



BOOK 1 OF THE COILING DRAGON SAGA

WO CHI XI HONG SHI (我吃西红柿)

TRANSLATED BY REN WOXING

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[WUXIAWORLD LIMITED](#)

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Foreword by the Translator

Coiling Dragon is one of the seminal web novels created by famous Chinese web novelist Wo Chi Xi Hong Shi, and I had the honor and privilege to translate this work of fantasy from the original Chinese to English. This was a major undertaking, as the original Chinese text spanned over 3 million characters!

This authorized translation was originally published on www.wuxiaworld.com, where we have many other works of translated Chinese fiction that can be read for free. For Kindle, we have divided up the twenty-one volume set into a total of eight books, all of which are being released in this Summer of 2018.

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For another (free) completed work by this author and translator on Wuxiaworld, you can try the story of Ji Ning, '[Desolate Era](#)'.

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Part I

The Ring

1

Early Morning at a Town

In the Kingdom of Fenlai, due west of the largest mountain range in the Yulan Continent, the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, there was an ordinary small town known as Wushan.

As the morning sun rose in the town of Wushan, a slight hint of the cold, pure pre-dawn air remained. Despite the chill, nearly every resident of this small town had already left their cozy homes to begin working. Even the six-and seven-year-old children hustled out of their warm beds and were preparing to begin their traditional morning exercises!

A large group of children, somewhere between one and two hundred, gathered on an empty field on the eastern banks of Wushan. The rays of the morning sun broke through the surrounding trees, leaving behind scattered spots of light on the empty ground. The children were divided into three groups, and each group arranged themselves into several equal rows. All the children stood there silently, their faces solemn. The first group of children was comprised of those approximately six years in age, the group in the middle was composed of the nine-to twelve-year-olds, and the third and final group in the back was made up of the older children, those who were aged thirteen to sixteen.

In front of this large group of children, there were three sturdily built middle-aged men clad in short-sleeve shirts and rough cut trousers.

“If you want to be a powerful warrior, then you must work hard from a young age,” coldly stated the leader of the middle-aged men, his head raised high, hands clasped behind his back. He swept his piercing, fierce gaze across the first group of children. All of those young six-year-olds and seven-year-olds pursed their lips while they gazed upon this man with their big, round eyes, none of them daring to make a sound.

The leader’s name was Hillman. He was the Captain of the Guard for the

Baruch Clan, the noble clan that owned the town of Wushan.

“All of you are commoners. Unlike those from noble families, you won’t have access to any of the secret manuals that teach you how to cultivate battle-qi. If you want to become someone of worth, if you wish to be respected, then all of you must use the most ancient, most simple, and most basic way of improving yourselves! Exercising your bodies, and building up your strength! Am I clear?!” Hillman swept his eyes over the children, driving the point home with his stare.

“Yes, sir!” the children replied brightly in unison.

“Good.” Satisfied, Hillman gave them a curt and cold nod. The eyes of the six-year-old children still held the confusion of youthful innocence, while the eyes of the teenagers were steeled with determination. They understood the meaning behind Hillman’s words.

Virtually every male in the Yulan continent would exercise diligently from a very young age. Those who slacked off now would be looked down upon by others in the future. Money and power—these were what determined a man’s status! A man without power would be scorned even by women.

If one wanted their parents to be proud of them, wanted the adoration and worship of women, and wanted to live a glorious life, there was only a single path open. They had to become powerful warriors! Every single one of them were common-folk, with no access to the precious manuals that taught the art of cultivating battle-qi. The only road to glory they had was paved with hard and bitter work, through exercising from a young age and gathering strength! They had to work harder than those nobles and sweat blood and tears in strengthening themselves!

“When the sun rises in the morning, all things begin to thrive. This is the best time to absorb the natural energy from our surroundings and improve the conditioning of our bodies. Same rules as always—legs spread apart, as wide as your shoulders! Both knees bent slightly, both hands pressed down at the waist. Assume the ‘Qi Building Stance’. When assuming this stance, remember—Focus your concentration, maintain a calm mind, and breathe naturally,” instructed Hillman. The ‘Qi Building Stance’ was the simplest, yet most effective way of exercising one’s body. It was developed by their forefathers through

generations, and based on their experiences. Every single child on the field assumed the 'Qi Building Stance' as soon as the instructions left his mouth.

"Focus your concentration, maintain a calm mind, and breathe naturally!" Hillman barked out as he walked among the children, inspecting their stances. A brief glance was all he needed to discern that the teenagers in the third group were all maintaining the stance calmly and breathing naturally. They had attained the goals of being stable and steady in the stance, and it was clear that they had reached a degree of proficiency in the 'Qi Building Stance'.

Hillman watched the children from the first group, the ones who had just left the shelter of their mothers, for a longer time. He noticed all of the bent backs and crooked knees barely bent in odd degrees, and the relaxed and loose legs. There was no doubt in his mind that their stances were unstable and without any power. He turned to the two men behind him, "The two of you, take charge of the second and third groups. I'll go take care of the youngest children."

"Yes, Captain!" The two middle-aged men immediately walked towards the second and third groups and started paying close attention to the children there. Every so often, they would kick the legs of one of those teenagers, checking to see who was standing in a firm stance and who was not.

Hillman walked towards the first group of children, sparking a burst of nervousness that arced through every child in that group.

"Crap, the Head Monster is coming!" A golden-haired child with large, bright eyes named Hadley said in a low voice.

Hillman marched into the middle of the group and walked among the children. He stared at them, his face cold and stern, masking the thoughts in his heart. "These kids are simply too young. They lack in both wisdom and strength right now. I can't demand too much from them, but it's good to get them in the habit of exercising from a young age. If they start working hard right now, then they'll have a higher chance of survival in the future when they're on the battlefield." The most effective way to teach children this young was to get them interested. If he forced them too hard, it would end up having the opposite effect!

"All of you, stand firm!" Hillman barked. Each and every child straightened

their backs, stuck out their chest and stared forward.

A hint of a smile played on Hillman's lips. He moved to the front of the group and took off his shirt. The lines running across the powerful muscles on his body made the children's eyes pop out. Even the children in the second and third groups couldn't stop themselves from staring at him, raptured in admiration of his physique.

Beyond his perfect musculature, Hillman's bare chest and back held countless scars from knives and swords amid dozens of other old wounds. The children stared at those wounds, their eyes shining with admiration and imagining the glory contained in every one of those marks. Knife scars. Sword wounds. These were a man's medals! Their hearts were filled with veneration for Hillman. He was a mighty warrior of the sixth rank, a warrior forged in the struggle between life and death! He was considered an amazing individual, even in the large and populous cities. In the tiny town of Wushan, he was a man who was revered by every single person.

Hillman saw the ardent gazes of the children, and he couldn't help but let a small smile escape his lips. This was exactly what he intended, he wanted to stir up a degree of hero-worship in the children. A burning desire to be just like him so they would work harder and be more motivated! "Let's add some more fuel to the fire!" Hillman thought to himself with a grin. He walked up to a giant boulder, one that easily weighed somewhere between three and four hundred pounds, and lifted it up with one hand. He brandished it about in a relaxed, effortless manner.

The jaws of the children dropped and their eyes widened. The giant boulder had to weigh several hundred pounds, but it appeared to be as light as a stick of wood in Hillman's hand.

"Too light! Lorry, if you have some free time after training go and get some larger boulders for me." With those words, Hillman casually tossed the boulder away, sending it flying dozens of meters away. It crashed back down next to a large tree and the ground trembled from the impact. Then he casually walked towards a few random boulders and stood in front of them.

"Hah!" Hillman breathed deeply. All the veins on his muscular body popped

out prominently as he directly struck at a nearby bluish boulder. His fist shattered the air, creating a howling sound that made all the watching children widen their eyes even further.

Hillman's mighty fist smashed the boulder. Crash! The sound of the fist smashing into the boulder made the children's hearts tremble. This was an extremely hard bluestone boulder! The bluestone boulder trembled, and then suddenly six or seven giant cracks appeared on it. Moments later, it split apart into four or five pieces with a 'peng' sound. However, Hillman's fist wasn't injured in the slightest.

"The Captain is as formidable as ever." Lorry, one of the two other middle-aged men, laughed as Hillman walked back towards them. The other man, Roger, also walked over. Usually, when the children practiced the 'Qi Building Stance', it was time for the three of them to relax and chat freely. Of course, they'd also watch for any children who decided to slack off.

Hillman laughed as he shook his head. "No way. When I was in the army, I trained like crazy every day while engaging in bloody battles on the battlefield. Nowadays all I'm doing is relaxing and stretching my muscles a bit in the morning. I'm not filled with as much energy as I was in the past."

The children stared worshipfully at Hillman. He had easily shattered that huge bluestone boulder with a single blow, then tossed that three-or four-hundred-pound boulder with an easy flick of the arm. What sort of power was this?

Hillman turned his head. Staring at the children, he felt very satisfied with the children's reactions. "Remember, even if you aren't able to cultivate battle-qi, in principle if you reach your body's fullest potential you can still become a warrior of the sixth rank! A sixth-ranked warrior, upon entering the army, can easily become a mid-level officer and easily obtain the military manuals which teach how to cultivate battle-qi! Even if you cannot become a warrior of the sixth rank and can only become a common warrior of the first rank, you will still be qualified to enter the military. Remember! If a man isn't able to become even a warrior of the first rank, that man can't be considered a man at all!

"If you are a man, then you must raise your chest high, welcome any and all challenges, and fear nothing!"

Upon hearing these words, smiles appeared on the faces of all the six-and seven-year-olds. They forced themselves to remain expressionless. These words were Hillman's oft-repeated mantra, and he repeated these words endlessly to the children.

"All of you, stand straight. Look at your elders to the south, then look at how you are standing!" Hillman censured them. All the six-year-olds immediately tried to adjust their stance to be more stable.

All the kids felt their legs cramping fiercely, but they gritted their teeth. Still, after a while the six-and seven-year-olds began to wobble. After holding out for a short time the children began to collapse and sit on the ground one after the other.

Hillman's face was cold and callous but he nodded inwardly. He was still very satisfied with the performance of these six-and seven-year-olds, and he simply continued to watch. After a short time some of the ten-year-olds in the middle group also could no longer hold out, and one by one they began to fall as well.

"Hold out as long as you can. I won't force you. But if in the future you are weaker than your peers you'll have no one to blame but yourselves," Hillman said coldly.

"Hmm?" Lorry suddenly stared, astonished, at the northern group. At this point in time many of the kids in the middle group had fallen down, but in the northern group, a six-year-old child had held strong.

"This must be Linley's first day at training. Who would've thought he'd be so formidable?" Lorry said, amazed. Next to him, Roger and Hillman also noticed. Looking in that direction they saw that to the north a single brown-haired boy was still holding firm. His lips tightened, the boy stared determinedly in front, both fists tightly clenched so hard that his knuckles were white.

A look of pleasant surprise appeared in Hillman's eyes. "Good kid!" Hillman secretly praised. Despite being just six years old, the kid could maintain the 'Qi Building Stance' for as long as the ten-year-old kids.

Linley, full name Linley Baruch, was the eldest son and heir to the Baruch clan which ruled over the town of Wushan. The Baruch clan was an ancient clan. It had once been extremely prosperous, but after the passage of thousands of

years it had only three members remaining: the clan leader, Hogg Baruch, and his two sons. The eldest son was Linley Baruch, six years old. The younger son, Wharton Baruch, was just two years old. As for his wife, she died giving birth to Wharton. Linley's grandfather was also dead, having lost his life in battle.

Linley's legs were trembling. Although his willpower was strong, his leg muscles were strained to their utmost and were beginning to tremble uncontrollably. He finally collapsed and sat down.

"Linley, how do you feel?" Hillman walked towards him, a smile on his face. Linley smiled back in turn. "I'm fine, Uncle Hillman." As captain of the Baruch clan's guardsmen, Hillman had watched Linley grow up. Naturally, the two of them were very close.

"Well done. You acted like a man." Hillman patted Linley's head. Immediately, his hair became tousled like windblown grass. Linley grinned widely. He was very happy to receive Hillman's praise.

After resting for a while they continued their exercises. The training regime for the six-and seven-year-olds was a lot more relaxed, but for the teenagers it was terrifyingly strict. The large group of children, including the six-and seven-year-olds, now had to lie down with their heads and their feet each on top of a flat rock, relying solely on the strength in their waists to keep them straight.

"The waist and the thighs form a triangular region." Hillman gestured with his hands to show the area he was describing. "This area is a person's core. Speed and power all come from this triangular core, making this region extremely important." As Hillman spoke, he continued to walk about, carefully inspecting the youths to see if their movements were correct.

"Tighten that up! Your waists need to be straight!" Hillman thundered. Immediately, the waists of many youths straightened. This was Linley's first day of training. His tiny head and his feet were both flat on the rocks, but by this point in time Linley could already feel his waist growing tight and hot.

"Hold! Gotta hold. I'm the best!" Linley kept encouraging himself. Linley's body had always been very strong, even as a baby. He had virtually never gotten sick. Given that he also worked very hard, for him to excel was nothing

special.

Thud! The first child fell down. However, the stones they were using as a pillow and footrest were only twenty centimeters high, so although the child fell down, it didn't hurt much. (In the Yulan continent, the goldsmiths used standardized lengths of 1 meter = 10 decimeters = 100 centimeters = 1000 millimeters.)

Thud! Thud! As time went on, more and more children could no longer hold out. Linley gritted his teeth. He could clearly feel the tightness in his waist already reaching the limits of his endurance, to the point where it was almost going numb. "My body feels so heavy. I'm almost unable to control it. Hold... Gotta hold for just a bit more." By this point in time, of the six-to eight-year-olds, only Linley remained.

Staring at Linley, Hillman couldn't help but be filled with surprise and joy. "Lorry!" Hillman suddenly shouted.

"Captain." Lorry immediately straightened, awaiting his orders.

Hillman commanded, "Tomorrow, prepare some special dyes. When they are training their waist strength, put a branch under all their waists and dye the branches. If any of them slack off and let their waists touch the branch, their body will be dyed as well. Their training regime will double in difficulty."

"Yes, Captain." Lorry couldn't help but let his lips tug up in a smile. He secretly laughed to himself, "The Captain is always filled with so many devilish ideas. Those punks are really gonna get it now."

Wasn't that just so? Looks of pain appeared on the faces of the ten-year-olds. Normally, they could still make slight adjustments and slack off. But Hillman's new idea ensured that they would have no chance to do so.

Hillman continued coldly, "Let me tell you all, when a warrior trains his battle-qi, the battle-qi is stored in a fist-sized location directly beneath the navel. You should understand that this is part of the triangle I was talking about. I expect you all should now understand the importance of strengthening the triangle region! This is your core. If it fails, then your body fails, no matter how strong the other parts of it might be."

A good instructor was of paramount importance to the children, and Hillman really was a formidable warrior. He knew the important parts of training and he knew how to increase the difficulty one step at a time. He knew what sort of tools to use with what ages. If it was too hard, it could make a child's body collapse.

“Battle-qi?” Upon hearing these words, all the youths, including the youngest children resting off to the side, stared at Hillman with wide eyes. All the commoners were extremely eager to learn battle-qi. Even Linley, the scion of a noble house, was extremely eager.

Thud! Linley could finally hold out no longer, but he still used his arms to prop himself on the ground as he slowly rolled off.

“That feels good!” Linley could feel that his waist felt a numbness which pierced through to the bone, so comfortable that his eyes crinkled slightly.

“How long was I able to hold out?” Linley opened his eyes wide, looking around. All the six-year-olds had collapsed. Even half the ten-year-olds had collapsed as well. All the fourteen-year-olds, however, held on. Hillman's face remained as cold as ever.

“All of you must remember: your body is like a vessel, like a wineglass. Battle-qi is like the wine! The amount of wine a vessel can hold is dependent on the size of the vessel. Same goes for the body; a person's ability to practice battle-qi is based on the extent of his physical conditioning. If his body is too weak, even if he gains access to powerful battle-qi manuals his body won't be able to hold much battle-qi and he still won't become a powerful warrior.” Hillman continued to impart many important bits of advice to the children.

Many warriors, due to not having received proper guidance in their youth, only understood the connection between battle-qi and body strength much later in life. By that age they wouldn't make much progress when they trained.

Many forefathers had gone down many wrong paths and gained much experience as a result, and Hillman now imparted those important experiences like how the spring wind imparted life-giving rain, deeply etching them in the minds of these children. Hillman didn't want these children to go down wrong paths as well.

After practicing the 'Qi Building Stance', the waist, back, thighs, shoulders, and other parts of the body would be harmonized. Now, almost all the children were sitting, relaxed on the ground. Hillman's training program was nearly perfect in the difficulty levels he assessed on each age group.

"Today's training ends now," Hillman announced. The town of Wushan's training regimes were regulated. Every day, it happened twice, once at dawn, and once at dusk.

"Uncle Hillman, tell us some stories!" As training ended, the children immediately began to call out. Every day, after the dawn lessons, Hillman would tell them stories of his army days, or some events which had happened on the continent. The children, all of whom had lived in the town their entire lives, thirsted for stories about the military.

Hillman smiled. He enjoyed telling stories to the children. This was a great way to make the kids eager to train. Hillman had always felt that only by making the children want to train would the children have great results.

"Today, I will tell you about the legendary Four Supreme Warrior bloodlines which everyone in the continent knows about." A look of awe appeared on Hillman's face.

The children's ears immediately perked up, and their eyes brightened. Linley, sitting on the ground, felt his heart thump furiously. "The legendary Four Supreme Warriors?" Linley's ears couldn't help but perk up as well, as he stared unblinkingly at Hillman.

In Hillman's eyes appeared a hint of excitement. His voice, however, remained calm. "On our continent, thousands of years ago, there appeared four powerful Supreme Warriors. All four of these Supreme Warriors possessed power comparable to that of the mightiest of dragons. They could wander amidst an army of millions at leisure and easily take the head of any general! These Supreme Warriors were known as the Dragonblood Warrior, the Violetflame Warrior, the Tigerstriped Warrior, and the Undying Warrior!"

"Warriors are divided into nine ranks. I, a mere warrior of the sixth rank, can easily shatter boulders and kick down a large tree! But a ninth rank warrior, even within our country of Fenlai, would be considered a top-level expert.

Finally, above the ninth rank warriors are the Four Supreme Warriors. They have surpassed the ninth rank warriors and can be considered the pinnacle of warriors. They belong to the level of legendary Saint-level warriors!” Hillman’s eyes were filled with excitement. “The legendary Saint-level warriors can melt giant icebergs, make the boundless sea roar with angry waves, make tall mountains crumble, make cities with millions of people collapse, and make meteors fall from the sky! They are absolutely undefeatable, the highest possible power.”

Silence. All the children were stunned as they continued to listen. Hillman pointed at a mountain to the northeast. “Look at Wushan. Isn’t it huge?” Hillman smiled.

After hearing Hillman’s words, many of the kids had been scared silly. They immediately nodded. Wushan was over a thousand meters high, and thousands of meters in circumference. In the eyes of men, it would definitely be considered a huge mountain.

“But Saint-level combatants can destroy Wushan in the blink of an eye,” Hillman said firmly. “A sixth-ranked warrior can only smash a boulder, but a Saint-level warrior can smash an entire mountain!” All the children’s mouths dropped and their eyes widened. All of them were shocked, and their hearts were suddenly filled with an unspeakable dread towards these Saint. But, their hearts were also filled with longing.

“Destroy a mountain?” Hillman’s words had a huge impact on Linley. After a short time, the stunned children returned to their homes. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry were the last to leave. Watching the children depart in clusters of three or five, a smile appeared on Hillman’s face.

“These children are the hope and future of the town of Wushan,” Hillman said with a smile. Roger and Lorry also gazed at the group of children. On the continent, virtually all the children of commoners had to train hard from an early age. Seeing the kids, Roger and Lorry reminisced about their own youth.

“Captain Hillman, you are definitely much more formidable than ol’ Potter of bygone years. Under your guidance, I believe that the town of Wushan will become the strongest town in our region, surpassing the other ten or so

towns,” Lorry said with a smile. The strength of a teacher determined a place’s future.

“Oh, Captain, how do you know about the power of Saint-level warriors and the Four Supreme Warriors?” Lorry suddenly remembered to ask.

Slightly embarrassed, Hillman grinned, “Well, um, actually, I’m not too clear about exactly how powerful the Four Supreme Warriors are. After all, they are the stuff of legends. It’s been years since any were seen.”

Lorry and Roger were astonished. “You don’t have any idea, and yet you lied to the kids?”

Hillman smiled slightly. “Although I’m not clear about the exact strength of the Four Supreme Warriors, I know this—Grand Magus, or in other words a mage which has attained the Saint level, can execute forbidden magical spell and eradicate an entire army of tens of thousands or even an entire city. Since Grand Magus Saints are so powerful, I expect that Saint-level warriors can’t be that much weaker.”

“More importantly, the reason I told the children these stories was to make them work harder. Couldn’t you tell how amazed those children were after hearing the stories?” Hillman smiled delightedly.

Lorry and Roger were both speechless.



*

“See ya later, ‘Ley!”

“See ya, Hadley!”

Bidding farewell to his good friend Hadley, Linley went back by himself to his home. After walking for a while, he saw the Baruch estate.

The amount of land the Baruch manor was built upon was actually quite large. Moss was growing on the walls and all sorts of ivy creepers twined up the walls as well. The scars of time were very apparent on the walls. The Baruch manor located in the town of Wushan was the ancestral home of the Baruch clan. An

ancestral home which had existed for over five thousand years and endured countless renovations continued to stand here.

But, with the decline in the clan's fortunes, the Baruch clan's finances had taken a turn for the worse as well. Towards the end it could only consume its previous gains. Over a hundred years ago the then-leader of the Baruch clan determined that all the members of the clan would live in the front courtyard, which took up a third of the space of the manor. The rest of the manor would no longer be maintained. That way, a great deal of money could be saved.

Despite these measures, by the time Linley's father Hogg Baruch took over they still needed to sell off family possessions in order to keep the family afloat.

The towering doors to the manor were open. "Saint-level warriors?" While walking, Linley was still thinking about that. "In the future, will I be able to become a Saint-level warrior?"

"Linley." Hillman's voice sounded from behind him. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry had finally caught up to him.

Linley turned around and immediately said happily, "Uncle Hillman!" Following this, Linley sucked in a deep breath. Raising his head to look at Hillman, he asked eagerly, "Uncle Hillman, are Saint-level warriors really that powerful? Then what about me? Is it possible that I could become a Saint-level warrior?" In Linley's heart there was a desire which all children possess.

Hillman was stunned. Beside him, Roger and Lorry were also speechless. A Saint-level warrior? "This kid really dares to dream big. The country of Fenlai has millions of citizens, but even so, after countless centuries it hasn't produced a single Saint-level warrior. To want to become a Saint-level warrior..." Hillman fully understood how difficult it was to become a Saint-level warrior.

It required someone to work extremely hard from a young age, the support of a noble clan, and at the same time a high amount of natural talent. It also required luck. How could it be easy to become a Saint-level warrior?

Hillman knew quite well how much he himself had to suffer in order to become a sixth-ranked warrior, and how many life-and-death battles he had to experience. It was very difficult to become a warrior of even the sixth rank. A seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-ranked warrior was of course only harder. As for a

Saint-level warrior? Even in his dreams, Hillman didn't dare imagine himself as one.

But faced with Linley's earnest gaze, all he could do was nod. "Linley, Uncle Hillman has faith in you. I'm sure you'll become a Saint-level warrior," Hillman said firmly, staring straight at Linley. These words of encouragement caused Linley's eyes to shine. In Linley's heart, as well, a desire arose which was more ardent than any he had ever felt!

"Uncle Hillman, from tomorrow on, can I participate in the training sessions with the ten-year-olds?" Linley suddenly asked. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry all stared at Linley in surprise. "My lord father always told me: if you want to become a man without peer then you must work harder than other men." Linley unconsciously mimicked his father's manner of speech.

Hillman suddenly smiled. He had seen the results of Linley's training today. Although Linley was only six, his physical conditioning could compare with nine-year-olds. He immediately nodded, smiling. "Fine. However, you'd best not slack off. You need to realize that this isn't a one-day or two-day commitment. This will be a long-term regime."

Linley raised his small head proudly and smiled with confidence. "Uncle Hillman, you just wait and see."

This had been a very normal morning for the town of Wushan. Afterwards, every morning was the same as this one. The group of Wushan youths would follow Hillman, warrior of the sixth rank, and train hard under his guidance. The only difference was that going forward the six-year-old Linley was placed in the central squad of ten-year-olds.

2

The Dragonblood Warrior Clan

In the blink of an eye, another half year had passed. Training hard and strengthening his body, Linley passed through the gentle spring, the blazing summer, and the chilly autumn. The white poplar tree next to the empty training field of the town of Wushan would always scatter some dried leaves onto the ground whenever the wind blew. The leaves slowly whirled down, covering the entire training ground.

The sky had slowly grown dark. Today, an exceptionally large number of people were on the training grounds, nearly three hundred in total. “Today’s evening training session ends now.” Hillman smiled. “Before leaving, however, everyone needs to first congratulate this next crop of children who are about to leave the town of Wushan and join the army.”

With autumn’s end came the season of military recruitment. With the entire continent engaged in an age of warfare, every youngster viewed becoming a mighty warrior as a badge of honor. Naturally, there were also those who wished to become mages, but becoming a mage is an extremely difficult task. Perhaps only one person in ten thousand had the necessary qualifications to become a mage. With such a low probability, the average person wouldn’t even consider it. Becoming a warrior was much easier. Upon turning sixteen, as long as they were at least warriors of the first rank, they could easily enter the army.

“Uncle Hillman, thank you!” A hundred and twenty-six children, all age seventeen, respectfully bowed towards Hillman. These youngsters normally did not attend training. They had all become adults, and had their own jobs to do. But since they had all been trained by Hillman since they were toddlers, they considered Hillman to have been their benevolent master.

Before joining the army, they came here to say farewell to Hillman.

Staring at this group of energetic, eager seventeen-year-olds, Hillman was filled with countless mixed feelings. This was because Hillman knew that all of

these children were eager to join the army, but after ten years of military service, how many of them would come back alive?

“I hope at least half of these hundred and twenty-six will be able to return alive,” Hillman prayed silently.

Hillman stared at the children, and said in a clear voice, “Brats, listen up! You are all men of the town of Wushan. The men of the town of Wushan must straighten their chests, welcome any challenges, and accept no fear. Am I understood?”

All of those seventeen-year-old youths straightened their chest, their bodies ramrod straight. Their eyes filled with a hot ardor for military life, they responded in loud unison, “Understood!”

“Good!” Hillman stood ramrod straight as well. His cold gaze was filled with a military aura. “Tomorrow, all of you will depart. Tonight, prepare well. I know how strong all of you are. All of you will be able to enter the army easily! I, Hillman, will wait here for all of you to make your glorious return to the town of Wushan!” Hillman said in a bright voice. The eyes of those youths shone bright as well when they heard this. Returning home with honor. This was the dream of every youth!

“Now, I order all of you to immediately go home and begin your preparations. Dismissed!” Hillman said in a cold, fierce voice.

“Yes sir!” A hundred and twenty-six youths respectfully saluted and then departed. They were followed by the worshipful gazes of the nearly two hundred youths that remained. Tomorrow, they would begin a brand new journey.

“I have two more years. When I become of age, I also want to join the army.”

“I really want to live the exciting, pulse-pounding life of a soldier. If I had to live here in the town of Wushan for my entire life, even if I lived forever, it would be pointless.”

A group of thirteen-year-olds chatted amongst each other, all of them longing for that exciting, vigor-filled life. All of them wanted to win glory and establish reputations for themselves. They wanted the adoration of the girls and the

esteem of their relatives. This was the stuff of dreams!

“Linley, your father Lord Hogg has some extremely important business with you. Don’t go off playing with the other kids. Come home with me.” Hillman walked to Linley’s side. Gazing at him, Hillman felt very proud.

Linley was exceedingly smart. Under the tutelage of his father, Hogg, since a young age, he had learned many words and could read most books. In this era, reading was a very luxurious thing. Usually, only the scions of noble houses could read. The Baruch clan was an extremely old clan, and it owned a large number of books.

“Uncle Hillman, I know already. My lord father has already reminded me three times. He’s never been so insistent about anything. I won’t go off and play.” Linley grinned, revealing his pearly white teeth, perfect but for the fact that one was missing. Linley was already beginning to grow permanent teeth.

“That’s enough. You are missing one of your front teeth. When you smile, you let the wind in.” Hillman laughed. “Go, go home.”



*

The ancient front courtyard of the Baruch manor. After the family finished dinner, Linley began to play around with his younger brother.

“Big brother, hug, hug!”

Little Wharton was staring at Linley with a look of pure, simple love. Walking unsteadily, he extended a small, pudgy hand towards Linley, trying to hug him. Linley stood not too far away, just waiting for little Wharton to reach him. “You can do it, Wharton!” Linley said encouragingly.

Little Wharton’s wobbly footsteps made people fear he would fall with each step. But in the end, little Wharton managed to rush into his big brother’s embrace. His smooth skin, as soft as water, was slightly pink. His big round eyes stared at his elder brother, and in a baby voice, he said, “Big brother, big brother.”

Looking at his baby brother, Linley’s heart was filled with boundless warmth

and love. He had no mother and no grandparents. Although he had his father and the family caretaker to take care of him, Linley, who had matured early, was extremely loving and protective towards his little brother. In Linley's eyes, as the big brother it was his job to take care of his little brother.

"Wharton, what did you learn today?" Linley asked, smiling.

Wharton frowned, an extremely cute expression. After pondering, he excitedly said, "Today I learned about using rags!"

"Rags?" Linley's face revealed an uncontrollable smile. "What did you wipe?"

Counting on his fingers, little Wharton said, "First I used the rags to wipe the floors, then the toilet chamber pots, and lastly I wiped... wiped... right, I wiped the plates!" He looked excitedly at Linley, awaiting Linley's praise.

"You wiped the chamber pots, and then wiped the plates?" Linley's eyes were huge.

"What, did I do it wrong? I really wiped them clean." In little Wharton's tiny head, his eyes were filled with an uncomprehending look as he stared at his big brother.

"Young master Linley, your father is looking for you. Let me carry young master Wharton." A brandy-nosed old man walked over. This brandy-nosed old man was the Baruch clan's housekeeper, Hiri. He was the only person to work in the entire manor. There wasn't even a serving girl.

Linley no longer had any time to chat with Wharton. He immediately handed Wharton over to Grandpa Hiri, and went towards the guest hall. "I wonder why father summoned me?" Although he was young, Linley could sense that this time, his father had called him for something important.

Entering the guest hall, in one corner there was a desk clock that was higher than Linley was tall. This desk clock can be considered a high-quality object. Generally, only wealthy or noble families had such a clock. At this moment, Linley's father was seated next to the fireplace. The flames in the fireplace burned, constantly crackling and popping.

“Um? Why did father change his clothes?” Seeing his father, Linley was filled with astonishment. While at home, his father normally wore only very simple clothes. Just then, while eating dinner, his father wore normal clothes. But now, he had switched to a set of very noble, beautiful apparel.

Hogg’s entire body emanated an ancient, noble aura. That aura wasn’t the sort that money could buy. It was something that an ancient noble clan cultivated in its heirs. Theirs was a clan that had survived for five thousand years. How could an ordinary noble clan compare?

Hogg stood up. Turning around, when he saw Linley, his eyes lit up. “Linley, come with me. Let’s go to the ancestral hall. Uncle Hiri, you know about the matters of my clan, so you can come as well.” Hogg smiled.

“The ancestral hall?” Linley was astonished. The members of the Baruch clan only stayed in the front side of the manor. The areas in the far back, virtually no one went there to clean. Only the ancestral hall in the back did they ever visit, once a month, to clean.

“But this isn’t the time to sacrifice to our ancestors. Why are we going to the ancestral hall?” Linley had a belly full of questions. Exiting the guest hall, Hogg, Linley, and Uncle Hiri, who still held Wharton, followed the blue stone path towards the back manor.

Deep autumn. The night was as cold as water. A cold wind blew, causing Linley to shiver. But Linley didn’t make a sound because he could feel that something was different today. Following his father, Linley entered the ancestral hall as well.

Clack. The door to the ancestral hall closed. The candles in the hall were lit up, causing the entire hall to immediately become very bright. Linley could instantly see the many spirit tablets placed in the very front of the hall. That thick, dense cluster of spirit tablets spoke volumes as to the age of the Baruch clan.

Hogg quietly stood in front of the spirit tablets, not saying a word. Linley felt very nervous. In the entire hall, aside from the sounds of the whispering candles, no sound was heard. The quiet was terrifying, creating an oppressive feeling on the heart.

Suddenly, Hogg turned and focused his gaze on Linley. In a weighty voice, he

said, “Linley, today, there are many things that must be done. But first, let me tell you some of the history of our Baruch clan.”

Linley could feel his heart thumping frantically. “Our clan’s history? What can it be?” In his heart, Linley was eager to know, but he didn’t dare to make a sound.

A look of pride appearing on his face, Hogg said in a clear voice, “Linley, our Baruch clan has existed for five thousand years. Even scanning the entire Kingdom of Fenlai, I don’t believe we can find a second clan which is as ancient as ours.” Hogg’s voice contained an absolute pride. *Ancient*. This was a word that some noble clans viewed with great importance.

“Linley, have you heard of the legendary Four Supreme Warriors of the Yulan continent?” Turning his head, Hogg looked at Linley.

Eyes brightening, Linley nodded. “I know. According to Uncle Hillman, the legendary Four Supreme Warriors are the Dragonblood Warrior, the Violetflame Warrior, the Tigerstriped Warrior, and the Undying Warrior.”

Satisfied, Hogg nodded. Smiling, he said, “Right! Now, I am going to tell you something. The legendary Four Supreme Warriors actually represent four ancient clans... and our Baruch clan is the ancient clan which contains the exalted bloodline of the Dragonblood Warriors!”

“The Dragonblood Warrior clan?!” Linley felt as though his entire head was buzzing. In Linley’s eyes, his clan was nothing more than just an ancient clan which had fallen on hard times. How could it be related to the legendary Dragonblood Warrior?

“You don’t believe me?” A trace of arrogance could be seen on Hogg’s face. “Linley, go up and take a close look at those spirit tablets. By now, you can read all the words on them. On the back of every single spirit tablet is the history of those departed ancestors of ours. The three spirit tablets at the very top, are three who are Dragonblood Warriors!”

Hogg took Linley by the hand. “Come.” Hogg led Linley towards the area behind the many spirit tablets. Lifting him up, Hogg said, “Take a close look at those characters behind.” Linley widened his eyes and began to read.

The words carved onto the uppermost tablet were etched very deeply and very clearly. Those five-thousand-year-old characters told of an astonishing story!

“Baruch, the very first Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. In the year 4560 of the Yulan calendar, outside the walls of the City of Linnan, Baruch did battle against a Black Dragon and a Titanic Frost Wurm. In the end, he slew both the Black Dragon and the Titanic Frost Wurm, causing his fame to spread across the world. In the year 4579 of the Yulan calendar, along the coastline of the northern sea of the continent, Baruch did battle against a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor. On that day, the waves crashed unceasingly and nearby cities crumbled, but after a vicious fight lasting a full day and night, Baruch finally executed the Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor... finally, Baruch founded the Baruch clan, and became the first leader of the Baruch clan!”

“Ryan Baruch, the second Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. In the year 4690 of the Yulan calendar, in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, he defeated and subdued a Saint-level Golden Dragon, and became known as the Golden Dragonrider Saint! In the year 4697...”

“Hazard Baruch, the third Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. Born in the year 5360 of the Yulan calendar, in his very first battle, he fought fiercely with a Saint-level Bloody-Eyed Maned Lion in the Mountain Range of the Setting Sun. He defeated the lion, forcing it to scurry away and flee, causing Hazard to become famous throughout the world...”



*

One mighty name after another, one amazing story after another, made the blood in Linley’s veins pump all the more vigorously. “My clan, is actually the clan of the Dragonblood Warriors?” Linley was extremely excited.

Beside him, Hogg said in a low voice, “The first three generations of the Baruch family were all Dragonblood Warriors. Upon becoming a Dragonblood Warrior, one’s life expectancy would dramatically increase. The second generation Dragonblood Warrior didn’t get married or have children until after

he was seven hundred years old.”

“And afterwards?” Linley wondered. “Father, why doesn’t our clan have any more Dragonblood Warriors?”

Hogg nodded. “To become a Dragonblood Warrior, the most important thing is the density and thickness of the dragonblood which flows in our veins. The higher the density, the better. After many generations, the density of the dragonblood in our veins has grown thinner and thinner. However... that isn’t an absolute because as time goes on, sometimes, out of nowhere, a descendant will possess a very high density of dragonblood.”

“After Hazard Baruch, the fourth Dragonblood Warrior appeared, nearly a thousand years later. Then, after fifteen hundred years passed, which is to say tens of generations later, the fifth Dragonblood Warrior finally appeared in our clan. But in the thousand years from then until now, not a single Dragonblood Warrior has shown up.”

Hogg shook his head and sighed. “The fifth Dragonblood Warrior only stayed on the Yulan continent for around two centuries, before he disappeared. In the thousand years since then, our Baruch clan has totally decayed.” After a thousand years, even the most illustrious of families could decay.

“However, our clan still has hope. Perhaps in the future, one of our descendants will have the requisite density of dragonblood in their veins, and meet the requirements to become a Dragonblood Warrior. If they meet the requirements, after just a few decades of training, they would be able to become a true, full Dragonblood Warrior. And at that time, the Baruch clan would once more be restored to the glorious days of yore, when we were known as the Dragonblood Warrior Clan!” Hogg’s eyes shone. “Linley, you are six and a half now. According to our rules, at your age, the test to see if your blood has a high density of dragonblood will be fairly accurate. Today, I am going to test you.”

Linley was stunned. “Testing the density of dragonblood in my veins? Test me?” Linley fully understood the implications of his father performing this test. This test would show whether or not he met the requirements for becoming a Dragonblood Warrior.

“Linley, wait here. I’ll go get the ‘Dragonblood Needle’.” Hogg clearly was very excited, as he immediately departed the ancestral hall for a nearby private room.

“Dragonblood Warrior? Will I really become a Dragonblood Warrior?” Linley was mentally fidgeting, his mind a confused mess. He was filled with both eagerness and fear. He feared that the density of dragonblood in his veins wasn’t high enough.

“If I fail, I guess father will be extremely disappointed,” Linley couldn’t help but think. Having grown up with his father and his younger brother, Linley didn’t want to disappoint his father. But the density of dragonblood in his veins wasn’t something he could decide.

After just a short period of time, Hogg returned from the private room with an extremely thin needle that was twenty centimeter long. “Is that Dragonblood Needle?” Linley mused as he stared at the long needle in his father’s hands.

“Alright, Linley. This needle will just barely break the skin when it goes in. It won’t hurt at all. Stretch out your hand.” Hogg smiled, and Linley nodded. Taking a deep breath, Linley stretched out his right arm. The slight trembling in his arm showed that Linley really was very nervous. Not just Linley. In truth, even Hogg was very nervous.

“Don’t move.” Holding the translucent Dragonblood Needle, Hogg lightly pricked Linley’s ring finger with it, easily piercing the skin. Linley felt a piercing pain, and the translucent needle immediately turned crimson as well. Hands shaking, Hogg immediately lifted the Dragonblood Needle up and inspected it carefully.

Raising his head, Linley stared at his father, feeling extremely agitated. “Is the density of dragonblood in my veins sufficient? Why has father stared at the Dragonblood Needle for so long?” Linley had a bad premonition...

“Alas...” With an exhaled breath, Hogg placed the Dragonblood Needle off to one side. Hearing his father’s sigh, the nervous Linley knew that the density of dragonblood in his veins clearly didn’t reach the required level. His tears immediately began to flow.

“Linley, why are you crying? Don’t cry. Be a good boy, don’t cry.” Hogg immediately hugged Linley. Seeing Linley cry, Hogg felt sick at heart. After all, Linley was still just six and a half. He was just a child.

“I won’t cry. Unh. Won’t cry.” Linley sniffled twice, then forced himself to calm down. “Father, I’m sorry. I’ve let you down.”

Hearing Linley’s words, Hogg felt a warm feeling in his heart. He couldn’t help but hold Linley against his bosom. “Linley, don’t feel bad. I actually didn’t raise my hopes too high. Over a thousand years and tens of generations, no one has become a Dragonblood Warrior. It doesn’t matter that you also failed. Father doesn’t blame you.”

Feeling the warmth of his father’s chest, Linley’s tightened chest gradually loosened. By this point, the two-year-old Wharton had long since fallen asleep in Grandpa Hiri’s arms.

“Linley, at this point in time, the Baruch family just consists of you, me, and your little brother. I don’t have any extravagant hopes. I’ve never dared to dream of becoming a Dragonblood Warrior.” Hogg laughed at himself satirically. How could becoming a Dragonblood Warrior be an easy task?

Linley raised his head, staring at his father. Linley rarely saw his father speak to him in such a manner. Normally, his father was always very strict and unyielding.

Staring at the rows of spirit tablets, Hogg’s eyes were filled with a dreary sadness. “My true goal is actually to recover the ancestral heirloom of the Baruch clan, passed down across the generations.”

“Our ancestral heirloom? What’s that? Why have I never heard about it?” Linley asked curiously.

Hogg proudly said, “Our ancestral heirloom – the warblade, “Slaughterer”. This was the weapon used by the very first leader of the Baruch clan, the very first Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. Alas... his descendants were unfilial. Six hundred years ago, because of poverty, a descendant who loved luxury actually sold our ancestral weapon for money.” As he spoke, Hogg was filled with so much fury that his body actually trembled.

Shaking his head helplessly, he said, “Afterwards, every single generation tried to recover the warblade ‘Slaughterer’, but despite six hundred years of trying, none of us have succeeded. After all, when we sold the warblade ‘Slaughterer’, it was for the price of 180,000 gold coins. 180,000 gold coins! We aren’t able to produce such a vast sum, but even if we were, the current owner wouldn’t be willing to sell to us.”

The ancient clan of the Dragonblood Warriors, actually had sold off its own ancestral heirloom? This was a humiliation! The humiliation of the ancient clan of the Dragonblood Warriors! Every succeeding generation had attempted to come up with ways to regain the warblade ‘Slaughterer’, but despite six hundred years of trying, they had never succeeded.

As the current clan leader, Hogg also had this desire, but the clan’s economic situation was in dire straits. 180,000 gold coins? Even if they sold off the manor and all their possessions, they might not be able to produce such a vast sum. No, the ancestral heirloom was lost forever. This humiliation constantly weighed on Hogg’s heart. He felt ashamed and helpless, unable to face his forefathers.

Seeing the look on his father’s face, Linley consoled him, “Father, don’t be unhappy! I promise that one day, I will recover our family’s heirloom and bring it back to this manor.”

“You?” Hogg chuckled. Eyes filled with love, he ruffled Linley’s hair. In his heart, Hogg couldn’t help but murmur to himself, “Linley. Do you know, these words you just said...all those years ago, I said these same words to your grandfather as well.” Six hundred years of efforts had all failed. How could this task be so easily accomplished?

After all, the person who had purchased the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ wasn’t an ordinary person either. Why would they be willing to sell? Even if they were willing to sell, how could the decrepit Baruch clan afford the cost?

“Father, don’t you believe me?” Raising his head, Linley looked at his father questioningly.

“I believe you, I believe you,” Hogg laughed.

Father and son held each other close. Only three members remained of the

ancient Dragonblood Clan in this era. When would this decaying clan be able to regain the glory and honor it had in prior years? At this moment, lying against his father's chest, Linley's fists were tightly clenched!

3

Growth

The spring wind came, turning green the poplar trees near the empty space outside of the town of Wushan. A group of youths were ardently training on the empty training grounds. Almost a year had passed since the Dragonblood test, and Linley was eight years old now. Over the course of this period of time, Hillman clearly saw that Linley had only become even more hard working!

“Well done, Linley! Hold it, hold it!” Hillman encouraged from the side. Right now, Linley was only wearing trousers. His upper body was covered with sweat, and his body, as taut as a drawn bowstring, was lying on the ground. His hands were pressed fiercely to the ground, as straight as tree trunks, while the rest of his body was motionless. He was supporting himself from a push-up position, with just his hands and the tips of his toes! His entire body was taut!

The ‘Static Tension’ training exercise! A very simple yet very effective training exercise. If a person could reach the level of being able to maintain this pose for an hour, then his body would no longer fear ordinary swords or sabres.

Drip, drip! Beads of sweat rolled down from Linley’s forehead. The sweat entered Linley’s left eye, and he couldn’t help but wince at the pain.

“Ley is really amazing. Just eight years old, but he’s able to match the thirteen-year-olds in doing the ‘Static Tension’ exercise.” Some of the children who had already given up were sprawled on the ground, chatting as they watched Linley.

“Ley, keep it up! Keep it up for the rest of us! Beat those thirteen-year-olds!” The golden-haired Hadley shouted from the side. “Yeah, keep it up, Ley!” The other children started to chant as well. Linley was on extremely good terms with the other kids. Although Linley was the child of a noble house, he was extremely kind to the children of commoners and often helped them train as well.

“Gotta hold it. Gotta hold it.” Linley constantly said to himself. In the back of Linley’s mind, the words his father said a year ago constantly echoed:

“Linley, we are the family of the Dragonblood Warriors. As a member of the Dragonblood Warriors clan, you have both advantages and disadvantages! The advantage is, even though the density of dragonblood in your veins hasn’t reached a sufficient level your body will still be much stronger than those of most ordinary people. It might be very difficult for others to become a warrior of the sixth rank through training alone, but for you, it will be somewhat easier.

“However, your disadvantage is this. The descendants of the Dragonblood clan are not able to train battle-qi according to normal manuals. This is because the blood in our veins is only suited to the training method inside the ‘Secret Dragonblood Manual’. It conflicts with all other types of battle-qi cultivation methods. Unfortunately, only those who have reached a certain density of dragonblood are able to practice using the method within the ‘Secret Dragonblood Manual’. Therefore, you will not be able to cultivate battle-qi at all.

“Also, although in theory anyone can reach the sixth rank through physical training, in reality the number of people who accomplish this is very low. But for us, it is different. Even if the amount of dragonblood in our veins is low, our starting level will be higher than others. Just from physical training alone, we can easily become warriors of the sixth rank. Your great grandfather managed to become a warrior of the seventh rank through physical training!”

Linley remembered his father’s words very clearly. Linley growled to himself, “I’m stronger than everyone else now, only because of the dragonblood in my veins. But since I can’t practice battle-qi, my only options are between working hard and working even harder! Since great grandfather was able to become a warrior of the seventh rank, then I shall...I shall become a warrior of the eighth rank. Or even the ninth rank! Nothing is impossible!”

A warrior of the eighth rank! A warrior of the ninth rank could be considered the most powerful expert in the entire country of Fenlai. A warrior of the eighth rank, although unable to restore the Baruch family to its former glories, would be able to dramatically improve its current situation.

“Gotta hold!” Linley gritted his teeth. By this point, his muscles felt like they were being chewed on by countless ants. His entire body was quivering, and every single muscle on his entire body trembled. Every single trembling muscle could be seen visibly.

After a long time, in the end... Thud! Linley collapsed to the ground, exhausted. “That feels wonderful.” Flat on the floor, his entire body relaxed, Linley could clearly feel how numb his entire body was. All the muscles on his body, after undergoing that training, were slowly growing. Although the growth wouldn’t be noticeable from just one or two exercises, after a long period of time the effects would be pronounced.

Hillman, off to the side, nodded briefly with satisfaction. Hillman’s face then grew cold as he turned to look at the fourteen-and fifteen-year-olds. “All of you had better hold on! Linley’s only eight years old, while all of you are almost adults. Don’t let an eight-year-old get the better of you!”



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After morning exercises ended, Linley bid farewell to his friends and went towards the Baruch clan manor. If a stranger had seen him, the eight-year-old Linley surely would have been assumed to be eleven or twelve years old and not just a mere child of eight. The descendants of Baruch truly were different from other men.

“Big brother!” Upon seeing Linley, the healthy-looking Wharton rushed over.

“That’s enough, Wharton. My entire body is covered with sweat. Let me wash myself first.” Linley patted Wharton on the face and laughed.

Wharton hmped. “I know that as soon as you wash up, you’ll go study with father.” As a member of a noble house, Linley’s education began from a young age. The five-thousand-year-old Baruch clan was even stricter regarding educational matters than even the royal families of most kingdoms were.

“Enough, Wharton. I’ll play with you around noon.” Linley laughed. Wharton was only a child, while Linley was much more mature.

After washing up and changing into some fresh clothes, Linley entered the study. At this moment, his father, Hogg Baruch, was sitting in front of a desk, his back ramrod straight. In front of Hogg were three thick tomes.

“Father!” Linley respectfully bowed. Hogg coldly nodded, and Linley quickly walked next to him.

“Yesterday, I explained the history of the countries of the Yulan continent to you. Repeat it back to me, Hogg said coldly. This was the real Hogg. Instances like the time when he was holding the crying Linley in his arms were extremely rare. Normally, Hogg’s attitude towards Linley could be summarized in one word: ‘Strict’. In all things, Hogg strove for perfection. He wouldn’t let Linley get away with any mistakes.

“Yes, father,” Linley said calmly.

“In the Yulan continent, there are three dangerous areas. The number one mountain range, the ‘Mountain Range of Magical Beasts’. The second mountain range, the ‘Mountain Range of the Setting Sun’. And, the number one forest, the ‘Forest of Darkness’. The space these three dangerous regions take up is incomparably large. The ‘Mountain Range of Magical Beasts’ runs across the entire continent, from north to south, covering over ten thousand kilometers. Within it are countless magical beasts, including Saint-level beasts that have the power to ‘destroy the heavens and ravage the earth’. Because of the ‘Mountain Range of Magical Beasts’, the Yulan continent has been divided into different regions.

“West of the ‘Mountain Range of Magical Beasts’, there are twelve kingdoms and thirty-two duchies. Within these kingdoms and dukedoms, there are two major divisions. The first is the Holy Union, with the Kingdom of Fenlai being the principal kingdom. The second is the Dark Alliance, with the Kingdom of Heishi being the principal kingdom. These two alliances are opposed to each other and constantly battle because one is controlled by the Radiant Church, while the other belongs to the Cult of Shadows.

“East of the ‘Mountain Range of Magical Beasts’, there are four empires, six major kingdoms, and countless duchies! These four empires are enormous, and are not influenced by the Holy Union or the Dark Alliance. In these four

empires, the rule of the emperors is absolute. Any of the four empires are comparable to the Holy Union.

“The four empires are the central Yulan Empire, the southeastern Rhine Empire, the eastern Rohault Empire, and the northern O’Brien Empire.” After having said all this at one go, Linley let himself relax slightly.

“Just this?” Hogg frowned.

Linley was about to immediately continue, but Hogg cut him off. “Let me ask you, within our Holy Union, how many kingdoms and duchies are there?”

“Within our Holy Union, there are six kingdoms and fifte... sevente...” Linley suddenly frowned.

How many duchies were there in the Holy Union? Linley’s memory was a bit hazy. He wasn’t sure if it was fifteen, or if it was seventeen. He couldn’t be sure.

“Hmph!” Hogg pulled out a wooden stick, his face cold and harsh. Linley obediently stuck his hand out. Hogg’s eyes narrowed. WHAP! Hogg whacked Linley’s hand with the stick. A red line immediately appeared on Linley’s hand, but Linley could only clench his teeth, not making a sound.

“Linley, you must remember, we are currently living within the Holy Union. You must know everything about the Holy Union!” Hogg coldly looked at his son. “In the entire Yulan continent, the most important entities are the four empires and the two alliances.”

Linley nodded. Although his father’s words were simple, Linley clearly understood the deeper meaning within them.

“At the far northern end, the Holy Union shares a border with the O’Brien Empire. While at the southern end, the Dark Alliance intersects with the Yulan Empire. Under the guidance of the Radiant Church, the unity of our Holy Union isn’t one whit inferior to that of the empires.”

Linley nodded as he listened to his father’s words. Yesterday, he had read many books. Clearly, the Holy Union could be considered the ‘cultural center’ for the entire Yulan continent. At the same time, in terms of economic strength it was on par with the Yulan Empire, making the two of them the most economically powerful entities in the world. It also had the support of the

Radiant Church. The Holy Union truly was very formidable.

“Today, we will study art,” Hogg said coldly. “As the descendent of a noble family, you must have a thorough understanding and appreciation of art. Art is what gives noblemen an aura of gravitas!” Hogg pulled out a large tome as thick as a fist, immediately opening it.

“In the year 3578 of the Yulan calendar, the grandmaster stone-sculptor Proulx was born...” Hogg solemnly taught while Linley strove hard to memorize. He wanted to meet his father’s requirements.

Time flew by quickly, and in the blink of an eye, the grandfather clock within the hall rang eleven times, signifying that it was now eleven in the morning.

“Is Hogg at home?” A clear voice rang out. The Baruch manor had no guards, so clearly, this person had already arrived within the manor grounds.

Hogg frowned, placing down the thick tome in front of him. “Linley, today we’ll come to a stop here.” Revealing a wisp of a smile, Hogg turned around and walked towards the guest hall.

“Ah, Hogg, my dear friend! Just the other day I heard the clothspinner bird’s cry, and I just knew that something good was going to happen. Indeed, by noon, I received your missive, and as soon as I read it, I was overjoyed.”

“Dear Philip, I am very happy to see you as well. Hillman, quickly go and bring me the stone sculpture, ‘Fierce Lion’. Philip, come, let’s go to the main hall and wait. The sculpture will be here shortly.”

Hearing these words, Linley felt his heart twinge. “We’re selling off more family belongings?” Linley knew that the ‘Fierce Lion’ sculpture was one that his father deeply liked. But the Baruch clan, which took very few taxes from the town of Wushan, really was in dire economic straits.

Fortunately, the Baruch clan was an ancient one, and by virtue of its age, had stored many rare and precious items. Unfortunately, even the vastest of hoards could not withstand so many years of auctions and sales. By this point in time, the number of valuable items within the clan was very few. Linley couldn’t help but turn to stare at the grandfather clock. “I wonder how long it will be before even this clock has to be sold off.”

A middle-aged man with long, golden hair and a nobleman's aura strode into the hall by Hogg's side. Linley immediately was able to guess that this middle-aged man must be 'Philip'.

"Oh, this adorable child must be your son, right Hogg?" Philip smiled very warmly at Linley. "Linley Baruch, right? May I address you as Linley?"

"It would be my honor, sire." Linley placed his right hand against his breast and respectfully bowed.

"What an adorable child." Philip seemed very pleased.

By his side, Hogg laughed. "Philip, stop wasting time with the child. Look, the 'Fierce Lion' you have desired for so long has arrived." As he spoke, Hillman easily carried in the large sculpture into the hall, and then easily set it down. It was a nearly thousand-pound stone sculpture, but in Hillman's hands, it seemed like naught but a toy, clearly showing Hillman's strength.

"Mr. Hillman, your strength amazes me. My own manor doesn't have anyone as fierce as you, Guard Captain, even though I control twelve towns." Philip smiled as he spoke, but the implicit meaning in his words was quite clear; he wanted to invite Hillman to work for him.

Hillman said coldly, "The town of Wushan is my home, sire."

"Forgive me." Philip quickly apologized.

Philip turned to look at Hogg. "Hogg, I must say, although I like this stone sculpture very much, the artisanship of this 'Fierce Lion' sculpture cannot be considered to be top tier, much less the masterpieces of those grandmaster sculptors."

"Philip, if you don't wish to buy it, then forget about it." Hogg was quite succinct.

Philip's eyes couldn't help but narrow, but then he laughed. "Haha... Hogg, don't be angry. I'm not saying that I don't wish to buy it. I'm just telling the truth. How about this. I'll buy this sculpture for five hundred gold coins. What do you think?"

"Five hundred?" Hogg frowned. This price was much lower than what Hogg

had hoped for. He had been hoping for at least eight hundred.

In the Yulan continent, one gold coin equaled ten silver coins equaled a thousand copper coins. The average commoner would be able to earn twenty or thirty gold coins in a year. Even the average army soldier would only earn a hundred or so gold coins. "The price is too low." Hogg shook his head.

"Hogg, you must know that in all the ten thousand plus years of the Yulan continent, there have been countless sculptures made. The true value of a sculpture is in terms of its artisanship. As far as the artisanship of this one... well, heh, suffice to say, I just like it. Five hundred gold really is my highest offer. If you don't accept, then let's just forget about it."

Philip laughed as he turned to look at the grandfather clock in the hall. His eyes gleaming, he said, "Hogg, if you were to sell this clock, however, I would be willing to pay a thousand gold." Hogg's face instantly grew cold. "Ahem, two thousand gold would be acceptable as well. This would be my highest offer." Philip added hurriedly.

Hogg sternly shook his head firmly. "The grandfather clock is not for sale! As for the sculpture, six hundred gold. Take it or leave it."

Philip carefully studied Hogg for a moment, then chuckled. "Fine, Hogg. I'll give you some face. Six hundred gold it is. Housekeeper, bring me six hundred gold." The caretaker for his manor, who had been waiting outside the entire time, immediately ran over with six sacks of yellow gold. "Six hundred gold, Hogg. You can count it, if you want." Philip smiled.

Hogg hefted the sacks. Just based on weight alone, Hogg was certain that there really were six hundred gold coins in them, a hundred gold per sack. Hogg smiled and nodded. "Philip, how about staying and having dinner with us?"

"No need, I still have some business back home." Philip laughed. Philip's housekeeper subsequently instructed two powerfully built warriors to lift and carry away the sculpture, which they did with difficulty.

After Philip and his entourage had departed, Hogg stared at the six sacks of gold, a dim look in his eyes. This time, he sold the stone sculpture. Next time? Although the manor still had many things remaining, sooner or later, they would have nothing left.

“Father, I want to learn to be a sculptor!” Linley suddenly said. Linley knew very well that in the Yulan continent, those famous master sculptors could produce works valued at tens of thousands of gold pieces each. Some famous sculptures could even reach a hundred thousand gold pieces. And wealth aside, the societal ranking of these sculptors was also very high.

“If I can become a master sculptor, then... then father will no longer have to sell our family possessions.” This is what Linley was thinking.

“Sculpting?” Hogg glanced at Linley, his eyes cold. “Linley, amongst the hundreds of millions of people in the Holy Union, there are at least several million who have studied sculpting. But in the entire Holy Union, the number of true masters can be counted on one hand. In addition, if you don’t have a good instructor, you simply cannot succeed on your own.”

“The inner circle of sculptors is not one which ordinary people are allowed into. You only see the sky-high valuation of the works of the masters, but do you know that the vast majority of sculptors only make a few dozen gold coins each year?” Hogg’s voice was very fierce.

Linley was so frightened he immediately knelt down. Just now, he only spoke because he thought that sculpting could improve his family’s situation. He didn’t expect his father to say so much and lecture him so sternly.

“Enough! The ancestral hall needs some cleaning. After lunch, go and clean it up,” Hogg said coldly.

“Yes, father,” Linley said respectfully.

Looking at Linley, Hogg sighed in his heart. “Sculpting? Oh, dear child... do you know that in the past, I also practiced sculpting? I spent ten full years of my life trying to learn. But unfortunately, my sculptures weren’t worth a single coin.” Hogg, too, had once foolishly dreamed of becoming a master sculptor and thereby improving his clan’s situation.

But in his heart, he felt very helpless. Despite spending ten years training, his sculptures were still worthless. The field of sculpting could be described as a pyramid. Those famous master sculptors were at the top of the pyramid. They enjoyed a high status, and each sculpture they made was worth hundreds of thousands of coins.

But the valuation of the work of the countless low-level sculptors at the bottom of the pyramid was soul-crushingly low. Most of their works would just be bought by commoners for just a few silver coins to use as decorations in their homes.

4

Coiling Dragon Ring

The rosy clouds underneath the setting sun seemed to cover half the sky, casting their red hue upon the entire world.

“Cleaning the ancestral hall is pretty easy.” Departing the ancestral hall, Linley had to admit that he had over-prepared. He had slotted an hour for this job, but in just fifteen minutes he was finished cleaning.

On the Yulan continent, each year was divided into twelve months, each month thirty days, each day twenty-four hours, and each hour sixty minutes. Most noble families owned grandfather clocks, and were able to accurately tell time. Some extremely wealthy or extremely high-status individuals might even own meticulously calibrated wrist watches.

“The ancestral hall is cleaned every month. Honestly, in just a month, the ancestral hall won’t get too dirty. All I have to do is just wipe it down a bit. I have almost an hour before training starts. What should I do?” Bored, Linley looked around in all directions.

The ancient Baruch mansion had five thousand years of history. The front courtyard was cleaned every day, but the rooms in the much larger back courtyard, aside from the ancestral hall, were all covered in dust, and even the walls were cracked. Wild grasses and dark green lichen covered the floors and even ran up the walls.

