

The Witch 651

Chapter 651: Rising Flames of Conflict (2)

Imperial Capital, Duke Zohar's Manor

In a meeting room filled with high-ranking members of Duke Zohar's faction, Duke Zohar sat in the main seat with a gloomy look, and his oppressive aura weighed down on everyone present.

It was clear to everyone that the duke was not in a good mood.

In particular, Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild felt the most pressure; they couldn't help but tremble in fear every time their lord gazed at them.

"Have we found out who killed the first-seated heirs of the Ravesk Clan and Brightglory Clan?" Duke Zohar inquired gloomily, glancing at Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild.

"N-Not yet, Your Grace..." Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild simultaneously replied with hesitation while sweating profusely with pale expressions under the gargantuan pressure of Duke Zohar's gaze.

Even if they knew they were innocent, they couldn't be completely free from the blame. After all, one heir died to the Invisible Palm Force, and the Sleeping Firelotus Finger killed the other.

Both were unique martial skills created by Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild based on their comprehension of the forces in nature.

The Invisible Palm Force utilized the Concept of Vibration to bypass one's opponent's defense and attack their internal organs. As evidence of Lord Nuvemze's Invisible Palm Force, Lord Ravesk's son had a palm imprint on his chest but died of a ruptured heart.

On the other hand, the Sleeping Firelotus Finger was even more distinguishable. Its victims would suffer burns in the shape of the lotus once the dormant fire force planted inside them erupted.

This was the effect of the Concept of Explosion from the Law of Fire.

Martial skills that incorporated the forces of nature weren't martial skills any warrior could simply learn, let alone use. Only warriors with incredibly tempered wills from training could chance upon the forces of nature and borrow their powers.

Furthermore, such warriors were usually all Half-step Transcendents or Transcendent-level Body Refiners.

As such, even if Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild had their personal martial skills stolen, only a few people in the empire were capable of learning them. After all, they had to satisfy two requirements: possessing incredibly tempered wills and being enlightened on the specific concepts of laws.

Most of the other members present believed Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild were guilty but too cowardly to admit their wrongdoings in front of their lord.

"Hm..."

Duke Zohar tapped the table repeatedly in thought before glaring at Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild again.

"Lord Nuvemze, Lord Mujild, I do not doubt any of you, but you, yourselves, should understand just how difficult it is for others to replicate your martial skills. That's why I will only ask you once – did you or did you not kill the heirs of the Ravesk and Brightglory Clans?"

"Think carefully before you answer," Duke Zohar added veiled pressure to force their honest confessions.

However, Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild did not hesitate to give their replies.

"It truly wasn't done by me, my Lord! You have to believe me!"

"That's right, my Lord! Someone is trying to frame us! Moreover, they are extremely capable!"

"Alright, that's enough," Duke Zohar sighed and lifted his oppressive pressure.

He never doubted his men, but he had to quickly clear the suspicions the other faction members had regarding the two. Otherwise, the distrust would eat away at the faction and cause its dissolution.

"You've all heard it. Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild are innocent in this matter. I don't want to hear or see anyone pointing fingers at them," Duke Zohar strictly declared before stating, "We have a more pressing issue."

"Even if we know Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild are not behind the deaths of the two heirs, the people from Duke Gamliel's side will not believe us. Even so, we have to give them an explanation. Otherwise, we will never be free from this blame."

"Since they won't believe us no matter what we say, aren't we just inviting humiliations upon ourselves by going out of our way to explain to them? Given the sensitive situation, they might even kill our messengers out of fury, Your Grace," mentioned Zajec, head of the Darkblight Clan.

"Going out of our way to explain to them is naturally unacceptable, but not making any effort to explain at all is even more unacceptable, Lord Darkblight!" Varkor of the Stagmaw Clan voiced.

"If we don't explain at all, what's the difference between that and basically admitting Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild killed those two heirs?"

"In my opinion, sending a letter is sufficient. Our two factions are not close; there's no need to give them so much respect by sending a messenger," Varkor added.

"You've made a good point. A letter, it is," Duke Zohar nodded with approval.

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Duke Gamliel's Estate

"My Lord, a letter from Duke Zohar has arrived!" a servant presented the sealed letter to Duke Gamliel with both hands after abruptly interrupting the high-ranking meeting.

At the mention of Duke Zohar, Lord Ravesk and Lord Brightglory's eyes were quickly filled with rage. Even so, they kept their silence as Duke Gamliel read the content of the letter.

"Hahaha..." Duke Gamliel suddenly laughed coldly, causing the room's temperature to drop.

Everyone's hearts skipped a beat as they watched Duke Gamliel's hands tremble with fury.

At the same time, the letter did not last three breaths after delivering Duke Zohar's explanation before it was torn to pieces by Duke Gamliel.

"What a good misunderstanding! Misunderstanding this, misunderstanding that! Are you trying to insult my intelligence, Zohar?! If you're going to give me an explanation, at least put some more effort into it!" Duke Gamliel coldly thundered.

With such a half-hearted explanation, it was clear to him that Duke Zohar no longer bothered maintaining the surface peace between them. In that case, it also implied Duke Zohar was prepared to wage a war against him.

In fact, the war between them had already started with the death of the two first-seated heirs.

"This letter was a declaration of war and a distraction!" Duke Gamliel sprung to his feet in alarm.

How insidious!

To incite his rage and cloud his judgment!

"Are there any major movements from Duke Zohar's faction in the last few hours? Bring me the battle map! I want to see the distribution of Duke Zohar's forces in the imperial capital!" Duke Gamliel demanded.

"Right away, my Lord!" the head servant complied.

Chapter 652: The Death Toll Rises

Shortly after the battle map was brought into the meeting room and laid out on the table, Duke Gamliel studied the positions of all the marked families and forces under Duke Zohar and compared them to his own.

Nothing seemed out of place, and everything was the same as when he reviewed the map last night.

The major families and forces in the imperial capital were mostly divided by the two ducal factions they supported. The major families and forces situated in the wealthy northern half of the imperial capital supported Duke Zohar, and the rest in the great southern half rallied under Duke Gamliel.

Only a few minor families and forces scattered across the imperial capital supported Duke Zaahir.

Nevertheless, any major movements from Duke Zohar's side near the central district, which divided the two factions, would be easily discovered by Duke Gamliel's people stationed nearby.

However, the opposite was also true for the other side.

But despite scouts reporting back every fifteen minutes, no large movements from Duke Zohar's side were discovered. Duke Zohar did not mobilize his forces for a decisive battle with Duke Gamliel.

"Was I mistaken?" Duke Gamliel frowned before pondering deeper into the matter.

Logically thinking, Duke Zohar wouldn't fight Duke Gamliel head-on as it would benefit no one. Even if Duke Zohar won against Duke Gamliel, it wouldn't just weaken his military power but also the empire's.

What was the point of sitting on the throne of a severely weakened empire?

"Just what are you planning to do, Zohar?" Duke Gamliel muttered as his frown deepened.

"My Lord, I've brought grave news!" Our chosen candidates for the Rising Dragon Division are all dead! They have all been poisoned to death, along with the rest of the diners at Redhot Wyvern Inn!"

