

The Witch 641

Chapter 641: Divine Sword City

The Shadow Witch Order founded by Eniwse served two main purposes. The first and foremost was to collect various information, regardless of their usefulness or not, for Vaan. It was the original intention behind the founding of the Shadow Witch Order.

However, the second main purpose was even more important than the first: learning about the various situations in Pangea.

Since the seven witch kingdoms had been isolated from the rest of the continent for many years, they knew very little about worldly affairs in the other parts of the Pangea continent. But now that they had gained access through the Holy Knight Empire, they were like butterflies breaking free from their cocoons. They had to spread their wings across Pangea and catch up on the state of affairs.

It was exceedingly important.

After all, there were still five Devil's Contractors hidden in Pangea.

Eniwse had learned how much trouble a single Devil's Contractor could cause. Even if she had no intention of dealing with the other five Devil's Contractors, she still had to keep them under her watchful eyes.

Nothing good would come from letting the Devil's Contractors freely act without restraint.

However, uncovering the identities of the Devil's Contractors was like searching for a needle in a haystack; it was extremely difficult, requiring a lot of time and effort. Even so, the Shadow Witch Order determined to achieve it, no matter where the Devil's Contractors were hiding.

To achieve their purpose, the shadow witches followed one motto – where there was a secret, the shadow witches' eyes and ears must be near.

Eniwse had worked tirelessly for her goal and spared little time for rest. A normal High Witch would have collapsed from exhaustion in her shoes, but she persevered. Her body and mind were weary, but her heart remained firm.

She wondered if her tenacious spirit was a benefit of recovering from berserk transformation.

Nevertheless, Vaan's timely yet surprising visit finally allowed Eniwse to unwind and relax. Alas, she could only enjoy three hours of intimate moments with Vaan before she was completely exhausted.

However, after thirty minutes of rest, since Vaan left, Eniwse's body and mind were restored to an even better state than before, as if she had taken some miraculous all-recovery drug.

When Eniwse came out of her main office, she immediately noticed the odd stares she received from her subordinates. Their faces were still feverish from the stimulation, and a unique womanly smell also permeated the air.

Realization quickly dawned on her, causing her cheeks to flush slightly red. Still, she maintained a cool and aloof look; even if she knew she forgot to use a sound-proof spell on her office, she couldn't reveal her embarrassed side in front of her subordinates.

Where would her face be if she did?

"Grand Mistress, who was that?" a shadow witch couldn't help but ask with strong curiosity, thinking a man who could reduce her leader to such a state of sheer bliss had to possess some ungodly skills in the art of pleasure.

"Besides Lord Vaan, who else do you think I would allow to touch this body of mine?" Eniwse calmly answered.

"Ah... Lord Vaan..."

Since Vaan entered and exited Eniwse's office with spatial shifts, not a single shadow witch had been able to identify him through the cover of the office wall.

However, once the shadow witches learned of his visit, they immediately wore regretful expressions as if they had missed a great opportunity to be graced by his noble presence.

The majority of the members of the Shadow Witch Orders were all Early-stage High Witches who had advanced with Vaan's assistance and swore their allegiance to him. They were also the main reason the Shadow Witch Order could expand its network to its current state so quickly.

"Alright, enough dilly-dallying and get back to work! We have a goal to achieve!" Eniwse dismissed the shadow witches sternly as she couldn't hide her embarrassment from them much longer.

The shadow witches quickly hurried back to their posts when they sensed a hint of annoyance in Eniwse's tone. They were aware they had overstepped their boundaries and were afraid of punishments.

What right did they have to inquire about their superior's personal business?

"Oh right, Grand Mistress. We received some alarming intel from our new branch in Divine Sword City," a shadow witch suddenly recalled her important business.

"From Divine Sword City?" Eniwse immediately furrowed her brows at the mention of the city's name as if just hearing it gave her a headache. "Spill it!" she demanded.

Divine Sword City was a city-state situated just south of the Holy Knight Empire.

It was also one of the twelve city-states that had entered an agreement and formed the Divine League in response to the Holy Knight Empire's potential invasion for territorial expansion.

When the Shadow Witch Order first infiltrated Divine Sword City to set up their new branch, they met with fierce resistance. As a result of their carelessness, their new branch was destroyed, and twenty-seven High Witches lost their lives.

They had also failed a second operation and lost another twenty-five High Witches.

On the third attempt, they eventually succeeded in establishing their new branch in Divine Sword City, but its situation was not stable. The cost it took to reach this stage had been the Shadow Witch Order's biggest loss since its establishment.

There was something wrong with Divine Sword City.

"Yes, Grand Mistress," the shadow witch quickly complied with a solemn expression.

"According to our members in Divine Sword City, the locals appear to be extremely hostile toward witches. Any new witch awakened to their Specialized Magic would be caught and hanged in three days if found out. As a result of this custom, the city's development is affected, and the local women live in perpetual fear."

"Compared to its neighboring countries, Divine Sword City is considered quite underdeveloped, yet its strength does not fall behind at all. On the contrary, their sword masters are unexpectedly very strong," the shadow witch reported.

The city-state wasn't well-developed, but it had strong sword masters that could deal with the Shadow Witch Order's High Witches without leaving any survivors.

If someone said there was nothing wrong with Divine Sword City, Eniwse would certainly be the first to disagree.

There was definitely a great secret hidden within Divine Sword City.

"Investigate it! We must get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, Grand Mistress!"

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Chapter 642: Uproar in the Evron Family

Meanwhile, after Vaan left Eniwse's place, he visited Astoria's bedchamber in the imperial palace of the Holy Knight Empire.

The sleeping beauty was originally breathing stably, but Vaan's sudden presence caused a brief pause.

Astoria was a light sleeper; the slightest disturbance or sense of danger would immediately wake her up normally. But perhaps because she felt Vaan's familiar presence or the sense of security that came with him, she was only half-awakened.

Unbeknownst to Astoria, a different form of danger was creeping closer to her.

Vaan silently undressed, slipped into her bed, and slowly embraced her from behind. Astoria was only fully jolted awake when he assaulted her twin peaks and caused a strong pleasurable stimulation to rush up to her head.

"Ahh—!" Astoria cried, eyes snapping wide open with alarm.

Fury quickly filled her heart, realizing someone had snuck into her bed to assault her. But when she found out it was Vaan, her anger deflated like drifting smoke.

"V-Vaan?! When did you return—Ahh..."

When Astoria's heart softened, and her body felt weak from Vaan's familiar warmth, touch, and sense, her voice became increasingly gentle and alluring.

In normal cases, Astoria would have the vigor of a mighty dragon and have the mood to battle Vaan in bed for several days straight under his blissful stimulations.

However, Vaan found her during one of her most vulnerable moments. Like Eniwse, Astoria had also been exhausted in body and mind from toiling without rest for the well-being of her empire. There was so much she wanted to achieve to steer the Holy Knight Empire on the right track.

When Vaan was around, Astoria worked hard. But when he wasn't around, she worked even harder!

"Vaan, please... not tonight. I'm tired," Astoria pleaded with a look that would tickle men's hearts.

"You've worked hard, my empress," Vaan softly chuckled, seemingly having no intention of following her wish, as he said, "As a reward, let this humble servant service you and nurse you back to health."

"You... Ahh~!"

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Astoria's captivating cries escaped her bedchamber as her body helplessly entangled with Vaan's in a heated session of dual practice.

Dual practice could be physically strenuous, but it always had the nature of giving more benefits to the weaker party. Even if Astoria was exhausted in body and mind, a little more exertion was only needed for her to enjoy a much swifter recovery and beyond when her dual-practice partner was Vaan.

Even if she were devoid of strength during their dual-practice session, she would surely be up and running the next morning, full of spirit and vigor.

It wasn't farfetched to say that Vaan was pumping life back into her fatigued body!

Vaan originally planned to visit another one of his women and satisfy them with the remaining time until morning, but alas... Astoria, this woman, was a tenacious fighter, even when she was worn out from overworking.

They ended up dual-practicing until the sun rose on the horizon.

"I need to go back now."

"Mm."

Astoria didn't say anything to keep Vaan for longer when he expressed his intention to leave.

They were playful when they could be playful, but they were both serious people. They would not hold each other back when they had something that needed to be done.

After Vaan cleaned and dressed himself, he left through a spatial portal without hesitation.

Astoria also didn't stay in bed for too long.

After an hour of rest to condition her body with the residual mana gathered during their dual-practice session, Astoria was like a dying dragon that had been revitalized.

This was especially so when she got up, causing the bedsheet stained from their lovemaking to slide off her body and allow the light of the morning sun to kiss the surface of her skin, filling her with more energy and life.

Her eyes sparkled with crystal-clear clarity as her body brimmed with spirit and vigor.

It had been a restless night for her. Yet, Astoria recovered better than any amount of normal beauty sleep could have given her. The proof was clear from her glossy, clear skin, which glowed like the reflection of the moon in lake water – translucent with a touch of ethereal beauty.

"Mmm~! Time to get back to work," Astoria muttered with bright eyes after stretching.

