

The Witch 591

Chapter 591: Bottleneck Breached

Black Rose Kingdom, Blackthorn City

The unique phenomenon of the concentrated mana beam descending onto Henrietta's palatial magic tower continued recurring for half a day.

Many people made blind speculations and assumptions regarding the cause behind the unprecedented phenomenon without a definite answer. And when it ended, they were left with even more doubts and questions as to why it stopped.

The entrance to Henrietta's palatial magic tower could be seen crowded with visitors from the start to the end of this never-before-seen event. In fact, the crowd grew several times compared to its initial size.

However, no matter who came, without any word from their Witch Queen, everyone was turned away at the entrance to the palatial magic tower by Henrietta's personal servants.

Only the involved parties actually knew what happened.

At that moment, Henrietta could be found seated, cross-legged on her bed with her eyes closed in meditation, bare without any clothes on.

Sweat perspired on her fair body, and her smooth skin still glistened with a tinge of warm redness – a lingering effect of her strenuous dual practice with Vaan, which had abruptly ended due to the sheer volume of mana absorbed into her small body, propelling her to make a breakthrough.

Meanwhile, Vaan observed Henrietta from a distance, still bare, after retreating to the edge of the room out of consideration of possibly interrupting her advancement. The intensity of his intrigued and curious gaze made it unclear whether he was studying the flow of mana or simply admiring Henrietta's naked beauty.

The sheer volume of mana gathered in the room had completely eclipsed the pink atmosphere they had painted together, turning it into a sea of ocean blue.

Three streams of concentrated mana poured into Henrietta's heart in great quantity like whirlpools in the sea.

The speed of mana absorption was far greater than any witch Vaan had previously met.

Space and time itself seemed to have been warped and twisted, making the room appear larger than it actually was. At the same time, nothing else seemed to matter besides the eighth mana ring forming around Henrietta's heart.

It was the sole focus in the room.

The brilliance of Henrietta's mana rings made her body appear semi-transparent, allowing any observer to witness every single revolving mana ring around her heart in different sizes and speeds.

An Early-stage High Witch only had three mana rings, but Henrietta, as an Early-stage Transcendent Witch, had seven mana rings!

Furthermore, the eighth mana ring was forming at that very instant.

The enormous amount of mana required to form the eighth mana ring revealed the sheer difficulty of the underlying task. Such a quantity of mana wasn't something a High Witch's mental strength could control at once.

Heck, even an average Transcendent Witch's mental strength might not be enough.

Vaan could see that the size of Henrietta's seventh and incomplete eighth mana rings were noticeably larger than her previous mana rings. The mana and mental strength demanded for their formation was only a completely different scale to the previous mana rings.

He did not doubt Emphyrean Scarletsea was assisting Henrietta with the formation of her eighth mana ring.

At the same time, he could see how Henrietta became a Transcendent Witch so easily.

After all, with an unfathomable existence for a master like Empyrean Scarletsea helping, how could she not become a Transcendent Witch so easily?

Forming the first three mana rings to become an Early-stage High Witch was only the beginner stage. These mana rings were the smallest, thus making them the easiest to form. As such, the first three mana rings could also be called the three minor rings.

However, Henrietta's fourth to sixth mana rings were evident larger but not as large as her seventh and incomplete eighth mana rings. As such, they could be considered the three middle rings.

It only took three minor mana rings to become an Early-stage High Witch but three middle rings to be a Peak-stage one. The demand for mana and mental strength was on a different scale. As such, it was no wonder that many failed to take the next step forward. They were ill-prepared due to miscomprehension.

Finally, the seventh and incomplete eighth mana rings were on a different scale of their own.

Vaan considered the mana rings at this step to be the major rings. Judging by the power of each major ring, he estimated Henrietta needed to possess four major rings to reach the peak of the Transcendent rank.

In other words, a Peak-stage Transcendent Witch would have ten mana rings – three minor, three middle, and four major.

But how would a witch advance beyond the Transcendent rank?

There was only so much space around the heart, and it would be used up by this step. As such, it wasn't realistic to continue forming new mana rings by this point.

Essentially, a new method of advancement had to be used to progress further beyond this point.

That matter aside, Vaan was curious how much stronger Henrietta would become after becoming a Mid-stage Transcendent Witch.

After all, she could deter the three empires with Peak Transcendent-level combat power despite her actual cultivation only being at Early-stage Transcendent Witch. Would the cultivation of Mid-stage Transcendent Witch allow her combat power to enter the ranks of Demigods?

Vaan figured it was most likely, but not immediately.

Henrietta would still need time to stabilize cultivation, adapt to her new power, and improve pre-existing spells before she reached such a level of combat power.

Nevertheless, seeing Henrietta's advancement was progressing smoothly with Emphyrean Scarletsea's assistance, Vaan shifted his focus to himself.

Although he had made some gains from their dual practice, his harvest was not to his satisfaction. This wasn't surprising, given the short period of their dual practice.

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[System Log]

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<[Objective Mission 3]: Collect 5 Transcendent Witch-level primal essences>

<[Reward]: A random Transcendent Witch-level Specialized Magic>

<[Progress]: 1/5 Transcendent Witch-level primal essence>

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<[Fire Affinity]: 80% → 82% (↑2%)>

<[Defense]: 1150 → 1155 (↑5)>

<[Strength]: 1200 → 1225 (↑25)>

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<[Fire Law]: 5% → 5.001% (↑0.001%)>

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As Vaan calmly reviewed his improvements, he became pleasantly surprised by one particular section.

Based on his own understanding of the universal laws, he figured 5% law comprehension was the absolute limit permitted to beings below the divine rank. Unless some conditions were satisfied, one would not improve their comprehension of the law, no matter how great their perception was.

However, that bottleneck was finally breached.

Vaan had gained something special from his dual practice with Henrietta, making it possible.

Although he had yet to figure out what that special something was, at the very least, he understood his comprehension of the fire law was no longer restricted.

'What an unexpected gain,' Vaan smiled silently.

Chapter 592: Vanderlin Pendragon

After Vaan finished his self-evaluation, he shifted his attention back to Henrietta, who was nearly done condensing her eighth mana ring with Empyrean Scarletsea's help. As he observed Henrietta's advancement, he realized a few things based on the staggering amount of mana consumed.

Firstly, despite possessing a cheat-like existence, such as Empyrean Scarletsea, to aid her cultivation, Henrietta could not progress further than the Early-stage Transcendent Witch rank. That was because there was never enough mana to keep up with her consumption rate in forming new mana rings.

That said, given Henrietta's status and power, accumulating the necessary quantity of mana for her advancement shouldn't be impossible.

As such, it wasn't that she couldn't advance; she simply chose not to.

The reason was quite simple – Empyrean Scarletsea wanted Henrietta to consolidate her cultivation and build a firm foundation before permitting her to advance further. After all, Empyrean Scarletsea had helped Henrietta become a Transcendent Witch with brute force.

Such a method required time for her to adjust, adapt, and master.

Alas, the flood of mana resulting from Vaan's dual practice with Henrietta forced her to advance anyway.

On that topic, Vaan was quite curious about how the Transcendent Witches achieved their level of power. After all, they couldn't possibly all have an undying-level master like Empyrean Scarletsea to guide and assist them.