"What?!"

Duke Gamliel and the other lords all stood up in disbelief and rage at the shocking news delivered by the messenger, who abruptly barged into the meeting room and forgo his manners.

However, no one had the heart and mind to criticize the messenger's action and only focused on the news he brought back.

"You're lying! Tell me it isn't true!" Lord Baldum of the Veldiku Clan grabbed the messenger's shoulders and glared at him with a fierce gaze, unable to accept the news.

"I-It's true, Lord Baldum! I wouldn't dare bring back false information! I saw it with my own eyes!" the messenger was frightened but still found the courage to confess in all honesty.

"Arghhh!" Lord Baldum immediately growled in pain of grief.

The chosen candidates in the Rising Dragon Division for the upcoming grand event were all heirs or talented offsprings the lords of Duke Gamliel's faction had nurtured over the years.

"My Lord, I want Duke Zohar and all of his people to accompany my son to the afterlife!" Lord Baldum cried as his heart bled and burned with vengeance.

Duke Gamliel closed his eyes with a painful expression, suppressing his great rage and sorrow.

The nephew of his late wife had also been among the list of candidates registered in the Rising Dragon Division. He had also doted on his nephew and treated him like one of his sons.

The atmosphere of the meeting room became especially heavy and thick with murderous auras once everyone realized Duke Zohar wanted to cut off their roots to cripple their development.

How dare that person try to eliminate all his competitors before the grand event!

"Duke Zohar has gone too far—No, he has gone mad! He has no regard for the stability of the empire! Argh, I can't live under the same sky as him, my Lord! Please command me to fetch his head!"

"Please give me the order, my Lord! I am willing to lead the troops to slay the tyrant!"

Multiple lords voiced their burning desire to kill their way into Duke Zohar's territory to collect Duke Zohar's head.

These lords had been angered several times in the past twelve hours and found it no longer possible to hold back their rage. Their thirst for vengeance could only be quenched by the blood of their enemies.

Duke Gamliel had taken a great deal of willpower to quell his rage and sorrow and clear his mind of irrational thoughts.

He knew nothing was more destructive than actions clouded by hatred.

"Do not be hasty! Calm your heart and clear your mind! Blindly charging into Duke Zohar's territory is most likely what he wants! You must be alive in order to exact your revenge! Otherwise, you will only die a meaningless death!" Duke Gamliel harshly rebuked his people.

At the same time, he used his oppressive aura to quell the lords' fury.

He couldn't help but frown at the limited effect, realizing it was difficult, even for him, to control his people once they were overwhelmed by grief and hatred.

At the same time, Duke Gamliel couldn't help but feel frightened by the invisible force guiding his faction and Duke Zohar's faction to slaughter each other. He felt powerless like he was only a chesspiece in someone else's grand scheme.

Nevertheless, Duke Gamliel at least managed to stop Lord Baldum and the others from charging out recklessly without a proper plan.

"Lord Baldum!" Duke Gamliel called.

"Yes, my Lord?" Lord Baldum answered, his heart thumped under the might of Duke Gamliel's calling.

No matter what, Duke Gamliel's majesty, power, and authority still affected his clouded mind.

"You will lead our men to investigate the deaths of Rising Dragons! The Redhot Wyvern Inn is our business, and yet all our talented candidates were poisoned to death within it! What a colossal joke that is!"

"Capture everyone working at Redhot Wyvern Inn and question them! Do not let a single person escape! You must get to the bottom of this matter and find out the source of the poisoning!"

"If it's a dog from Duke Zohar's faction, kill him! If it's a rat from a third party, torture him! No matter what, you must find the culprit, their intentions, and their background! I want the complete information on my desk within three days!"

"Y-Yes, my Lord!" Lord Baldum answered, dripping with cold sweats. His original fury was replaced by a gargantuan, mountain-like pressure from his lord.

In Duke Gamliel's heart, he hoped the poisoning incident was Duke Zohar's doing. That would simplify the situation.

Interference from an unknown power would only complicate the matter to a whole different level.

Chapter 653: Thunderous Assault

Imperial Capital, Nuvemze Clan

"Dammit! How could something like this have happened?" Naasir Nuvemze, the younger brother of the clan head, muttered as he clutched his head with distress.

Ever since news of the two heirs' deaths spread, the Nuvemze Clan had been on high alert, and the number of people within the clan's territory doubled overnight as it received reinforcement from others in the faction.

Naasir understood his older brother well and knew he wouldn't do something stupid like killing the Ravesk Clan's heir with his unique martial skill. But even if his older brother was innocent, he also understood the Nuvemze Clan would never be free from the blame.

As such, Naasir anticipated the Ravesk Clan would come for revenge. However, he did not know when or how fiercely the Ravesk Clan would retaliate.

"Vice Head, there's no need to be stressed over this matter. No matter what, this is imperial capital, where killing is prohibited without justifiable cause. The Ravesk Clan is strong but not strong to the point that they would ignore the imperial laws and kill their way to our doorstep," the head servant reassured reasonably.

Furthermore, the Ravesk Clan and Nuvemze Clan were quite close in power. Now that they also had support from other members of their ducal faction, the Ravesk Clan alone would not be enough to trample them.

Nevertheless, Naasir found no comfort in the head servant's words and gave a half-hearted laugh dismissively.

"Without justifiable cause, you say? The heir of the Ravesk Clan was killed by the Invisible Palm Force! That is more than enough justification for the Ravesk Clan to seek revenge, not to mention the imperial laws mean nothing in the face of a major conflict between two dukes."

The emperor had long turned a blind eye to conflicts between the three dukes. As such, no one would intervene in a conflict between two dukes if even the emperor wouldn't.

"The Ravesk Clan is not stupid; it is even truer for the Duke Gamliel. If they dare come for revenge, they would naturally take our reinforcements into account. This will not be an easy fight should they come," Naasir added gravely.

"Vice Head made very valid points. It was I who had not seen things clearly and spoke carelessly," the head servant acknowledged his inadequacies but then added, "Still, we have many scouts on the lookout, Vice Head."

"If the Ravesk Clan truly intends to make a move against us, we will be able to discover their large-scale movement very quickly and make preparations for it—"

Boom!

Shortly after the head servant spoke, the Nuvemze Clan's front gates were shattered by a strong impacting force, sending stone shards flying inside. Several clan members were struck and injured, and a few were even unfortunately killed.

Everyone inside the Nuvemze Clan's territory was shocked as they had no prior warnings of the attack.

No one had seen it coming.

Thud!

With a heavy step, a strong warrior with a powerful and intimidating presence entered the Nuvemze Clan's territory and pointed his huge battle mace at the main residence with a ruthless glare.

"Go! Kill the dogs of the Nuvemze Clan and bring me their heads to pay tribute to my son!" Bellor Ravesk barked.

Rumble...!

At the Ravesk Clan Head's command, the three-thousand-strong warriors of the Ravesk Clan charged into the Nuvemze Clan's open courtyard with high momentum.

"Kill—!" the warriors roared fiercely.