“Heeeey...” Seeing the decrepit architecture, Linley’s eyes slowly brightened. “Lots of places in the back courtyard haven’t been visited in over a century. I wonder if there are any ancient, valuable items there?”

Upon thinking of this possibility, Linley’s heart began to pound. “If I am able to find some valuable things and give them to Father, no doubt he will be very happy.” Linley took a deep breath, then immediately entered a decrepit room next to the ancestral hall. Step by step he walked carefully, wielding a sturdy

wooden stick in his hands which he used to strike down the cobwebs, allowing himself a more careful examination.

Immediately upon entering the room, a rotten scent wafted past Linley's nose. Thick cobwebs could be seen in each corner, and spiders could even be seen clambering about.

Many spiderwebs were covering decorative curtains and furnishings. Upon closer examination, all of these curtains appeared very ancient. Unfortunately, the curtains were tattered beyond belief and just barely holding together.

"If these curtains weren't ruined, no doubt they would be worth a lot of money." Linley helplessly shook his head. He continued to inspect the room, using his stick to brush aside the layers of cobwebs as he carefully searched. He searched the floor, the cabinets, and even to see if there were any secret passageways on the walls.

"According to the books I've read, it is quite common for walls to contain hidden levers or passages." Linley carefully rapped the walls, listening to the sounds. Linley very much enjoyed this feeling of searching for treasures in the ancient room. Alas, he had forgotten something. If he could come up with this idea, wouldn't his father, his grandfather, and the other elders of the Baruch clan also have thought of this? These ancient rooms had long ago been scoured clean by the long-dead ancestors of the Baruch clan.

Linley was only eight years old, after all. Although the strict education of the clan helped him mature quickly, there was still a large gap between him and an adult. Naturally, he wouldn't be able to consider things from a more complete point of view.

"Nothing in this room. Next one..." Linley exited the first room and entered the second. There were actually many rooms in the back courtyard. After all, the front courtyard which Linley resided in, constituted only a third of the entire manor. The back courtyard was far larger. Linley would probably have to spend an entire day in order to finish searching the entire back courtyard.

"All these decorations are ruined. Not a single one of them is worth any money." Linley exited yet another empty room, then stared up at the sky. "Eh, looks like it's almost time for training. I have another fifteen minutes or so at

most.”

Linley turned his head around and stared at an extremely large room. “I’ll just look at that last one, that big one. I’ll spend about ten minutes searching. If I can’t find anything, I’ll go off to training.” Having made up his mind, Linley raced towards the room.

This ancient room was much larger than even the main hall in the front courtyard. Stepping inside, Linley carefully scrutinized the place. “I bet that centuries ago, this was the dining hall for our Baruch clan.” From the ornaments and furniture, Linley could tell that this was a hall for people to reside in. It was a truly huge, grandiose-looking hall.

“Search the ground first.” Same as before, Linley lowered his head, widened his eyes, and began carefully searching the room one part at a time. Upon seeing anything interesting, he would tap it twice with his stick. If it was made out of stone, he would ignore it. Since he didn’t have much time left before training was to start, his searching speed increased as well.

“Time to search the walls and the curtains. Oi. Last, best hope.” Linley grimaced as he scanned the surroundings. “Clan elders, I really hope you guys left one or two things behind for me to find. Even something small would do.”

Linley carefully searched the walls, even peeking behind the tattered curtains. On the ancient walls were many rotted wooden cabinets, each of which had many drawers. Linley pulled open each and every drawer, but the drawers were totally empty, almost immaculately so. The only thing inside of them? Some dust.

“Ugh!” After pulling open the last drawer, Linley felt bitter disappointment in his heart. “After searching for all this time, I didn’t even find a single valuable item. All I did was cover myself with sweat and dust.” Linley stared at his clothes. They really were filthy, now. Linley couldn’t help but feel discontented.

Linley’s gaze once more flashed across the room. “Hmph. I’m leaving.” Linley angrily used the stick in his hand to strike hard against a nearby cabinet, as though he wanted to give vent to all the anger that had built up over an hour of fruitless searching.

“Thud!” The stick struck the cabinet square in the middle. The cabinet was

extremely ancient. After having been chewed on by mites for a hundred years, it couldn't withstand any weight at all. After having been struck so fiercely, it began to creak and groan.

Hearing this, Linley couldn't help but look behind him in alarm. "Uh oh, it's going to fall!" While searching the other rooms Linley had also destroyed a few other pieces of furniture, so by now, he was very experienced. Linley hurriedly dodged to one side.

The cabinet, which was twice as tall as Linley himself, collapsed with a crashing sound, smashing against the floor and breaking into seven or eight pieces. It covered the room with even more dust... but hidden amidst the dust, unseen by Linley, was something special.

Upon the shattering of the cabinet, a black ring which had been hidden within the wooden supports came tumbling out, falling to the ground.

"Ew, ew!" Linley spat out the two words as he hurriedly tried to escape the wave of dust. "My luck is terrible! I'm completely covered with dust now, and I bet training is about to start. I'd best go take a quick shower and put on some new clothes." With a wave of his arm, Linley pushed open the door and departed the ancient room.

The black ring had rolled forward, landing precisely in front of the doorway. As a result, when Linley had strode forward by three steps, reaching the doorway, he came to a sudden halt because he could clearly feel that he had stepped on something hard.

"Just now, I searched the ground and didn't see a single rock. This must have come from the shattered drawers." Thinking about the collapsed drawers, Linley couldn't help but feel angry. He viciously stomped on the piece of 'shattered wood' beneath his feet.

Linley expected it to be a piece of shattered wood which would easily be stomped into fragments. But in reality...

"Whoah, it's hard! What's under my foot?" Linley felt that the item underneath his foot was extraordinarily tough, and immediately stepped aside to take a closer look. He saw a jet-black object in the shape of a ring lying peacefully on the ground. It was covered by a layer of dust, and was not at all

catching to the eye.

“Oh, a ring?” Linley’s eyes were bandit-sharp. He happily plucked the ring up, then used his filthy sleeves to give the black ring a vigorous rub-down. Only then could Linley make out what this item really looked like.

This black ring was made of a material that seemed to have properties of both wood and stone. On the body of the ring, there was a very faint carving of an indistinct object as well. “Is that an earthworm?” Linley suspiciously looked at the carving on the ring. At first glance, Linley felt that the sinuous carving on the ring seemed to be that of an earthworm.

Linley laughed to himself, “Whoever carved this on the ring did a terrible job. I bet even a mediocre carver could make something more attractive. What a shame. This black ring doesn’t even have a single diamond on it, much less any valuable magic crystals.”

Most rings were adorned with either diamonds or magic crystals. Unfortunately, this black ring seemed to have been made out of a material that had properties of both wood and stone. Not even the shadow of a gemstone could be seen. Clearly, it was worthless.

But for some reason, upon seeing the ring, Linley immediately felt that he had taken a liking to it. He suspected that it was most likely because this was the only thing he had discovered after spending a prodigious amount of effort in searching the manor.

“Hm, this ring is really thick. There’s no way to wear it on my finger without it slipping off. I’ll string it through with silk and wear it around my neck.” Linley’s eyes brightened. The eight-year-old Linley’s hands, after all, were much smaller than the hands of an adult. There was no way he could wear the ring on his fingers.

“Now, what name should I choose for this black ring? Earthworm Ring? No way, that sounds terrible.” Linley mumbled for a few moments, then his eyes lit up. “Haha, that sinuous thing can also be considered a ‘dragon’, right? A dragon curled around the ring... then, I’ll call it the Coiling Dragon Ring!” Although in his heart Linley felt like the carving looked more like an earthworm, he still chose the name ‘Coiling Dragon Ring’ for it.

“The Coiling Dragon Ring!” Lifting up the dark, unadorned ring, Linley felt exceptionally pleased.

“Wait. Crap! It’s almost time for training!” Linley suddenly remembered. He frantically stared at his filthy clothes, covered in dust and grime. He looked like a beggar. “Oh no...” Linley had no time to think. He immediately ran out of the ancient courtyard and charged straight for the washroom.

The sound of rushing water could be heard as Linley dumped water over himself. His skin was bright and vigorous, and muscular lines were already beginning to develop all over his body. This was the result of Linley’s training. Underneath the rushing water flow, the dust was quickly washed away.

Using the least amount of time necessary, Linley washed himself clean then hurriedly put on his training clothes. “String, string...” Linley hurriedly looked about for a thread on which he could hang the Coiling Dragon Ring. Suddenly, Linley’s gaze fell on a ruined old washcloth. His eyes lit up, and he immediately pulled a string out from within the washcloth.

Although the washcloth was very ordinary, it was very sturdy and durable. The string, too, would be very resilient. He quickly strung on the Coiling Dragon Ring, then immediately put on his makeshift necklace.

“I’m gonna be late. This is my first time being late!” Linley bolted out like a roaring flame. As he ran, he tucked the Coiling Dragon Ring into his clothes. Feeling the coolness of the ring against his chest, Linley couldn’t help but feel happy.

In exchange for being late, he gained the Coiling Dragon Ring.

Linley rushed out of the Baruch clan manor in a flash, and then immediately ran towards the empty training ground east of the town of Wushan. By this time, most of the commoners had already returned home, leaving the streets empty, but as they saw Linley run, they were able to guess the reason.

“Young master Linley, careful, don’t hurt yourself!”

“Master Hillman is extremely rigorous. I’m afraid young master Linley is going to be punished.”



*

The kindness that the Baruch clan had showed the commoners caused them to also be filled with love and goodwill towards Linley.

“How will Uncle Hillman punish me?” Even as he hurriedly rushed forward, Linley was still thinking about this question. At this point, Linley had no time to chat or pay respects to any of the uncles or aunties nearby. In a short period of time, Linley arrived at the training field of the town of Wushan. By this time, all three squads had already lined up. Hillman was speaking, but upon hearing Linley’s footsteps, Hillman’s cold gaze couldn’t help but shoot towards him.

Linley ran towards the training squads. Taking position next to the squads, he nervously awaited Hillman’s orders. “Today’s training exercises will be doubled for you. Return to your team!” Hillman said calmly.

“Yes sir!” Linley raised his head high and said in a bright voice. The youngsters nearby couldn’t help but stick out their tongues at the severity of it. Linley had only been late by minutes, but his punishment was double duty training. Today, Linley probably wouldn’t have any time to go home and eat dinner.

Just as Linley began jogging towards his usual position in the team, suddenly... THUD! The entire earth began to tremble slightly, with a strangely regular cadence. It was as though a giant creature was walking on the earth, causing it to tremble with each step. “East. It came from the east.” Linley immediately discerned the direction.

Not just Linley. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry all turned towards the east, their expressions growing solemn. The vibrations were growing stronger and clearer. All of the youths present could clearly feel that the regular vibrations were coming from an enormous creature headed their way.

Each of the thunderous footsteps seemed to cause a vibration powerful enough to shake Linley’s heart. What giant creature was causing this?

Linley widened his eyes and stared east...

Magical Beast, Velocidragon!

The giant creature that caused the earth to shake finally revealed itself. Upon seeing this enormous creature, Linley and the rest of the children were scared silly. Hillman, Roger and Lorry's reaction speeds were very quick; they immediately stood in front of the group of kids and carefully watched the enormous creature.

"A magical beast of the seventh rank. A Velocidragon!" Hillman's face tightened, while Lorry and Roger, who were by his side, felt their legs grow weak.

"So bi-bi-big! Is, is this a legendary magical beast?" Linley was totally stunned. Since Linley was born, the largest creatures which he had ever seen were the warhorses that sometimes passed by the town of Wushan. Those large, powerful horses were 1.8 meters tall, but in front of this giant creature they seemed like nothing more than babes in front of a giant. The difference was truly astounding. This creature was easily two stories high and at least twenty or thirty meters long.

This was a magical beast – a Velocidragon!

The Velocidragon's entire body was covered by huge, fiery-red scales, each scale glittering with cold, golden light. The scales alone were stunning and frightening to behold. The Velocidragon's four scale-covered long legs were even more terrifying in their thickness. Two fully-grown men would barely be able to surround them with their arms. The flame-red Velocidragon was entirely crimson in color, with the exception of its cold, deadly black claws.

The Velocidragon's long, scale-covered tail made up over half of its total body length. Like a whip, it swept across the ground. Each time it struck the ground, a deep thud could be heard emanating from below.

"GRRR..." With a low-throated growl, white steam erupted from the nostrils

of the Velocidragon, carrying with it the stench of sulfur. Those diamond-like eyes, nearly the size of a lantern, were also, strangely enough, red as well. The huge head of the Velocidragon turned towards Linley and the children. Its cold gaze terrified all of the children, freezing them in their tracks.

“TCHHH. TCHHH.” The Velocidragon’s mouth tensed, revealing two rows of enormous, saw-like teeth. Each tooth was ivory white, and the sight of them caused everyone’s hearts to grow cold. No one dared to question their sharpness.

Linley felt as though his heart had stopped beating. Right now, it seemed as though all sound had faded away. “This is absolutely terrifying. Is there anyone who can possibly defeat such a creature?” Linley was scared stiff.

Just from looking at this huge magical beast, Linley felt as though its power was irresistible. Linley believed that with but a swipe of its enormous tail, it could surely disintegrate even the sturdiest stone houses of the town of Wushan.

“Is this the town of Wushan?” Suddenly, a cold voice emanated from on top of the Velocidragon. All of the terrified children looked up, astonished. Upon the Velocidragon’s enormous, scaly back, a mysterious man wearing violet robes was sitting cross-legged. The Velocidragon was simply too huge in size, and its back was extremely broad. There was more than enough space for someone to stand, sit, or even roll around.

“Lord Magus, this is indeed the town of Wushan. Is there anything we can help you with, Lord Magus?” Hillman’s voice rang out.

Upon hearing Hillman’s voice, everyone seemed to find their bearings again, and recovered from the state of stunned terror. But no one present, including Roger and Lorry, dared to make a single sound. They stood behind Hillman and fearfully stared at the terrifying Velocidragon and the mysterious, violet robed magus riding it.

“The town of Wushan. Looks like I didn’t get lost.” The violet-robed man said in a low voice. The mysterious, violet-robed man didn’t say anything else. After gazing at Linley and the rest of the group with its cold eyes the Velocidragon continued forwards, two more lines of smoke appearing from its nostrils. Seeing

the Velocidragon go in the direction of the town, the look on Hillman's face changed.

"Everyone, stay here." After he spoke, Hillman immediately chased after the departing Velocidragon.

"Uncle Lorry, what is that? Is that a magical beast?" Linley was the first to ask.

Lorry cleared his throat, a look of terror still in his eyes, but he still nodded. "Yes, it is, and it's a very powerful one, a magical beast of the seventh rank. A Velocidragon!"

"Velocidragon?" Linley memorized the word, forever etching it in his mind. The Velocidragon's huge body, hard scales, sharp claws, and powerful tail served to create a terrifying appearance. Linley believed a single Velocidragon could most likely annihilate the entire town of Wushan.

"The defensive power of a Velocidragon's scales is astonishing, and its attack power is terrifying as well. In addition, it is proficient in destructive fire magic!" Lorry's heart was filled with fear as he explained to Linley and the others. "If faced with a terrifying magical beast such as the Velocidragon, most likely even a platoon of a thousand soldiers would be wiped out, unless it had a number of sixth-or seventh-ranked warriors and magi who could unite to penetrate the Velocidragon's scales."

Linley's heart trembled. Even a platoon of a thousand soldiers would be wiped out?

"However, the most terrifying thing is not the Velocidragon... it is the mysterious violet-robed man riding it." Lorry took two stabilizing breaths, calming his agitated heart.

By his side, Roger nodded as well. "Right. In order to subdue a Velocidragon, one must force the Velocidragon to willingly submit to being a servant. In other words... the violet-robed man must be significantly more powerful than the Velocidragon. Based on his clothing, he should be a magus."

"At least a magus of the seventh rank. Perhaps even a magus of the eighth rank!" Roger's fists couldn't help but tremble as well. "I never imagined such an important individual would come to our home."

Linley could sense the fear that was in the hearts of Roger and Lorry. A Velocidragon had come to town, as had a mysterious magus whose power dwarfed the Velocidragon's? This was definitely enough to inspire terror in anyone.

"The magus was even more powerful than the Velocidragon?" Linley found this somewhat hard to believe. The Velocidragon's huge body, hard scales, sharp claws, and powerful tail... it all seemed to dwarf the small human figure of that magus.

"GWAAAR!" Suddenly, an angry roar erupted from the middle of the town.

"Crap!" Lorry and Roger were stunned. Linley and the other children grew worried as well. Was the Velocidragon's angry roar caused by Uncle Hillman, or by the town of Wushan? Nobody knew. "All of you, stay here." Lorry and Roger, although terrified, still raced towards the center of the town.

Linley gritted his teeth. "Uncle Hillman!" Linley was also worried for Uncle Hillman as well as the citizens of the town of Wushan. He immediately chased after Lorry and Roger. At this moment, the two of them were both panic-stricken at the thought of the Velocidragon that they didn't notice Linley following behind them.

In but a few moments, they arrived in the middle of the town. Hillman was standing far away, watching. "Why did you come?" Hillman reprimanded in a severe tone. Upon seeing Linley follow behind Lorry and Roger, Hillman frowned even further. "Linley, it's far too dangerous here. Go back immediately." Only now did Lorry and Roger notice Linley had followed them.

"Linley, why did you..." Lorry and Roger didn't know what to say.

"Uncle Hillman, I'm not going back." Linley wasn't willing to return.

Hillman helplessly shook his head. He knew how stubborn Linley could be, and how hard it was to force him to change his mind. "Fine. Stay behind me, do not go too far. As long as you stay next to me, I am confident that I can protect you."

"Thank you, Uncle Hillman. I definitely won't run around." Linley was overjoyed.

At this point in time, Hillman's group was roughly a hundred meters away from the Velocidragon. They quietly watched the events in the center of town unfold. In front of the huge Velocidragon, a group of youngsters could be seen. Four men, three women. "Captain, what's going on up ahead?" Lorry said in a quiet voice to Hillman.

A hint of a smile played at Hillman's lips. "That mysterious magus seems to be at odds with that party over there. Just stay here and watch. No need for us to interfere." Hillman himself was only a warrior of the sixth rank. In truth, he didn't dare to interfere either. The Velocidragon alone was something he would not be able to fight off, much less the mysterious magus.

The strength of the seven-person party in front of the magus was not weak either. Five of them were warriors, while the other two were magi. The leader of their party was a powerfully built man with tousled red hair who rode a pitch-black iron bull. The two sharp horns of the iron bull glittered under the light, dark and deadly.

Its blood-red eyes gave testament to the true nature of this bull – this was a "Vampiric Iron Bull", a magical beast of the fifth rank.

With a snort, smoke began to emit from the bull's nostrils as well.

Of the seven people in the party, four were men while three were women. Both of the magi were women, while the third woman was an archer. Aside from the Vampiric Iron Bull, a huge griffin floated in mid-air as well.

"Griffins" –magical beasts of the fourth rank!

The Griffin had the head of a lion but a pair of enormous, powerful wings. For a party to have two magical beasts and two magi... clearly, this adventuring party was no ordinary one.

"Youngsters, it'd be better if you handed the d'Bero shadow diamond over," the mysterious man seated on the Velocidragon said a second time, his voice cold.

"Lord Magus, we don't wish to be your enemy, but in order to acquire this d'Bero shadow diamond we paid an enormous price in time and effort. The value of it exceeds a hundred thousand gold coins, but you, Lord Magus, want

to buy it from us for just seven hundred coins. This... this is impossible,” the red-haired leader of the group said in a solemn voice.

Linley was listening to the conversation from far away by Hillman’s side. He now understood everything. This mysterious magus wanted to spend seven hundred gold to purchase a d'Bero shadow diamond which was worth a hundred thousand.

“Wow, the price of that diamond...” Linley was shocked. “For it to be worth so much money, clearly this d'Bero shadow diamond must have some significance attached to it. Otherwise, it wouldn’t cause this magus to be willing to lower his status and try to take it by force.” An offer of seven hundred gold, for an item worth a hundred thousand. No wonder the small party was unwilling to accept.

“Hmph.” The mysterious magus coldly harrumphed. “I only have seven hundred gold on me. Right now, I’m still willing to use money to buy it from you. If you lot don’t know when to step back and make the right decision... then not only will you not receive a single gold coin, you will also lose your little lives,” the magus said in a frozen voice.

“GRRRR.” The Velocidragon, taller than most of the houses in the town, let out a deep growl, causing all the houses nearby to shudder.

“Captain, we risked our lives to obtain this d'Bero shadow diamond. We can’t just cower in front of this guy and give it away!” a woman in black said coldly. As an experienced adventuring party, these seven people had experienced many battles and wouldn’t easily submit.

The red-haired captain said in a solemn voice, “Honored Lord Magus, I am of the Kingdom of Fenlai’s ‘Cayley’ clan...”

This captain wanted to use his background to force the opponent down. But unfortunately, powerful magi usually were eccentric and didn’t give a whit about noble families. “You all have chosen death,” the mysterious magus sneered coldly.

“Careful.” In a flash, the seven-person party raised its guard. The four warriors charged in front, the female archer in the back pulled out her strongest bow, and the two female magi began to prepare spells.

“GWAAAR!” The huge Velocidragon opened its mouth, and an enormous plume of fire erupted from its fangs, headed directly for the party.

Where the fire came near, the very stone road underneath the fireblast began to warp, crack, and even shatter from the intense heat as the entire road charred black.

“Careful!” the red-haired leader said in a deep voice as his entire body became suffused with red-colored battle-qi. The other three warriors activated their battle-qi as well.

The red-haired leader wielded an enormous claymore in his two hands. With rapid speed, he fiercely swung it against a nearby stone wall, and with a thundering sound the stone wall collapsed, sending hundreds of rocks rolling down to the floor and causing dust to explode outwards. Right at this moment the fire from the Velocidragon enveloped the four men, who used their battle-qi to resist it.

“Hah!” The red-haired man kicked a large rock nearly half a meter long at the magus. The other three warriors did the same, also kicking large rocks with the speed and power of enormous slingshots. The four rocks split the air, howling as they pierced forth towards the magus seated on the huge Velocidragon.

“Swish! Swish! Swish!” One after another, a barrage of rocks assaulted the magus. In the twinkling of an eye, all the rocks from the collapsed wall were used up.

Seeing this battle from afar, Linley’s hands were tightly clenched. “How incredible. They actually dare to use their feet to kick such huge rocks.” Watching the four men unceasingly kick the huge rocks, he felt all the more in awe of warriors in general. “However, the Velocidragon is even more terrifying!”

Staring at the Velocidragon, Linley watched as its whip-like tail snapped about, dancing in front of it. “Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!” One giant rock after another was smashed into smithereens. The rocks couldn’t even come close to harming the magus on the Velocidragon’s back.

“Swoosh!” The Velocidragon’s tail seemed to be totally unimpeded. It covered an enormous area, and whenever it casually passed by a stone house it sliced

through it as though the house was made of mud. The stones would be shattered without any resistance. As one house after another began to collapse, stones rolled about everywhere and the entire area was bathed in dust.

“Roaaaar!” Even in the middle of the dust storm, the Velocidragon’s mighty roar could be heard, and it continued to vomit fire from its jaws.

This entire time, the two female magi in the back of the party were continuously mumbling magical incantations in a light voice. The words of magic were completely different from the common tongue spoken on the Yulan continent. It was much more awkward-sounding and complex. Before too much time had passed, the two female magi finished their incantations!

“Protective Icy Carapace!” the two female magi chanted out in a low voice. Bright light erupted from their bodies, with four rays covering the four male warriors with a translucent, crystalline armor.

The red-haired leader was delighted. With the protective icy carapace supporting his battle-qi, he now felt more confident in this battle.

“Attack!” The red-haired leader ordered. The four warriors shot out four more rocks at nearly the same time, attacking the mounted magus simultaneously. Immediately after that, the four warriors charged forward like arrows released from bows as they shot towards the Velocidragon.

6

Dance of the Fire Serpents

“GWAAAAR!” The flames erupting from the Velocidragon’s mouth encompassed a diameter of tens of meters of the surrounding area, bathing them in a sea of fire.

Hiss... the Velocidragon’s fire danced around the bodies of the four warriors, but guarded by the Protective Icy Carapace and their own battle-qi, the four warriors were completely capable of resisting the heat.

By this point the archer had already mounted the Griffin and taken to the skies, her bow nocked. As for the Vampiric Iron Bull, it stood there like an iron wall, protecting the two female magi.

Swish! Swish! Swish! Her eyes filled with a fierce cold gleam, and her hands as steady as a rock, the Griffin-mounted archer shot out three arrows in a row. The target – the mysterious magus on the back of the Velocidragon!

Whoosh! The Velocidragon’s whip-like tail shot out like lightning, moving even faster than the arrows. In the blink of an eye, it shattered the arrows released from the archer’s triple shot. Immediately afterwards, its tail swept back towards the four charging warriors. The howling sound generated from the tail shattering the air with its movement caused the expressions on the faces of the four warriors to change dramatically. They immediately tried to leap backwards, almost like agile monkeys.

Unfortunately, the draconic tail didn’t move in a purely straight pattern; it oscillated and curved strangely, with no fixed pattern.

BANG! One of the four warriors didn’t manage to dodge in time, and was directly struck by the draconic tail on the waist. Both the Protective Icy Carapace and his own battle-qi were smashed into nothingness in the blink of an eye. With a slight flick, the tail curled around him and tightly wrapped him up.

“Luke!” The red-haired warrior by his side howled angrily, his eyes filled with pain.

“No!” Luke was also screaming in terror.

With but a flick, the draconic tail tossed Luke directly towards the Velocidragon’s mouth. The Velocidragon opened its jaws, revealing its bloody maw, and chomped down. With a terrifying crunching sound, the last thing escaping Luke’s throat was an anguished scream.

Ground beneath the Velocidragon’s saw-like teeth, Luke’s entire body was turned into mincemeat. Half of one bloody leg escaped the Velocidragon’s mouth and fell down to the ground. Gleaming white bone could be seen protruding from the bloody half-leg.

“Don’t look.” Hillman covered Linley’s eyes. That sudden display was simply too bloody. Even a fully-grown adult, when faced with such a terrifying scene for the first time, would be terrified and panic. Linley was just an eight-year-old child.

But it was too late. Linley had already seen everything. *Huff. Huff.* Linley felt as though his heart was being compressed by a giant boulder. His breathing was growing labored, and he started to pant. But in his mind’s eye, he replayed the sight of the young man named Luke being eaten, over and over again.

His belly was ripped open, and his intestines had been shattered. His skull had been crushed, and half his leg had dropped to the ground! All of these things made it hard for Linley to breathe, and he felt dizzy.

This was the first time Linley had seen a fight become so vicious and cruel. It was also the first time Linley had seen someone being eaten alive by a huge Velocidragon. The half-eaten leg, in particular, deeply buried itself in Linley’s mind.

Hillman, Roger, and Lorry exchanged troubled glances as they watched Linley. What sort of harm to the psyche would this bloody affair cause an eight-year-old child? Would it serve as a constant psychological trauma? Once a youth became traumatized by battle, his future accomplishments would be dramatically impacted.

“Killing someone. No big deal. No big deal.” Linley forced himself to think these words repeatedly. “When I grow up and join the army, I’ll have to kill people as well. Gotta hold on. Gotta hold on.”

Linley really was intelligent. He had read many books, and knew what path he had embarked on for the future. On the Yulan continent, when a man grew up, it would be very likely that he would experience life-and-death struggles. But since Linley was just a child who had not done so yet, he had to repeatedly tell himself to calm down. Slowly, the terror and horror in his heart really did begin to lessen.

In fact, much the opposite; in just a short period of time, Linley felt as though his blood was beginning to surge. “That battle really is incredible. It really is exciting.” For some reason, that bloody battle just then made Linley’s blood boil with excitement, filling his heart with desire – a desire to battle and kill!

“Is it because of the dragonblood in my veins?” Linley didn’t know, but he suddenly discovered that he was actually very eager to participate in these bloody struggles. Linley immediately stepped to the side, bypassing Hillman’s protective arm, and continued to watch the battle which was still going on a hundred meters away.

“Linley, don’t watch.” Hillman saw that Linley was intending to continue watching and was shocked.

“Uncle Hillman, I’m not afraid.” Linley turned his head to glance at Hillman.

Hillman suddenly noticed a red gleam of excitement in Linley’s pupils. Surprised, he no longer tried to prevent Linley from watching. As Linley continued to watch the battle from afar, he saw that it was reaching an even bloodier climax.

“GWAAAR!” With a howl, the Velocidragon turned its head and bit down towards a warrior, while its huge claws swept towards another one. Its lightning-fast, whip-like tail also struck out, aiming at the third warrior. The warriors were pressed to the point of abandoning their assaults and instead retreating.

The mysterious magus on the back of the Velocidragon still hadn’t moved. He let the Velocidragon deal with the threats as his lips continued to mumble... and

then all of a sudden, his voice rang out.

“Dance of the Fire Serpents!”

In the blink of an eye, seven enormous fire serpents, each spanning tens of meters long, appeared. Howling, they erupted away from the magus in all directions. Each fire snake appeared to be a real, living creature, with distinct scales and enormous bodies that inspired fear in all who saw it.

Everyone who was watching was stunned. This was a Fire Element spell of the eighth rank – Dance of the Fire Serpent!

It now became clear that this entire time, the mysterious magus had been mumbling the words to a magical incantation. He was preparing this terrifying Fire Element spell – Dance of the Fire Serpent! This spell could unleash seven enormous fire serpents, each of which had a simply astonishing attack power. Even the terrifying defensive ability of the Velocidragon would not be proof against it; if struck, even if it survived it would still be badly injured.

If they were dealing with a magus of the seventh rank, the small squad might be able to hold on for a while longer, but dealing with a magus of the eighth rank who was assisted by a Velocidragon as well? They simply did not have the power to resist.

Only now did they understand that this mysterious magus was a master of the eighth rank! “It’s the Dance of the Fire Serpents. Quick, run away!” The red-haired warrior’s facial expression changed dramatically, and he shouted in a loud voice. The six remaining members of the small squad were now all filled with terror.

“Too late. Prepare for the baptism of death!” The mysterious magus said in a cold, cruel voice, which pierced like a cold dagger at the hearts of the members of the small squad.

The seven fire serpents flew at a very high speed, and wherever they passed through, the stone houses nearby immediately began to blaze. The burning flames towered towards the high heavens, an absolutely catastrophic scene. Seeing their homes be disintegrated from afar, the denizens of the town of Wushan who had long since fled and hidden far away all felt pain and sorrow.

In front of the seven giant fire serpents, their stone houses seemed like naught but toys. They were easily demolished, and the flames in the wreckage rose towards the sky. “Run!” The female archer no longer cared about anything else. She immediately directed her griffin to fly to a higher altitude. There was a limit to the distance at which a fire-element magus would be able to control the seven fire serpents. If the archer and her mount could fly beyond that point, she would be safe.

Whoooooosh. Two of the blazing fire serpents enveloped the two female magi and the Vampiric Iron Bull as well. Almost instantaneously, the sound of burning, crackling flesh could be heard, and Linley thought that he could smell hair burning.

“Big brother Kerry! Save us!” The desolate cry of a female magus sounded out, filled with pain, from within the middle of the fire serpent.

Snort. Snort. The eyes of the Vampiric Iron Bull were terrifyingly red, and every single muscle in its body was quivering nonstop. It continuously roared in anger, wanting to charge past through the encircling fire serpents, but unfortunately the restrictive power of each fire serpent was simply too great.

“Louisa!” The red-haired warrior howled angrily, his voice filled with anguish. Very shortly afterwards, both female magi and the Vampiric Iron Bull were reduced to naught but gray ash. As for the red-haired warrior, he no longer had even the opportunity to cry out. He and the other two warriors each had to face an enormous fire serpent of their own as well. In front of the titanic flaming bodies of the serpents, they seemed to be nothing more than children, incapable of the slightest resistance.

They had the power to split stone with a single punch, but so what? While constricted by a huge flaming serpent, what could they do? “Ahhhh!” Surrounded by flaming serpents, the three warriors couldn’t help but let out torturous cries.

As they shouted, their battle-qi vanished, having been demolished. The hissing sound of burning flesh once again could be heard. The muscles on the faces of the three warriors twitched, and their eyes bulged out. All the hair on their bodies was burnt clean in the twinkling of an eye, and following that, their

skin, their flesh, and their bones. Nothing could withstand the terrifyingly high temperature of the fire serpents. In a very short period of time, the three formidable warriors had also been reduced to nothing more than dust.

“Huff... huff...” The female archer’s breath was ragged, but she had finally escaped the boundaries of the Dance of the Fire Serpents. “Luke... Louisa... big brother Kerry... I will definitely avenge you all. Definitely!” the female archer cried bitterly, and as she did she directed her griffin to fly still higher.”

ZZZZT! An enormously thick bolt of lightning struck down from the clear, cloudless skies, smiting down directly upon the totally unprepared archer. Her entire body was turned directly to dust from that strike, while her griffin was scorched black as well. The two of them fell down from the sky, heavily crashing into the stone ground of the town after they smashed through a wooden roof and into the base of a dwelling.

“Want to run? Hmph.” The mysterious magus let out a deep snort.

Over a hundred meters away, Hillman swallowed hard, his own heart filled with a thread of inescapable fear. “Not only is he a magus of the eighth rank... he is a dual element magus!”



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“That spell was called Dance of the Fire Serpents?” Linley was still standing there, totally awestruck. The sight of those enormous fire serpents and the inferno they had cast had totally shocked Linley, like he had never been shocked before. Each of the fire serpents was as terrifying as the Velocidragon. Seven of them together? They represented an utter apocalypse. Even the stone houses were disintegrated by their flames.

In the blink of an eye, those four mighty warriors, those two magi, and that archer, as well as their two magical beast companions were utterly destroyed, with the possible exception of that griffin.

The seven fire serpents had disappeared by now, but Linley could still feel the terrifying, seismic presence and power emanating from the area. The entire

battlefield had been annihilated, leaving nothing left but the finest of debris. The debris all radiated tremendous heat, as though testifying to the power of the battle they had just endured.

“Ama... amazing.” Linley’s breathing slowly began to stabilize. Swimming in his mind were images of those seven fire serpents, and how they had descended on the battlefield like a catastrophe of power. Compared to that vision, even the Velocidragon was not as impressive as before.

Linley’s gaze suddenly turned towards the mysterious magus on the back of the Velocidragon. By appearances, the magus was much smaller and much weaker. “Just then... just then, was he the one who cast the ‘Dance of the Fire Serpents’?” Linley really found it a little hard to believe. A person who seemed a full size smaller than Uncle Hillman was actually able to cast such an apocalyptic spell.

Linley’s heart was suddenly filled with dread, as he stared at that far-off, distant figure. “This... this is what a magus is?” For the first time, the concept of a magus clearly imprinted itself in Linley’s mind. At the same time... Linley suddenly had a powerful urge to become a powerful magus as well.

“If one day, I too was capable of such a powerful attack...” Fantasizing about it, Linley felt the blood in his veins boil to the limit. He was in a state of tremendous excitement. Right at that very moment, Linley knew the path that he would take in the future. He was going to pursue the peak, the pinnacle of power.

“Father!” Linley suddenly saw his own father, Hogg. Seeing how the town of Wushan had just suffered an unmitigated catastrophe, as the lord of the town of Wushan, Hogg’s heart was filled with helplessness.

Don’t make a sound. Hogg glanced at Linley, conveying that message with his eyes. Hogg turned towards the magus, his heart filled with ruefulness. *He’s actually a magus of the eighth rank. And a dual-element magus! Perhaps the entire Kingdom of Fenlai has only a handful of people more powerful than him. Someone like him actually came to our little town...* Hogg’s only hope, at this point, was that the mysterious magus would leave as soon as possible and let the town of Wushan return to its normal tranquility.

The mysterious magus suddenly leapt down directly from the back of the Velocidragon. He was at least two stories up, but he descended easily with a single jump. Striding up to the ashes of the red-haired warrior, the mysterious magus waved his hands, and the gray ash parted. A violet, almost translucent-looking diamond suddenly appeared. With a flick of the wrist, the mysterious magus plucked out the d'Bero shadow diamond.

“Haha, the d'Bero shadow diamond. I searched for you for ten years. Who would have thought that just because today, I decided to pass by this town, I would actually manage to find you? Haha... Heymans, now that I have this shadow diamond, once I socket it into my staff, I want to see how you will possibly stand against me next time. Haha...” the mysterious magus began to laugh wildly.

Hogg and the other residents of the town of Wushan simply watched quietly from afar, not daring to make a sound, for fear of angering this powerful, mysterious magus.

“The town of Wushan, eh... who leads the town of Wushan?” The mysterious magus suddenly said.

Father... Linley was shocked.

At this point, Hogg had no choice but to stiffen his spine and step forward. He respectfully said, “Mighty Lord Magus, I am the leader of the town of Wushan.”

“Oh.” The mysterious magus’ face was still covered by his violet robes, preventing anyone from seeing his face. He said casually, “Your town suffered some serious damages today. I annihilated this small adventuring party. On their bodies, there is sure to be a good amount of gold coins. The gold coins, no doubt, have been melted and reforged by my ‘Dance of the Fire Serpents’, but they are still worth some money. Just consider them yours, as my recompense for what the town of Wushan just went through.”

Hearing the words of the mysterious magus, Hogg felt a sense of relief. This mysterious magus probably wouldn’t go crazy and kill them. “I, Hogg, would like to thank you for your kindness on behalf of the entire town of Wushan, Lord Magus.” Hogg respectfully bowed down.

The mysterious magus lightly nodded, then turned and walked towards the

Velocidragon. The Velocidragon immediately knelt down, stretching out its foreleg. The magus stepped onto the Velocidragon's leg, walked two steps, then easily jumped onto the Velocidragon's back.

“Hmph.” The Velocidragon let out a lazy snort, as two plumes of white smoke once more emanated from its nostrils.

And then, the Velocidragon once more began walking, its heavy footsteps shaking the earth. Watching the enormous creature and the mysterious magus on its back walk far away and disappear off into the distance, all the citizens of the town of Wushan finally felt their hearts begin to calm down.

The Will of the Mighty

Only after seeing that magical beast of the seventh rank, the Velocidragon, and its mysterious magus master depart, did Hogg calm down.

“Uncle Hiri.” Hogg immediately turned to look at his housetaker, Hiri. “Immediately order some people to recover all of the melted gold from within those piles of ashes. This adventuring party was quite extraordinary as well. No doubt they had a great deal of wealth on them. I hope they had enough to recompense the losses we have suffered today” Hogg stared in all directions, seeing how so many houses had been reduced to rubble.

“Yes, milord.” Hiri nodded.

“Hillman.” Hogg turned to look at Hillman. Smiling, he said, “What do you think?”

Hillman nodded back. “I was absolutely terrified. When I saw that magical beast of the seventh rank, the Velocidragon and that mysterious magus, I knew that the town of Wushan didn’t have the slightest chance of fighting back in any way. If such an exalted personage as a magus of the eighth rank decided to destroy our town on a whim, I doubt anyone would dare to criticize him, much less sanction or punish him.”

Magi had extremely high social standing. Even an ordinary magus had the same social standing as a noble. A magus of the eighth rank? Even if he was in the presence of a king, he would not need to kneel or show obeisance. He could just chat while staying on his feet. From this, one could tell how exalted a level an eighth-rank magus held.

“Right. So, we should all celebrate the fact that not a single person from the town of Wushan perished today.” Hogg laughed.

“It definitely is worth celebrating,” Hillman nodded and laughed as well.

“Hillman, take some men to assist Uncle Hiri. After finishing up, please address the issue of the commoners who lost their houses,” Hogg instructed.

“Yes, Lord Hogg.” Hillman assented.

Hogg looked behind him carefully, then asked Hillman suspiciously, “Hm? Where did Linley go? He was just here a moment ago.”

“No idea. I didn’t notice.” Hillman shook his head as well.

“My lord, young master Linley has already gone home,” Hiri said from the side. “Although, when he left, he seemed to be in a daze. No clue what he was thinking about.”

Hogg nodded thoughtfully.



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If there was one thing that the Baruch clan manor did not lack, it was rooms. In the days of the Baruch clan’s glory, hundreds of people had lived here. The population now was much lower than before. Even an eight-year-old child like Linley had his own quarters.

Within Linley’s bedroom. Linley was kneeling on the bed, his brow furrowed in thought. Again and again, the terrifying power of the ‘Dance of the Fire Serpents’ swam about in his mind’s eye. Those seven huge fire serpents and the tempest of flame they generated repeated themselves in his mind over and over again, as well as how they instantly turned everything around them to ash, including the powerful warriors and magi of the small adventuring group.

“Magi are so powerful.” Linley felt a thread of desire in his heart. “Although I am a member of the Dragonblood Warriors clan, the density of dragonblood in my veins is too low. The fact that anyone with dragonblood is totally unable to utilize any other battle-qi cultivating methods is something which will hold back my ability to develop my warrior abilities to the maximum. I wonder if it would be possible for me to be a magus, instead.” Linley suddenly had the desire to become a magus.

“That Velocidragon was terrifyingly powerful as well. If I were to have a

Velocidragon, then..." Linley began to think back to the awe-inspiring might of the Velocidragon. Its lightning-fast, whip-like tail had so easily shattered the stone projectiles aimed at it, and had demolished any houses it touched. Its enormous body resembled the huge siege weapons which armies might field in a war. Once it charged forward at a fast pace, considering how tough its scales were, the Velocidragon really would be a terrifying opponent. "Magical beasts... I wonder how someone acquires a magical beast." Linley desired to have a magical beast of his own as well.

For whatever reason, as he lay on the bed, Linley simply couldn't fall asleep. He tossed and turned, his mind filled with images of the Velocidragon and the 'Dance of the Fire Serpents' which the magus had displayed.

"Linley, what's wrong?" A familiar voice said. Linley hurriedly scrambled to his feet. Raising his head, he saw that it was his father, Hogg. At the moment, a smiling, praising look was on Hogg's face as he watched Linley.

"Father." Linley said respectfully. Suddenly, Linley felt confused. *Why is Father smiling at me? And with this sort of expression?* Hogg was extremely strict with Linley and rarely smiled at him in such an intimate manner. His current expression made Linley feel all the more astonished.

"Not bad, not bad," Hogg said proudly as he looked at Linley. "You really are a scion of our Dragonblood Warrior clan. You have our superior qualities. If a descendant of the Dragonblood Warriors were to be terrified of death, terrified of blood, of slaughter, then it would be an absolute joke."

Upon hearing these words, Linley immediately understood. His father was happy at how he had not been terrified by the sight of the Velocidragon eating Luke alive. Linley said, surprised, "Father, you saw everything?"

"That Velocidragon caused such a stir. How could I not? As soon as the Velocidragon arrived at the town of Wushan, I came out as well, but I was off to a different side. I could clearly see the expression on your face, and on Hillman's," Hogg nodded.

Linley grinned. Back then, aside from the initial bit of panic, he later only felt his blood boil and surge, filling him with a thirst for bloodletting. Linley himself had also wondered at the time if it was because of the dragonblood in his veins.

Hogg laughed. “Linley, did the events of today astonish you so much that you even forgot about dinner?”

“Dinner?” Linley was startled.

“Rumble.” Linley’s belly sounded in agreement at this time. Only now did Linley realize that the evening training hadn’t even begun before the Velocidragon and the mysterious magus had arrived.

By all rights, it was now time for dinner.

But Linley’s mind was still preoccupied thinking about the ‘Dance of the Fire Serpents’ and the Velocidragon.

“Father, I’d like to ask, is it possible for a member of the Dragonblood Warrior clan to become a magus?” Linley’s hands unconsciously balled up, clenching his bedsheets. He stared hard at his father.

Hogg was startled, but in the next moment he immediately understood. It looked like his child now wanted to become a magus.

“It is possible.” Hogg nodded.

Linley couldn’t prevent a look of joy from appearing on his face.

Hogg waved his hand, motioning for Linley to calm down, before saying, “Linley, there have been magi in the lineage of our Dragonblood Warrior clan. However, there have only been two in total. Linley, you should know that the most important thing for a magus is ‘natural talent’. Normally, only one person in ten thousand has the talent to become a magus. One in ten thousand! The chance really is very low. So, you’d best not have too much hope.”

Linley shook his head.

“Father, so long as there is any hope, I will persevere.” A solemn look was on Linley’s face.

Hogg looked at the serious expression on his eight-year-old boy’s face. By all rights, a young child being so serious should be an amusing thing. But Hogg did not laugh.

Hogg considered the matter for a while, then said, “Linley, every year, when the army recruitment drive begins in deep autumn, in the royal capital of Fenlai

City, there is a magus student recruitment testing drive. If you really wish to go, when autumn comes around, you can go take the test.”

“Late autumn? Isn’t that just half a year away?” Linley’s eyes were filled with excitement.

At dinnertime, the three members of the Baruch clan and their housekeeper, Hiri, all shared dinner together. Little Wharton raised a cute ruckus at the dinner table, filling it with laughter. By the time dinner came to an end, the old housekeeper carried Wharton back to his room, while Linley and his father, Hogg, began to chat.

“Right. Father, which one is stronger? A magus, or a warrior?” Linley was curious.

Hogg glanced at Linley. Chuckling, he shook his head and said, “Linley, magi and warriors each have their own strengths. At the same rank, a magus is perhaps slightly stronger than a warrior. But the most important thing is that the status of a magus is a full rank higher than that of an equivalent warrior. For example, that dual-element magus of the eighth rank, in terms of social standing, is perhaps slightly superior to even a warrior of the ninth rank.”

“If they are only slightly more powerful, why is there such a big discrepancy in status?” Linley was curious.

Hogg laughed. “Before discussing this, first you should understand the ranking system of the magi. There are nine ranks. First rank and second rank magi are considered junior magi. Third and fourth rank magi are considered mid-level magi. Fifth and sixth rank magi are considered senior magi. The three ranks above that; seventh, eighth and ninth? These are all terrifyingly powerful people. And of course, above the magi of the ninth rank are the Saint-level magi!”

“The reason why magi have such social standings is because the destructive potential their spells have is enormous.” Hogg picked up a glass of juice and continued talking while sipping at it.

“Destructive potential?” Linley looked at his father.

Putting down the glass of juice, Hogg nodded. “A single warrior, even a

Dragonblood Warrior, can at most kill a hundred people with the swipe of a sword. When faced with a million-man army, at best he could kill their leader, but when a leader dies, he can simply be replaced. But a Saint-level magus? If he chooses to utilize one of those powerful forbidden spells, he can annihilate an entire town or wipe out an army of hundreds of thousands. With an entire army destroyed, even if its leader survived, what's the use? Thus, to a kingdom, a Saint-level magus is more terrifying than an entire enemy army."

Linley immediately understood.

"Let's not discuss Saint-level magi for now. Even a magus of the eighth or ninth rank would be capable of using spells that contain shocking power and that are capable of single-handedly changing the course of a battle. This is why magi have such high social standing." Hogg said with a light chuckle.

Linley quietly nodded.

In the war-torn land of the Yulan continent, one could imagine how important the magi were to a kingdom.

"Oh, right. Father, I read in one of the books that compared to a warrior, a magi's physical strength is much weaker. But just then, I watched that magus jump down from the back of the Velocidragon with ease. How could his body be physically weak?" Linley pursued.

Hogg replied, "Let's discuss this question later. Linley, you should know that in the Yulan continent, an average person's lifespan is around 120-130 years. Powerful magi and warriors can live for longer, usually up to two or three hundred years, or sometimes even four hundred years. The absolute limit to a person's lifespan is five hundred years. Only those who have attained the legendary power of Saint-level combatants can live eternally, unbound by the dictates of time."

Linley nodded.

He had read of this in his books as well.

"But Linley, do you know the reason why powerful warriors and magi enjoy such a long lifespan?" Hogg followed his statement with a question.

Linley was startled.

Linley had always considered it to be a fact of life that powerful warriors and magi could live for three or four hundred years. He had never considered the reason.

Looking at the expression on Linley's face, Hogg couldn't help but laugh. "Linley, first of all, I must tell you that in this world, there are elemental powers. Fire-type element, water-type element, wind-type element, earth-type element, lightning-type element, light-type element, and darkness-type element. Warriors and magi both rely on absorbing these elements from nature as a part of their training. Both magic spells and battle-qi are fueled by and determined by a specific elemental type. If you had carefully observed, you would have been able to notice that in the adventuring party you saw earlier today, of the four warriors, the red-headed leader had fire-type battle-qi. The other three had either wind-type battle-qi or water-type battle-qi. And just like battle-qi, the spells that magi use also have elemental types!"

This was the first time that Linley had ever heard about this. Only now did he learn that both magi and warriors relied on absorbing natural energy from the elements.

"The reason why powerful magi can live so long is because when magi absorb natural elemental energy into their body to generate pure mageforce, when the elemental energy flows through their body, it will naturally refine their apertures, their joints, and their flesh, making their bodies stronger and stronger. With a stronger body, they will naturally live longer. By the same logic, when warriors cultivate their battle-qi, they also absorb natural energy, which flows through their body and strengthens it. The more powerful a warrior is, the stronger his body will be. Naturally, he will live a long life." Hogg explained everything in detail.

Linley felt as though only now did everything become crystal clear.

Based on his father's words, the bodies of magi had also been strengthened by elemental power and would therefore naturally be very strong.

"But father, why is it that people say that magi have weak bodies?" Linley was confused.

Hogg shook his head. "Can't you think this through yourself? Magi only have

weak bodies in comparison to warriors of the same rank, and not in absolute terms. For example, a magus of the eighth rank might have the same physical strength of a warrior of the second or third rank, even if he never engaged in any physical training. But of course, compared to a warrior of the eighth rank, his body would be very weak indeed!”

Linley slapped himself on the head, then laughed, somewhat embarrassed.

How could he not have realized this simple logic? His thoughts really had been too rigid.

“Although, despite the fact that magi are vulnerable in melee combat, they do have their own ways to address this deficiency. One method is utilizing magical protective spells, such as the ‘shield of earth’, ‘shield of ice’, ‘shield of wind’, or ‘shield of light’ spells. First, they would use their magic to defend; then, they would use their magic to strike back!”

“And truly powerful magi have another method. Using ‘magical beasts’!”

Hearing these words, Linley’s eyes shone.

Linley wanted a magical beast of his own as well, such as a powerful Velocidragon.

“A powerful magical beast can protect the body of his magus, preventing enemies from getting close. This way, the magus can immediately cast his attacking spells to kill his opponents.” Hogg smiled as he spoke.

Linley immediately asked, “Father, how can a person acquire a magical beast companion?”

Seeing the expression on Linley’s face, Hogg couldn’t help but laugh. “There are only two ways to acquire a magical beast companion. The first is to make the magical beast willingly subordinate himself to you and serve you. The second way is to use a soul-binding magical array to enslave the magical beast.”

“The requirements for the former are very difficult. For a magical beast to willingly subordinate himself to you, perhaps the only way would be to defeat the magical beast in direct combat. Only then would he willingly follow you. For example, if you wanted to subdue a Velocidragon, you would first have to be able to defeat that Velocidragon in battle.” His father’s words rendered Linley

speechless.

He wanted a Velocidragon of his own, but how could he possibly have the power to defeat one?

“As for the second method, it is an extremely complicated matter to set up a soul-binding magical array. Only a magus of the seventh rank, at the very least, could set up such an array.” Hogg said in a composed voice.

Linley was stunned. “Father, by what you say... only a magus of the seventh rank or higher could enslave a magical beast?”

“No, not necessarily. If you have enough money, you can purchase a soul-binding scroll. When the time comes, all you have to do is to tear it apart, and it will automatically generate a soul-binding magical array. However, a soul-binding scroll is amazingly expensive,” Hogg said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“How expensive is it?” Linley pursued the topic.

“Last I heard, the going price was around ten thousand gold coins. And what’s more, even if you had the money, there’s almost no market for it due to its rarity.” Hogg’s words forced Linley to laugh bitterly at himself.

The hardest part of acquiring a magical beast companion was defeating it.

Of course, you could always acquire a weak magical beast as a companion, but what would be the point? But for a powerful magical beast, did you have enough power on your own to subdue it? If you were to defeat it using traps and trickery, how could the magical beast possibly be willing to serve?

It isn’t an easy thing to convince someone to whole-heartedly submit to you.

As for the second method of using a soul-binding array, it was clear that this option was only available to powerful magi or to wealthy people. Not even many noble clans would be willing to part with the extravagant sum of ten thousand coins for a single soul-binding scroll.

Chewing on his lips, Linley furrowed his brows in thought.

“If I really want to acquire a magical beast companion, based on my family’s economic situation, I would have to become a magus of the seventh rank first. That’s the only way.” Linley secretly pondered all the possibilities, but he knew

very well how difficult this would be.

And the first barrier to this plan? The question of whether or not he even had the natural talent to use magic!

After all, he only had a one-in-ten-thousand chance. If he didn't have the natural talent for it, then there was no way he could become a magus.

The Battle in the Sky

Dawn the next day.

Just like every other day, the empty ground east of the town of Wushan was filled with youths. Hillman and the other two teachers had not yet arrived, and so all the children were noisily and energetically chatting together. Naturally, the topic of their conversation was yesterday's shocking battle.

"That magical beast yesterday was so powerful. When Uncle Hillman and the others were standing up in front, I was behind them, sneaking peeks from afar. You guys have no idea. When that huge magical beast simply scraped its claws against the ground, the stone road was shattered into countless pieces. And those houses collapsed like they were made of mud." In the midst of all the children, Hadley, ever the most talkative of them, was narrating glibly and wildly, waving and gesticulating as though he had seen everything with his own eyes.

All the children were staring at Hadley with wide eyes.

"Hadley, yesterday you were with us on the east side as well. You didn't dare go over. How could you see all this?" A thirteen-year-old brown-haired child snorted.

These slightly older children weren't as easy to deceive as those seven-and-eight-year-old kids.

Hadley turned to stare at the thirteen-year-old youth. His eyes widening, he said, "Faura, you don't believe me? When have I, Hadley, ever tricked anyone?"

The brown-haired child named Faura spoke with a sneer, "Everyone knows what a big talker you are. When do you ever speak the truth? Hey everyone, why don't you guys speak for yourselves; has Hadley ever told the truth?" Faura said to the children next to him.

Those twelve-to fifteen-year-old children all began to laugh. “Right on. This little scamp Hadley is always filled with nonsense.”

A number of slightly older children stood on Faura’s side.

Hadley immediately said urgently, “You guys don’t believe me? Fine, don’t believe me!” Furious, Hadley turned around, searching everywhere until he found Linley. His eyes brightening, he immediately said, “But everyone here knows that aside from Uncle Hillman and the other two, Linley also went. Linley saw everything with his own eyes. Linley’s words should be true, right? Let Linley tell you if I spoke the truth or not.”

“Young master Linley?” The youths turned to look at Linley.

In the eyes of the children of the town of Wushan, Linley had some stature amongst them. First of all, he was the heir to the Baruch clan, and secondly, as an eight-year-old child, Linley could match the thirteen-and fourteen-year-olds in training. In the war-torn land of the Yulan continent, Linley’s prowess caused all of the children of the town of Wushan to admire him.

“Young master Linley saw everything with his own eyes. Naturally, we would believe whatever young master Linley says.” Those youths nodded.

Those thirteen-and fourteen-year-olds were more mature as well. They knew that Linley was a noble and not like them. Almost all of them addressed him as ‘young master Linley’. Only Hadley and the rest of the rascally seven-and eight-year-olds still continued to directly address him as ‘Linley’ without regard for propriety.

“Tell’m, Linley! Was I lying? Tell’m what happened!” Hadley rushed towards Linley, tugging Linley’s hand and secretly winking at him.

Linley couldn’t help but feel helpless. How was it that Hadley’s nonsense roped him into this conversation as well?

“That magical beast is known as a ‘Velocidragon’, and is a magical beast of the seventh rank. It is incredibly powerful. Its entire body is covered in extremely hard scales, impenetrable to normal weapons. It is also armed with a sturdy, whip-like tail and with sharp claws. Those tough road stones and floor foundation stones were ripped apart like paper by its tail and claws. It was even

able to breathe fire from its mouth, fire so hot that even the stones cracked apart,” Linley said truthfully.

All of the children listened quietly to Linley.

“Actually, all of you knew how powerful the Velocidragon was from the moment you saw it. No need for me to elaborate,” Linley said with a smile.

All of the older children nodded.

As soon as they had seen the Velocidragon the previous day, they had been scared stiff. Its huge body had seemed as massive as a mountain cliff, and those huge red scales on its body left nothing to the imagination with regards to how tough they must be.

“You hear that? I told you, that Velocidragon creature is really powerful!” Hadley began shouting loudly.

That youth named Faura glanced at him, and was about to say something.

“Uncle Hillman is coming.” Linley saw Hillman, Lorry, and Roger walking towards them from afar, and immediately spoke up. Immediately, all of the children calmed down and lined up in three groups in a very orderly fashion.

The empty training field immediately settled down. Only the footsteps of Hillman and the other two could be heard.

Hillman and the other two walked to the front of the three groups, facing the children. Hillman smiled and directly addressed what was on everyone’s mind. “Everyone should know about what happened yesterday, right?”

“We do.” Hearing Hillman’s words and seeing how relaxed Hillman was, all of the children immediately replied vigorously.

“Great.” Hillman’s facial expression suddenly turned serious. “That huge creature is known as a Velocidragon. The magus on top of the Velocidragon is incredibly powerful. But everyone should know one thing!”

Hillman’s gaze immediately sharpened as it swept across the face of each child. “Even that mysterious magus gained his power one step at a time, starting from the bottom ranks. In order to subdue that powerful Velocidragon, he had to spend many years of toil and hard work! If you guys want to subdue a

Velocidragon of your own, to be as powerful as that mysterious magus, then all of you have to work hard without fail!”

“Every single person has the potential to become mighty. The only question is, are you willing to work hard enough at it?”

Uncle Hillman’s words were as clear and as hard as nails. His gaze was fierce and cold.

Immediately, all the children quieted down, but all of them still had their own imaginations running wild, and their gazes shone with their different thoughts.

“Now, time to do our morning exercises. Same as always – face the sun, and begin the ‘qi-absorbing exercise’.” Hillman crisply began the day’s program, and immediately the three groups of children began to practice the ‘qi-absorbing stance’.



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Based on each squad’s ability, Hillman assigned them different exercises. Under the guidance of the three adults, each child studiously completed each exercise. Today, the training atmosphere was totally different. Almost none of the children complained of being tired.

Every single one of them had some fire in their bellies today, and they trained hard!

“...fifty...fifty-one...” Linley counted mentally as he laid horizontally on the ground, supporting himself with just the fingertips of one hand and the tips of his toes. His entire body was tense. He was in the middle of training through five-finger pushups.

This exercise could not only train his palm strength, it could also improve his finger strength and his elbow strength. This method was simple and effective.

If someone wanted to be a mighty warrior, normally they would have to practice cultivating battle-qi. The ability to cultivate battle-qi, in turn, was determined by how strong and sturdy one’s body was, as a stronger body would be able to enjoy a more powerful battle-qi.

“Since my body has dragonblood in its veins and is unable to practice battle-qi, my only option is to far outstrip everyone else in bodily strength.” Linley’s eyes were firm, and his fingers jutted into the ground, as tough and unyielding as old roots. He did one pushup after another, amazing many of the already-exhausted youths around him.

“98, 99...”

Linley continued to persevere.



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“Morning exercises are over,” Hillman said in a loud voice, facing the children.

After saying these words, Hillman took a deep breath as he thought to himself, “What story should I tell them today?” Every day, when morning exercises were completed, Hillman would tell the children stories. This had turned into a routine.

“Uncle Hillman, we—”

A child’s voice rang out.

But just at that moment, halfway through the child’s words, Hillman, who had been looking slightly downwards as he collected his thoughts, suddenly felt a strange feeling. He lifted his head up. Right now, all three groups of children were all staring east, eyes wide and jaws dropped. Roger and Lorry had also turned to stare east, and their gazes were also filled with awe.

“Eh?” Surprised, Hillman couldn’t help but turn around and stare to the east as well.

In the east, not too far away, perhaps two or three hundred meters in the air, an enormous, ebony-colored dragon lay coiled in the sky, its body at least a hundred meters long. The enormous black dragon’s giant eyes were the size of cartwheels. Its sparkling black scales were huge enough to fill any man’s heart with dread. Its hundred-meter long wings were gently flapping, but each movement contained incredible power.

Magical beast – Black Dragon!

Black Dragons were ranked amongst the most powerful magical beasts in the world. The Black Dragon race were generally at least magical beasts of the ninth rank. Powerful members of this race could even reach the stage of being Saint-level combatants. But regardless of whether a Black Dragon was of the ninth rank or Saint level, it would indubitably be incomparably more powerful than the Velocidragon.

At present, the group of children and the three instructors were about several hundred meters away from the Black Dragon. To see a hundred-meter long Black Dragon from such a close distance is an awe-inspiring experience which simply can't be explained with words.