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Great Ratholos Empire, Imperial Capital

Vaan calmly stepped out of the spatial portal and found himself back inside the underground training chamber within the Evron family's estate.

'Any changes in the Evron family during my absence, Fraegar?' Vaan inquired.

'Yes, Supreme Leader,' Fraegar admitted before reporting, 'The Evron family found out about their empty treasury half an hour after you left, and the entire estate had been in a state of uproar since then.'

'The head of the family also wanted to ask you some questions but did not send anyone to summon you. Instead, he had been anxiously waiting for you to emerge from the training chamber,' Fraegar added.

'Oh?' Vaan was a little surprised by Beru's attitude.

Even if the Evron family sided with a villainous character like Duke Gamliel, who had no scruples in ruining the western region's development and causing suffering to millions of people to suppress a rival, they still had some notable integrity.

It was clear that not everyone in Duke Gamliel's faction would be an irredeemable character like Duke Gamliel himself. Although most people in Duke Gamliel's faction likely pursued self-interest, some also joined for self-preservation.

Not everything was always clearly divided into good and evil, right and wrong. It could be wrong to join hands with evil, but it could never be wrong to protect one's family.

Perhaps the Evron family did have a choice but to side with Duke Gamliel's faction, and they weren't necessarily bad people. Vaan still needed time to observe them before he could make a conclusive judgment.

But for now, he currently didn't have a bad impression of them at the very least.

That said, Vaan wouldn't return their treasury even if the Evron family were good people. They stood on the opposing side due to the benefits, so they had to accept the losses that also came with it.

'Let me see what the head of the Evron family has to say,' Vaan smiled with fear as he looked forward to the meeting.

Chapter 643: Stirring the Pot of Shit

When Vaan left the underground training chamber, the guards immediately informed him of their family head's desire to see him. As such, he willingly followed them with a look of ignorance, seemingly unaware of what was happening.

At the same time, Vaan had Fraegar remove her anti-detection and detection spells on the underground training chamber to remove their traces.

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Evron family's estate, Meeting Hall

"Lord Evron, Young Master Vanderlin emerged from his training and has come to see you."

"What? Quickly send him in at once!"

"Yes, my Lord."

News of Vaan's arrival quickly reached Beru's ears before he urged his servants to bring Vaan inside the Meeting Hall to see him. Besides Vaan's absence, all direct members of the Evron family were present.

However, everyone's eyes were red, weary, and filled with concerns and worries. It was clear they had stayed up all night.

"Lord Beru, I've heard you wanted to see me?" Vaan casually strode into the Meeting Hall and commented, "I noticed the mood within the Evron family didn't seem quite heavy and serious."

"What happened? Did we get attacked again during the night?" Vaan added with baffled surprise.

"We didn't get attacked, but it's worse than any attack we could have gotten; we were robbed by someone! Our underground treasury had been emptied, Young Master Vanderlin. Most importantly, no one knew when or how it happened!" Beru solemnly stated, giving Vaan a sharp look as if he were trying to see through him.

"What?" Vaan revealed a look of utter shock and disbelief as he muttered, "Oh no, how could such a thing happen? Young Master Acharon only just gave me a tour yesterday. There were so many valuable items in there, big and small. How could someone move all of it out of the treasury without anyone noticing?"

As if fearing his priceless Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill had also been robbed unknowingly, Vaan fumbled through his clothes to find the item before heaving a sigh of relief.

Naturally, if the 'culprit' could unknowingly rob the Evron family's treasury, they could do the same to the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill... right?

"Haiz!" Beru sighed heavily and dropped his suspicions of Vaan after seeing that.

Beru's suspicions had been weak and had no basis to begin with. In fact, he didn't believe Vaan could have robbed his Evron family's treasury.

After all, the poor lad had been targeted by the unknown enemy's magical attacks twice and had his clothes and backpack destroyed. All his belongings spilled out, and there was nothing he could have hidden, not even spatial storage-type magic tools.

Thus, Vaan's words only further validated the truth that he could not have been the culprit. Instead, he was a victim of a vicious scheme.

The enemy wanted to make Young Master Vanderlin a scapegoat – was what Beru believed.

How could Beru not see that?

Nevertheless, despite knowing all that, Beru still had no choice but to suspect Young Master Vanderlin, even a little, because he had no other leads.

"That's the biggest mystery none of us can figure out!" Beru scrunched his brows with complicated emotions, feeling both confused and depressed.

"The enemy must have taken advantage of the chaos to rob the treasury... But no matter how chaotic the Evron family's estate was, it shouldn't have been possible for anyone to slip past our security..."

The chaos only lasted a short moment during the first magical attack. Such a small time frame was too small for anyone to have emptied out the treasury.

Furthermore, after the initial chaos, the security was even tighter!

Who was so capable of cleaning out their treasury from right under their noses with these conditions?!

Meanwhile, Acharon heaved a sigh of relief when he heard his father's words. Since Young Master Vanderlin was no longer suspected, the pressure on him was also gone. After all, if Young Master Vanderlin were truly the culprit, he would have been the one who let the wolf into their home.

His punishment wouldn't have been light in that case, even if he was the eldest young master.

"Father, Young Master Vanderlin isn't the culprit, but his intellect is as astounding as his martial talent," Acharon mentioned before suggesting, "Perhaps he can offer us some insight that may disperse the fog before our eyes?"

"Alright," Beru nodded, turning back to Vaan. "What do you think about this matter, Young Master Vanderlin?"

"This shouldn't be the work of a warrior," Vaan immediately stated with a look of certainty.

"Oh?" Beru was startled.

At the same time, Beru became curious due to Vaan's confidence despite him knowing nothing about the robbery prior to their meeting.

"May I ask why you think that is the case?" Beru asked.

"I have seen the content of the treasury; there were far too many valuable items in there, big or small. Even if an enemy warrior with a spatial storage-type magic tool managed to slip inside the treasury, it would take them too much time to take everything. This is the first point," Vaan calmly listed.

"Secondly, the treasury's security isn't poor. The guards were not weak, and the sealed entrance was of the highest quality. Even if a Rank 5 Body Refiner or Aura King managed to slip past the guards, they still wouldn't have been able to access the treasury without alarming the Evron family—unless they had the key."

"However, I trust Young Master Acharon had the key on him at all times during the period of the robbery and had never lost sight of it."

"That's right!" Acharon admitted happily, but then his expression paled, fearing everyone might suspect he played a hand in the robbery.

Acharon wanted to say something to defend himself, but his unfounded worries were absolved by Vaan's following words.

"That's why it can't be the work of any warrior. Even if the magical attacks had been a distraction, no warrior could have cleaned out such a large treasury so quickly. However, it would be a different story for someone who could use magic and has a high level of advancement in it."

"It wouldn't be difficult for a magic user to cloak himself with invisibility and bypass the treasury's security before proceeding to swallow everything with their magic."

"I also heard magic users at the Rank 3 Senior Witch level or above all have a Magic Domain, which could also act as their personal spatial storage. As such, these kinds of magic users don't need any other spatial storage-type magic tools."

"So it was the work of a Witch Doctor or Shaman?" Beru uttered as his expression turned cold.

Although the Great Ratholos Empire wasn't well-developed or focused on magic, the study of magic still existed.

That said, magic was only a supplementary path to aid warriors in their development.

Such magic aid varied from assisting warriors' advancement in their cultivation, fixing internal injuries that resulted from training mistakes, or simply healing external wounds and curing illnesses in general.

There were also other areas where magic was relied upon when warriors could not resolve them through non-magic means.

As such, while Witches were scorned in the Great Ratholos Empire, Witch Doctors and Shamans were valued. Essentially, Witch Doctors and Shamans were also Witches, but they were considered noble and greatly respected by warriors.

Witches only advanced magic for the sake of themselves, but Witch Doctors and Shamans did so to help others.

That said, Vaan was no fool; he wouldn't believe all Witch Doctors and Shamans were selfless saints.

"It is most definitely the work of a Witch Doctor or Shaman. However, every faction also has at least a couple of Witch Doctors and Shamans. The Evron family shouldn't be an exception, either. Thus, if we add all these Witch Doctors and Shamans, the list would be far too long and the suspect unclear."

"If we want to find the culprit, we must first tackle the most important questions – who benefits the most from robbing the Evron family's treasury? They could rob the Evron family's treasury, but they didn't take my Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill? I was clearly targeted, yet I was also spared. So what was their purpose behind this?"

"If you think about it, someone was clearly trying to make me a scapegoat. I believe everyone would most likely suspect this was Duke Zaahir's revenge against me for betraying his trust."

"Isn't that likely the case, Young Master Vanderlin?" Acharon uttered with surprise.

After the direct members of the Evron family listened to Vaan's points, it truly seemed like an act of revenge made by Duke Zaahir's faction.

After all, killing a traitor wouldn't be difficult for Duke Zaahir, but would he let a traitor who flocked to Duke Gamliel's side have such an easy death? Why not arrange it so that Duke Gamliel's faction would doubt the traitor and leave him with no backers?

Why not borrow the hands of Duke Gamliel's faction to remove a traitor? Would the traitor not die with great regret?