Naasir's expression underwent a multitude of emotions as his face turned pale, dark, and finally red.

"Get into formation and fend off the enemy!" Naasir thundered from the third-floor balcony of the main residence.

"Stop them!" many clan members cried with abject fear.

Even though the Nuvemze Clan's combined force was greater than the Ravesk Clan, they were overwhelmed by their enemy's high momentum.

Puchi! Puchi!

Within moments, blood was spilled, and the main courtyard was painted red by both sides.

Although the Ravesk Clan had high momentum and the element of surprise, they couldn't completely make up for the difference in numbers and strength.

Even so, every warrior from the Ravesk Clan was filled with fury and fought like desperate beasts. They slaughtered their foes without any regard for themselves, even if it meant sustaining critical injuries and death. They gave their all to kill their opponents.

The combined casualties of both sides quickly soared into the hundreds in a mere instant. The usual duels between warriors were merely child's play in the face of war.

Human lives were fleeting like wheat on a farm as the death reaper harvested.

"H-How could this be?!"

The head servant fell back on his rear as he trembled with fear, clearly horrified by the Ravesk Clan's fearless determination.

"Scouts! What the hell were our scouts doing?! With such a large-scale movement, we should have been notified ahead of time!" the head servant barked with dismay.

The Nuvemze Clan had no idea that their scouts had all quietly and mysteriously died before the Ravesk Clan's forces arrived at their doorsteps.

A similar situation also happened in the Mujild Clan's territory, which was facing the furious onslaught of the Brightglory Clan.

It didn't take long before the thunderous news of both places reached Duke Zohar's manor, shocking all the high-ranking lords under Duke Zohar.

Bang!

Lord Nuvemze and Lord Mujild simultaneously slammed the table and leaped to their feet in agitation.

"This is absolute madness! The Ravesk Clan and Brightglory Clan are openly disregarding the imperial law and slaughtering people in broad daylight! My Lord, please permit me to return and assist my people! The Ravesk Clan and Brightglory have lost their minds!"

"My Lord, please ask His Imperial Majesty to punish these evildoers! They have gone too far!"

Multiple lords expressed their outrage and pleaded for imperial interference, hoping they could borrow the power of the emperor to overturn the situation and minimize their losses.

However, Duke Zohar shook his head helplessly.

"My Imperial Brother will not intervene in this matter. If he wanted to interfere with the disputes between dukes, he would have done so long ago," Duke Zohar firmly stated, shattering Lord Nuvmze and Lord Mujild's hopes.

"We can only rely on ourselves. Let us be swift and lend our aid to the Nuvmze Clan and Mujild Clan," he quickly added, full of gloom.

The rabid dogs under Duke Gamliel were crazier than he had anticipated. No, no matter how crazy they were, they still followed Duke Gamliel's will.

In other words, Duke Gamliel permitted such a situation to transpire!

That crazy son of a...!

Chapter 654: Memories of a Distant Past

While the tension of conflict between Duke Zohar and Duke Gamliel continued to rise, spreading death, fear, and unease throughout the imperial capital of the Great Ratholos Empire, the imperial palace remained indifferent without the slightest movement.

But despite the imperial palace's inaction, streams of news continued to flow inside, keeping Emperor Varan updated on the overall situation.

Emperor Varan listened to the reports from his Minister of Internal Affairs and Minister of Defence with a cold, detached expression. He didn't reveal the slightest concern for the two dukes who were his blood brothers. After all, their conflict had yet to reach the point where their blades were at each other's throats.

However, even if they were, it didn't seem like Emperor Varan would still concern himself with their wellbeing.

Emperor Varan only had one singular focus – the hidden force secretly stirring the chaos from the shadows.

"For dozens of years, I have been aware of your existence. But despite my efforts to uncover everything about you – your identity, people, strength, and purpose, not even the shadows of your tail have been seen all this time..."

"And yet, this time, because of one single spark, you are all jumping out to fan the flames of conflicts... Have you all become that impatient to achieve your goals?"

Emperor Varan's eyes flickered with a chilly glint as he quietly muttered to himself.

Magic had always been the weakness of the Great Ratholos Empire due to their single-minded pursuit of the extreme limits of body refining.

Even when the Great Ratholos Empire became aware of the limitless magic application of mana, it only saw mana as a supporting tool for furthering one's path in body refining.

This was because, back then, magic was a deep abyss of unknown possibilities; no one in the Armstrong imperial family knew if developing the empire in the direction of magic was worth it.

Thus, compared to the risk that came with the unknown, the Armstrong imperial family chose the conservative choice, focusing on body refining, which they already had a rich knowledge of and were open to greater possibilities due to the emergence of mana.

Thanks to that decision, the Great Ratholos Empire cemented its position as one of the most powerful nations in Pangea.

However, as magic continued to be developed by other countries, that firm position started weakening as early as a hundred years ago. As such, after Emperor Varan reached the transcendent level of body refining, he chose to permit the development of magic.

Shamans and Witch Doctors emerged after that, along with hidden threats that accompanied them.

The Great Ratholos Empire's relationship with the seven witch kingdoms worsened due to the existence of the hidden force that sought to plunge the empire into chaos. After all, many had suspected the involvement of the seven witch kingdoms.

Emperor Varan only realized that was untrue in the past several decades when he finally caught faint traces of demon involvement, which he didn't find surprising either.

The real problem was which of the Seven Great Devils were involved.

'Impatience or not, I won't miss this opportunity to catch you all in one fell swoop and learn everything!' Emperor Varan coldly thought with a clenched fist.

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In a seemingly distant past of the Divine Realm, when the universe was still in its earlier stage of existence, a couple floated in the dark void of space as they gazed at a supermassive black hole ahead of them.

The couple of one man and woman were both humans, but they were more than just mere humans. They had skins white like snow jades, eyes black like the starry night sky, and fluttering soft black hair like silk in the wind.

Coupled with the eastern dragon and phoenix robes they wore, which heightened their elegance and grace, the dashing handsomeness of the man, and the unrivaled beauty of the woman, they were like celestials that came out of paintings, stories, or one's imagination in the mortal worlds.

They were existences akin to gods and leading figures in their era – the Era of True Divinity.

While many were still figuring out how to become True Gods, this particular couple had already—or rather, just recently become Peak Heavenly Gods in the Divine Realm.

"The Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning, the graveyard of gods and devils... Now that I am a Peak Heavenly God of Space, I can finally try to explore this perilous region and uncover its secrets," the handsome man muttered with anticipation as he held the beautiful woman's hand and peered into the distant black hole together with her.

Since the beginning of time, many have sought the secrets within the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning, and he was no exception.

Feeling the beautiful woman's grasp of his hand tighten, the handsome man glanced at his wife affectionately and softly said, "You know, I may be the Heavenly God of Space now, but I still don't have complete confidence in venturing into the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning and making it back alive."

"You don't have to accompany me on this trip, Scarlett," the handsome Heavenly God of Space stated.

The beautiful woman called Scarlet gently shook her head and replied with a smile, "Wherever you go, I go. Be it in glory or dull, cultivation or the mundane, life or death, we promised to share everything when we consummated our love. There's no point trying to get rid of me now, Vanitas."