Suddenly, Vaan shook his head and put his miscellaneous thoughts aside.

Based on his observation and conclusion, Henrietta would spend considerable time in isolated training after her advancement to consolidate her power. As such, there was no need to stick around and expect further dual practice together any time soon.

They had already reaped considerable benefits from each other. Vaan also wasn't so desperate for physical intimacy that he would need to wait on a woman to achieve it.

As such, Vaan decided he would leave for his journey after he finished guarding and ensuring Henrietta's smooth advancement without incident.

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Meanwhile, a group of witches suddenly appeared on the southern outskirts of Blackthorn City via a spatial portal.

Victoria sighed as her gaze fell on the grand black city filled with soaring magic towers ahead.

If she hadn't found out her fourth daughter's child was still alive, she wouldn't have returned to the Black Rose Kingdom to look again.

Under Queen Henrietta's rule, the Black Rose Kingdom never hunted the Great House of Caelestis. It could be considered one of the safest lands for their family to settle down. But ironically, it was also in this very land that the Great House of Caelestis lost the greatest talent it had seen since the dawn of magic.

As a result, the Great House of Caelestis's relationship with the Black Rose Kingdom had become estranged.

Victoria would avoid coming to this land if she didn't have an important purpose – it contained too much disappointment and sorrow for her to bear.

Given the convenience of space magic, it would only take mere minutes to reach Blackthorn City from Black Dragon Peak. Unfortunately, she still had to respect the ruler of the land and follow the rules.

As such, it ended up taking half a day to acquire the border pass to enter the kingdom – something that shouldn't have taken so long in the past.

"It was unexpected that we had to wait half a day to be granted border access, but at least we are here now, Second Lady," a spatial-attribute elite servant at the Peak-stage Senior Witch rank said, noting Victoria's expression.

"The Black Rose Kingdom is currently undergoing great changes. It's no surprise if security becomes a little strict," Victoria shook her head with a sigh before prompting the group, "Alright, let us enter the city."

"Yes, Second Lady!" the elite group answered.

Shortly after the group stated their affiliation and purpose at the city entrance and received their city permit, Victoria led them directly to the palatial magic tower. At the same time, she didn't forget to check the radar-like screen on her special sensory-type magic tool as it scanned the surroundings.

She became ecstatic the moment a red dot appeared on the upper-middle part of the screen – it implied there was someone with spatial attributes or the blood of the Caelestis family in the city.

However, she suddenly saw several more red dots appear a split second later, and they were all congested in the same location. Such a sight was like getting splashed by a bucket of cold water; it woke her up and chilled her excitement.

Recalling the family had sent another group to the Black Rose Kingdom ahead of time, Victoria sighed with disappointment.

"Second Lady...?"

"It's nothing. Let us keep going."

"Yes, my Lady!"

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Meanwhile, the moment Vaan confirmed Henrietta's advancement succeeded without an issue, he silently left via spatial shift. He made a quick stop at a couple of stores to buy a few essential items such as medicines, clothes, spices, silverware, and bedware.

Afterward, Vaan entered a small public restroom and never came out.

A poor soul waited two hours to unload his waste before realizing the person who entered the toilet before him was nowhere to be seen. The person seemed to have vanished into thin air. After all, there was only one exit, and it wasn't used after entry.

Where could the person have gone?

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Great Ratholos Empire – southern border checkpoint

At that moment, Vaan was queueing in line with a crowd, waiting to pass the security check to enter the Great Ratholos Empire. He was dressed in plain, semi-ragged clothing, seemingly worn out from long travels.

Although he still retained the general traits of a Darkan person, his facial appearance, height, and body structure had all been altered.

He appeared more ordinary, shorter, and a little thin but still muscular – something he could easily achieve with a little makeup and his newly developed body reformation technique derived from his bloodline transformation.

No one who saw him would be able to guess who he was.

Vaan had purposely traveled an extra thousand-odd kilometers just to use the southern border entry. It was the only logical point of entry to roam the Great Ratholos Empire with an official, unsuspected identity.

After all, the northern and western borders were either heavily guarded or completely cut off. The eastern border was not even an option. As such, there was only the southern border left.

Thousands of warriors queue up at the southern border to enter the holy land of warriors every day.

Thus, security was a little more lax.

Of course, given Vaan's strength, he could have simply entered the land directly with his original appearance. However, his status was sensitive, and any reckless act could cause international disputes and stir countless countries into action.

Going through a little inconvenience to avoid the constant pursuit and pestering of flies was the safest and most worthwhile choice. It was also wrong to underestimate the unknown just because he had acquired strength.

More importantly, even if he couldn't be killed, he could still be annoyed.

"Name and purpose?" the border guard inquired with a dull look, having repeated the same tedious process thousands of times daily.

"Vanderlin Pendragon. I've come to train," Vaan calmly answered.

The border guard thoughtlessly nodded as he recorded the information to issue Vaan's identity card when his pen-holding hand suddenly paused.

He glanced up and scrutinized Vaan's scrawny yet lean appearance with a somber look.

Chapter 593: Not a Pushover

The moment Vaan declared his name to be Vanderlin Pendragon, it wasn't just the border guard who gave him a careful look. In fact, everyone who heard him looked over – some with astonishment, some curiosity, some with disdain, and some with concerns.

There were also a few who appeared like they were about to witness an interesting show.

"Vanderlin Pendragon, was it? Is that your real name?" the border guard solemnly sought Vaan's confirmation.

"It is." Vaan calmly nodded before asking casually, "Is there a problem?"

The border guard stared at Vaan for some time but couldn't find any visible signs of dishonesty in his expression. Thus, he believed him. But because of that, he also didn't know whether to feel sorry for him or not.

"Is there a problem, huh?" the border guard's stern expression relaxed as he rubbed his forehead with a wry smile.

"Listen here, brother – officially, I am required to write your name as is on your identity card. That being the case, however, if you don't want to look for trouble, you better not go around declaring your name to other warriors."

"Many, if not everyone, will not take such an impressive name lightly," the border guard warned out of the goodness of his heart.

Naturally, Vaan knew what kind of stir the name 'Pendragon' would cause in a dragon-worshipping country like the Great Ratholos Empire.

But that was also precisely why he had chosen it.

Changing his name and appearance to hide his true identity didn't mean he had to be low profile. Being low profile would be restrictive and counterintuitive to his plans for the Great Ratholos Empire.

"I am aware of that and will keep your words in mind. Thank you," Vaan replied to the border guard cordially with a polite smile.

However, Vaan had long drawn attention to himself.

No doubt, there were many warriors in the line who were already thinking about challenging him to a duel. After all, if they could defeat a 'Pendragon,' it would be something to be proud and boast about, even if the person was weak.

"Take care," the border guard casually said.

After Vaan received his identity card, he proceeded past the border checkpoint and stepped into the barren land of the Great Ratholos Empire. Rocky pillars, sandy soils, and dusty winds immediately greeted him beyond the mountain pass, where the checkpoint was situated.

A trail of stones could be found wedged into the sand, forming a clear road through the maze of rock pillars. It would eventually lead him to a human settlement if he followed it.