The most terrifying thing of all?

On top of the head of the Black Dragon, a gray-robed man stood, arrogant in demeanor. The wind howled about him, but although the man's gray robes fluttered a bit, he himself maintained a ramrod straight posture, as though he were a carved sculpture. His gaze was focused on a middle-aged, green-robed man who hovered in the middle of the air in front of him. The green-robed man wore a sword behind his back.

The gray-robed man mounted on the Black Dragon and the sword-bearing green-robed man were staring at each other.

Hovering in the sky!

Aside from wind-type magi who were able to use the seventh-ranked spell, 'Soaring Technique', only Saint-level combatants were able to stand and hover in the sky. The sword this green-robed middle-aged man bore on his back gave testament to his true status.

Warrior. A Saint-level warrior.

"A man in gray who was able to subdue a Black Dragon? And a Saint-level combatant who can fly?" The eight-year-old Linley was totally stunned, even after having witnessed the previous day's amazing battle. Not only him; even Hillman, a warrior of the sixth rank, was totally flabbergasted.

"Saint-level combatants. Actual Saint-level combatants." Hillman was

mumbling, his entire body trembling.

Hillman, being a man who had been tested in trials of blood and death, was the first to recover and clear his mind. But even after recovering, Hillman still felt as though he were in a dream. “Yesterday, a dual-element magus of the eighth rank came. Today, something even more amazing; two Saint-level combatants, and a Black Dragon! In my entire life, I’ve never seen anything so amazing.”

Hillman felt slightly dizzy.

Black Dragons were amongst the most powerful of magical beasts, at least ninth-rank in power. Someone who was able to subdue one was almost certainly a Saint-level combatant. And from the looks of it, the person facing off against him was also a Saint-level combatant.

This was ample proof that the gray-robed man was a Saint-level combatant as well.

Hillman and the others were hundreds of meters away from the Black Dragon. No matter how sharp their ears were, there was no way for them to hear the words being exchanged by the two parties.

Not knowing what was being said, they just watched, until suddenly...

“Roaaaaaaaaaaaar.”

Suddenly, the enormous Black Dragon let out a furious roar as its two huge wings began to flap vigorously. It emanated a terrifying pressure, causing everyone, Hillman included, to feel their legs grow soft and to feel as though they couldn’t breathe.

“Is this dragonsfear?” Linley also felt as though his heart was being squeezed by a huge stone, making it impossible for him to breathe. Nonetheless, Linley felt extremely excited, and his blood was beginning to boil.

The Black Dragon was simply too powerful.

“Rudi! Don’t go overboard!” That green-robed man suddenly let out a powerful shout. The explosive sound of his words reverberated in the air as though it was thunder. Not only did Hillman hear these words clearly; every

single person in the town of Wushan heard the words clearly.

Hillman paused. He mumbled the words, “Rudi? Rudi?”

But Hillman quickly realized what was going on. Rapidly turning around, he shouted fiercely at all the children, “Everyone, go home right now! Go home and hide! NOW!” Hillman’s loud roar and his urgent expression stunned every child present.

Hillman’s thought processes were very clear.

These two Saint-level combatants were obviously engaged in some sort of dispute. Apparently, they were about to come to blows.

When Saint-level combatants were about to engage in a fight, the children standing there watching the fight would not be able to protect themselves at all. The slightest side reverberations could kill all the children present. Saint-level combatants were reputed to have the power to shatter the heavens and obliterate the earth.

Even if that reputation was slightly exaggerated, they definitely did have the power to obliterate a city or a tall mountain.

“Quick, let’s move. Don’t stand there in a daze, move!” Hillman shouted loudly while shoving some children away.

Only now did the rest of the children awaken from their stupor. Although they didn’t understand why Hillman was pushing them to go back to their homes and wanted to continue watching the Saint-level combatants, Hillman’s awe-inspiring presence was still enough to send all of the children running speedily for their homes.

“Lorry, Roger, quick, take the six-and seven-year-olds back home. Quickly! If Saint-level combatants clash, when the side-effects of their struggle reach us, the aftermath will be...”

Hillman’s face was filled with urgency.

“Understood, Captain!” Lorry and Roger totally understood what their captain was thinking.

Lorry and Roger immediately turned around and lifted the children who were

slow runners. They carried two in each arm and two on their backs as well. Hillman joined them as well, quickly beginning to pick up child after child.

“Linley, go home, quick!” Hillman, still carrying several children, shouted towards Linley, who was also running.

“I know, Uncle Hillman!” Linley replied loudly.

Although Linley was only eight years old, his running speed was on par with a fourteen-year-old’s. While running, Linley would often turn back to stare at the sky. That huge coiled Black Dragon and those two Saint-level combatants had fully captured his attention.

Twelve warriors came flying out of the Baruch clan manor. As soon as they saw Hillman, they shouted at him. “Captain, Lord Hogg ordered us to come assist you!”

“Quick, take these children home!” Hillman immediately ordered.

“Yes, Captain!” The warriors hastily replied, and quickly began sending the six- and seven-year-olds to their homes.

“All of you, go home! Go home and hide! Protect yourselves!” Hillman shouted again in a loud voice.

Hillman possessed a great deal of authority in the town of Wushan. Upon hearing his words, many of the villagers who had been terrified at the sight of a Black Dragon knew immediately what to do. Right now, the entire town of Wushan had turned into a frenzy of activity. All of the children and all of the workers fled to their homes. At this point in time, the only thing which could protect them was the sturdy stone of their houses.

Linley directly charged into his own residence.

“Quick, hide in the cellar beneath the storage room.” Hogg was standing in the middle of the courtyard. Upon seeing Linley, he immediately ordered him in. The cellar beneath the storage room was the largest, sturdiest cellar within the Baruch clan manor. Anyone hiding there definitely would be able to survive.

“Yes, father!” Linley nodded repeatedly, and immediately ran in the direction of the storage room.

While running as fast as he could, Linley's mind returned to the Black Dragon, its gray-robed rider, and the green-robed man. He couldn't help but turn once again and look back at the eastern sky. Since all the buildings in the small town were fairly low in height, he could see clearly for hundreds of meters.

Right now, the Black Dragon was growling nonstop in a low voice.

"Dillon, if you are going to be so stubborn about this, then don't blame me for my actions." A cold voice emanated from the sky. Immediately afterwards, the Black Dragon began to let out a series of angry roars and belched smoky black fire from its mouth.

"Rudi, today I'm going to see exactly how powerful of a Saint-level magus you are!" the green-robed man shouted angrily.

Catastrophe

Clearly, the swordsman wearing green was named Dillon, while the gray-robed man was named Rudi.

The Black Dragon beneath the gray-robed man breathed out a huge plume of black flame, surrounding the green-robed man and swirling like smoke. Suddenly, the green-robed swordsman's eyes shone with a fierce green light, and then his entire body was surrounded by a protective green aura, preventing the flames from injuring him in the slightest. At the same time, the ringing sound of a sword could be heard.

That ringing sound was even louder and more pure than the dragon's roar, encompassing the heavens and the earth.

The green-robed man struck out with his longsword, and suddenly, a huge, indistinct sword tip spanning tens of meters in length appeared and slashed outwards into the air, fiercely attacking the gray-robed man. The gray-robed man stared coldly at that sword of light. Not moving in the slightest, he just constantly mumbled magical incantations.

"Is this the tip of a sword? The tip of an enormous sword?" While running to the warehouse, Linley was still watching with his head turned. "How is that gray-robed man going to block? Using the Black Dragon?"

"Crash!"

The Black Dragon didn't block at all, and allowed the enormous sword-tip to come crashing down directly on the body of the gray-robed man. The man's gray robes immediately exploded in all directions, but after having done so, a suit of shining protective battle armor was revealed underneath it. The battle armor was so shiny it was piercing to the eye, as though it were made of diamonds.

The sword-tip's collision with the battle-armor had actually done no harm at

all to the gray-robed man.

“How is that possible?!” Linley was truly scared silly.

Since he wasn't watching where he was running, Linley suddenly stumbled on a stone and went crashing to the floor. But even on the floor, Linley was still continuing to watch that battle in the eastern sky. “What sort of armor is that? How could its defensive abilities be so strong?”

“Linley, hurry! Stop daydreaming!” Seeing Linley, Hogg couldn't help but let out a furious roar.

“Yes, father!” Linley was startled awake. He immediately clambered to his feet and began running in the direction of the warehouse again.

“Rumble, rumble...” Suddenly, a terrifying sound could be heard from the heavens, followed by a terrifying screech which shook the entire town of Wushan. Linley couldn't help but once again turn his head towards the eastern sky to take a look. That single glance stunned him once again.

The eastern sky had suddenly become densely filled with giant flying boulders, every single one of them the size of a house.

“Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh!”

All of those house-sized boulders were covered with flashing light the color of yellow dirt. They flew through the air at astonishing speeds as they struck like meteors towards the green-robed man. Every single stone had to be tens of millions of pounds in weight. Each one of the boulders was many times heavier and larger than the stones used by catapults in times of war.

Even the walls of a city would not be able to resist such a powerful boulder.

A single giant boulder carried such powerful force, but now, the entire sky was filled with them, as countless boulders were arcing towards the green-robed man. Every single person in the town of Wushan was stunned by the sight.

“Crash!”

As the first boulder struck the green-robed man, the amount of green light covering his body suddenly increased dramatically, transforming him into a

green sun, emanating piercing rays of green light in all directions.

Countless boulders converged on the green-robed man, like drops of water in a rainstorm.

In the blink of an eye, it seemed as though he had become completely surrounded by boulders. The green light could now only be seen through tiny 'cracks' in that wall of boulders.

"Shatter!"

With a thunderous cracking sound, one boulder after another began to explode, as the boulders began to be shattered into tiny pieces by that terrifyingly powerful battle-qi. Each and every boulder, originally the size of a house, was shattered into much smaller pieces that shot outwards in every direction.

They were hundreds of meters in the air to begin with. When shot out with the force of that battle-qi, the rubble shot out with tremendous power to an extremely far distance.

"Oh no." Hogg's face had turned white. Hillman, who was still on the streets of the town of Wushan, saw this, and his face turned white as well. They all understood...

A catastrophe was descending upon the town of Wushan!

Countless rocks, ranging in size from two meters in diameter to man-sized, fell down in all directions, with no rhythm or pattern. Each boulder had produced tens, if not hundreds, of pieces, and perhaps 20% of them were shooting in the direction of the town of Wushan.

"Quick, go inside, quick!" Hogg was so agitated, he roared with fury.

At this moment, Linley was still tens of meters away from the warehouse. Hearing his father's angry roar, Linley paid attention to nothing else and ran towards the warehouse at top speed. As he did, he could hear one 'crash', 'crash', 'crash' after another. The sound of countless stones raining down on the town of Wushan had begun.

It was like an earthquake was occurring. A picture of absolute disaster.

“Whoosh!” A boulder that must’ve weighed hundreds of pounds shot right past Linley, coming to a crashing rest not too far away from his feet, creating a huge crater. Linley felt cold sweat pour down his back. Just a tiny bit of a difference in trajectory, and his little life would’ve been over.

“Crash!” “Crash!” “Crash!” “Crash!”

The sound of stones smashing houses apart could be heard. The sound of stones colliding with the ground, the sounds of stones shattering wood, the sounds of people howling in pain... all sorts of sounds mixed together unceasingly, forming a symphony of disaster.

“Swoosh!” Another huge rock slammed into the ground in front of Linley, forcing him to rapidly jump backwards.

But if he kept on having to dodge like this, how would he manage to hide within the warehouse?

“Young master Linley, hurry!” A man came charging out from within the warehouse. It was Uncle Hiri, the housekeeper. His body was currently covered with red battle-qi, and he ran directly towards Linley.

“Big brother, hurry!”

At the door to the warehouse, four-year-old Wharton stood crying as he yelled towards Linley.

“Wharton, go inside now!” Linley roared back angrily.

“WHOOSH!” A huge rock nearly two meters in diameter came flying in their direction from far away, headed directly towards the warehouse. Linley immediately realized that when this giant boulder smashed into the warehouse, Wharton would either suffer serious injury, or even die!

“Quick, Wharton, inside!” Linley’s eyes were opened so wide as to appear bloodshot, and he howled angrily as he ran towards the warehouse at top speed.

He no longer paid any attention to the raining stones, nor did he try to avoid them. He ran directly towards the warehouse in a straight line.

Hiri was facing Linley, and simply couldn’t see the giant boulder headed

towards the warehouse. But Linley saw everything clearly. When the boulder descended and shattered the room, how could little Wharton survive?

“Young master Linley?” Seeing how Linley was acting, Hiri couldn’t help but feel shocked.

Three more boulders came crashing down near Linley, but moving like a panther, Linley continued to charge forwards, his gaze fixed on little Wharton as he finally entered the warehouse. Hiri, turning around, only now became aware of that two-meter long boulder descending towards the warehouse. His face immediately turned white.

“Lie down!” Linley roared angrily, his face fierce.

Wharton had never seen his big brother look so angry before, and was so terrified that he immediately lay down. His eyes filled with tears, he looked at Linley and mumbled, “Big brother...” But with a flying hug, Linley tackled Wharton and covered him with his own body.

At that instant...

“CRASH!”

The sound of the boulder crashing into the warehouse. That enormous boulder had smashed into the warehouse roof with terrifying power. Although the stone roof of the warehouse was sturdy, when slammed into by such a huge boulder, it still broke apart. Even the floor of the warehouse was shattered apart by the vibrations from that collision.

“Young master—“ Housekeeper Hiri’s eyes immediately turned red. The battle-qi in his body exploded, and like a bolt of red lightning, he flew towards them. Using his own body as a protective barrier, he also used his two hands to push at a huge piece of the falling roof which was going to fall on Linley’s body. Hiri and that collapsing ceiling arrived next to Linley at almost the same time.

“Rumble, rumble...”

In the blink of an eye, Wharton, Linley, and Hiri were totally trapped and pressed down under the falling rubble.

Hogg was in the courtyard, wielding an enormous sword, deflecting one

boulder after another. But when he turned his head towards Linley, he saw Linley risk everything to protect Wharton, and then Housekeeper Hiri fly towards them to protect them both. His mind immediately went blank.

The warehouse collapsed, and rubble poured down onto it.

“Linley!” Hogg’s eyes turned red.

Right now, there was no way for Hogg to tell if Hiri had managed to position himself in front of Linley in time, or if the falling rocks had slammed into Linley first.

“Thud! Thud! Thud!”

A few more crashing sounds continued to sound out from within the town of Wushan, but a short period of time later, no more stones fell from the sky. All of the boulders had been thoroughly demolished by the green-robed swordsman. But by now, no one in the town of Wushan had any spare energy left to pay attention to their battle.

“Lord Hogg, the town of Wushan is in bad shape. Just then—... Lord Hogg? What’s wrong?” Hillman rushed into the manor. Just as he was beginning to report on the town’s situation, he saw that Hogg was standing there in a daze, not making a single sound.

Hogg’s body trembled. Only then did he regain his usual faculties. “Linley.” Hogg charged violently towards the warehouse at an astonishing speed. Seeing this, Hillman guessed what had happened and immediately followed Hogg.

“Smash!” Before Hogg had arrived, the rubble covering Hiri, Linley, and Wharton had been blasted apart.

Housekeeper Hiri stood up from within the rubble.

“Uncle Hiri, what’s the situation?” Hogg’s voice was trembling. At the same time, he stared at the prone bodies. The first thing he saw was Linley, head covered with blood. The sight of the blood was so piercing to the eye that Hogg felt his head grow foggy, and his body swayed, almost falling down.

Up ‘til now, Linley’s body was still elevated from the ground, as he had been using his fists in a push-up position, so as not to crush Wharton.

“Father.” A youthful voice emanated from beneath.

Wharton slowly crawled out from under Linley. His body was small, and he had been fully covered by Linley, so he didn't experience any injuries at all.

“Big brother, big brother, what's wrong?” Wharton tugged at Linley's body.

“Linley. Linley!” Hogg's voice was quavering.

Housekeeper Hiri said from off to the side, “I was still a little too slow. There was one piece of rubble that had struck young master Linley in the head before I managed to block it. Still, I believe that the strike shouldn't have been too heavy.”

“I... I'm fine,” a low, hoarse voice. Linley forced himself to lift his head and stare at Hogg, managing a weak smile.

At this moment, upon seeing Linley's smile, Hogg's tears came spilling out.

Linley straightened his body and sat up. His clothes were covered with blood, as was his face and his hair. When the stone had struck him, it had caused a great deal of blood loss. At the moment, Linley also felt slightly woozy. Still staring at his father, Linley said in a weak, low voice, “Father, you are crying.”

“I, I'm fine.” An excited smile appeared on Hogg's face.

“Wharton? Why were you at the doorway earlier?” Linley rubbed his little brother's head and said in a reproving tone.

Wharton also knew that he had made a mistake. Lowering his head, he said, “Big brother, I'm sorry.”

Housekeeper Hiri, off to the side, said, “This was my fault. This disaster came too suddenly, and as soon as I had taken Wharton into the warehouse, I saw young master Linley in great danger, so I immediately rushed forward to help him. I didn't imagine that in just that instant, a huge boulder would head for the warehouse. This was my fault.”

“RUMBLE!”

Suddenly, a huge tremor shook the earth.

Everyone's facial expressions changed as they stared towards the eastern sky.

A giant had appeared, hovering in the sky, over ten meters tall, muscles bound tightly, with a ruthless expression on its face. Its entire body was the color of yellow earth. At the moment, this earthen giant was engaged in a fierce battle with the green-robed swordsman, and their every exchange of blows created a sound like crashing lightning or roaring thunder.

The sound of the blows alone gave testament to how mighty the earthen giant was. Every single one of its blows was more powerful than the combined force of those countless boulders from earlier.

Linley stared at this battle in awe. "This earthen giant must have been conjured by the magic of the gray-robed magus." Linley could easily come to this conclusion, since the gray-robed magus was a mighty magus, after all.

"Linley, how are you feeling?" Hogg said with concern.

Linley squeezed out a smile. "I'm fine. There's just a cut on my head, is all. I just lost some blood."

"Young master Linley, you actually lost quite a bit of blood. If you lose too much, you could die." Housekeeper Hiri immediately retrieved some white gauze from within the warehouse and wrapped it around the injury on Linley's head.

Hogg took a close look at Linley. "Uncle Hiri, how does his injury look?"

Uncle Hiri smiled at Hogg. "Not bad. Linley is in excellent physical shape, and he hasn't fainted. There shouldn't be too much to worry about. In the coming days, he just needs to eat more meat to replenish his blood, and he'll be fine."

Only now did Hogg secretly release a breath he had been holding.

Just then, when he had seen Linley charge over to protect Wharton, Hogg had truly been scared silly. He had truly been terrified that his sons would've died, just like that.

After taking a deep breath, Hogg looked at Hillman. "Right, Hillman, you were just saying that the town of Wushan was in bad shape. How bad of a shape is it in?"

"I can't say with exact precision as to how bad the condition is," Hillman said,

his face grim, “But from what I could see, some people must have died, and many were injured or even crippled! This catastrophe came simply too quickly. Even though I shouted for everyone to hide, many people didn’t have the chance to barricade themselves in their cellars.”

“It really did come too fast.” Hogg turned his head to stare at the eastern sky.

Saint-level combatants were on a totally different level than the people of the town of Wushan. A Saint-level combatant could wipe out the entire town with the wave of a hand. Earlier, the rain of boulders, and the green-robed man’s destruction of said boulders, was nothing but the opening gambits of these two combatants.

But even the side effects of just those initial, testing blows were enough to cause an utter catastrophe for the town of Wushan.

“The legendary earth-style incantation of the tenth rank, a forbidden spell – the earth element ‘World Protector’. The power of this ‘World Protector’ is extremely terrifying. It’s considered the most powerful offensive spell available to an earth-style magus.” Staring at the earthen giant, Hogg’s face grew cold as he spoke.

Hogg was a member of the Dragonblood Warrior clan. Although the Dragonblood Warrior clan had fallen on hard times, their five thousand years of history meant that within their family archives, there was information about all of the most powerful magical attacks used by the most powerful people in history. Hogg naturally could tell what was going on at a glance.

“An incantation of the tenth rank...” Linley took a deep breath.

Linley badly wanted to one day also ride a Black Dragon and utilize apocalyptic incantations of the tenth rank. His thoughts naturally turned to the magical testing and recruiting event. “The test will only be held in autumn in the capital. There’s still half a year left...”

From the bottom of his heart, Linley was eagerly awaiting the magical ability examination in half a year.

“Hillman, in a little while, accompany me in inspecting the situation of the residents of the town of Wushan,” Hogg said, and then looked at Hiri. “Uncle

Hiri, after these two Saint-level combatants depart, take Linley home to change his clothes and make sure he gets some rest.”

“Yes, lord.” Hiri nodded.

Hogg turned back to look at Linley, who was enraptured watching the exciting battle between two Saint-level combatants. Laughing, he said, “Oh Linley, you little rascal. Even though you are injured, you still want to watch Saint-level combatants fight. Fortunately, given that the Saint-level magus has unleashed the ‘World Protector’, this battle is about to come to a close soon.”

Absorbed in the shocking battle going on off in the distance, Linley didn’t notice at all that around his chest area...

Since his head had been injured, the so-called ‘Coiling Dragon’ ring he wore underneath his clothes had also been stained by blood. But the blood on the Coiling Dragon ring seemed to have disappeared, like water into an endless ocean, as the strange black material slowly absorbed it all.

And then, the Coiling Dragon ring actually began to shine with a faint, dim light.

But since it was being worn underneath his clothes, no one could possibly notice the faint light shining from the surface of the Coiling Dragon ring.

10

The Coiling Dragon Spirit

In the eastern sky, the gray-robed man still stood on the head of the Black Dragon, which lay coiled in the sky. A self-assured smile was on his face, as he watched the green-robed man battle against his earthen giant.

“Sschhhhwiiing!”

A piercing sound split the air as the green-robed man’s sword pierced directly into the earthen giant’s head. “Rumble!” The earthen giant’s head split apart, but the earthen giant didn’t collapse. Its boulder-like fists directly slammed into the green-robed man’s body.

“Ah!” The green-robed man spat out a mouthful of blood, his entire face turning ashen white.

And then, the earthen giant’s shattered head began to reform and regenerate, as though no damage had been done at all!

“Dillon, you’d best just hand it over. The World Protector that I summoned isn’t something that you can overcome,” the gray-robed man riding the Black Dragon said calmly.

The green-robed man stared coldly at the gray-robed man. He suddenly said in a fierce voice, “Rudi, if I can’t have it, then you won’t either!” A bright green light began to shine from within the green-robed man’s hands. Upon seeing this, the gray-robed man, who had previously been standing so calmly on the head of the Black Dragon, immediately grew startled and anxious. “Stop!”

“Splatter!”

The green-robed man’s arms suddenly shone as bright as the sun. An explosive sound could be heard, and then immediately disappeared.

“Dillon, you—!” The gray-robed man pointed angrily at the green-robed man, but couldn’t say anything.

The green-robed man's face was ashen white as he stared at the gray-robed man, whose face had also turned white. "Now, nobody has it. Rudi, I've been injured, but if you want to kill me, that's still going to be quite hard to accomplish!" With a cold laugh, the green-robed man transformed into a beam of green light as he flew off at a fast speed into the northeastern skies.

The gray-robed man watched him fly off. He only frowned, and did not pursue.

The earthen giant by the gray-robed man's side also slowly disappeared.

"The 'Stellar Sword Saint' Dillon? Pity. I can't kill him yet," the gray-robed man said in a low voice. And then the Black Dragon underneath his feet, as though knowing his master's wishes, flapped its enormous wings and went flying off in a southeastern direction.

In the blink of an eye, these two Saint-level combatants had disappeared.

But the town of Wushan was still filled with the sight of utter devastation. Nearly a thousand houses had collapsed, and screams of pain, angry curses, and sorrowful, pain-filled cries filled the air. In a short period of time, the previously peaceful town had turned into a disaster area.



*

Within the Baruch clan manor courtyard, there was only Hogg.

Hogg was seated at a table, his forehead furrowed. As the lord of the town of Wushan, he absolutely had to think carefully about how to take care of his people.

Footsteps. Uncle Hiri emerged from within the living room. "Lord."

"How is Linley?" Hogg immediately turned his head and asked.

Hiri chuckled. "Lord, please be at ease. I've already washed and cleaned young master Linley's wounds, then re-bandaged them. I've made him eat a big meal, and then change his clothes and go to bed. By the time he wakes up, he'll be much better."

Only now did Hogg feel relieved, and he nodded. But his forehead was still furrowed.

“Lord, are you worrying about the people of the town of Wushan?” Hiri asked.

Hogg nodded. Smiling wryly, he said, “Uncle Hiri, most of the people in the town of Wushan aren’t like us. The town of Wushan’s men won’t be too badly off, as most of them are warriors of the first or second rank, but the women aren’t. For so many boulders to come raining from the skies non-stop, it would be hard for them to block any at all!”

Hiri nodded as well.

The number of people in the town of Wushan who were able to utilize battle-qi could be counted on one hand. Just now, thousands of rocks had descended from the heavens. If people hadn’t managed to hide in cellars early on, or use thick shields to block, then as soon as the stones came crashing down...

“There’s nothing we can do now, aside from waiting on Hillman’s report.” Hogg felt extremely restless.

After a long time, urgent, rushed footsteps could be heard entering the manor.

Hogg’s eyes brightened. Turning, he saw Hillman striding quickly into the manor.

“Hillman, what’s the situation in the town of Wushan?” Hogg quickly asked.

Hillman let out a pain-filled sigh. “We just ran some calculations. Over three hundred people died, and a thousand were injured.” The entire town only had a population of five thousand. This meant the casualty rate was about 20%! And this was for those who lived in stone houses. This really was a disaster.

“So many casualties?” Hogg couldn’t help but begin to grow worried.

Food was the lifeblood of any nation, and a small town was the same. For their workforce to suddenly decrease dramatically, but the number of injured and crippled to skyrocket... the town’s economic situation was going to worsen even further.

“Ugh!” Hogg let out a long sigh.

He wanted to lower their taxes, but the town of Wushan's tax rate was already very low. Right now, his own clan's survival had already become a problem. How could he assist the commoners of the town? The situation was different from those other towns, where taxes were so high that many commoners died of exhaustion and misery.

"Lord Hogg, all the commoners in the town of Wushan greatly appreciate your kindness and generosity. Everybody knows how much you have done for us. Please don't be too vexed," Hillman said from the side.

Hillman himself was born in the town of Wushan.

Based on his status as a warrior of the sixth rank, even in the capital, he could be the guard captain of a noble family. But because Hillman felt gratitude towards the Baruch clan due to their kindness and generosity, after Hillman retired from his army career, he directly became the captain of the guard for this decaying old noble Baruch clan.

"Hillman, lead the guard squad to do some more scouting about the town. Uncle Hiri, go and get some rest," Hogg directly instructed.

"Yes, lord," Hillman said.

Housekeeper Hiri also bowed respectfully and departed. After Hillman also left the pavilion, once again, the only person left remaining was Hogg.



*

Within Linley's bedroom.

Due to Linley's head injury, Hiri had instructed everybody not to bother Linley and to let him get some rest. While the town of Wushan was a whirlwind of activity, Linley's bedroom was peaceful and quiet. Linley himself had been drawn deeply into a world of dreams.

"Ding!"

A gentle, chime-like sound could be heard as rays of light began to leak out from Linley's chest area. And then, a cage of light surrounded the pitch-black

Coiling Dragon ring, which slowly flew out from under Linley's pajamas and began to hover roughly ten centimeters away from him.

The ring began trembling more strongly, and the glow from the Coiling Dragon ring began to grow as well.

Fortunately, there was no one in Linley's bedroom right now. Anyone entering the room would have been stunned. Linley, however, was still blissfully asleep, and didn't notice at all that the Coiling Dragon ring was now floating.

"Ting!" The glow surrounding the Coiling Dragon ring suddenly began to contract rapidly, and then a single ray of hazy light flew out from within the ring. Descending next to Linley's bed, it transformed into a person's image.

The image was of an amiable-looking old gentleman with moon-white robes and a long white beard.

At this point in time, the Coiling Dragon ring directly fell back onto Linley's chest, powerless. Linley's eyelids flickered, and then slowly opened. Upon seeing an old man whom he had never met before at the head of his bed, he couldn't help but feel shocked. "You... who are you?!"

"Hello, kiddo. My name is Doehring Cowart. I am a Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire!" The amiable looking old man said with a smile.

Linley's eyes suddenly turned round. "You... you are a Saint-level magus?"

The white-haired old man nodded confidently.

"No way. Gramps, you just said you were from the Pouant Empire. The Pouant Empire that was eradicated over five thousand years ago?" Linley was quite familiar with the history of the world, and he knew very well that the Pouant Empire had ceased to exist before his own clan had even come to be. In the modern era, the Pouant Empire was not one of the four great empires of the world.

The Pouant Empire had lasted for an extremely long period of time, and had been founded over eight thousand years ago. The entire Pouant Empire had lasted for three thousand years, but in the end, it had still been destroyed. The domain which the Pouant Empire had previously held sway over was approximately the combined borders of the Holy Union and the Dark Alliance.

In other words...

The entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the twelve kingdoms, and the thirty-two duchies had all once belonged to the Pouant Empire. From this alone, one could tell what a vast empire it had been.

But the Pouant Empire had been destroyed long ago!

“Over five thousand years ago?” The white-haired old man was momentarily stunned, and then let out a sigh. “There’s no way for me to sense the passing of time from within the Worldring. I didn’t expect that by the time I left the Worldring, over five thousand years would have passed since the destruction of my country.”

“Gramps, what are you talking about? I’m confused.”

Linley felt as though his entire mind had been turned muddy. This old grandpa had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and claimed that he was a Grand Magus from the era of the Pouant Empire, which had been destroyed five thousand years ago. What could be more ridiculous than this?

Linley even wondered if he was in a dream!

“Kid.” The white-haired old man looked at Linley. Smiling, he said, “The ring you wear next to your chest is the Divine artifact I once used — the Worldring!”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

Linley immediately peered up at him and said, “What ‘Worldring’? This ring around my chest was left behind by the elders of my ancestral clan. Its name is the ‘Coiling Dragon Ring’!”

“Coiling Dragon Ring? It was originally named the Coiling Dragon Ring?” The old man said in surprise.

Linley was stunned.

“Original name? What do you mean, original name?” Linley looked questioningly at the old man.

Only now did the old man begin to laugh. “Oh, ‘Coiling Dragon Ring’ must be the name you gave it. Or perhaps the name an elder of yours gave it. When I originally discovered this ring, I searched through all sorts of documents but

couldn't find any information about it. Thus I gave myself the authority to title it the Worldring. But as to what it was originally called, even I have no idea."

"Oh, gramps, you chose the name for it yourself as well. But now it belongs to me, and I named it the Coiling Dragon Ring." Linley was quite stubborn.

"Fine, fine, call it the Coiling Dragon Ring if you wish." The old man chuckled, not wanting to argue with Linley.

"Gramps, can you tell me why you just appeared from within the Coiling Dragon Ring?" Linley questioned.

The old man smiled. "In year 4280 of the Yulan calendar, I—"

Upon hearing this, Linley was secretly shocked. "Year 4280? This year is year 9990!"

"In year 4280 of the Yulan calendar, I encountered an old foe of mine, a Saint-level Grand Magus named Hamelin, and the two of us began to fight. I didn't expect yet a second Saint-level combatant to ambush me and sneak attack me. In the end, I was defeated, and my body was destroyed. I didn't wish for my spirit to be captured and tortured by my enemy, Hamelin, so I sealed myself within this Worldri—, ahem, this Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man explained what had happened in the past.

"The Coiling Dragon Ring is an extremely amazing object. It doesn't appear to emanate any magical aura, but in usefulness it can even compare with Divine artifacts. When I sealed my soul within the ring, Hamelin and the other man searched for me for a long time, but weren't able to find me. This, too, was thanks to the Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man smiled as he spoke.

Linley secretly nodded.

The Coiling Dragon Ring, by appearances, really did look quite plain. As a member of an ancient clan, Linley had a rather appraising eye.

Normally, precious items would have at least some sort of elemental aura. But this Coiling Dragon Ring seemed like nothing more than plain, inert wood.

"Gramps, you said that five thousand years ago, you were ambushed by a Saint-level Grand Magus and a Saint-level combatant, and then you were self-

sealed within this ring? And that this ring is an artifact which is comparable in power to a Divine artifact?" Linley finally said.

"Right." Seeing that Linley understood, the old man couldn't help but smile and nod.

"Then Gramps, how is it that you appeared from within the ring just now?" Linley looked doubtfully at the old man.

Laughing, the old man explained, "Actually, when I sealed my spirit within the Coiling Dragon Ring, I interwove my very existence into the Coiling Dragon Ring. Only when a person becomes the new owner of the ring would I be allowed to depart it."

"Becomes the new owner of the ring?"

"Right. Through dripping blood onto the Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man laughed.

Linley frowned while mumbling, "Dripping blood onto the ring?" Frowning as he tried to recollect when that had happened, Linley suddenly remembered that when the rock had cut his head open, fresh blood had suffused his clothes and his chest. Most likely, it was around then that the blood had dripped onto the ring.

"Oh. Then that makes me the owner of the Coiling Dragon Ring." Linley nodded.

"Right. Only now, after you became the owner of the Coiling Dragon Ring, was I able to depart the ring and once more experience the air of the Yulan continent." A hint of a smile was on the old man's face. "Right. Kid. I just told you my name, but what is yours?"

Linley smiled brightly. "My name is Linley! Linley Baruch!"

"Linley, a fine name." The old man smiled.

"Gramps, are you going to be forever bound to the ring and unable to ever regain your freedom?" Linley felt rather bad for him.

The old man smiled and nodded. "Linley, you must know that when most people die, their spirits will enter the Nether Realm! But because I was a Saint-

level Grand Magus at the time of my death, my mental energy had obtained physical form. That was the only reason why I could temporarily resist the call of the Nether Realm and seal myself within the Coiling Dragon Ring. Right now, there is only one way for me to leave this ring – exhaust all of my remaining mental energy.”

“Exhaust all your remaining mental energy?” Linley didn’t quite understand.

“What men call mental energy, ghosts might call ‘spiritual energy’. When a person’s mental energy is utterly exhausted, his soul will naturally dissipate. In other words... when my soul dissipates, it will leave the confines of this Coiling Dragon Ring,” the old man said calmly. “But the current situation is also fine. Although I am confined in the Coiling Dragon Ring, preventing me from ranging more than three meters away from it, this isn’t too bad.”

Linley’s heart trembled.

Suddenly, in his heart, Linley felt some pity for this old man.

“Heh heh, Linley, I’m already very satisfied. You don’t know this, but... if my spirit had been captured by Hamelin, it would have been a fate worse than death.” The old man sighed.

“Gramps, you said your name is Doehring Cowart? Can I address you as Grandpa Doehring?” Linley suddenly said.

Doehring Cowart had been a mighty Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, and thus had had an extremely high personal status. Back then, he would have ranked amongst the top five personages in the Yulan continent. He fell only because he had been despicably ambushed by Grand Magus Hamelin and another Saint-level combatant.

However...

Doehring Cowart had never had a child, nor grandchildren. Upon hearing Linley address him as Grandpa Doehring, Doehring Cowart’s heart, which had been lonely for thousands of years, suddenly felt warm.

“Yes, yes.” Doehring Cowart felt extremely happy.

A look of excitement suddenly appeared in Linley’s eyes. “Grandpa Doehring,

just now, you said that you are a Saint-level Grand Magus. Then, can you teach me how to use magic?" Linley's heart was frantically pounding. The person in front of him was a five thousand-year-old Saint-level Grand Magus.

In Linley's mind, the huge body of the Velocidragon, the terrifying spectacle of the Dance of the Fire Serpents, and the countless boulders falling from the sky began to play over and over again, along with the spectacle of that proud man who stood on top of the Black Dragon.

He deeply desired that one day...

He, too, would step on top of the head of a Black Dragon and make the heavens tremble.

Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard. His eyes shining, he said, "Of course I can! Your Grandpa Doehring is a Saint-level Grand Magus of the almighty earth-style... and amongst all of the elements, the element of earth is the mightiest of them all!" As he began to discuss magic, Doehring Cowart began to get excited.

Earth-Style Magic

Linley's anticipation was about to erupt like a volcano as he immediately became suffused with excitement.

"Grandpa Doehring, can you really teach me to become a magus?" Linley excitedly looked up at old man Doehring.

Doehring Cowart, seeing the state Linley was in, stroked his white beard. "Linley, your Grandpa Doehring is a Saint-level Grand Magus. Even if you don't have much natural talent, I can still teach you magic. Of course... if your talent is low, your accomplishments will be low as well."

If any other magus had been present and heard his words, they would have been astonished.

Amongst the society of magi, the most important thing was talent. No talent meant no possibility of becoming a magus. Many people believed this!

But Doehring Cowart dared to claim that even if his student's talent was poor, he still had the ability to make a magus out of the student. If anyone else had made this claim, they would be viewed as just wildly boasting... but the man who said these words was a five-thousand-year-old Saint-level Grand Magus!

"Low talent, low accomplishments?" Linley felt his heart tremble.

The reason he wanted to become a magus was because he wanted to restore glory to the Baruch clan. Even if he couldn't accomplish this, he hoped to at least accomplish the one task which generations of clan elders had strove to achieve for centuries – reclaiming their ancestral heirloom. If he could accomplish this, it would be enough.

But to do so, power was an important component.

"Linley, don't be worried. Your aptitude for magic hasn't even been assessed yet. Who knows if it will be high or low? Perhaps you will have a tremendous

talent for magic.” Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard as he smiled.

Grandpa Doehring’s tranquility brought calm to Linley as well.

“Grandpa Doehring, how does one test for magical aptitude?” Linley couldn’t help but grow eager.

“It is actually quite easy to test for magical aptitude.” Just as Doehring Cowart spoke, suddenly –

Footsteps could be heard from outside the door. Hearing them, Linley immediately grew nervous. He quickly said to Doehring Cowart, “Grandpa Doehring, quick, hide. Someone is coming.” If this five-thousand-year-old Saint-level Grand Magus of the bygone Pouant Empire was discovered, it could be disastrous.

Doehring Cowart only smiled, not moving at all.

“Grandpa Doehring!” Linley was beginning to grow impatient.

“Creaaak.” The bedroom door swung open, and Housekeeper Hiri stuck his head inside. Seeing that Linley was awake, he couldn’t help but smile. “Young master Linley, I didn’t expect that you would have already awoken. How do you feel, young master?”

Linley immediately forced out a smile. Nodding, he said, “Thank you for asking, Uncle Hiri. I’m much better now.”

Linley felt extremely agitated. He couldn’t help but turn to look in the direction of Doehring Cowart, but Doehring Cowart was still standing there, grinning. “What’s going on with Grandpa Doehring? Ugh. We’re about to get discovered. It’s going to be so annoying to have to explain.”

“Young master Linley, it’s time for dinner. Since you are already awake, come eat dinner with us.” Uncle Hiri smiled as he spoke.

“Oh. Got it.” Linley snuck another peek at Doehring Cowart, his heart filled with questions. “What’s going on? From Uncle Hiri’s expression, it seems as though he can’t see Grandpa Doehring at all.”

Seeing Linley constantly glances at the corner of his bed, Uncle Hiri asked curiously, “Young master Linley, why are you staring at the side of your bed?”

Did you drop something? I can help you look for it.”

“No— nothing.” Linley immediately crawled out of bed. “Uncle Hiri, let’s go eat dinner.”

Although he found Linley’s reaction to be a bit odd, Uncle Hiri didn’t think too much of it, just nodding and smiling. Linley dressed himself, but still couldn’t help but sneak a peek at Doehring Cowart. But just as he did so, Doehring Cowart, who was still grinning at him, suddenly disappeared from Linley’s field of vision.

“He entered the Coiling Dragon Ring.” Linley could now clearly feel that a spirit was now residing within the Coiling Dragon Ring.

Unlike in the past, Linley had now soulbound the ring with his own blood, giving him a deeper level of understanding.

“Linley, no need to speak aloud. Just speak to me mentally. As the master of the Coiling Dragon Ring, you can directly engage in spiritual communication with me, as I am a spirit within the ring.” Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

This greatly surprised Linley.

“Grandpa Doehring?” Linley tested the mental link.

“I hear you.” Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind as well.

Linley’s heart was immediately filled with joy. But as he engaged in conversation with Doehring Cowart, he didn’t pay attention to where he was walking, and he tripped over the doorway. Uncle Hiri, walking ahead of him, turned and laughed. “Young master Linley, watch where you walk.”

“Got it, Uncle Hiri,” Linley laughed in reply.

While excitedly engaging in mental conversation with Doehring Cowart, Linley entered the dining room and sat down. Today’s dinner was actually quite sumptuous, including a fragrant-smelling roasted sheep. Hogg glanced at Linley. Smiling, he said, “Linley, have some.” As he spoke, Hogg personally tore off a strip of meat from the sheep’s lower hindlegs for Linley.

“Thank you, father.”

Linley felt quite surprised. His family was in poor economic straits, so normally their dinner was quite spartan. But today, they even had roast sheep?

What Linley didn't know was... when the rain of stones descended on the town, aside from men and women, many animals were killed as well. The Baruch clan aside, even some poor families who rarely ate meat were enjoying an extravagant meal today.

"Grandpa Doehring, why didn't Uncle Hiri see you just then?" Linley mentally asked Doehring Cowart.

"Linley, I must inform you that aside from you, nobody can see me. Because right now, I'm just a spiritual projection, which has no matter. I'm invisible to the eye. Only you, as the master of the Coiling Dragon Ring, can see me," Doehring Cowart explained in detail.

Linley suddenly understood.

Previously, Grandpa Doehring had said that he had died long ago, and only his spirit now remained.

"Grandpa Doehring, in the future, doesn't that mean you can always appear by my side?" Linley felt extremely happy.

Just as Linley spoke, he saw that next to him, a white-haired old man suddenly appeared out of nowhere. It was Doehring Cowart. But Hogg, Housekeeper Hiri, and his younger brother Wharton still continued to eat and chat, not noticing Doehring Cowart's existence in the slightest.

"Wow..."

Hearing and seeing were two different things. When he personally witnessed all the other people at the dinner table be unaware of Grandpa Doehring's presence, Linley felt deeply astonished.

"There are still some people who can sense my presence. Those whose spiritual presence is on par with mine can feel my presence. But naturally... if I hide within the Coiling Dragon Ring, they definitely won't be able to sense me." Doehring Cowart's voice sounded within Linley's head.

"On the same spiritual level as Grandpa Doehring?" Linley chewed and

thought at Doehring Cowart at the same time.

“Those who have the same spiritual power as me are most likely Saint-level combatants. Only Saint-level combatants can sense my presence, if barely. But of course, the prerequisite is that I appear outside the Coiling Dragon Ring. Once I enter the ring, there is no way they can find me.” Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley mentally nodded as he grabbed a roasted leg of mutton and chewed on it.

“Linley, eat more slowly.” Hogg saw how fast Linley was eating and couldn’t help but laugh.

Linley grinned at his father, but continued to devour his food with haste. In the twinkling of an eye, he had stripped the leg of mutton of all flesh. Linley let out a comfortable burp, then used the napkin to wipe his lips. Standing, he said, “Father, Uncle Hiri, I’m done eating. I feel like my head is still a bit dizzy, so I’m going to go and get some more rest. Wharton, see ya.” Linley was the first to finish eating.

“Still feeling dizzy? Then go and get some rest,” Hogg said hurriedly.

The earlier events of the morning had left a lasting impression on Hogg. There had been a moment when he had even thought that Linley had been crushed to death. After experiencing such an event, Hogg’s attitude towards Linley had clearly improved substantially.

“Big brother, see ya.” Chubby little Wharton waved at Linley with a grease-covered hand.

Linley ran directly back to his room, and then tightly shut the door behind him.

He quickly removed his shoes, then jumped onto the bed and sat down. “Grandpa Doehring, come out now. Help me test my magical aptitude.” Linley was extremely impatient. When he was eating dinner just now, all of his thoughts were turned towards this.

A misty ray of light shot out from within the ring, falling onto the floor and transforming into Doehring Cowart.

Grinning, Doehring Cowart said, “Linley, don’t be so impatient. First, I must tell you that because I don’t have any specialized magical aptitude testing equipment with me, I can only test whether or not you have any talent for earth-style magic. Since I have no tools, there’s no way for me to test and see if you have aptitude for any other magic.”

“You can only test for my aptitude for earth element magic?” Linley felt a little disappointed.

He had also heard that in order to test for magical aptitude, special tools were needed, but since Grandpa Doehring was a Saint-level Grand Magus, Linley had been hoping Doehring might have some special methods.

“What’s wrong with the earth-style? Linley, let me tell you, amongst the elements of earth, fire, water, wind, thunder, light, and darkness, earth is the mightiest style of them all.” A look of pride was on Doehring Cowart’s face. Clearly, he was filled with confidence. After all, he was a Saint-level Grand Magus of the earth element style.

Linley found this somewhat hard to believe.

Each style should be equal. How could the earth-style be the mightiest?

“Grandpa Doehring, I heard that fire-style elemental attacks are the most powerful? And that darkness-style elemental attacks are the most unpredictable? How could the earth-style be the mightiest?” Linley frowned.

The formerly amiable Grandpa Doehring suddenly turned angry as he grumbled, “Linley, let me tell you that when it comes to attack power, each elemental style has its strengths!”

“For example, the forbidden fire-style spell of ‘Heavenly Fire Burning the Fields, Earthly Fire Burning the Cities’ can burn an entire city to ashes, true. But the water-style has the forbidden spell of ‘Absolute Zero’, which when unleashed can freeze hundreds of thousands of people to death. Thunder-style’s ‘Heavenly Lightning of Absolute Destruction’ can unleash tens of thousands of lightning bolts, which no one can survive. Wind-style’s forbidden spell, ‘Annihilating Tempest’, can fill the entire sky with blade-like gusts of wind...”

Doehring Cowart let out a long sigh.

Linley's heart was trembling.

He had thought that the fire-style's attacks were the most powerful, but from the sound of it, that was an absolute joke. Every single elemental style, at the level of forbidden spells, contained astonishing destructive power.

"And earth-style?" Linley didn't forget about the earth-style elemental magic.

Doehring Cowart self-confidently said, "How could the earth-style be weak? When the earth-style's forbidden spell, 'Heavenly Meteor's Descent', is executed, countless enormous boulders will rain from the sky and reduce a city to rubble in the twinkling of an eye. It also has the forbidden spell, 'Heaven Collapses, Earth Shatters'. When this spell is used, the earth itself will begin to roil about like waves in the ocean. Houses will collapse, the earth itself will split apart, and magma will spew out from the cracks, killing countless people."

Linley didn't dare to even breathe.

"Simultaneously, the earth-style also has the wide-ranging protective spell, 'Pulsating Guard'. Once the Pulsating Guard is used, the area above, below, and around an entire city will become protected from all attacks. Even if an opponent uses the 'Heavenly Lightning of Absolute Destruction', this spell can fend it off."

Doehring Cowart began to speak faster and faster while laughing. "But of course, I'm just speaking of wide-range destructive spells, and not one-on-one battle magic."

Linley nodded.

He could tell that Grandpa Doehring was exclusively talking about wide-range, catastrophe-level magic.

"Grandpa Doehring, it seems like the earth-style has lots more forbidden spells? Why is that?" Linley said curiously.

Doehring Cowart said confidently, "Linley, there's something you aren't understanding. Actually, each elemental style is roughly balanced, but they will have different effects in different environments. For example, in the water-rich

environment of the ocean, water-style magic will be extremely strong. In some places where the wind blows powerfully, wind-style magic will be very powerful as well.”

Linley began to understand.

“Linley... in the entire world, isn't it true that most battles and most magi are on the earth? And when used while standing on the earth, earth-style magic is extremely effective.” A smile was on Doehring Cowart's face. “As you stand firmly on the boundless earth, an earth-style magus will have an extremely effective assistant.”

Linley now understood!

Each elemental style of magic was more effective in certain places.

But the battles fought by the magi of the Yulan continent were virtually all on land, meaning that earth-style magi were almost always at an advantage.

“Amongst all the styles of magic, as the earth-style allows us to absorb earth elemental essence into our bodies, earth-style has the most benefit for improving your physical form. Mother Earth is most benevolent towards us.” A look of veneration was on Doehring Cowart's face. “When we earth-style magi sit upon the ground, we can feel the vastness of the earth, feel its pulse, and feel Mother Earth's love for us.”

“When it comes to attacks, earth-style magic has the one-on-one ‘World Protector’ forbidden battle spell, and also the destructive spells of ‘Heavenly Meteor's Descent’ and ‘Heaven Collapses, Earth Shatters’. When it comes to defense, amongst the forbidden spells, there is the wide-ranging protective spell, ‘Pulsating Guard’, as well as the personal protective spell, ‘Earthguard’. When it comes to personal protection, nothing beats earth-style elemental spells!”

Doehring Cowart appeared very confident.

“Personal protection? Grandpa Doehring, you're saying that the earth-style has the strongest personal protection spells?” Linley looked questioningly at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart laughed as he said, “At the earliest levels, earth-style magi

have access to simple spells such as a shield of earth, or a wall of earth. Upon becoming a magus of the fifth rank, you will gain access to the ‘Earthguard’ spell, which will continuously grow in power along with you.”

“When utilized by a magus of the fifth or sixth rank, it will cover your entire body with a layer of stone armor. But upon reaching the seventh rank, it will transform into an armor of jadeite. Upon reaching the eighth rank, this Earthguard armor will be made up of crystal jade. And upon reaching the ninth rank, it will be composed of platinum. Finally, when a Saint-level magus executes the Earthguard spell, the protective armor will be made out of diamonds. The defensive power of this spell...” as he spoke, a smile appeared on Doehring Cowart’s face.

Linley couldn’t help but sigh inwardly.

This earth-style element really was a mighty one. When the Earthguard spell reached the Saint level of power, it was composed entirely of diamonds! Linley knew that diamonds were an extremely hard and unyielding substance. And the ‘diamonds’ composing the Earthguard were no ordinary diamonds, but ones formed from magic, making them even tougher than real diamonds.

“Oh, right...”

Linley suddenly remembered the two Saint-level combatants who had been fighting in the sky. He remembered how the green-robed man had landed that huge hazy sword-tip attack on the gray-robed man, whose robe shattered and revealed a diamond-like armor beneath it.

That Saint-level magus named ‘Rudi’ had relied on that diamond armor to block the attack by Dillon.

“That must have been a Saint-level Earthguard spell.” Linley felt secretly shocked.

It was powerful enough to take a direct blow from a Saint-level combatant. From this, one could tell how powerful it was, defensively.

“This is why I told you that earth-style magic is the mightiest elemental style of them all.” Doehring Cowart’s white beard fluttered about, making him look all the more self-satisfied.

After all, all men survived by living on the earth. They lived on the earth, and they made war while on the earth. Naturally, earth-style magi would always have an advantage.

Spring Ends, Autumn Comes

Actually, all of the elemental styles, including the earth-style, had their own particular strengths. But as a Saint-level Grand Magus of the earth-style, it was only natural that Doehring Cowart would strongly praise the earth-style. The eight-year-old Linley, upon hearing Doehring's words, was filled with eagerness.

"Grandpa Doehring, hurry up and test me to see if I have any aptitude for becoming an earth-style magus." Linley was feeling extremely anxious.

Doehring Cowart began to laugh. "Fine, I'll test you right away."

"First, let me tell you that the test for magical aptitude is a two-part test, so the test I am administering will also have two parts." Doehring Cowart was behaving in an unusually generous manner. After having been trapped in the Coiling Dragon Ring for five thousand years, of course he was now in a wonderful mood when faced with such a cute little child.

"Magical aptitude is divided into two parts - the strength of one's magical affinity for certain elements, and the strength of one's mental energy." Doehring Cowart began to explain the basics of the test.

"What are these two parts good for?" Linley asked curiously.

Doehring Cowart said in a kindly voice, "Linley, before answering this, let me ask you, if a magus is about to cast a spell, what does he rely upon?"

"Magical incantations!" Linley said immediately.

Linley had seen how the magus who rode the Velocidragon first mumbled many magical words before casting his spell.

"Wrong."

"I've seen magi cast spells. All of them recited magical incantations first," Linley immediately argued.

Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard, and contentedly said, “When casting spells, the most important thing for a magus is his ‘mageforce’ and his ‘mental energy’. If his mental energy is sufficiently powerful, he can even instacast spells, without need for any incantations. Magical incantations only serve a supplemental function.”

“Oh? Instacast?” Linley looked questioningly at Doehring Cowart. Linley felt as though suddenly, the huge world of sorcery was slowly opening up before his very eyes, but still remained hazy and indistinct. Doehring Cowart, however, was dissipating the mysterious façade behind this world of magic.

Smiling, Doehring Cowart nodded. “Right. To cast a spell, your body must be able to provide a sufficient amount of mageforce, and then use mental energy to control that mageforce to summon sufficient elemental essence to form it into a spell!”

“Elemental essence?” Linley was surprised. “Grandpa Doehring, are you saying that in order to cast magical spells, we need to draw upon external elemental essence?”

“Haha. Of course. Linley, did you think that a powerful magus could simply rely on the elemental essence already in his body? Impossible! Let’s look at forbidden-level magical spells. The mageforce in the body of a Saint-level magus can only provide 1% of the amount of essence needed. The other 99% can only be provided by natural, elemental essence.”

“Let me put it to you like this... a magus’ so-called ‘mageforce’ is really just pure, highly-refined elemental essence. Mageforce can be described as a ‘general’, whereas nature’s elemental essences are the soldiers. A magus summons his mageforce and uses it to direct nature’s elemental essence to form amazing spells. Understood?” Doehring Cowart smiled as he looked at Linley.

Linley couldn’t help but frown.

“Oh... I understand.” Linley laughed and nodded. “The ‘mageforce’ inside a magus is kinda like Uncle Hillman, while elemental essence is like our group of kids. Uncle Hillman, all by himself, directs our entire group in training, or in attacking, or engaging in battle!”

Doehring Cowart smiled and nodded. "Right. Therefore, the 'mageforce' of a magus is extremely important. If he doesn't have enough mageforce, he will not be able to cast a spell."

Linley nodded.

"Compared to mageforce, however, mental energy is even more important!" Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke. "By now, you should have realized that so-called mental energy is really spiritual energy, a form of controlling energy!"

"Linley, a large amount of mageforce draws out an even larger amount of elemental essence. If such a huge amount of force is not controlled by spiritual energy... what do you think the end result would be?" Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard as he quietly watched Linley.

Linley frowned, pondering.

"Grandpa Doehring," Linley said in a low voice as he frowned. "In some books, I read about some military tactics. In it, one of the things it said was... to subdue an enemy, first subdue their king. For example, bandits. If you first kill the bandit leader, the bandit army will naturally crumble to pieces and fall apart. So spiritual energy should serve a similar purpose as the 'controlling energy' which the bandit leader exerts on his subordinates. Without spiritual energy to control a large amount of mageforce and elemental essence, this power would run wild."

Doehring Cowart laughed.

"Haha, Linley, you are very smart." Doehring Cowart was laughing happily.

"Right, a large amount of mageforce and elemental essence, when controlled by spiritual energy, can be formed into a spell! Sometimes, in order to execute a particularly powerful spell, too high of a demand is placed upon one's spiritual energy. Thus, the assistance of magical incantations is needed." Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley felt as though a huge, important principle of magic had suddenly become crystal clear to him.

Smiling at Linley, Doehring Cowart continued, "Of course, that's just the basic theory. The world of magic is far more complicated than you can imagine! The

question of exactly how one uses mageforce and elemental essence to form 'magic', now that's the real issue!"

"What's the point of having mageforce, if you don't know exactly how to shape it into a magical spell?" Doehring Cowart let out a long sigh. "The world of magic is an extremely complicated one. Magical research is very difficult and dangerous. But due to intra-empire struggles, countless magi engage in the research of new types of spells."

"Actually, every single empire researches new ways of using different matrices of mageforce and elemental essence to produce different spells! But magical research is extremely dangerous. The more destructive a spell potentially is, the harder it is to research. Sometimes, it can even catastrophically backfire upon the researchers."

Doehring Cowart laughed as he spoke. "In most magus academies, you can only study spells up to the sixth rank. Spells of the seventh, eighth, and ninth ranks, as well as Saint-level spells, are considered secrets. Only if you join a kingdom will you gain access to those special spells."

Linley had read many books and therefore understood this principle.

"If you have no instructor? No matter how much mageforce you have or how high your spiritual energy is, you won't be able to execute a single spell!" Doehring Cowart smiled faintly. "The profound secrets of every magical spell lie in how to control mageforce and elemental essence to form the spell."

"After countless years of magical experimentation, the magical system has essentially been perfected." Stroking his white beard, Doehring Cowart laughed loudly. "Linley, don't worry. In the future, there's no need for you to bend a knee to any kingdom or any lord, because... I can teach you seventh, eighth, ninth, and even Saint-level spells!"

Linley took a deep breath.

He could feel himself embarking on a new path.

Under the guidance of Grandpa Doehring, he had no need to continue to follow the path of the warrior. He would now embark on the more mysterious, more powerful way of the magus.

“Come, let’s begin the test of the strength of your elemental affinities. Sit down with legs crossed, close your eyes, and enter a meditative state.” Doehring Cowart said gently.

“Meditative state?” Linley felt his heartbeat quicken.

How would his affinity rate?

“Don’t worry. Just carefully try and see what you can sense, and whenever you sense something, just tell me.” Doehring Cowart smiled encouragingly towards Linley. Linley immediately closed his eyes and tried to force himself to calm down.

“Don’t worry. Just do as I instruct,” Doehring Cowart said in a gentle voice.



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Meditation was one of the basic underpinnings of all magi. It was needed for both absorbing elemental essence to transform it into mageforce, and for improving one’s spiritual energy. The first time one entered a meditative state was the most difficult and dangerous one, but of course, under the guidance of a Saint-level Grand Magus, Linley wouldn’t find it too difficult.

After half an hour of instruction, Linley finally entered the meditative state for the first time.

Seeing Linley in a meditative state, Doehring Cowart let out a faint smile, then waved his hand.

Immediately...

A large amount of earth essence began to swirl around Linley. Normally, most places only had an ordinary density of earth essence, but right now, Doehring Cowart was using his powerful spiritual energy to increase the density of earth essence near Linley by a hundredfold.

“If he still can’t sense any earth essence around him even under these conditions, then there’s no hope for him at all,” Doehring Cowart said to himself.

Even a totally ordinary person should sense something, given that the density of earth essence was a hundred times greater than normal.

Right now, Linley, still in a meditative state, felt extremely happy and excited. He had never realized... that around him, there were so many amazing things. Countless earth-colored specks of light were floating around him, in such a high density as to be shocking.

“Linley, can you feel it?” Doehring Cowart’s voice gently sounded in Linley’s mind.

“Grandpa Doehring, I can feel it. There’s so many specks of earth-colored light. So many... too many. They’re clustered so densely, thousands, no, tens of thousands. A hundred earth-colored specks of light just floated past my hand. There’s too many.” Feeling the large amount of earth-colored specks of light floating around him, Linley felt extremely happy.

Hearing this news, Doehring Cowart was immediately ecstatic.

“Very good. Now, slowly, do as I say. Don’t think about anything. Quietly...” Doehring Cowart droned almost hypnotically, helping Linley to depart the meditative state. At the same time, he released the control he was exerting over the earth essence. Immediately, the earth essence density around them returned to normal.

After awakening from the meditative state, Linley felt as though he was full of energy, totally different from before. Even while fully awake, Linley felt as though he could still sense some of the oscillations from the nearby earth essences, even though he couldn’t sense them as clearly as when he was in the meditative state.

“Grandpa Doehring, I can still feel the movements of those earth-colored specks of light. Really! Even though it’s not as clear now, I can still somewhat feel them.” Linley was feeling extremely excited.

This was his first step into the world of magic. Linley was filled with amazement.

“What did you say? You can still sense them?” Doehring Cowart was very astonished, because the nearby density of earth essence had returned to

normal now, and Linley was no longer in a meditative state. If he could still sense the nearby earth essence, even while awake... then his affinity for earth essence...

“Grandpa Doehring, why aren’t you talking? How is the strength of my affinity for earth elemental essence?” Linley said nervously.

Linley didn’t know if he had done well or poorly.

“Good. Extremely good. Your affinity for earth elemental essence is extremely high.” Doehring Cowart’s face was wreathed in smiles. “Based on what I know, only perhaps one in a thousand magi would have as strong an affinity for earth elemental essence as you do. Truly.”

Linley felt his heart began thumping frantically. He was so excited he didn’t know what to say.

“But naturally, elemental affinity is just one part. Spiritual energy is the most important of all! After all, given enough time, one’s mageforce will naturally strengthen. But it’s extremely difficult to improve the spiritual energy of a magus,” Doehring Cowart said solemnly.