Surely, such a method would be much more satisfying than simple execution.

"But what if the true culprit wanted everyone to think that way? – To rob the Evron family and pin the blame on Duke Zaahir?" Vaan introduced another train of thought, causing Beru's heart to turn cold.

"Duke Zaahir's influence in the eastern region is quite weak, let alone the imperial capital, which lies in the easternmost area. As such, Duke Zaahir catching news of my betrayal and taking lightning-swift actions with a carefully thought-out scheme in mind so quickly doesn't seem possible if you think about it."

"I guess the real question is – who would benefit the most by sparking a big conflict between Duke Zaahir and Duke Gamliel?"

Boom!

Vaan's enlightening words were like thunder in Beru's ears, shaking his heart with great alarm. At the same time, a clear image of the true culprit was also formed in his mind.

"Duke Zohar!" Beru's eyes burned with hatred.

Besides Duke Zohar's faction, who else possessed the biggest and strongest number of Witch Doctors and Shaman? Besides Duke Zohar's faction, who else would benefit the most from a big conflict between Duke Zaahir and Duke Gamliel?

If Duke Zohar made Duke Zaahir and Duke Gamliel destroy each other, he would have no more competitors!

Even if Duke Zaahir and Duke Gamliel didn't destroy each other, they would be greatly weakened! Then, Duke Zohar would emerge as the strongest victor with the highest chance of ascending the throne after Emperor Varan!

Based on Vaan's intel, Duke Zaahir was originally uninterested in the imperial throne.

However, Duke Zaahir was embroiled in Duke Zohar and Duke Gamliel's conflict after he cultivated his farmlands and developed the western region, which led to the latter two viewing him as a huge threat and teaming up.

They gauged the heart of a gentleman with their villainous means!

However, what caused these three blood brothers to compete for the imperial throne when their eldest brother was still firmly sitting on it?

The truth was actually not a big secret – Emperor Varan had no sons, only daughters.

The absence of an heir affected the stability of the empire!

Chapter 644: Stirring the Pot of Shit (2)

Vaan had read and heard Varan Armstrong was an emperor with unparalleled strength and great wisdom. Although such praises towards the emperor tend to be exaggerated and sometimes even incorrect, there must be some truth behind them.

As such, how could Emperor Varan not know about the importance of an heir? And if Emperor Varan knew about the importance of an heir, why didn't he produce one? Or was it because he couldn't?

Vaan had yet to learn the full situation regarding Emperor Varan, but he could already smell the stench of conspiracy.

Moreover, it was a big one.

After all, if the emperor knew about the problem but had yet to resolve it after so long, then it only proved that the emperor was incapable of resolving it.

However, that also implied the mastermind, who was stopping the emperor from having sons, used well-hidden or untraceable methods.

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Meanwhile, after Beru and his Evron family pondered over Vaan's analysis, they became increasingly certain Duke Zohar had been the mastermind behind last night's attack and robbery.

They had spent a whole night without sleep trying to figure out the culprit. Now that the culprit had been identified, they finally had a target to direct all their anger.

Such concentrated anger was even enough to terrify an ordinary person to death!

After all, the Evron family's future hundred years of development resources had been robbed clean by a temporary ally.

Who could bear such a loss? Who could stomach such injustice?

Nevertheless, Beru felt thankful to Vaan.

Vaan had reminded Beru of one truth – Duke Gamliel and Duke Zohar might have joined hands to deal with Duke Zaahir, but they were absolutely not allies!

"Hmph! What a good Duke Zohar!" Beru spat grudgingly with a stomach full of hatred.

Beru wanted nothing more than to tear Duke Zohar apart and force the latter to spit out everything he had taken from the Evron family. However, he also knew the Evron family alone could not deal with a giant like Duke Zohar.

"Prepare some riders! I will be making a trip to see Lord Gamliel. The Eldest Young Master and Young Master Vanderlin will also accompany me," Beru instructed, knowing Acharon and Vaan intended to visit Duke Gamliel.

Sometime later, the trio left on the back of wyverns. But before they left, Beru firmly instructed the servants to guard the family's treasury well.

"Why did the family head instruct us to guard the treasury? The underground treasury had already been robbed clean. There's nothing left to guard..." a male servant uttered.

"Stupid! The underground treasury is gone, but don't we still have the surface one?! If we even lose the surface wealth, then the Evron family would really be ruined! We might even end up on the streets!"

"Right..." the male servant reflected.

If the Evron family truly went bankrupt, who would pay his salary?

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Duke Gamliel was the ruler of the largest territory in the southern half of the eastern region. As such, he did not have a lot of land in the imperial capital. He only owned a single manor to use during his visits.

That said, Duke Gamliel's manor was still large enough to accommodate fifty other guests besides himself.

Moreover, Duke Gamliel's manor occupied one of the best hills in the imperial capital's southern district. It also grew all kinds of rare plants and herbs that could be used for body-refining purposes. As such, its value was very high.

The air was refreshing, and the environment was peaceful; simply living there could make regular people healthy.

However, the usually tranquil atmosphere of the herbal garden was suffused with a heavy gloom after Beru Evron recounted Vaan's analysis and expressed his thoughts to Duke Gamliel while the latter tended to his rare plants.

Duke Gamliel's top two retainers were also present with solemn expressions after they listened.

The attention to detail and clear reasoning within Vaan's analysis left them utterly convinced of Duke Zohar's involvement in the night raid on the Evron family's estate.

In their minds, there wasn't anyone else who was more resourceful and capable enough to carry out such an elaborate and swift robbery on one of the top families in the imperial capital. Besides Duke Zohar, they couldn't think of anyone else with such means.

As such, when Duke Gamliel casually sought their opinions while watering his plants, they quickly voiced their opinions in favor of Beru's guess.

"My Lord, it has to be Duke Zohar's doing. His scheme is too devious; he never thought about playing fair!"

"That's right, my Lord! Duke Zohar's territory in the north is richer mana, which allowed him to recruit from a larger talent pool of Witch Doctors and Shamans. This, in turn, allowed him to possess more power and influence than us!"

"Duke Zohar must have grown impatient since he holds the greatest advantage and conveniently found a way to take Duke Zaahir and us both out in one fell swoop! We would have fallen for his scheme if not for Lord Beru's words!"

Duke Gamliel calmly nodded, silently agreeing with his two retainers' statements.

Indeed, the Evron family had not been secretive about Vaan's visit and his possession of a Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill. As such, everyone in Duke Gamliel's faction quickly believed the night attack on the Evron family was Duke Zaahir's retaliation against them for stealing his people.

Nevertheless, the source of last night's issue stemmed from Vaan's "defection" to their faction.

After learning the detailed analysis had come from Vaan, Duke Gamliel's interest in him grew. After all, such an intelligent and talented person chose Duke Gamliel's faction over Duke Zohar's.

Didn't that imply Duke Gamliel had a higher chance of sitting on the throne?

"Young Master Vanderlin, what do you think about this situation? Do you also think Duke Zohar was behind last night's events?" Duke Gamliel inquired, glancing at Vaan with a thoughtful look.

After all, Vaan had only provided an analysis; he had yet to draw his own conclusion. At the very least, he had not openly said he believed Duke Zohar was the mastermind.

That said, Vaan had no intention of directly accusing Duke Zohar. Doing so would only leave a flaw in his plan and weaken everyone's belief in Duke Zohar's involvement.

An intelligent person could even suspect Vaan was secretly pushing everyone to think that way.

As such, the only way to make everyone completely believe in Duke Zohar's involvement was to make Duke Zohar himself unknowingly admit he was behind it.

Since Vaan arrived at Duke Gamliel's manor before Duke Zohar's people did, the initiative was in his hands.

"Although the subtle clues of last night's events seem to point towards Duke Zohar, we don't actually know for certain if it was truly Duke Zohar's doing. Without proof, all speculations are just educated guesses, Your Grace," Vaan calmly replied.

"Oh?" Duke Gamliel's eyes lit up.

His expectations of Vaan were raised after hearing his reply.

In fact, Duke Gamliel would have been disappointed if Vaan had outright accused Duke Zohar of being the mastermind of last night's events.

Duke Gamliel wasn't looking for a collective opinion—or rather, a collective opinion was not good enough for him.

Duke Gamliel was the feudal lord of the eastern region's southern half and had an ambition as high as the heavens. Every choice he made had enormous impacts and consequences. To act on a mere assumption was not good enough for him; he needed certainty.

"In that case, does Young Master Vanderlin have any method of proving Duke Zohar was the mastermind?" Duke Gamliel asked with heightened expectations, thinking Vaan's defection to his faction was his greatest blessing in recent years.

"About this..." Vaan appeared to contemplate the subject seriously before replying, "I believe regardless of Duke Zohar's involvement or not, we will only know after he pays Your Grace a visit."

"Oh? How can you be so sure Duke Zohar would visit me, Young Master Vanderlin?" Duke Gamliel smiled.

"That's because Duke Zohar is not omniscient," Vaan confidently stated.