However, Vaan paused after taking a few steps. Two warriors who had passed the checkpoint before him obstructed his path. They glanced at him and grinned, eyes burning with fighting spirits.

"Hey, buddy. You must be seeking to train and gain some experience if you have chosen to come to this land. How about a friendly spar?" one of the two bulky warriors suggested.

"Hey, hey. I would also like a turn, too," another voice sounded from Vaan's rear as more warriors approached them, one after the other.

The one who spoke belonged to a tanned male with well-defined muscles and red hair – the most common traits of Duneans, people of the sand.

"Surely, this brother won't turn me down, right?" the Dunean pressed, further adding, "After all, you must be quite bold if you weren't worried about others hearing your name back at the checkpoint."

"Me too. I would like to spar. One shouldn't fear a challenge while they are in the Great Ratholos Empire. This is the holy land for warriors. Fighting every day is the norm."

"That's right! Count me in as well. I would also like to spar with a Pendragon. I want to see if he is worthy of such a name!"

"Don't forget about me."

The gathering warriors voiced their intentions to spar with Vaan, one after the other – some did so to satisfy their vanity and make themselves look better after defeating him, and others did so to test him.

Even if he didn't look the part, a person carrying the name 'Pendragon' had to have some special qualities. Otherwise, the person was only looking for suffering by coming to this land.

"Spars are fine. However, my time is limited. Why don't you all come at me all at once and let us be done with it quickly?" Vaan casually suggested. "I can take you all on."

Ptui!

A Dunean Warrior spat at his suggestion and barked, "You are looking down on our warrior's integrity! I can't believe you have the nerve to suggest such a thing to us, Pendragon! How is that fair for you?!"

"That's right! We only want to fight you, fair and square, Pendragon!" another Dunean Warrior voiced.

Even if everyone could defeat Vaan with such a method, it wouldn't be something they could brag about. In fact, they would be too ashamed even to mention it!

Using numbers to defeat a Pendragon... What was there to be proud of?

"When you want to spar with someone, you must look at their strength first. Even if you all come at me, it won't be fair to you all," Vaan coolly stated.

"Hmph! Even if you speak the truth, it's not right, Pendragon! You have your confidence, but we have our warrior's pride!"

"I'm not convinced! Let me see your strength!"

Many warriors hesitated to fight Vaan due to their pride, but some didn't care. They just wanted to defeat Vaan and bolster their reputation.

'I defeated a warrior surnamed 'Pendragon' as soon as I entered the country!' – how good would it be if they could make such a claim?

Under such a temptation, several warriors immediately charged at Vaan after voicing their intention to fight. However, a few shameless warriors also didn't, and their actions could be regarded as sneak attacks – something that any proud warrior would frown upon.

Of course, Vaan didn't intend to go easy on such shameless and selfish people. He immediately meted out punishment with his iron hand of discipline.

Pwak!

A Darkan Warrior, seemingly twice Vaan's body mass, was suddenly smacked squarely on the cheeks. His huge body was sent flying like the wind and crashed into a small rock pillar over thirty yards away.

Boom!

The impact shattered the rock pillar and caused it to crumble to the ground, burying the Darkan Warrior underneath it.

Although the aura of a Peak-level Rank 2 Aura Master shielded the Darkan Warrior from getting crushed to death, it was impossible to get out unscathed. Several bone fragments were guaranteed!

Hiss!

Every assailant forcefully halted their steps in shock and fright while the observers sucked in a deep breath of cool air and broke into cold sweats. It only took a single slap to wake them from their willful dreams.

Sure enough, a person bold enough to carry the name Pendragon wouldn't be a pushover!

Chapter 594: Sunrock Bazaar

"Who's next?" Vaan nonchalantly asked.

The closest warriors to Vaan immediately took a step back with awkward expressions. Their faces became hot from embarrassment and shame, but they also felt as if they had been slapped as well.

It didn't take a genius to realize how much strength was put into that single slap – it contained the force of a Rank 3 Body Refiner, at the very least!

Meanwhile, everyone else was only Rank 2 Body Refiners or Aura Masters!

What kind of spar could they possibly hope for by challenging the Pendragon? They were simply asking for a beating!

But who could have known such a small body would possess so much strength?

Suddenly, all the warriors who thought they could gain fame by defeating Vaan felt ashamed. There was no quick road to success. Their glorious future could only be forged by the blood and sweat of their hard work.

"No one? Then, I'm leaving—"

"I'd like to have a spar with you, Sir."

Seeing that the warriors cleared a path for him with their heads hung down, Vaan was prepared to leave when another person expressed their intent to fight him.

Vaan glanced and noticed a Solaran Warrior who had just arrived.

This newcomer had, more or less, heard and seen why the crowd of warriors was gathering around him. Despite that, he did not cower from his desire to spar, as seen from the eager gleam in his eyes.

"Mid-stage Aura Grandmaster!" a Rank 2 Body Refiner Dunean Warrior uttered after the Solaran Warrior revealed his aura and fighting spirit.

Everyone immediately retreated some extra distance to make room for them with tacit understanding.

There wasn't anyone among the Rank 2 Body Refiners and Aura Masters that could be the Pendragon's opponent. However, a Mid-stage Aura Grandmaster was a different story. Perhaps the newcomer could give them a good fight to watch.

Although everyone had given up their challenges, watching those stronger than themselves fight was also beneficial for them.

"Come at me then."

"Then, please pardon my offense."

The exchange was brief before the Solaran Warrior coated his entire body in a red aura and lunged straight at Vaan with a strong fist.

The force and momentum carried behind this fist were enough to shy away the Rank 2 Body Refiners and Aura Masters, discouraging them from challenging the person. They all knew it wasn't a force they could endure without serious injuries.

Nevertheless, Vaan casually caught the fist with his palm.

Boom!

The impact generated a strong shock, causing the sands and stones beneath Vaan's feet to blow away. However, Vaan himself remained firm in his place like an immovable mountain.

Such a situation was beyond the Solaran Warrior's imagination. He had gravely miscalculated his opponent's strength, having assumed them to be roughly equal. Unfortunately, his opponent had not shown all his strength.

No one expected this.

After all, every day and every year, the strength of warriors journeying to the Great Ratholos Empire for more extensive training was no more than Low-level Rank 3 and no less than Low-level Rank 2.

As such, the Solaran Warrior's strength was already above the norm.

Who would have known he would run into another person whose strength was even more perverted than his at this time?

He could only count himself unlucky.

That said, the Solaran Warrior was only surprised, not discouraged. Even if his opponent's strength was High-level Rank 3, he still wished to spar with such a person.

A man afraid of defeat would never be able to taste the sweetness of victory.

Everything had happened in an instant. After the contact of the first blow, the Solaran Warrior wanted to retract his fist for a follow-up attack. However, his wrist was by Vaan's vise-like grip, and his vision blurred following a powerful pulling force.

Swoosh!

Vaan hurled the huge body of the Solaran Warrior through the air like he was throwing away the trash.

Although the move seemed very casual, the latter could not resist the force behind it and regain his sense of direction and balance in midair. He smashed into multiple rock pillars like a ragdoll, chipping away small chunks of rocks with each impact before face-planting into the ground over a hundred yards away.

Hiss!