Linley took a deep breath and nodded.

“Now, it’s time for the second test, to test your spiritual energy.” Doehring Cowart looked at Linley solemnly.

Linley also knew that this test of spiritual energy was an extremely important one.

“Grandpa Doehring, what do I need to do?” Linley stared at Doehring Cowart, mentally preparing himself.

“Nothing at all.” Doehring Cowart laughed.

“Uh...” Linley was startled.

“I am the spirit of the Coiling Dragon Ring, while you are the master of the Coiling Dragon Ring. I am totally capable of sensing the strength of your spirit! There’s no need to test it at all. I can tell you right now!” Doehring Cowart smiled at Linley.

“I... how is my spiritual energy?” Linley held his breath.

The strength or weakness of a person's spiritual energy determined one's destiny.

"Your spiritual energy is ten times stronger than an average person of your age." Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley felt a sense of excitement in his heart. Ten times!

That wasn't a small number.

But Doehring Cowart continued, "Generally speaking, only one in ten thousand can become a magus, principally because there's a high requirement when it comes to spiritual energy. The absolute minimum requirement for a magus is having five times more spiritual energy than someone of the same age. Ten times puts you roughly in the middle of the pack, as far as the average magus goes."

Linley's earlier excitement was immediately dampened.

"If it were anyone else instructing you, you could at most become a magus of the fifth or sixth rank. However... since the person instructing you is me, the situation is now different." Doehring Cowart stroked his beard contentedly, a look of self-confidence in his eyes.

Linley suddenly came to the same realization.

Right. Doehring Cowart was a Saint-level Grand Magus!

"As long as you work hard, Linley, I am fully confident that you can reach the eighth rank. But as to whether or not you can become a magus of the ninth rank, or even a Saint-level magus? That will depend on your own comprehension and your own experiences," Doehring Cowart said seriously. "If you do not work hard, I'm afraid you might not even become a magus of the sixth rank. At that point in time, you'll have no one else to blame."

A good instructor in magic was just one part of the equation.

The most important part was still one's own effort.

"Grandpa Doehring, please don't worry. I won't disappoint you, or my father, or the Baruch clan." At this moment, Linley's mind was filled with the image of the spirit tablet in front of the ancestral hall, and those illustrious names and

stories engraved on the back.

To renew the former glory of the Baruch clan!

Linley's chest was filled with boiling heat!

“Good. Starting tomorrow, I will begin to instruct you.” Doehring Cowart looked at Linley, his eyes gleaming. Right now, Doehring Cowart's body was once more emanating the self-confidence and pride which a Saint-level Grand Magus possessed!



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Starting the very next day, Linley began to live an extremely tough, arduous life.

He couldn't reveal the existence of Doehring Cowart to his father. Every morning and evening, he still needed to attend physical training, while later in the morning, he would have his lessons with his father on politics, religion, religious rites, warfare, geography, art... and all sorts of other lessons.

Only in the afternoon, during his previously spare time, would Linley run towards Wushan, east of the town, hide in a quiet place, and begin to learn the basics of magic under the guidance of Doehring Cowart. He studied hard, while entering the meditative state to absorb and process mageforce.

In addition, each day, after eating dinner, Linley would spend a large amount of time in the meditative state.

Every day, Linley would spend only six hours sleeping. All of his other time was spent in physical training, intellectual studies, magical instruction, and meditation. Six hours of sleep a day, frankly speaking, was simply not enough. In truth, entering the meditative state was extremely taxing, far more tiring than most people's lives. Every day, Linley entered a very deep sleep for those six hours.

Filled. His time was absolutely filled.

With each day passing like this, day after day, Linley's improvement was very

evident, to the point where it wasn't just improvement, but a form of transformation!

As he was hard at work training...

He experienced, for the first time, the joy of absorbing elemental essence into his body, and then transforming it into mageforce.

He experienced, for the first time, entering so deeply into the meditative state that he almost became unconscious.

And he experienced, for the first time, the excitement of performing earth-style magic, even if it was nothing more than generating a tiny 'Earth Spike' that was only twenty centimeters high.



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Hard work, day after day...

Linley's effort and the speed of his improvement caused even Doehring Cowart, that five-thousand-year-old Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, to sigh with amazement.

Due to his daily physical training exercises, Linley's body was growing sturdier and sturdier. Because he often entered the meditative state and absorbed earth essence, Linley became calmer and more tranquil. Linley's transformation caused his father Hogg and Hillman to both be amazed and overjoyed.



*

Spring ended, and autumn came. In the blink of an eye, it was now autumn.

There was only one month remaining before the magus affinity testing and recruitment event.

In the ancestral hall within the Baruch clan manor.

"Whew. All done cleaning. Time to go do some more magical training. Yesterday I actually managed to successfully execute the 'Earth Tremor'

technique. That was wonderful.” Right now, Linley was in an extremely good mood. He quickly strode out of the ancestral hall and closed the door.

Walking on the blue tiled steps of the stone walkway, Linley’s footsteps were firm and swift, but made little sound.

This was an ability that virtually all earth-style magi possessed. Because their power was derived from the earth itself, they could mask virtually all sound from their footsteps.

“Eh?” Linley frowned.

His ears twitched as he turned and stared towards a far-off building. “I heard something?” He immediately stealthily walked in that direction. His footsteps made almost no sound. Normally, just while walking ordinarily, he could mask his footsteps. Now that he was intentionally trying to hide them, he made even less noise.

He crept closer, step by step.

When Linley reached the door to the building and took a peek inside...

“What’s that?” Linley’s eyes widened.

He saw a twenty-centimeter long black mouse chewing on a piece of stone rubble. And then, in the blink of an eye, the black mouse appeared tens of meters away in a different direction, and began to nibble on a piece of blue tile. The black mouse’s fur appeared very soft. Its eyes were guileless, and its paws were furry. In a word, it looked very cute.

It even hopped around just on its two hind legs for fun.

“What an adorable little mouse. And how amazingly fast!” Hiding by the doorway, Linley exclaimed silently.

Most mice wouldn’t reach such a size, and most mice were loathsome creatures, but this mouse seemed particularly adorable. Its eyes seemed to be full of meaning, as though they could speak. Most importantly of all... it was astonishingly fast.

“Such speed... I bet even Uncle Hillman, a warrior of the sixth rank, couldn’t catch it. How can it be so fast?” Seeing the cute mouse move tens of meters in

just the blink of an eye, Linley felt astonished.

Doehring Cowart flew out from within the Coiling Dragon Ring. Standing next to Linley, he looked at the black mouse with some surprise. “A magical beast, a Shadowmouse? And judging by its size, a Shadowmouse infant.”

“A magical beast? Shadowmouse? It’s so big! How can it be an infant?” Linley stared at Doehring Cowart in surprise.

Aside from the Vampiric Iron Bull, the Griffin, the Velocidragon, and the Black Dragon magical beasts he had seen, this was the first time Linley had seen any other magical beasts. This adorable black mouse was actually a magical beast? A magical beast, with magical abilities?

Part II

Growing Up

Magical Beast, Shadowmouse

“Magical beast ‘Shadowmouse’? Grandpa Doehring, what special qualities does a Shadowmouse possess, and what rank does it have amongst magical beasts?” Linley and Doehring Cowart were mentally communicating, but at the same time, Linley was staring excitedly at him.

Doehring Cowart smiled. He pretended to hem and haw for a few seconds, then slowly said, “The magical beast ‘Shadowmouse’ cannot easily be hemmed into a particular rank. This is because it represents an entire race of mice. Amongst rat-type creatures, there are two major types; the Stoneater Rat, and the Shadowmouse. But both the Stoneater Rat and the Shadowmouse are omnivores. They can eat anything, whether it is stones, bones, or even meat.”

Linley mentally nodded.

Just now, he had seen that black Shadowmouse nibbling on a rock.

“Magical beasts are divided into nine ranks. Magical beasts of the first rank are the weakest. And of course, above the ninth rank are magical beasts at the Saint level!” Doehring Cowart smiled at Linley. “Linley, the weakest type of Stoneater Rat is the Grey Stoneater Rat. Stoneater Rats of the first to third ranks are all grey in color, with some minor shading differences. A Stoneater Rat, upon reaching the fourth rank, will see its fur turn pure silver. Upon reaching the seventh rank, its fur will turn gold! A gold-colored Stoneater Rat will at least be a magical beast of the seventh rank, and at most a magical beast of the eighth rank.”

“Linley, the Stoneater Rat race is an extremely terrifying race, primarily because they have huge numbers, and extremely sharp teeth, far sharper than the Shadowmouse race. When large numbers of Stoneater Rats appear, even an army of a hundred thousand people cannot hope to withstand them.” Doehring Cowart sighed as he spoke.

Doehring Cowart was recalling a catastrophe he had witnessed long ago.

The Stoneater Rat was not as fast as the Shadowmouse, but its body was as tough and durable as steel. The higher ranked a Stoneater Rat was, the tougher its body would become, and the sharper its teeth would become. Its body seemed small, but that was deceptive; in large numbers, they were absolutely terrifying.

“The weapons used by most armies cannot kill a Stoneater Rat, but a Stoneater Rat can easily kill and devour a soldier.” Doehring Cowart sighed again.

In Linley’s imagination, there appeared the image of a vast, endless flood of Stoneater Rats descending from the wilderness or mountains and attacking an army of men. Imagining that flood of Stoneater Rats devouring the entire army, Linley’s heart shivered.

Absolutely terrifying.

“Amongst the two races of rat-type creatures, the Stoneater Rat has an extremely tough defense, sharp teeth, and huge numbers. But Shadowmice? There are quite a large number of Shadowmice as well, but their numbers are far less than Stoneater Rats.” Doehring Cowart seemed like an encyclopedia, all-wise and all-knowing.

“And Shadowmice? How powerful is a Shadowmouse?” Linley asked.

There was a Shadowmouse not too far from him. Naturally, Linley wanted to know more about how powerful they were.

“The weakest Stoneater Rat is a beast of the first rank. But the Shadowmouse is different! The weakest Shadowmouse is a magical beast of the third rank, with jet black fur. When its entire body turns blue in color, that is a sign that it has reached the fifth rank. And when all of its fur has turned violet, that means it has at least reached the seventh rank, and at most the eighth rank.” Doehring Cowart’s words were clear and precise.

Linley nodded inwardly.

Based on potential power, a Shadowmouse was not at all inferior to a Stoneater Rat.

“Grandpa Doehring, based on what you just said, a Shadowmouse of the third or fourth rank would have pure black fur. Only upon reaching the fifth rank would its fur turn blue. So are you saying that little guy there is a magical beast of the third or fourth rank?” Linley followed up with more questions.

“This black-colored Shadowmouse is not ordinary.”

Doehring Cowart frowned as he spoke. “The Stoneater Rat is famed for its toughness and its sharp teeth, while the Shadowmouse is famed for its speed and its sharp teeth! Speed is thus a very good way to determine the strength of any particular Shadowmouse.”

“It moved really fast, tens of meters in the blink of an eye. But since it is a Shadowmouse, I guess that isn’t out of the ordinary.” Linley still remembered its earlier movements clearly.

Doehring Cowart nodded. “Shadowmice are indeed very fast, but for an infant Shadowmouse to already have reached the speed of an adult Shadowmouse is definitely out of the ordinary.” A hint of a smile was on Doehring Cowart’s face.

“Out of the ordinary?” Linley looked at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart continued, “Right. For an infant Shadowmouse to have reached the speed of an adult Shadowmouse of the fourth rank means that when it grows up, it has the possibility of becoming a violet-colored Shadowmouse of the seventh rank. I suspect... that it is the child of a Violet Shadowmouse.”

“The child of a Violet Shadowmouse?” Linley said questioningly. “But its fur is black.”

Doehring Cowart laughed. “Linley, Violet Shadowmice and Blue Shadowmice, when born, all start off with black fur. Only as their strength grows will the color of their fur slowly change! The color of their fur is proof of their power!”

Linley suddenly understood. “So that’s how it is!”

“Grandpa Doehring, then based on your words, this Shadowmouse is really amazingly fast. The Shadowmouse in front of me is slightly faster than even Uncle Hillman, but you are telling me that it is comparable to a Shadowmouse of the fourth rank. For a magical beast of the fourth rank to be faster than a

warrior of the sixth rank..." Linley couldn't help but sigh in amazement.

Doehring Cowart laughed. "Linley, if they weren't so fast, why would they be called Shadowmice?"

At the same rank of power, a Shadowmouse, when running, was far, far faster than a human warrior.

"A Shadowmouse is a rare prize as magical beasts go, especially the seventh-ranked Violet Shadowmouse. Many a magus would want a Violet Shadowmouse, but they are simply too fast. An adult Violet Shadowmouse is valuable, but extremely hard to catch and tame. It is much easier to catch and tame an infant Violet Shadowmouse, but it is extremely rare for one to be able to meet an infant Violet Shadowmouse by itself." Doehring Cowart smiled as he looked at Linley.

Linley could imagine it as well.

A Violet Shadowmouse was a magical beast of the seventh rank at least, which meant that at the very least, they had a Velocidragon's level of power.

"Linley, a Violet Shadowmouse is considered a king amongst rats, and can command a large swarm of Shadowmice. Although Shadowmice are not as numerous as Stoneater Rats, they are still quite numerous. An infant Violet Shadowmouse would therefore be protected by many adult Shadowmice."

Doehring Cowart glanced sideways at that distant black Shadowmouse, still chewing some rocks.

"To be so powerful when still so young, eight or nine times out of ten, means that it is the infant of a Violet Shadowmouse. I really wonder how he managed to make his way to your clan's manor, without a single adult Shadowmouse guard." Doehring Cowart said with an air of amazement.

Linley also agreed with Doehring Cowart's words.

"Linley." Doehring Cowart suddenly looked at Linley with a strange look in his eyes. His voice carrying a hint of enticement he said, "Regardless of why the infant Violet Shadowmouse is here... would you want to collect it as a companion? Shadowmice grow very rapidly, especially Violet Shadowmice. In ten years or so, it will finish its growth cycle. By that time, you would have a

magical beast companion of at least the seventh, and possibly even the eighth rank.”

Hearing his words, Linley’s heart fluttered.

Taming a magical beast of the seventh or eighth rank was extremely difficult. But taming them when they were in the infant stage was far easier.

In addition, not all infant magical beasts were the same. Some grew up very quickly, while some grew up very slowly. Amongst the ‘dragon’ type magical beasts, some could take a thousand years to mature. Most humans simply didn’t have the ability to wait so long. Shadowmice were one of the types of magical beasts that grew up fairly quickly.

But encountering an infant Violet Shadowmouse was simply too rare of an occasion.

After all, the more powerful a magical beast was, the more importance it would attach to protecting its young. Although it wasn’t too clear why this young Shadowmouse had appeared within his manor, it was an indisputable fact that it was indeed here, alone.

“Linley, possessing a Violet Shadowmouse is equivalent to possessing an entire Shadowmouse army!” Doehring Cowart smiled at Linley. “This is why the Violet Shadowmouse is a far more precious magical beast than many other beasts of the seventh or eighth rank.”

Doehring Cowart continued to try and entice Linley.

How could a seven-or eight-year-old Linley resist?

“Grandpa Doehring, how would I tame this Violet Shadowmouse?” Linley looked excitedly at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart felt very happy. “If little Linley really can tame this Shadowmouse, in the future, I can be a bit more at ease.” Doehring Cowart knew very well that as a spirit, he had no mageforce of his own at all. A Saint-level Grand Magus without mageforce really didn’t have many attacking abilities.

There was no way for him to protect Linley.

But after the past half year, he had already begun to consider this pure, hard-working child as his own grandson. Naturally, he wanted to come up with ways to improve Linley's strength.

"Linley, you must be calm." Doehring Cowart said solemnly. "Even if this is just a Violet Shadowmouse infant, his speed is comparable to a mature Shadowmouse of the fourth rank. Even your Uncle Hillman wouldn't be able to catch him. You simply don't have the ability to forcibly subdue him, and you also are not able to utilize a soul-binding magical formation.

Linley was startled.

His overheated mind suddenly calmed down. Laughing bitterly, he said, "Now I remember. To tame a magical beast, the first way is to forcibly subdue them, and the second way is to use a soul-binding magical formation, which can only be utilized by a magus of the seventh rank, at least."

Linley couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed.

Alas, he was too weak. Even though he had the good fortune to encounter a Violet Shadowmouse infant, he didn't have the ability to tame it.

A Clumsy Method

“Linley, don’t be discouraged. I only meant to say that there was no way for you to forcibly subdue him, I didn’t say that it was impossible to tame him at all.” Doehring Cowart laughed self-indulgently. “If he were an adult Shadowmouse, I probably wouldn’t be able to help, but... he’s just a baby Shadowmouse. As a Saint-level Grand Magus, I have some methods which can be effective in dealing with a baby Shadowmouse. In addition, there is no need for a soul-binding magical formation.”

Linley’s calm mind immediately grew agitated again, and he turned to look at Doehring Cowart with shining eyes.

“Grandpa Doehring, quick, tell me, what’s your plan?” Linley excitedly spoke to him mentally.

Doehring Cowart said with a self-satisfied smile, “It’s simple. The ‘soul-binding’ technique used by the soul-binding magical formation creates a master-servant bond. And naturally, if one can subdue a magical beast, one is qualified to become its master. Right now, there’s no way for us to initiate a ‘master-servant bond’, so we can only take a step back... and initiate a ‘bond of equals’ with the Shadowmouse.”

“Bond of equals?” Linley said curiously. “What is that? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s normal for you not to have heard of it. Even five thousand years ago, during the era in which I lived, very few people knew about the ‘bond of equals’.” Doehring Cowart’s eyes crinkled as he smiled. “A bond of equals represents that you and the magical beast share the same status in the relationship, with no one being the master or being the servant. As a matter of fact, a ‘bond of equals’ will give you a more intimate relationship with your magical beast, and your magical beast will more whole-heartedly assist you, giving the two of you superior teamwork.”

Linley now understood.

“Oh? Grandpa Doehring, from your words, it sounds like there’s a lot of advantages to this ‘bond of equals’. Why don’t most people use it?” Linley queried.

Doehring Cowart laughed loudly. “Because, the ‘bond of equals’ is not initiated by people. Rather, it is initiated by the magical beast.”

“Initiated by the magical beast?!” Linley was stunned.

No wonder there was no need for setting up a soul-binding magical formation. This bond was initiated by the magical beast itself. Doehring Cowart continued, “Every single magical beast, upon birth, has the ability to initiate a ‘bond of equals’, but in their entire life, a magical beast may only enter this bond a single time. It isn’t like the soul-binding master-servant relationship, where once the master dissolves the relationship, someone else can use another soul-binding technique to tame the beast again.”

Linley nodded.

“But it is extremely difficult to convince a magical beast to willingly initiate a ‘bond of equals’,” Doehring Cowart continued more seriously. “You need to convince a magical beast that you are like family, and make it decide that it cannot bear to part from you. Only then will it willingly enter a ‘bond of equals’ with you.”

Linley nodded slightly.

“Adult magical beasts have a very high intelligence, so if you want to move the heart of an adult magical beast and make it view you as family, it is almost impossible.” Doehring Cowart sighed. “But juveniles are different. It is much like how human babies have low intelligence and can easily be tricked into liking you by, say, giving them some tasty food. The intelligence of magical beast babies is even lower. As long as you feed him often, he will like you. Then, spend some time playing with him. In a short period of time, this magical beast will come to adore you. This is especially true for an infant magical beast who has been separated from his community. Those are even easier to tame.”

Hearing Doehring Cowart’s words, Linley felt as though a great weight had

been lifted from him.

“So it’s just a matter of coaxing a little kid.” Linley laughed.

He was extremely experienced in this. Ever since he was young, he had accompanied his younger brother, Wharton, playing with him and coaxing him. Linley was very much a master in the art.

“Linley, don’t be too cocky. If you want to coax an infant magical beast, you have to pay attention to many details. If you aren’t careful, this little Shadowmouse might just bite you,” Doehring Cowart reminded.

“Bite me?”

Linley looked at the far-off Shadowmouse. The sound of it crunching through rocks could be heard from afar. The Shadowmouse was chewing through it as easily as he normally would’ve chewed through bread. Linley didn’t question the sharpness of the teeth of this Shadowmouse in the slightest.

“Then what should I do?” Linley immediately lost his confidence.

“Relax. Based on my method, you won’t have any problems at all. Based on this ‘clumsy idea’ that I have, all you need is time and patience. Don’t get agitated or impatient.” Doehring Cowart slowly began to explain his ‘clumsy idea’. “Linley, a Shadowmouse is an omnivore; it will eat anything. Bones, rocks, meat. But its favorite food is still meat, especially roasted meat. This is based on the experience of elders.”

“Therefore, just go up Wushan to kill some beasts, then place the cooked meat far away from him on the ground. Remember. Do not try to get near him. Each time he eats, wait for him to approach you.” Doehring Cowart laughed. “If you try to approach him, it might cause him to attack you out of fear! But if he approaches you, then there won’t be any danger at all.”

“This method is clumsy, but very safe,” Doehring Cowart said with a smile.

Linley understood.

This method really was a bit clumsy, but it was also simple and direct.

“Grandpa Doehring, won’t this Shadowmouse run all over the place?” Linley was worried that if he went and got some roasted meat, he might come back to

find that the Shadowmouse had gone. There would be nothing he could do then.

“Who can say? It all comes down to your luck. But I believe that in a short period of time, it won’t go anywhere.” Doehring Cowart said.

“Fine, I’ll go kill some wild beasts.” Linley nodded, then quickly ran towards Wushan. His footsteps were very sure, but strangely made no sound at all. This was the proof of one’s ability as an earth-style magus.

After departing from the back gate of the manor, Linley began to run at a normal pace, his footsteps beginning to sound again.

“Young master Linley, headed to the back mountain again?” Uncle Hiri, broom in hand, was dusting the floor. He saw Linley and smiled at him.

“Yup.” Linley assented as he sped up his pace.

Over the past half year, Linley had been going to Wushan to train in magecraft almost every afternoon. No one else knew that he was training in magecraft, of course. But they knew that in the afternoons, Linley liked to spend his spare time playing in the mountains.



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Autumn. Most of the trees on Wushan had shed their leaves, but there were still many evergreen trees, as well as some maple trees covered in deep red leaves.

A vigorous, nimble shadow could be seen piercing through the mountain forests. Linley ran silently, but nimbly and fast. After having absorbed earth essence for half a year, Linley didn’t just possess mageforce; his physical strength had been raised as well.

By this point in time, Linley’s body was comparable to the average fifteen-to-sixteen-year-old in the town of Wushan, and possessed the strength of a warrior of the first rank.

There were many squirrels and rabbits on Wushan, while there weren’t many

fierce beasts. This was the reason why most adults didn't worry too much about their children playing in the mountain. After all, Wushan was a fairly small mountain, with very few large animals, much less magical beasts.

Linley's footsteps suddenly halted, as he saw a dull-yellow colored rabbit eating grass up ahead.

Even a very cautious wild rabbit wasn't able to detect Linley in the slightest.

"Wild rabbits have a fast reaction time, and run fast too. Best if I use magic." Linley immediately began to chant the words to a magical incantation.

Linley felt that in the center of his chest, a small gust of earth-style mageforce began to throb. Most warriors stored their battle-qi approximately ten centimeters below their navel, but magi stored their mageforce directly in the middle of their chests, at the middle of a line between their nipples. But spiritual energy, of course, was stored in their head.

It didn't make much of a difference if a magical incantation was mumbled or shouted. The only thing that mattered was making sure one's spiritual energy was guided by the energies released by the incantation.

In scant seconds, Linley finished his incantation, and his eyes lit up as he stared at the hare.

Earth-style, magic of the first rank – Earth Spike!

"Poof!"

A sharp spike of earth erupted from directly beneath the wild hare, piercing directly into its chest. Scarlet blood flowed out, dyeing its soft fur. Shocked at the ambush, the hare immediately began to struggle, but all it succeeded in doing was make itself lose blood even faster.

Linley immediately ran over and grabbed the rabbit by the throat with one hand. "CRACK!" The rabbit, previously struggling in agony, twitched twice, then went still. Ever since watching those two battles half a year ago, the 'bloodthirsty' nature of the dragonblood in Linley's veins had been in full sway.

"I am both a warrior of the first rank and a magus of the first rank, but in terms of attack power, my magic is stronger." Grabbing the wild rabbit, Linley

couldn't help but laugh and then sigh.

Magi were divided into nine ranks, and becoming a magus of the first rank was easy. But later on, it would become much harder, and take more time, to attain each new rank! Many powerful magi of the seventh or eighth ranks would spend hundreds of years and still find it hard to attain a higher rank.

But for the first rank, half a year would be enough for someone talented. Even if one didn't have much talent, as long as they met the basic requirements for becoming a magus, two to three years would be sufficient for them to become a magus.

The rabbit in his clutches, Linley immediately began running down the mountain.

"Linley, why aren't you cooking it? Although the Shadowmouse will eat raw meat, his favorite is cooked meat." Doehring Cowart's voice sounded in Linley's mind.

"Grandpa Doehring, I bet you've never coaxed any kids before." While running, Linley replied in a teasing voice.

Doehring Cowart was startled. He had never had any grandchildren, and why would a revered Saint-level Grand Magus like himself stoop to coaxing other kids?

"Um, no, I haven't." Doehring Cowart was forced to admit.

Linley self-confidently said, "I often have to coax little Wharton. Lemme tell ya, if you want to give a kid something, you can't give them something too good right off the bat. Otherwise, in the future, they'll expect something really good every single time, or something even better. Right now, the Shadowmouse is chewing on rocks. If I give him some raw meat, he'll be really happy. I'll give him raw meat for seven or eight days, and then I'll give him cooked meat. That will make him even happier."

Doehring Cowart immediately understood.

The older one got, the craftier one became. How could he fail to understand this logic? It was the same method he had used in dealing with subordinates. First giving them just a little taste, and then giving them more later. If you gave

them too much too early, it would be hard to satisfy their urges in the future.

“I read about this as well in a book regarding raising monkeys. ‘Saying three in the morning and then raising to four in the afternoon’ is much more effective than ‘saying four in the morning and then lowering it to three in the afternoon’.” Linley grinned.

Doehring Cowart suddenly felt that although Linley was only eight, he wasn’t in any way inferior to many young adults.

“Looks like the educational methods of the Baruch clan are rather effective after all.” Doehring Cowart silently sighed with praise. Education can raise a person’s intelligence, but most commoners didn’t have access to education. Most commoners could not meet either the entry requirements or the fee requirements for good magus or warrior academies.



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None of the people of Wushan found it strange for Linley to be running home with a wild hare in hand. In truth, ever since Linley had learned the ‘Earth Spike’ spell, he often brought wild hares home.

“Young master Linley is so formidable. He caught another wild hare.” The commoners in the town grinned as they watched him pass by.

Linley also politely smiled back at them as he walked past them on the street.

“I wonder if the Shadowmouse will eat something which is provided by another.”

Taking a deep breath, Linley entered his family’s manor and went to the back courtyard, and one careful step at a time, approached the location where the Shadowmouse had appeared, his footsteps not making a single sound. In a short period of time, Linley returned to his earlier position.

“Where’s the Shadowmouse?” Linley stared at the ancient building, but aside from some rubble and rotting leaves, he didn’t see anything.

Some of the stones still showed signs of being chewed on, but despite

scanning inside the entire building, he couldn't see even the shadow of the Shadowmouse. Linley couldn't help but feel despondent and miserable. "Grandpa Doehring, the Shadowmouse isn't here anymore. It was just an hour. Did it leave already?"

A ray of light shot out of the Coiling Dragon Ring and transformed into the white-robed Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart also frowned in confusion. "That shouldn't be the case. It was just an hour. Did it really leave already?"

Suddenly!

"Crunch, crunch." That familiar, soft crunching sound could be heard once again. Linley's eyes brightened, and he immediately turned and headed towards an ancient courtyard nearby. Arriving at the entryway, he clearly saw the black Shadowmouse chewing on stones in one spot, unmoving. He seemed almost like a sculptor, as he chewed each rock into surprising, bizarre shapes.

Linley stood at the doorway.

Tap! Linley purposefully let his foot bang into the doorway and make some sound.

"Eek!"

The black Shadowmouse immediately moved and in the blink of an eye, appeared over ten meters away. His two guileless eyes stared towards the doorway, and he immediately saw Linley. His eyes were filled with caution.

"Here, this is for you to eat."

Linley smiled at the Shadowmouse, then tossed the wild hare in front of the doorway. Perhaps the Shadowmouse couldn't understand human speech, but Linley understood that an intelligent magical beast should be able to understand the meaning of a smile.

After all, magical beasts weren't like wild beasts. Their intelligence levels were only slightly lower than humans, and some powerful magical beasts were incredibly crafty.

"Don't rush it, don't rush it." Linley kept on telling himself, and then forced

himself to slowly walk away.

The Shadowmouse saw Linley depart, and then looked at the wild hare. He only managed to resist for a short period of time, then he scurried like a flash to the doorway while still staring at the now-distant Linley. Only then did he look at the dead hare. The Shadowmouse immediately grew ecstatic and was so happy that he began to hop about.

“Squeak, squeak!” The Shadowmouse began to make a happy sound.

And then he immediately began to eat the wild hare. His sharp teeth chewed at an incredibly fast rate. Although the Shadowmouse had a small body, this wild hare which was physically larger than the Shadowmouse was fully devoured by it, aside from the fur. Even the bones weren't spared.

“Buuuurp!” The little Shadowmouse made a belching noise, and then, in a very human-like gesture, rubbed its belly, extremely content.

Compared to stones, raw meat was clearly a much tastier treat.

After finishing his meal, the Shadowmouse glanced again in the direction which Linley had departed in. The baby Shadowmouse immediately felt a degree of kinship for this young fellow. After all, he was just recently born, an infant magical beast. The baby Shadowmouse even felt a bit of anticipation. Would this young man return in the future with another wild hare?

That same day, before dinner.

“Wonder if the little Shadowmouse ate it or not.” Linley was currently in the back courtyard of the manor, and walked towards the area where he had tossed the wild hare earlier.

“Linley, don't worry. That's just a baby magical beast. It's always very hungry.” Doehring Cowart's laughter echoed merrily in Linley's mind.

Linley nodded slightly. He quickly arrived at the doorway, and saw that at the doorway, there was some rabbit fur splattered with blood. But the rabbit's flesh and bones were all gone. Seeing this, Linley's eyes immediately shone.

“Wonderful!” Linley clenched a fist.

The first step was a success. The only thing left to do was persevere!

The next afternoon, Linley killed another wild hare as well as a wild chicken. He gave the wild hare to Uncle Hiri to prepare for dinner, and then tossed the wild chicken in the exact same location as he had tossed the hare; at the doorway to that courtyard.

“The Shadowmouse is actually here staring at me.” Linley chuckled as he saw the Shadowmouse inside the courtyard watch him approach.

“Linley, looks like things are progressing smoothly. He didn’t run away immediately upon seeing you, which means that he doesn’t feel much hostility towards you.” Upon seeing this, Doehring Cowart secretly felt joy for Linley. Linley really was lucky to have met such a powerful juvenile magical beast.

“I really wonder what this young fella’s parents are up to.” Doehring Cowart was secretly suspicious.

After placing the wild chicken at the doorway, he said a few words to the young Shadowmouse, smiled, and then retreated. But this time, he didn’t depart, but just stood off to the side and watched. Shortly afterwards, the young Shadowmouse scampered out. Looking around himself, when he saw Linley’s far off presence, he wasn’t too scared. He immediately lowered his head and began to eat the chicken.



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Day three. Day four. Day five.

These activities continued. Day after day, Linley continued to undergo meditative training while preparing wild rabbits and other animals for the little Shadowmouse to eat. Nobody in the entire town of Wushan, including Hogg and Hillman, knew that Linley was learning magic. Similarly, none of them knew that Linley was taking care of a juvenile magical beast that already possessed power of the fourth rank!

Only Doehring Cowart was aware of it all, as he watched Linley mature.

“There’s no way that this tiny little town of Wushan is big enough for Linley.” Watching Linley enter the meditative trance to practice magic, Doehring Cowart

felt a hint of excitement. “Sooner or later, he will bring an adult Violet Shadowmouse and step onto the endlessly broad stage that is the world of the Yulan continent.”

The Ernst Institute

As time passed, the little Shadowmouse, which had not known much love from others, began to fear Linley less and less. By the eighth day, when Linley put the rabbit down, he moved only two steps away, and that little Shadowmouse still immediately ran over to eat, and even squeaked twice at Linley.

The tenth day!

“Right, today I’ll give the little Shadowmouse some cooked meat.” Linley covered a wild chicken with a cloth sack, and then happily went to the back of the ancient courtyard in the manor.

Doehring Cowart was walking by Linley’s side as well, but aside from Linley, no one else could see him. Doehring Cowart was smiling so widely that his white whiskers were leaning horizontally. “Linley, over these past nine days, the little Shadowmouse has lost all fear of you. Today, you are even giving him cooked meat. He’s going to be extremely excited and will become even closer to you.”

Hearing his words, Linley couldn’t help but grin as well.

Just as Linley walked into the courtyard...

“Squeak, squeak!” The little Shadowmouse immediately ran up to Linley, and began hopping up and down while squeaking at him.

“I haven’t even taken the food out, and he’s already run up to me. He really isn’t afraid of me at all.” Linley felt joy in his heart.

Next to him, Doehring Cowart smiled merrily at the little Shadowmouse, which didn’t notice his presence at all. Doehring Cowart said with a smile, “Looks like he’s already feeling quite close to you.”

“Squeeaaaak!” The little Shadowmouse looked at Linley with its innocent

black eyes and began to squeak with impatience, as though telling Linley to hurry up and give him the food already.

“Don’t be impatient.” Linley took the roasted chicken out of the clothsack.

Upon smelling the roasted chicken, the little Shadowmouse’s eyes shone, and then it looked at Linley pitifully. Seeing this, Linley couldn’t help but laugh until his stomach hurt. In the past, when Linley gave good food to little Wharton, little Wharton would say, “Big bro, I want!” while staring at him in a pitiful manner.

Now this little Shadowmouse was doing the same!

“Hehe, all yours!” Linley gave the cooked chicken to the Shadowmouse.

The little Shadowmouse squeaked with joy, immediately seizing the roast chicken. After taking a single bite, the little Shadowmouse began to eat faster and faster. In a very short time, the roast chicken, which was about the same size as the Shadowmouse itself, had been completely devoured.

“I really don’t get how his stomach can contain so much. How can he swallow that much food?” Linley laughed while sighing.

It seemed as though this time, the little Shadowmouse had enjoyed his meal very much. He was so happy that he immediately began to hop up and down while squeaking at Linley, while even hugging Linley’s leg with his own front arms. Linley couldn’t help but feel pleased; this was the first time that the little Shadowmouse had acted so intimately towards him, even after eating.

“Linley, try and use your hand to smooth his fur. Usually, most magical beasts like their family members to groom them and stroke their fur,” Doehring Cowart advised.

Linley tentatively stretched his hand out and placed it on the little Shadowmouse’s head. The little Shadowmouse didn’t dodge in the slightest. Instead, it contentedly half-closed its eyes. Linley immediately felt more confident, and began to stroke his fur, causing the Shadowmouse to feel so comfortable that it began to snore.

“This little guy is so adorable.” Linley was really beginning to like this little Shadowmouse more and more.

“Grandpa Doehring, magical beasts are so strange. That Velocidragon is so huge and has such tough scales, making it a magical beast of the seventh rank. But this little Shadowmouse, when he grows up, will also become a magical beast of the seventh rank. Both of them have the same rank, but why is there such a big difference between them?”

While petting the little Shadowmouse, Linley couldn't help but feel amazed.

“You can't judge them just based on their appearances. Perhaps an ordinary old geezer that you meet on the street is able to ride a flying dragon and level a mountain with the wave of a hand.” Doehring Cowart laughed merrily.

Linley understood this logic.

But unconsciously, he still used appearances to judge.

For example, that Velocidragon. Seeing how huge its body was and seeing how its scales gleamed with a frozen golden light, anyone could tell how powerful it was.

“I really wonder when this little Shadowmouse will initiate a ‘bond of equals’ with me.” Linley mumbled. There was nothing he could do. The ‘bond of equals’ could only be initiated by magical beasts, so he could only passively wait.

Doehring Cowart laughed. “Things are progressing very well. Remember. You must have patience.”

“Right. I got it.” Linley laughed as well.



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In the blink of an eye, time passed. Linley had fed the little Shadowmouse for twenty days now, and the little Shadowmouse was now behaving in a familiar way towards him. But for some reason, even though the two of them had become extremely close, the little Shadowmouse still had not initiated the ‘bond of equals’.

Darkness covered the land, and the entire town of Wushan was very quiet.

Within the Baruch clan's living room, candlelight flickered from within as

Linley and his family, along with Housekeeper Hiri, were enjoying supper together on the long dining table.

Halfway through the meal, Hogg put down his utensils and turned to Linley. “Linley, I hear that you’ve often been bringing roasted hares to the back courtyards?”

Linley was startled.

“Looks like it is time for me to confess.” Linley said to himself, then looked at Hogg and nodded. “Father, recently I discovered a cute animal living in our back courtyard, an extremely cute animal. So I often bring him some food.”

“A cute animal?” Little Wharton’s eyes shone.

“Oh.”

Hogg nodded. “People rarely visit the back courtyard, so it’s normal for there to be animals there. Right. In a week or so, Fenlai City is going to begin another round of magical aptitude testing and magus recruitment. Do you want to participate?”

“Oh, the magus testing and recruiting event?” Linley suddenly remembered this event.

The ray of light which only Linley could see shot out from within the Coiling Dragon Ring, turning into the white-bearded Doehring Cowart. Doehring Cowart laughed at Linley, “Linley, the magus testing and recruiting event is optional for you. Under my guidance, will you achieve less than at a magus academy?”

Linley agreed with this line of thought.

Doehring Cowart was a Saint-level Grand Magus. Would any magus academy require a Saint-level Grand Magus to teach there?

“What, you don’t want to go?” Hogg’s face, previously smiling, immediately grew cold as he frowned.

Hogg remembered clearly that ever since the battle between the dual-element magus of the eighth rank and the small party, Linley had very much wanted to become a magus. Why was he hesitating now? In Hogg’s heart, he too hoped that his son could become a magus.

“Father, I...”

“No, Linley, accept your father’s offer.” Doehring Cowart frowned and hurriedly said.

Linley’s words died unspoken on his lips. At the same time, he suspiciously asked, “Grandpa Doehring, I have you to teach me, right? With you teaching me, why would I need to go to a magus academy? Wouldn’t that be a waste of family resources?”

“No.” Doehring Cowart said seriously. “I haven’t interacted with the Yulan continent for over five thousand years. Five thousand years, Linley! You must understand that many magi in the world have been continuously researching and developing new spells during this time period. Who knows how many new spells have been developed in the interim.”

Linley suddenly understood.

“And Linley, you must know that the town of Wushan is not the stage on which you will perform. You must step onto a far wider stage.” Doehring Cowart said seriously.

“A far wider stage...”

Linley couldn’t help but be moved.

He couldn’t help but remember that huge Velocidragon, and the destructive power unleashed by the ‘Dance of the Fire Serpents’, as well as the Saint-level Grand Magus ‘Rudi’, who effortlessly controlled those countless boulders to cause an absolute calamity.

“The future...”

Linley’s heart began to beat faster. If he could one day step atop the head of a dragon and control cataclysmic power, if he too could feel the power of standing at the very pinnacle of mankind, that must be an amazing feeling. When he thought of this, Linley felt his blood begin to boil.

“Linley, what are you thinking about?” Hogg was beginning to grow unhappy. While he was talking to Linley, Linley was daydreaming.

“Oh, nothing!” Linley immediately looked at Hogg and quickly nodded while

saying solemnly, “Father, in my heart, I really want to become a magus. In a week, please arrange for me to go to Fenlai City to take part in the magus testing and recruiting event.”

Upon hearing these words, Hogg finally smiled.

“Magus, ooo, ooo, like that fire-breathing magus?” While listening, little Wharton clapped his little hands together.

“Wharton, that was just a circus trick! Don’t mix up circus tricks and real sorcery.” Hogg said seriously.

“Oh.” Little Wharton pouted and stopped talking.

Linley chuckled, then turned to look at Hogg. “Father, there must be many magus academies. Which ones are good? Right, are there any combined magus academy/warrior academy schools?”

Hogg laughed as well. “Actually, all four of the major empires and both of the major alliances have their own elite academies. You should know that one of the four major empires, the O’Brien Empire, is the empire with the strongest military power.”

Linley nodded. Everyone knew that.

“The most elite school in the O’Brien Empire is the O’Brien Academy, which is reputed to be the number one warrior academy in the entire Yulan continent. But as far as magus academies go...” Hogg chuckled. “The number one magus academy in the entire Yulan continent belongs to our Holy Union. Its name comes from a legendary Holy Emperor of the Holy Church, ‘Holy Emperor Ernst’. The ‘Ernst Institute’.”

'Bebe' the Shadowmouse

“The Ernst Institute is the number one magus academy in the world. All of the graduates of the Ernst Institute are at least magi of the sixth rank, and there’s even many who are of the seventh rank! If our Baruch clan was able to produce a magus of the seventh rank, we at least would stand a chance of recovering our ancestral heirloom.”

While speaking, Hogg looked at Linley eagerly.

Linley could feel the hope which Hogg was placing on him.

“Our ancestral heirloom. For our ancestral heirloom to be lost to us is a humiliation that must be washed away.” Linley could also feel his heart grow heavy.

As a scion of the ancient Dragonblood Warrior clan, he felt proud of his ancient and mighty lineage. But the mighty Dragonblood Warrior clan had lost its own ancestral heirloom. What a humiliation! Hogg and countless elders who had passed away had all felt ashamed whenever they thought about it.

Unfortunately, the type of family which could collect the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ was not an ordinary one, and the current Baruch clan was far too weak.

“Ernst? The legendary Holy Emperor of the Radiant Church?” The nearby Doehring Cowart started.

“What is it, Grandpa Doehring?” Linley asked questioningly. “I bet all of the hundreds of millions of citizens in the six kingdoms and fifteen dukedoms of the Holy Union know about the legendary Holy Emperor Ernst of the Radiant Church.” Linley also knew much about the affairs and history of the legendary Holy Emperor Ernst.

He had dramatically raised the profile of the Radiant Church, and single-

handedly created the Holy Union.

“I didn’t imagine that kid, Ernst, would end up having such accomplishments. And he even became a legendary Holy Emperor of the Radiant Church!” Doehring Cowart sighed.

“Grandpa Doehring, you knew Holy Emperor Ernst?” Linley was somewhat surprised.

But then, Linley thought things through.

That’s right. In the past, when the Pouant Empire was still unified, the Radiant Church, the Cult of Shadows, and even the Pavilion of Divinities all had many churches within the empire. But all of those churches were under the control of the Pouant Empire.

“Naturally. Ernst was a genius who entered the Saint level when he was merely fifty or so years old. But in my age, he could only be considered a promising latecomer,” Doehring Cowart said calmly.

When Doehring Cowart was still alive, Ernst had still been developing himself. When Ernst had finally entered the Saint level, Doehring Cowart had already been standing at the very pinnacle of the Yulan continent for a long time. Even amongst Saint-level combatants, Doehring Cowart would have been considered one of the greatest.

Doehring Cowart had an extremely high status within the Pouant Empire, which Ernst hadn’t come close to matching, at the time.

If Ernst had run into him, he would have had to courteously bow and pay his respects.

“I didn’t expect that after I died, Ernst would become so incredible.” Doehring Cowart laughed faintly.

Linley couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of veneration for Doehring Cowart from his heart. A Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, and one of the most powerful persons in the Yulan continent. And now, Doehring Cowart was carefully instructing him in magic. How fortunate Linley was!

As dinner progressed, the conversation amongst the Baruch clan manors was

quite cheerful.

“Linley, in a week’s time, I’ll arrange for Uncle Hillman to take you to Fenlai City and attend the magus testing and recruiting event.” Hogg smiled towards Linley.

“Yes, father.”

Linley nodded.

“Young master Linley, I’m sure that you will be able to enter the finest of magus academies.” Housekeeper Hiri chortled.

“The finest. Oh. The finest!” Little Wharton’s hands were covered in grease from eating, but still beamed as he waved his greasy hands.

Hogg smiled faintly as he said, “Becoming a magus is no easy thing. Perhaps only one in ten thousand has the talent. The requirements for entering the Ernst Institute are even higher. Only someone with an extremely high aptitude for magic will be admitted. If Linley can become a magus, I will be very satisfied, regardless of what academy he is accepted to.”

“I won’t let you down, father.” Linley’s words were filled with confidence.

Because Linley, after all, was already a magus of the first rank.



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As time flowed onwards, seven days passed in the blink of an eye.

Linley was lying on the grass near the back courtyard, while the little Shadowmouse was hopping up and down around Linley. It was squeaking nonstop, but Linley paid him no mind.

The little Shadowmouse rolled its eyes, then stood up on its hind feet and placed its front feet on top of Linley’s body.

“Squeeeek.” The Shadowmouse called out with displeasure.

Linley rubbed the little Shadowmouse’s head. “Alright, stop making a fuss. Tomorrow, I’m going to leave home and go to the capital. After the magus

recruitment event is over, I'm going to be going to a magus academy. I'm afraid we won't have many chances to meet after that."

There was no way he could bring a little Shadowmouse into a magus academy.

Not a single student in a magus academy was an ordinary one, and there were many powerful magi there as well. If they found a little Shadowmouse there, they would probably immediately subdue and tame him. Even magi of the seventh and eighth ranks were present in magus academies. Catching a little Shadowmouse wouldn't be too hard.

After all, he hadn't bonded with the little Shadowmouse yet, so anybody could subdue and tame him.

"Sniff, sniff..." Hearing Linley speak, the little Shadowmouse also began to sniff in a low tone.

"You don't even know what I'm saying," Linley shook his head helplessly.

"I don't know how much time I will have to spend in a magus academy, or how many years I will be there for. Will we ever meet again?" Linley stroked the little Shadowmouse's fur, somewhat unwilling to part from it. After playing with the little Shadowmouse for the past month, he had really come to care for the cute little Shadowmouse.

The little Shadowmouse enjoyed the petting so much that its eyes grew half-lidded as it squeaked quietly in contentment.



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The next day, after lunch. The Baruch family's front courtyard.

Hogg stood there, straight as a ramrod. Staring directly at Linley, he said, "Linley, the town of Wushan is located fairly close to the capital, just ninety or so kilometers away. You should be able to make it to the capital before nightfall. Remember, when you reach the capital, don't cause any trouble. There are too many rich and powerful people in the capital."

“Yes, father.” Linley bowed as he spoke.

“Hillman, I entrust Linley to you.” Hogg looked at the nearby Hillman.

Hillman smiled as he said, “Lord Hogg, please set your mind at ease.”

“Alright, you can go now.” Hogg laughed.

“Farewell, father,” Linley said respectfully, and then smiled at little Wharton.

“Wharton, your big brother is gonna leave now.”

Little Wharton immediately squinted towards Linley. In a sad voice, he said, “Big brother, bye bye!”

Linley glanced at the back courtyard, thinking to himself, “I’m afraid no one is going to come bring meat to the little Shadowmouse in the next few days.”

Hillman, who was next to him, said to Linley, “Linley, let’s go!”

“Yes, Uncle Hillman.”

Linley didn’t think about it anymore, and immediately followed Uncle Hillman as they departed from the manor.

“Squeak.” On the rooftops above the living room of the Baruch clan manor, the little Shadowmouse watched Linley and Hillman depart. The little Shadowmouse’s mind was filled with questions. In his eyes, this was the time when Linley should be going off to kill a wild hare. Why had he taken up a bag and headed off with someone else?

The little Shadowmouse really liked Linley.

Over the past month, the friendless little Shadowmouse had really come to view Linley as family.

“Squeak!”

The little Shadowmouse’s body flickered and in the blink of an eye, disappeared from atop the eaves of the Baruch clan’s manor. In two or three movements, it moved, reappearing on top of a nearby peasant’s house, still watching Linley and Hillman. As it followed behind Linley, the little Shadowmouse had soon left the town of Wushan.

The little Shadowmouse had previously watched Linley go hunting rabbits in

the mountain, but this time, Linley wasn't headed for the mountain. He was headed off in a totally different direction, traveling on a road. The little Shadowmouse immediately panicked.

“Squeak, squeak!”

The little Shadowmouse suddenly rushed in Linley's direction.

Just as Linley was walking, he suddenly discovered that his legs had been hugged from behind. Lowering his head, he saw that it was the little Shadowmouse. The little Shadowmouse was standing up on his hind legs, his two forelegs tightly clenched around Linley. He stared at Linley with two quavering, pitiable eyes, as though he were about to cry.

“Uh, what's the little Shadowmouse doing here?!” Linley was somewhat surprised.

Next to them, Hillman turned his head towards them. Upon seeing the little Shadowmouse, he was shocked. “A magical beast! Is it a Stoneater Rat?” Hillman didn't know too much about the various types of magical beasts, but there once was an entire army which had been devoured by Stoneater Rats, so most soldiers knew and feared rat-type magical beasts.

“Linley, be careful!” Hillman immediately rushed towards them. Linley only saw a blur, and then Hillman was there, right next to the little Shadowmouse.

But the little Shadowmouse was even faster, and in the blink of an eye, scurried on top of Linley's shoulder.

“Uncle Hillman, hold it!” Linley finally managed to react.

Hillman was startled.

“Uncle Hillman, he's the pet that I've been feeding and raising in the back courtyard,” Linley hurriedly said. “Little Shadowmouse, isn't that right?”

The little Shadowmouse seemed to understand Linley's words, and his small head nodded.

Hillman looked at Linley with shock. “Linley, are you saying that you've been raising... raising a magical beast?”

“Uncle Hillman, wait a sec. Lemme tell him to go home.” Linley cupped the

little Shadowmouse in his hands and said to it, “Little Shadowmouse, I am going to leave with Uncle Hillman to the capital. You cannot go to the capital. Understood?”

The little Shadowmouse just stared at Linley with pitiable sad eyes, as though he were about to cry

Linley placed the little Shadowmouse on the floor, then waved his hand at it. “Go back.” And then he pointed to the road. “I’m going that way. To the capital.”

After waving his arm, Linley began to continue going forward.

“Squeak. Squeaaaaak!” The little Shadowmouse stood there, watching Linley.

“Uncle Hillman, let’s go. Hehe, the little Shadowmouse is smart. He knows what I’m saying,” Linley said to Hillman. Hillman, who had been watching this spectacle with amazement, chuckled and then continued walking forward with Linley.

Seeing Linley and Hillman slowly disappear, the little Shadowmouse still stayed there, unmoving.

“Squeak squeak...”

The little Shadowmouse suddenly gave out a loud squeak, and then turned into a black blur, traveling twenty or thirty meters in the blink of an eye. His speed was absolutely shocking, as was his agility. Linley and Hillman were chatting while walking on the road, but Hillman suddenly felt something was quickly charging them from behind and couldn’t help but look back.

“Whoosh!”

Hillman wasn’t even given enough time to react. That blur suddenly landed next to Linley’s legs, and immediately chomped down on Linley’s right leg.

“OW!” Feeling the sudden, fierce pain, Linley immediately jumped up in the air.

Looking down, he saw that it was actually the little Shadowmouse. At the moment, the little Shadowmouse was staring up at Linley with its pitiable, sad little eyes. Linley rubbed his leg, and noticed that he was actually bleeding. He

couldn't help but grow unhappy. But seeing how sad the little Shadowmouse was, he couldn't grow angry at him.

"Linley, are you okay?" Hillman said.

"I'm fine," Linley chuckled.

Suddenly —

A thick, dense black light began to emanate from the little Shadowmouse's body. A droplet of fresh blood suddenly flew out from the corner of its mouth. That droplet of fresh blood held both Linley's blood as well as the little Shadowmouse's blood. That blood suddenly, bizarrely transformed into two opposite, interlocking black triangles, which the thick black light merged with, forming a strange magical formation which gave off a dark aura.

Linley and Hillman watched, stunned.

"Is this... can this be?" Linley had a wild guess in his heart.

From within the Coiling Dragon Ring, Doehring Cowart flew out. His white beard fluttering happily, he said, "Linley, the little guy is setting up a 'bond of equals' formation."

"It really is the 'bond of equals'?" Linley's heart clenched. Even though he had guessed as much, he still felt stunned and excited.

The strange black magical formation separated into two parts, with one of the two black triangles flying into Linley's body, and the other one flying into the little Shadowmouse's body. Upon seeing this, the nearby Hillman was filled with shock and fear.

"Linley, are you okay?" Hillman was starting to fear for Linley.

"I'm fine. I'm wonderful!" Linley could feel his spirit and the little Shadowmouse's spirit interlinking.

Standing on this quiet road leading out of the town of Wushan, Linley and the little Shadowmouse stared at each other, engaging in their first communication.

"Little Shadowmouse, what is your name?" Linley mentally asked him.

The little Shadowmouse said, somewhat excitedly, "Bei... bei..."

Linley stared at the little Shadowmouse.

“What’s the little Shadowmouse saying?” Linley didn’t really understand.

His white beard flowing, Doehring Cowart floated next to him and mentally said, “Linley, this little Shadowmouse is still an infant. He can’t form precise sounds yet. Even when engaging in mental communication with you, for now, he can only communicate simple intentions.”

Due to their spiritual link, Linley could feel the little Shadowmouse’s excitement, but the little Shadowmouse simply couldn’t speak at all.

“Okay. You were saying ‘Bei’... ‘Bei’... so I’m going to call you ‘Bebe’. How’s that?” Linley grinned as he watched the little Shadowmouse.

The little Shadowmouse seemed to ponder this for a while, and then happily nodded.

“Bebe.” Linley was grinning so widely, his face was about to split.

“Squeak squeak.” The little Shadowmouse immediately began to jump up and down.

“Bebe!”

“Squeak squeak.”

“Bebe!”

“Squeak squeak.”



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An eight-year-old child and a little Shadowmouse were both excitedly shouting.

“Linley, this... what... what is this?” Only now did Hillman recover from his stupor. His eyes couldn’t help but grow round with shock. “Linley, what was that black magical formation just now? What just happened? Are you okay?”

Hillman had heard that for darkness-style magic, there were many curses and hexes involved.

Could it be that Linley had just been hexed?

Hillman, who only had an inkling about magic, couldn't help but feel shock and fear.

"Haha, I'm fine. It's just that Bebe has become my magical beast, just now." Linley was extremely happy. "Come, Bebe, hop onto my shoulder." Immediately, the little Shadowmouse let out a happy squeal, then scurried onto Linley's shoulder.

"You... tamed him?" Hillman was stunned.

Hillman was a worldly man, and of course he knew that taming a magical beast was an extremely difficult, extremely arduous matter. But just now, Linley had actually subdued a magical beast.

Hillman felt totally bewildered. "You... you don't have a soul-binding scroll, how... how did you?"

"That's enough, Uncle Hillman," Linley chortled. "Let's hurry, we have a lot of ground to cover. The capital is still really far away." As he spoke, Linley pulled Hillman by the hand, not allowing him to speak as they continued heading towards the capital.

And the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, stood happily on Linley's shoulder and squeaked.

And with his squeaks to accompany them, Linley, Hillman, and the Shadowmouse disappeared off into the distance.

Fenlai City

Next to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts were the Holy Union and the Dark Alliance. And the capital kingdom of the Holy Union was the Kingdom of Fenlai!

Fenlai City, in turn, was the capital of the Kingdom of Fenlai.

In addition, it also served as the 'Holy Capital' of the Holy Union, because the Radiant Church itself was headquartered in the western part of Fenlai City.

The entire City of Fenlai was divided into two parts; East Fenlai City and West Fenlai City. East Fenlai City was governed by the King of Fenlai, while West Fenlai City was managed by the Radiant Church. Because Fenlai City was both the kingdom's capital as well as the Holy Capital, its opulence could be matched by very few cities in the entire Yulan continent.

Fenlai City took up a huge amount of space, and had more than a million denizens living within its area. In the entire Yulan continent, it could be considered one of the top five megacities.

As nightfall came, Linley and Hillman entered Fenlai City.

"Wow."

As they walked on Fragrant Pavilion Road, the primary road of East Fenlai City, Linley felt as though his eyes were dazzled. The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, had been instructed by Linley to hide within his clothes, but he also took a sneak peek at their surroundings, and then began to squeak in shared excitement.

Fortunately, the entire road was filled with all sorts of noises and gaudy things, so nobody noticed the sound.

"Quiet!" Linley gently tapped the little Shadowmouse, which obediently went silent. But it continued to express its excitement through its shared mental connection with Linley.

The entire Fragrant Pavilion Road was constructed of symmetrical limestone tiles, wide enough to allow multiple horse carriages to pass simultaneously. On each side of the tiles were hotels, clothing stores, weapon stores, nightclubs, and all sorts of other places. In addition, both sides of Fragrant Pavilion Road were lined with pine and cypress trees.

Rich madams and young ladies, all wearing fashionable new clothes, were chatting and smiling as they walked along the road.

Seeing Linley's reaction, some of the nearby noble ladies began to titter quietly amongst themselves while pointing at Linley. Clearly, Linley's reaction was that of a 'country bumpkin entering the city'. The nobility of the capital had a clear sense of innate superiority towards those country bumpkins.

"Hmph. How uncultured," Linley frowned, feeling very unsatisfied by the pointing and laughing of those noble ladies.

Having been nurtured and educated by the clan since his earliest days, Linley quickly managed to subdue his sense of excitement, making the expression on his face much more tranquil, at least superficially.

"Linley, how do you feel about Fenlai City? This is the largest city in our entire Holy Union." Hillman walked alongside Linley, occasionally seeing some warriors and even one or two magi pass by. He couldn't help but sigh, "Linley, in Fenlai City, mighty warriors and mighty magi are a very common sight."

Linley laughed while nodding. "In the books, it is said that Fenlai City is the political, economic, and cultural capital of the entire Holy Union."

"This is heaven for rich people and people with status." Hillman nodded and sighed.

The Fragrant Pavilion Road, bustling with activity, often had many opulent carriages pass through it. After wandering the Fragrant Pavilion Road for a time, Hillman and Linley headed directly for an ordinary guesthouse to settle down.

There was a small restaurant near the guesthouse, so Linley and Hillman decided to have dinner there.

That night, within the guesthouse.

Linley and Hillman were staying in the same room. There were two beds in this room. Immediately upon entering, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, leapt out from within Linley's clothes and immediately began circling around Linley while squeaking loudly.

"I know, I know, you're hungry. Eat up." Linley threw the roast duck he had brought back from the restaurant onto the floor, and Bebe immediately ran to it and began chewing excitedly.

"Linley, get an early night's rest. Tomorrow morning, you will participate in the magus assessment and recruitment event," Hillman instructed.

"Understood, Uncle Hillman." Even as he spoke, Linley walked to a nearby window and pulled it open.

The guesthouse was three stories tall, and Linley was staying on the third floor. There were no three-story buildings in the town of Wushan at all, but in the capital City of Fenlai, they were a common sight. The capital even had seven-or eight-story buildings.

Peering out through the window, Linley saw that the streets were still filled with people.

"Whew. It's been quite a while since I've been in a large city." A hazy white light shone out from the Coiling Dragon Ring, transforming into a white-bearded old man. Doehring Cowart and Linley stood side by side as they stared at the street below.

"Grandpa Doehring." Linley immediately greeted him.

"Linley, how does it feel to be in a big city?" Doehring Cowart laughed as he spoke.

"No big deal." Linley quirked his mouth.

Doehring Cowart sighed emotionally, "You haven't been here very long. You don't know much about how large cities like this work. This place will have countless lavish places to spend money, like large auctions, where some magnates would spend even hundreds of thousands of gold coins, or perhaps even millions of gold coins, to purchase just a single item."

“A million gold coins?” Linley felt his throat go dry.

How enormous a sum was that? His own family’s possessions, all added together, probably wouldn’t even total a million gold coins.

“There are many rich families here. Money, power, beauties... the fight for these things is fierce. Every day, someone dies here. The poor ditch-diggers of Fenlai City will often find buried bodies, which perhaps used to belong to a noble family.”

Doehring Cowart chuckled calmly. “But in order to stand up in that sort of world, you must have some sort of personal power.”

“Don’t hope to be able to rely on the benevolence of others. Everything will depend on yourself, and yourself alone.” Doehring Cowart looked at Linley.

In truth, the dragonblood flowing through Linley’s veins also made him thirst for battle and blood.

“If anyone threatens me or my family, I will kill them,” Linley said resolutely. After having read many history books about the rise and fall of noble families, Linley knew very clearly that showing mercy to enemies was the same as being merciless to oneself.

If you let an enemy off the hook, they might one day murder your family.

“However, right now my power is very weak.” Linley couldn’t help but recollect how, when he had first entered Fenlai City, those noble ladies had looked down on him. In the eyes of those upper class people, he was nothing more than an impoverished little country bumpkin.