"Even if he did plot last night's events, he would need confirmation of its success – Duke Zohar would need to know if he had successfully fooled us into believing Duke Zaahir was the culprit instead. As such, he will definitely come to discuss last night's matter and feel us out."

"On the other hand, even if Duke Zohar wasn't the mastermind, he should be wise enough to realize someone was framing him. As such, he will still come to explain it was a misunderstanding and say it has nothing to do with last night's events."

"However, this is also where it gets tricky," Vaan added.

"There's more?" Duke Gamliel's eyes beamed with excitement. He felt as if listening to Vaan's deconstructed analysis allowed him to grasp the situation in its entirety without missing any gap in detail.

"Absolutely, Your Grace," Vaan affirmed before continuing, "Even if Duke Zohar was a wise schemer, does that automatically make you a fool? If you were someone so easily fooled by his schemes, then there shouldn't have been any competition between you at all. At the very least, it wouldn't last until now."

"Right," Duke Gamliel nodded with satisfaction, feeling good about Vaan's analysis. He was a proud man and naturally considered himself capable and wise.

More importantly, why would he admit to being fooled?

"That's why if even Duke Zohar schemed against you, he would still doubt whether you saw through his scheme or, at the very least, suspect him. Thus, ultimately, Duke Zohar will come to give you an explanation, regardless of whether he was the mastermind or not."

"However, the timing of his explanation will let us to know whether he truly was the mastermind or not," Vaan stated.

"I see," Duke Gamliel was enlightened as he grasped the full picture.

The truth was actually very simple.

If Duke Zohar weren't guilty, providing an explanation wouldn't be the first thing he would try to do upon visiting Duke Gamliel.

On the other hand, if Duke Zohar were innocent, he would be trying to discuss Duke Zaahir's intention instead. After all, they were still officially cooperating to suppress Duke Zaahir.

"My Lord, Duke Zohar has come to see you. He is currently waiting outside the manor."

When Duke Gamliel heard the servant's sudden news, he immediately burst into laughter.

"Escort Duke Zohar to the Meeting Hall. I will see him shortly!" Duke Gamliel gallantly commanded, face brimming with smiles of confidence.

He felt like he had been graced by Mother Pangea's smile and had the whole world in the palm of his hand.

Chapter 645: Duke Zaahir's Joy

The more Duke Gamliel looked at Vaan, the more pleased he felt with the latter. Such a talented individual had flocked under his banner.

How could Duke Gamliel not feel gratified?

"I heard you wished to sell your Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill for long-term cultivation resources. I am willing to buy your pill for twenty thousand high-rank mana stones. Do you agree?" Duke Gamliel asked.

When everyone in the herbal garden heard Duke Gamliel's offer, they immediately exclaimed with shock.

Twenty thousand high-rank mana stones were the equivalent of two million low-rank mana stones, but they couldn't be compared in the same breath at all!

After all, high-rank mana stones contained higher purity of mana and were more appealing to a Witch Doctor or Shaman's cultivation. As such, as long as the right buyer was found, one could easily exchange twenty thousand high-rank mana stones for far more than two million low-rank mana stones.

Turning twenty thousand high-rank mana stones into three million low-rank mana stones wasn't out of the realm of possibilities.

What kind of concept was three million low-rank mana stones?

It was more than enough to support a small household's living expenses in the imperial capital for their entire lifetime, let alone a single warrior!

More importantly, even though Rank 4 Body Reformation Pills were extremely precious with great demand but no supply, he had never been sold for more than one and a half million low-rank mana stones at an auction house.

As such, as long as Vaan was lucky enough to buy another Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill from the auction house, it would be as if Vaan had never exchanged his Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill and still profited enough to purchase another one.

Duke Gamliel's generosity was very evident; everyone could easily tell Duke Gamliel favored Vaan.

"I agree, Your Grace," Vaan accepted with a smile, adding, "How could I have the heart and courage to bargain with Your Grace is already so generous?"

"Then it's a deal," Duke Gamliel acknowledged calmly, feeling satisfied with Vaan's answer. The latter knew his place and wasn't greedy.

To Duke Gamliel, a Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill was precious but not something he had to acquire at all costs. After all, he still has three such pills in his collection.

Meanwhile, although Vaan would have loved to tour Duke Gamliel's treasury, the latter wasn't situated in the imperial capital. Also, Duke Gamliel's status was on a whole different level from that of the Evron family.

Duke Gamliel wouldn't just let anyone enter his treasury.

Furthermore, if Vaan had attempted to negotiate more benefits from Duke Gamliel, all his previous efforts to earn the latter's trust would have gone up in smokes. After all, he was giving others the impression that he wanted to flock under Duke Gamliel's banner.

How could someone who wanted to be in Duke Gamliel's good grace dare to re-negotiate an already generous offer?

More importantly, Vaan had already finished analyzing the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill. Even if he couldn't recreate it immediately, he had already learned about the ingredients required and was simulating the pill's creation in his mind.

It was only a matter of time before he figured out how to reproduce the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill en masse. The only reason he had yet to figure it out immediately was due to one vital piece of information that was still missing.

As such, Vaan was more than willing to trade one Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill if it was all it took to destabilize the Great Ratholos Empire.

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Duke Gamliel was very decisive.

After receiving Vaan's agreement, Duke Gamliel immediately summoned two wooden chests from his storage ring, each containing ten thousand high-rank mana stones.

But seeing Vaan stare at them at a loss for words, seemingly uncertain how he would carry them, Duke Gamliel quickly swapped them out for a nameless gold bank card holding the equivalent amount with the Gold Trust Union, the number one financial group in the empire.

Due to the inconvenience of carrying large amounts of mana stones and the lack of spatial storage-type magic tools, nameless bank cards were the mainstream choice for carrying large amounts of wealth.

This type of bank card did not require identity checks to withdraw from the Gold Trust Union; it was practically another form of high-value note money.

"I'm guessing Young Master Vanderlin would like to go and train at the Black Mountain until the Ten-Year Glory Evaluation begins now that you have acquired both the wealth and status required to train there?" Duke Gamliel asked.

Duke Gamliel did not even need to ask whose faction Vaan would participate in the grand competition under. The answer was obvious to him.

After all, Duke Zaahir had pinned his hopes on Vaan winning the championship in the Rising Dragon Division. However, Vaan had sold the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill to Duke Gamliel, which was the equivalent of giving up the chance to win the championship and betraying Duke Zaahir's trust.

As such, even if Vaan participated in the grand competition under Duke Zaahir's affiliation, he would not earn back the latter's goodwill. And if Vaan didn't participate under Duke Gamliel's affiliation, then he wouldn't just be offending one duke but two – something a normal and sane person wouldn't do.

Thus, Duke Gamliel didn't have the slightest doubt about which affiliation Vaan would participate under.

"Mm, I still have Duke Zaahir's three-day training pass, Your Grace," Vaan nodded.

Duke Gamliel quickly burst into laughter before patting Vaan on the shoulders and wishing him good luck during his training. After Duke Gamliel arranged an escort to take Vaan to the Black Mountain, he finally went to receive Duke Zohar jovially.

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Meanwhile, Duke Zohar felt displeased with Duke Gamliel for making him wait in the meeting hall. Over time, this feeling grew.

However, Duke Zohar quickly became startled when he noticed Duke Gamliel's happy expression disappeared upon his arrival, replaced with a slight coldness in his gaze.

This sudden change in attitude alarmed Duke Zohar as he realized what Duke Gamliel suspected.

"Third Brother, this is a misunderstanding. Last night's attack on the Evron family has nothing to do with me," Duke Zohar quickly explained himself.

"Oh?" Duke Gamliel uttered nonchalantly, but his gaze became colder.

"And why would Second Brother think I suspect you were the one behind last night's attack on the Evron family?"

"How do you want me to reply to such a question?"

Duke Zohar felt ridiculous when he received such a rhetorical question from Duke Gamliel.

If Duke Gamliel had not looked at him with such coldness in his eyes because he suspected him behind last night's attack on the Evron family, then what else could have been the reason for such a change of attitude?

Duke Zohar had no idea Vaan was the cause behind Duke Gamliel's change of attitude.

If Vaan had never said anything to Duke Gamliel, the latter would not have shown such coldness toward Duke Zohar. But even if Duke Gamliel doubted Vaan's loyalty, he could do nothing to stop the seed of doubt Vaan planted in his heart.

As such, even if Duke Gamliel later found out Duke Zohar was innocent in last night's matter, it was still impossible for them to continue working together.

How could Duke Gamliel continue working with someone he could not trust?

Moreover, Duke Zohar currently posed the greatest threat to his chances for the throne. On the other hand, Duke Zaahir's threat was almost negligible. As such, he should be helping Duke Zaahir instead.

If Duke Gamliel continued to work with Duke Zohar, he would only be helping the latter sit on the throne.

"How you want to reply is up to you," Duke Gamliel coolly stated before saying, "However, whoever schemed last night's attack, I believe Second Brother knows best! Why else would you suddenly come to see me?"

"But since you came to see me, that is also good! I wanted to tell you something – our cooperation ends today!" Duke Gamliel stated resolutely.