"Besides, for the longest time, I have always been looking forward to exploring the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning and uncovering the secrets of the universe with you. No matter the outcome, I am content as long as I am with you," Scarlett added tenderly.

In response, Vanitas simply smiled back warmly.

He had already anticipated such a reply. Since he understood his wife well, he also knew it was impossible to dissuade her from following him into the known region of no return.

"The Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning possesses the mightiest devouring force in the entire Divine Realm. Since the beginning of time, it has also been swallowing up any and everything that fell into its net, not to mention the concentrated divine energy that wraps around it like a white blanket..."

"We don't know what we might find inside the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning either, but I'm almost certain the divine energy, if we find any, would be of the highest purity and potency in the entire universe."

"Right," Vanitas completely agreed with his wife's statement. It was the most logical train of thought.

Furthermore, it was also precisely because of that possibility that they were willing to take the risk to explore the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning right after becoming Peak Heavenly Gods.

Chapter 655: Memories of a Distant Past (2)

Although it was generally accepted that all of the most primal divine energy in the universe was spurred into existence from nothingness and formed the current Divine Realm, it was also acknowledged that divine energy couldn't be created nor destroyed, only transformed from one form of energy to another.

However, this didn't mean that it was absolutely impossible to create or destroy divine energy, only that the power of law required to do so was beyond people's understanding and currently unreachable.

Vanitas and Scarlett were hopeful that all the divine energy, even the most primal form of divine energy, devoured by the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning since the beginning of time, had not been destroyed by its unimaginable crushing force.

After all, if such divine energy had not been destroyed but had been accumulating all this time, it would most likely be the key to elevating their heavenly god power to a higher realm of power.

That said, even though Vanitas and his wife, Scarlett, had decided, they still couldn't help but feel apprehension and fear as they approached the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning. No matter how lofty their statuses or high their power was, they still felt small and insignificant in the face of such an enormous, crushing force of space.

"It's not too late for us to turn back now if you feel the slightest hint of uncertainty in being able to break us through the countless layers of crushing space," Scarlett softly said, feeling a little nervous.

However, Vanitas tightened his grasp on her hand and shook his head with a smile, replying, "Have you forgotten who your husband is, my love? I am Heavenly God Divine Void, the foremost expert in the law of space."

"I have full confidence in taking us inside the Divine Abyss of Absolutely Beginning. My apprehension and fear mostly comes from the unknown that awaits us within its depths. This is an uncharted region, never explored by any man, god, or devil."

"We don't know what to expect inside, so its dangers could be beyond our wildest imagination," Vanitas sighed.

"Finding out the secrets of the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning has always been our wish. Since we have decided to explore it together, I won't have any regrets whether we live or die through this," Scarlett smiled.

They weren't just husband and wife but also lifelong dual cultivation partners.

One was the Peak Heavenly God of Space, and the other was the Peak Heavenly God of Fire. With their individual power, they stood among the top ten strongest Heavenly Gods in the Divine Realm.

However, few knew that when they worked together, the synergy of their combined might would allow them to stand at the apex of the Divine Realm. Even the other eight strongest Heavenly Gods wouldn't be their match if they fought together.

Most heavenly-matched couple and foremost leading figures in the Divine Realm – it was also because of their reputation that they had their responsibilities to be trailblazers of the unknown.

"You really won't regret, even though I could be taking you into a region of death?" Vanitas asked.

"With you to accompany me, what is there to regret? If it's life, we'll seek it. If it's death, we'll accept it," Scarlett firmly answered before softly laughing, "Even if we do die, it also wouldn't be too bad to explore the secrets of the afterlife together."

"I don't fear anything as long as I'm with you, Vanitas," Scarlett added intimately.

Vanitas smiled back at her with a gentle gaze, full of affection, before his eyes flashed with determination.

"Then let us be on our way."

With those words uttered, Vanitas curled the terrifying crushing force of space ahead with his heavenly divine power and constructed a spatial tunnel that drilled into the depths of the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning.

However, the crushing force of the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning wasn't something that could be tamed by a Peak Heavenly God of Space. Not even a full breath passed before the spatial tunnel deformed, fragmented, and then swept away by the flow of crushing space.

Even so, Vanitas was only testing the waters and had yet to use his full power. He knew the path ahead wouldn't be smooth. After he confirmed the viable route ahead, he wrapped his arm his wife's waist.

"Hold on tight, my love. It's going to be a rocky ride ahead," Vanitas stated.

Scarlett nodded, embracing him tightly like it had been practiced millions of times. Shortly after, while holding his wife, Vanitas dived through a newly constructed spatial tunnel with unimaginable speed.

The new spatial tunnel easily deformed and fragmented like the first, but with Vanitas's power of space, the new spatial tunnel continuously repaired itself. Even so, it didn't stop the terrifying crushing force of the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning from slipping inside like gusts of wind.

Each sliver of crushing force had the power to rip gods and devils to shreds.

Despite the dangerous journey ahead, Vanitas was still the Heavenly God of Space; he knew the Law of Space like the back of his hand and skillfully evaded all the spatial turbulence and fractures within his spatial tunnel.

Even so, he was no different from a small boat sailing through a storm of strong wind, heavy rain, and rocky waters – the slightest mistake would cause it to capsize.

One breath turned into ten breaths, and ten breaths became a hundred breaths – the coupled passed through thousands upon thousands of layers of crushing space with breakneck speed, and yet there didn't seem to be an end to it.

Ten thousands... Hundred thousands... Millions of layers of crushing space later, Vanitas frowned without losing focus.

Given his speed and the passage of time, the distance he traveled should have been enough to loop around the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning three times!

And yet, there were still no signs of entering into the inner depths of the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning!

More alarmingly, Vanitas sensed the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning growing bigger as he dived deeper into it with his wife. It was to the extent that he felt the space within the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning was even bigger than the Divine Realm itself and not by a small margin!

Given his affinity with space, what he sensed shouldn't be an illusion.

However, even he, the Heavenly God of Space, couldn't remain calm when he felt the space grow to an infinite number of Divine Realms.

The world within the Divine Abyss of Absolute Beginning was so large and boundless that it was mortifying, completely incomprehensible, and beyond his wildest imagination. Nothing prepared him and his wife for what they discovered.

When the final layer of crushing space was breached, Vanitas and Scarlett immediately felt their souls screamed with danger, making their hair stand on end, and their hearts turn chilly cold.

Chapter 656: Memories of a Distant Past (3)

The Divine Abyss of Absolute Nothingness... The largest and most central black hole in the Divine Realm...

The denizens of the Divine Realm mostly believed it was a land of death and destruction – anything and everything that ever fell into it would be ground to dust and atoms by the absolute crushing power of space and gravity.

Even Vanitas and Scarlett were no exceptions to such a belief.

However, what they found once they had truly entered the depths of the Divine Abyss of Absolutely Nothingness was far beyond anything they had imagined.

At the same time, the danger that screamed from their very souls was not caused by any imminent danger but due to the unpredictable number of dangers that lurked in their surroundings, like well-hidden landmines, just waiting for them to step on and erupt.

