."

Vaan's attitude from the start of their meeting had told Duke Zaahir that much.

Furthermore, Vaan was still a suspected member of the Evermore ancient family. It was impossible to recruit such a person. As such, Duke Zaahir could only give up on that and hoped they could at least cooperate.

"You like to be free and unfettered," Duke Zaahir added.

Vaan calmly smiled before asking, "What can you offer me if I agree to participate in the Ten-Year Glory Evaluation and win the championship for you?"

"You said you were interested in the creator of the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill and the ingredients used to create it, correct?" Duke Zaahir mentioned before saying, "I can tell you more about the Pill King."

"However, if you want to acquire the pill ingredients, I cannot help you with that, even if I want to. The pill ingredients are all specially cultivated by the Pill King in a very special but limited environment."

"Even if I am a duke of the empire, my words hold no weight in front of the Pill King. No one can take his precious herbs if he doesn't want anyone to. Thus, the best thing I can do within my authority is arrange a meeting with the Pill King for you—if that is your wish," Duke Zaahir stated.

"I see..." Vaan uttered thoughtfully.

Although Duke Zaahir's offer was nothing much, he did indirectly reveal some vital information.

For example, the Pill King's status was very high. However, Vaan didn't find this strange at all. Anyone who could create a heaven-defying pill capable of producing a Rank 4 Body Refiner deserved nothing but the highest level of respect in any warrior-oriented country.

Secondly, the special environment where the Pill King cultivated his herbs was top secret and couldn't be elaborated.

Given Vaan's current status, it would indeed be difficult for him to meet such a highly regarded figure in the empire without external support. As such, borrowing Duke Zaahir's influence would be ideal for him.

"Is that all you can offer me?" Vaan asked before softly muttering, "That doesn't seem very appealing for the amount of effort I have to put in to receive it..."

"Of course not, Young Master Vanderlin. I only mention these first because I believe you would be interested," Duke Zaahir smiled wryly before saying, "I can also write a recommendation letter to the Martial Hall, asking them to make you an honorary core member."

"That should save you some trouble, right?" Duke Zaahir smiled.

"Oh?" Vaan appeared more interested and said, "Now we are talking. What else can you offer me? There should still be more, right?"

"What do you mean 'what else?'" Is that not enough for you?' The corners of Duke Zaahir's lips twitched as he thought Vaan's appetite was not small.

"I can give you a three-day training pass on the Black Mountain," Duke Zaahir further offered with a forced smile while feeling his heart bleeding.

Training on the Black Mountain was not cheap.

However, Duke Zaahir believed this sacrifice would all be worth it as long as Vaan could win the championship in the Ten-Year Glory Evaluation for him.

What was the Ten-Year Glory Evaluation anyway?

Chapter 620: The Rising Dragon Division

The Ten-Year Glory Evaluation was a grand competition that was only held in the capital of the Great Ratholos Empire once every ten years. Talented warriors across the empire would travel to the capital to participate and try their luck.

The Ten-Year Glory Evaluation had two important purposes as to why it was hosted every ten years. The first was to determine the most talented warrior of that period, and the second was to uncover the lord who had cultivated the best and most talented warriors.

Of course, not every participating warrior in the event would be personally cultivated by the lord. But as long as the lord's territory was their home, their lord would also share in their glory—if they achieved amazing results in the competition.

Essentially, the competition was held to review the development status of each lord's territory.

Naturally, the grand event came with generous rewards that would benefit both the top-ranking warriors in the competition and the lord of the region they were affiliated with. Considering the event was sponsored by Emperor Varan and the Sea Emperor, it would be strange if the rewards weren't great.

Supposedly, the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pills had been part of the reward for the past several Ten-Year Glory Evaluations.

Nevertheless, Duke Zaahir was definitely not after these Rank 4 Body Reformation Pills. These priceless pills were only rewarded to the champions of the competition. The lords had a different kind of benefit.

For example, the opportunity to meet Emperor Varan and ask him to implement a new law or change an existing one.