Duke Zohar opened his mouth to speak but eventually held back his words. He saw no reason to prove his innocence.

Since the latter was already determined to blame him, why bother wasting his efforts in vain?

"Hmph!"

Duke Zohar flicked his wrist before angrily storming out of Duke Gamliel's manor without sparing another word on the hopeless fool.

No matter what, Duke Zohar was still a proud lord.

Why did he need to lower himself to someone beneath him—just to clear his name?

That would only make him look weaker!

Furthermore, they had already succeeded in eliminating their greatest threat, Duke Zaahir. Their Fourth Brother had been suppressed so badly for so long that he had fallen into poverty. It would take a long time for Duke Zaahir to recover.

As such, there truly was no further need to continue their cooperation.

If there was one thing Duke Zohar was disgruntled about, it was the fact that their alliance ended before he could deal Duke Gamliel a critical blow!

'This is also fine. It would be a little boring if I defeated my Third Brother too easily,' Duke Zohar thought to himself.

Whether it was wealth, status, or power, he held the advantage in all three categories. He just needed to maintain these advantages until Emperor Varan retired from the throne.

'When Eldest Brother decides to step down, he will surely give the throne to me!'

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As Vaan flew on the back of a wyvern to reach the Black Mountain, news of his deeds reached Duke Zaahir's ears via a long-distance voice-transmission magic tool by one of his supporters, Lord Moyse of the seventh-ranking Sroel family.

When Duke Zaahir first heard Vaan visited the Evron family, an affiliate of Duke Gamliel's faction, with the intention of selling the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill, he did not fly into a rage; he only felt utterly disappointed.

After all, Vaan earned the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill and did not receive it as a gift. Secondly, even if Vaan wanted to join Duke Gamliel's faction, he couldn't do anything to change it.

It was an understandable choice.

However, when Duke Zaahir later heard the Evron family's treasury was robbed clean, all traces of his disappointment disappeared, replaced by a strange, peculiar expression.

Others might not know if he was behind the robbery or not, but Duke Zaahir definitely knew it wasn't him. He was so far away from the imperial capital. Even receiving the latest news from there was delayed, so how could he take such lightning-swift actions?

When Duke Zaahir further heard from Lord Moyse that Duke Zohar went to Duke Gamliel's manor—only to leave with a dark look, he finally couldn't hold it in and burst into laughter.

If even Duke Zohar didn't have anything to do with the robbery, then it definitely had something to do with Vaan!

"My Lord, how can you laugh at such a grave matter? Young Master Vanderlin's betrayal is too great of a blow. We have no hope of restoring the western region's prosperity and ending the people's suffering now," Lord Moyse said with a somber look through the voice transmission.

"Hahaha...!" Duke Zaahir laughed even louder as great joy filled his entire being.

After years of suppression, Duke Zaahir finally felt a mountain of weight lifted off his shoulders. He could vaguely guess Vaan's plan and foresee the upcoming storm it would bring.

If his Second Brother and Third Brother turned against each other, they would not care about him; he would have room to breathe and redevelop the western region. Perhaps one of them would even help in order to deal with the other.

Duke Zaahir wiped the tears that formed on the corners of his eyes before replying, "You do not have to doubt Young Master Vanderlin's loyalty, Sir Moyse. He is absolutely one of our people!"

"However, Young Master Vanderlin is playing a very dangerous game! You must not openly support him, as it may ruin his plans and endanger his life! Protecting him in the dark and playing along on the surface is the best support we can offer!"

"I will be arriving in two day's time with more people. Wait for me," Duke Zaahir instructed with renewed vigor.

Lord Moyse felt emotional after sensing the vigor in Duke Zaahir's tone.

"I hear and obey, my Lord."

Chapter 646: The Divine Black Mountain

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Imperial Capital, Black Mountain

Within the sea of buildings that were part of the imperial capital, a huge plot of land was left undeveloped due to the mountain of black iron at its center, standing out like a sore thumb. A three-hundred-foot-high wall of stone and wood also surrounded the region, barring entry to all without special passes and authority.

Although the wall did not seem all that durable, it was enchanted with countless magical spells and arrays. Whether it was defensive, detection, or offensive spells and arrays, the wall possessed a variety of each category.

Clearly, the Great Ratholos Empire placed the highest importance on the Black Mountain, and its security couldn't be any higher than this.

The number of people who could enter the vicinity of the Black Mountain was few, and those who could stay on it were even fewer. Moreover, depending on their wealth and privilege, they could only stay for a fixed amount of time.

Nevertheless, there were still a few individuals who were permitted to take up permanent residence within the area of the Black Mountain.

The pill creator of the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill was one such individual.

Previously, Duke Zaahir had told Vaan that the ingredients used to create the Rank 4 Reformation Pill were cultivated in a very special and limited environment. Vaan could see from a distance that Duke Zaahir's words could not have been more precise.

The Black Mountain's special magnetic field created a unique domain that separated itself from the rest of the world. As such, herbs grown within this special environment would undoubtedly turn out differently compared to other places.

As Vaan observed on the back of the flying wyvern, he could see that most of the land surrounding the Black Mountain had been used to cultivate herbs.

However, what surprised yet confirmed his suspicion was the faint energy present within the Black Mountain's domain.

"This should be... spirit energy!" Vaan's eyes flickered.

Once Vaan confirmed the lingering spirit energy within the Black Mountain's domain, he found answers to several of his doubts.

He understood why the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill could have such a miraculous effect on the human body and unconditionally raise a warrior's strength by such a substantial amount.

The herbs were nurtured in an environment with spirit energy, so how could they not?

Nevertheless, spirit energy was a byproduct of life. Whether it would be humans or plants, they all produced spirit energy as long as they existed. Alas, the unknown force in Pangea had stripped all traces of it from the world.

On that point, while it was true that the herbs in the Black Mountain's domain were nurtured by spirit energy, it was more accurate to say they had unrestricted growth.

With such a miraculous Black Mountain that could retain the spirit energy of people and plants, it was understandable why the Great Ratholos Empire could succeed in nurturing so many powerful body-refining warriors.

The Black Mountain was undeniably the most precious treasure in the possession of the Great Ratholos Empire.

Vaan had no doubt the Black Mountain was a foreign object that wasn't naturally formed on Pangea but crashlanded from the sea of stars. And like many people suspected, the Black Mountain was most likely a small fragment of a dead star's core.

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After Vaan disembarked at the designated wyvern landing square a short five hundred meters away from the wall, he showed his identification to the gate guards at the front.

The gate guards quickly identified Vaan's status as an honorary core member of Martial Hall and granted him entry to the Black Mountain. They did not make trouble for him despite finding him unfamiliar.

Originally, Vaan had a strong interest in meeting the Pill King due to the miraculous effect of the Rank 4 Body Reformation Pill, which could only be refined by the Pill King. However, he had already figured out the secrets behind it.

Thus, Vaan no longer had a reason to meet the Pill King for now.

Vaan made a beeline for the foot of the Black Mountain, where most of the warriors from the Martial Hall had gathered. Although there was a queue to enter the mountain, the queue was not the reason for the large gathering of warriors at the foot of the mountain.

Many warriors simply lingered around the foot of the Black Mountain to spectate other warriors' training and compare their performances.

Due to the warriors' natural competitive spirits, the atmosphere was very lively.

"Senior Martial Brother Esai has been stuck on the 429th step for three months. I wonder if he will be able to beat his record this time?" a bald, middle-aged warrior uttered shortly after a famed warrior ascended the mountain.

"Probably," another warrior of similar age replied, adding, "Senior Martial Brother Esai looked pretty confident just now. Perhaps he made some advancement in his strength recently."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up," a gloomy warrior said pessimistically.

"From the 400th step onward, the gravitational pressure greatly increases with each step. A minor advancement in strength won't help one ascend these steps, and forcing yourself to surpass your limit will only result in serious internal injuries."

Since it was too costly to compete in how long a warrior could endure the Black Mountain's gravitational pressure on the lower steps, most warriors tended to compete in how high they could climb.

The higher they climbed the Black Mountain, the stronger the gravitational pressure—or, more precisely, the closer to the center, the stronger the gravitational pressure.

After Vaan made his way through the crowd, he entered the only building at the foot of the Black Mountain – the Service Hall.

The Service Hall provided a range of services, which could be divided into three sections – trade, labor, and time.

In the trade section, warriors could sell or purchase body-refining pills and healing pills from the Service Hall or other warriors. There was also a bulletin board for warriors to post pill requests of specific effects if the Service Hall didn't have them.

In short, it was a small pill market.

In the labor section, the Service Hall offered miscellaneous jobs around the Black Mountain and gave warriors opportunities to earn contribution points, though such jobs were usually just for herbal assistants and physicians.

They also had their own bulletin board where all the available jobs were posted for warriors to see and grab.

Finally, the time section managed warriors' training duration on the Black Mountain. Warriors had to purchase their training time and collect their time trackers at the Service Hall's time section before they could ascend the Black Mountain to train.

Their failure to do so would result in fines and punishment.