With a calm smile, Linley sat down on the bed and entered the meditative trance, beginning to gather energy.

The meditative trance was a good way to train one’s spiritual energy. The way it worked was, it used all sorts of methods to exhaust one’s spiritual energy to a bare minimum, and then allowed rest to recover it!

Within the dantian in Linley’s chest...

A misty earth-colored haze billowed about within the dantian. This misty haze was the mageforce which had been derived from natural earth elemental

essence. Based on Doehring Cowart's teachings, from the first to sixth ranks, mageforce appeared as a haze. As a magus continued to progress, the quality of the mageforce would rise, and so too would its density.

Upon reaching the seventh rank, the mageforce of a magus would condense into a liquid.

Thus, between the sixth rank and the seventh rank, there was a major leap to be made!

"This kid, Linley, is so hard working. Even at night, he is training his mental energy." Seeing Linley sitting cross-legged with his eyes closed, Hillman couldn't help but silently praise him. Mental energy was extremely important to both magi and warriors!



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Early next morning, on East Fenlai City's Greenleaf Road.

One of Fenlai City's principal roads, the buildings constructed on each side of Greenleaf Road were lavishly built and decorated. Some of those buildings were actually owned by the kingdom. And the tallest building of them all? It was the Cathedral of the Radiant Church.

The Radiant Church controlled the entire Holy Union, which was comprised of six kingdoms and fifteen dukedoms.

The Holy Emperor of the Radiant Church had an extremely high status. He had the authority to depose any of the kings of the various kingdoms! This was why, in Fenlai City, the tallest building was the Cathedral of the Radiant Church.

This morning, many people were gathered around the entrance to the Cathedral of the Radiant Church. The vast majority of the people there were richly dressed noblemen. Countless carriages filled up the space in front of the Radiant Cathedral, and the various nobles chatted with each other.

Linley and Hillman had arrived here as well.

"Uncle Hillman, there are so many people here today. Many nobles brought

their children here.” Linley laughed to Hillman. At this time, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was hiding within Linley’s clothes, occasionally peeking out to get a look at his surroundings.

Hillman laughed calmly, “Nobles? Every single student of the Ernst Institute can easily become an earl in any kingdom.”

“An earl in any kingdom?” Linley immediately understood.

It wasn’t hard to be conferred a noble title in any kingdom, but to become an imperial noble would be extremely difficult. After all, any of the four great empires were a match for the entire Holy Union. The Kingdom of Fenlai couldn’t come close to comparing to them.

“Oh, Lord Doyle, you came as well?”

“Eber, I’m here because of my child, of course. Hess, come pay your respects to Uncle Eber.”

Not too far away, a group of nobles were chatting amongst themselves. The testing fee alone at this magus testing and recruiting event was ten gold coins. And if a student was accepted to a magus academy, then the school fees would be even higher. Most magus academies charged hundreds of gold coins each year! Ordinary families simply couldn’t afford the fees. But if their children were selected, naturally they would be able to find a noble patron to pay for them.

However, not all magus academies had expensive tuition fees.

For example, the number one magus academy, the Ernst Institute. Because it admitted so few students, any students who hailed from the Holy Union did not have to pay any fees at all! After all, anyone who could be admitted to the Ernst Institute had to be genius level. In the future, their possibilities were limitless.

“Hmph. Those commoners and country bumpkins have also come. Aren’t they just dreaming?” A far-away noble laughed.

There were some commoners amongst the hundreds of people crowding the square, and some countryside nobles such as Linley. Usually, those nobles from small countryside noble families were also looked down upon. The nobles of the capital were an arrogant lot who generally looked down on people.

“Linley, don’t pay any attention to the likes of them.” Hillman said in a low voice.

Glancing at the group of nobles, Linley chuckled quietly. “Uncle Hillman, I won’t pay any mind to their like.” Under the tutelage of his father Hogg, Linley wouldn’t pay too much heed to that group of self-centered, arrogant nobles.

The entire square was clearly delineated into two camps. A circle of nobles who conversed casually, and another with commoners or countryside nobles.

At the moment, two armor-clad warriors were standing in front of the Radiant Cathedral, barring all entry.

After a while, a black-robed official stepped forth from the cathedral doors. Stopping in front of the doors, he smiled and said in a bright voice, “The magical assessment ceremony is about to commence. All of the recruiters for the various major magus academies are ready as well. Everyone who is here for the test, please follow me into the main hall.”

The Magical Aptitude Test

Under the guidance of the church official, all of the people in the square were led into the main hall of the cathedral.

Within the cathedral.

The great hall of the cathedral had a floor paved with marble, and hanging above was a massive crystal chandelier. It could easily fit the hundreds of people who had entered yet still feel spacious.

In the very front of the great hall there were a line of chairs, seated upon which were the representatives and recruiters of each of the great magus academies. Directly in the middle of the great hall was the testing location.

The black-robed church official smiled and said in a clear voice, “The testing location is right in the center. All test-takers, please come forward one at a time. No one else can enter the circle in the center. All test-takers, please get in line. Family and friends, please step to one side.”

“Linley, here is the examination fee. Here is your proof of identification. Go quickly. Oh right, let the little Shadowmouse stay with me. It will be difficult to have the little Shadowmouse with you as you take the test,” Hillman said.

“Bebe, stick with Uncle Hillman for now. I’m going to take the test.” Linley mentally instructed the little Shadowmouse, who somewhat unwillingly shuffled around a bit under Linley’s clothes. But after multiple requests from Linley, the little Shadowmouse directly scurried into Hillman’s clothes.

Linley then accepted the ten gold coins and headed towards the line. The youths there ranged in age from six or seven years old to seventeen years old. These children organized themselves into two long lines, while the cathedral pursers collected the fee from each of them.

The central circle was ten or so meters wide, and there were three adults

within it. Two of them were responsible for administering the test, while one was responsible for recording the results. The testing equipment consisted of a crystal sphere and a complicated, six-sided magical formation.

“First.”

The bald old man pointed at the crystal ball and said, “Place your hand atop the crystal ball. We will test your elemental essence affinities.”

The first test-taker was a twelve-or thirteen-year-old young man. The young man nervously placed his right hand atop the crystal ball. Immediately, the entire crystal ball began to emanate a hazy, light red glow, with the occasional hint of green mixed in.

The bald elder glanced at the scrap of paper in his hands, and emotionlessly said, “Age, twelve. Elemental essence affinities – Fire, average affinity. Wind, low affinity.

“Now, step into the magical formation. Time to test your spiritual essence. Remember, stand there. Don’t kneel or fall down. Let’s see how long you can take it.” The bald elder remained as cold as ever. The young man nodded, then stepped into the six-cornered magical formation. A holy white aura immediately emanated from the bald elder, which shot into the middle of the magical formation.

Light-style elemental magic – Overawe!

“Looks like the testing procedures in this era are the same as they were in the past.” Doehring Cowart flew out of the ring and appeared next to Linley.

“Grandpa Doehring.” Seeing Doehring Cowart, Linley calmed down.

“In the magical aptitude test, the elemental essence affinity test is secondary. The spiritual essence test is the main one. After half a year of meditation, your spiritual essence should be sixteen or seventeen times that of most people your age.” Doehring Cowart chuckled at Linley. “For you, this test will be extremely easy.”

In a short period of time, the youth in the middle of the magical formation could no longer hold on.

“Spiritual essence, two times stronger than the average person of the same age. Not qualified to become a magus.” The bald elder coldly announced as the magical formation deactivated, and the youngster quietly departed.

A burst of noise from nearby.

“Silence.” The bald elder coldly said, and immediately the large group of nobles no longer dared to speak. “Next.”

Doehring Cowart watched with interest from the side.

One youngster after another was tested. Of the first ten, none met the requirements. Right now, there was a young lady in the magical formation, who had been able to hold out for longer than any of the ten before her.

“Hrm?” The bald elder’s eyes shone, and he immediately increased the power of the magical formation.

After a long period of time, the young lady finally dropped down to one knee.

The bald elder nodded in a satisfied manner. A hint of a smile on his face, he said, “Spiritual essence, eight times stronger than most people your age. The minimum qualifications for becoming a magus have been met. You also possess average elemental essence affinity. You can become a magus!” The judgment of the bald elder had just determined this young woman’s fate.

“Oh, how wonderful!” The first person to shout with joy was not the young woman. Rather, it was the young woman’s father, a bald, middle-aged, gentlemanly-looking person.

“Quiet!” The bald elder snapped in a cold, unhappy voice.

Immediately, the ushers came and escorted the girl and her father to where the line of magus academy recruiters sat.

Many envious eyes were cast towards the young woman.

As time went on, the people in the main hall grew more and more numerous. The magical testing event would go on for seven days, so most people didn’t feel the urge to come right away at the beginning. When Linley’s turn came, the line of test-takers had already stretched out the main doors of the cathedral.

“Next, The bald elder said again.

Linley calmly walked into the center, with Doehring Cowart remaining by his side. In Doehring Cowart's eyes, only a Saint-level combatant could, just barely, detect his presence. These ordinary magi definitely couldn't detect him.

Linley placed his right hand on the crystal ball.

Instantly!

The crystal ball suddenly burst forth with light, as though it were a sun! Earthen rays of light intersected with green rays of light, and there were even some thin lines of red spaced in between. That eye-piercing brightness forced even the people nearby to squint their eyes.

Seeing the sun-like brightness emanating forth from the crystal globe, everyone in the great hall was stunned.

The bald elder quivered as he stared at the piece of paper in his hands. It was clearly written on top that Linley was eight years old.

"Age, eight. Elemental essence affinities – Earth and Wind, affinity level of exceptional for both! Fire affinity, average." That bald elder felt his heart thumping wildly. Most magi had average elemental essence affinity. Even high elemental essence affinities were quite rare, and as for exceptional affinity... exceptional affinity was ridiculously rare!

By way of explanation, an ordinary magus might take ten hours to produce a certain amount of mageforce, but Linley would only require a single hour to get the same result.

"Oooooooo."

The entire hall was shocked. Not only was the kid's elemental essence affinity of the exceptional level, it was for two different elements! This was simply too terrifying.

"Exceptional affinity for the wind element?" The nearby Doehring Cowart was shocked.

"Whoah, I, I have affinity for the wind-style as well?" Linley was stunned. He couldn't help but turn to look at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart squeezed out a smile. "Linley, I did tell you early on that I

could only test for the earth elemental essence affinity. Right. When you absorbed natural elemental essence, did you never sense any wind essence?”

“Wind elemental essence?” Linley was stunned. “The first time you taught me to process elemental essence, you told me to not be distracted, so although I did notice some green-colored specks of light around me, I didn’t pay any attention to them. But later on, when I began to absorb earth elemental essence, I would be surrounded by earth essence and the green specks would no longer appear.

Doehring Cowart now understood.

When training mageforce, especially dual-element mageforce, if one only focused on training one element, such as earth, all the nearby earth elemental essence would be drawn near while all other essences, including wind, were pushed aside.

“Afterwards, whenever I trained, I only sensed earth elemental essence nearby. I didn’t think about those green specks of light.” Linley was feeling extremely happy as well.

Because he knew how powerful a dual-element magus was; far more powerful than a single-element magus.

After the elemental essence affinity test came the spiritual essence test!

“Remember, when engaging in the spiritual essence test, you must hold strong. Resist for as long as you can,” Doehring Cowart said solemnly. “I don’t know much about the wind-style, so you absolutely must go to a magus academy. With such strong elemental essence affinities, it would be an absolute waste for you not to train in the wind-style.”

Linley understood this as well.

“Please enter the magical formation.” The bald elder actually used the word ‘please’ when addressing Linley.

Even the nearby nobles began to look at Linley with a new light in their eyes. For a person to have exceptional elemental affinity meant that they could generate mageforce in an extremely short period of time. The rest of their time could then be spent on cultivating spiritual energy. His future prospects would

therefore be unlimited.

Linley stepped into the magical formation.

The magical formation immediately glowed with a white aura, and then a sense of pressure immediately flooded into Linley's spirit.

Light-style elemental magic – Overawe!

“How weak. Compared to the overawing presence of the Black Dragon from half a year ago, it simply isn't even close to being on the same level.” Linley was relaxed enough to even think about that.

As time went on, the aura of the magical formation grew stronger and stronger, and the overawing presence grew stronger and stronger as well. Everyone in the great hall held their breaths, as everyone watching knew very clearly that in the future, this plainly-dressed youngster would definitely become a powerful magus.

“Does anyone know that youngster? What clan does he belong to?” The nobles in front were all whispering to each other.

If they made friends with this youngster with amazing potential now, they would acquire, in the future, an extremely formidable ally.

“His name is Linley?” Some of the magus academy recruiters learned his name from the test administrators.

The entire group of magus academy recruiters, who had previously been sitting there smiling, all ran over en masse to watch. Which magus academy would not want to recruit a genius such as this?

Standing alone in the magical formation, Linley continued to resist the overawing presence.

Linley was breathing heavily, and at the moment, his entire mind felt hazy. That powerful spiritual pressure was pressing down on him like a mountain, and the strength of the pressure was continuing to rise. But Linley was continuing to persevere...

“The longer I can hold on, the better an academy I can enter.” Linley gritted his teeth.

And then, when the pressure had reached a certain height, Linley finally could no longer resist. He dropped to one knee, his hands clenching into fists on the floor.

Everyone's gaze turned to the bald elder.

His face suffused with a happy red glow, the bald elder announced in a clear voice, "Spiritual essence, eighteen times that of his peers, high level. High spiritual essence, exceptional elemental affinity."

At this point in time, all of the magus recruiters charged forward. "Hello, Linley. I come from the Lander Magus Academy. Our Lander Magus Academy sincerely would like to admit you into our school. As long as you enroll with us, your entire tuition will be free, and every year we will even provide you with a thousand gold coins for living expenses. We will also invite an especially skilled magus teacher to personally train you."

"Linley, I come from the Welling Magus Academy. We..."



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Seeing the swarm of people around him and how warmly they were treating him, Linley was stunned for a long moment, while in his heart, he sighed with amazement. In the blink of an eye, so many recruiters had learned his name. This was really too amazing.

"Hey, everyone, please return to your seats. We need to continue the test," the bald elder said in a kind voice.

He could be arrogant towards those common folk, but he had to be courteous to the representatives of mighty magus academies.

"Linley. Our Ernst Institute would sincerely like to invite you to become one of our students." From far away, another voice sounded out, and when it did, the entire hall went silent. Even the bald elder stopped speaking.

Linley turned around.

A white-robed middle-aged man walked over. Smiling, he said, "Exceptional

elemental affinity, high spiritual essence, and dual-element. Linley, our Ernst Institute would very much like to welcome you to join us. I don't know if you would be willing to enter our Ernst Institute?"

Hillman, nearby, had been staring in stunned silence. He immediately ran over next to Linley, so excited that his hands were quivering.

The Ernst Institute?

Enter the Yulan continent's number one magus academy, the Ernst Institute? What did that represent?

That represented that immediately upon graduation, even if he was just an average student, he could easily become an earl in any of the nearby kingdoms. If he was a superior student, even the four great empires would sincerely welcome him to join them.

Across the entire massive Yulan continent, the Ernst Institute only enrolled a scant hundred students each year!

A hundred students a year. What did this mean?

Every single student who was enrolled into the Ernst Institute could be described as a genius!

"Linley, agree to his offer," Hillman excitedly said.

Linley also felt extremely excited, but his head was extremely clear, and he also looked very calm on the outside. Linley knew very well that upon becoming a member of the Ernst Institute, and with the guidance of Doehring Cowart, in just a few decades, it would not be too difficult to become a magus of the seventh or eighth rank.

His clan would once again flourish.

"Sir, it would be my honor to enroll within the Ernst Institute," Linley said courteously.

Surprised at Linley's equanimity, the white-robed man still smiled. "Linley, I will inform the Institute of your biographical details. When the time comes, just bring your proof of identity to the Institute and take a second, correlating test. Then, you will become an official student of our Institute."

It was pointless to try and get someone else to take the test for you, because each school would do a backup test as well.

“Each academic year is divided into two semesters, with the first semester beginning on February 9th. As long as you arrive by February 9th, you will be fine. This is your proof of identity. It can also be considered your proof of admission.” The white-robed man withdrew a sealed red envelope from within his sleeves.

In fact, immediately upon knowing Linley’s test results, he had recorded Linley’s details into the paperwork in the envelope. Because the white-robed man believed without a doubt – no one would refuse an offer from the Ernst Institute!

“Thank you.” Linley accepted the envelope.

Linley didn’t look too excited on the outside, but Hillman was uncontrollably excited. A student at the Ernst Institute. Who amongst them were not venerated? Linley’s future accomplishments could already be predicted.

“Uncle Hillman, let’s go.” Linley placed the red envelope into his clothes, then left the main hall with Hillman.

Despite being packed, everyone in the main hall, from the commoners to the nobles, all discreetly made way for him to move through. Even those nobles who had previously scorned Linley as a country bumpkin were all now smiling at him in a friendly manner. Their attitudes were amazingly good.

This was a simple demonstration of the status which an Ernst Institute student held!

Watched by a crowd of nobles, commoners, and church officials, Linley and Hillman departed the cathedral.

“Squeaaaaak!” After exiting the cathedral, the little Shadowmouse shouted out, sensing Linley’s excitement.

Only now did Linley let the excitement he felt show on his face. His hands suddenly clenching into fists, his eyes shone with energy. Turning to look at Hillman, he rapidly said, “Uncle Hillman, let’s go, let’s go back! Back to the town of Wushan! I’ve gotta let my father know the news!”

The Secret Dragonblood Training Tome

The town of Wushan. The Baruch clan manor.

Hogg had just finished lunch not too long ago, and was currently sitting down, relaxed, on a sofa, while leisurely reading a book.

Two shadowy blurs suddenly entered the manor. It was Linley and Hillman, who had rushed the entire way back from Fenlai City. At the moment, both of their faces contained uncontrollable excitement, and Linley began to shout from far away, "Father, I've returned!"

"Lord Hogg." Hillman was very excited as well.

Hogg raised his head. Seeing the wild excitement on Linley and Hillman's faces, he had a positive premonition. He immediately stood up. Staring at Linley and Hillman, his voice quavered as he said, "How did the magus assessment test go?"

The Baruch clan had been in a downward spiral for too long. This ancient clan needed a mighty personage to restore it to its former glory!

"Lord Hogg, the Ernst Institute! It's the Ernst Institute! Linley was accepted by the Ernst Institute!" Hillman said excitedly.

Hogg seemed to have turned into a statue. At the moment, Hogg felt as though his brain had suddenly been deprived of oxygen, as everything went blank for a moment.

"Ernst... lord? Lord?" Hillman called out twice.

Hogg, slowly regaining his mental faculties, suddenly hurriedly walked towards Linley and Hillman. In a disbelieving tone, he said, "Ernst, did you just say, Ernst Institute?" Right now, Hogg's eyes were bulging and round.

"Father, here's the acceptance letter from the Ernst Institute." Linley directly handed the admissions envelope to his father. Hogg was stunned for a moment,

then quickly took the red envelope and removed the letter from within it. He scanned the letter carefully.

Several names in bright red particularly stood out – “Ernst Institute” “Linley”.

“Haha, hahahahaha! Elders of the Baruch clan, there is hope for our clan again!” Hogg suddenly lifted his head to the sky and laughed wildly, so hard that his entire body was trembling, so hard that tears began to flow. “There is hope for our Baruch clan again!”

That wild laughter and those coursing tears absolutely stunned Linley.

“Father...” Linley said in a soft voice, as though afraid to disturb his father.

Linley had never seen his father act so wildly before, and his father’s tears made Linley’s heart quaver as well.

Housekeeper Hiri came over as well. He was also stunned by Hogg’s reaction. Hiri had no idea what had just happened.

Hogg took a deep breath, then looked at Linley, his eyes filled with boundless excitement. “Good, good.”

“Hillman, Uncle Hiri!” Hogg looked at the two of them. “Tonight, I am going to host a banquet. Quick, make the arrangements! Tonight, I am very happy, extremely happy. To have such a son, even if I die, I will be able to proudly face the elders of the Baruch clan.”

“Yes, Lord Hogg,” Hillman and Hiri responded.

“Squeak squeak!” Suddenly, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, scurried out from within Linley’s clothes. He hopped onto Linley’s shoulders to stare at Hogg, his little eyes filled with anger.

Mentally sensing the little Shadowmouse’s emotions, Linley didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

As it turned out, the little Shadowmouse had fallen asleep next to Linley’s chest, but Hogg’s explosive laughter had startled him awake. An infant Shadowmouse spent a great deal of time napping, and hated being awakened. At this moment, he was naturally extremely furious.

“Shadowmouse. A magical beast, Shadowmouse?” Upon seeing the little

Shadowmouse with Linley, Hogg's facial expression changed dramatically.

"Father." Linley was afraid that his father would strike, so he hurriedly said, "The little Shadowmouse and I have already entered a soulbinding pact."

Hogg seemed to have been thunderstruck. He stared dumbly for a long moment. "You, you subdued and tamed this magical beast, this Shadowmouse?"

The two ways to tame a magical beast were 1) Subduing it by force, and 2) Setting up a soulbinding magic formation.

Hogg naturally knew very well that Linley's physical strength was very weak. And even the weakest Shadowmouse was at the third rank of power. And in addition, there was no way for Linley to set up a soulbinding magical formation, so that couldn't have happened at all.

"Yes, father, I've tamed him," Linley said seriously.

Hogg only felt that his own son seemed to have dramatically changed, totally changed!

"Lord Hogg, Linley really did tame this Shadowmouse. I witnessed it personally. This little Shadowmouse is also the reason why in recent days, Linley has often caught wild animals to feed to the 'adorable pet' he had behind the back courtyard." Hillman explained.

"He was feeding this 'pet'?" Hogg thought for a moment, then stared at Linley disbelievingly. "Magical beast Shadowmouse. This is the 'cute animal' you told me you were feeding in the back courtyard?"

Linley nodded honestly.

Hogg didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. The 'cute pet' was actually a magical beast?

Although he had many questions about how Linley might have entered a soulbinding pact with the little Shadowmouse, Hogg didn't worry too much about it. Right now, he was in a wonderful mood.

"Fine, enough of that topic. Uncle Hiri, Hillman, lead the guards to make the arrangements right away. Tonight, I am going to host a magnificent banquet."

Hogg laughed loudly. Right now, his laughter was extremely full and carefree.

Linley stared at his father. From as far back as he could remember, he had never seen his father so happy.



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That very night.

It was extremely noisy inside the Baruch clan manor. Even the ten-plus bodyguards and their families had all been invited. There were five full tables placed in the main courtyard of the manor, and the entire Baruch manor was filled with laughter and joy.

“Yummy, yummy.” Little Wharton first grabbed this, then grabbed that, eating excitedly.

“Young master Linley, congratulations on being admitted to the Ernst Institute. In the future, young master Linley will no doubt become a mighty, powerful magus.” A clan guard laughed as he toasted Linley politely.

During this banquet, Linley was the main attraction.

Upon hearing that Linley had been admitted to the Ernst Institute, everyone present had become excited. One could easily understand that entering the Ernst Institute meant entering a certain destiny. In the future, Linley definitely would not be constrained by their tiny little town of Wushan.

“Big brother, all of them are toasting you. I want to also.” Little Wharton grabbed his juice cup.

Seeing little Wharton’s greasy hands, Linley didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. But he still raised his own glass of juice and tapped it against little Wharton’s cup.

“Come, we’re brothers.” Linley grinned as he lifted his cup as well.



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Late night, the Baruch family ancestral hall. Only Linley and his father were present.

The door to the ancestral hall was closed, and a row of candles was lit along the entire hall, making it quite warm. At this moment, Hogg was staring at the spirit tablet in the middle of the hall. His voice low, he said, “Linley, after the fifth Dragonblood Warrior was born, our Baruch clan began to weaken, generation by generation, to the point where even our hereditary, ancestral heirloom was lost. Every time I think of this, I can’t help but feel absolutely ashamed. We’re supposed to be the noble Dragonblood Clan!”

Linley stood behind him without making a sound.

He felt the shame as well.

An ancient clan which had lasted five thousand years. The Dragonblood Warrior clan. Linley felt pride in his heart. But their ancestral heirloom had been lost.

“Linley.” Hogg suddenly turned and looked at Linley solemnly. “From today forward, I will no longer treat you as a child. I will view you as the sturdiest pillar in the future of our Baruch clan! Our clan’s hopes for the future will all rely on you, now.”

“Yes, father.” Linley resolutely nodded.

“Wait a moment. I am going to get something.” Hogg suddenly turned and entered a hidden room next to the ancestral hall. Shortly afterwards, he returned with a thick book in hand. “Linley, take this and give it a good read. Memorize everything.”

“This is...?”

Linley looked suspiciously at the thick book he had just accepted. There were no words on the cover, but when he opened it, there were four big words printed on the first page – Secret Dragonblood Training Tome.

“The Secret Dragonblood Training Method?” Linley couldn’t help but look strangely at his father.

Hogg smiled. “Not only is it the Secret Dragonblood Training Method, this

tome also discusses many things related to our Baruch clan. The Secret Dragonblood Training Tome is included within, as well as the method to create and control the Dragonblood Needles, as well as the history of some of the elders of our clan.”

Linley flipped through it carefully.

Indeed, the tome was divided into four sections. The first part was regarding the ‘Secret Dragonblood Training Tome’, while the rest were regarding other matters pertaining to the clan.

“Linley, even if this tome falls into the hands of outsiders, it would be useless to them, as there is simply no way an outsider can train in accordance with the Secret Dragonblood Training Method. As for our family history, so what if someone learns about it? What’s more, we have multiple copies of this tome as well. This one is also just a copy. After so many years have passed, the original has long since turned to dust.” Hogg laughed as he spoke.

Linley immediately laughed as well.

“Makes sense. Even if someone acquires it, it would be useless.” Linley immediately began to more curiously flip through the pages of the tome and read through each section.

Secret Dragonblood Training Tome, Chapter 1.

“If one wants to utilize the Secret Dragonblood Training Method, one must be able to call forth the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors flowing through their veins. There are two ways of calling forth the dragonblood. The first method requires that the density of one’s dragonblood reach a certain level. But if the density is insufficient, there is still a second method...”

Reading this, Linley was stunned.

Aside from a high density of dragonblood, there was another method? Why hadn’t anyone in the family succeeded in all these years, then?

“The second method is to take a deep drink of the blood of a living dragon, or of the blood of a dragon that has just died a few minutes ago. The longer a dragon has been dead, the lower the chance of awakening the dragonblood! A deep drink of dragon’s blood can activate the inherent dragonblood flowing in

each member of our clan's veins. For the best results, drink the blood of a Saint-level dragon. If one only drinks the blood of a dragon of the ninth rank, the chances of activating one's dragonblood is rather low."

Reading through this, Linley was stunned.

"Our clan elders really were formidable. They actually came up with the idea of drinking the blood of a living dragon in order to utilize the Secret Dragonblood Training Method." Linley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"Drink the blood of a living dragon, and a Saint-level one at that? Linley, your ancestors really were extremely formidable." Doehring Cowart had appeared by Linley's side and was reading the tome as well. Seeing the introductory paragraphs, he couldn't help but feel shocked as well.

Hogg, of course, couldn't discover Doehring Cowart's existence at all. Hogg laughed bitterly at Linley. "Linley, did you see that? Based on our ancestor's method, the dragonblood is lurking hidden within all of our veins. To call it forth, there are just two methods. But the second method requires one to drink the blood of a living dragon. How can that be an easy task? What's more... Linley, flip to the back and take a look."

Linley flipped the page.

"However, this second method of drinking live dragon's blood is extremely risky. Dragon's blood is extremely forceful. When it is rubbed on one's body, it has the effect of improving the quality of one's body, rapidly increasing one's strength. However, it will also cause pain comparable to one's skin being peeled off. And this is just a topical application. If one actually drinks dragon's blood, then one's body will feel as though it is being scorched, to the point where one can actually be burned to death, with one's veins actually exploding, causing immediate death."

Upon seeing this part, Linley was utterly speechless.

"Father, who wrote this Secret Dragonblood Training Tome? Since it's so dangerous, why did he even include it?" Linley didn't know what to say.

Hogg said with a solemn face. "Linley, this Secret Dragonblood Training Tome was written by our founder and first ancestor, the very first Dragonblood

Warrior to appear in the Yulan continent, Baruch! He naturally must have had his own reasons for writing this down. Nonetheless, in our family history, there have been two descendants who drank the blood of a Saint-level dragon, and in the end, both of their veins erupted and they died.”

“There have been people who actually drank the blood of a Saint-level dragon?” Linley was somewhat shocked.

But actually, it was quite normal.

In the past, when the first, second, and third generation of Baruch clan members were all Dragonblood Warriors, the clan was in its glorious ascendancy. At that period in time, it wasn't impossible to procure the blood of a Saint-level dragon.

“The events of the past happened too long ago. The real secrets of that era, this book has not revealed. All I know is that because of this, the dragon race sent representatives to engage in discussions with our Baruch clan's clanlord. After this, our descendants no longer attempted this method. Later on, when our family line weakened, even when we wanted to drink dragon's blood, we no longer were able to.” Hogg shook his head and sighed.

Linley nodded.

The arrogance of the dragon race was something discussed in many books.

Capturing a live Saint-level dragon to engage in bloodletting? How great a humiliation would this be for the dragon race? It was quite lucky for the Baruch clan that the dragon race didn't exterminate them in a fiery rage. However, from this, one could imagine how powerful the Baruch clan had been at that time.

“This can't be right, father. If no one has ever successfully become a Dragonblood Warrior as a result of drinking dragon's blood, then why did our ancestor write that it was possible to use dragon's blood to refine our own? And even say that the blood of a dragon of the ninth rank would also have some effect?” Linley was really puzzled.

Hogg was startled.

“Linley, don't ask too much. Honestly, I only know a little bit about our family

history as well. As far as what happened four thousand years ago, there's no way we can clearly know what happened." Hogg laughed towards Linley.

Linley nodded.

But in his heart, Linley was still suspicious. If no one in history had ever successfully become a Dragonblood Warrior by drinking dragon's blood, then why would this method be written down in the Secret Dragonblood Training Tome?

"Linley, it's getting late. You should go back and get some rest." Hogg laughed.

Linley nodded.

Night.

Linley had returned to his own bedroom and was reading the tome, but his heart was still full of questions.

"Grandpa Doehring, what do you think? If no one has ever succeeded in using this method, how could it have been discovered?" Linley simply couldn't understand the logic.

Doehring Cowart was so old that he had become as crafty as a fox. Stroking his white beard, he said in a self-satisfied manner, "Linley, the answer is simple. Based on what I know, the dragon race is extremely proud, and also extremely large and powerful! I wager that drinking the blood of a live dragon is probably an effective method, but your clan came under tremendous pressure from the dragon clan, and therefore altered the contents of this book."

Linley immediately understood.

This was very possible.

Under pressure from the dragon race, the Dragonblood Warriors of the Baruch clan were undoubtedly forced to stop catching live dragons for bloodletting.

"But of course, that's just my conjecture," Doehring Cowart said placidly. "And Linley, based on what I know, drinking the blood of a live dragon is not necessarily a road to death. As long as you combine it with some Blueheart

Grass, the negative effects of dragon's blood will be negated. But I bet there are very few people nowadays who know this secret."

Linley was stunned.

And then, he was wildly overjoyed. "Grandpa Doehring, are you saying that fresh dragon's blood, when mixed with Blueheart Grass, is safe to drink?"

Doehring Cowart nodded confidently. "Of course. In the past, in the Pouant Empire, when a princess acquired a serious disease, in the end, the only method of curing her was a medicine that included a mixture of fresh dragon's blood and Blueheart Grass. As a matter of fact, I was the one who personally caught a Saint-level dragon."

"I remember the master physician who provided the prescription saying that everything in this world has its equal and its opposite. For every single ingredient, there was another that would match with it. In that era, the only person who knew how to mix fresh dragon's blood with Blueheart Grass was that old physician. Since six thousand years have gone by, no doubt no one knows it any longer," Doehring Cowart said calmly.

Linley nodded.

"Fresh dragon's blood and Blueheart Grass..." Linley's eyes shone with excitement. "In the future, when I am powerful enough and become a magus of the ninth rank or even higher, I will use fresh dragon's blood and Blueheart Grass to let little Wharton become a Dragonblood Warrior."

Linley even hoped that...

If he had the chance, he himself would use this recipe.

If he could become both a Saint-level magus and a Dragonblood Warrior... but of course, that was just a dream. To even be able to catch a Saint-level dragon was a distant, untouchable dream.

"The road ahead is still long. Time to sleep, time to sleep. I need to train tomorrow."

Instructions

Time flowed on, and in the blink of an eye, months had passed. Many new trees had begun to sprout in the town of Wushan, filling the area with a feeling of spring.

Beneath a pine tree.

Linley was seated cross-legged in a meditative trance, generating mageforce.

After having entered the meditative trance, Linley could clearly sense large amounts of earthen specks of light and green specks of light. These countless specks of light continuously swirled into his body and, through his limbs and his bones, were purified and stored within the central dantian in his chest.

Within his central dantian, there was a smoky earthen mist intermingled with a smoky green mist.

The earthen mist was his earth element mageforce, while the green mist was his wind element mageforce.

“Whew.” Slowly releasing a breath, Linley exited his meditative trance.

Doehring Cowart, wearing a moon-white robe, was seated cross-legged next to him, a smile on his face as he enjoyed the surrounding scenery. Seeing Linley awaken, he laughed. “Linley, you are heading to the Ernst Institute tomorrow, yet you are still hard at work today?”

Linley’s lips curved up in a smile. “Grandpa Doehring, I believe you were the one who said that strong combatants must work hard every single day, and not relax for even an instant. Only long-term training will produce astonishing power.”

“Little punk, so now you’re going to give me instructions?” Doehring Cowart laughed while grumbling.

“Hehe,” Linley chortled.

“Woosh!” A black shadow from far away came flashing towards them, appearing on Linley’s shoulders in the blink of an eye. It was the Shadowmouse, Bebe. Young Bebe leaned towards Linley, making a chewing motion with his mouth, while pointing at a nearby dead hare.

Just from the look on Bebe’s face, Linley knew what was up.

“You want me to cook it?” Linley laughed as he spoke.

Bebe nodded repeatedly.

“Linley.” The nearby Doehring Cowart mentally spoke to him. “This little Shadowmouse is really quite strange. It’s been months, but judging from his size, it’s almost as though he hasn’t grown at all. For an infant Shadowmouse, the early childhood growth rate should be quite noticeable.”

“I have no idea either.” Linley shook his head.

Although the Shadowmouse, Bebe, did not increase in size, his speed was improving quite remarkably.

“It really is bizarre.” Doehring Cowart looked at Bebe. Right now, Bebe didn’t have any idea that a spirit was mentally weighing him.

“It’s getting late. I’ll need to start warrior training soon.” Linley stood up and grabbed the dead hare as he began heading down the mountain. Doehring Cowart flew by his side, unhappily saying, “Linley, in the future, you will be a magus. Why are you still engaging in warrior training?”

Linley laughed, “Grandpa Doehring, I’ve discovered that warrior training can increase my endurance, and with increased endurance, my spiritual essence can increase as well.”

“I know that, of course,” Doehring Cowart said, dissatisfied. “But how could those basic training methods compare to the meditative trance in terms of how fast one’s spiritual essence increases?”

Linley shut his mouth and no longer spoke.

While it was true that fighter training allowed one to improve one’s spiritual essence, that wasn’t the real reason.

The real reason that Linley continued his fighter training was this. “In the

future, if I have the chance to drink fresh dragon's blood, I will be able to practice according to the Secret Dragonblood Training Tome. I have to keep up my physical training. The body is like a vessel, while battle-qi is like wine. The body is extremely important. The earlier I begin building my fundamentals, the faster my improvement will be when I study the Secret Dragonblood Training Tome in the future.”

Actually, based on Linley's affinity for elemental essences, he didn't have to spend too much time or effort to gather and generate mageforce each day.

Most of his time was spent in the meditative trance, training his spiritual essence.

But spending significant amounts of time training spiritual essence was exhausting. Warrior training served as a form of rest and alternative exercise.



*

The next morning, all of the commoners of the town of Wushan gathered on its main road, all for the purpose of sending Linley off. It was definitely an incredibly glorious thing for the town of Wushan to be able to produce a magus who would attend the Ernst Institute.

Each year, the Ernst Institute only accepted a hundred students from across the entire Yulan continent.

At the moment, Linley was still within the Baruch clan manor, while Hillman and the others were all outside. The only people within the manor were Hogg, Linley, little Wharton, and Housekeeper Hiri.

“Linley, today you are going to go to the Ernst Institute and formally become an Ernst Institute student. When you graduate from the Ernst Institute, you will be a powerful magus! Before you depart, as your father, I want to say to you...” On this last day, Hogg had a bellyful of things he wanted to say to Linley.

But after pausing for a long time, Hogg only said a few simple sentences. “Linley, remember the ardent desire that the elders of the Baruch clan have held for centuries, and remember the humiliation of the Baruch clan!”

Hogg's face was turning slightly green.

“When you graduate, you will be at least a magus of the sixth rank. If you work hard and train hard, it won't be too hard to become a magus of the seventh rank. And in addition, you are a dual-element magus! A dual-element magus of the seventh rank would definitely be a major force in the Kingdom of Fenlai. In the future, you will definitely be capable of retrieving our clan's ancestral heirloom. If you do not, even if I die, I will not forgive you!” Hogg fixed a deathly stare on Linley.

“Even if I die, I will not forgive you!”

These words made Linley's heart tremble.

These were the instructions his father gave to him upon their parting.

“Father, don't worry. So long as I live, I will ensure that the ancestral heirloom of our Baruch clan is restored to us. I so swear!” Linley promised, meeting his father's steely gaze, his own eyes filled with resolve as well.

Hogg's eyes began to shine, and he patted Linley on the shoulder with a mighty clap.

“I believe in you, son!”



*

On the road headed east from the town of Wushan, Linley turned his head and saw the hundreds of familiar faces who had come to send him off, with his father, Hogg, and his younger brother Wharton standing in the lead.

“Big brother, bye bye!” Little Wharton waved mightily.

Seeing his father and his younger brother, Linley also waved, his eyes turning red.

“Father. Wharton.” Linley's heart was filled with longing.

Ever since he was born, Linley had never left home for an extended period of time, but this time, he would be gone for extremely long. At this moment, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was obediently perched on Linley's shoulders, not

making a sound, as if he sensed Linley's thoughts. The nearby Doebling Cowart, in spirit form, also looked encouragingly at Linley.

"Linley, let's go," Hillman said. Hillman was escorting Linley to the Ernst Institute, acting as his bodyguard in the event that they met with any bandits.

Linley unwillingly took one last glance at his family, and then finally forced himself to turn away and begin traveling in the direction of the Ernst Institute.

"Farewell, my family. Farewell, my home."

Yulan calendar, year 9991. The nine-year-old Linley, accompanied by the young Shadowmouse, Bebe, and the Baruch clan's guard captain, Hillman, departed from the town of Wushan.

A Congregation of Talents

The Ernst Institute. The finest magus academy in the entire Yulan continent.

The Ernst Institute was located in a rustic area approximately twenty kilometers south of the Holy Capital of Fenlai City. The Ernst Institute was founded and financially supported by the Radiant Church. Naturally, it was wealthy and knew how to throw money around. They took up a very large space, with a circumference of ten kilometers. Such a huge academy was nearly the size of a city.

Outside of the Ernst Institute, few visible signs of human presence could be seen, just an empty mountain range.

Restaurants, clothing stores, bars, and other sorts of service industries were all located on the campus itself. It could be said that the students of the Ernst Institute spent their entire lives within the campus.

“What an imposing style.” Linley stood at the gateway to the Ernst Institute. He couldn’t help but sigh with emotion.

The main gate of the Ernst Institute was fully fifty meters wide. Above the great gate was an enormous, crescent moon-shaped construct, covered with all sorts of magical scripts which one could tell at a glance were amazingly complicated. One could imagine how powerful and mighty the magical formation protecting the Ernst Institute was just from seeing how complicated the scripts over the gate were.

Right now, the main gate of the Ernst Institute was a very lively place. There was a row of academic staff, and a single youth who had brought his admission letter and his proof of identity and had begun to be processed for admission. Linley immediately grabbed his own documents and headed in for processing as well.

“School officially starts February 9th. Today is February 8th. Based on the

notification, students must arrive before February 9th. Since the young man in front of me is also just arriving today, no doubt he also lives rather close to the Institute,” Linley thought to himself.

The young man in front of Linley could actually be more precisely described as a child. He was half a head shorter than Linley, and there was an old man by his side.

“Hi there. I’m from the O’Brien Empire, and my name is Reynolds.” The student being processed for intake in front of Linley suddenly turned his head and greeted him warmly.

Hearing that he came from the O’Brien Empire, Linley was startled. “The O’Brien Empire?”

The O’Brien Empire, one of the Four Great Empires, was located to the east of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, while the Ernst Institute was located west of it. In order to reach the Ernst Institute, one had to circle around the entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts from either the north or the south. After all, aside from combatants of the ninth rank or Saint-level combatants, no one dared to directly cross that mountain range.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was over ten thousand kilometers long.

For someone to come from the O’Brien Empire, the entire trip would have consisted of at least twenty thousand kilometers’ worth of travel. If they had come from the eastern part of the Empire, the journey would have been even longer.

It probably would’ve taken about a year or so to travel twenty thousand kilometers.

“My name is Linley. I’m from Fenlai Kingdom,” Linley courteously said to the boy called Reynolds.

Reynolds blinked, and sighed emotionally. “Fenlai Kingdom? Then you had it nice and cushy. It took me a full year just to get to Fenlai Kingdom from my home. It didn’t take you too much time.”

“Right. From my home to here, I travelled for about half a day,” Linley replied

honestly.

“Whoah...” The expression on Reynolds’ face was priceless.

One of them had travelled for over a year. The other, for just half a day.

“Students, hurry up.” One of the test administrators nearby urged.

One of the admission processes for new students was to retake the magus test. After all, the Ernst Institute was afraid that someone might steal an admissions letter and falsely enroll.

“Coming.” Reynolds went to take the test.

Upon seeing the results, Linley couldn’t help but feel shocked.

This boy named Reynolds had high elemental essence affinity... and as for his spiritual essence...

“Reynolds, eight years old. Spiritual essence, thirty-two times higher than students his own age. Exceptional level.”

Hearing these numbers, Linley’s eyes briefly bulged. But the test administrator seemed to be very calm, and not the least bit surprised.

“Linley, what is it? Amazed just by this?” Reynolds said dismissively. “This is the Ernst Institute. Each year, they accept only a hundred students from across the entire Yulan continent. Which one of them is not an amazing talent? My results can only be considered average, across the student base.”

“But the Ernst Institute does show some favoritism to the Holy Union. They accept fifty students from the Holy Union, and only fifty more in total from the other Four Great Empires. It’s so unfair.” Reynolds sighed.

Linley chuckled when he heard this.

The Ernst Institute was founded by the Radiant Church. Of course it would show favoritism towards the Holy Union.

“My turn.” Linley ran towards the test giver as well.

Reynolds wrinkled his little nose. “This fellow called Linley is from the Holy Union. He no doubt had a much easier time being accepted than me. I bet he isn’t as talented as I am.” Reynolds was extremely confident.

But when the test administrator reported Linley's results, Reynolds was shocked.

"High spiritual essence, exceptional elemental essence affinity? And dual-element affinity for earth and wind?" Reynolds was totally speechless.

Exceptional elemental essence affinity was already extremely rare, but Linley was not only dual-element, but had exceptional affinity for both the wind and the earth elemental essences. This was a true talent, one rather more formidable than even himself. After all... dual-element magi were extremely powerful.

"Reynolds, don't just stand there looking silly. Let's go." Linley laughed.

"Oh." Reynolds was a year younger than Linley, but judging from appearances, seemed three years younger.

Linley and Reynolds accepted their Ernst Institute student IDs, then acquired their residence keys. At the Ernst Institute, all students, regardless of wealth or economic background, had to live together. Tuition fees and residence fees were totally waived.

However...

"Hey, you have to pay tuition?" When Linley saw the old man accompanying Reynolds pull out the tuition money, he couldn't help but feel shocked.

Hillman, besides Linley, laughed. "Linley, the tuition waiver and rent waiver provided by the Ernst Institute are only for members of the Holy Union. All others have to pay an extremely high fee."

Reynolds nodded also.

The old man next to him smiled at Linley. "That's right. This isn't just the rule for the Ernst Institute; the number one warrior academy in the Yulan continent, the O'Brien Academy, does the same. They provide a full tuition waiver for their own Empire's students, but charge an astronomical fee for students coming from other places."

Linley wasn't stupid. He immediately understood.

"Linley, my young master has the same residence key as you. The two of you

should be living in the same residence. I hope that in the future, the two of you can help each other out.” The old man said.

“Okay, Grandpa Lomu, you can go back now. I’ve already arrived at the Ernst Institute., Reynolds said unhappily

“Uncle Hillman, you can go back as well. I can take care of myself.” Linley smiled as he spoke to Hillman, and Hillman nodded back, satisfied. “Then I’ll go back now, Linley. Work hard,” Hillman encouraged.

Linley smiled and nodded.

“Linley, let’s go.” Reynolds warmly grabbed Linley by the hand, and began to run into the Institute.

“Farewell, Uncle Hillman.”

Hillman and the old man both watched the children enter the Institute. Only after a long time did they depart.

After saying his farewells to Uncle Hillman, Linley and Reynolds entered the Ernst Institute together. The Ernst Institute was filled with shady groves, lakes, stone bridges and ancient buildings... an ancient aura permeated the entire place. Just from the size of the giant trees, which seven people would have to surround in order to hold hands, one could imagine how old the place was.

“It really is something. It isn’t nearly as gaudy as some of the newer institutes. This is what is known as ‘sophistication’.” Reynold’s curious eyes took in their surroundings while he spoke.

Within the Ernst Institute, as a one-time event, there were many instructional signs telling students where each location was. Clearly, this was intended to help assist the new students.

“Linley, let’s go find our dorm.” Reynolds, pulling Linley’s hand, began hurrying in the direction of the dormitories.

Dorm number 1987.

Linley and Reynolds had completed their admission processes at the same time, one after another. Most dorms held four students. When Linley and Reynolds arrived at the dormitory area, they couldn’t help but sigh in

amazement. At first glance, there appeared to be thousands of stand-alone dormitories.

Among the thousands of dormitories, there were even a few two-story apartment style dorms.

“1987, 1987...” Linley and Reynolds inspected the dorm numbers, running south nonstop.

The dorm area was numbered very logically, beginning from 0001, with each row housing 100 individual dorms. When Linley arrived at row 20, he saw dorm 1901. And then, as they continued running east, Reynolds began to pant for breath, until finally, they arrived at dorm 1987.

The Bros of Dorm 1987

“Wheh, I’m exhausted. Linley, how come you’re in such good shape?” Reynolds was panting for breath, but Linley didn’t feel anything.

“What, you are tired already?” Linley started to laugh. How short a distance had they just run?

He didn’t even feel too tired after running from the town of Wushan to the Ernst Institute.

“Hey, just put it down there. Right. Put the box down there. Put it down carefully. If you break it, there’s no way you can afford to compensate for it!” From within dorm 1987, the clear voice of another youth could be heard. Linley and Reynolds glanced at each other, then entered curiously. Immediately upon entering, they saw several muscular men busily moving things about.

A gaudily-dressed youth was standing in the center of the room, directing their moves.

Immediately upon seeing Linley and Reynolds, the young man’s eyes brightened, and he excitedly ran over. “Haha, you guys are my dormmates, right? I’ve waited so long for you guys. Up ‘til now, it’s just been me here. Lemme introduce myself. My name is Yale, and I suppose I just barely qualify as a member of the Holy Union.”

“What do you mean, you just barely qualify as a member of the Holy Union?” Reynolds mumbled, and then said, “My name is Reynolds. I’m from the O’Brien Empire.”

“My name is Linley. I’m from the Holy Union’s Kingdom of Fenlai.” Linley smiled as well.

As long term dormmates, in the future, they would be together for a long period of time.

“Oh, Reynolds, Linley, I am so happy to see you fellows. Hey, where did my exercise equipment go?” Yale turned his head and stared at his servants.

“Exercise equipment?” Reynolds blinked at Yale. “Yale, what do you have those for? Are you going to be a warrior?”

Yale wrinkled his nose as he chortled. “Although I am a dignified magus, I still need to work out and have a good physique. Otherwise, how will I be able to seduce beautiful women? There are many beautiful women amongst the ranks of the magi. And the female magi of the Ernst Institute are not only pretty; they are also very classy. Plus, there’s a lot of face to be gained by being able to brag to others that I have an Ernst Institute student as my girlfriend.”

“Uh...” Reynolds was speechless.

Linley didn’t know what to say either. Seeing the exercise equipment, Linley wanted to go work out, but he didn’t expect that these were the tools which Yale planned to use to do bodybuilding to seduce pretty girls.

“I’m eight years old. How about you, Yale?” Reynolds was clearly very open-minded.

Yale was extremely tall. The nine-year-old Linley was already 1.5 meters tall, but Yale was half a head taller than even Linley.

“Me? I’m ten. Haha, but I’m not getting any younger. My elder brother lost his virginity at age twelve. I’ve got to make some preparations in advance as well.” Yale’s eyes shone.

“What does ‘losing virginity’ mean?” Reynolds looked questioningly at Yale.

“Yeah, what’s ‘losing virginity’?” Linley also looked curiously at Yale.

Staring at his two dormmates, Yale became momentarily speechless as well. Next to Linley, the ghostly form of Doehring Cowart was holding his belly as he laughed uproariously. This made Linley ask him curiously, “Grandpa Doehring, why are you laughing?”

“Young master, we’ve arranged everything,” an extremely muscular man said respectfully.

“Mm. You can leave now. Go back and tell my father that in the future, if

there isn't something urgent, not to bother me. Oh, right. Remember... every year, he can't forget to transfer money into my magicrystal card. He should know very well that a magus needs a lot of money for his magistaff and socketable gems," Yale said loudly and casually.

"Yes, young master," the man said respectfully.

Yale nodded, satisfied, then dismissed the men with a wave of his hand, as though he were a general.

"Magicrystal card?" Reynolds stared at him in amazement. "The magicrystal card is only offered by the 'Golden Bank of the Four Empires', which all four of the great empires established together. I heard that the processing fees for requesting a card totals a hundred gold coins."

"Right on." Yale was quite knowledgeable about this. "The minimum starting balance for a magicrystal card is at least a thousand gold coins. But I'm afraid that a thousand coins wouldn't be enough to even sustain a month's worth of expenditures for me."

Linley, upon hearing these words...

"Rich guy," he sighed to himself.

His own father gave him only a hundred gold coins each year for living costs. In fact, in Linley's eyes, a hundred gold coins was more than enough. After all, most commoners would only make twenty or thirty gold coins in wages after a year of hard labor.

"You really are a rich guy. My dad only gives me two hundred gold coins a year." Reynolds mumbled, "And he even said that he wants me to spend my time focused on studying magic."

"Just a hundred for me," Linley laughed. "But for a simple life, it's enough."

"Bah, bros, my money is your money. If you run out, just come find me! In the future, we'll probably be living together for decades. We'll be bros for decades. Why quibble about 'yours' and 'mine'?" Yale was extremely expansive, but just as he finished speaking...

Linley and Reynolds both started.

“Decades?” Linley stared at Yale in shock.

Yale said casually and naturally, “Linley, you can only graduate from the Ernst Institute if you reach the rank of a magus of the sixth rank. For a magus, the higher you progress, the harder it becomes. For most people, it takes a couple decades to become a magus of the sixth rank.”

Linley frowned.

Decades? He was going to be a fiscal burden to his father for decades?

“Grandpa Doehring, why didn’t you tell me this?”

Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in his mind. “Linley, relax. For most people, decades will be needed to reach the sixth rank, yes. But under my tutelage, I can let you become a magus of the sixth rank in just ten years.”

Ten years.

In ten years, Linley would only be nineteen years old. Only now did Linley relax.

“Is everyone here already?” A clear voice rang out as a child walked into the room. Approximately the same height as Reynolds, this child looked a bit more mature. “Hello, everyone. My name is George. I’m ten, and I’m from the Yulan Empire.”

Yale, Reynolds, and Linley all gave basic self-introductions to the newcomer.

“The Yulan Empire?” Linley was startled.

The Yulan Empire. The most ancient of the empires of the Yulan continent. When the Yulan calendar was first started, ten thousand years ago, the Yulan Empire controlled the entire Yulan continent. And then, as time passed, the Yulan continent began to fall into war, causing the Yulan Empire to fragment as well.

By this era, the Yulan Empire had become just one of the Four Great Empires.

But despite this, the Yulan Empire was still the most economically powerful of the empires, and it was also filled with magi. The magus academy of the Yulan Empire was second only to the Ernst Institute.

“George, the magus academies of the Yulan Empire aren’t that bad. Why did you rush all the way here?” Yale asked in amazement.

George smiled. “Although the magus academies of the Yulan Empire are very good, they are still a bit weaker than the Ernst Institute. If you’re going to go to school, you should go to the best. Although the journey was a bit long, it could be considered a form of training as well.”

“George, you’re ten? But you look the same as me,” Reynolds said to the side.

George immediately began to laugh.

The eight-year-old Reynolds and the ten-year-old George were of the same height. Both were the shortest in the group. Linley was half a head taller than them, while Yale was the tallest of them all.

“Enough of that topic. I just found out from the admissions office that every one of the hundred new students have at least high levels in both elemental affinity and spiritual essence. I even discovered guys who have ‘exceptional’ levels in both elemental affinity and spiritual essence. What monsters.” George seemed to have good inside information.

Yale pursed his lips. “That’s very normal. Which student in the Ernst Institute is weak? Myself, my elemental affinity and spiritual essence are both high-level, putting me towards the bottom of the pack of our one hundred. If it weren’t for the fact that my old man has a special relationship with the Radiant Church, I probably wouldn’t even be able to make it in.”

Linley couldn’t help but stare at Yale in shock.

This Yale fellow’s dad surely was something quite amazing, to have a special relationship with the Radiant Church.

“The person in our dorm with the highest natural talent is Linley. But have you guys heard of the unmatched talent who is studying at the Ernst Institute?” Yale glanced at the other three.

Linley and Reynolds both shook their heads.

But George smiled as he nodded. “I’ve heard of him. The number one genius of the Ernst Institute, ‘Dixie’, a talent that appears once in a century. He is a

dual-element magus, and has exceptional levels of elemental affinity and spiritual essence. But his spiritual essence is especially amazing; 68 times that of others his age. Usually, reaching thirty times is considered 'exceptional', so his precise level should be 'super exceptional', but since the highest level is 'exceptional', that's what he's classified as."

Linley understood.

Dual-element. Exceptional elemental affinity and spiritual essence.

"I'm just ten-something times that of other people my age, but that genius has 68 times the spiritual essence of people his age," Linley sighed in amazement.

The Ernst Institute really did have as many talents as there were clouds in the sky. It could also be said to have congregated all of the magical geniuses of the Yulan continent. Here, Linley could only be considered above average. However... behind Linley, there was a five-thousand-year-old Saint-level Grand Magus!

Most of the students of the Ernst Academy would stay at the Institute for decades, so usually by the time of graduation, fellow dormmates would be extremely close friends. Although Yale, Reynolds, Linley and George were all more mature than most others their age, at heart, they were still children.

After just chatting for a short period of time, the four of them immediately grew very close.

"Everyone, let's spend the day getting to know our campus better. Tonight, I'll treat you all to dinner! Haha," Yale slapped his chest and said enthusiastically.

"This guy even has a magic crystal card. If we don't take advantage of him, who else would we take advantage of?" Reynolds laughed.

George and Linley were both still children, and they immediately grinned evilly.

"Squeak squeak!" At this moment, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, suddenly popped his head out from within Linley's clothes. Having just woken up, the little Shadowmouse was feeling lonely, so he popped his head out.

“Whoah, what’s that?” Reynolds was so startled he jumped.

“Bebe, you woke up?” Linley laughed as he stroked Bebe’s little head. Bebe closed his eyes in contentment, and then opened his little eyes and peered at Reynolds, Yale, and George. His little nose snorted three times, as though he looked down at them.

“Magical beast, it’s a magical beast! I’ve seen them in books.” Yale suddenly shouted.

“Linley, you have a magical beast companion?” Reynolds and George were also shocked.

They were all children. How could one of them make a magical beast submit to them?

“Bebe is just a baby magical beast. I just gave him some food, which made him like me. So I entered a soul-binding contract with him.” Linley laughed.

“Good heavens, that’s a magical beast! Linley, you are really formidable. I’ve dreamed of having one since I was young.” Yale stared at Bebe, his eyes shining. “Although I have access to soul-binding formation scrolls, I don’t have the ability to force a magical beast to submit to me,” Yale said in a depressed voice.

“You aren’t able to subdue a magical beast? Not even an infant?” Linley laughed.

Yale shook his head. “I’m not even a magus of the first rank yet. Based on my strength, maybe I could train a magical beast of the first or second rank, but what would I do with such a weak critter? And the infants of magical beasts of the seventh or eighth ranks are extremely hard to acquire. What’s more, the infants of those beasts are more powerful than me, even as babies.”

Linley agreed with him silently.

The little Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’, currently was as strong as a magical beast of the fifth rank. He was far stronger than Linley. But having been together with Bebe for half a year, he could tell that Bebe hadn’t grown larger at all. This was what confused both Linley and Doehring Cowart.

“Linley, this little Shadowmouse is named Bebe? Can you have Bebe allow me

to cuddle him?" Reynolds gaze was glued to the little Shadowmouse.

"Bebe?"

Linley immediately asked Bebe through their soul link.

"No, no way." Bebe could also express some simple intentions to Linley through their soul link. At the same time, Bebe flashed his fangs towards Reynolds. "Squeak squeak!" He squeaked loudly, clearly very angry.

Reynolds couldn't help but pucker his lips in disappointment.

"Reynolds, I'll tell you a secret. Bebe loves to eat roast meat. If in the future, you can feed him some roast ducks or roast chickens, I believe that he won't be very hostile to you." Linley laughed upon seeing Reynolds eyes shine.

"Can do."

Reynolds suddenly frowned as he turned to Yale. "Yale, if in the future I run out of money, you've got to lend me some. When Grandpa Lomu comes, I'll pay you back."

"No problem," Yale said magnanimously.

"I bet everyone hasn't had a chance to get a good look at the campus yet, right? Let's go for a stroll and familiarize ourselves, shall we?" George smiled as he spoke.

Of the four bros, George was the steadiest and the most amiable. Reynolds was the most childish one of them. Yale... was the playboy type. As for Linley, in the eyes of the other three boys, he was the most mysterious.

Dual-element magus, exceptional affinity, and a magical beast companion.

He really was mysterious.

The ancient Ernst Institute was filled with countless buildings which were thousands of years old. There were even introductory placards in front of some of them.

The youngest of them was eight, the oldest of them was ten. The children stared worshipfully at each famous name, especially at the histories of the Saint-level combatants, which caused their hearts to beat faster. All of them

dreamed of one day becoming a Saint-level combatant.

But a voice right next to Linley's ear kept on grumbling. "Nothing more than some promising latter-day youths. This guy is actually bragging about killing a Violet-Tattooed Black Bear? A Saint-level combatant who can only kill ninth level magical beasts and not Saint-level magical beasts can only be considered a newbie Saint-level."

Many famous graduates of the Ernst Institute were bashed by Doehring Cowart as not worth mentioning.



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The four bros of dorm 1987, along with the little Shadowmouse Bebe, strolled about the entire campus, gaining a basic level of familiarity with it. That very night, the four of them went to a lavishly decorated hotel next to the dormitory area and had themselves a feast. But of course, all they drank was juice.

The next day. February 9th. School started.

There were no classes today; those would start on February 10th. February 9th was a day where the students were meant to go and listen to the exhortations of school management to work hard. This group of six-to twelve-year-olds filled the auditorium. They didn't know exactly who the people speaking to them were, so many of the children began to daydream. When the ceremony concluded, all of them happily departed.

After dinner, the four bros of dormitory 1987 were all seated on chairs inside the dorm and discussing their classes.

"It's so easy here. Just one class a day. Oh, Linley is dual-element, so he has two." Yale sighed. "But the Ernst Institute is really relaxed. If you want to attend class, you can. If you don't want to, you can skip."

George smiled calmly. "Yale, don't grow complacent. Although there aren't formal requirements for students, every year, there will be an ability test. Only if you advance a rank in power can you advance a grade. If you don't work hard, do you plan to stay here for a century? What's more, the Ernst Institute has a

rule that if one does not become a magus of the sixth rank in sixty years, one will be expelled, no exceptions.”

Reading the various regulations of the Institute written on the introductory packet, Linley nodded silently.