The spectators sucked in another mouthful of cool air as they witnessed the scene. Everyone realized they had severely underestimated Vaan's strength, even though he did not look that strong.

Even a High-level Rank 3 Body Refiner would not have been able to throw the Solaran Warrior so far so effortlessly.

After these two fights, no one else present made trouble for Vaan.

As such, Vaan resumed his journey, following the rock path leading him to the next human settlement. However, he only traveled five kilometers before another newcomer caught up to challenge him and confirm the spreading rumors.

Such a situation repeated a dozen times by the time Vaan reached the first human settlement located sixty kilometers from the border checkpoint. Each fight had been brief and instant, but that did not shy away subsequent challengers, who did not know any better.

In the Great Ratholos Empire, many warriors were not afraid of challenging stronger opponents to gain insights. Such spars were considered asking for pointers—but only the stronger opponents showed patience and leniency.

Alas, Vaan did no such thing.

Every challenger was ruthlessly sent flying into the distance in a single exchange without an exception. As such, none of his challengers managed to gain any valuable fighting experience or insights.

"Sunrock Bazaar... Sir Pendragon, we're finally here," a Dunean Warrior hastily said after rushing to catch up to Vaan.

The Sunrock Bazaar was a huge marketplace-turned-city comprising more than three hundred interconnecting rock pillars via wooden and rope bridges. Open stalls could be found on all levels, hustling and bustling with activities and people. No matter where Vaan looked, fabrics of various colors could be seen hanging everywhere, providing both shade and cover.

However, Vaan could not enjoy this rare sight as he felt a growing headache from hearing the Dunean Warrior's voice.

Of the dozen or so challenges he received along the way, half belonged to this Dunean Warrior. Furthermore, he was responsible for the other half.

Vaan couldn't help but wonder if this annoying person enjoyed being hurled by him.

Otherwise, why would he keep coming back for more?

Chapter 595: Madam Morning Dew

Of course, it was just a passing thought.

Vaan knew the real reason why the Dunean Warrior persistently followed him and repeatedly challenged him despite his unwillingness to satisfy the person's wish – the person was hopeful he would eventually give into his stubbornness.

This hope was derived from the conclusion that Vaan was only heavy-handed against those who challenged him with ill motives.

Since the Dunean Warrior purely sought self-improvement by challenging a stronger opponent, he only suffered bruises and small cuts despite getting hurled half a dozen times. His bones and muscles remained undamaged, let alone his inner organs.

Through these recurring exchanges, Vaan gradually learned the Dunean Warrior's name – Jihaad Falahan.

Jihaad Falahan was a thirty-year-old Dunean with a tanned complexion, deep crimson-red hair, and a large shredded body, containing the power of a Peak-level Rank 2 Body Refiner and Peak-stage Aura Master within.

Generally, the average warrior would have lived at least half a century by the time they reached the Aura Grandmaster rank. Although Jihaad was only a step away from achieving this rank, it was a bottleneck that halted many aura users for many years.

Without hard work, opportunities, or the backing of a wealthy family, few would be able to reach Jihaad's level and take the next step.

If Jihaad could make a breakthrough in his aura cultivation, there would not be many Aura Grandmasters as young as him. As such, he would be considered a talented genius. Alas, that was it – just a talented genius.

Such a level of strength was still far from making him a genius among geniuses.

After all, the young scions of the top powerful families in every country could all reach this level, and at a much younger age—but only if they had the full support of their families.

However, this was solely based on aura cultivation alone.

Dual practitioners of aura and body refining as accomplished as Jihaad at his age were even rarer. If he could take the next step in both aura cultivation and body refining, he would be sought out anywhere he went.

From this, it could be seen that Jihaad was either very diligent in his training, had a few fortuitous encounters, came from an influential family, or even a combination of the two or three.

"Sir, what are your plans now that we have reached Sunrock Bazaar?" Jihaad inquired politely.

Most young scions of influential families were naturally arrogant. However, Vaan had seen none of it from the start of their encounter. As such, he was more inclined to believe Jihaad had a few fortuitous encounters and was very diligent in his training.

Of course, the possibility of Jihaad coming from a powerful family wasn't completely ruled out. He might have had an excellent upbringing.

His origins remained unknown, and Vaan wasn't curious enough to find out for the time being.

"Find a bar, drink something, and gather some information," Vaan casually replied to Jihaad's question without much thought.

Jihaad ignored Vaan's indifference to him as his eyes lit up.

"In that case, might I suggest visiting Madam Morning Dew, Sir?" Jihaad suggested before briefly introducing it, "This bar is very popular around here. It has the best drinks and is always bustling with people. All kinds of rumors and information will find its way there."

"Alright," Vaan agreed before giving Jihaad a casual glance. "It seems you're quite familiar with this place."

"Eh? Not really, Sir," Jihaad scratched his head awkwardly before confessing, "I've only heard about it from others in passing. I'm not a native here."

"I see," Vaan uttered nonchalantly and made no further comment.

Although the Great Ratholos Empire was home to many Duneans, not all Duneans lived there. Just like any other ethnic group, Duneans were also spread across the continent. Not all Duneans wished to live in desert regions.

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Madam Morning Dew was an open bar and could be found right in the heart of Sunrock Bazaar. It used a single stone pillar as the base of its establishment and had five floors. However, this single stone pillar was also at the center of eight intersecting roads.

As such, it was no surprise that it would be bustling with people – it was a high-traffic location.

Although there were a lot of spots to sit around the bar, there wasn't a single chair to be found on any floor. Instead, there were round straw mats that seemed like they had never been washed or wiped clean. Drinks were also spilled everywhere.

Evidently, the establishment was messy and unsanitary – something the locals didn't seem to mind or even care about, for that matter.

A brief glance allowed Vaan to understand how the establishment operated.

As such, after a short wait, Vaan and Jihaad immediately sat down on the two spare mats that their previous occupants had just left. This prompted a female waiter to approach them.

"What can I get you two fine warriors?" the female waiter professionally inquired as she held her empty serving tray.

Jihaad appeared mesmerized the moment he laid eyes on the female waiter, which Vaan didn't find surprising.

The female waiter was exceptionally beautiful among the Dunean ladies he had seen thus far. She had a slim yet curvy body with silky-smooth skin. Her deep black eyes appeared bright and seemed to reflect the starry sky.

Her friendly smile also carried a trace of innocence and vulnerability that would make men lower their guards.

She didn't look like an ordinary worker who had toiled with laborious work but a delicate lady who had lived a sheltered life in a wealthy family. As a result, not a single well-informed warrior dared to hit on her and make her job difficult at the establishment.

Vaan understood this was the result of Madam Morning Dew's prestige and the power behind it.

Only a fool would cause trouble at Madam Morning Dew.

"I... Um, we..."

"We would like two Madam Morning Dews, two servings of your Glazed Rockmeat, and the company of someone who can introduce us to this land's points of interest."

While Jihaad stuttered to reply, Vaan ordered with a calm, cordial smile.

Chapter 596: Latifa

It was clear that while Jihaad was diligent in training and could even be said to be quite accomplished, he was rather lacking when it came to interacting with women.