Vaan did not say much after arriving at the Service Hall's time section. He handed over his three-day training pass and received a time-tracking magic tool set for three days from the female Dunean working there.

"Oh? We have a new face here. Hey, this little brother. Are you interested in a little competition with bets?"

Shortly after Vaan left the Service Hall and approached the Black Mountain, his unfamiliar face quickly caught the eyes of several observant warriors.

The one who spoke to him was a sixty-year-old male Dunean filled with long scars. He was only a Low Rank 4 Body Refiner.

Being a Low Rank 4 Body Refiner at sixty years of age was considered ordinary or even mediocre; it wasn't worth mentioning in front of a genius. Even so, a Low Rank 4 Body Refiner was, by no means, weak compared to most people.

And yet, it was also this kind of person who openly challenged newcomers.

In a single glance, Vaan quickly understood what kind of person this sixty-year-old Dunean warrior was – he was just an untalented senior prick who preyed on newcomers for small benefits; he didn't care about his face, only money.

There was no merit in winning against such a person, nor were the small gains worth the time.

"Not interested," Vaan replied indifferently, shoving the person aside to climb the Black Mountain Steps.

"You—!"

Naturally, the sixty-year-old Dunean warrior was not used to taking no for an answer. Even if a junior wanted to refuse him, they would not dismiss him so nonchalantly for fear of offending him.

However, when the sixty-year-old Dunean warrior wanted to resist Vaan's forceful passage, he quickly choked on the words he wanted to spill. He realized he didn't have the strength to resist the force shoving him aside at all.

It was as if the hand on his shoulders wasn't a hand but the Black Mountain itself – immovable and insurmountable.

Meanwhile, the other warriors were surprised to see this senior bully step aside so meekly without throwing his weight around.

"Hahaha, what's wrong, Martial Brother Melzahr? You're going to let the newcomer walk off just like that? This isn't like you."

"Shut up!"

The sixty-year-old Dunean warrior called Melzahr quickly had a darkened expression once he heard the mocking words of a forty-year-old male Dunean. But despite being told to shut up, the forty-year-old male Dunean showed no fear.

After all, he was also a Low Rank 4 Body Refiner, but with superior body-refining talent.

"Hahaha! Why don't you make me?" Obryn taunted.

"Hmph!" Melzhar snorted before ignoring the younger warrior's provocation, unwilling to bicker with the person. He had to admit he was inferior to Obryn in talent and strength. He wouldn't gain anything by wasting energy on such a strong opponent.

Seeing Melzhar's cold, silent treatment, Obryn and the others soon shifted their attention to Vaan. They were curious how he made Melzhar give up so quickly.

None of them seemed to have realized it was through sheer force.

However, this couldn't be blamed on them. These warriors had stayed around the Black Mountain for far too long; they had not seen the deepest depths of the earth or the height of the heavens. Their level of common sense was only at the same level as everyone else who had not been outside their empire.

To them, even the most peerless genius would have to be at least thirty to reach the level of a Low Rank 4 Body Refiner. As such, the possibility of a twenty-odd-year-old warrior being stronger than Melzhar didn't cross their mind.

Even Melzhar, who had personally yet briefly experienced Vaan's strength, still found it hard to believe.

'Did I not eat enough today? How can such a young brat be stronger than me?' Melzhar doubted.

Moreover, the difference in strength wasn't small but very large.

Amidst the doubts and confusion, no one else bothered Vaan despite their curiosity. They watched him freely ascend the Black Mountain, which hadn't been done by a newcomer in a long while.

Everyone had grown accustomed to the newcomer bullying and treated the loss of wealth as a way of respecting the seniors. After all, they had all been newcomers to the Black Mountain and also went through such an experience.

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The entire Black Mountain had countless uneven flat surfaces from top to bottom and came in different sizes. But regardless of their varying sizes and elevated shapes, they were all called the Black Mountain Steps.

Some steps could only fit a single person, while others could even fit up to a hundred warriors seated in the lotus positions. Furthermore, the single-person steps were generally used for meditation, and the larger steps were used for practical training.

However, there were no existing rules that allowed warriors to reserve the larger steps for their sole occupation. As such, warriors commonly engaged in physical conflicts over them.

Even if someone arrived at the large step first but kicked off later, they would have no one to blame but themselves for their inadequate strength.

On the Black Mountain, if one wanted more rights, having a bigger fist was the only way.

"Hm?"

A senior warrior quickly frowned after Vaan climbed onto the same large step he was using to practice a new martial skill.

"Oi, brat. Can't you see I'm already using this spot?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm just passing through."Chapter 647: Value of the Priceless Heavenly Treasure

Although the senior warrior was displeased with Vaan's brief passage, he was unwilling to waste time and effort turning it into a big deal. For him, every moment he spent on the Black Mountain was precious.

"You... okay," Makurim sighed before advising Vaan, "You should avoid passing through other people's steps, or you will end up offending a lot of martial brothers."

"Thank you for the advice," Vaan casually replied, shaking his head after a glance at the senior warrior.

Makurim had joined the Martial Hall thirty years ago. With his above-average martial talent, it wouldn't be surprising for him to be a Rank 4 Body Refiner.

Unfortunately, he had once overexerted himself on the Black Mountain and suffered a grievous internal injury that had never fully healed. As such, his strength has stagnated at Peak Rank 3 Body Refiner.

Normally, Body Refiners of this level could reach up to the 390th step on the Black Mountain.

However, due to the internal injury of the past, Makurim could only train around the hundredth step to avoid aggravating his old wound.

Although Vaan didn't know about Makurim's past, he could at least see the person could not train on higher steps due to his sequela.

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In a matter of minutes, Vaan had already ascended to the 400th step, surprising all observers.

Although the height of the steps one could reach wasn't directly related to one's body-refining strength, it was still a good indicator.

As such, most warriors who could reach the 400th step were at least Low Rank 4 Body Refiners.

"Damn, that new guy already reached the 400th step in such a short time. His internal tempering is quite solid. Tsk, tsk."

"Only quite solid? You don't believe that young man is a Low Rank 4 Body Refiner yet?"

"Do you think Low Rank 4 Body Refiners that young are cabbages? He looked like he was still in his 20s. Even if he was a 29-year-old Low Rank 4 Body Refiner with a baby face, this kind of talent is still rare in the imperial family and the ducal factions."

"You're right. It's rare but not unprecedented."

While the martial warriors were speculating about Vaan's strength, Vaan continued to scale the Black Mountain Steps indifferently.

Since Vaan had never endured such intense gravitational pressure, the gravitational pressure beyond the 400th step was no joke to him. He could feel the burden from the gravitational pressure, but it was still far from suppressing him to the point that he could no longer advance.

In fact, if Vaan were only aiming to see how high he could climb, he wouldn't have an issue climbing beyond the 550th step—provided that the increase in gravitational pressure remained consistent.

However, that was clearly not his goal.

When Vaan reached the 450th step, he finally decided to halt his ascent and meditate on one of the single-person steps.

At this level, there were fewer warriors around, and of those present, none were practicing martial skills. They were all meditating in silence. As such, the area was quite tranquil compared to the lower steps.

The 430th to 460th step was around the limit of what Mid Rank 4 Body Refiners could endure. As such, Mid Rank 4 Body Refiners on this level would not have the spare strength to practice their martial skills even if they wanted to.

Practicing martial skills under gravitational pressure wouldn't just improve their proficiency in said martial skills but also raise their strength.

However, without adequate internal tempering for the level of steps, doing so was tantamount to suicide.

In the history of the Black Mountain, there had been no shortage of warriors overestimating their abilities and inflicting cultivation-crippling internal injuries upon themselves.

The senior warrior whom Vaan had previously passed was one such example.

Nevertheless, while everyone meditated to temper their internal organs and adapt to the gravitational pressure, Vaan meditated to perceive the Black Mountain's laws.

Even if the Black Mountain was only a tiny fragment of a dead star, it was still part of a living star once upon a time. The stars contained the secrets to the highest level of the Fire Law in the universe. Thus, a fragment of a dead star would still possess lingering traces of the highest level of Fire Law.

No matter how little it was, this level of Fire Law was far superior to the Fire Laws Vaan could perceive in the Red Dragon Tribe's Land of Fire.

How could earthly flames compare to heavenly fire?

Even though Vaan could conjure a miniature sun with his current law comprehension, its power was still that of earthly flames. In essence, it was just a big ball of fire – its temperature was a far cry from a true star.

'I wonder how much of the Fire Law I can perceive and comprehend now that the bottleneck on my law comprehension is breached...' Vaan silently mused with anticipation.

Although Vaan looked forward to his progress in the Fire Law, he had another equally important focus.

While it was true that stars contained secrets of the highest level of the Fire Law, a shattered star was different – it didn't just contain secrets to the highest level of the Fire Law but also the secrets to the highest level of the Spatial Law!

After all, there was a chance the fragmented star core came to Pangea as a result of a supernova explosion, and the supernova of stars had a chance of forming black holes.