But despite the untold dangers in this vast, unknown world, they couldn't help but marvel at its beauty.

The concentrated divine energy they hoped to find... they found it.

However, its concentration and density were also beyond anything they had imagined despite keeping their minds open to the possibilities. The deeply concentrated divine energy had actually formed an unimaginably long, solid thread that seemed nigh indestructible.

Furthermore, this thread of divine energy stretched through the vast dark void like an enormous neural network of unprecedented, unparalleled scale. It emitted light of various colors of the rainbow.

There were even some colors Vanitas and Scarlett didn't think existed—or rather, they never knew of their existence due to the limit of their perceptions.

If they had not sensed the immense power of divine energy inside the threads of divine energy, they would have never known they were even looking at the concentrated, solid form of divine energy.

It took a while before Vanitas and Scarlett regained their senses.

"The laws in this place is... I don't think this is the same world we came from, Vanitas..." Scarlett voiced her doubts with alarm after noticing her control over the Law of Fire had weakened substantially – to the point that she felt like a mortal again.

"Rather than a different world, I feel like it is more accurate to say we have entered a whole different dimension," Vanitas solemnly stated after serious thought.

Even his control over the Law of Space had been severely restricted.

As for the other minor laws he had comprehended, his control over them was practically non-existent.

The only reason such a thing would happen was if they had entered a higher dimension where the laws were incomparably much firmer.

Perhaps they had been peak existences in the Divine Realm. But here, in this unknown dimension, they were no different from ants, and that could still be an overestimation.

"We don't belong here. We should leave, Vanitas," Scarlett suggested, surprised by the fearful tone of her own voice.

However, it couldn't be helped to feel such fear.

After becoming a Peak Heavenly God, she had become one of the strongest beings in the Divine Realm, and there were few existences that could threaten her life. Thus, the notion of fear had disappeared.

Unfortunately, the power that allowed her to feel fearless couldn't be wielded, making her feel not much different from a weak, helpless mortal.

Simply staying in this unknown dimension felt suffocating.

Nevertheless, despite Scarlett's careful suggestion, Vanitas stubbornly shook his head and tightened his grasp on her hand.

"We've already come this far, my love. It would be a pity if we returned empty-handed. At the very least, we should try to harvest some divine energy from this place. It might help us gain insight into the path to transcend Heavenly Gods."

"You're absolutely right, dear. We can't return empty-handed," Scarlett smiled after calming down and regaining her wits.

"I have already braced myself for the possibility of death when I chose to accompany you here. I can't believe I would be so unnerved by the changes upon reaching this place," Scarlett softly muttered, feeling slightly disappointed with herself.

It appeared she was a little lacking in mental cultivation.

Nevertheless, despite calming down, her hands continued to shake from subconscious fear. The sense of security brought by Vanitas's grip had little effect in suppressing it.

"This concentrated divine energy here seems to be the closest. Let's start there," Vanitas guided Scarlett to the nearest thread of divine energy.

Although it was called a thread of divine energy, it was as thick as a fully-grown watermelon and boundless in length. The divine energy also flowed through it very quickly, seemingly at light speed.

As for its age... its boundless primal aura seemed to suggest the neural network of divine energy had existed for much longer than the Divine Realm itself.

"Hm?" Scarlett suddenly paused as she glanced into the dark void with doubt.

"What's wrong?" Vanitas halted to check.

"..." Scarlett frowned before shaking, "It's nothing. I thought I saw something move in the void. It must have been my imagination."

"If you thought you saw something move, then something must have definitely moved," Vanitas believed in his wife's sense.

As Heavenly Gods, it would be strange to be fooled by their own imagination.

And considering they were in such a dangerous, unknown dimension, it was better to doubt than to disbelieve.

"Don't doubt what your senses, my love," Vanitas added, pulling Scarlett closer before peering into the dark void vigilant. His senses were heightened to the limits.

Time passed, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

However, considering they were in such an extraordinary place, where everything seemed extraordinary in and of itself, such ordinariness was, without a doubt, concerning.

The silence was loud, and the scream of danger even louder.

Although Vanitas failed to pinpoint the threat, he felt the illusion of being eyed by an invisible predator. Something was watching him from the dark void.

'When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gaze back at you...' Vanitas thought ruefully.

This unintended staring contest lasted several minutes before the unknown party lost its patience and moved.

In that instant, Vanitas finally noticed it, but not because he could see it; he only saw the distortion of space that outlined its existence. Scarlett also locked onto its location.

However, Vanitas and Scarlett were both alarmed. Despite knowing something was there, in that exact spot, they couldn't see it nor sense its existence at all, only its dwindling curiosity and increasing killing intent.

It was like an apex predator that saw something strange for the first time and wondered whether they were food or not.

"What is this thing? Why can't I sense or see it?"

"This unknown creature is from a higher dimension. I don't think our sensory organs and divine perceptions from the lower dimension can perceive its true appearance..."

"Oh, no! It has determined to kill us!"

The instant Scarlett and Vanitas sensed the invisible creature's killing intent erupt explosively, only one thought went through their mind – Flee!

Chapter 657: Mental Change

Ding!

<You have finished reading a memory fragment of one of your past lives>

<Your insight in the Divine Realm has increased>

<Your comprehension of the «Law of Space» has increased>

<Your comprehension of the «Law of Fire» has increased>

<Your comprehension of the «Law of Nothingness» has increased>

...

<Spatial Law: 6.75%>

<Fire Law: 5.2%>

<Nihilicity Law: 0.3%>

...

Along with the abrupt end of the distant memory, a string of system notifications shifted Vaan's attention.

Although Vaan didn't get to see what kind of fate awaited the Peak Heavenly God duo after the invisible threat chased them, he gained a lot of information about the two Heavenly Gods, the Divine Realm, and some insight into the unknown dimension they had stumbled inside.

Vanitas, the Heavenly God of Space. Divine title – Heavenly God Divine Void. Scarlett, the Heavenly God of Fire. Divine title – Heavenly God Scarletsea. Two peak existences from the earlier era of the Divine Realm.

Empyrean Scarletsea was also a person from the Divine Realm.

Although Vaan had never seen Empyrean Scarletsea's true appearance and her character was a stark contrast compared to Heavenly God Scarletsea in the distant memory, he knew they were the same person.

It didn't take a genius to draw the connection between the two.

'I must admit, Empyrean Scarletsea was quite the peerless beauty,' Vaan clicked his tongue as he recalled Scarlett's goddess-like appearance in the distant memory.

As for Heavenly God Divine Void, Vanitas... That should have been who he was in one of his past lives. But contrary to his current promiscuous life, Vanitas was a faithful man with only one wife.

However, Vaan understood why Vanitas, a dual cultivator, only had one wife. Scarlett was undoubtedly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

All other women's beauty paled in front of her.

Furthermore, Scarlett was extremely gifted and competent, rivaling Vanitas in power and wisdom.

With such a mighty wife, how could Vanitas dare to look for other women?