Although there was a chance the request could be rejected if it was too ridiculous, Vaan didn't doubt Duke Zaahir was pinning his hopes on this opportunity to save his domain. Duke Zaahir only needed to ask Emperor Varan to set a price limit for water sales to stop the greedy water suppliers from exploiting the western region's weakness.

Alas, that would only resolve the surface issue.

It wouldn't solve the political problem, which even Emperor Varan had turned a blind eye to.

However, what was the political problem?

Vaan could guess it was related to Duke Zaahir and Emperor Varan's other brothers, who were also dukes. Even though they ruled over parts of the prosperous eastern region, they must have felt threatened by Duke Zaahir, who practically controlled the entire western region alone.

Furthermore, this sense of threat was most likely borne when Duke Zaahir's farmland took shape.

The other dukes must have realized that once Duke Zaahir made the western region prosperous, he would have higher chances of earning first place in all future Ten-Year Glory Evaluations.

After all, the other dukes' territories in the eastern region were smaller compared to Duke Zaahir, who controlled the whole western region with his farmland. Moreover, most of the foreign visitors entered the empire from the western region. That gave Duke Zaahir the first opportunity to recruit any talented warrior that came.

In other words, Duke Zaahir would have an incomparably larger talent pool to draw from if he could succeed in making the western region prosperous.

As such, how could the other dukes not try to suppress Duke Zaahir by ruining his farmland, the key to controlling the whole western region?

Vaan blinked as he saw through the heart of the matter.

"Alright, I agree," Vaan accepted Duke Zaahir's offers.

Vaan could have tried to push for a few more benefits, but he was aware Duke Zaahir had already given him the best offers. The person had shown enough sincerity by doing so. There was no need to hurt a potential long-term business partner for small gains.

"Great!" Duke Zaahir exclaimed with delight and no longer felt burdened by the matter.

Shortly after, Duke Zaahir and Vaan refined the details of their agreement. Duke Zaahir agreed to give Vaan some of the benefits in advance. However, the Ten-Year Glory Evaluation was only one week away.

As such, in order to give Vaan enough time to train on the Black Mountain with his three-day training pass, Duke Zaahir quickly arranged for Vaan to leave with his personal group of talented warriors on the same day.

Duke Zaahir also wrote his recommendation letters and stamped them with his unique seal before handing them to Vaan. He also told him who to find and which letter to hand over.

After everything was settled, Duke Zaahir still had one important matter he needed to confirm with Vaan.

"By the way, Young Master Vanderlin. How old are you, exactly? Although you look young enough, they test people's bone age to determine their real age. This is to avoid cheating. So it will also be awkward if you didn't meet the age requirement to participate in the Rising Dragon Division," Duke Zaahir mentioned.

The Ten-Year Glory Evaluation was divided into the Junior Dragon Division, Rising Dragon Division, and Senior Dragon Division. Only those under twenty could participate in the Junior Dragon Division. The Rising Dragon Division required those below the age of forty.

As for the Senior Dragon Division, only warriors between the forty and a hundred years of age could enter.

The Senior Dragon Division gave the best individual rewards, while the Rising Dragon Division had the best regional lord benefits.

Vaan thought for a moment before answering honestly, "Twenty."

"Twenty..." Duke Zaahir's body spasmed.

Duke Zaahir was shocked, but not because Vaan's age met the bare minimum requirement to enter the Rising Dragon Division. He was shocked because Vaan was even younger than he imagined.

In Duke Zaahir's mind, Vaan had already consumed the Rank4 Body Reformation Pill. Thus, his body cultivation must have already been elevated to the next stage.

'A twenty-year-old in the middle stages of Rank 4 Body Refining Realm... Oh my god!' Duke Zaahir was dismayed and wanted to scream.

The young man before him was barely an adult, yet he nearly stood on top of the world.

'The Evermore family... What the hell have they been doing all these years? Did they dig up the site of some ancient civilization and obtain a powerful inheritance or something? How did they produce such a monster?'

At that moment, Duke Zaahir felt certain Vaan came from the Evermore family. Other than the most elusive of the five ancient families, who else could cultivate such a monster?

'This monster is going to shock the entire capital at the event,' Duke Zaahir firmly believed.