Although the school had lax supervision, allowing one to not study at all for sixty years, once you reached the end of those sixty years, if you still had not become a magus of the sixth rank, you would be directly expelled.

“Expelled?” Yale stared. “If I really were to be expelled, my old man would probably kill me.” Expulsion by the Ernst Institute would result in an unbearably humiliating reputation. No one would be willing to shoulder it. After all, to have been accepted meant that they were all talented people.

“Class starts tomorrow. I wonder how the teachers are. If they aren’t even as good as my Grandpa Lomu, I’ll have come for nothing,” Reynolds mumbled.

“Reynolds, your Grandpa Lomu is a magus?” Linley asked, somewhat surprised.

“Of course. On the long road from the O’Brien Empire to the Ernst Institute, Grandpa Lomu had already begun to teach me magic,” Reynolds said proudly.

When Linley and the other three were chatting with each other, they felt very excited.

“The earth element class isn’t that important. In terms of understanding the earth element, how could any of the teachers at the Ernst Institute compare with Grandpa Doehring? The most important class is the wind element class. I wonder what wind magic is like?”

The day had already begun to grow dark, but the sounds of laughter and chatter continued to sound out from the four children within dormitory 1987.

Wind-Style Magic

For the academic calendar of the Ernst Institute, every month, the first 28 days had classes. Only the last two days were free.

Earth magic classes were taught from 8:00 AM to 10:00 AM in the morning, fire magic was taught from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM in the afternoon, water magic from 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM in the afternoon, wind magic from 4:30 PM to 6:30 PM in the afternoon, lightning magic from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM at night, and light magic from 9:30 PM to 11:30 PM at night.

But since the majority of students were single element, they only had to take two hours of classes a day. Linley was dual-element, which meant he had just four hours of classes each day. But because these classes were on a voluntary basis, if you didn't want to go, no one would force you.

The school of earth magic was divided into six classes, with each class having its own building. New students and first rank magi attended the first grade class, magi of the second rank attended the second grade class, magi of the third rank attended the third grade class... and so on, up until the sixth rank, who attended the sixth grade class.

Magi of the sixth rank could choose to graduate at any point in time. But naturally, if they elected not to, they could continue to study.

February 10. Within the classroom of first grade classes.

The classroom for first grade earth magic was extremely large, and was capable of seating hundreds of students. Twenty students had already arrived, and Linley selected a seat located relatively in front and sat down. At 8:00 AM, there were around fifty students present.

"I expect only part of the students present are new. I wonder how long the others have spent here," Linley wondered to himself.

After all, for a new student to reach the second rank, they would usually need to train for several years.

“Greetings, everyone.” An amiable, kindly-looking brown-haired middle-aged man stood in front of the class. “My name is Wendi, and I will be your instructor in earth magic. Today, we have approximately twenty new students. So, same as always, first we are going to have our new students introduce themselves, so that we can all get to know each other.”

Immediately, one new student after another began to introduce themselves.

“My name is Gerhans. I come from the great grasslands to the far east.”

Upon hearing Gerhans’ self-introduction, Linley was shocked. “The students here really do come from all over the Yulan continent. There’re even someone from the great grasslands in the far eastern part of the Yulan continent.”

In the great map of the Yulan continent...

The Holy Union and the Dark Alliance were located west of the Yulan continent’s Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. East of the range were the Four Great Empires, but even further east of the empires was a vast grassland, which contained three kingdoms of its own. The distance between the great grasslands and the Ernst Institute was unbelievably great. A one way trip alone would take at least three years!

“My name is Linley. I’m from the Holy Union.” Linley also walked to the front of the classroom and gave a basic self-introduction.

After the self-introductions were complete, the earth-style magus Wendi began to brag about the power of earth-style magic. Only in the second hour of the class did he actually begin to instruct in earth-style magic.

Linley and the group of students just listened quietly. Next to Linley, Doehring Cowart appeared as well.

“This fellow has a very solid foundation. Although he isn’t very strong, in terms of teaching magi of the first rank, not even magi of the eighth or ninth rank would necessarily be a better teacher.” Doehring Cowart nodded as he sighed in praise.

Linley knew a great deal about earth-style magic by now, so listening to the lecture was very easy for him.

“But Grandpa Doehring, although his foundation is solid, he isn’t able to distill the profound into simple words like you. He seems to make it more complicated,” Linley said.

Doehring Cowart laughed self-confidently. Stroking his white beard, he said, “Naturally. A Saint-level Grand Magus’ understanding of magic is far greater than that of a magus of the eighth or ninth rank. The Saint level is a totally new realm of existence. Naturally, my teachings regarding magic are more profound and point more directly to the underlying nature of magic.”

After listening to this class, Linley made a decision.

“From today forward, I will only attend the earth magic class once a month.” Linley didn’t want to waste his time.

Linley had it all planned out. Every day, he would spend some time outside training in magic. As for where he would do this training... Linley had already chosen a place, a mountain located right behind the Ernst Institute. Being located near a mountain range, there were naturally many mountains near the Institute.

Four in the afternoon.

Linley was intently listening to the teachings being given in the wind-style magic class.

“Greetings, everyone,” a handsome, yellow-haired youngster said with a smile. “I am a sixth grade student, Trey. From today onwards, I will be responsible for teaching you wind-style magic. I live in dorm 0298, so if you have any questions after class ends, you can come find me there.”

Sixth grade students, being magi of the sixth rank who could apply for graduation at any time, were fully qualified to teach students of the first or second grades.

“Before this, let’s all first introduce ourselves.” Trey smiled.

This was a basic rule to start off every class for the first time. All of the

students gave self-introductions.

“Hey, Linley, have you noticed? There’s lots of cute girls amongst the wind-style students. Check it. That little blonde girl just smiled at you.” Doehring Cowart, next to Linley, pointed as he spoke. “Based on what that little blonde girl just said, her name seems to be Delia. Delia. Such a cute name. Based on my 1300 years of experience, when this little girl grows up, she’ll be a beauty for sure. Linley, smile at her and build a good foundation. That way, in the future, you’ll be able to advance your relationship.”

Right now, Linley was totally ignoring Doehring Cowart.

Linley was focused on the wind-style magus instructor ‘Trey’, and closely listening to Trey’s teachings.

“Wind-style magi are the fastest, most nimble magi in the world. In addition, we are the only magi who can fly before reaching the Saint level!” Trey’s words and mannerisms all conveyed the love which he felt towards wind magic. “Do you wish to use your own power to fly above the skies? To soar in the air and gaze down upon countless mountains? How wonderful the feeling is, and how many people desire it!”

The eyes of many of the children who were seated below, listening, began to shine.

Fly?

Who wouldn’t want to fly?

“A Saint-level magus can fly, yes, but the Ernst Institute can perhaps produce just one, at most, in a century! But we magi of the wind-style can, upon attaining the fifth rank, immediately execute the ‘Floating Technique’,” Trey said confidently, “And wind-style magi are extremely fast. When they execute the ‘Supersonic’ technique, they can increase their speed dramatically.”

“But of course, those are just common techniques. The legendary forbidden technique, ‘Annihilating Tempest’, is the most powerful destructive technique of them all. There’s also the legendary forbidden technique, ‘Dimensional Edge’, which is the most powerful one-on-one attacking technique.” Trey’s voice was filled with reverence.

Many of the youths stared wide-eyed.

“Hmph, how can the Annihilating Tempest be considered the most powerful destructive technique? What about my earth-style’s ‘Heaven Collapses, Earth Shatters’ and ‘Heavenly Meteor’s Descent’?” Doehring Cowart, upon hearing these words, was somewhat unhappy.

“Grandpa Doehring, what is this ‘Dimensional Edge’ technique?” Linley asked.

Given that Grandpa Doehring had not mentioned the ‘Dimensional Edge’ spell, Linley believed that perhaps it really was the most powerful one-on-one attacking technique of them all.

“The Dimensional Edge spell? It can slice through the dimensional walls which separates matter itself. Of course it is powerful. But although it is ridiculously strong in one-on-one combat, it’s still only a one-shot spell. How can it compare to our earth-style’s ‘World Protector’, which can battle nonstop with the enemy?” Doehring Cowart was quibbling and equivocating.

But Linley could tell.

This Dimensional Edge spell clearly possessed a terrifying power. And most likely, it wasn’t as simple as Grandpa Doehring made it out to be. A one-shot technique? Even a one-shot technique could be enough, if the opponent couldn’t dodge.

“If I can become both a Dragonblood Warrior as well as utilize wind-style magic, then...” Linley’s heart was moved.

And then, he just continued to listen to the class. Linley became more and more intrigued by wind-style magic. Of the four elements of earth, fire, water and wind, each contained profound mysteries which were as deep as the sea. The ocean of magical knowledge was an endless one. And now, Linley had begun to wade into its depths.

A Learning Period

Spring left and autumn came. In the blink of an eye, Linley had spent half a year at the Ernst Institute.

During those days in school, Linley was like a thirsty man in the desert, frantically drinking up the basic fundamentals to magic. With regards to wind-style magic, Linley's knowledge and strength continued to rise as well, with Doehring Cowart giving him pointers every so often.

Today, the sunlight was bright and beautiful.

The four bros of dorm 1987 had just finished lunch. They were wearing a set of sky-blue robes, the school uniform of the Institute. Due to his constant physical training, Linley appeared all the more mesmerizing, with his elegant form covered by the sky-blue robes. This was why quite a few of the young girls in the wind magic class liked to chat with him.

At this moment, the four bros were walking while chatting idly.

"Right, Linley, today the rest of us are going to attend the new students' fellowship. Are you going?" George chortled.

George loved to participate in student unions and fellowships, and he was excellent in ferreting out news and making new friends. Although he had only been at the Institute for half a year, among the first grade students of the Ernst Institute, George had become a mover and a shaker.

"Nope." Linley's answer was succinct and direct.

"Haha, I knew Linley definitely wouldn't go." Reynolds laughed loudly.

Putting his arm around Linley's shoulders, Yale sighed, "Linley, my man, there's no need to be this diligent when it comes to studying. Based on your talent, if you just expend a bit of effort, you can easily become a magus of the sixth rank in thirty years. Why do you have to work so crazy hard? You should

learn to relax and enjoy life. There's a lot of cute girls who will be at the fellowship, you know."

"Right. Really cute girls." Reynolds opened his eyes wide and nodded.

Linley could only sigh helplessly.

Under the guidance of Yale, the innocent youngster Reynolds had begun to go astray.

"Yale, you pervert, stop tugging at me. Alright, time for me to go train. Tomorrow is the end of the month; I'll hang out with you guys then." Linley laughed. For the last two days of each month, Linley let himself take two-day break.

Knowing Linley's temperament, Yale, Reynolds, and George all nodded.

Linley immediately walked off, quietly but quickly heading towards the mountains behind the school. There were thousands of students at the Ernst Institute, and there were also many magi who were researching new spells here. There were also many servants. In short, the Ernst Institute was a well-populated place.

On the road to the mountains, many students wearing blue gowns could be seen as well.

"Growl..." A low roar sounded.

Linley turned to look, and his eyes brightened. "A magical beast!"

A flowing mane, slick cyan fur, and four thick, forceful limbs. A pair of eyes filled with wildness, viciousness, and a cold fierceness. Those coldly flashing golden claws made onlookers' hearts tremble.

The magical beast, 'Windwolf'.

A terrifying magical beast that moved as fast as the wind itself.

The most terrifying thing one could encounter in a forest of magical beasts was a pack of Windwolves. If you encountered them, based on their speed, there was no way you could escape.

A handsome, black-haired man was seated atop the Windwolf. The young

man was staring delightedly around him, seemingly very proud of having such a fine magical beast.

“This should be a magical beast of the fifth or sixth rank,” Linley decided.

At the Ernst Institute, there were indeed quite a few people who had magical beasts. Aside from the magi who had been invited to come to the Institute, some fifth and sixth grade students were able to buy soul-binding formation scrolls, and had managed to tame some magical beasts to serve as their mounts.

“It’s just a magical beast. Why be so cocky about it?” Linley looked somewhat contemptuously at the self-pleased youngster.

After departing from the school, Linley entered the mountain in the rear.

The mountain behind the Ernst Institute was an extremely wide-ranging one. Long, long ago, magical beasts used to live on this mountain, but as time went on, all of the magical beasts were exterminated by the magi of the Institute. By now, there were only a few normal beasts still living here.

Upon entering the mountain, Linley’s speed increased dramatically.

He naturally began to use the wind-style ‘Supersonic’ spell, making his entire body as light as a leaf. Like a spirit, he wound his way through the mountains. After running for several kilometers, Linley reached his target destination, an empty area next to some flowing water.

“Squeak squeak, Bebe chirped at Linley.

Linley chuckled and said, “You want to go out and play again? Fine, but don’t run off too far.” Linley had a lot of faith in Bebe. A year had passed since he had met the little guy, but although Bebe still hadn’t grown larger and was still just twenty centimeters long, his speed had improved dramatically.

“Magi? Perhaps a warrior of the eighth rank would be able to catch the little Shadowmouse, but only a Saint-level magus would be able to do the same.” Linley knew very well how strong the bodies of most magi were.

The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, scurried into the mountain forests.

“Grandpa Doehring, please come out and instruct me,” Linley immediately

asked mentally.

A mist flew out, transforming into Doehring Cowart. Doehring Cowart blinked and glanced at Linley. “Linley, what’s going on? In the past, haven’t you always ignored this old fellow and entered the meditative trance first? Why are you calling me out now? I was having a wonderful nap just now, hmph. You ruined my beautiful dream.”

Linley quirked his lips.

Although Grandpa Doehring was a Saint-level Grand Magus, after getting to know him, Linley realized that although he looked kindly and amiable on the outside, on the inside, he was a playful scamp.

“Grandpa Doehring, I feel like I have reached the level of a magus of the second rank. I want you to take a look and see for yourself,” Linley finally said.

“A magus of the second rank?”

Intrigued, Doehring Cowart ran some calculations. “Hmm, right, about a year has passed since you started learning with me. Right, first, perform the introductory spell of ‘Shattered Rocks’. Do your absolute best, understood?”

‘Shattered Rocks’ could be considered a spell which scaled.

There was a ‘Shattered Rocks’ spell of the first rank, but there was also a Saint-level spell for ‘Shattered Rocks’; only, the name for it was called ‘Heavenly Meteor’s Descent’. Naturally, when the strength of an earth-style magus increased, his power in using the ‘Shattered Rocks’ would also increase.

“Yes, Grandpa Doehring.”

Linley immediately began to quietly mouth the words to a spell. The words had long since been memorized by Linley, to the point where he could recite them without thinking. As the words to the spell continued, Linley could feel his entire spirit enter a special mode.

The earth-style mageforce in his chest began to roil about, and natural elemental essence began to gather there as well.

Suddenly, the nearby earth began to crack and shatter.

Five skull-sized pieces of rock flew up and began to circle around Linley’s

head. These five rocks were all covered with earthen specks of light, and as Linley's eyes began to shine, he let out a deep shout. The five rocks rapidly shot off to a far distance, carrying a gust of wind with them.

“SMASH!”

The five stones covered in earthen light smashed into a thick tree trunk. The tree swayed, but its trunk did not shatter. In the end, the five stones still came tumbling down to the ground.

“Yeah, not bad.” Doehring Cowart's eyes lit up. “To be able to control five stones at once with such impressive speed shows that you do, in fact, have the power of a magus of the second rank.” Doehring Cowart was very satisfied with Linley's performance.

Linley couldn't help but reveal a hint of a smile on his face as well.

He had just taken another step towards his goals.

Linley would never be able to forget the words his father had said to him when he left. “If you cannot bring it back, even when I die, I won't forgive you!” These words had pierced Linley's heart like a sharp knife, and he was constantly reminded of them.

Right now, Doehring Cowart was chortling happily. “But Linley, you must understand that a magus of the second rank counts for little. Based on our ranking systems, magi of the first and second rank are all considered ‘entry-level magi’. Magi of the third and fourth ranks are considered ‘mid-level magi’, and fifth and sixth ranks are ‘high-level magi’. A magus of the seventh rank is called a ‘senior magus’, a magus of the eighth rank is a ‘master magus’, and a magus of the ninth rank is an ‘arch magus’. These ranks of seven through nine are the highest. The road you have to travel is a long way.”

“I know.” Linley nodded.

“Good. Train hard.” Doehring Cowart once more entered the Coiling Dragon Ring.

Linley collected himself, suppressing his excitement at becoming a magus of the second rank. He once again tranquilly sat and entered the meditative trance. The strong became strong one step at a time, and through achieving

many accomplishments.

Approximately three kilometers away from Linley.

Linley's wind-style magus instructor, the sixth-ranked magus Trey, frowned. "Hmm, the earth magic spell, 'Shattered Rocks'? Based on its power, it should be of the second rank. An entry-level magus has come to the mountain to train? Who is it?"

Just then, Trey had utilized the 'Windscout' spell, and had sensed the earth-style magic which Linley had just cast.

Based on the magic vibrations, Trey was able to determine what spell it was.

Trey curiously walked in that direction. Based on his prowess as a magus of the sixth rank, his execution of the 'Supersonic' spell was far stronger than that of Linley's. Like a passing fog or cloud, Trey flowed through the mountain easily and tranquilly.

In the blink of an eye, Trey had reached a spot two hundred meters from Linley.

Standing next to a large tree, Trey saw Linley from afar.

"It's him?"

Naturally, Trey recognized his own student. "This kid called Linley never talks in class. Even when experimenting in new spells, others will try them out, but he will just stand and watch from afar, never showing his strength. It seems... this kid called Linley is already a magus of the second rank. I remember him being one of our new students. Didn't expect him to be so talented."

Linley already knew how to cast spells, so of course when the instructors told the other students to give it a try, he would just stand and watch.

Never participating in any group activities, Linley's secretiveness was acknowledged by everyone who knew him.

"Hehe, looks like I have a genius among my students. Mm. Looks like this year, I should receive a reward when the first grade student competition commences." A brilliant smile was on Trey's face. As for Linley, right now, being in a meditative trance, he couldn't sense anything more than a hundred meters

away from him.

A month had passed after Linley had become a magus of the second rank.

Within the first grade wind magic classroom.

Linley would only go to the earth magic class once every month or so, but he attended every single wind magic class. Today, Linley was seated in his usual spot.

“Linley, you came.” Just as Linley sat down, a very adorable young lady sat down next to him.

Seeing the girl, Linley smiled. “Delia, you came pretty early. There’s still quite some time before the next class starts.” Sitting together with a beautiful girl was of course something enjoyable. Naturally, Linley wouldn’t push her away.

Delia was no ordinary person.

Her brother, Dixie, was the number one genius of the entire Ernst Institute, and was described as a talent which would be found once in a century at most. He, too, was a dual element mage, and his elemental essence affinity was exceptional. But what was more, he was a supreme talent with 68 times the spiritual essence of an ordinary person.

As Dixie’s sister, Delia was naturally pretty exceptional as well.

“It’s because I know you always come early.” Delia beamed, her eyes crinkling.

The two sat together and chatted. Time passed quite quickly, and before they realized it, class had started. Instructor Trey energetically explained things in front, and Linley sat beneath him, listening intently. But Delia, every so often, would sneak a peek at Linley.

“Alright, today’s class is over for now. But before class ends, there’s something I must inform you all about.” Instructor Trey smiled as he spoke.

All of the students immediately began to buzz.

“The older students all know that our Ernst Institute has a tradition. During the last two months of every year, a yearly tournament will be held. The yearly tournament is always the noisiest, energetic time at the Ernst Institute. The

students who achieve victory in the yearly tournament will have a higher chance of being rated 'superior' upon their graduation. When these students graduate, it is more likely that they will be invited by the Four Great Empires." Instructor Trey laughed.

All of the students below immediately began to grow excited.

At the Ernst Institute, talents were as common as the clouds. And the number one problem that all talents shared was that they didn't like to admit inferiority to others!

Thus, the yearly tournament had become a way for talents to become famous. Close to 90% of the students would pay attention to the tournament, and everyone with some ability would participate.

"Naturally, we wind magic practitioners will also do battle. Everyone interested in signing up, please speak to me." Instructor Trey smiled as he spoke, but his gaze drifted towards Linley.

"Instructor, I wish to enroll." Many students below immediately began to clamor to sign up.

"Great." Instructor Trey took out a duck feather quill pen and began to record names, but after taking down ten or so names, he realized that Linley was busy chatting with Delia, apparently not interested in signing up at all.

Trey walked over.

Linley involuntarily glanced up and immediately called out respectfully, "Instructor Trey." The nearby Delia also paid her respects.

Trey smiled and nodded. "Linley, this yearly tournament is an excellent opportunity to train oneself. I expect all of the elites of the first grade students to attend. Why aren't you signing up? This is a rare opportunity."

"I'm not interested," Linley said directly.

Instructor Trey couldn't help but start.

"Linley, you are no doubt unaware that the victors of the tournament will receive some rewards," Instructor Trey said enticingly.

"Rewards?" Linley was in desperate need of money.

His clan's economic situation was in such terrible shape. If he could win some money, he wouldn't mind attending the yearly tournament.

"Right. You should know that most students live in ordinary dorms, those single unit ones. But the top three victors of the tournament are all qualified to live in those two-story buildings for a year. That's a proof of status. The rooms there are much more comfortable as well." Instructor Trey continued.

Linley understood.

There weren't many two-floor dorms, and most of those belonged to powerful magi of the seventh or eighth ranks. From what he was now hearing, the top three students in each grade also were allowed to live in them.

Housing conditions?

Linley didn't care about it at all.

"I'm not attending," Linley still said.

Instructor Trey grew somewhat impatient. As a sixth grade student, if one of Trey's students became one of the top three in his grade, not only would he be rewarded, he would also gain a lot of face. Young people all cared about face.

Instructor Trey leaned in towards Linley, saying in a low voice, "Linley, are you concerned about revealing your ability? I know that you are a magus of the second rank."

Hearing these words, Linley couldn't help but look up at Trey in surprise.

How had Instructor Trey learned about his current level of power? After all, it was hard to judge one's abilities based on external appearances alone.

Seeing the expression on Linley's face, Instructor Trey thought that he had hit the mark. Laughing, he said, "Linley, if you have ability, you shouldn't hide it. Even if you decide not to attend the competition for fear of revealing your ability, I might just decide to expose you myself."

"Whatever. Still not going."

Linley stood up unhappily, and then politely paid his respects. "Farewell, instructor."

And then, ignoring the stupefied look on Trey's face, he immediately left.

"Bah. This kid." After recovering, Trey couldn't help but laugh. The nearby Delia couldn't help but cover her mouth and giggle as well.



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By the time the wind magic class had ended, it was almost six at night. The sky was growing dark. Linley ran back towards his dorm. The bros of dorm 1987 shared strong affection towards each other, and at night they always ate together.

"Linley, you're back," a curly haired youngster from dorm 1986 said warmly to Linley.

"Harry, have you eaten dinner?" Linley smiled back in response.

Linley was on excellent relations with most of the nearby neighbors. Harry laughed and nodded. "Of course I have. Your three bros are all waiting for you inside."

"Linley's back. Let's go, everyone, time to eat!" Yale's voice sounded out.

Clearly, Yale had heard Linley's voice from inside their dorm. Yale, Reynolds, and George all walked out and waved to Linley. The four bros proceeded towards the dining areas. The Ernst Institute contained some luxurious restaurants, but after being persuaded by Linley, Reynolds, and George, Yale no longer took them to those places.

The dishes in the small dining hall were simple and fresh, very pleasing to eat.

After ordering some food, the four bros began to chat amongst themselves.

Linley got most of his news regarding the Institute's goings-on from his three bros, as Linley, who spent all his time training in the mountain, probably would be totally in the dark otherwise.

"Man, in about a month, the school year is coming to an end. During the last two months of each year, the entire Institute will engage in the yearly tournament. The top three students in each grade are all allowed to live in

those two-story dorms for a year,” Yale said.

“The yearly tournaments?” Linley began to laugh. He had just heard about this from his classroom.

“Haha, I’m definitely attending,” Reynolds said confidently.

Yale pursed his lips. “Punk, you became a magus of the first rank on the road from the O’Brien Empire to the Ernst Institute. I wager that by now, you aren’t too far off from becoming a magus of the second rank. That really is unfair.”

Reynolds had spent a full year traveling from his home to come here.

Through the entire journey, his family housekeeper had been teaching him magic, which is why he had become a magus of the first rank even before the journey had ended.

George smiled towards Linley. “Hah, you’re forgetting about Linley. Linley was a magus of the first rank by the time he entered the Institute as well. What’s more, he’s crazy about training, and he’s a dual-element magus. I think he’s probably the strongest person in our dorm.”

Linley quirked his lips in a smile. “George, don’t flatter me.”

“Linley, have you gained your second rank yet? Be honest.” George stared at Linley.

“How could he gain his second rank so quickly? From an introductory student to the first rank, based on our talent, a year is necessary. But from the first rank to the second rank, at least two years is needed.” The nearby Reynolds frowned as he spoke.

“Not necessarily. I also feel that Linley’s been really sneaky.” Yale also looked at Linley. “Linley, have you become a magus of the second rank?”

Linley nodded casually.

What was the big deal about becoming a magus of the second rank? Even before the magus testing event, he had already become a magus of the first rank. A full year had passed since then. If he still had not become a magus of the second rank by now, then all his hard work would’ve been totally pointless.

“You really reached it?” Yale, Reynolds, and George’s eyes all bulged out.

None of them expected it to be true.

“Go sign up for the yearly tournament, Linley. You’ve gotta take part. Give those guys a good trampling and gain some prestige for dorm 1987,” Yale immediately said.

By now, the servers had brought the dishes they had ordered.

“Eat, eat! I’m not interested in the yearly tournament.” Linley had no interest in competing with those weaker than himself. Those tournament battles were nothing more than exercises in showing off!

Yale and the other three traded glances.

They all knew how hard Linley trained. Although in their year, there were geniuses who had exceptional levels of elemental affinity and spiritual essence, in terms of being hard-working, none of them could match Linley. And with Linley being dual-element... in their hearts, all of them believed that Linley was most likely the most powerful amongst the first grade students.

“It would be such a waste if you didn’t participate. Someone else is going to get the glory, once again, in the yearly tournament,” Yale mumbled. “Too bad I’m not strong enough. If I had your strength, Linley, I would’ve given everyone a dazzling display long ago. Then, I would be able to seduce some pretty girls.”

Linley laughed. “That’s enough. Let’s eat. Stop fantasizing.”

Linley really didn’t care about the yearly tournament in the slightest. But the vast majority of the students at the Ernst Institute were extremely excited about it. And not just the students. Even some of the full magi residing at the Ernst Institute would pay close attention to the tournament’s results.

Who is Number One?

The mountain behind the Ernst Institute, a place of tranquility.

Linley sat cross-legged next to flowing water. Listening to the murmurs of the water, he naturally entered the meditative trance, and all the nearby earth essence and wind essence immediately began to shine. Everything within ten or so meters around Linley became extremely clear to behold.

Earth and wind essence entered his body through his four limbs, as his flesh, bones, and organs all slowly absorbed nourishment from the essences. Slowly but resolutely, the strength of his body was continuing to climb.

Additionally, a large portion of the wind and earth essence, after purification, came to rest within the 'central dantian' in the middle of his chest.

"Splash, splash." The flowing water murmured unceasingly.

Next to him, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was chewing on a wild duck. The scene was as peaceful as a painting, as though it had come out of a painting.

But while it was peaceful here, the Ernst Institute was extremely rowdy. All of the thousands of students, as well as many of the magi, and even many important people from the outside world, were all at the Ernst Institute, watching the various battles.

The yearly tournament.

All of the students of the Ernst Institute were prideful heaven-blessed talents!

Each and every single battle was amazing to behold. Amongst the first grade students, balls of earth, flashes of lightning, and blades of wind flew hither and to. But the battles of the third and fourth grade students were really astounding. Various supportive spells and area of effect spells were used. Spells such as 'Shattered Rocks' now caused dozens, approaching a hundred, of large stones to smash upon the heads of their opponents, and lightning forked down

without cease.

And the fifth and sixth graders? That was all the more terrifying.

All sorts of astounding spells continuously flashed, filling the compound with the unending sounds of explosions. The watching students were all roaring nonstop, as the energy was reaching a crescendo. Virtually all of the people in the Institute were here.



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The yearly tournament went on for a bit over a month, which naturally was the wildest, most rowdy month each year at the Ernst Institute. During this frenetic period, Linley would only occasionally watch the battles of the fifth and sixth grade students. All of the rest of the time, he would quietly train by himself.

“This tournament actually requires one to not intentionally try to kill one’s opponent. How can this sort of competition be considered a real competition, when one’s hands and feet are tied?”

Under the influence of Doehring Cowart, Linley, too, began to view the competition with disdain.

“Linley, your current assignment is to train hard and build up your strength. As far as combat experience goes, when you become a magus of the fifth rank, you should enter the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts and enter a series of genuine life-and-death experiences,” Doehring Cowart persuaded Linley.



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The Huadeli Hotel, the most expensive hotel and restaurant within the Ernst Institute. Tonight, Yale was hosting the four bros of dorm 1987 to a lavish meal at the Huadeli Hotel.

On the first floor of the Huadeli hotel.

The floor of the hotel was as slick as a mirror. A row of beautiful waitresses stood there politely, ready to answer at a moment's notice.

There were many men and women dressed in student attire at the Huadeli Hotel. Those who were able to afford this place were generally those who had strong economic backgrounds. A casual table of dishes might cost a few dozen gold coins. If Linley had come by himself, he definitely wouldn't have been able to afford it.

The yearly tournament had just ended, and all of the students at the hotel were discussing it. Most of the people here were youngsters, but one table was filled with four children.

"I'm pissed just thinking about this year's competition. It was so close! I was so close to entering the semifinals. Maybe I would've been able to enter the top three." Reynolds was extremely dissatisfied. Reynolds was the youngest of the four, and also the proudest of them.

Yale laughed. "It really was a shame. I didn't expect Rand to become number one in the end."

George chuckled but didn't speak.

George was a friendly fellow and offended almost nobody.

"Rand? Right. I've heard you guys discuss him before. He was one of the new students who had exceptional elemental affinity and spiritual essence, right?" Linley remembered the name 'Rand'.

George laughed and nodded. "Right, him. He has very high talent. Even before training, his spiritual essence had reached the level of a magus of the second rank. All he did this year was accumulate sufficient mageforce. It isn't too hard for someone with the power of a magus of the second rank to become number one in the tournament amongst first grade students."

"Relying on his talent alone? When it comes to talent, can he compare to our Institute's number one genius, Dixie?" Yale quirked his lips. "I look down on Rand. He won the first grade tournament, so what? Linley, you didn't see how self-satisfied he looked upon winning. I really can't imagine how he would look if he actually were to win the fifth or sixth grade tournaments in the future."

The stronger a magus became, the harder it was to progress even further.

This was why the large majority of students at the Ernst Institute were high-level magi. The higher one's grade was, the fiercer the competition was.

Reynolds nodded as well. "I also don't like him. Our school's number one genius, the third grader Dixie, won the third grade tournament. Look at how composed he was! The difference between the two is too huge. What's more, the strongest amongst us first graders isn't Rand."

"Right. Third bro, you didn't participate. If you had, hmph..." Yale harrumphed.

Based on age and seniority, the four of them had begun to address each other as 'second bro', 'third bro', and so on.

"Hey, what are you guys saying?"

Linley and Yale turned their heads. Four youths in the same hotel were making their way down from the second floor. Their leader, a golden-haired youth, stared at Linley's group coldly.

Yale said loudly, "Oh, so it's Rand. What, didn't you hear what we were saying?"

Linley couldn't help but laugh helplessly to himself.

Yale feared neither heaven nor hell, and cared tremendously about face.

"Hmph, don't think I didn't hear," Rand said coldly.

The brown-haired youth next to Rand sneered as well. He arrogantly said, "Rand, don't quibble with these four useless things. It's not worth your time. Reynolds, what do you think you are looking at? What, you aren't satisfied with the way you lost in the tournament?"

Reynolds stared at the brown-haired youth, his mouth quirking in disdain. "And who do you think you are? You just got lucky and beat me once. Why so cocky?"

The brown-haired youth's face grew cold.

George smiled at everyone. "Rand, enough. It was wrong of us to so casually

discuss you. Let's just forget about it."

"Shut your mouth, George. This is none of your business." Rand stared at Yale. "Yale, last time I saw you at the Fragrant Elm bar, your arrogant manner pissed me off. And now, this time, you dare to be so arrogant in front of me. If you have the ability, come and fight me. Why don't you have the balls to fight?"

After speaking, Rand intentionally laughed mockingly a few times.

Although Yale was somewhat furious, he knew that he wasn't as strong as his opponent.

Immediately, many gazes from all over the hotel focused on this altercation. Many of the high-level students of the Ernst Institute stood up and stared at the two parties with curiosity. Clearly, both parties were just ten-year-olds.

"I know that golden-haired kid. His name is Rand. He won the yearly tournament amongst first graders. I expect that in the future, he'll have some accomplishments."

"The brown-haired kid next to him is called Rickson. He was number three among the first graders. I know him. In terms of strength, Rand's party is stronger than their opponents. This should be fun."

The group of magi of the fifth and sixth ranks all chatted and laughed, watching the two parties.

Seeing others notice him, and hearing them praise him as the winner of the first grade tournament, Rand's face became even more arrogant, and he looked at Linley and the others even more contemptuously.

"Hmph." Rand glanced at the table where Linley and the others were sitting. "Juice? You guys are still drinking juice? Oh, Yale, I really feel embarrassed for you. The four bros of my dorm are all drinking victory wine. You guys are drinking juice?"

Seeing how Rand went on endlessly, Linley couldn't help but begin to frown.

"Rand, we four bros are eating here. Get the hell out." Linley's face sank down, and he stared coldly at the four of them.

If he was training and was disturbed by beasts, he would immediately kill

them.

“Oh, and this one.” Rand’s eyes shone as he stared at Linley. “How come I never knew that there was someone like you in Yale’s dorm?”

Linley’s gaze grew cold.

Like a wild rabbit, he shot forward with incredible speed. Rand’s eyes only had time to widen. “You—!” Before he could even react, Linley grabbed Rand by the throat and, just based on physical strength, hoisted him in the air.

“Wha, uh, uh...” Rand couldn’t make any noises from his throat, and his eyes were filled with fear.

Linley stared coldly at Rand. Rand, heart filled with fear, felt as though he would be killed at any moment.

At this moment, Linley felt the dragonblood in his veins begin to blaze, as his bloodthirsty nature began to awaken. Linley couldn’t help but frown as he tried to calm down. “This is the Ernst Institute. I can’t kill someone for no reason.”

The three students next to Rand were all stupefied and frightened as well.

“Fuck off!”

With the wave of an arm, Linley slammed Rand to the floor, as though he were nothing more than a beanbag.

By now, Linley had nearly reached the peak of the second rank for warriors. Given that the strength of an ordinary warrior of the first rank was enough to lift a hundred pounds, a warrior of the second rank could casually throw hundred pound objects about.

“You... cough... cough...” Holding his throat, Rand coughed a few times, and then stared furiously at Linley. “You... you actually...”

“Yeah!” Yale suddenly shouted loudly, his face filled with excitement. “That felt so good. Third bro, I didn’t expect you to be as strong as that!”

“That kid is pretty small, but he’s so strong...”

Those magi of the fifth and sixth ranks were all astonished. There were some magus instructors in the hotel as well, and all of them were staring at Linley

with surprise.

A kid who appeared to be perhaps twelve or thirteen years old was able to casually toss a ninety-pound person with one hand.

And this youth was a magus!

“Hey, Rand, weren’t you bragging about how you were number one among the first graders?” Yale mocked.

Rand’s face went red, as his heart was filled with fury and shame. Staring at Linley, he shouted fiercely, “You, are you a magus? If you have the skills, compete with me using magic. What sort of behavior was that? A noble magus actually used the lowly skills of a warrior.” Rand was filled with anger and humiliation. He had just won the yearly tournament for the first graders, but just now, when Linley seized him by the throat and hoisted him up, he had been filled with the terrifying sense that his life was in the hands of another.

“Right, if you have the skills, compete using magic! Are you even a student of the Ernst Institute?” Rand’s nearby friends immediately called out in support.

But towards Linley, the four of them felt some dread in their hearts. Linley’s astonishing display of strength just now had shocked them.

“Magic?”

Reynolds immediately began to laugh loudly, as he said arrogantly, “Rand, do you actually believe that just because you won the first grade tournament, you really are the strongest amongst the first graders? Dream on. The number one first grader is our dorm’s third bro. You? Step off to the side.”

“Third bro, show’m a bit of your power,” Yale urged as well.

George had just been yelled at by Rand, so right now, he was in no mood to give Rand any face either. “Rand, let me tell you something. Know your own limits. Many of the experts in our school simply don’t deign to participate in the yearly tournament. Don’t really believe that you’re something special.”

Rand’s face grew uglier and uglier.

“You’ll know the truth upon dueling. Rand, compete with them,” those fifth and sixth grade students called out laughingly. They viewed the struggles of the

first graders as nothing more than an amusing diversion.

Rand was just ten years old, after all, and had been called a genius since he was little.

Even at the Ernst Institute, he was among the top tier. When had he ever suffered such humiliation?

“Number one?” Rand ground out. “Number one isn’t something that is simply proclaimed. It comes through competition. If you have the ability, then come duel with me.” Rand was very confident in his magical ability. After all, he had won the yearly tournament for first graders.

“Hey, why isn’t the manager of this hotel coming in to calm things down?” Some of the onlookers felt surprised and curious about this.

In fact, the Huadeli hotel manager was standing not far away, but he didn’t want to interfere.

Because he recognized these students.

Even aside from the fact that these were students from the Ernst Institute, based on the status of these students, he didn’t want to anger them. Especially... Yale.

“Young master Yale is here? Ugh. Forget it. He can do as he wishes. Even if he smashes the entire hotel, it’s none of my business.” The hotel manager rubbed and shook his head helplessly. He couldn’t dare to offend young master Yale.

And upon entering the Ernst Institute, Yale’s status amongst his family had only increased even more.

“Well spoken. Number one isn’t self-proclaimed. It’s won.” Linley stood up as well, his face cold as he stared at Rand. “Rand, if we are going to engage in a magical duel, let’s make it exciting. If you win, when I see you in the future, I’ll have to take the long way and avoid crossing paths with you. If I win, you need to do the same.”

Rand couldn’t help but sneer, “You call that exciting? When the loser meets the winner, not only does he have to take the long way around, he also has to give the winner a hundred gold coins. How about that?”

Linley frowned.

A hundred gold coins?

He only received a hundred gold coins each year for living expenses. He wasn't rich like some people.

"Haha! Rand, just a hundred gold coins? Aren't you embarrassed, saying such a number? How about this? Loser pays ten thousand gold. Deal?" The nearby Yale said loudly.

"Ten thousand gold?"

Upon hearing these words, many students in the hotel sucked in a cold breath. Ten thousand gold coins was not a small sum. There were perhaps only a few students in the hotel who could so casually and calmly bring out such a large sum.

"Ten thousand gold?" Rand couldn't help but feel his heart shake.

Although his clan was a large one, he only received three thousand gold in living expenses each year. He didn't come spend money at the Huadeli Hotel every day. Today, he had only come to celebrate him and Rickson becoming the number one and number three victors of the tournament.

"Haha, don't have the balls?" Yale pulled out a magicrystal card, waving it around as he spoke.

"Rand, agree to hi bet," Rickson said. "We four bros should be able to pool together ten thousand gold coins. I refuse to believe that this little punk who came out of nowhere can be a match for you."

Rand and his three bros glanced at each other.

"Fine! Ten thousand gold it is!"

Rand said loudly, and then sneered towards Linley, "Let's go. This place is too small. We'll go to the arena where the tournament was held. If you have courage, follow me!" After speaking, Rand arrogantly left the hotel, and his three bros followed him.

"Let's go." Yale's eyes were shining.

Reynolds and George were also excited. Linley nodded as well as he calmly chuckled, “Someone wants to give us ten thousand gold? How can we refuse?”

Linley, Yale, Reynolds, and George all left the hotel as well, heading directly for the arena.

The entire hotel was now in an uproar. A duel with a ten thousand gold coin wager on it was rarely seen, even by sixth grade students. And what was more, of the duelists, one was the person who had just won the yearly tournament for first graders, Rand, and one was a mysterious kid that no one knew.

Immediately, many people paid their tabs and headed off in that direction as well.



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The arena floor was made of limestone, and was extremely sturdy.

Right now, Rand and Linley were each standing on separate sides of an arena dueling area.

Beneath the upraised dueling area was a large group of people. After all, this was dinnertime, so on the way here from the Huadeli Hotel, one person became ten, and ten became a hundred. In a short period of time, a large group of people had been gathered. This exciting duel with a ten thousand gold wager was more than enough to attract many onlookers.

Seeing how many people had come and how noisy it had become, a look of confidence appeared on Rand’s face.

“Today, I am going to engage in a magical duel with this kid Linley, with the loser paying ten thousand gold coins and having to avoid the other in the future. Everyone, please be my witnesses.” Rand said. He enjoyed the feeling of being watched by many people. He didn’t suffer from any stage fright at all.

Immediately, many cheers exploded from below. During the yearly tournament, Rand had many supporters, while in contrast, very few people were supporting Linley.

But Linley just stood there on the dueling area quietly.

“Said enough?” Linley said calmly.

Rand smiled arrogantly. “Let’s go.”

Rand and Linley almost simultaneously began to chant the words to a spell. As both were magi of the second rank, the spells they used were all of the first and second rank and were easy to cast, requiring just a word or two.

“Whoosh!”

Seven sharp blades of wind sprang into existence, slicing directly towards Rand.

“A magus of the second rank?” The experienced onlookers could immediately tell.

But Rand had released a spell at the same time, and five balls of dull red flame shot towards Linley as well. The blades of wind were much faster than the fireballs, however, and Rand was forced to dodge in a rather sorry fashion. But Linley casually and effectively sidestepped the fireballs. And, while doing so, Linley’s lips continued to move as he executed his second spell.

Earth-style magic – Earth Tremor!

“Rumble...”

Rand felt the limestone beneath his feet begin to tremble violently. Under these circumstances, Rand couldn’t focus enough to chant any spells. Immediately afterwards, Linley released his third spell, and five fists of earthen-colored stone shot out rapidly towards him.

Rand couldn’t even maintain his footing on the shaking earth. He just barely dodged two of the stones.

“Thud.”

One stone smashed into Rand’s stomach, immediately causing him to vomit fresh blood. Rand hurriedly used his arms to cover his chest. Two more striking sounds were heard, and Rand was directly thrown off the dueling area, his entire body covered with dust.

Magic duel, Linley, victorious!

Linley calmly glanced at Rand once. Linley was very clear about the attack he had just used. With just a month's recovery time at most, Rand would be fine. If he, Linley, had decided to be merciless, he could have directed the stones at Rand's head and most likely finished him.

"A dual-element magus of the second rank. We have such an expert amongst us first graders?"

The onlooking first graders called out, astonished. For a second rank magus to appear among the first graders was a rare event, much less a dual-element magus, who would be the absolute strongest among them.

"This kid controlled his mageforce very precisely, and his body movements were very nimble."

Some of the fifth and sixth graders were a bit surprised. Just now, when facing the fireballs, Linley had been able to dodge while continuing to chant the words to a spell. From this, one could tell how agile Linley was.

"Haha, Rand, did you really think you were number one? Our dorm's third bro, just using magic, is still able to easily trample you." Yale laughed loudly.

"Cough, cough." Rand stood up, clutching his chest.

Rand knew in his heart that just then, Linley had shown mercy.

"Yale, tomorrow, bring Linley. I'll go with you to the Golden Bank of the Four Empires local branch to transfer money. Ten thousand gold coins. I'll keep my word." Rand took a long look at the distant Linley. This defeat at Linley's hands had totally woken Rand up from the arrogant haze of being a genius.

Even if one was talented, if one wasn't strong enough, he would still be defeated by others!

"Linley, thank you!" Rand said, bowing, causing Yale and others to be startled. And then, Rand stared at Linley and said resolutely, "But there will come a day when I will defeat you."

And then Rand, still clutching his chest, left with the help of his bros, returning to his own residence.

“Linley, you are too awesome. You won your bros a lot of face!” Reynolds immediately ran over and embraced Linley, who had stepped down.

Linley glanced around.

Many people were now staring at him and discussing him. Most of the talented people at the Ernst Institute had become well-known already. Nobody expected such an individual to appear out of nowhere amongst the first graders and easily defeat Rand, the tournament champion.

“Hi Linley, my name is Danni, a water magus of the first rank. I’m glad to meet you.” Immediately, a golden-haired girl with a tall, slender figure walked over and said to Linley with a smile.

“Hi, my name is Linley.” Linley didn’t have the habit of talking to strangers much. “Sorry, I’m going to go train and enter the meditative trance now.”

After speaking, Linley glanced expressively at his three bros. Yale and the others knew what he was thinking, and immediately, the four bros ignored everyone around them and departed, leaving behind the young lady, Danni, who frowned unhappily.

The Proulx Gallery

The Golden Bank of the Four Empires was a bank that had been jointly established by the Yulan continent's Four Great Empires. People who were capable of opening a magiccrystal card account with the bank were undoubtedly people of great wealth. Given that the card itself cost a hundred gold coins, normal people wouldn't be willing to part with such a high sum.

Ten thousand gold coins, if divided into hand-sized pouches, would fill a hundred pouches. Even a burlap rice sack would be half-filled and very heavy.

"A hundred gold coins, gone like that." Walking out from the local branch of the Golden Bank of the Four Empires within the Ernst Institute, Linley couldn't help but sigh to himself. Now, next to his chest, was a magiccrystal card of his own.

Linley knew that while he continued to live at the Ernst Institute, if he put a huge pile of gold coins in his dorm, it wouldn't be safe. The safest option was to put them all in a magiccrystal card.

It must be known that the cost to create the card was not low. It had taken master goldsmiths centuries to develop, and each card responded to the fingerprints of its owner alone. Thus, every single magiccrystal card could only be used by its original owner.

This was the reason why magiccrystal cards cost a hundred gold coins.

"With these ten thousand gold coins, my living expenses at the Ernst Institute will be more than sufficiently covered, with lots left over. I can help father as well." Linley felt very happy.

Yale's arm was around Linley's shoulders, and he whistled a little tune while delightedly peering at the nearby Rand and his bros.

Rand and the other three had taken money out their living expenses, and the

four of them had perhaps only a thousand gold coins left. But fortunately, the school year was about to end.

Reynolds and George were both calmly smiling as well, and were joking with Linley to the side.

But in truth, neither Reynolds nor George had suffered much in the past.

“Second bro, third bro, fourth bro, tomorrow, at the end of the month, my father will come over. At that time, I will arrange for carriages and guardsmen to be brought over. Where should we four bros travel to?” Yale suggested.

“The Holy Capital?”

Reynolds, George, and Linley’s eyes all shone.

Fenlai City, the Holy Capital, was no ordinary city.

“The Holy Capital is a great idea. On the way here from the O’Brien Empire, I stayed at Fenlai City for two days. I haven’t had a chance to visit many places yet, Reynolds hurriedly said.

George and Linley both nodded.

“The Holy Capital has lots of places to visit. Tomorrow, I’ll take you guys out and expand your horizons,” Yale said mysteriously.



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At dawn the next day, Yale and the others all had breakfast together, and then directly went to the Ernst Institute’s main gate and began waiting for Yale’s escorted carriage.

After waiting for two hours, the carriage had still not arrived.

“Squeak squeak.” Bebe, perched on Linley’s shoulder, began to squeak.

“Bebe is getting impatient. Yale, you pulled us all here early in the morning, but the carriage still hasn’t come,” Reynolds said unhappily, while Yale laughed apologetically. “I don’t know either, they should be here by now.” Linley just stroked Bebe’s little head.

“There they are,” Yale suddenly shouted loudly.

George, Reynolds, and Linley, all of whom had almost fallen asleep, turned to look. From afar, there really were four carriages and hundreds of mounted guardsmen hurrying towards them en masse. Above the formation, there were even seven or eight Griffons, and of the hundreds of riders, over ten were riding magical beasts such as Windwolves or the Vampiric Iron Bull.

“So Yale’s clanguard divisions are so formidable.” Linley couldn’t help but feel shocked. The eyes of Reynolds and George also shone.

Doehring Cowart was seated next to Linley, enjoying the sun. Upon seeing the cavalry division, his eyes lit up as well. Very shortly, the four carriages and hundreds of riders arrived at the main gate, and three magi came out to greet them.

A middle-aged man stepped forward in front of the four carriages. Before even speaking to the three magi, he strode towards Yale.

“Second Uncle, what took you guys so long?” Yale asked unhappily.

This ‘Second Uncle’ of Yale’s immediately laughed and said, “Haha, did you grow impatient? Alright, your carriages are all ready. The last one is filled with some goods, I’ll have them clear it out so you have a place to sit. You’re going to the Holy Capital, right?”

“Cass, take three others with you. You are responsible for protecting young master Yale,” This ‘Second Uncle’ ordered.

Off in the distance, a bald rider immediately dismounted, walked in front of Yale, and bowed. “Cass pays his respects to young master Yale.”

Next to Linley, Doehring Cowart’s eyes lit up and he said to him, “Linley, this brother of yours is definitely extraordinary. Based on how he dismounted and his eyes, I can feel that this Cass is an expert who is a good deal stronger than even your Uncle Hillman. In addition, that hawk on his shoulder should be a magical beast of the seventh rank – the ‘Blue-eyed Thunderhawk.’”

For Cass to be praised by Doehring Cowart as an ‘expert’ meant that he was definitely out of the ordinary.

“Linley, let’s go. Get in the carriage quickly. Let’s go to the Holy Capital,” Yale beckoned.

Linley and the other three entered the carriage together. The interior was very spacious, and the four of them weren’t cramped at all. Immediately, the carriage driver began heading towards the direction of Fenlai City, the Holy Capital.

Cass and the other three riders all followed from behind.

In the cabinets within the carriage, there were actually fruits, honey, and wine. The four bros began to eat and drink and chat within the carriage. The Ernst Institute was only twenty kilometers away from Fenlai City, so they arrived after about half an hour or so.

They left the carriage.

Under the protection of Cass and the other three, Linley’s group began to roam Fenlai City.

“Hey, where is everyone going? Fenlai City has an incredible amount of places to have fun. East Fenlai City has lots of luxurious places to spend money with lots of beautiful waitresses, while West Fenlai City has many art museums, such as the famous Proulx Gallery.” Yale was very familiar with Fenlai City.

“Beautiful waitresses? Okay okay, let’s go to East Fenlai City.” The eyes of that mischievous scamp Reynolds began to shine.

“It’s only the afternoon. Those places are only fun in the evening. But of course, we can go now as well,” Yale said laughingly.

Linley felt some reservations about those types of places, and so he said, “Yale, forget it, what’s the point of us kids going to those places? Just now, you mentioned the Proulx Gallery? Since the Proulx Gallery names itself after the famous Grandmaster Proulx, it must be extraordinary. Let’s go check it out.”

Proulx was the number one sculptor in the history of the Yulan continent.

“Grandmaster Proulx? I’ve heard of him as well. In the past, one of his sculptures was sold for the price of several million gold coins. The name of that sculpture was ‘Hope’. Millions of gold coins, my god. So rich.” Reynolds sighed.

George laughed confidently. “In the history of sculpture, from the beginning ‘til now, there have been countless stone sculptures made. Of the top ten sculptures, any one of them would be worth a million gold coins. And of those top ten sculptures, three were made by Grandmaster Proulx. He can be considered the number one person in the history of stonesculpting!”

Linley sucked in a breath of cold air.

Millions of gold coins?

What an enormous sum that was. Even if his clan sold off their ancestral home, they most likely would only be able to scrape up a hundred thousand gold coins.

“Let’s go check it out,” Linley immediately said.

The Proulx Gallery.

The number one art gallery for sculptures; each of the largest cities in the Yulan continent had a Proulx Gallery branch. The Proulx Gallery took up an extremely large space, and a great majority of those entering the gallery were people of culture and breeding.

Within the Proulx Gallery, if you had too many ostentatious magic rings on your hands, the likely result would just be you being mocked and derided for having no class.

Art, sophistication!

This place valued these things the most.

The entry fee to the Proulx Gallery was one gold coin per person.

A ding-dong sound, as clear as the sound of a mountain spring, rang out from within the Proulx Gallery. The sound of it made listeners feel at peace. Countless people traversed the gateway, with many noblemen, noblewomen, and beautiful young girls, all dressed very tastefully.

And commoners, in front of the Proulx Gallery, would almost unconsciously comport themselves.

When Linley and his bros, along with Cass and the three guardsmen, arrived at the Proulx Gallery, anyone who was a decent judge of character could

recognize the Ernst Institute clothing that they wore. Upon seeing the Blue-eyed Thunderhawk on Cass' shoulders, they naturally would become very courteous and polite.

"Uncle Cass, come in along with us. The other three can wait for us outside," Yale instructed.

Linley, his three bros, and Cass thus entered the gallery. In the main hall of the Proulx Gallery, there was a large, man-shaped sculpture. This sculpture was precisely that of the number one grandmaster sculptor, Proulx.

The entire Proulx Gallery was extremely quiet.

Virtually everyone, regardless of status, spoke in hushed tones, so as to avoid bothering anyone else.

Yale, Reynolds, George, and Linley viewed one stone sculpture after another, and in their hearts they felt as though these sculptures truly were incomparably beautiful.

"The Proulx Gallery's exhibits are divided into three halls; the main hall, the experts' hall, and the masters' hall. This main hall is filled with sculptures that some sculptors arranged to be placed here, to be valued and bought by others as they see fit. Each work is exhibited for a month, and after a month, the highest bid wins the sculpture. These ordinary sculptures are mostly just worth a few gold coins, with particularly good ones worth a few dozen coins."

Yale laughed as he explained. "But the experts' hall is different. The experts' exhibition is divided up into many individual rooms, with each sculpture in a room by itself. Generally speaking, an 'expert' is someone whose sculpting ability has received general acclaim, and most expert sculptures are worth around a thousand gold coins or so."

"As for the masters' hall, that's even more amazing. In the innermost sanctum of the gallery, there are a very small number of masters' sculptures. The prices for these sculptures are frighteningly high. Any of them are easily worth tens of thousands of gold, and some of the masterpieces which first brought fame to their master sculptors are easily worth hundreds of thousands of gold pieces." Yale explained the gallery to his three bros in detail.

Linley's breath stopped.

Any masterpiece by a master sculptor was worth tens of thousands of gold coins. To a master sculptor, money really meant nothing at all.

"But it is quite difficult for a master sculptor to produce a masterpiece, since they naturally don't want to make any mistakes at all." Yale sighed as he spoke. "A masterpiece that is worthy of being venerated throughout the ages requires talent, ability, and sometimes a sudden spark of genius."

"The works in this main hall are just a bit pleasing to the eye, that's all. Let's go inside." Yale led them deeper within.

Walking within the quiet Proulx Gallery, and listening to that peaceful music, Linley felt as though he were swimming in a sea of culture. And just at this time, Doehring Cowart flew out from within the Coiling Dragon Ring and began to appraise the art nearby.

"Terrible, terrible. How can people have the face to bring out artwork of this quality to show others?" Doehring Cowart said unhappily.

"Grandpa Doehring," Linley turned to look at Doehring Cowart. "This is just the main hall of the Proulx Gallery. There is an experts' hall up front, as well as a masters' hall."

"Proulx Gallery?" Doehring Cowart started, and then actually stopped talking.

"Grandpa Doehring? Grandpa Doehring?" Linley mentally called out a few times. But seeing that Doehring Cowart was still lost in his thoughts, Linley no longer tried to call to him. He followed Yale, Reynolds, and George to the experts' hall. This hall really was different, as within the center of the main hall, each and every artist had their information and the locations of their displays recorded.

Yale, Linley, and the others began to enter the individual display rooms.

Although he didn't know much about sculpture, Linley could still clearly feel that the sculptures of the experts were clearly different than those in the main hall. They seemed to carry within them some sort of ineffable grace and culture.

Just as Linley was falling into a reverie while enjoying the sculptures, Doehring

Cowart's voice sounded out in his mind once again.

"Not bad. These at least can be considered accomplished." Doehring Cowart sighed with praise. "But compared to the works of Proulx, there's still quite a ways to go."

Linley was speechless.

"Doehring Cowart, how can these people possibly compare to Grandmaster Proulx?" Linley shook his head and laughed helplessly. Proulx was the number one sculptor in the entire history of the Yulan continent.

Doehring Cowart frowned. Stroking his beard unhappily, he said, "What is it? Do you think that Proulx was a grandmaster from birth? He, too, started as an ordinary sculptor and worked his way up, only becoming a true grandmaster sculptor in the end."

Linley was stunned.

There was some logic to Grandpa Doehring's words.

After finishing inspecting the experts' hall, Linley and the other three headed for the innermost masters' hall.

"Everyone, remember, while within the masters' hall, don't touch anything. If you break anything, it would be disastrous," Yale reminded them.

Entering the masters' hall. Silence.

The masters' hall was extremely large, but there were very few sculptures inside. After all, only so many masters had ever existed, and each master had only four or five works of art on display. In the entire hall, there were only twenty or thirty works on display.

But although there were very few sculptures, when Linley and the others saw these sculptures, they felt a spirit emanating from them, as though these sculptures had life.

"Oh, not bad, not bad. I didn't expect that in five thousand years, the art of stonesculpting would reach such a height," Doehring Cowart said in amazement. "If these can improve a bit more, they will be able to approximate Proulx's level."

Silently mesmerized within the art gallery, Linley and the others felt their spirits being uplifted.



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Night. The Ernst Institute's main gate. Linley and other three dismounted the carriage.

"Second bro, third bro, the two of you, ugh. I planned for us to have a good time tonight in Fenlai City, but you... ugh, you guys are so thin-skinned. I started having fun in those places when I was six years old." Yale was still unhappily grumbling nonstop.

"Right on, right on," Reynolds said from the side.

George and Linley glanced at each other, and couldn't help but chuckle bitterly.

"Quick, open the gate!" A furious, urgent shout rang out.

Linley and the others couldn't help but swivel to take a look. They saw a curly-haired youth carrying another bloody youth, with a pretty girl by his side. The bloody youth's face was ashen white. His left arm was broken, with white bones sticking out, and his chest was covered with claw marks.

"Looks like some of the trainees who went to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts were wounded. What group is this? We haven't even been at the Ernst Institute for a year, but we've seen so many high-level students who were injured outside," Yale said casually.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was east of the Holy Union.

As a matter of fact, it was quite close to the Ernst Institute, perhaps just a hundred kilometers away. Generally speaking, those in good shape would be able to jog from the mountain range to the Ernst Institute in about half a day.

"Here at the Ernst Institute, I've seen so many magical beasts. Wow, man, there are flying beasts, running beasts, and all sorts of beasts. But most of the people who have magical beast companions at the Ernst Institute are magus

instructors, and a few high-level students.” George sighed in admiration.

Just as the four bros arrived at the main gate, suddenly –

“Linley.”

A familiar voice sounded out. Turning his head to look, surprised joy appeared on Linley’s face. “Uncle Hillman.”

A Wonderful Surprise

Hillman was standing in a corner near the gate. Smiling, he walked over. “The Ernst Institute has extremely strict management. They actually denied me entrance and just had a guard go looking for you. I didn’t expect you would actually be outside.”

Linley turned his head and said, “Yale, you guys go on ahead, I’ll join you later.”

Yale, George, and Reynolds all smiled at Hillman, then entered the Ernst Institute.

“Uncle Hillman, why are you here? I thought you would only come here to pick me up after the semester ends?” Linley said questioningly.

“Let’s talk over here.” Hillman pulled Linley off to a side, a look of irrepressible excitement appearing on his face. “Linley, I have wonderful news for you, extremely wonderful news.”

Linley’s eyes shone.

“What news?” Linley urged him.

Hillman smiled. “Linley, do you remember little Wharton’s date of birth?”

“Of course. January 3rd. What, does this have something to do with his birthday?” Linley questioned.

Hillman laughed. “It is December right now, so little Wharton is almost six years old. Just last night, your father tested little Wharton for the density of dragonblood in his veins in the ancestral hall. And the test result was... haha...” Hillman once again began to laugh.

Linley’s heart rate sped up dramatically.

The dragonblood density test result was...

Could it be...?

Linley asked, "Did the dragonblood density in little Wharton's veins reach the cutoff?"

Hillman laughed loudly and nodded. "Right. Your father was absolutely ecstatic. He excitedly drank wine with me until midnight. Your father said that his two sons are the absolute pride of his life. One is a mighty magus, and the other is a Dragonblood Warrior. Haha..."

"Wonderful."

Linley's heart was full of excitement.

The five-millennium-old legendary Dragonblood Warrior clan's prospects, prior to Wharton being tested for the dragonblood density, had previously been carried on Linley's shoulders alone. The greater their former glory was, the heavier the burden Linley had been carrying.

But now...