A capable man could have multiple wives, while an incapable man could only dream of it. Although Vanitas wasn't an incapable man, he had an extremely capable first wife. Thus, it could only be said that he wasn't capable enough.

...

Vaan cross-referenced Empyrean Scarletsea's story and experience with the newly acquired information from the distant memory before he inferred the events that followed.

'Vanitas and Scarlett promised to live and die together, but Vanitas most likely couldn't bear to see his wife die in front of him. Thus, he must have sacrificed himself to send her back to the Divine Realm and let her live on...' Vaan mused.

'Subsequently, Scarlett, who had her life saved, couldn't die to follow Vanitas in death as it would make his sacrifice meaningless. As such, she was forced to live on, bearing all the grief and loss alone. The betrayal of her trust must have twisted her heart and given birth to hatred and resentment...'

'As a result, the Empyrean Scarletsea detests love and finds it meaningless...' Vaan continued to contemplate.

In truth, Empyrean Scarletsea had never told Vaan about her view on men and love. Vaan had figured it out himself from the impression he received based on the few interactions he had with her when she possessed Henrietta's body.

Nevertheless, Empyrean Scarletsea's matters were of little importance to the present Vaan as he had learned of something more concerning – the threat posed by the unknown higher dimension.

Although Empyrean Scarletsea successfully fled to the Divine Realm, her escape must have also left behind traces that allowed denizens of the unknown higher dimension to reach the Divine Realm.

The unknown invaders with strength beyond the True Divinity Realm in Empyrean Scarletsea's story were most likely from that very higher dimension.

Vaan couldn't help but lament with a sigh as he reached this conclusion.

What Vanitas had done was very selfish and also stupid. Although he saved the love of his life, he screwed over the Divine Realm and made his current life more difficult.

Vaan felt quite certain that the higher dimension in the distant memory he saw was not a part of Chaos.

Although it was brief, Vaan had been to Chaos before and had even seen what it was like through the dimensional crack. The boundless void in Chaos was suffused with a red hue due to the ever-present power of existence. On the other hand, the void in the unknown higher dimension was dark, like the present universe.

In other words, there was another boundless world besides Chaos and his universe.

Although Vaan didn't know if the unknown higher dimension was bigger than Chaos, it was definitely bigger than the Divine Realm—at least according to what he had sensed through Vanitas inside the memory fragment.

Compared to the extinction-level threat posed by the unknown higher dimension, Gehenna's threat seemed insignificant.

'In front is Gehenna, and behind is the higher dimension. There's no path of retreat. The only path is forward,' Vaan thought.

The current state of the Divine Realm was unknown, and there was no telling how many denizens of the higher dimension invaded the current universe. Thus, fleeing into the sea of stars to look for another habitable planet was the same as seeking certain death.

After all, the threat posed by Rank 6 Divine Beings was not the same as the threat posed by existences potentially above Rank 13.

'What a difficult world we live in...' Vaan's frown deepened.

The newly acquired information had seriously thrown a wrench in his plans. However, he was glad he found out rather than stay ignorant.

The sense of urgency and desire for power in his heart surged uncontrollably.

Even if he had to risk starting a continental war, he had to unify Pangea in the shortest time possible. Only then would he have access to all possible knowledge, resources, and manpower in the world.

Vaan had enough self-awareness to understand that while he might have already become the strongest person in Pangea, he was still an insignificant ant in the grand scheme of things.

The power of one man was limited, perhaps only enough to cause a small ripple in the great ocean.

On the other hand, the power of an entire race could create wonders and miracles.

Vaan seemingly had a breakthrough in his mental state.

After knowing what must be done, he no longer cared whether he exposed his true identity and capability to the people of the Great Ratholos Empire.

He boldly advanced to the top of the Black Mountain, where the suppressive force of gravity was the greatest, to comprehend as much of the Law of Space in the shortest time possible.

The weak relied on their intelligence, while the strong made use of their strength.

'I will cow this world into submission with strength so great people can only despair and look up to, never dare to compare!' Vaan's eyes flickered with a fierce glint.

The reason he was reborn... The reason he was gifted with unparalleled talent... He was beginning to understand the purpose of his life...

He was burdened with a great mission that no other could or hoped to realize.

Chapter 658: Rapid Improvement

Ever since Vaan had ascended to the 490th Mountain Step, he had long drawn the attention of everyone around the Black Mountain. Even the elderly warriors from the 495th Mountain Step and beyond were no exception.

After all, anyone who could practice under the gravitational pressure of the 490th to 530th Mountain Steps was considered a top powerhouse in the entire Great Ratholos Empire.

As such, while the ordinary observing warriors at the foot of the mountain were full of shock and disbelief, these elderly warriors' reactions to Vaan's ascension were milder. Rather, they were mostly amazed than shocked.

However, that amazement quickly turned into shock when Vaan reached the 540th Mountain Step.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't stop there, and their expressions became more colorful – from shock to greater shock and from greater shock to dumbfounded. They didn't know what to think or feel when Vaan overcame the pressure of the 570th Mountain Step, which even Emperor Varan struggled to endure.

When Vaan ascended to the 600th Mountain Step, all their conflicting and bewildering emotions turned into worship and awe.

Regardless of whether Vaan had used his capabilities or relied on external assistance to reach the 600th Mountain Step, he had undoubtedly created an unprecedented legend in the Great Ratholos Empire.

"I must be dreaming... That young man has ascended to a height that even the mighty Sea Emperor could not reach..."

"How is that even possible...? Does that mean his strength is even greater than His Imperial Majesty and the Sea Emperor?"

"That's... impossible! No one can surpass His Imperial Majesty and the Sea Emperor. That kid just has monstrous talent and potential... Yes, that must be it!"

"Monstrous talent and potential? Are you kidding me? Sheer talent and potential can't make up for such a huge gap in body refinement. This kid's internal organs must be made of tempered tungsten or something..."

It didn't take for the entire Black Mountain to erupt into heated discussions as everyone speculated Vaan's background and true ability.

Regardless of the warriors' envy and awe, not a single person could take their eyes off Vaan's ascending figure.

Most of the younger warriors even hoped he could reach the very top of the Black Mountain and create an unsurpassable legend that would be remembered for thousands of years.

To the younger warriors, just reaching the 450th Mountain Step was already a distant goal. Thus, they wouldn't even dare compare themselves to Vaan.

It was simply exciting to bear witness to the birth of a legend.

...

The 667th Mountain Step... the absolute peak of the Black Mountain...

No one could imagine the terrifying gravitational pressure it possessed. However, everyone believed it wasn't something a Transcendent-rank Body Refiner could bear.

When Vaan ascended to the peak, everyone at the foot of the Black Mountain cheered with excitement.

Of course, Vaan himself was unconcerned with other people.

Even with Vaan's current physical attributes, he found it exceedingly difficult to endure the gravitational pressure of the Black Mountain. It was as if all of the Black Mountain's gravitational force had been channeled into a single point, bearing down on Vaan.

The gravity was so immense that even Demigods would be brought to their knees.

However, it was just the kind of pressure Vaan needed to temper his body as he perceived the laws, killing two birds with one stone.