Nevertheless, after hearing Vaan's casual order, Jihaad's eyes widened with surprise. But shortly after, he quietly chuckled self-deprecatingly. He thought he could act as a guide with his knowledge, but alas, his thought was rather naive.

Who hasn't done their fair share of research before they decided to travel to the Great Ratholos Empire to train?

The realization made Jihaad feel quite embarrassed.

On the other hand, the beautiful waiter's pupils glimmered with a hint of surprise for an instant before they receded.

"Understood, Sir," the beautiful waiter acknowledged Vaan's order before politely inquiring, "How may I refer to you?"

"T-This is Sir Vanderlin Pendragon, a great warrior w-w-who has won fifteen rounds of challenges and remained u-undefeated since his border entry, Miss...?"

Jihaad enthusiastically introduced Vaan in his stead before seeking the beautiful waiter's name, albeit with much stuttering. His cheeks also reddened as their eyes met.

"Latifa. You can call me Miss Latifa. Everyone around her does," the beautiful waiter briefly introduced before extending a hand to politely greet Jihaad as she also sought his name, "And how may I address you, Good Sir?"

"Latifa..." Jihaad softly muttered with a thoughtful look, like he was trying to imprint the name in his heart.

He was a bit slow to notice Latifa offering a handshake. But once he did, he immediately grabbed it and eagerly shook it with both hands, feeling her delicate, smooth skin.

"J-Jihaad. Jihaad Falahan. You can call me Sir Jihaad, Beautiful Miss Latifa," Jihaad nervously yet excitedly introduced without letting go of her hand as he further added, "I-I am my father's son and the eldest one of my family. I am thirty this year, u-unmarried, and have never been in a relationship. M-My body is still pure."

"Um..." Latifa was speechless.

Despite her practiced work etiquette, Jihaad's sincere yet silly introduction had put her at a loss for words.

Even the surrounding customers who had eavesdropped half-heartedly were dumbfounded by it. After all, it was just a casual greeting, not a marriage interview. There was no need to say so much.

Moreover, what the heck was a "I am my father's son," huh?

Something that obvious was not even worth mentioning. If he was not his father's son, what was he then? Did he think people thought he was his father's daughter instead? With that kind of look?

Do you think we are all blind not to recognize such an obvious matter?

What a funny man!

Although Jihaad appeared to have overstepped his boundaries, Latifa did not feel like he was being rude despite getting caught off guard by him. That was because there was no hint of lust in Jihaad's eyes.

Such a strong man was surprisingly pure and naïve.

As a result, she did not request the guards to remove him from the establishment. And since she hadn't said anything about it, the other customers didn't speak up for her either. Rather, they simply observed and listened in silence, feeling amused.

"Pft, excuse my poor manners, Sir Jihaad," Latifa apologized for her laughter. She retracted her hand and then commented with a mesmerizing smile, "You're pretty cute and interesting."

You're pretty cute and interesting... cute and interesting...

As Jihaad heard these words, he was enchanted with a blank, dreamy look and heard nothing else as they replayed like a loop in his mind.

Meanwhile, Latifa returned her attention to Vaan apologetically.

"For your company, do you have any preference, Sir Pendragon? Or will I do?" Latifa politely enquired as she tried to maintain her professionalism.

The locals were immediately startled by her words.

Nevertheless, Latifa wasn't concerned about that. She felt a little weird as she looked at Vaan. She did not expect him to possess such an impressive and uncommon name.

Ordinary people wouldn't have such an impressive surname. And even if they did, they would not dare use it in the Great Ratholos Empire unless they believed themselves to be more impressive than the emperor.

As such, there were only two possibilities as to why a person would suddenly appear within the empire with such an impressive surname: they were either a foolish braggart or someone with genuine power.

Based on Latifa's observation of Vaan's calm manner, speech, and steady aura, she didn't get the impression of a pretentious fool who would like to show off.

However, his ordinary appearance also made her doubt he could be someone extraordinary.

Many warriors also had this thought the moment they learned Vaan's name.

As such, these warriors all made mental notes to challenge Vaan as soon as he left the establishment. They didn't dare to spar him on the spot and cause a mess at the establishment.

"I don't have any preferences, nor am I aware of my options for a chatting buddy. So you will do, Miss Latifa," Vaan nodded with a calm smile before adding, "If you don't reject the idea, you can also add another Madam Morning Dew and serving of Glazed Rockmeat to the order for yourself."

"In that case, I will thank you for your generosity and patronage in advance, Sir Pendragon," Latifa bowed gratefully before excusing herself, "I will go prepare your order now."

"Alright," Vaan calmly nodded.

Shortly after Latifa left to turn in the order, Vaan briefly glanced at Jihaad, who had just recovered from his stupor. The person wanted to hide his shame and embarrassment after he reflected on his interaction with the beautiful waiter.

Jihaad might have been awkward, but he wasn't ignorant. He could hear the nearby gossip about him. Even so, he could only thicken his skin and pretend he didn't hear them. He didn't want to escape the situation and potentially miss an opportunity.

As Vaan patiently waited for their food and drinks, he thought about Latifa's identity.

He had, more or less, figured it out based on their interaction and the locals' reactions and treatment toward her and the establishment. As such, he was confident that she could answer whatever he asked her.

And on the off chance that she didn't know the answer to his questions, then, most likely, no one else in the area would know either.

However, he only had simple questions. Thus, the latter situation was unlikely to happen.

Chapter 597: Three Wonders

A few moments later, Latifa returned with her serving tray filled with three mugs of Madam Morning Dews and three servings of Glazed Rockmeat. The time of her departure to the time of her arrival was no more than two dozen breaths.

Such efficiency was hardly seen in bars and restaurants.

However, it was only possible with Vaan because none of the items he ordered required preparation. Everything was pre-made and ready to serve; they only needed to be grabbed and delivered.

Moreover, it appeared he was getting special treatment from the beautiful waiter.

Evidently, while Vaan was interested in Latifa's information, she was similarly interested in learning more about him. He had piqued her curiosity. Since there was something she didn't understand, she had to investigate and shed light on her doubts.

"Sorry for the wait, Sir Jihaad and Sir Vanderlin."

"I-It was no wait at all, Miss Latifa!"

"Right. Surely you jest, Miss Latifa."

"Haha..."

Latifa smiled after Jihaad and Vaan's comments as she knelt down behind them. After wiping the gap between them clean, she unloaded their drinks and food, including her share.

"Please enjoy first, Sir Jihaad and Sir Vanderlin," Latifa politely said before dismissing herself.

Vaan and Jihaad nodded.

Since it was the first time for both of them, they glanced at the three mugs of Madam Morning Dew and three plates of thinly sliced Glazed Rockmeat with interest and curiosity.

There was nothing particularly special about their appearances, nor did they possess any appetizing aroma. In fact, they seemed very ordinary at a glance. After all, while they were signature drinks and food of the popular bar, the taste wasn't their forte, nor was it their focus, for that matter.

Instead, it was their function.

The Madam Morning Dew was clear and transparent like water but a little viscous like maple syrup or honey. It was cold and refreshing but had no distinct smell.

According to Vaan's knowledge, the hydration potency inside a standard mug's worth of Madam Morning Dew was enough to stop a Rank 3 Body Refining warrior from feeling thirsty for three days. Naturally, the effect would be even stronger for those below a Rank 3 Body Refiner.