His own little brother's dragonblood density was sufficiently high that with just a few decades of hard work, he could become a world-renowned Dragonblood Warrior.

"I came here today to tell you this wonderful news. Your father said to me that right now, the strongest people in the town of Wushan are myself and him. We are both warriors of the sixth rank! Our level of expertise isn't enough to provide good tutelage for your little brother, and the training methods of your clan are written down but unclear." Hillman's face grew solemn. "Thus your father has decided to send your little brother to the O'Brien Empire's 'O'Brien Academy' to study. In that mighty military Empire, in the finest military academy, your little brother will receive the best tutelage available."

Linley agreed as well.

A person who only had tremendous brute strength but lacked technique and experience could only be considered a big, dumb ape.

"Wait." Linley frowned as he looked at Hillman. "Uncle Hillman, that O'Brien Academy's tuition must be extremely high. Although they will allow their own

students to study free of charge, no doubt they are extremely merciless in charging out-of-empire students.” Linley clearly remembered how much Reynolds had paid to be admitted to the Ernst Institute.

Hillman nodded. “The O’Brien Academy’s yearly tuition is approximately five thousand gold coins. Your father intends to have Housekeeper Hiri escort Wharton there and take care of him. The tuition fee really is high. In ten years, it’ll be fifty thousand gold coins.”

Fifty thousand gold coins would approximately equate to the entire value of all of the Baruch clan’s possessions, if sold off.

“Right! Uncle Hillman.”

Hillman looked questioningly at Linley as he watched Linley withdraw a magiccrystal card from his pocket. Hillman was shocked. “A magiccrystal card?” Previously, when he had been a soldier, he had seen magiccrystal cards before.

“Linley, how do you have a magiccrystal card? Not even your father has one.” Hillman looked at Linley with surprise.

Linley tugged Hillman and said, “I won this magiccrystal card from a rich kid who lost a magic duel with me. Let’s go to the Golden Bank of the Four Empires.” Right now, the guards at the Ernst Institute’s entrance no longer attempted to bar Hillman’s passage, because they recognized Linley, who had left earlier this morning.

To Linley, this extra money didn’t have too much usage. If he could use it to help his family, that would be enough.



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The town of Wushan, within the Baruch clan manor’s main hall.

Hogg was pondering.

Since his clan had produced a descendant with the requisite density of dragonblood, he must be given the best upbringing. Even if they had to beggar themselves, it would be worth it. This was without question!

“Who should I sell the stone carving screen in the bedroom to? Philip is too stingy, he won’t give me a good price.” Hogg was pondering nonstop.

The tuition needed to send little Wharton to the O’Brien Academy was astonishingly high. The question in Hogg’s mind right now was how to sell his clan’s possessions for a sufficiently high price.

Suddenly, footsteps sound out.

Turning his head, Hogg said, “Hillman, you’re back. Uh, what’s that on your shoulders?”

Hillman tossed the bag across his shoulders onto the floor. The bag collided with the floor with a heavy ‘thud’ sound. Clearly, it was very heavy.

“Lord Hogg, Linley asked me to bring this to you.” Hillman opened the bag and then poured everything out. One small, gold-colored sack after another formed a small mound on the floor, and the sound of gold coins clinking within the gold-colored sacks was very clear and crisp.

These gold-colored sacks were used solely by the Golden Bank of the Four Empires. Each bag generally contained a hundred gold coins.

“Gold coins? So much gold. There must be at least ten thousand gold coins here.” Hogg stared at Hillman, astonished. “Hillman, you say that Linley asked you to bring this here?”

Hillman said solemnly, “In total, nine thousand, nine hundred gold coins. Linley asked me to bring this to you. At the Ernst Institute, a rich young fellow engaged in a magical duel with Linley, and in losing, also lost ten thousand gold coins. Linley stored them in a magicrystal card, and now, has withdrawn the entire balance.”

Hillman still remembered the words that Linley had said to the attendant at the Golden Bank of the Four Empires. “Withdraw everything!”

“9900 gold coins? Linley’s?”

Staring at the mound of gold-colored sacks, Hogg immediately grew silent.

The Straight Chisel School

Many days later, at the Ernst Institute.

It was morning. Linley had eaten breakfast, and was now headed to the back mountains, preparing to begin training.

While walking on the road out of the Institute, the little Shadowmouse was on Linley's shoulders, scanning about in all directions. There were quite a few people at the Ernst Institute who had magical beast companions, and thus no one cared at all that Linley had a little Shadowmouse as a companion. But just at that moment...

"That guy is Linley, the number one magus amongst us first graders." A clear voice rang out from not too far up ahead.

Linley couldn't help but stare in the direction of the voice, and saw two cute girls chatting to each other while staring at him. When Linley glanced at them, the two girls began to titter in a quiet voice.

"I've become famous," Linley mocked himself.

Over the past few days, he would often run into people discussing him. Since he had defeated Rand, the victor of the first grade tournament, everyone had tacitly agreed that he was the number one expert among the first graders.

"Oh, in front is?" Linley suddenly saw a slender, small frame up ahead.

Short golden hair, with a body as slender as that of Reynolds. A cold aura emanated from him as he walked calmly along the road.

"Dixie?" Linley's pupils contracted.

Dixie was nine years old as well, and in fact was actually a month younger than Linley. But this nine-year-old child had already become a magus of the third rank. Although it became harder and harder to progress in the higher ranks, a nine-year-old magus of the third rank was still very astonishing.

“It’s Dixie. I heard that yesterday, at the annual magus assessment test, Dixie showed that he had already reached the requirements for the fourth rank.” A number of seventeen-and eighteen-year-old girls said from the side.

Most of the students in the third grade were more than sixteen years old, with only the genius Dixie as a clear exception!

“A magus of the fourth rank!”

Linley felt his heart shudder violently. They were both nine years old, and Dixie was even a month younger than him. But he had already become a magus of the fourth rank, while Linley was only of the second rank.

Demeanor as cold as ice, Dixie walked past Linley.

The absolute genius, Dixie. No one his age could come close to matching him.

A white line shone out of the Coiling Dragon Ring, and Doehring Cowart appeared next to Linley, smiling. “Linley, there actually isn’t a huge difference between you two. When Dixie enrolled, his spiritual essence was 68 times that of his peers. This means that even before training, his spiritual essence had reached the level of a magus of the third rank. That’s why in his first year, all he had to do was accumulate sufficient mageforce for him to become a magus of the third rank. By now, he’s been at the Ernst Institute for almost two more years, so it is very normal for him to become a magus of the fourth rank.”

Linley understood this in his heart.

This person simply had too much natural talent. He was born with tremendous spiritual essence, and he had exceptional elemental affinity as well. Clearly, he must have accumulated mageforce very quickly as well.

“Although his training speed right now is fast, I expect him to need another three or four years to advance from the fourth rank to the fifth rank. And to go from the fifth rank to the sixth rank, he will need four or five years.”

“Right now, you are a magus of the second rank, while he is of the fourth rank. But I am confident that in ten years, you will catch up to him,” Doehring Cowart said confidently.

But Linley didn’t believe it.

“Grandpa Doehring, the more natural talent one has, the faster one will progress. He has much more talent than I do, and holds two more ranks than I do. How could I possibly catch up to him in ten short years?” Linley was no fool. His studies at the Ernst Institute had made him aware of how difficult it was for a magus to advance a rank.

In the past, Doehring Cowart had told Linley that he would become a magus of the sixth rank in ten years, but Linley had always had reservations about that claim. After all, to date, his rate of improvement was clearly insufficient.

As he said these words, Linley had already left the gates of the Ernst Institute and entered the back mountains. As he passed through the mountain forests, Doehring Cowart suddenly said, “Linley, go to a place next to the mountainside.”

“Next to a mountainside?” Linley was confused.

“Don’t ask too many questions. When you arrive, I’ll explain.” Doehring Cowart laughed.

Most of the back mountain was covered with wild grass and many different large trees. But after a while, Linley found a place that satisfied Doehring Cowart’s requirements. The place was a mountain peak that rose hundreds of meters into the air. At the base of the peak, Linley stood.

“Grandpa Doehring, what do you want me to do here?” Linley said questioningly.

Laughing, Doehring Cowart said, “Linley, do you disbelieve my claim that I can let you reach his level in ten short years? Haha... Linley, as a mighty Saint-level Grand Magus, I, in fact, am in possession of a method to improve one’s spiritual essence.”

“A method to improve one’s spiritual essence? Isn’t the meditative trance enough for that?” Linley stared at Doehring Cowart questioningly.

Doehring Cowart smiled calmly. “Linley, I will admit that the meditative trance has very good results. But after meditating, one will feel extremely tired.”

“Of course I would feel tired. The meditative trance involves me using my spiritual essence non-stop. After totally exhausting my spiritual essence, I then

allow it to recover. It'd be strange if it wasn't exhausting." Linley frowned.

Doehring Cowart proudly said, "But my method is different. It doesn't cost spiritual essence at all. In fact, it is a form of entertainment."

"Entertainment?" Linley was dazed.

"Right. This form of entertainment is – stonesculpting!" A prideful look appeared on Doehring Cowart's face.

"Stonesculpting?" Linley said, astonished. "Like the sculptures in the Proulx Gallery?"

Doehring Cowart smiled and said, "Right. When others sculpt stone, they will exert a lot of energy and exhaust themselves. But my stonesculpting method is different. Although it is also tiring when you first begin to train in it, towards the end, it will have extremely good results."

"Are you serious?" Linley couldn't quite believe it.

Doehring Cowart stared at him. "Linley, you don't believe me? As a venerable Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, in the past, there were several sculptures I made which nobles offered a million gold coins to purchase. But how could I, a Saint-level Grand Magus, be willing to give the sculptures which I was the most proud of to others?"

"You were that good? How come I've never heard of your name amongst the other grandmaster sculptors, then, Grandpa Doehring?" Linley asked suspiciously.

Doehring Cowart said awkwardly, "Well, I hid all of my works in an underground vault which no one knew about. After five thousand years, I'm no longer even sure where it is." Five thousand years is enough for a sea to turn into farmland. The entire Pouant Empire had been eliminated. Who knew where the vault was now?

"Oh ho, so no one's ever heard of you?" Linley began to chortle.

"You don't believe me?" Doehring Cowart stared at him. "Back in the day, when Proulx was just a young kid, he came to me and earnestly begged me to allow him to view my sculptures. After analyzing my sculptures, that kid Proulx

had a mental breakthrough, which in the end allowed him to become a grandmaster sculptor. As a matter of fact, he can even be considered a student of mine.”

Linley was stunned.

“Proulx?” Linley was truly terrified now.

Proulx, the man who had been acclaimed throughout the ages as the finest sculptor in history, could be considered a student of Doehring Cowart.

“Of course, if one can describe Proulx’s works as being in pursuit of perfection, my works were in pursuit of a different extreme. I named my sculpting method the ‘Straight Chisel School’. The Straight Chisel School is totally different from all other sculpting methods. It pursues a totally different extreme. This method, in the beginning, is very exhausting, but as one masters it, you will realize its true fruits.” A look of absolute confidence was on Doehring Cowart’s face.

Glancing at Linley, a smile appeared on Doehring Cowart’s face. “But of course, in the past, I was the only member of the Straight Chisel School. From today forward, you will be a second member.”

In his heart, Linley had total confidence in Grandpa Doehring, so of course he had decided to study sculpting with him.

And what’s more...

If Grandpa Doehring’s words were true, and he could grow stronger while also becoming a master sculptor, just based on his sculpting skills alone, he would be able to support his little brother’s tuition.

“Written, recorded history goes back only a few tens of thousands of years at most. In the long ages before then, before the writing system had even been invented, stonesculpting had already existed.” Doehring Cowart said with a sigh. “Hundreds of thousands of years, or even millions of years ago, our ancestors would record their memories and their visions in sculptures. This is the most ancient method of recording culture and history.”

Linley nodded as well.

There was no form of culture at all which was older than stonesculpting.

“Throughout the ages, sculpting has always been very hard to do. And creating a sculpture with a unique aura is even harder. The harder something is to do, the more valuable a success will be.” Doehring Cowart sighed emotionally.

Linley agreed in his heart.

If you wanted to paint a single stroke, you could easily do so. But if you wanted to carve out a paint-stroke, it would be extremely difficult, because stone is too unyielding.

“A stone’s appearance, quality, grain, and coloration not only impacts its appearance, but its entire potential and true form. We use chisels to remove the excess parts and allow its natural beauty to be revealed. This is stonesculpting.”

“The stonesculpting way is really a way of controlling space and appearance. When stonesculpting, one must carve from the outside to the inside, one step at a time, slowly drawing out a ‘form’ from within. And then, slowly, one would remove the excess parts, allowing the form to become more and more clear. This will allow the sculptor to naturally feel as though his work of art is ‘evolving’ beautifully.



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Once he started, Doehring Cowart couldn’t stop talking about carving.

But Linley could clearly tell how much Doehring Cowart revered this art.

“Most stonesculpting methods use many tools, such as the butterfly chisel, a straight chisel, a skew chisel, a triangular chisel, a jade bowl knife, hammers, saws, and more. The reason there are so many tools is because stone is very firm and hard. Thus, they will use a butterfly chisel to draw the form, the straight chisel for the initial cuts, the triangular chisel...”

Listening to him speak, Linley began to understand more about the basics of stonesculpting.

Doehring Cowart suddenly laughed. “But my stonesculpting method is totally different from that of others. This is because my stonesculpting method uses only a single tool – the straight chisel! This is why I have named my sculpting method, the ‘Straight Chisel School’!”

“How is that possible? You carve just using a straight chisel?” Linley immediately argued. “You just said yourself that more tools are needed. For example, the scales of a fish. How would you use a straight chisel to carve that? Isn’t that totally impossible?”

“Wrong. Although others cannot, we earth-style magi can!”

Doehring Cowart said confidently, “Earth-style magi can totally sense the entirety of a rock’s form. With sufficient wrist strength, we can sculpt stone using just a straight chisel. But of course, the ‘Straight Chisel School’ is not a simple one to enter. Today, your mission is to go purchase a sufficiently sharp straight chisel. From today onwards, every day, I will spend three hours guiding you in how to sculpt stone.”

Six Years

The flowing water continued to swirl as Linley sat cross-legged next to it. In his hands, he held a straight chisel and a rock the size of his palm.

“Begin with the basics. I’ll start with this little rock as I begin my training...”

Linley sat there alone in the mountains behind the Ernst Institute. Under the tutelage of Doehring Cowart, he began to study the art of stonesculpting. As he began to understand more and more about this art, Linley also began to understand why in the later stages, the Straight Chisel School could assist in improving one’s spiritual essence.

When others carved, they needed to use a large pile of tools.

They had to spend a huge amount of time and mental energy just considering what tools to use where. Naturally, this would be exhausting. Every single work of art represented their blood and painstaking effort.

But the Straight Chisel School was different.

The only tool used was a straight chisel, so there was no need to consider what tool should be used for what. Naturally, the difficulty level was greatly heightened due to this use of just one tool. For example, using the straight chisel to carve out the parts normally reserved for the jade bowl knife required an extremely perfect understanding and grasp of the basic form of a stone.

In addition, great strength was needed.

If one tried to use just a straight chisel on some larger pieces which would normally require a saw to cut through, one would need sufficient strength.

One could use an earth-style magus’ unique connection to the earth to understand a stone’s essence. But wrist strength had to be trained. As a magus of the second rank, Linley’s wrist strength was not bad, but it was only enough to carve some smaller pieces. If he wanted to carve anything large, his wrist

strength would not be enough.

However...

Right now, Linley was just working on the basics.



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When the school year came to an end, Linley returned to town of Wushan.

After the New Year, little Wharton and his older brother, Linley, had only a few days to spend in each other's company. And then, under the auspices of Housekeeper Hiri, Wharton headed towards the O'Brien Empire. Linley had no choice but to wistfully watch little Wharton depart. Crying nonstop, the six-year-old Wharton parted from the ten-year-old Linley and headed off.

Time passed.

Linley continued to be a solitary figure at the Ernst Institute. The vast majority of his time each day was spent in arduous training at the back mountains.

Entering a young adult's growth period, Linley's appetite increased enormously, and he began to grow taller as well. Naturally, his physical strength and musculature also improved rapidly. In the art of stonesculpting, with Doehring Cowart's guidance and his own hard work, Linley continued to make progress.



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Spring went, autumn came. Flowers blossomed, flowers withered. In the blink of an eye, three years passed.

At a waterfall in the mountains behind the Ernst Institute.

"Roar, roar." Like a solid sheet of water, the waterfall poured down in torrents, smashing into the deep pool of water.

Linley was right next to the waterfall, wielding a thirty-centimeter straight chisel in his hand as he constantly chipped away at a man-sized block of stone.

The straight chisel in his hand danced in an almost illusory fashion. Every place the straight chisel passed saw scraps of stone detach and fall down. An embryo of a statue was beginning to take shape from the stone.

He continued from morning until evening, and the statue's form began to grow clearer and clearer.

Linley's gaze was totally fixed upon the stone. At this moment, his entire being was focused on the stone and permeated it, as his heart had become one with the inside of the stone. This marvelous feeling caused Linley not to even notice the passage of time. This sensation of being totally one with nature actually caused Linley's spiritual energy to begin to regenerate, and even grow organically.

But Linley himself did not notice this, as he continued to wield the straight chisel and unceasingly work on the statue.

Pieces of excess stone continued to fall down, causing each detail of the statue to grow more pronounced. By the time the sun had set, the straight chisel in Linley's hands finally came to a halt.

“Whew!”

Linley let out a soft breath and brushed away some small pieces of excess stone still remaining. The entire statue had taken shape. A half-meter long lively-looking mouse stood in front of Linley. At a glance, one might mistake it for a real mouse. This caused the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, to begin squeaking wildly.

From start to finish, this was done in one go!

“What an amazing feeling.” Only now did Linley realize that his spiritual essence had improved dramatically.

A white-robed Doehring Cowart smiled cheerily at him from the side. “Linley, starting today, you can just barely be considered to have mastered the basics. Have you felt that special feeling yet? But your work can only be considered to be a superficial pseudo-artwork. It's only worthy of being placed in the standard hall at the Proulx Institute. If you show it off there, I would be humiliated. Destroy it.”

“Yes, Grandpa Doehring.”

The straight chisel in Linley’s hand flashed many times, and the statue suddenly became divided into more than ten pieces. This year, Linley finally had mastered the basics of stonesculpting!

And this year, Linley was thirteen years old!

Day after day, year after year.

After mastering the basics of stonesculpting, Linley’s spiritual essence began to improve at a much more rapid pace. Specifically, when Linley was nine and a half, he had become a magus of the second rank, and when he was eleven, he had become a magus of the third rank. And when he was thirteen, he had become a magus of the fourth rank!

Magi found it harder and harder to advance in ranks as they grew more powerful. Logically speaking, from the fourth to the fifth rank, it should have taken Linley at least three years.

But in reality...

In year 9996 of the Yulan calendar, when Linley was fourteen and a half, he reached the rank of a magus of the fifth rank. From the fourth rank to the fifth rank, he only spent a year and a half. It was even faster than when he advanced from the third to the fourth rank.

This was the benefit of entering the Straight Chisel School!



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Year 9997 of the Yulan calendar was the seventh year Linley had spent at the Ernst Institute. This year, Linley was fifteen years old.

Wearing a sky-blue robe, Linley was walking on a road within the Ernst Institute. The little Shadowmouse Bebe continued to stand on Linley’s shoulders. Although six or seven years had passed, Bebe’s body hadn’t changed in the slightest.

By now, Linley was 1.8 meters tall and gave off a very steady, stable air. Earth

and wind elemental essences had continuously nourished his body. Combined with Linley's nonstop training, and the advantages provided by his Dragonblood Warrior heritage, Linley had already become a warrior of the fourth rank.

He could easily lift boulders which weighed hundreds of pounds, and shatter rocks with his punches.

His study of the Straight Chisel School of stonesculpting had also caused Linley's spiritual essence to constantly improve ever since he was thirteen.

At the start of year 9997 of the Yulan calendar, Linley entered the fifth grade class at the Ernst Institute, the same grade as the Ernst Institute's number one genius, Dixie. It had taken Dixie three years to advance from the fourth rank to the fifth rank, but up until now, he still had not been able to advance from the fifth rank to the sixth.

Fifteen years old. A magus of the fifth rank!

Linley and Dixie could both definitely be considered freaks of nature. But in the hearts of the vast majority, Linley was even more of a freak, because since the day he had taken the ability assessment for the fourth rank, he had spent only a year and a half before attaining the fifth rank.

Linley's astonishing rate of improvement had shocked everyone.

Now, Linley was ranked along with Dixie as the publicly-acknowledged 'Two Ultimate Geniuses' of the Ernst Institute.

"Look, it's Linley. Two years ago, he became a magus of the fourth rank, and just last year, he became a magus of the fifth rank in just one year! Too amazing. I predict that Linley will become a magus of the sixth rank before Dixie does."

"Linley spends every day training in the back mountains. I hear that recently, Dixie has also begun to train hard in the rear mountains as well. Most likely, he's being influenced by Linley."

"Very possible. Given Linley's astonishing rate of improvement, very possibly he will supplant Dixie and become the number one genius of the Ernst Institute."



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On the street, there were many people who, upon seeing Linley, began to discuss him amongst themselves. As the acknowledged genius of the Ernst Institute, no matter where he went, people would discuss him. But although Linley's strength continued to increase, he still refused to participate in the yearly tournaments.

"Genius?" Linley mocked himself.

Linley had never considered himself a genius. His strength came from intensive training every single day. For six years, he had been as steadfast as he was the first day. And that, combined with guidance from Grandpa Doehring, was what gave him his current accomplishments.

"But right now, my strength is actually less than that of Bebe's." Linley glanced at Bebe on his shoulders. "Bebe, what rank of power have you reached?"

"Squeak squeak." Bebe smirked at Linley, then said to him mentally, "I don't know either, since I've never competed against any other magical beasts. But you definitely aren't a match for me, hehe." Bebe was extremely self-satisfied.

Totally ignoring the worshipful gazes aimed at him by bystanders, Linley calmly left the Ernst Institute by the back gate and entered the mountains, once more beginning his solitary training. Those six years which went by like one day were the reason for his success.

Linley quickly and casually floated through the forests, while the little Shadowmouse Bebe continued to chat with him nonstop through their mental link. "Boss, when are we gonna go to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts to test our strength? You're already a magus of the fifth rank. You can begin to test yourself. And I, Bebe, will finally be able to show my awesome abilities."

"No rush." Linley's reply was very short.

"You're breaking my heart, man. I'm a magical beast, but I haven't even gone to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts a single time. What a tragedy!" After

six years, Bebe's abilities at self-expression had improved dramatically.

"Quiet. If you keep on making a fuss, I won't help you cook meat today." As soon as Linley spoke these words, Bebe immediately shut his mouth and didn't make a sound.

After entering the mountains, Doehring Cowart appeared by his side. Watching Linley, Doehring Cowart felt extremely gratified in his heart.

"Linley," Doehring Cowart suddenly said.

Linley turned his head and smiled at Doehring Cowart as he engaged in mental conversation. "Grandpa Doehring, is something the matter?"

Doehring Cowart smiled. "Based on your last few works of art, I can formally inform you that your abilities in stonesculpting have met the threshold."

Linley's eyes involuntarily shone.

His Grandpa Doehring had an eccentric temperament. Any works of art which didn't reach his exacting standards had to be destroyed immediately. Per his words, "If these works of art were to appear in the world, they would lose face for my Straight Chisel School, and lose face for me, an honorable Saint-level Grand Magus."

Thus, Linley had been forced to destroy every single sculpture he had made, even though they could have been sold for some money.

"Met the threshold? Grandpa Doehring, do you mean...?" Linley stared at Doehring Cowart in amazement.

Doehring Cowart nodded happily. "Right. Starting today, after you finish a stone sculpture, you don't need to destroy it. They are worthy of remaining in this world. Naturally, if you wish, you can deliver your sculptures to the Proulx Gallery to sell them and thus begin to build up a reputation for our Straight Chisel School. At the same time, you can make a bit of gold for yourself."

Part III

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts

Stone Sculpting

The warm, comfortable rays of the spring sun shone down upon the bros of dorm 1987, who were resting in their backyard.

Yale, George, and Reynolds were all engaged in idle conversation. By now, Yale and George were both sixteen years old, while Reynolds was now 14. The three of them had quickly gained in height, and even the shortest, Reynolds, was now 1.6 meters tall. The tallest of them was Yale, at an astonishing 1.9 meters.

“George, stop faking in front of the two of us. Even fourth bro has lost his virginity. Why are you and third bro still faking? How about this, at the end of this month, why don’t you and third bro both go to Fenlai City’s “Jadewater Paradise”. I’ll handle the expenses. I guarantee that both of you will enjoy yourselves very much, and I’ll also guarantee that the girl will also be a virgin. Deal?” Yale was doing a chest workout with two small stone weights, laughing as he spoke.

Those two stone weights each most likely weighed around 20-30 pounds. Linley generally disdained such light weights.

George laughed as well. “Boss Yale, stop trying to force us. Why don’t you two go to the Jadewater Paradise while third bro and I go drinking? Isn’t that a better idea?”

Reynolds mocked from the side, “George, you simply aren’t a man at all.” George could only laugh helplessly.

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard from outside the courtyard. Yale put the two stone weights down and headed towards the courtyard exit while saying, “I bet it’s our third bro. C’mon, time to eat...” Before he finished his words, Yale suddenly went silent.

He saw Linley stride forward, carrying a huge rock on his shoulders. The

boulder was at least three feet high and a hundred pounds heavy, but he was clearly carrying it into the dorm with ease. Yale, George, and Reynolds all stared, slack-jawed. Linley casually set the giant rock down in a corner of the courtyard, and the weighty sound of the rock slamming into the ground made all of their hearts tremble.

“What the hell? Third bro, I know you’re strong, but how are you this strong?” Yale stared at the boulder. “Is the boulder hollow or something?” As he spoke, Yale moved forward and stretched out his hands, giving the boulder a test.

“Hrrrrrngh!”

Yale used all of his strength, and his entire face flushed dark red, but that giant boulder seemed to be rooted to the earth and didn’t budge at all.

“Boss Yale, stop wasting your energy. There’s no way you can move it.” Linley laughed.

Yale’s physical strength was weaker than that of even a warrior of the first rank. How could he lift it?

Reynolds stared at the boulder with round eyes. Letting out a few surprised breaths, he suddenly turned his head and stared at Linley questioningly. “Hey, Linley, why did you bring such a huge boulder into our dorm? Oh, I know!” Reynolds eyes lit up. “I’ve seen powerful warriors use their hands to lift giant boulders as a form of weight training. Are you preparing to start weightlifting, Linley?”

“Such a huge boulder could smash me into meat paste.” George stared at the boulder, also letting out a few surprised breaths before turning to look questioningly at Linley. “Third bro, why did you bring this giant boulder into our apartment?”

Linley smiled at his three bros, and he said two words: “Stone sculpting!”

Based on what Doehring Cowart had said, his sculptures were now qualified to be placed within the standard hall. But it took a lot of time to carve each piece, and usually a day wasn’t enough. In the past, he could casually carve in the rear mountains without worrying about making mistakes, but now things were different.

“Stone sculpting?”

Reynolds, George, and Yale all stared at Linley, shock in their eyes.

“What, is this really shocking?” Linley looked back at his three bros.

Reynolds hurriedly said, “It isn’t shocking, no. It is extremely shocking! We four bros have lived together for six or seven years now, but I’ve never seen you sculpt stone before. Are you planning to start training today?”

Linley laughed, “Who says I’ve never been trained before? I’ve been practicing stone sculpting in the rear mountains for over five years now, but this time, after I finish this piece, I plan to take it to the Proulx Gallery and display it there and see if it can be sold for any money.”

In order to come up with enough money to allow his little brother, Wharton, to have sufficient funds to go with Housekeeper Hiri to the O’Brien Empire to request admittance and training, the Baruch clan had virtually exhausted all of its funds.

But despite this, Hogg was still very happy.

So what if his family had bankrupted itself? His elder son, Linley, was a student at the Ernst Institute, and upon graduation would definitely become a powerful magus. And his younger son, Wharton, had the possibility of becoming a Dragonblood Warrior.

Hogg could already foresee the dawning splendor of the Baruch clan!

“The Proulx Gallery?” Upon hearing this, Yale and the other two looked at Linley in shock.

Linley was the pride of their dorm, dorm 1987. Despite being just fifteen years old, he had entered the fifth grade at the Ernst Institute, and had been acclaimed alongside Dixie as one of the ‘Two Ultimate Geniuses of the Ernst Institute’. Yale and the others all acknowledged Linley as being a genius, but...

Stonesculpting was an extremely profound art form.

Many people would painstakingly train for decades, but still only be considered ordinary sculptors. As an extremely ancient and long-lived art form, how could it be easy for stonesculpting to be mastered? How did Linley dare to

dream that his artworks would be exhibited in the most venerated of art galleries, the Proulx Gallery?

“Third bro, don’t get too carried away.” George joked in a consoling manner.

“Linley, I’m worried... your sculpture, will anyone actually buy it?” Reynolds frowned, a look of disbelief on his face.

Yale laughed loudly. “Why are you guys acting like this? Third bro, go ahead and put on an exhibit. As long as you have an exhibit, I’ll spend ten thousand gold to buy it and help spread your fame.”

“I’m telling the truth.” Linley retrieved a straight chisel from his clothes.

“Straight chisel?” Reynolds said in surprise. “Linley, looks like you’ve made some preparations. But in the past, I was also prepared to learn stonesculpting, so I know that lots of tools are needed, including the straight chisel, the butterfly chisel, the triangular chisel, the jade bowl knife, and tools like saws. What, did you only prepare a single tool?”

George, Reynolds, and Yale all knew at least some rudiments about art.

Linley didn’t say too much.

Wielding his straight chisel, Linley naturally entered a tranquil mental state. His spirit could feel the earth essence flowing through the boulder in front of him, and could even sense, just barely, the veins in it. Smiling, Linley began to use the chisel.

The flashing chisel reflected the light of the sun, causing the nearby Reynolds and the others to squint. But all of them continued to stare at the boulder.

“Whooooosh!”

Wherever the shadow of the chisel fell, large pieces of stone began to fall as well.

“How is this possible?” Yale watched in astonishment. “To remove such a large piece of rock, a saw should be used to chop it. He actually removed it with just a straight chisel. How astonishing must his wrist strength be?” Next to him, Reynolds and George both fell totally silent.

Wrist strength?

To do this in such a manner as casually as Linley did, with every cut being perfectly even, was not something which could be accomplished just with strong wrists.

Linley was as tranquil as a pond of still water. The straight chisel in his left hand stretched out, quickly carving through every part of the boulder; pieces of excess stone continuously rained down. The natural, elegant manner in which Linley carved was a treat to watch.

“Third bro, he...”

Yale, George, and Reynolds exchanged glances. At this moment, they felt in their hearts that perhaps Linley truly was an expert stone sculptor.

Tranquil. Natural. Peaceful.

Linley very much enjoyed the feeling of stone sculpting. At his current level, Linley didn't have to consider how much effort or strength should be used in any particular place. The straight chisel in his hands would naturally attain the most perfect usage of force. This was a subconscious effect.

Compared to the ‘Straight Chisel School’?

None of the other schools of stone sculpting could be so effortless. All the experts of the other schools had to consider which of the many various types of tools should be used for each part of the sculpture. This alone was exhausting.

In this natural, unrestrained manner, Linley's stonesculpting led his spiritual essence to rapidly grow, like the grass after a rain. That sensation of natural growth was extremely wondrous to Linley, making him feel comfortable from his very core.

Linley's right hand suddenly halted.

The flying dust and specks of stone took a bit longer to settle, but the outline of a crawling creature could be seen from the boulder.

“Why are you guys standing there in a daze? All shocked?” Linley laughed as he turned to look at Yale and the others. “I've just made a simple outline. There's a lot more time and effort I'll have to spend later. Come on, let's get lunch.”

Yale, George, and Reynolds all glanced at each other.

Just based on what Linley had just shown them, all three of them were sure of one thing:

“Genius, Yale said admiringly.

“A genius amongst experts,” George added.

Even among stone sculptors, for someone to be able to reach Linley’s level of proficiency in just five or six years was an event which occurred perhaps once in a century.

Within the Huadeli Hotel.

“Since we just found out today that Third Bro is an expert stonesculptor, we absolutely must go out and celebrate. Let’s go to the Huadeli Hotel,” Yale said. And just like that, the four of them had gone to the Huadeli Hotel. As soon as they set foot within the hotel, many students patronizing the hotel turned to stare at them.

The vast majority of the students’ gazes were focused on Linley.

Dixie, Linley!

The most prominent, standout geniuses of the Ernst Institute. Any place they went, they became a focal point of attention. From far away, many students began to chat amongst themselves in lowered voices.

The four bros were seated now, and the dishes had just arrived.

“Squeak squeak.” Bebe, who had been napping lazily this entire time, stuck his little head from out of Linley’s robes. His pair of slick, devilish little eyes stared at a gleaming roasted chicken on the table. Reynolds immediately grabbed the chicken and offered it to Bebe. “Bebe, c’mere.”

“Boss Linley, I’m gonna go eat,” Bebe immediately said mentally to Linley.

Before Linley even had the chance to reply, Bebe leaped onto the table, grabbed the chicken, and began to chomp down on it. In less than ten seconds, the entire roasted chicken had been totally devoured by a little Shadowmouse that was a full size smaller than it.

“Third bro, each time I see how fast Bebe eats, my heart can’t help but shudder.” Yale laughed.

After eating, Bebe turned around to look at Linley. Seeing grease covering Bebe’s paws, Linley couldn’t help but frown.

“Squeak squeak.”

Bebe intentionally chirped out twice towards Linley, and then half-closed his eyes in a very self-delighted manner, while at the same time, his entire body radiated a black glow. The black aura expanded, and then, in the blink of an eye, disappeared. But Bebe’s two previously oily paws, as well as his tail, were now absolutely clean.

Rubbing his small face, Bebe stared at Linley and chirped once, while saying mentally, “Boss Linley, clean enough for ya?”

Linley couldn’t help but laugh.

“Whoosh.” With a flicker, Bebe once more burrowed his way into Linley’s clothes.

And then, the four bros began to chat and eat.

“Right, third bro, if you intend to deliver your sculptures to the Proulx Gallery, there’s a few things you’ll need to keep in mind,” Yale reminded Linley.

“Oh, what do I need to remember?” Linley asked.

Linley didn’t know a single thing about the system through which the Proulx Gallery accepted new sculptures.

Yale smiled. “For most sculptures, on the lower left corner, the artist must leave an inscription of his name or a pseudonym signifying that this is your art. That’s the first thing. The second thing is that when the sculpture is delivered to the Proulx Gallery, it must be totally sealed and boxed. This is to prevent the sculpture from being damaged while being delivered to the gallery. When the sealed sculpture is delivered to the Proulx Gallery’s warehouse, there will be people who will inspect it to see if it is in good condition, as well as take down a detailed recording of your own information. Usually, your artwork will be ready to be displayed at the standard display hall in the Proulx Gallery within three

days or so.”

Linley nodded.

Leaving behind one’s name on one’s artwork was done in order to prevent others from falsely claiming that the work was theirs.

Linley could also understand the reasoning for requiring the sculpture be boxed and sealed. “Some sculptures are carved very exquisitely and delicately. During the shipping process, it is entirely possible that the sculpture might be damaged. If I totally seal it off, and also add lots of paper and cloth padding, it should be much safer.”

“What about pricing and bidding? How does the Proulx Gallery handle this?” Linley asked.

The whole point of delivering the sculpture to the Proulx Gallery was for the sake of making money, so as to improve his family’s economic situation.

Yale said delightedly, “The sculptures are placed within the standard hall, and potential buyers are allowed to set any price they want. After a month, the highest bidder will receive the sculpture, while you will get your compensation. Naturally, the Proulx Gallery will receive a 1% transactional commission, with a hard limit of ten gold coins. If your sculpture exceeds a thousand gold coins in price, the gallery’s commission will still remain just ten gold coins.”

Linley understood now.

“Third bro, don’t worry. I’ll arrange for some people in Fenlai City to take care of everything. I guarantee it’ll all be to your satisfaction.” Yale smiled towards Linley as he spoke. “If the third bro of our dorm delivers a sculpture to the Proulx Gallery and it sells well, I’ll gain a lot of face as well.”

Off to the side, George couldn’t help but sigh with praise. “Third bro, by now, you are a fifth grade student. In the future, you’ll no doubt also be a master sculptor. Your future is boundless. You’ll no doubt do much better than us.”

“A master sculptor? Don’t flatter me,” Linley laughed at himself.

The four bros chatted as they continued to drink and eat.

“Living in the Ernst Institute really is comfortable,” Yale suddenly sighed,

putting his wine cup down. “I remember when I was young and I lived at home, our family rules were extremely severe.”

Reynolds quirked his lips as well. “We are all students of the Ernst Institute. According to Grandpa Lomu, right now, the world is very chaotic. In the outside world, there is constant warfare and slaughter. The Ernst Institute is backed by the Radiant Church, so no one dares offend it. That’s the reason why our lives are so comfortable. In the future, when we go out and train in the real world, we’ll see how cruel the world can be.”

“Absolutely correct.”

Linley nodded and sighed. “I’m a fifth grade student now. Many of my fellow classmates have already gone training in the real world. From what they say, some students die in battle outside, and many are crippled or wounded. Without experiencing real life-and-death battles, it will be hard for us to grow.”

“We are just like the pets of the noble families. Our lives might be easy, but how can they compare to the viciousness of the real world?” George also sighed. “I really look forward to the bloody life-and-death battles which the high-level students will engage in. Those exciting, blood-boiling lifestyles must be extremely stimulating.”

George, Yale, Reynolds, and Linley were now all fifteen years old. In all of their hearts, there was a thirst for the exciting events of the outside world.

But Yale and the others were far too weak. If they embarked on that lifestyle of life-and-death battles now, their chances of death would be far too high.

“Linley, you are a fifth grade student now, yes?” Reynolds suddenly asked.

Yale and George also looked at Linley, their eyes gleaming.

Linley took a deep breath, and nodded. “Right. I am now a magus of the fifth rank. I can be considered a high-level magus now. In June, I plan to embark on a two-month trip to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, returning only in August.” Linley had decided long ago.

“The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?”

Yale, George, and Reynolds all sucked in a cold breath.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the largest mountain range in the Yulan continent, lay less than a hundred kilometers east of the Ernst Institute. Many high-level students did indeed venture there for their second or third training missions. But most students would select some more ordinary locales for their first training expedition.

For example, they might take on some low-risk assignments like being a bodyguard or escorting a caravan.

“Linley, you plan to go to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for your very first training expedition?” Reynolds couldn’t help but ask. George and Yale were also worried.

“Relax. I have full confidence in my abilities.” Linley was rather confident in himself. As a magus of the fifth rank and a warrior of the fourth rank, he possessed great speed as a warrior, which could be further supported by the wind-style spell, ‘Supersonic’. Based on his current speed, when combining his speed with this spell, Linley could reach the speed of a warrior of the sixth rank.

And even more importantly...

Linley could utilize the high-level wind spell, “Floating Technique.”

A Night at the Jadewater Paradise

Time flowed on, and in the blink of an eye, it was now the end of May.

During the past two months, every day, Linley spent part of his free time in the meditative state, and the rest either practicing stonecarving or reading. The Ernst Institute's library held an enormous amount of books within it, and through reading these books, Linley was able to increase the breadth of his knowledge.

May 29th. Morning.

Linley, Yale, George, and Reynolds stood in the square in front of the Proulx Gallery. A nearby carriage held three wooden crates. During these past two months, Linley had actually managed to produce nine new sculptures, but since this was his first time delivering art to the gallery, Linley just wanted to get a taste of how it all worked and thus only brought three.

"Carry those three boxes," Yale directed.

Some servants from Yale's clan began to lift and move the crates.

"Third bro, come with me." Yale was clearly quite familiar with this road, and he headed directly towards the side of the Proulx Gallery. The Proulx Gallery took up a very large amount of space, and off to the side of the main entrance, a few hundred meters away, there was an unremarkable door, with a middle-aged man dressed in warrior attire standing in front of it.

When the middle-aged man saw Yale stride towards him, his eyes lit up and he immediately hurried over. Smiling, he paid his respects and said, "Young master Yale, welcome!"

Yale smiled and nodded. "I imagine you already know why I am here. This is my good friend, Linley. These three sculptures are his. Where are your servants? Have them carry the sculptures inside."

“Please wait.” The middle-aged man smiled and nodded.

Very soon, several movers emerged from the corridor, and the middle-aged man smiled towards Linley. “Young master Linley, per the rules of our Proulx Gallery, you need to leave behind your proof of identification. All you need to do is let us take down the details of your Ernst Institute student identification.”

The Ernst Institute’s student identification was more than enough proof.

Linley took out his student identification.

Accepting the identification papers from Linley, the middle-aged man glanced through them, and his eyes immediately lit up. Shocked, he raised his gaze back to Linley. “Fifth grade?” Linley’s grade was very visible on the identification papers. For someone so young to reach the rank of a magus of the fifth rank was quite surprising indeed.

Yale couldn’t help but say proudly, “This brother of mine is one of the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute. Last year, when he was only fourteen years old, at the end-of-year exams, he reached the title of magus of the fifth rank.”

One of the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute?

In his heart, the middle-aged man knew quite clearly that the future prospects for this young man standing in front of him, Linley, were boundless. His attitude immediately became much more obsequious. After recording Linley’s biographical details, he made a mark on each of the three crates.

“Young master Linley, everything is handled. All you have to do, young master, is come back in a month and collect your remuneration.” The middle-aged man smiled.

“In a month? I don’t have any time next month. Can we delay it to three months from now?” Linley asked. Linley was planning to head to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts in a week or two, and on this trip, he was planning on spending two months or so there.

“No rush. As long as your sculptures find buyers, you can come back at any time to collect your fee.” The middle-aged man nodded.

Yale frowned. "Hrm? What's going on? I remember that in the past, before accepting sculptures, you would first inspect the contents of the crate. Why aren't you doing an inspection this time?"

The middle-aged man said, "The reason we inspect the insides of the crates is to prevent unscrupulous people from sending us some already-damaged sculptures. If we are unable to detect the damage, they might claim that the damage was caused by the gallery and try to extort us. But since these three particular sculptures have been delivered by young master Linley and you, young master Yale, I have no concerns. I am confident that someone like you, young master Yale, would not stoop to such actions."

The middle-aged man knew exactly what he was doing.

What sort of person was Yale?

Extort the Proulx Gallery? The amount of money that he might be able to extort probably wouldn't even be enough to count as pocket change for him. And the creator of these sculptures, Linley, was known as one of the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute. How could people like them lower themselves to such base actions?



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Day turned to night. On East Fenlai City's main road, the Fragrant Pavilion Avenue. The third floor of the Jadewater Paradise. Linley and the other three had a room of their own.

The nights in Fenlai City were always quite busy.

But the nights within the Jadewater Paradise were even more bustling, having reached its busiest time of day. The coquettish laughs of women could be heard nonstop, while the roaring, heroic laughter of men also constantly sounded out. Within the private room, the four bros drank while making idle conversation, and by each of their sides was a delicate and pretty girl.

"Second bro, third bro, I'm going to go to bed, and fourth bro is as well. The two of you..." His arm draped around a girl with long, green hair, Yale's breath

smelled strongly of liquor.

“That’s enough, boss Yale. Stop talking, alright?” Linley interrupted Yale’s words.

Yale and Reynolds exchanged glances, then looked at Linley and George with contemptuous gazes. And then Yale and Reynolds, each of them with an arm around the waist of their respective companions, left the private room. For two years now, Linley and the gang had often come here.

Generally, Yale and Reynolds would go off to have fun, while Linley and George would at most drink a little and chat with the girls.

“Young master Linley, we’ve known each other for two years now, but you...” The green-haired girl seated next to Linley said in an unhappy voice.

Linley couldn’t help but feel a headache coming on.

“Ira, if you’re tired, you can go back and get some rest. I guarantee that when the time comes, you won’t receive a single copper coin less than you deserve.” Linley had no choice but to speak coldly, causing the girl named Ira to no longer dare speak. It really was quite rare to see someone come to the Jadewater Paradise but only drink.

A white light shone forth from the Coiling Dragon Ring, transforming itself into Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart, face wreathed in smiles, looked at Linley. Jestingly, he said, ‘Hey, Linley. Why do you have such a foul look on your face with such a girl in front of you? Alas, I, a venerable Saint-level Grand Magus, am now just a bodiless spirit. I can’t touch a woman, even if I want to. And you, you punk, act in such a way?’

“Grandpa Doehring,” Linley frowned unhappily as he said mentally to Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart pursed his lips. “You’ve never gotten a taste of a woman. If you had, you wouldn’t be acting in such a way.”

Linley raised his head and stared outside the window, no longer paying any attention to that lecherous old Doehring Cowart. The cold outside air blew on

his face, helping Linley to calm down.

“The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. What is it like inside?”

In one or two weeks, Linley was going to head off on his journey. Within the Ernst Institute, Linley had heard many legends regarding the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and had also heard much from Doehring Cowart. However, Linley had never gone himself. Thus, Linley had only his own imagination to rely on when trying to picture the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

“In a week, let’s go.”

Staring outside the window at the boundless night sky, Linley made up his mind.

The Price

Within the Proulx Gallery. Elegant music wafted over everyone present, as all of the visitors silently inspected one sculpture after another.

The gallery was divided into the main gallery, the expert's gallery, and the master's gallery.

The main gallery took up an enormous amount of space, and also contained the most works of art. Towards the northeast corner of the gallery, there were three works of art, all of which emanated a very unique aura. Anyone who had spent time studying the art of sculpting would immediately sense those auras.

But there were more than ten thousand works of art in the gallery, and these three sculptures were thus like needles hidden within an ocean. It was quite difficult for anyone to pay them any mind.

“Most of these sculptures feel hollow. They have a shape but no soul.”

The one-hundred-eighty-year-old Count Juneau was slowly making his way through the main hall, his gaze flickering past one work of art after another. Count Juneau didn't have any other hobbies; the only thing he liked was sculptures. Every day, he would spend his morning strolling through the Proulx Gallery.

But within the main gallery, there were very few sculptures capable of attracting Count Juneau's interest.

“Milord Count, have any sculptures struck your fancy?” A beautiful attendant by his side asked him. Because Count Juneau came here every morning, all of the attendants working at the Proulx Gallery had become quite familiar with him.

Count Juneau shook his head and laughed. “Haven't found any yet.”

“Milord Count, the quality of the sculptures here is much inferior to that of

the sculptures in the hall of experts and the hall of the masters. Why do you spend every morning here?" The female attendant asked curiously.

Count Juneau intentionally let out a mysterious laugh. "You don't understand. There are countless sculptures within this main hall. Perhaps there are some good works hidden within. The feeling of panning for gold by sifting through mud is quite marvelous."

"Oh?" The attendant looked at Count Juneau questioningly.

Count Juneau didn't explain any further. He continued to appraise one sculpture after another without stopping, but when he reached those three works of art sculpted by Linley, his eyes lit up. Having appraised sculptures for over a century, he could immediately discern that these three sculptures were special.

"Cool, natural, proud and aloof..."

Count Juneau couldn't help but praise.

The word was 'essence'. For a work of art to be termed a 'good' work of art, it had to have that certain special essence to it. At a single glance, Count Juneau could tell that these three works of art emanated a cool, proud, and aloof aura. It was this unique aura which had stopped Count Juneau in his tracks.

"Come over here and help me place a bid. For these three sculptures, I am willing to bid a hundred gold coins each," Count Juneau said to the female attendant.

The female attendant beamed and immediately pulled out a records book. After recording the registration number of each sculpture, she took out three pieces of paper and placed them next to the sculptures, with each piece of paper bearing the words 'hundred gold coins' on them.

While the female attendant was doing her administrative work, Count Juneau continued to savor these three sculptures.

"Wait a second!" Juneau's shadowy eyes suddenly lit up again as he stared fixedly at the sculpture of the 'Velocidragon'. "How is it possible that the scaly armor on the back of the Velocidragon shares the same outline and line with the leg, as though it were all done as part of one series? Logically speaking, the

scaly carapace should have been carved by a butterfly chisel, while the leg should have been carved using the straight chisel. No matter how careful one is, a sculptor can't possibly make the lines flow together 100% perfectly!"

Count Juneau had studied sculpture for over a century.

Originally, he wasn't a particularly wealthy noble, but based on his keen sight, he had collected many sculptures at a low price which he would later sell at a much higher price. This was how Count Juneau had become one of the wealthy nobles of Fenlai City.

"Can it be that it was carved using a single tool? Impossible; aside from the butterfly chisel, what tool could possibly have been used to carve out such perfect, exquisite details in each protruding scale?" Count Juneau frowned, concentrating fiercely. He had never seen anything so queer.

"Milord Count?" Seeing him in a daze, the female attendant couldn't help but call out to him softly.

Count Juneau's eyes flickered. He said to himself, "I didn't expect that I would encounter such a unique work of art in the main hall of the Proulx Gallery. I can't let others notice it. If I bid a hundred gold coins, some people will take special notice of it. It might cause the price to increase dramatically."

Count Juneau immediately made his decision.

He would leave these sculptures alone for a few days, and come back later to bid on them during the final two days.

"Please assist me in cancelling my offer," Count Juneau said directly to the woman next to him.

"Cancel?" The female attendant was startled. Based on their normal rules, once a bid was made, it could not be retracted. But Count Juneau was a very old, longstanding customer of the Proulx Gallery, and so the female attendant very matter-of-factly removed the three bidding stickers.

"Might I ask milord Count why you have retracted your bid?" The female attendant asked.

Count Juneau smiled mysteriously. "No need for you to ask. Oh, right, I want

to ask you, how many days have these three sculptures been on display?”

The female attendant flipped through her records, then smiled. “These three sculptures will be on display until June 30th. They were just brought here to the main hall yesterday.”

Count Juneau nodded fractionally.

“Alright, I’ll wander around a bit. You can go ahead and do what you need to do.” Count Juneau smiled.

But in his heart, Count Juneau secretly rejoiced. In his appraisal, the true valuation of these three sculptures should be in the range of three thousand gold pieces. An ordinary sculpture by an expert was worth around a thousand gold pieces, and these three sculptures were all carved in a very unique manner. Just based on that alone, the actual valuation would be doubled.



*

Count Juneau continued to visit the gallery every day. Indeed, just as he had expected, because the Proulx Gallery had so many sculptures, nobody else had managed to discover these three sculptures. Even if someone had, they only felt that the sculptures looked nice, and couldn’t see their true value.

June 10th.

Count Juneau once more arrived at the Proulx Gallery. Casually strolling about the main hall, he browsed through the selections. But once he reached the three sculptures, his face tightened. Next to each of the sculptures, there was a bidding slip.

Three stone sculptures, each one with a bid for three hundred gold coins.

Seeing this bid, Count Juneau inwardly seethed. “Fool! Even if you saw the true value of the sculptures, why would you bid such a high price right off the bat? This will just draw more attention to them.” Count Juneau’s heart was filled with rage, but there was nothing he could do. He didn’t have the authority to retract someone else’s bid.

Everything unfolded just as he had predicted and feared.

June 12th. Count Juneau once again reached the three sculptures. By now, the price had changed once again.

“Five hundred gold coins?” Count Juneau’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Seems like there’s quite a few people who know quality when they see it.”

Count Juneau still refused to make a bid. He planned to make his bid on June 30th. As time flowed past, the valuation of the three sculptures continued to rise, but because even an expert crafter’s work was valued at around a thousand gold, the price rose rather slowly.

500 gold coins. 510 gold coins. 515 gold coins.

The bids continued to rise slowly. By June 29th, they had only risen to 625 gold coins.

June 30th.

Count Juneau actually did not appear this morning, which was quite a rare occasion. He waited until nightfall, because the Proulx Gallery did not close until midnight. Linley’s three sculptures would also be removed from the gallery at midnight.

“The price yesterday was 625 gold coins. I’ll make my bid at the end.” Count Juneau smiled as he walked towards the three sculptures.

“900 gold coins? What idiot made this bid?” Upon seeing the highest bid, Count Juneau’s heart exploded with fury.

The price yesterday had been just 625 gold coins, but in a day, the price had risen so dramatically. Although Count Juneau was furious, there was nothing he could do. He decided to wait patiently, and after a long period of time, he finally looked up to see the clock up above.

“It’s already 11 PM. In an hour, the place will close.” Count Juneau revealed a hint of a smile.

In Fenlai City, Count Juneau could be considered a middle-class noble. When he was young, Count Juneau had actually been quite poor. Later, it was due to his shrewd investment in and collecting of sculptures that helped him slowly

gain wealth. His current net worth was in the hundreds of thousands of gold coins. He could be considered a rather well-off noble.

“Count Juneau, you are here as well?” A whiskered middle-aged man in a swallow shirt smiled as he walked over.

Upon seeing this person, Count Juneau’s countenance changed, but he still was able to smile calmly. “Count Demme! It’s almost eleven. Why are you here?” But in his heart, Count Juneau felt that things had just taken a turn for the worse.

Count Juneau and Count Demme were both considered rather famous collectors of sculptures within the noble circles of Fenlai City.

“Me? For these three sculptures, of course.” Count Demme stroked his whiskers, then said contentedly, “Count Juneau, take a look. The lines and aura of these three sculptures are so very mesmerizing. The expert who was able to produce such a unique aura must surely also be a unique person.”

Count Juneau’s heart trembled.

Indeed...

This Count Demme had also seen the value of these three sculptures. For him to arrive at eleven o’clock most likely meant he had had the same idea as Count Juneau.

“Miss, come over here, please,” Count Demme said quite courteously to a nearby female attendant, who walked towards them with a smile. Count Demme pointed at Linley’s three sculptures. “I’m willing to pay a thousand gold coins for each one of these sculptures.”

“Just a moment,” the attendant said courteously.

She took out a record book and made some notations before placing the bidding slips next to the sculptures.

“A thousand gold coins?” The facial muscles on Count Juneau’s face twitched.

Count Demme said to him with a smile, “Count Juneau, these three sculptures really are exceptional. Right, what brings you out here so late at night, rather than resting at home? Are you here for these three sculptures as well?”

Count Juneau let out a light hum.

“I didn’t expect that Count Demme would be so interested in these three sculptures. Honestly, I hadn’t paid them much attention yet. Let me take a good look first.” Count Juneau smiled, then turned and began studying the three sculptures intensely, totally ignoring Count Demme.

Seeing the scene before him, Count Demme sneered mentally. “Old fellow, do you really think you can hide your thoughts from me?”

Like the murmurs of a river, the music continued to play in the main hall of the Proulx Gallery as Count Juneau and Count Demme both quietly viewed various sculptures. The gallery remained as quiet as ever.

“Dong. Dong.” The clocks on the walls began to chime.

It was now midnight.

“Miss, please come here,” Count Juneau said to the attendant, who immediately ran over.

“These three sculptures, I am willing to buy for 1010 gold pieces.” Count Juneau made his bid at the last moment.

The attendant saw that the current bid on the sculptures was 1000 gold pieces. She couldn’t help but glance sideways at Count Juneau. It was quite fortunate that Count Juneau had added ten pieces, and not just one.

“Please wait a moment.” The attendant took out her record book.

“Count Juneau, you actually just beat my bid by ten gold pieces? I’ll offer 1100 gold pieces!” Count Demme’s voice rang out. Count Juneau frowned as he turned to stare at Count Demme, who was casually striding over with a jocular air, an arrogant look in his eyes.

As it turned out, Count Demme had been paying attention to Count Juneau this entire time, and as soon as Count Juneau made his bid, he came over.

“I bid 1200,” Count Juneau said in a low voice, his fury clearly visible. Seeing the oncoming struggle between the two nobles, the attendant closed her record book and stood off to the side, happily watching the battle. The attendants of the Proulx Gallery loved to see customers enter bidding wars.

Count Demme glanced at Count Juneau with 'astonishment'. "Count Juneau, even the sculptures in the hall of the experts are worth only around a thousand gold coins. How could a frugal man such as you be willing to pay 1200 gold coins for these?"

Frugal?

Miserly was the word! Count Juneau was notorious for his miserliness.

"Count Juneau, if even you are willing to bid 1200, then I can't be stingy either. 1300 gold pieces!"

Count Juneau's gaze was ice cold. "The only reason why I am willing to offer a high price for these three sculptures is because I am fond of them. Their real value is only around a thousand gold or so. 1500 gold pieces! If you, Count Demme, are willing to make a higher bid, then you can take them." Count Juneau made his final offer.

In all honesty, Count Demme was not as insightful as Count Juneau. He hadn't discovered the unique, strange aura to these statues.

In Count Demme's eyes, these statues didn't hold any secrets. They were just three good pieces of art, worth a thousand gold or so. If he raised the price any further, there wouldn't be much point.

"Haha," Count Demme laughed. "It's so rare for Count Juneau to be so refreshingly magnanimous in his bidding. In honor of this occasion, I certainly can't rob a man of his beloved possessions. These three sculptures are all yours, Count Juneau."

Only now did the attendant step forward again and begin recording the bid into her book.

"Milord Counts, it is already midnight. The gallery is about to close. Count Juneau, I will arrange for the sculptures to be delivered to you tomorrow," the attendant smiled. Only now did Count Juneau also smile.

Count Juneau flicked a glance at Count Demme, feeling scornful. "Kid. How many years have I spent analyzing stonesculpting? You don't have any insight, and you still want to bid against me?"

The Invitation

“Hrm, there were three sculptures in the main hall which sold for 1500 gold pieces each?” Austoni, a manager at the Proulx Gallery, stared at the records in astonishment. After flipping through the biographical details of their sculptor, Linley, he couldn’t help but be even more amazed. “These three were all made by Linley, and he’s only fifteen?”

The world of sculpture was definitely that of a pyramid.

The entire Holy Alliance had only five or six master-level sculptors who stood at the peak of this field, and perhaps a hundred or so expert sculptors. From this, one could imagine how rare these experts were. Usually, someone who could be termed an ‘expert sculptor’ was someone who had an understanding of life, and whose skill in this art was such that he could infuse this understanding into his sculptures. Only then would their sculptures have special auras.

A fifteen-year-old expert sculptor?

All but unheard of!

“And this Linley fellow is a student at the Ernst Institute?” Austoni was growing more and more shocked. The Ernst Institute was the number one magus academy in the entire Yulan continent. “And he is a student of the fifth class? A fifteen-year-old student of the fifth class?”

Austoni sucked in a cold breath.

Genius!

“Even if these three sculptures were only worth a thousand gold apiece, based on the age of the sculptor alone, the true value of these sculptures would definitely be several times greater.” Austoni became absolutely convinced of this.

For a fifteen-year-old sculptor to be able to produce sculptures at this level meant that the value of his artwork would be exponentially greater.

For this fifteen-year-old sculptor to also be a student at the Ernst Institute meant that he was a genius amongst geniuses. Once again, this would multiply the value of his sculptures.

“This afternoon, I am going to the Ernst Institute. It has been quite some time since the Proulx Gallery has enrolled a new expert sculptor among our ranks.” Austoni made his decision. By virtue of the fact that all three of his sculptures had fetched a high price, Linley had clearly proved his worth.

He was fully qualified to be invited to have his sculptures displayed in a private booth in the hall of experts.

That very afternoon.

A horse carriage drew up outside the main gates of the Ernst Institute. Within were Austoni and two guards. Arriving at the main gate, Austoni took out his identification, showing himself to be a manager at the Proulx Gallery. The Ernst Institute actually deployed one of their own guards to escort him.

At the instructional areas for the fifth grade students of the Ernst Institute.

“Mr. Austoni, this is where most of the instructors for the magi of the fifth rank congregate.” Smiling, the escort pushed the door open. Currently, around ten or so magi were here, chatting and laughing. To be qualified to instruct magi of the fifth rank, one would need to be a magi of the seventh or perhaps even the eighth rank.

As the door opened, these magi of exalted rank all turned to look.

“Milords, this is Mr. Austoni of the Proulx Gallery. He has some business which he would like to beseech your aid for,” the escort said respectfully.

The magi all nodded calmly.

The Proulx Gallery had multiple branches in all of the kingdoms and empires in the Yulan continent, and it possessed astonishing power and influence. Thus, even proud, arrogant magi would be fairly cordial when dealing with the Proulx Gallery.

“Milords magi,” Austoni said with a smile. “I’m here in search of a student named Linley.”

“Linley?”

All of the magi laughed. Amongst them, a purple-robed magi said with a smile, “Linley? That’s one of the two utmost geniuses of the Ernst Institute. He is a dual-element magus, wielding earth and wind. Go speak with his wind-element instructor. He might know.”

“You can forget about the earth element instructor. This Linley fellow, in the past three months, has only shown his face twice in our earth element classes,” a whiskered old man said unhappily. “But Linley attends virtually every single wind element class.”