Of course, the supernova of smaller stars wouldn't form black holes, but Vaan was confident the Black Mountain was the fragmented star core of an especially large star. Naturally, its impressively strong gravitational field was one factor, but the main deciding factor in Vaan's confidence was the presence of spatial law.

In fact, Vaan perceived the Spatial Law around the Black Mountain more clearly than the Fire Law, which also verified his doubts regarding his potential extreme spatial affinity.

Vaan wasn't sure if there was anything more powerful than stars and black holes in the boundless Chaos regarding the Fire Law and Spatial Law. However, it was certain that in the current chaosverse, stars and black holes embodied the highest level of the Fire Law and Spatial Law.

In other words, until he was powerful enough to perceive the laws from black holes and stars directly, the Black Mountain was the best lucky chance he could come across for perceiving the Fire Law and Spatial Law.

The value of the Black Mountain in terms of enlightenment on the Fire Law and Spatial Law far outstripped its use in tempering the body.

It was a priceless heavenly treasure, but the Great Ratholos Empire could only utilize it primitively.

Chapter 648: Concept of Cosmic Flow

Vaan was a man of great focus; the moment he was seated in the lotus position and closed his eyes, he immediately entered the perfect state of meditation – the state of emptiness.

In this state, a person would not have any distracting thoughts, and their sense of the world would be heightened to the greatest extent as if they had become one with it.

Normally, people would have to practice for months or even years before they could achieve this mystical state. Even the experienced ones would still take half an hour of meditation before entering the state of emptiness.

Nevertheless, Vaan's state of emptiness was quite different from everyone else – he had thousands upon thousands of micro-thought processes in the back of his mind, constantly simulating scenarios and calculating probabilities.

Logically, these thousands upon thousands of micro-thought processes should have hindered Vaan from entering the state of emptiness; it should have been his greatest challenge.

After all, given the greatness of his mind, to not think was akin to not breathing; it was discomfoting. He wouldn't be able to do it for prolonged periods.

But contrary to one's expectations, these micro-thought processes did not hinder Vaan's meditation but even aid him.

These micro-thought processes were sub-consciousness that had been divided from Vaan's main consciousness to retain his humanity and sense of self. But even when divided, they were still a part of his consciousness.

As such, it only took a single will to end all thoughts.

When Vaan entered the state of emptiness, the micro-thought processes were like headless lambs without the command of the main consciousness – they scattered chaotically.

This chaotic scattering of Vaan's senses allowed him to contact the surrounding elements around the Black Mountain and better perceive the laws in the area.

Without any surprise, Vaan could sense most of the elements around the Black Mountain were of the fire attribute. On the other hand, the spatial elements were quite scarce.

However, Vaan didn't find this surprising.

Even if the Black Mountain came from a supernova star that formed a black hole, it would only be imprinted with the spatial laws that occurred during the initial formation of the black hole; it wouldn't record the complete formation.

If the Black Mountain had been imprinted with the complete formation, it wouldn't have landed in Pangea. Instead, it would have been devoured by the black hole long ago.

Nevertheless, despite the scarcity of spatial elements, the spatial elements were more drawn to Vaan's consciousness than the abundant fire elements.

'The Fire Law is more evident, but I can perceive the scarce Spatial Law more clearly? As expected, my spatial affinity is exceedingly high,' Vaan thought.

A few moments later, Vaan rid himself of distracting thoughts and focused on perceiving the laws of the Black Mountain. However, it only took a few moments before he broke focus due to an unexpected discovery.

Vaan knew his affinity with space was incredibly high. Still, the extent of it never ceased to amaze him.

As his consciousness gathered the specks of spatial elements, they surprisingly formed a visual recording of the initial formation of the black hole that replayed in his mind. The amount of information he could dissect from it was far better than any simulations produced through human observation and technology from his past life.

It was known that black holes possessed one of the most, if not the most, powerful gravitational forces in the universe.

However, all matter caught within them would not be devoured directly but followed a pattern similar to the centrifugal flow of water in the presence of a sinkhole. Although this manner of devouring seemed slow compared to a straight-line devouring, it was actually extremely fast due to the sheer quantity and rate of devouring.

Nevertheless, why did the black hole have such a devouring pattern? In fact, what was gravity?

Although people knew gravity was the invisible force of attraction that pulls objects to each other, not everyone knew why this force existed.

Of course, Vaan was aware the secret was related to the Law of Space.

As Vaan observed the initial formation of the black hole and studied the curvature of spacetime that caused all matter to be devoured by the black hole in a spiraling pattern, his eyes eventually beamed with enlightenment.

'Gravity is just spatial compression. When space is compressed, the distance between objects naturally shrinks,' Vaan mused.

However, it wasn't just a simple spatial compression; there was an intricate way of compressing space. A black hole had layers upon layers of centrifugal-directional spatial compression.

Although it sounded simple, the spatial compression of a black hole involved the highest level of application. A normal Demigod did not have the mental faculty to recreate it, even if they had comprehended the Law of Space. Even a Rank 6 Divine Being would find it extremely difficult to achieve.

However, this was Vaan's area of expertise.

In the field of law manipulation, even the mighty ancient Empyrean Scarletsea would have to admit to being inferior to him.

His ever-growing ability to absorb information and learn was unique and possibly supreme under the heavens.

'This intricate way of compressing space... This is the Concept of Cosmic Flow,' Vaan's eyes glimmered with profundity.

Ding!

<Your understanding of the Law of Space has improved>

<Your Authority of Space has been raised>

<[Law Comprehension] Space Law: 1% à 5%>

Unknowingly, Vaan's understanding of the Spatial Law soared and came infinitely close to the same level as his understanding of the Fire Law, which took days to achieve. In contrast, he had only meditated on the Spatial Law for a few hours.

The disparity of his talent in these two laws was like that of heaven and earth; there was no point in comparing.

However, Vaan felt strange as he perceived the Law of Space. It did not feel like he had gained insight into anything new but rather consolidated what he already knew. It was strange for him to feel this way since he knew he had definitely gained new insights into the Law of Space.

Although Vaan pursued power, even he knew his rate of improvement on the Law of Space was abnormal.

This made him doubt his origin once more.

'My perception and comprehensive talent are very high, but they shouldn't be to this degree...' Vaan frowned.

Vaan was already aware of one past life, but could it be that he had more than one past life? Perhaps in one of his other past life, he was someone peerless in the Law of Space?

But if so, why didn't he have any memory of that life? Was it sealed? Or was he simply too weak to unlock multiple past-life memories?

Chapter 649: The Path to Becoming Divine

Vaan's great mind was a continuous whirlpool of doubts and chaos. He sought answers but would only get more questions in their place instead. Even if he had confidence in his speculations, they would remain unsolved mysteries without proof or evidence to validate them.

No matter how much Vaan demanded the answers, they would remain unanswered. He was aware of that, and he also knew his distracting thoughts affected his session of law comprehension.

As such, he quickly emptied his mind and focused on his meditation again.

After Vaan's Law of Space reached 5% comprehension, the same as his Law of Fire in the past, he knew he had reached another bottleneck. Despite his heaven-defying affinity to space, he was still halted at this step.

The law comprehension of 5% wasn't just a number – it represented the pinnacle of power a Demigod could muster.

It was the wall dividing mortals and the divine.

Vaan's comprehension of the Law of Fire only managed to break through this 5% bottleneck due to a stroke of luck. That said, Vaan had no intention of stopping his comprehension session on the Law of Space.

Since he had broken through the bottleneck once, the second time would be easier. Even so, the second time would undoubtedly be different from the first time.

The trace of divinity Vaan acquired from his dual practice with Henrietta was, in truth, a glimpse of Empyrean Scarletsea's soul fragment.

It had taken him time to understand the structure of Empyrean Scarletsea's soul fragment. However, the moment he did, he understood many things, and the path to the Divine became clear.

The relationship between a normal human soul and the body was like a small cloud of mist trapped within a glass jar. On the other hand, a Peak Demigod's soul would be like liquified cloud mists that had completely filled the glass jar, leaving no further room for any addition.

The quantity of cloud mist would not increase unless the glass jar became bigger or the cloud mist was condensed.

The secret to becoming a Divine Being lay in condensing the soul into something denser. A Divine Soul was one that would not scatter in the event of the body's destruction.

Whether it was the soul of a normal human or Peak Demigod, they would both experience death from the scattering of their souls once the body accommodating them was destroyed.

Only a Divine Soul would not.

Although Vaan had no idea how long it would take him to achieve such a solid state of the soul like Empyrean Scarletsea's soul fragment, he figured he only needed to reach a semi-solid, malleable state of the soul for it to be considered a Divine Soul.

Nevertheless, condensing the soul was easier said than done.

According to Lord Narvim, Soul Masters weren't extremely rare for a reason. Even in Chaos, there must be very few who could manipulate the world with a thought and cultivate the soul in the truest sense.

Although Vaan had been suspected of being a Soul Master, he wasn't one—or at least not yet. He didn't have the ability to influence the world with his thoughts alone.

The strengthening of his soul was all due to his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

As such, even he had limited direct means of condensing his soul. He could only rely on external forces to assist him. Borrowing the suppressive force of the Black Mountain to condense his soul was one such choice.