On the other hand, the Glazed Rockmeat was a type of meat jerky.

However, it was much tougher than normal meat jerky; it was hard like a rock, hence its name. It contained a concentrated amount of energy that could assist in promoting physical growth. Alas, it only applied to ordinary warriors.

For someone at Vaan's level, it had no effect besides a little satiety.

Nevertheless, a few moments later, Latifa returned without her serving tray. Instead, she brought a round mat for herself. She seated herself right where she had previously knelt, forming a triangle between them.

Although this took up some of the walking space, it didn't obstruct the other waiters with their work.

"What would you like to learn about our Great Ratholos Empire, Sir Vanderlin? Do you have any specifics in mind?" Lafita inquired before suggesting, "Or would you like me to give you a brief introduction of our empire's top warrior training locations first?"

Jihaad was a little downcast when Lafita focused her attention on Vaan, but his eyes immediately lit up when he heard her suggestion.

"Please give us a brief introduction of the empire's top warrior training locations, Miss Latifa!" Jihaad requested excitedly.

Latifa's expression slightly crumpled as she looked forward to hearing more from Vaan. But since the two were together, she could only agree with some hidden reluctance.

"Alright, Sir Jihaad," Latifa nodded.

After she turned to Vaan and received his acknowledgment, she sorted out her topics and decided where to start.

"The Great Ratholos Empire has many training locations throughout its territory. But when asked which ones are the best, only three would immediately come to mind. And I believe they are renowned enough that every warrior paying the empire a visit would have at least heard something about them beforehand."

Latifa paid attention to Vaan and Jihaad's expressions at this point.

After she noticed their silent approval, she continued, "You've guessed it. They are the empire's three wonders – Black Mountain, Heavenly Steps, and Martial Hall."

"The Black Mountain... while its name is ordinary, it is anything but ordinary. This Black Mountain is completely made up of black iron, both above ground and below. It is our empire's largest untouched mineral deposit of black iron. Its value cannot be estimated."

"The Black Mountain could bring immense wealth to the empire if mined and processed. However, it has become one of our empire's holy training grounds due to its particularly strong gravity field. It is said that warriors scaling it can experience anywhere between twofold to an incredible hundredfold gravity!"

"This kind of extreme pressure is very useful for tempering the body and highly efficient in doing so, especially the inner organs. After all, it's the most difficult area to strengthen. Unfortunately, if Sir Vanderlin and Sir Jihaad are thinking of visiting Black Mountain, I suggest giving up on that idea."

"Why?" Jihaad wondered with a frown after getting his hopes dashed.

"Because Black Mountain is protected and isn't open to the public. If Sir Jihaad and Sir Vanderlin wish to gain access to Black Mountain, you must become core members of the Martial Hall," Latifa patiently explained.

The Martial Hall was the largest martial arts academy in the Great Ratholos Empire. Anyone could join it by becoming a citizen of the Great Ratholos Empire. However, becoming a core member of the Martial Hall required a different set of conditions that needed to be satisfied.

Be that as it may, Black Mountain wasn't the only benefit members of the Martial Hall could enjoy.

The Martial Hall had a large library of martial art techniques, body refining exercises, and aura cultivation methods that even ordinary members could access.

Even so, Jihaad couldn't help but become dispirited after listening to Latifa. He knew it wasn't easy to become a core member of the Martial Hall.

"You don't need to be disappointed, Sir Jihaad," Latifa comforted after noticing Jihaad's expression.

"Even if you can't access Black Mountain right away, the empire still has other training locations and facilities that can allow you to experience a glimpse of the Black Mountain's effect."

"For example, the Gravity Chamber in the northern district is one such place."

Chapter 598: Three Wonders (2)

"Northern district..."

Jihaad immediately noted the location of the Gravity Chamber in his heart. Even he had heard about the Great Ratholos Empire's Gravity Chambers.

Gravity Chambers were complex rooms that made use of magic formations and enchantments to create artificial gravity and apply pressure on the warriors in training. No amount of weight training could compare to training under heightened gravitational pressure.

After all, weights only target specific muscles depending on the physical exercise. On the other hand, higher gravitational pressure targeted the entire body.

"However, our Sunrock Bazaar's Gravity Chambers are nothing special; they are only Rank 1 Gravity Chambers. They can only produce twofold gravity," Latifa suddenly explained.

A Rank 1 Body Refiner could still get some benefits from this quality of Gravity Chambers. But Jihaad and Vaan's level, they would just be burning money for nothing if they were expecting something.

"I-I see..." Jihaad uttered with further disappointment before suddenly pausing in thought.

After ruminating over Latifa's words, he realized that if Rank 1 Gravity Chambers existed, Rank 2 Gravity Chambers or higher could also exist.

"W-Where can I find Gravity Chambers for Rank 3 Body Refiners, Miss Latifa?" Jihaad sincerely inquired with pure eyes.

His clear gaze slightly moved Latifa.

Warriors striving to improve themselves was nothing new to her. However, seeing one as purely driven as Jihaad was still rare. Normally, people of such diligence trained for an unselfish reason.

"Duke Al-Hulazar's domain would be the closest region from here," Latifa stated after some thought before adding some advice, "Although there are Rank 3 Gravity Chambers there, I wouldn't recommend training there as a long-term plan, Sir Jihaad."

"Why?" Jihaad became curious.

"It's too costly to reserve a Rank 3 Gravity Chamber, Sir Jihaad," Latifa smiled helplessly and said, "Even if you have deep pockets, they'll be drained quickly."

Most warriors visiting the Great Ratholos Empire weren't wealthy people, nor did they have influential backgrounds. As such, they normally couldn't afford the cost of using a Rank 3 Gravity Chambers.

Although Jihaad and Vaan were interesting and mysterious, Latifa didn't think they were wealthy according to their worn-out attire.

"T-Thank you for your advice, Miss Latifa. W-We will keep that in mind," Jihaad said.

"Do you have any questions so far, Sir Vanderlin?" Latifa turned to Vaan, hoping he would speak more. After all, he was the one she was more interested in chatting with, not to mention he was the one who requested a chatting companion.

Vaan briefly contemplated before asking, "The Black Mountain... it's not from this world, is it?"

Latifa immediately expressed her astonishment and thought, 'Sure enough, Sir Vanderlin has more interesting topics to discuss.'

"That's actually unconfirmed. However, many people do believe the Black Mountain was originally a large piece of space debris that fell from beyond the sky. I also share this belief, Sir Vanderlin," Latifa admitted.

"I see..." Vaan's eyes flickered thoughtfully.

According to Latifa's words, there was a high chance the Black Mountain wasn't just any mountain of black iron. In fact, it should most likely be a mountain of Starcore Iron!

Only iron from a star's core would be incredibly heavy and have a strong gravitational field.

However, if the Black Mountain were made of Starcore Iron, its value would be truly astronomical. After all, true Starcore Iron was incredibly strong, if not the strongest. Weapons and equipment forged with it wouldn't be low in quality.

Nevertheless, turning such a large piece of Starcore Iron into a forging material would be extremely wasteful. It was no wonder the Great Ratholos Empire would treat it as its national treasure.