Nevertheless, without using any supportive skills to alleviate the pressure, Vaan's body started breaking apart; his skin cracked, his blood vessels burst, and his organs ruptured—only to be restored by his inhuman regenerative ability.

Under the constant cycle of destruction and recreation of his body, Vaan experienced drastic improvements.

Ding!

<Your comprehension of the Law of Space has increased by 0.1%>

<Your comprehension of the Law of Earth has increased by 0.4%>

<Your affinity to the earth has been raised by 1%>

<Your physical body has been tempered by gravity>

<Your pain tolerance has improved>

...

...

Vaan continued to receive strings of notifications from the system as he endured the torturous, self-mutilating meditation, which burdened both his body and mind.

The pain felt like his entire being was submerged inside a giant cauldron of life-threatening flames, refining his body and soul. He didn't get a single chance of respite. The slightest relaxation could prove fatal.

Ding!

<Your body's overall defensive attributes have reached the Early-level Transcendent Rank>

<Your soul has become slightly more condensed and one step closer to divine>

...

As Vaan's body underwent rapid improvement, his soul and comprehension of the laws continued to improve.

However, compared to his comprehension of the laws, the progress in his soul improvement seemed incomparably slower. Given the current rate of improvement, even if he comprehended 10% of the Law of Space, it still wouldn't be enough to form his Divine Soul.

Vaan's eyes suddenly flashed with enlightenment.

'Understanding the power of laws could indeed achieve the Divine Soul. However, it isn't an absolute prerequisite to reaching the divine,' Vaan understood.

As his comprehension of the Law of Space improved, Vaan gained a deeper understanding of the divine way.

The power of laws could allow him to become a Divine Being, but it wasn't the only path to forging the Divine Soul. If anything, the power of laws was more supplementary in augmenting one's combat prowess than promoting one's level of existence.

'I'll be making a grave mistake if I take the power of laws as the answer to reaching the divine,' Vaan thought.

He felt that achieving the divine through the power of laws was an inferior path.

If he became one with the Law of Space, he could indeed become a mighty Divine Being with a lifespan as long as the sun and moon. However, that would be his limit – at the level of the laws.

How could someone who wished to be supreme settle for the same level as the heavenly laws?

His ambition lay above the heavenly laws!

'I can comprehend the Law of Space to the absolute peak, but I must never tie my existence to it or any other law. That would lower the upper limit of my growth.'

Vaan felt certain in the truth of his conclusion because of the Nihility Law, the Law of Nothingness. His 0.3% comprehension of the Nihility Law had never slipped his mind.

In fact, it had grabbed much of his attention.

The Nihility Law also contained the power of a law. However, its power should be above all other heavenly laws. After all, it's the most primal law, even more ancient than the universe itself.

As for anything above the Nihility Law? Vaan did not know.

However, what he did know was that he couldn't rashly enter the divine no matter how much he desired power.

'There must be a suitable divine soul path for me, one that doesn't require fusing with the heavenly laws...'

Chapter 659: Rapid Improvement (2)

All the attention in Black Mountain had been stolen away by Vaan's unprecedented achievement. His brilliance burned so brightly that no one within the Black Mountain paid attention to the chaos spreading outside of it.

Ba-dump!

Many hearts thumped loudly whenever the concerned warriors witnessed Vaan's body crack under the gravitational pressure only to reform itself.

No one knew how long Vaan could last under such unimaginable suppressive power, but no one wished for him to fall. The natural respect and worship for the strong ingrained in every warrior didn't permit them to desire otherwise.

At that point, it no longer mattered who Vaan was or where he came from. Even if he weren't someone from their empire, their feelings wouldn't necessarily change.

After all, to bear witness to the birth of someone greater than Emperor Varan and the Sea Emperor was a form of glory, and having such a strong human emerge from their empire was a good thing for humanity.

Splurt!

Blood burst from the cracks on Vaan's skin as his body broke down again, only to regenerate shortly after. The process of destruction and recreation of the body had repeated over several dozens, soaking the mountain top in his blood.

It was a bloody scene no one would have believed was created by one man had they not seen it themselves.

Vaan's body was like a vessel of boundless blood as his bone marrow continuously produced new blood to restore his physical condition to its peak. Although Vaan showed no sign of fatigue, he was definitely feeling the burden.

After all, the energy of his bone marrow wasn't limitless, nor did it come from nothing.

As such, after enduring fifty cycles of bodily destruction and recreation, Vaan retrieved a few magical plants with restorative properties from Heaven-Swallowing Space and directly consumed them.

Ding!

<You have consumed a Rank 4 Blood Invigorating Flower>

<You have consumed a Rank 4 Sun Glazed Ganoderma>

<You have consumed a stalk of Peak Rank 4 Blithe Nirvana Grass>

<Effectiveness of all fire-attribute magical plants has increased by 100%>

<Your body has completely absorbed the efficacy of the fire-attribute magical plants>

<Your blood potency has greatly increased>

<Your marrow energy has fully restored>

<For a short period, your regenerative abilities will be 100% more effective>

...

After consuming the blood-enhancing magical plants, Vaan's blood was filled with medicinal power as they turned scorching hot like fire.

Every new wound that opened on the surface of his flesh disappeared almost instantly. It was as if the brief cracks that appeared were mere illusions.

Ding!

<Your physical body has been tempered by gravity>

<Your physical body has been tempered by gravity>

...

Vaan continued to endure the self-mutilating cultivation without a complaint. Although blood kept splurting out from the cracks in his skin, the amount had been greatly reduced compared to the initial process.

As his fleshly body improved at an unbelievable rate under the power of gravity and medicine, it became less susceptible to cracking under pressure.

'My body is a piece of iron. With my blood as the fire and the Black Mountain as my hammer, I will temper my physical self to the limit and forge an indestructible body!' Vaan steeled his resolve.

Ding!

<Your body's overall defensive attributes have reached the Peak Early-level Transcendent Rank>

...

<You have consumed a Peak Rank 4 Dragon Jade Lotus>

<You have consumed nine drops of Divine-rank Stalactite Milk>

...

<Your physical body has been tempered by gravity and medicinal power>

<Your body's overall defensive attributes have reached the Middle-level Transcendent Rank>

<Your body's overall defensive attributes have reached the Peak Middle-level Transcendent Rank>

<Your body's affinity to the earth has reached 80%>

<Mid-rank Earth Spirit Body → High-rank Earth Spirit Body>

<You have acquired Earth Authority>

...

Vaan's body was already improving very quickly. But after he consumed higher-quality magical plants and precious heavenly elixirs without hesitation, his improvement rate could only be described as insane.

In a mere six hours, Vaan's physical body was tempered to a level that most Body Refiners couldn't achieve in their decades or centuries of cultivation.

However, it was also understandable.

After all, other Body Refiners did not have a Divine-rank physique and bloodline like Vaan, nor did they have precious magical plants and heavenly elixirs like the Divine-rank Stalactite Milk to consume recklessly.

Furthermore, they couldn't enjoy the full might of the Black Mountain in tempering their bodies.