To perceive the Law of Space and condense his Divine Soul simultaneously was killing two birds with one stone.

Alas, the gravitational force of the Black Mountain was very effective on his body but had little effect on his Peak Demigod soul.

Even so, little effect was still something.

'I need greater pressure,' Vaan thought.

Having spent half a day on the 450th step, Vaan finally decided to ascend to a higher step to bear greater gravitational pressure.

Many warriors weren't bored enough to stick around to watch Vaan meditate for so long and had long left to do other things. However, there were still a few rare exceptions that actually did.

"That guy is finally moving again...!"

"Who? The newcomer? Haa... He should have been on the 450th step for around twelve hours now. This is very impressive for a newcomer, but I guess he has finally hit his limit and is forced to descend—"

"He is climbing to higher steps!"

"What?!"

Within a short time, a commotion erupted at the foot of the Black Mountain. After catching the news, dozens of warriors quickly returned to observe the situation.

Nevertheless, regardless of who stayed and came, they were all dumbfounded by Vaan's progress.

"This is... impossible!"

"How can this newcomer improve so quickly?! He hasn't even come down from the Black Mountain to restore his condition before challenging the higher steps!"

"Maybe... Maybe the 450th step wasn't his limit, and he was only taking it easy until now...?"

Several warriors felt the corners of their lips twitch when they heard the latest guess.

From the 460th step onwards, there were no more than two dozen people on the Black Mountain. Moreover, they were all members of the older generations, having lived more than eighty years.

Some were even over 150 years old!

After all, above the 460th step were only Peak Rank 4 Body Refiners or stronger. Anyone weaker wouldn't be able to endure the tremendous gravitational pressure. This was especially so above the 490th step.

Of course, it was still possible for one with lower strength to reach such heights if their internal organs were firmly consolidated, but such a capable genius was nonexistent.

At the very least, the Great Ratholos Empire didn't have such a genius body refiner.

When Vaan ascended to the 490th step, he almost gave a few old fogies a heart attack when they saw how young he looked.

Nevertheless, Vaan ignored their shock and focused on himself.

"The pressure on this step is much better. It indeed has a better effect for condensing my Divine Soul, but this effect is still minimal," Vaan noted.

After some calculations, he figured even if he ascended to the top, the powerful pressure at the peak still wouldn't be enough to help him form his Divine Soul. Instead, his feat would only alarm the entire empire.

The Black Mountain's gravitational pressure was only supplementary; it alone couldn't help him form the Divine Soul.

Vaan needed another method to use alongside it.

'Should I use the Concept of Cosmic Flow?' Vaan contemplated with some hesitation.

To use the power of spatial compression to condense his Divine Soul was undoubtedly an extremely dangerous and risky move. After all, the slightest mistake would kill him.

For that reason, Vaan wasn't too eager to attempt it.

'It's too early to form the Divine Soul... I should at least become proficient with the Concept of Cosmic Flow to boost my confidence,' Vaan sighed.

The path to becoming Divine was revealed but still out of reach.

Even so, it was only a matter of time.

Chapter 650: Rising Flames of Conflict

"Hey, Old Fart. Is it fun pretending to be young? What is the use of chasing undeserved fame and attention at this age?" an old warrior called out to Vaan from the 495th step, believing Vaan was an old warrior who had altered his appearance.

The Youthful Rejuvenation Potion was the most common product for restoring one's youthful appearance.

Although the Youthful Rejuvenation Potion had no other benefits, beauty products were never cheap. Even so, anyone who could become a Peak Rank 4 Body Refiner wouldn't be short of funds.

That was why the old warrior was so certain of his assumption.

"Think what you will," Vaan calmly replied, paying no further heed to the old warrior on the 495th step. He didn't see the need to explain himself.

However, the old warrior was not satisfied with his response.

"Hehe, the younglings might be ignorant, but I know you are definitely an old fart inside. Why don't you tell me your name? Perhaps I might know you," the old warrior said, softly chuckling.

"Vanderlin Pendragon," Vaan flatly answered.

"Hahaha..." the old warrior laughed, but his gaze became increasingly disdainful, knowing Vaan used a fake name. "Stubborn to the end, huh? What a boring old fart."

The old warrior lost interest in Vaan and refocused on his meditation.

Vain old fogies using the Youthful Rejuvenation Potion and changing their names to chase fame and young women was uncommon but not unprecedented.

With such a unique name, the old warrior was completely certain Vaan was just another attention-seeking old fogey.

After their short interaction ended, Vaan focused on the application of the Concept of Cosmic Flow. This powerful method allowed him to compress a huge amount of space within a short time, which could be used in many ways.

With Vaan's brilliant mind, he already derived many spatial skills within a short time. These new skills were mainly divided into three categories: offensive, suppressive, and defensive.

No one could deny the crushing power of the black hole. Thus, the Concept of Cosmic Flow undoubtedly possessed strong offensive power.

However, Vaan believed the greatest aspect of the Concept of Cosmic Flow didn't lie in its strong offensive power but in its suppressive and defensive power.

He could replicate the gravitational pressure of the Black Mountain to suppress his opponents or train his own group of Body Refiners.

Even Witches could benefit from it.

The Concept of Cosmic Flow could also be used to seal away and restrict objects and people, trapping them within layers upon layers of space or suppressing his opponents' powers, potentially lowering their combat prowess.

Provided that he was capable enough, Vaan could even create an infinite void of compressed space between him and his opponents, causing their incoming attacks to be like feet stuck in muddy swamps, moving incredibly slow in the eyes of others.

'If I use the Concept of Cosmic Flow like a slingshot, my travel speed in the sea of stars can also achieve new heights,' Vaan mused.

There didn't seem to be any limit to the application of the Law of Space; the only real limitation was one's imagination.

As Vaan endured the pressure of the 490th Black Mountain Step, his comprehension of the Law of Space eventually surpassed the 5% bottleneck. In that instant, something seemed to have awoken in the deepest part of his soul, making him look blank as information and unfamiliar memories filled his mind.

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Although Vaan caused quite a stir with his ascension to the 490th mountain step, he did not draw strong attention from the imperial capital.

Normally, such an achievement by a member of the younger generation would attract everyone's attention. However, the imperial capital presently had a greater concern – the conflict between Duke Zohar and Duke Gamliel!

Within the first quarter of the past twelve hours, the two ducal factions discovered several dead bodies of their members in secluded places around the imperial capital. Some died of poison or single-knife wounds to the heart and neck, but some also died from recognizable martial skills.

More importantly, members of both ducal factions commonly practiced such martial skills.

Of course, both Duke Zohar and Duke Gamliel had been scheming against each other for years. The death of these low-ranking members in their factions wasn't enough to alarm.

Moreover, they could vaguely sense the intervention of a third party – one who wanted to see the conflict between their two ducal factions.

Furthermore, it likely had nothing to do with Duke Zaahir.

After all, they had a good understanding of each other and knew none of them could have made a low-level mistake such as leaving evidence of their martial skills on the bodies of the victims.

In other words, another force was fanning the flames of their conflict!

However, even though Duke Zohar and Duke Gamliel arrived at that conclusion, they had no evidence to back up their suspicions.

As such, it could only remain as it was – suspicions.

Due to their shrewdness, a single splash in the pond wasn't enough to stir Duke Zohar and Duke Gamliel to take action against each other. They both adopted a wait-and-see situation.

However, that didn't last long.

In the second quarter of the past twelve hours, a few important members of their ducal factions were finally killed with the core martial skills of their factions.

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Inside Duke Gamliel's estate, the bodies of Bellor Ravesk and Arth Brightglory lay on the floor before Duke Gamliel. At the same time, Lord Ravesk and Lord Brightglory grieved in front of their sons' corpses.

Although Bellor Ravesk and Arth Brightglory weren't exactly high-ranking members in the factions, they were both first-seat heirs of their respective households. Furthermore, the House of Ravesk and the House of Brightglory were the top two families supporting Duke Gamliel.

"Your Grace, I beseech you to seek justice for my son! He has died unjustly to the Invisible Palm Force of the Nuvimze Clan under Duke Zohar!" Lord Ravesk cried.

Common faction martial skills could be learned by others, but the Invisible Palm Force was the unique martial skill of Lord Nuvimze.

It wasn't a martial skill warriors could easily imitate just by seeing it.

With Duke Gamliel's rich martial knowledge and experience, he could quickly determine the wound on Bellor's chest was made by the current head of the Nuvimze Clan.

Duke Gamliel's expression turned cold.

"Zohar, oh, Zohar... Your selfishness truly disappoints me. Even with outsiders trying to fan the flames of conflict between us, you still try to take cheap opportunities to weaken me," Duke Gamliel muttered, seemingly talking to himself before his eyes suddenly became fierce. "Did you think I wouldn't figure out what you've done?!"

"Lord Ravesk, Lord Brightglory. Your losses also saddens me. Now, I will give you both a chance to take revenge. Lead our men to kill the most talented direct members of the Nuvemze Clan and Mujild Clan!"

"Make them feel your pain!" Duke Gamliel ordered.