"Since training with Rank 3 Gravity Chambers isn't recommended, where do you recommend we should train, Miss Latifa?" Vaan calmly inquired.

"The Heavenly Steps would be my recommendation, Sir Vanderlin. Although it can't be compared to Black Mountain, it's still better than ordinary Gravity Chambers. More importantly, it's open to the public and free for all to challenge," Latifa said before suddenly smiling wryly. "Although... You will have to travel a little far."

The so-called Heavenly Steps was a set of staircases that ran deep under the Eastern Sea. As such, Latifa wasn't kidding when she said they had to travel a little far. After all, it was located beyond the far east shores of the Great Ratholos Empire.

Warriors could train at the Heavenly Steps by putting their bodies under immense underwater pressure. The more steps they advanced, the greater the underwater pressure they had to withstand.

"The distance isn't an issue, Miss Latifa." Vaan casually waved his hand before saying, "However, that isn't all the reason why you recommend the Heavenly Steps to us, isn't that so?"

"It seems I can't hide anything from you, Sir Vanderlin," Latifa smiled wryly, feeling a little doubtful of her service.

She wondered if Vaan even needed her to explain anything to him. She felt like Vaan already knew everything and simply sought her explanation to verify his own information.

Latifa could only admit with a nod, "That's right. In addition to the benefits I mentioned, you could hunt sea monsters for battle experience and sell their meat for money. The carcasses of sea monsters have high values."

"This should help you accumulate wealth to reserve higher-ranking Gravity Chambers for training. However, you can also trade them for merits at the Martial Hall to improve your membership rank, allowing you to become a core member sooner."

"Although there is a certain level of danger in doing so, when has the world ever been free of dangers? Moreover, warriors improve the fastest when they bear the pressure of life and death."

"That's true," Vaan and Jihaad both nodded, one with calmness and the other with excitement.

Vaan could see through Latifa's ulterior motive – she wanted to utilize sea monsters to gauge his true strength. Latifa was aware that if he could remain undefeated in fifteen challenges, ordinary warriors at Sunrock Bazaar would be inadequate to test him.

But regardless of Latifa's secret intentions, it was also true that the Heavenly Steps was the ideal place to start training.

Jihaad's eyes burned with anticipation, setting the Heavenly Steps as his first destination after Martial Hall. Even Vaan was interested in perusing the techniques at the Martial Hall.

Shortly after Latifa briefed them on several other minor training locations, she asked, "Is there anything else you would like to learn, Sir Vanderlin?"

"How much do you know about the Delarosa family, Miss Latifa?" Vaan casually asked.

Latifa's eyes immediately flashed with greater interest.

Chapter 599: Glory Ranking

"Delarosa family is..."

Latifa pondered carefully before explaining the Delarosa family's background to Vaan. Although she omitted some confidential information, Vaan heard everything he needed to know.

The Delorosa family was a powerful and influential aristocratic family situated in the capital city of the Great Ratholos Empire. They had many Rank 4 Body Refiners and even an ancestor on the verge of becoming a Rank 5 Body Refiner.

They also had many Senior Witches and several High Witches and were said to be pioneers in uncommon magic applications.

Vaan didn't doubt Hexes was included in their so-called uncommon magic application.

The Delarosa family was involved in politics, military, and business.

Among the seven great aristocratic families living in the Great Ratholos Empire's capital city, it was only ranked fifth. However, the Delarosa family was allied with the first-ranking aristocratic family – the Merak family through marriage, making them a force to be reckoned with.

If Vaan wanted to learn more confidential information about the Delarosa family from Latifa, he could not do so without paying her. Furthermore, his actions would alert the Delarosa family, prompting a counter-investigation on him.

Although Vaan intended to be high profile in the Great Ratholos Empire, this wasn't the kind of attention he wanted. As such, Vaan did not dig further into the Delarosa family. Instead, he inquired about the other top aristocratic families and their warriors to obscure his intentions.

Because of that, he learned about the Glory Ranking – a list compiling the names of the strongest warriors in the empire.

However, the most surprising discovery was that Emperor Varan, a Late-stage Aura King, was only ranked second. Moreover, the first ranker didn't have a name, only a title – Sea Emperor.

Vaan couldn't help but develop a stronger interest and curiosity towards the Eastern Sea. It was full of hidden dangers and possibilities. Even history itself could be buried in the depths of its dark waters.

Meanwhile, Jihaad found himself a new goal to strive for during his training period in the Great Ratholos Empire – to have his name carved on the Glory Ranking. Unfortunately, with his present strength, he was still far from his goal.

Every warrior on the Glory Ranking was at least a Rank 4 Body Refiner. As such, challenging them would be no different from throwing an egg against a hard rock.

Even so, Jihaad still had it on his mind after leaving Madam Morning Dew. He did not notice the looks of surprise when Vaan paid Latifa three mid-rank mana stones for the service. After all, everything added together didn't cost that much.

Furthermore, Vaan had paid with mid-rank mana stones – something only an extremely wealthy person would do.

Latifa felt ashamed of her initial assessment when she received the mid-rank mana stones. But after she recovered from her shame, her eyes burned with interest and anticipation.

'Sure enough, Sir Vanderlin is not a simple person,' Latifa thought. She looked forward to the day she unraveled his strength and background.

Meanwhile, everyone else at the bar cast their greedy eyes on Vaan's departing back. Everyone knew better than to flex one's wealth. Doing so was only asking for trouble.

'A fat sheep has appeared,' the simpletons thought.

During the period of Vaan and Jihaad's stay at Madam Morning Dew, news of Vaan's feats had spread by his defeated challengers. As such, many warriors below Rank 3 Body Refiner immediately gave up the thought of challenging him.

Since even a Mid-level Rank 3 Body Refiner was defeated with a single slap, the few High-level Rank 3 Body Refiners temporarily staying at Sunrock Bazaar also hesitated to challenge him.

However, several greedy and unscrupulous warriors who had been present at Madam Morning Dew never thought about letting Vaan walk away with his wealth. They figured that even if they couldn't beat him, they could still rob him.

After all, fighting and pickpocketing required different sets of skills.

...

As Vaan and Jihaad left Madam Morning Dew and made their way northward through a busy road filled with street vendors and people, even Jihaad became alerted to the signs of people tailing them.

"There are people following us, Sir Pendragon," Jihaad carefully warned in soft whispers.

"It's fine. Let them follow us," Vaan nonchalantly replied. The matter was something he had anticipated but was of no particular concern.

And since he had said that much, Jihaad no longer concerned himself with the matter. He didn't believe Vaan didn't know what was going on.

Mana stone was a universally accepted currency in Pangea, and it was also the currency Vaan could have used to pay the beautiful waiter. After all, using currencies of the seven witch kingdoms or the Holy Knight Empire was nothing short of foolishness.

In order to avoid drawing attention from traveling light, Vaan didn't keep everything stored inside his Heaven-Swallowing Space. Instead, he had been carrying a medium-sized leather bag on his back and had a money pouch strapped to his belt.

The greedy warriors tailing him could not escape his detection.

He noticed they had stopped tailing behind him and went ahead to the other end of the road before turning back, heading towards him from the front.

Thud...