Anyone else in Vaan's shoes would have long died under the crushing force of the Black Mountain before they could enjoy its tempering benefits, let alone with precious magical plants and heavenly elixirs to indulge in.

When the body-refining masters watched Vaan cultivate on the peak of the Black Mountain, they all felt a chill run down their spines.

Anyone at their level could endure hardship in the process of pushing their bodies to the extreme limits. However, none of them had ever seen anyone refine their body in such a cruel and gruesome way.

It shook their hearts greatly.

There wasn't a single spot on Vaan's body that wasn't covered by blood.

After Vaan's body reached a level that stopped cracking under the Black Mountain's crushing pressure, his blood quickly dried under his high bodily heat, forming a thin layer of blood crust.

Vaan remained motionless like a firm mountain under such a condition. Because of that, no one knew if he was alive or dead. Sadness permeated the hearts of many warriors as they assumed his death.

They couldn't help but mourn his silent passing.

Among the crowds of warriors gathered at the foot of the Black Mountain, Berucha, who had come from the Martial Hall, became absent-minded with a sense of loss.

He was unwilling to believe in Vaan's death.

An Old Master sighed, "Today, a legend was born, shining brightly like the sun in the sky. Everyone was dazzled by its brilliance. Unfortunately, it was also short-lived like the shooting stars..."

"Young Master Vanderlin isn't dead! He can't be dead!" Berucha quickly regained his wits as he denied the increasing murmurs of assumption regarding Vaan's death. He was unwilling to believe it.

The person had given Berucha far too many surprises since the beginning of their encounter.

When they met, Berucha already felt the person was extraordinary. However, it was only after the person ascended to the top of the Black Mountain did he see how extraordinary the person truly was.

It didn't seem likely for such an extraordinary person to roll over and die just like that.

'Everyone is mistaken. Young Master Vanderlin is definitely alive,' Berucha silently convinced himself despite having no confidence or proof.

Chapter 660: The Shadows of Demons

"Young Master Vanderlin?"

A nearby Peak Rank 3 Body Refiner, seemingly someone of notable status, turned to Berucha before briefly evaluating him.

"This Junior Brother... Are you saying the person on the mountain peak is Vanderlin Pendragon, the new honorary core member who has been the topic of gossip in the Martial Hall recently?"

"Yes..." Berucha answered.

Although Vaan's name was already known among a few people present, it quickly became widespread with Berucha's confirmation. At the same time, no one found his surname inappropriate whatsoever, at least not after what he had achieved.

"So his name is Vanderlin Pendragon..."

"Haha, what an imposing name...but it is also quite fitting! Unless someone else can also reach the peak, the top seat will remain his, an eternal legend!"

"It's not necessary for someone to reach the top before they can remove the corpse from the—" A young warrior didn't finish commenting before he received dozens of fierce glares.

"What utter nonsense! You better watch your tongue, boy!" an elderly warrior snapped at the young warrior after descending the Black Mountain. "Young Pendragon's legend might have been short, but he did reach the top with his own abilities! His seat is fully deserving and shouldn't be removed by foul means."

"I will not allow anyone to dishonor Young Pendragon! If someone wants him off the top seat, then climb to the peak with their own strength!" the elderly warrior stated.

In fact, the elderly warrior did not need to say so much.

Many warriors viewed Vaan's achievement as sacred, something comparable to how others treat divine relics of their religious gods. For the unqualified to act or even think of disrespecting Vaan's body was a serious taint to their warrior's pride.

As such, the young warrior immediately felt immensely regretful after his careless remark.

...

The crowd gradually dispersed after some time as many warriors thought they had lingered around the Black Mountain long enough. Since there was nothing left to see, most of them went back to doing their own things.

Only a small minority and newcomers remained behind to admire and sigh over Vaan's seemingly 'unfortunate fate.'

Of course, Vaan had been conscious the whole time.

Although he remained motionless and didn't seem to display any sign of life, his body continued to improve under the pressure of the Black Mountain, albeit at a turtle pace compared to before.

Originally, his high aura cultivation had caused great strain on his blood vessels and meridians. But now that his constitution caught up, such strain disappeared.

As such, he could further increase his aura cultivation without consequences.

However, since everyone was starting to believe he was dead, it would be a pity to give up his current cover. After all, unless people realized he was still alive, it was unlikely for anyone to try removing him from the Black Mountain.

In other words, Vaan could stay on the Black Mountain to perceive the laws and monitor the imperial capital indefinitely—should he wish to.

After he acquired the High-rank Earth Spirit Body and gained Earth Authority, he could feel much more of the earth, allowing his senses to reach much further. Information was constantly fed to him from all directions.

It wasn't farfetched to say that countless people within the imperial capital were his eyes and ears without their own knowledge.

He was silently monitoring the situation at all times with a portion of his consciousness.

The only disadvantage of such passive spying was that he couldn't eavesdrop on people's conversations outside his detection range and those staying in special anti-detection fields.

However, Vaan had also taken proactive measures to counter such an obvious flaw – he relied on the dragons and their magic.

The number of young dragon elites performing recon in the Great Ratholos Empire alone had increased to twenty-five out of the fifty original young dragon elites. Furthermore, it occurred in the last twenty-four hours.

Every country has its own darkness, and Vaan knew the glorious and mighty Great Ratholos Empire was no exception.

However, even Vaan was surprised when he discovered how deeply rooted and hidden the darkness was in the Great Ratholos Empire. Moreover, its force was far greater than he had imagined.

Yet despite the great force the darkness wielded, it still remained in obscurity, biding its time patiently for the right moment to shock the world.

If the people of the Great Ratholos Empire learned as much about this hidden force as Vaan did, they would have been absolutely horrified. After all, it was a force capable of overturning the sovereignty of the Great Ratholos Empire—if no other force intervened.

Naturally, since Vaan was around, he wouldn't let that happen, especially because it most likely involved another Devil's Contractor. Even if Vaan was wrong in his guess, it shouldn't be far off.

He was certain this hidden force had strong ties to the demons of Gehenna one way or another.

Otherwise, how could it elude the eyes of everyone for so long?

The shadows of demons were everywhere.

'Chaezi,' Vaan willed.

'What is your order, Supreme Leader?' Chaezi's sweet, compliant voice was immediately heard as if she had been on standby, awaiting his command.

'Give me an update on the Sacred Tirtha and Delarosa Household,' Vaan demanded.

Among the areas where Vaan's Omni-Sense could not reach, the Sacred Tirtha and territory of the Delarosa Household were at the top of the list.

Not only were these two places very large, but they also accommodated many people, particularly shamans, witch doctors, and those with the potential to become one of the two.

Shamans practiced the art of divination and healing, while witch doctors studied the art of breaking curses and curing diseases.

The Sacred Tirtha was precisely a place for training shamans and witch doctors.

Not only had it trained the most shamans and witch doctors in the history of the empire, but it also provided the highest healing water and treatment to warriors.

Countless warriors were greatly indebted to its River of Healing and Pond of Rebirth.

But while the warriors of the empire saw the Sacred Tirtha as the most sacred place, deserving of the highest respect, Vaan found it very suspicious. It was easily the safest place to hide something.