"Sorry," a warrior apologized after seemingly bumping into Vaan by accident before hurrying off with a small money pouch in his hand.

"Watch where you're going!" Jihaad snarled at the increasingly distant warrior and didn't think much further. But then he thought something was strange and noticed Vaan's money pouch was missing, and his expression immediately turned ugly.

He had already warned the person, but the person still got pickpocketed!

"Sir Pendragon, you've been pickpocketed!" Jihaad informed with a heavy, grim expression.

"Hm? It's fine. I didn't lose anything," Vaan casually replied, revealing a bigger leather pouch for holding money. Evidently, it wasn't the same one strapped to Vaan's belt previously.

Jihaad wore a look of wonder as realization dawned on him. He was awed by Vaan's deft hands. He didn't know how Vaan did it, but the pickpocket didn't seem to realize what he had lost either.

"Not bad," Vaan commented after confirming the content of his new money pouch.

His previous money pouch only had some useless pebbles to make up the mass, but the new money pouch he acquired actually had some gold coins, crystals, and low-rank mana stones.

He replaced the content with useless pebbles and strapped the new money pouch to his belt.

"Sorry."

"Pardon me. I'm in a hurry."

"Apologies."

"My bad. Gotta go."

...

Vaan continued to be 'bumped' by several more pickpocketing thieves on the busy and crowded road while wearing a nonchalant expression. A slight manipulation of the Spatial Law made it far too easy for him to steal. He didn't even need to lift his hand.

But since Jihaad couldn't see how Vaan did it, he was even more amazed and dumbfounded at the same time. He didn't know who to feel sorry for.

The thieves lost all their money while the 'victim' became richer and richer.

"Sunrock Bazaar is such a nice place... I didn't expect to receive so many gifts on a casual stroll. The people here are too friendly... too friendly..." Vaan softly muttered, seemingly talking to himself.

The corners of Jihaad's lips twitched.

'Who are you trying to fool? Damn! While you are rejoicing, they are probably crying!' Jihaad silently thought, feeling slightly agitated.

He felt fortunate that he did not make an enemy out of Vaan.

Chapter 600: Vaan's Thoughts

In a slightly remote corner of Sunrock Bazaar, a sneaky warrior glanced around vigilantly before opening a small money pouch with excitement. But the moment he saw the content inside, his expression froze.

He immediately turned the money pouch upside down and shook everything out. Tiny pebbles and rocks, which could be found anywhere on the roadside, fell out one by one.

There was nothing else—nothing of value at all!

"What the.... f*ck?!" the warrior cursed, eyes widened with disbelief. He couldn't believe what he saw. More importantly, he didn't want to believe it!

After all, how could someone casually tossing away mid-rank mana stones possibly carry a pouch of useless pebbles and rocks?!

Something was wrong!

It didn't take long before the warrior noticed his body felt a little lighter than usual. After that initial discovery, he realized the reason – his own money pouch was missing! Not only did he steal a useless pouch without money, he even lost his own pouch!

Go for wool and come home shorn!

The warrior gritted his teeth with indignation and anger. But no matter how angry and indignant he felt, he didn't dare return to seek justice.

A thief crying thief... who would believe it?

Similar situations happened to the rest of the thieves who went to pickpocket Vaan. Their cries of anger and loss could be heard in various remote corners of the bazaar. They had escaped very far before they dared to check their loot, only to realize they themselves had been robbed.

Even if they had the courage to go back, they might not necessarily find Vaan. As such, they could only swallow their loss and grief in silence.

...

Meanwhile, Vaan and Jihaad continued northward to Sunrock Bazaar's Rank 1 Gravity Chamber Center. Although these Rank 1 Gravity Chambers wouldn't help them improve their training efficiency at their level, they were still curious about them.

A preliminary experience would give them a better idea of what to expect from higher-rank Gravity Chambers and Black Mountain.

"Sir Pendragon, what are your plans after this?" Jihaad inquired.

"Head to the capital, apply for membership at the Martial Hall, then proceed further east to experience the Heavenly Steps," Vaan casually replied.

He had already thought everything through.

While he was very interested in the martial arts accumulated at the Martial Hall, becoming its member was also an important step to gaining a foothold in the Great Ratholos Empire.

After all, becoming a member of the Martial Hall wasn't just limited to receiving training opportunities and benefits. There were also more freedom and privileges to act within the Great Ratholos Empire.

An insider causing trouble in the empire would receive preferential treatment compared to an outsider.

Jihaad became very excited when he heard Vaan's plan – he had the same idea!

However, it wasn't just them. In fact, most warriors would devise the same plan after learning the relevant information from a guide or intelligence organization. After all, it was the most cost-effective plan for newcomers to train and rise in the Great Ratholos Empire.

"Really?! I was planning to do the same thing! It might be impudent to ask, but may I continue to follow you, Sir Pendragon?" Jihaad requested with a hopeful gaze.

The longer they traveled together, the more chances he had to ask Sir Pendragon for pointers!

"Do as you wish," Vaan nonchalantly replied.

He was not bothered by Jihaad's presence. More importantly, Jihaad's presence added a layer of assurance for him. After all, he did not doubt Jihaad possessed an impressive background in one of the southern countries.

Thus, people would naturally assume he must also be somewhere from the south if they were together.

"Great!" Jihaad cheekily grinned once he received Vaan's agreement. His heart was filled with greater hopes and anticipation.

Vaan quietly and subtly studied Jihaad's behavior as they steadily drew closer to the Gravity Chamber Center, which was only a short distance further to walk.

If he had to describe the person, it would be a greenhorn who had just left the safety and sheltered life of his home for the first time to train independently. Such a person possessed a certain purity and naivety that were rare in society.

Jihaad had yet to be tempered by the ugliness, malice, and cruelty that existed in human hearts. As such, he was someone very easy to befriend.

Suddenly, Vaan became a little absentminded and lost in thought.

He started with nothing at the beginning of his second life. However, he steadily acquired everything, whether they were power, wealth, or authority. He had acquaintances, benefactors, women, and even subordinates.

But the one thing he didn't have was a friend—a true friend.

There wasn't anyone he could call as such.

With his current status, such a thing was even harder to have. The complexity or simplicity of human desires would bring self-interests into the equation. Anyone who tried to befriend him would consider how they or their family could benefit from affiliating with him.

Jihaad was no exception.

He was sticking to him because he was strong, and by sparring with him, he could benefit from the experience and insights gained – a goal driven by self-interest for self-improvement.

That said, Jihaad's desire for self-improvement was pure and sincere. He was willing to put in the hard work and not seek shortcuts that may come at the expense of others, making him more likable in Vaan's eyes.

That was why Vaan could accommodate and tolerate his stubborn presence.

Nevertheless, they had only just met.

Thus, Vaan couldn't be completely sure of Jihaad's true character. It was fine if everything was as it seemed. But if everything the person had shown was only an act, then the person was nothing short of a terrifying being for being able to fool even his eyes.

In essence, the person was still far from being considered a friend. And those who did eventually became his woman or subordinate.

'Perhaps in this life, I am destined not to have a true friend,' Vaan silently thought with a sad, rueful smile.

He was a loner in his past life, and he was still a loner in his present life.