Another bearded elder said with a smile, “I am Linley’s wind element instructor. I’m fairly knowledgeable about him. If you have any questions, you can ask me.”

Austoni nodded. “A month ago, Linley brought three sculptures over to the Proulx Gallery. His sculptures already possess the grandeur of an expert. Based on the price they fetched this month, we have determined that Linley is qualified to have his sculptures displayed in a private booth in the hall of the experts. Thus, I have come to gift him with a silver magicrystal card.”

“A private booth?”

Those magi were all amazed.

These proud, lofty magi were all fairly knowledgeable when it came to sculptures. They all knew that it was extremely hard to even carve a physically perfect sculpture, much less one with a special aura or essence. To have a private booth at the Proulx Gallery was the dream of countless sculptors.

“Are you sure it was Linley? This Linley fellow is normally quite diligent and hardworking in his studies. And he is only fifteen years old,” Linley’s wind element instructor, that silver-haired, white-robed old man, said disbelievingly.

Austoni smiled. “This is beyond any question. At the Proulx Gallery, we’ve recorded all of Linley’s biographical data. And, based on our data, he came to the Proulx Gallery in the company of young master Yale.”

Those magi all nodded.

And then, they all began to talk amongst themselves animatedly. One of the two utmost geniuses of the Ernst Institute was actually an expert sculptor as well. For a genius magus to be able to secure a private booth at the Proulx Gallery was something which would rarely occur even a single time over the course of a thousand years.

Naturally, these magi were all amazed.

“Milords magi, can any of you inform me as to where Linley is residing?” Austoni asked.

That silver-haired, white-robed elder said, “Linley resides in dorm 1987.”

“Dorm 1987?” Hearing this, Austoni was about to head there right away.

The silver-haired, white-robed elder continued, “But please wait. Although Linley lives in dorm 1987, I happen to know that three weeks ago, he departed from the school to engage in training. Thus, unfortunately, I’m afraid you came here for nothing.”

“Training?” Austoni started.

Austoni knew quite well that magi of the fifth and sixth ranks were qualified to engage in real world field training. The Ernst Institute also strongly encouraged this practice.

Austoni couldn’t help but sigh.

He didn’t expect that, despite rushing to the Ernst Institute so enthusiastically, this would be the end result.

“Then, milords magi, I will take my leave.” Austoni bowed respectfully. Those magi all nodded casually towards him, signifying acceptance, and no longer paid him any heed. All of them began to excitedly chat amongst themselves.

“I didn’t imagine that this kid Linley was so formidable...”

All of these magi instructors were unable to stop praising Linley who, without anyone knowing, was able to qualify to have a private booth at the Proulx Gallery.

The Journey

Let us go back in time a few weeks, to June 5th.

This afternoon, Linley bid farewell to his three bros. Carrying a leather sack on his back, Linley headed down the road to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

“Squeak squeak!” The little Shadowmouse squeaked happily from his perch on Linley’s shoulders.

“Boss, we’re finally headed to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Wow, I’m so excited!” The little Shadowmouse’s voice rang out in Linley’s head. Linley just smiled. At this time, a white ray of light shone out and transformed into Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart instructed, “Linley, when travelling alone, you must be careful. Perhaps you will meet with bandits.”

“I know, Grandpa Doehring.” Linley laughed.

Grandpa Doehring had already repeated his warnings about the dangers of traveling alone over and over. Right now, Linley was dressed in sturdy cloth slacks and a sleeveless shirt. Just judging from his bulging muscles alone, anyone would definitely be certain that he was a warrior.

Per Grandpa Doehring, in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, a mage’s robes would be rather unwieldy and get in the way.

Linley moved very quickly. Although the road from the Ernst Institute to the mountain range was rather rough, based on Linley’s stamina as a warrior of the fourth rank, he easily traversed forty kilometers in a single hour. Just at this time, he suddenly saw three people up ahead.

“Hrm?” Linley’s gaze focused on one person in particular.

That person was actually dressed in the robes of a student of the Ernst

Institute. Of the other two, one was extremely muscular and bore a giant warblade on his back. The other man was extremely skinny, and had a shortsword sheathed by his side. That skinny man alertly turned his head and stared at Linley.

Linley couldn't be bothered to pay attention to them, and just sped up, preparing to pass them by.

"Linley, is that you?" A voice suddenly said.

Linley turned his head questioningly. The man dressed in the robes of a magus of the Ernst Institute smiled and called out, "Linley, I'm Delsarte, remember me?"

"Oh, Delsarte, it's you!" Linley came to a halt.

Linley actually knew this Delsarte.

Delsarte, like him, was a wind magus of the fifth grade class. Although they couldn't be considered to have a deep friendship, they were classmates after all.

Delsarte brought the two warriors over, smiling as he warmly said, "Linley, I didn't expect that you, a magus, would be dressed like this. I barely recognized you. Only when I saw that little Shadowmouse on your shoulder did I realize it was you."

"Kava, Matt, let me introduce you. This is Linley, one of the two ultimate geniuses of our Ernst Institute. He's only fifteen years old, but he's already a magus of the fifth rank." Delsarte enthusiastically introduced Linley to his companions.

Kava was the muscular warrior, while Matt was the skinny warrior.

"I've long heard Delsarte talk about the two ultimate geniuses of the Ernst Institute. I didn't expect that we would have the good fortune to meet you today," Matt said courteously, while Kava's eyes widened as round as an ox. "You are a magus? Why do you look like a warrior to me?"

Linley didn't explain. "All of you are heading to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

Delsarte nodded. “Right. Kava and Matt travelled with me last year for field training. We have good teamwork. This year, we plan to do some exploration around the borders of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Linley, you should come with us. In a group, we’ll all be safer.”

Linley nodded.

“I’ll travel with them for now. Delsarte is a classmate of mine, so he should be trustworthy. When we reach the mountains, we’ll split up.” After making his decision, Linley and Delsarte’s trio all headed towards the mountains together.

The four of them travelled at very high speed.

Even the physically weak Delsarte was able to move rapidly through the usage of the wind-style spell ‘Supersonic’. Thus, their group moved quickly along the barren roads.

Kava’s loud voice rumbled, “Linley, if you join us, then we would have two magi of the fifth rank. When the four of us work together, we might even be able to kill a magical beast of the sixth rank. The magicite cores of magical beasts of the sixth rank are worth around a thousand gold apiece. If we kill a few of them, we won’t have to worry about our living expenses for a century.”

For most people, in a year, ten gold pieces was more than enough for living expenses.

A thousand gold coins was an enormous sum.

Linley’s heart was swayed. In the back of his mind, he was suddenly reminded of the books regarding magical beasts he had read. These books had discussed the energy core all magical beasts had within them; the magicite cores.

“These magicite cores will solidify in the bodies of beasts of the third rank and higher. But for beasts which have not reached the sixth rank, the value of their cores is not high. They probably aren’t even worth as much as one of my sculptures,” Linley thought to himself.

However, the magicite cores of magical beasts of the sixth rank were still only worth about a thousand gold.

Based on Doehring Cowart’s calculations, Linley’s sculptures were definitely

qualified to be displayed in the hall of experts, with a valuation of around a thousand gold or so each. Killing a magical beast of the sixth rank, in terms of difficulty and danger, was something that was far deadlier than sculpting.

“At the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, my primary goal is to train myself. Acquiring magicite crystals? That’s just a side benefit,” Linley said to himself as he looked at the other three.

Delsarte and the others were engaged in enthusiastic speculation. Clearly, they were very excited about acquiring magicite cores.

“The magicite cores of magical beasts of the third, fourth, and fifth ranks aren’t worth much. Even cores from beasts of the sixth rank are just worth a thousand or so,” Delsarte said, shaking his head unconcernedly. “If we can kill a magical beast of the seventh rank, then we will be rich.” When he said these words, Delsarte’s eyes gleamed.

Just like humans, where there was a huge gap between magi of the sixth and seventh ranks, magical beasts of the sixth rank also had a huge gap in power compared to magical beasts of the seventh rank.

The magicite cores of a magical beast of the seventh rank were worth tens of thousands of gold pieces.

If they could kill just one, in the countryside, they would be considered extremely wealthy and not have to worry about money for the rest of their lives.

“A magical beast of the seventh rank? Based on our ability, that would be a deathwish,” Linley said casually.

Linley had witnessed the power of the Velocidragon, a magical beast of the seventh rank. Linley, at his current rank, probably couldn’t even break through the Velocidragon’s terrifyingly protective scales. If he couldn’t even pierce its defenses, how could he possibly try to kill a magical beast of the seventh rank? How was that possible?

The sly-looking fellow, Matt, nodded. “It’s hard to say if the four of us would even be able to defeat a magical beast of the sixth rank. Fighting with a magical beast of the seventh rank would be suicide.”

“I’m just making small talk.” Delsarte rubbed his head as he pursed his lips.

Just as the four of them were talking and laughing, in a mountain forest a hundred meters behind them, a man wearing green clothes and with leaves all over his face was staring coldly at them.

This man’s mouth was moving nonstop, apparently mumbling the words to a magical spell.

At the same time, the longbow in his hands had been pulled to the limit. Suddenly, the arrow shot out, flashing with a cold blue light. It tore through the air at a terrifyingly rapid speed, traversing the hundred meters in the blink of an eye.

Linley, who was engaging in idle talk with the group, suddenly felt all the hairs on his body stand up. His heart immediately reached a maximum level of tension.

“Danger!”

Linley quickly dodged to the side. “Whoosh!” The high-speed arrow shot past him like a bolt of lightning, piercing through the body of the robed Delsarte. It pierced through his torso, leaving a gaping hole behind as it flew another few dozen meters before halting.

Clutching his throat, Delsarte’s eyes turned round. Some indistinct words gargled in his mouth as fresh blood spewed forth from the wound in his chest.

“Urg... urg...” Delsarte’s eyes were filled with a longing for life. They were filled with horror and fear, but as the blood continued to pour from the gaping hole in his chest, quite quickly, all life fled from Delsarte’s eyes, and he collapsed.

Linley, Kava, and Matt all quickly flattened themselves against the grass as they alertly looked behind them.

“A wind-element magus-archer. Based on how that arrow of his melded both the ‘Supersonic’ and ‘Precision’ spells, this wind-element magus-archer must have at least reached the fifth rank.” Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind. “Based on this fellow’s prowess, if he gets within fifty meters of you, even if you are able to dodge, you will still suffer a severe injury. Flee!”

Linley's heart trembled.

"Give up all your valuables, and I'll spare your lives." A cold voice rang out, and then over ten men dressed in dark green burst out of the forest. All of them were wielding longbows, with shortswords at their waists. These ten people stared coldly at Linley and the other two while pressing closer and closer.

But the speaker did not appear.

Linley and the others glanced at each other. They didn't hand over their valuables. They only watched warily as the archers approached.

"Fire!" The cold voice rang out again. The wind-element magus behind them was quite decisive. Since Linley and the other two didn't immediately surrender, he immediately issued the order to kill.

"Twang" "twang" "twang" "twang".

Abruptly, the archers all shot their arrows, and the arrows soared towards Linley's group, who hurriedly dodged. In addition to dodging, Kava also used the huge warblade in his hands to block some arrows.

Linley executed the wind-style spell 'Supersonic', allowing himself to dodge aside easily while still maintaining enough presence of mind to watch the other two. Matt was dodging nonstop, quite precise and quite careful, while also using his shortsword to deflect arrows.

But Kava was not as agile. While wielding a giant warblade, he clearly could not move very quickly. He was primarily using his giant warblade, as well as a thin layer of battle-qi, to defend himself. And indeed, the threat of those arrows was not too high; a warrior of the fifth rank could withstand them.

"Raaawr, die!" Kava roared furiously, charging forward towards the archers with his warblade in hand.

Seeing this, a killing gaze appeared in the eyes of the wind-style magus-archer hiding in the forest. He once more drew the bowstring to his longbow and began to chant the words to the 'Supersonic' and 'Precision' spells, causing his longbow and arrow to glitter with gold and blue light.

Roaring furiously, Kava continued charging towards the archers, but halfway

there, he suddenly sensed a blue gleam flash before him. Before he was able to react, the arrow was right there, in front of him, terrifying him to the point that cold sweat instantly drenched his clothes. He immediately lifted his giant warblade to block. However...

“Argh!”

The arrow pierced straight into his skull.

“Ah...” Kava stood there stupidly, his eyes filled with disbelief. He had clearly been able to use his warblade to block the arrow. How did it kill him? His eyes filled with disbelief and questions, all the light faded from his gaze and he toppled down, like a collapsing mountain.

The faraway Linley felt his heart tremble.

“The wind-style supportive spell, ‘Precision’. It really is precise!” As a wind-style magus, Linley knew very well that this supportive spell, ‘Precision’, when used to support an archer, could cause the archer’s arrows to undergo minute course corrections en route to its target.

For example, just now, Kava did indeed get his warblade up in time to block, but just by adjusting its direction slightly, the arrow went straight through Kava’s skull.

“Wind-style magic, when paired with a longbow, really is terrifying.” Linley felt secretly shocked, but in the next instant, he immediately began to chant the words to a magical spell.

“The two of you had best surrender obediently.” The cold voice rang out once more from the forest, and the ten or so archers also laughed arrogantly. A wind-style magus-archer required both powerful magical abilities as well as sufficient physical strength to utilize a longbow properly.

A wind-style magus-archer was an extremely terrifying long-range attacker.

A murderous gaze flashing through Linley’s eyes, as he stared at those ten archers as though they were just corpses.

“Crack!” “Crack!” “Crack!” “Crack!”

Suddenly, the earth trembled, and one earthen spear after another erupted

from beneath the ten archers. One sharp, gleaming stone spear after another pierced into the legs and chests of the archers, filling the ground with fresh blood and the air with their screams.

Earth-style spell of the fifth rank – Earthen Spear Array!

“Ahhh!” Miserable cries split the air.

Dozens of earthen spears had erupted simultaneously from beneath them, each spear over a meter high. In the blink of an eye, the troop was pierced by the dense array of spears, which had caught them unawares, like a devastating ambush. All of the ten archers entered a state of pain and despair.

“Leader, save us, save us!” A man who had been impaled in the stomach cried out miserably.

“Ah, ah!” Another archer who had been pierced through his thigh also cried out with pain.

Of the troop of archers, four died on the spot, while nearly ten of them were severely injured. Their combat ability had essentially been destroyed.

“An earth-style magus!”

The archer hidden in the woods felt greatly shocked. He and his men had been hidden here, on the outskirts of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, for quite some time now, ambushing and killing travelers, and had accumulated quite a bit of treasure.

Generally, when he launched his ambush, he would first kill the enemy’s magus!

An enemy magus, after all, could also launch long range attacks. Therefore, they posed the greatest risk. He didn’t expect that after killing one magus, another one would show himself.

“Let’s go.”

Taking advantage of his opponents being caught off guard, Linley immediately utilized the ‘Supersonic’ spell to increase his speed to its maximum limits, hurriedly scurrying away and disappearing off into the distance. Linley knew quite well that he had no way to attack the magus-archer hiding in the woods.

The distance between them was too great, and even magic had range limitations. But if he closed in on the magus-archer, he perhaps wouldn't be able to block the assault of a wind-element magus-archer.

Running away at maximum speed, Linley fled nearly thirty kilometers.

"Boss, why'd you run away? That magus-archer might've posed some risk to you, but if I were to attack, I would've killed his ass easy. Why didn't you let me kill'm?" The little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' mentally grumbled angrily to Linley.

Linley knew quite well how powerful the little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' had become.

When Linley was just eight years old, the little Shadowmouse already had a speed surpassing that of a warrior of the sixth rank. But seven years later, with Linley now fifteen years of age, although Bebe's physical size had not changed, his speed was almost on par with that of a warrior of the ninth rank!

Based on the little Shadowmouse's speed, that magus-archer probably wouldn't even be able to aim at him.

"This is my training excursion. I should try to resolve everything based on my own ability," Linley explained.

Jumping onto Linley's shoulders, the little Shadowmouse scratched at Linley as angry squeaking sounds came from his sharp teeth. Mentally, he was angrily shouting at Linley, "Boss, you are going too far! I also need to train, I also need to fight!"

Looking at the little Shadowmouse, Linley couldn't help but laugh. "Fine, when we reach the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, if we run into any powerful monsters, I'll let you fight them, deal?"

"That's more like it." The little Shadowmouse sat up, folding his little paws over his chest. His little nose wrinkled as he beamed happily.

Just at this moment, the dark, grim sky was shattered with a 'crash' as bolts of lightning lit up the world, followed by echoing thunder.

"Looks like it's going to storm hard soon." Linley frowned.

Linley immediately sped up, hastening towards the Mountain Range of

Magical Beasts. By the time Linley was just ten or so kilometers away from the mountains, the first drops of rain began to fall, followed by torrential showers which flooded the land.

“Rumble...”

The sound of thunder sounded out again and again, while the torrential rain continued to cover the lands with water. It felt as though the entire world had been flooded.

But not much rain fell on Linley, who continued to forge ahead with rapid speed. This was because ten centimeters above Linley was a ‘wind shield’ approximately one meter in diameter. The defensive ability of the ‘wind shield’ spell was quite high. Linley only had to use a tiny bit of mageforce in order to allow it to block the rain constantly.

As the wind itself was formless, the wind shield, as well, appeared to be just a translucent, faint blue streak.

From far away, one simply couldn’t tell that there was a wind shield there. Thus, using this wind shield, Linley forged rapidly ahead. After a bit of time, Linley saw a long, sinuous range of mountains, running north to south with no end in sight. This mountain range, which virtually split the Yulan continent into two halves, was the number one mountain range in the world – the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Seeing the titanic mountains just a few kilometers away, Linley couldn’t help but hold his breath.

“What a huge mountain range...”

This mountain range was simply too enormous. Based on the naked eye, as far as one could tell, the mountains were limitless, and as far north and as far south as one could see, there were mountains. Seeing the boundless mountains in this mountain range was like seeing the boundless water in the sea.

It stretched into infinity!

“This is the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the number one mountain range in the continent. How many magical beasts does it hold? How many Saint-level magical beasts, for that matter?” At this moment, Doehring Cowart

appeared by Linley's side, his gaze distant and lofty. "It has been a long time since I have come to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts."

A look of excitement shone from Linley's eyes.

"Let's go!"

Filled with a heroic air, Linley charged through the all-encompassing rainstorm towards the mountain range, while the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, squeaked excitedly from Linley's shoulders. Under the cover of the rainstorm, Linley quickly entered the endless mountains.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was vast and boundless.

Within it, Linley could see ancient pines that were centuries or millennia old, blotting out the landscape. All sorts of various grass filled the land, and thistles and thorns were equally commonplace. Dry leaves covered the land; with each step, they crackled and popped. Ancient vines and weeds could be seen everywhere.

“With all of these weeds, dense vines, and trees which have been around for who-knows-how-long, even if a magical beast were just ten meters away from me, I still probably wouldn’t sense it.” Linley grew apprehensive.

Grandpa Doehring appeared by his side as well.

“Ten meters? Linley, even in the grass right in front of you, there could be a magical beast in wait, such as a giant snake.” Doehring Cowart laughed as he spoke.

Linley involuntarily glanced at the grassy area in front of him, which was almost half as tall as he was. Such thick, tall grass really could hide a snake. Taking a deep breath, Linley stood there as he began to mumble the words to a spell.

Suddenly, a gentle gust of wind emanated from Linley, spreading about in all directions before finally dissipating.

Wind-style magic – Windscout!

Generally speaking, a magus of the third rank would be able to execute the Windscout spell. But of course, the more powerful a magus was, the wider an area the Windscout spell could cover. The Windscout spell of a magus of the third rank would only affect an area of around ten or so meters around him, but the Windscout of a magus of the fifth rank had a diameter of over a hundred

meters.

“Within a hundred meters, the only magical beasts around are a magical beast of the first rank, a Bubblerat, and a few magical beasts of the second rank, ‘Earth Scorpions’,” Linley said confidently.

The Windscout spell could discern the aura and lifestone of any living creature.

“Don’t be too cocky. A powerful magical beast could burrow under the earth, and some Saint-level magical beasts can even disguise their power level,” Doehring Cowart reminded, but then he chuckled. “But of course, if they wanted to deal with a little fellow like you, would a Saint-level magical beast bother to hide its power?”

But upon hearing these words, Linley grew all the more cautious.

“Ambush through disguising power levels? In some books, it was said that the intelligence of magical beasts rivals that of man’s. Looks like it’s true,” Linley said to himself. Glancing at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, on his shoulders, he thought, “This little fella, Bebe, already has a really high level of intelligence. I can’t let my guard down.”

Air swirled around Linley’s feet. This was part of the byproduct of Linley’s ‘Supersonic’ spell.

Linley passed quietly into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. He surveyed his surroundings carefully, while on his shoulders, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also perked up and stared in all four directions, his beady little black eyes peering about him. Slowly, the two of them travelled deeper and deeper into the mountains.

“The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is over ten thousand kilometers long, with an average width of seven or eight hundred kilometers. In the outermost hundred kilometer region, the magical beasts are mostly of low rank. If we go more than a hundred kilometers deep, we’ll meet lots of magical beasts of the fifth and sixth ranks. If we go still deeper inside, we will see many beasts of the seventh, eighth, and ninth ranks, and perhaps even Saint-level magical beasts.”

Doehring Cowart once more began to lecture Linley about the Mountain

Range of Magical Beasts.

“But of course, nothing is absolute. Perhaps a magical beast of the ninth rank might be bored and go for a stroll in the outer territories,” Doehring Cowart said. “And perhaps you might be so unlucky as to meet with a huge, ten-thousand-unit strong pack of wolf monsters. If that happens, all I can say is, you have terrible karma.”

Hearing Doehring Cowart’s words, Linley’s lips pursed.

That went without saying!

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was enormous. How could he be so unlucky? But if he was, Doehring Cowart, who survived only as a spirit, would not be able to assist him in any way. A Saint-level Grand Magus without mageforce had no way to attack.

“Grandpa Doehring, I know this already. Be quiet and don’t distract me,” Linley said discontentedly.

Doehring Cowart immediately chuckled. Stroking his white beard, he no longer spoke.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was a place of deep mountains and ancient trees. The trees were so thickly clustered that virtually all of the rain was blocked, with just a few drops occasionally sprinkling down. After walking for a period of time, he realized that this outer region was indeed not that dangerous.

Linley exerted some strength with his legs, and almost as if he were floating, leapt up on top of a seven-or eight-meter-high tree branch as he carefully scanned about.

“Boss, far away to the right, there’s a wild pig.” Bebe’s voice sounded out in Linley’s mind.

Hearing these words, Linley couldn’t help but turn and look. Indeed, approximately a hundred meters away, a wild boar with a single horn was carefully scanning his surroundings. If Linley hadn’t had such a high vantage point, Linley perhaps wouldn’t have been able to see this Unicorn Boar.

“Unicorn Boar, a magical beast of the third rank, an earth-element creature. The only technique it has is the ‘Earth Spear’ technique.” Some information regarding the Unicorn Boar came to Linley’s mind.

“Even though it’s just a beast of the third rank, it will at least serve for dinner. Boar flesh is quite tasty.” Nimbly and vigorously, Linley crept through the trees as he stealthily approached the boar. Due to the density of the local flora, the boar had not noticed Linley either.

When he got within ten meters of the boar, Linley lay down flat in the grass. Peering through the dense grass, he could still make out the outline of the Unicorn Boar.

Whoosh!

Like a serpentine dragon leaving its lair, Linley leapt out from the grass. When the Unicorn Boar turned his head and stared in shock, Linley fell upon it like a gust of wind. The Unicorn Boar let out an indignant roar, and thrust its long, thick horn straight at Linley.

“Hrrg!” Linley reached out with his left hand, grabbed the horn and gave a tremendous tug.

The huge Unicorn Boar, weighing several hundred kilograms, was tossed up seven or eight meters into the air by Linley, who then began to fiercely kick at it with his left leg, using it like a giant claymore and slamming it into the boar’s head with thunderous power and speed.

“Thud.” With a sickening, bone-crunching sound, the Unicorn Boar was kicked into a tree. When it fell to the ground, the very earth shook. The bones of the Unicorn Boar had already been shattered, and brain matter had already begun leaking out from its shattered skull. A trail of fresh blood streamed forth from its mouth. Its four limbs quivered momentarily, then grew still.

Just based on his prowess as a warrior, killing a Unicorn Boar was not a tough feat for Linley.

“Although the magicite core of a magical beast of the third rank is only worth ten or so gold coins, I can’t let it go to waste.” Linley withdrew the straight chisel from his backpack, and with just two or three simple slices, he cut the

boar open. An entirely unremarkable earth-colored magicite crystal rolled out. Linley wiped it off on the grass, then placed it in his backpack.

And then, with practiced ease, Linley skinned the boar and cut off its legs.

After casually chopping down a few branches, with a flick of his wrist, Linley summoned forth a small flame. As the fire began to grow, Linley began to roast the boar legs.

The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, began to drool. His eyes were fixed on the boar legs. "Boar legs are delicious. Boss, hurry up, hurry up. Why don't you just directly use your fire-element magic to roast the boar, wouldn't that be faster?"

"Fire-element magic? I only have a bit of fire element mageforce. And what's more, when it comes to cooking, using higher temperatures isn't necessarily superior." Linley smirked as he spoke, withdrawing some coarse salt and other ingredients from his backpack.

When Linley had originally tested for magical aptitude, he had had exceptional affinity for both earth and wind elemental essence, but just average affinity for fire elemental essence. Honestly speaking, for an ordinary person, average affinity for an elemental essence was quite good. But for someone like Linley, he couldn't be bothered to spend time and energy working on his fire magic.

After all, if he wanted his abilities in fire magic to match his abilities in wind and earth, he would probably have to spend ten times as much time.

Thus, Linley would usually just casually refine a little bit of fire element mageforce. He did, however, definitely have enough to generate some fireballs without any problems.

After finishing roasting two boar legs, Linley and Bebe each shared one while Linley began to work on roasting the other two.

"Wow, delicious," Bebe chatted while eating enthusiastically. "This wild boar tastes so much better than those farm-grown hogs. It tastes so fragrant. But naturally, your roasting abilities also played a big role, boss." Bebe was so happy that he even began flattering Linley a bit.

Linley couldn't help but start to laugh.

“Boss, I want more.” After finishing one leg, Bebe looked at Linley with a pitiful expression.

Seeing Bebe’s sad gaze, Linley didn’t feel sorry for him in the slightest. He sternly lectured, “This boar leg is way larger than a roast duck. One leg is more than enough for you. The other two legs will be dinner.” After speaking, Linley turned away and ignored Bebe’s pitiable face.

After finishing roasting the two legs, Linley used two large leaves to wrap them up, and then placed them within his backpack and hurried along the road with Bebe again.

Within the countless peaks of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts were innumerable ageless trees and forests that made travel through the range very difficult. What made it even more difficult was the constant need to pass through one peak and ravine after another, or perhaps take a circular path.

“When traveling within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, don’t carve out a path through the pre-existing thorns and brush. It’s best to take an alternate path.” Doehring Cowart continued to provide Linley with the benefit of his experience.

Linley listened carefully as he proceeded forward.

“Remember, the biggest mistake you can make in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is to constantly make noise. This will cause many magical beasts to pay attention to you. Even if you are forced to make some noise, you need to immediately leave the nearby area,” Doehring Cowart continued. “Remember, if you are injured, you must immediately do your best to staunch any loss of blood. The stench of blood will attract beasts as well. The noses of magical beasts are far more sensitive than we humans.”

Linley nodded.

The massive crowns of countless trees covered the entire sky. Looking at them, Linley was reminded of some information that he had gleaned from books at the Ernst Institute. In a place like this, where even the sun was all but blocked out, one had to learn how to distinguish north, south, east, and west.

As agile as a monkey, Linley leapt past a series of disorderly tree roots and

vine growths, but just as he walked past...

“Whoah.” Linley sucked in a cold breath as he saw something not too far away.

The corpses of three men and two women were a few dozen meters away from him. The five corpses had not yet rotted much, but the bite marks on them were very visible. The corpses had all been dismembered. A male corpse had half its leg eaten, and a giant hole ripped in its belly, with his severed intestines laying strewn about. Half of a female corpse’s head had been eaten, leaving behind a single eyeball and a white skull bone with a few strands of hair attached.

Linley’s face turned pale, and he forgot to breathe.

“They should’ve died three or four days ago.” Doehring Cowart appeared next to Linley, carefully inspecting the corpses. His face was still quite calm. “Linley, take a close look. On the chest of every single person, there are some similar, unremarkable wounds. If my guess is correct, these five should’ve been killed by humans, and most likely, by a single person.”

Linley started.

“Doehring Cowart, you’re saying that a person killed them?” Linley looked at Doehring Cowart, shocked.

Doehring Cowart smiled calmly. “Linley, this is your first visit to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Once you’ve been here a bit longer, you will come to realize that in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, in addition to dealing with the attacks of local beasts, you will also have to guard against the attacks of other humans.”

“The attacks of humans? Why would other humans attack?” Linley felt a bit of rage beginning to grow in his heart.

In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the local monsters already held a huge advantage by virtue of their countless numbers. He didn’t expect that the humans here would fight among themselves as well, instead of helping each other.

“This is very normal. Why do humans venture into this mountain range? The

vast majority come here in the hopes of acquiring magicite cores. If they kill a magical beast, they will only acquire a single core, but if they kill a human being, that person might have several magicite cores in their backpack, or even more.” Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard.

Linley finally understood.

Greed!

It was all due to greed. Some people here wanted to easily acquire a large number of magicite cores, and indeed, killing the other human beings here was a good way to do so.

“Linley, you must be careful. Based on what I’m seeing, the person who killed these five must possess astounding ability. If you look closely at these people’s clothing, you can see that four of them should be warriors, while one of them was a magus. But all five of them were killed at about the same time by a clean blow through the heart. The ruthless precision of this assault is chilling. However, since we don’t know how strong these five people were, it’s hard to estimate the strength of their killer.” Doehring Cowart frowned. “But for these five to be willing and able to brave the dangers of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts suggests that they were not weak. From this alone, we can safely say that the person who killed them is, at the very least, no weaker than you.”

Linley stepped forward to take a closer look, then nodded in agreement.

The killing blows were very clean and direct.

“This is still just the outer perimeter of the mountain range. Hurry on in.” Doehring Cowart laughed.

Linley nodded, then continued on his journey deeper into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. On his journey, the sight of corpses of both men and monsters became quite common, as well as many rusted weapons. Linley also occasionally ran into a few weak monsters.

Nightfall. Linley and the little Shadowmouse were resting while each munched on a leg of boar. Linley was seated on the ground, while the little Shadowmouse was seated on his shoulder.

“At night, one cannot light a fire in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts,” Doehring Cowart had once again instructed.

“Understood, Grandpa Doehring.” Linley knew quite a bit about the basics of survival here. This place was no ordinary wilderness, and the beasts here would not be afraid of fire.

Seated on the ground, Linley calmed himself and closed his eyes while beginning to sense the flow of earth essence and wind essence around him. The feeling of elemental essence around him was akin to the feeling of being in one’s parents’ embrace.

Due to his exceptional affinity with earth essence and wind essence, Linley could sense them quite clearly.

“The Pulse of the Earth. The Flow of the Wind.” A peaceful smile was on Linley’s face as he began to drift off into sleep. Linley had total confidence that any tremors on the ground caused by something approaching, or any disturbances in the wind caused by something moving rapidly toward him, would immediately awaken him.

These were the abilities possessed by earth magi and wind magi.

The night slowly grew deeper. Curled in front of Linley, the little Shadowmouse ‘Bebe’ also began to emit extremely light, quiet snoring sounds. The night wind grew cool as well, but right now, it was summer in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Only at night would it feel cool and refreshing. In the day, it felt stiflingly hot.

Late at night. All was dark.

“Rustle, rustle.” The soft sounds of something rustling against the grass could be heard.

A pair of powerfully-built Windwolves with gleaming blue fur were pacing about within the forest. Their green-tinted eyes were carefully inspecting their surroundings as their powerful limbs silently stalked through the area.

Their cruel white fangs gleamed with a cold light in the night.

Wolf Pack

Still seated cross-legged, Linley's eyes suddenly snapped open, and he immediately stared southwards. But there was nothing to the south aside from a mass of vines and rattan growth. This was one of the reasons why Linley had selected this location to rest. With so much forest growth, even if a magical beast neared Linley, they might not notice him.

"Two magical beasts are nearing me, and right now they are around forty meters or so away." Based on the vibrations from the disturbances in the local air elemental essences, Linley was certain that there were two beasts.

Linley silently walked to the edge of the mass of vines. Peering through the vines, he saw that thirty meters away, a pair of powerfully-built Windwolves were slowly pawing towards him. Based on their route, they would come very close to him. Suddenly, Linley felt a weight settle on his shoulders, and he knew that Bebe had already arrived on his shoulders.

"Boss, it's just a pair of Windwolves. We've seen them several times at the Ernst Institute." Not worried in the slightest, Bebe chatted casually with Linley.

Linley's gaze was fixed on the two Windwolves. "Yes, they are Windwolves. Among the wolf packs, there are three major types: Fangwolves, Windwolves, and Frostwolves. Frostwolf packs are the strongest type, while Fangwolves are the weakest. Windwolves are squarely in the middle. In a pack of Windwolves, even the weakest will be a magical beast of the fourth rank, while elites might be of the fifth or sixth rank. Supposedly, the strongest a Windwolf can be is a magical beast of the eighth rank."

Even an ordinary Windwolf was of the fourth rank. A Unicorn Boar simply wasn't on the same level.

My power as a warrior is just of the fourth rank. Based on physical skills alone, I can't overcome these two Windwolves." Linley was feeling a bit excited. "But

this will make it a challenge.”

Watching the two Windwolves draw nearer, Linley’s lips began to mumble the words to a magic spell as his eyes grew cold.

“Shrrrk! Shrrk! Shrrrrk! Shrrrk!”

A deep roar could be heard as within the dark night, ten or so large rocks, each at least one meter long and earthen-colored, suddenly flew towards the Windwolves, smashing at them. But the Windwolves quickly raised their heads. Seeing the danger, they immediately began to flee at high speed.

The low thud of an impact.

In the short period of time before the rocks struck, the Windwolves were able to respond with uncanny swiftness. Of the two Windwolves, one had a back leg smashed, while the other managed to adroitly dodge every single rock.

“They live up to the name of ‘Windwolves’. They are so fast!”

Linley thought to himself, even as he began mumbling the words to another spell, the wind-style ‘Supersonic’ spell. Simultaneously, he pulled out his straight chisel blade, then charged directly forward at the injured, retreating Windwolf at high speed.

A warrior of the fourth rank, aided by the Supersonic spell, had roughly the same level of speed as the uninjured Windwolf. Naturally, the injured one was much slower than Linley. The injured wolf frantically fled in terror while baring its fangs.

“Swish! Swish! Swish!”

A string of knives of air appeared out of nowhere and hacked at Linley.

“Hrmph, all wolves have heads as hard as copper and tails as hard as steel, but their waists are as soft as tofu.”

Linley was extremely agile. With three simple motions, he dodged the wind knives and drew even closer to the injured Windwolf. Like a tornado, Linley kicked out with his left leg, snapping forward viciously like a whip onto the Windwolf’s waist.

“Woooo!” The Windwolf was sent flying by the kick, and he let out an

agonized howl.

With another step, Linley once again drew close to the injured Windwolf. The straight chisel in his hand flashing with a beautiful, cold, pitiless light, he chopped at the Windwolf's chest. Linley felt as though the straight chisel in his hand had struck a tough, resilient cloth. He was only able to just barely cut through, causing blood to spurt out.

"The Windwolf's waist is fairly weak, but its fur is quite tough. Or perhaps a better way to put it is my straight chisel isn't sharp enough. It can cut through simple stone, but the fur and skin of a magical beast of the fourth rank is a tougher matter," Linley thought to himself as he carefully kept his gaze on the other Windwolf.

The other Windwolf didn't actually move. It was just standing there, staring at Linley. Within its cold green eyes was a murderous aura, and low growls were constantly coming from its maw.

"If the Windwolf isn't injured, then just based on my prowess as a warrior of the fourth rank, there's no way I can kill him. That's just a dream." Linley knew quite well that Windwolves specialized in speed. If he hadn't been assisted by a wind magic spell, he wouldn't be able to match it in speed.

Linley immediately began to mumble the words to another spell, but halfway through, his face suddenly changed.

"Not good!"

The low howl of the Windwolf echoed in all directions, and it was matched by howls from all directions as well. Linley swept his gaze across the area, and as he did, it was met by one pair of cold green eyes after another, hidden in the darkness.

"It isn't just one Windwolf... it's a pack!"

Linley's heart immediately tightened. Even Bebe, who up 'til now had just been sitting off to the side and feigning boredom, sat up, all his fur straightening as well as he carefully looked in all directions.

"Boss, looks like it's getting dangerous."

“Grandpa Doehring, your prediction was way too prescient...” A bitter expression was on Linley’s face.

In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, running into a pack of Windwolves was just as lethal as running into an extremely powerful magical beast.

“Prescient my ass. I was talking about encountering a pack of tens of thousands of Windwolves. In a situation like that, unless you can fly, there’s no way you’ll be able to survive. The current situation is a bit better. At most, there’s twenty or thirty of them.” Doehring Cowart’s voice was casual, but his face was solemn. “But Linley, you must understand, I’m just a spirit without any mageforce. I can’t help you. It’s all up to you.”

Linley felt miserable.

“Twenty or thirty Windwolves, all at least of the fourth rank. Windwolves are very fast, and they can use magical attacks. I’m just a magus of the fifth rank.” Linley felt enormous pressure. Right at this moment, the howls of the surrounding Windwolves ceased.

From within the pack of Windwolves, two exceedingly powerfully-built Windwolves strode out. In terms of size, they were at least one size larger than the previous Windwolves Linley had seen. The one which had been lucky enough to survive was respectfully walking beside these two, and even whining in a low voice, as if it were saying something to them.

Their bodies and even their eyes were a full category larger than the others. This made Linley feel even more nervous as he began to consider what to do next.

“These are definitely elites among Windwolves. At the very least, they are of the fifth rank. I hope they aren’t of the sixth rank!” Linley’s heart was tight, and he quickly began to contemplate how to deal with these opponents.

Even if they were just of the fifth rank, a pair of Windwolves of the fifth rank, with the assistance of a pack of magical beasts of the fourth rank, all attacking Linley... Linley didn’t feel too confident. Even a Windwolf of the fourth rank had the same speed as Linley’s absolute maximum. Most likely, even using the Supersonic spell, Linley would not be able to match a Windwolf of the fifth rank in speed.

The two leading Windwolves stared at Linley with their cold eyes, a murderous intent emanating from them.

“Looks like I’ll have to go all out this time.” Surrounded by a pack of wolves, Linley’s forehead and back were all drenched with cold sweat. His heart tight in his chest, he began to chant a magical spell with even greater speed.

“Hoooooowl!”

Of the two clear leaders of the pack, one of them suddenly let out a low howl. Immediately, the twenty or thirty powerful Windwolves charged forward, as fast as the wind. Their white fangs bared, they snarled at Linley as they ran. At the same time, over a hundred deep green blades of wind appeared out of nowhere, each carrying great power within them.

Linley was currently surrounded by around twenty Windwolves, and over a hundred deep green blades of air virtually locked Linley in, preventing him from fleeing.

There was no way to flee!

Linley suddenly moved. At high speed, he launched off the ground and, like an arrow, shot up in the air, aiming to land on a sturdy tree branch. But because there were simply too many wind blades, over ten of them still landed on Linley’s body.

“Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!”

The wind blades slashed at Linley’s sturdy leather armor, knocking him off course midair. Linley frantically grasped at a thick tree branch, and with a somersault, flipped onto the tree and began to climb up. Only after hurriedly climbing up twenty or thirty meters did he come to a halt and look downwards.

“That was really dangerous.”

Linley let out a breath. Right now, Linley’s body was suffused with a layer of stone-like armor which was in turn covered by a layer of earth elemental essence emanating a faint rocky glow.

Earth-style magic – Earthguard!

The Earthguard spell required its user to at least be a magus of the fifth rank.

When magi of the fifth and sixth ranks used this spell, they used a large amount of earth elemental essence to form a rocky armor which had fairly strong defensive abilities. It could defend against multiple attacks from an opponent of the same level.

These wind knife spells only possessed the strength of the third or fourth ranks.

“Roaaar!” A fierce howl split the air.

Linley stared downwards, and saw that the wind was beginning to gather beneath the feet of those twenty Windwolves. All of them suddenly leapt up into the air, with the two leaders managing to leap up ten meters, landing on a large branch. Their powerful talons dug into the branch, giving them a very stable footing.

Windwolves possessed a tremendous sense of balance, so climbing trees was actually not too hard for them.

“I’m not afraid of you guys climbing trees. I’m only afraid that you wouldn’t climb up.” Linley felt the blood in his veins begin to boil. The more dangerous the situation was, the more potentially lethal it became, the more excited Linley got.

In terms of climbing ability, Windwolves were somewhat inferior to humans. Linley agilely clambered from one tree to another, while the pack of Windwolves howled with fury as they gave chase.

In the outer regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, a pack of Windwolves was definitely the most powerful organization around. Even most warriors of the sixth rank, when faced with a pack of Windwolves, would elect to retreat. After all, no matter how tough they were physically, even the body of a warrior of the sixth rank could not stand a direct blow from a Windwolf’s claws.

Linley and the twenty or so Windwolves thus began a game of hide and seek on the trees. The two Windwolf leaders were faster than Linley, and so Linley had no choice but to constantly change directions to dodge. Suddenly, the leading Windwolves shot out numerous wind blades, and Linley was immediately forced to change direction to dodge.

“Crack!” A tree trunk was severed by the wind knives, and the tree began to topple.

“Crash!”

The claws of one of the leading Windwolves reached Linley, raking at his back. The Earthguard armor trembled a few times, and its elemental essence flashed and flickered.

“Crash! Crash! Crash!”

The Windwolf leaders were simply too fast, and they were also extremely agile. Their fierce claws reached Linley’s back several times, as well as his head and other extremities, but fortunately, because the Earthguard armor was formed from elemental essence, it could be manipulated in terms of shape. Linley was currently using it to form a helmet as well. But under the repeated assault from the Windwolf leaders, the elemental essence on top of the armor was starting to flicker.

“These Windwolf leaders are simply too fast. The Earthguard armor won’t hold much longer.”

Grinding his teeth, Linley climbed higher and higher up. By weight, he was much lighter than the Windwolves, and his climbing abilities were also superior. By the time Linley reached a height of around eighty meters, the Windwolves could no longer climb any higher. All they could do was spit out one wind knife after another at Linley. Linley dodged the best he could; only if he absolutely couldn’t dodge did he allow his Earthguard to take the blow.

“If you fell from such a height, wouldn’t you die?” Linley was murmuring the words to a magic spell. To be able to maintain his calm under such a dangerous situation was something Linley accomplished thanks to constantly training his mental fortitude.

“Crash!”

A wind knife smashed against the Earthguard armor. Previously teetering at the edge of destruction, the Earthguard armor finally broke apart into countless specks of elemental essence, sparkling in the air. This knife was immediately followed by another one, which Linley detected right away.

“Most wind knife spells from these wolves are equivalent to a third level magus’ spell. They won’t be able to kill me, given that I’m a warrior of the fourth rank.” Linley continued to chant the words to his spell, allowing the wind knife to slash his body. “Swish, swish.” Blood erupted from the slash as a terrifying wound appeared on Linley’s chest, leaking fresh blood.

Linley only frowned slightly, continuing to chant the words to his spell.

“Whoosh!” “Whoosh!” “Whoosh!” “Whoosh!”

Over a hundred sharp rocks coalesced, gleaming with earth elemental essence. The densely packed stones shot out at the twenty Windwolves, with thirty stones centered on the heads of the two leading Windwolves. Both of the Windwolf leaders were knocked to the ground. The stones were simply too densely packed. With one crashing sound after another, the Windwolves were knocked to the ground, one after another. Even the tree branches were smashed through as they fell.

After using this technique, the vast majority of the Windwolves were smashed to the ground. But these Windwolves were very agile, and their fur was very thick. Although they were smashed downwards, many of them managed to get a clawhold on a tree branch, while others just suffered some superficial injuries. None of them died.

“This injury looks bad, but it’s actually just a flesh wound. Still, I can’t let it keep on bleeding like this.” Linley’s left hand suddenly blazed with flame, and then he pressed it against his wounds. A crackling sound could be heard, and Linley couldn’t help but wince and suck in a deep breath. The smell of cooking flesh wafted out from Linley’s chest. Just like that, Linley had ‘sealed’ the wound with flame, leaving behind a very ugly scar.

While doing the above, Linley also took the opportunity to quickly flee, jumping from one tree branch to another. In the blink of an eye, he fled very far, and then directly threw himself towards the ground. Linley directly fell around eighty or so meters, but as his body was surrounded by a flow of air, his speed of descent was not too fast. By the time he reached the ground, Linley had already finished mumbling the words to yet another spell.

That pack of Windwolves had also chased towards him, and quite soon, they

drew close.

The two Windwolf leaders were the first to draw near. Howling, they stared at Linley, a look of suspicion in their ice cold eyes. Why had Linley stopped fleeing? These highly intelligent magical beasts were now suspecting that Linley had prepared some trap.

“Growl...” One of the two Windwolf leaders let out a low growl. Immediately, as though responding to an order, a Windwolf of the fourth rank leapt directly towards Linley.

Linley suddenly leapt up and pointed at the distant group of Windwolves. In a low voice, Linley said, “Supergravity Field!”

Earth-style magic – Supergravity Field!

This was an extremely terrifying earth-style spell. Through controlling and utilizing a large amount of earth elemental essence, this spell allowed the user to manipulate the strength of gravity in a localized area, causing opponents to suffer dramatically from the increased gravity. Only a magus of the fifth rank was capable of utilizing the Supergravity Field spell.

And the more powerful an earth-style magus was, the more powerful the effect his Supergravity Field would have.

“Rumble...”

The very air trembled. With Linley at the epicenter, a circular area with a diameter of 100 meters suddenly began to glow with earth elemental essence. All of the Windwolves within this diameter suddenly felt an astonishingly powerful pull of gravity. The Windwolf which was charging Linley was also affected by it, causing him to collapse to the ground in mid-leap. All the other Windwolves felt rather shocked as well. The two Windwolf leaders let out furious howls, and ignoring everything else, charged directly towards Linley. But these two Windwolves now clearly possessed less than half of their original strength.

“Your speed has been halved, but mine is unimpaired.” Earth elemental essence was glowing and swirling around Linley as well, seemingly paired perfectly with the earth elemental essence glowing over the ground.

The earth elemental essences used by the Supergravity Field utilized certain unique vibrations. Each individual earth-style magus would utilize it in a slightly different manner, and would have different frequencies of vibrations. If one could totally control the oscillations of the earth elemental essences, one could nullify the influence of the Supergravity Field.

With the opponent's speed halved, his own speed, comparatively, was now much higher. Linley agilely dodged his enemy's attacks, while quickly beginning to mumble the words to another spell.

“Rumble! Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!”

Dozens of earthen spears erupted from the ground beneath the feet of the Windwolves. Those fiercely sharp edges directly penetrated into the chests of seven of the Windwolves, causing them to bleed profusely. Several of the other Windwolves were also seriously wounded by the earthen spears.

“Hooooowl!”

The two Windwolf leaders were growing frantic.

Within the area of effect of the Supergravity Field, they had less than half of their original speed. They simply had no way of stopping the agile, nimble Linley. If they fought him head on, they could kill him, but they simply couldn't get near him! Based on Linley's ability as a magus of the fifth rank, dealing with them wasn't too difficult.

“Hooooowl!” A low howl.

Without any hesitation, the two Windwolf leaders turned tail and ran. The ten or so surviving Windwolves also fled with them. Covered by darkness, in the blink of an eye, the Windwolves disappeared from Linley's field of vision. Seeing this, Linley quickly ran over and caught up to three heavily injured Windwolves that hadn't managed to flee in time.

“Crash! Crash! Crash!”

Linley landed three successive kicks on the skulls of the heavily wounded Windwolves. The sound of splintering skulls could be heard, and the three Windwolves immediately collapsed. Including the seven Windwolves that had been stabbed in the chest by the earthen spears, a total of ten Windwolves had

been slain. But because Linley had just exerted himself too vigorously, the wound across his chest had split open once again, and fresh blood began to flow out.

Danger

“**W**hew. They finally left.” Linley finally let out a deep breath.

Linley knew very well that he only had the prowess of a warrior of the fourth rank. Engaging in close quarters combat with Windwolves of the fifth rank was tantamount to suicide. Only by using magic could he hope to survive. But if it weren't for the fact that he had had sufficient speed, how would he have had the chance to cast any magic spells? Fortunately, he was quite fast, and so he had managed to obtain this favorable result.

“Even if a magus of the sixth rank were present, he wouldn't necessarily have done better than me. A magus of the sixth rank, in terms of speed, wouldn't have been able to shake off the pursuit of those Windwolves. When surrounded and attacked by a pack of Windwolves, he might not even have had the chance to cast any spells.” Linley felt all the more certain that his decision to not let up on his physical training had been a very wise decision.

Linley glanced at the Coiling Dragon Ring on his left hand. Ever since he had grown up, he had begun wearing the ring on his finger.

“And it's a good thing that I have this Coiling Dragon Ring! Otherwise, how would I have been able to utilize so many spells of the fifth rank?”

For the average magus of the fifth rank, after utilizing two spells of the fifth rank, they would most likely be out of mageforce. But Linley was different. He had just used six spells of the fifth rank; three casts of 'Shattered Rocks', one cast of 'Supergravity Field', one cast of 'Earthguard', and one cast of 'Earth Spear Array'.

The reason for this? The Coiling Dragon Ring.

In years past, Doehring Cowart had come across this ring by accident. One time, when Doehring Cowart cast a spell, he found out, to his astonishment, that a spell which was cast through the Coiling Dragon Ring would only require

a sixth as much mageforce and spiritual energy to achieve the same effect.

Clearly, through the Coiling Dragon Ring, one could more clearly sense and manipulate elemental essence. Additionally, it placed a much lower demand on spiritual energy and mageforce.

A sixth. What did that represent?

A Saint-level magus could normally just utilize the terrifying ‘Annihilating Tempest’ spell a single time. But with the aid of the Coiling Dragon Ring, he could use the spell six times! Such a terrifyingly powerful treasure caused Doehring Cowart to be uncontrollably excited. He considered this discovery to be the blessing of the earth mother, which was why he had named the ring the ‘Worldring’.

The divine treasure, ‘Worldring’.

This was the name which Doehring Cowart had bequeathed upon it. Based on what Doehring Cowart had said, although the Yulan continent had some exceedingly powerful treasures which could make it much easier for a magus to cast spells, there were virtually none which had the same degree of effect as the ‘Worldring’.

But after obtaining this Coiling Dragon Ring, when training with it, Linley discovered something.

“Not just earth-style magic! Wind-style magic, and even my miniscule amount of fire-style magic, when channeled through the Coiling Dragon Ring, only requires a sixth as much spiritual essence and mageforce.” Looking at the ring, Linley felt happier and happier.

Doehring Cowart also chose this moment to appear besides Linley.

“Don’t look at it. In my era, after obtaining this Coiling Dragon Ring, I never dared to inform anyone about it. If anyone found out about it, most likely a large number of Saint-level combatants would come to try and take it from me. But I must say, even I did not imagine that it could also assist fire-style and wind-style magic users.” Doehring Cowart sighed.

Linley nodded. “In the future, I will never dare to reveal this secret either.” Linley knew very well how precious this ring was. If its secret was leaked out, he

would most likely be dismembered by all the Saint-level combatants of the Yulan continent.

“Boss, you done?” The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, chose to speak at this moment. He was standing atop a grassy place not far away. Just then, Bebe had not joined the battle, just watched from afar.

Linley smiled.

“Oof, that hurts.” Seeing the wound on his chest and how his clothes had been torn and stained by blood, Linley began to carefully dress his wound while also using elemental essence to close it.

Bebe was staring at Linley’s wound as well, seemingly quite concerned.

“Boss, the next time something like this happens, I’m gonna take action.” Bebe suddenly said to Linley mentally.

“No need, not unless you believe I’m in a situation where I am powerless to resist and am definitely going to die. Only then can you act. Otherwise... what’s the point of me doing training here?” Linley’s voice was firm and unyielding. Bebe immediately no longer dared to speak. Bebe had long ago wanted to engage in slaughter, but Linley had never agreed.

Right now, hiding in the grass thirty meters away from Linley, a black shadow lay in ambush.

“Just now, in that battle, from start to finish, he utilized six spells of the fifth rank. Although the spells only had the power of the fifth rank, given that he was able to cast six of them, he is most likely a magus of the sixth rank. His combat prowess should be that of a warrior of the fourth rank. Based on the fact that his movements were assisted by wind-style magic, he most likely also possesses affinity for wind magic. In summary: A dual-element magus of the sixth rank, and a warrior of the fourth rank.”

The distant dark shadow was calculating.

“90% chance of killing him successfully. I can make my move.” The dark shadow made his decision.

Linley had just finished with one large battle. Naturally, he would be a bit

more relaxed. The dark shadow still remained unmoving. In the dark night, he was nothing more than just another shadow. Not even the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, had the slightest idea he was there, much less Linley.

The layer of glowing elemental essence on the ground had vanished.

The Supergravity Field had expired!

“Now!” The dark shadow, which had been lying in ambush this entire time, suddenly flew out silently, flying at astonishing speed towards Linley, like an illusionary shadow.

Linley suddenly felt a sense of panic, and he immediately dodged at high speed while turning his head to look behind himself. He saw a dark shadow stabbing at him with a sharp knife, the knife emanating a cold light which made Linley’s heart turn to ice. The cold, callous, murderous eyes in the dark shadow also made Linley’s heart tighten.

“How incredibly fast!” Linley hurriedly retreated, but clearly the shadow was even faster. The flashing black knife had almost reached his eyes.

“Clang!”

Linley wielded his straight chisel to block the opponent’s knife, and the opponent’s black knife viciously collided with the straight chisel. With a cracking sound, the straight chisel was totally shattered, with some of the shards of the straight chisel cutting into Linley’s face, leaving bloody lines all over him.

“Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!”

Seven or eight blades of wind suddenly appeared next to Linley and chopped at the dark shadow. Based on Linley’s current level of ability, he was totally capable of subvocally casting the wind blades spell. Those seven or eight wind blades all chopped at the dark shadow, but once they came into contact with the black light emanating from the shadow, they all disappeared.

“Darkness-style battle-qi!” Linley immediately made the deduction.

Although these seven or eight blades of wind had not managed to block the dark shadow, they had managed to distract it momentarily. Linley immediately turned around and shot forward like an arrow from a bow. The dark shadow

had fast reflexes, however, and chased after Linley, vaulting forward towards Linley at an even higher speed.

In midair, facing Linley, the dark shadow thrust at Linley with his knife once again, still aiming directly for Linley's heart. At this moment, the image of those five corpses he had seen just before entering the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts flashed in the back of Linley's mind. All five of them had been killed by stabs to the heart.

“Die.”

The dark shadow was totally confident. His knife, covered with a black glow, had already reached Linley's chest. In midair, there was no place for Linley to go or to hide. The only option he had was to instacast the most protective defensive spell available to him; the shield of earth! A small shield of earth, only a third of the size of a normal one, suddenly appeared in front of Linley's chest.

“Hrmph!”

The dark shadow sneered. The knife in his hand pierced through the shield at an even greater speed. To someone on the dark shadow's level, a shield of earth posed no barrier at all.

After having been shrunk in size, the shield of earth actually had quite respectable defensive abilities, but when faced with the attack from this knife, all it could do was slow it down and not stop it. Linley felt some pain in his chest as in just a few moments, the knife pierced all the way through his shield of earth.

“Raaaaawr!”

A terrifying, high-pitched scream could be heard as the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, suddenly appeared next to the dark shadow's wrist. The Shadowmouse's mouth was large enough to chomp down on a human hand, while his sharp teeth were totally capable of chewing through anything. Bebe bit down hard on the dark shadow's wrist. With an anguished cry, the dark shadow lost his hand at the wrist.

All that was left was half of a hand, still grasping the dagger that had pierced through the shield of earth and penetrated Linley's chest.

“Ah.... ah!!!” His wrist had been totally bitten off. The pain caused the dark shadow to scream in misery.

With a flash, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, suddenly arrived right in front of the dark shadow. The dark shadow stared with terror and amazement at the pet-sized Shadowmouse. “What... what... what freak is this?” The dark shadow definitely couldn’t believe that this was a Shadowmouse. He had seen Shadowmice before, and none were this terrifying.

The dark shadow forced himself to ignore the pain from his severed wrist as he generated a dark layer of protective battle-qi while also moving to flee.

The dark shadow only seemed to see the little Shadowmouse flicker in front of him. And then, he felt sudden, excruciating pain, as the little Shadowmouse had lunged forward and bit him directly in the throat. Even his protective layer of dark battle-qi was chewed through.

“CRUNCH!”

That person’s quavering scream suddenly cut off. Half his neck had been bitten off. His head was only attached to his body by a thin strip of flesh. The eyes of this dark shadow gradually lost all life, and his body slumped down to the ground.

At this time, Linley also landed on the ground. He immediately pulled out the dagger, blood already pouring from the wound in his chest, staining his clothes red. Seeing the wound in his chest, Linley felt his heart quiver. If his opponent’s knife had gone in just a few more centimeters, his heart would have been penetrated.

“So close. Just a bit further, and my life would’ve been gone.”

After this narrow shave, Linley couldn’t help but turn to look at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe. Bebe urgently asked, “Boss, what’s the situation?”

“Not too bad. I didn’t lose my life.” Linley smiled at Bebe. If it weren’t for Bebe, he really would’ve died.

Hearing these words, Bebe’s face was no longer as frantic as it was earlier. At the same time, he also began to grow cocky. The fur on his back stood up straight, and he began wagging his posterior at Linley. After wagging a few

times, he delightedly said to Linley through their mental bond, “Boss, you are way too weak. You keep on saying that you want to train yourself, but look! You almost just got yourself assassinated by that guy.” There was no way that the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was going to give up this opportunity to mock Linley.

Linley only chuckled.

“Bebe, thanks. You saved my life just then.” Looking at the two terrifying wounds on his chest, Linley couldn’t help but sigh. “And this was just the first day!”

Doehring Cowart appeared as well, also sighing in surprise. “This assassin’s subterfuge abilities were really terrifying. This time, the little Shadowmouse really saved the day. If it weren’t for him, Linley, you would’ve been done for. As for me, this useless old fellow, all I have left is my spirit. There’s no way for me to rescue you.”

Linley understood that Doehring Cowart, despite being a Saint-level Grand Magus, only had his spirit left.

“Doehring Cowart, how could that assassin move so quickly? Even with the assistance of wind-style magic, I couldn’t outpace him.” Linley didn’t really understand.

Doehring Cowart explained, “That assassin should’ve been a warrior of the sixth rank, but he specialized in the strange, secretive ways of darkness-element battle-qi. In addition, he should’ve received special training in subterfuge and concealing his aura. A warrior of the sixth rank who has received special training should have higher combat ability than the average warrior of the sixth rank. Darkness-element battle-qi is quite strange and secretive. Most likely, he specialized in a certain darkness-element technique that boosted his speed.”

Linley nodded slightly.

Darkness-element magic or battle-qi was forbidden in the Holy Union. In the Four Great Empires and in the Dark Alliance, however, the darkness styles were not forbidden. Similarly, in the Dark Alliance, light-style magic and battle-qi training was forbidden.

“Boss, get over here quick!” The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, began jumping up

and down next to the corpse of the assassin.

Linley glanced over questioningly. “Bebe, what is it?”

“This assassin had a pouch on his back,” the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, said excitedly. Linley walked over to the assassin’s corpse. The black clothes on the assassin’s back had already been ripped apart. Clearly, this was the doing of the little Shadowmouse.

Beneath the torn back clothes, a backpack was tightly strapped to the assassin’s back.

“Linley, I’ll wager that those five we saw earlier were killed by him as well. Based on his ability, who knows how many he has killed? His pouch most likely has quite a few magicite cores.” Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley couldn’t help but feel excited. Based on this assassin’s prowess, he was perhaps able to kill even your average warrior of the sixth rank. Most likely, he had quite a few possessions.

“Squeak squeak!” The little Shadowmouse grabbed the backpack with his teeth, and with a bound, leapt on top of Linley’s shoulder.

Seeing this, Linley couldn’t help but feel secretly surprised. “Bebe’s speed really is incredibly fast now. Even though that assassin was very fast as well, he was only a bit faster than me. But Bebe’s speed is fast enough that I don’t even have the ability to react to him. No wonder that assassin was bitten to death by Bebe without even having the chance to dodge or block.”

“Squeak! Squeak!” Holding the backpack in his teeth, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, shook it a few times. “Boss, hurry up and open it up to take a look!” He said rather urgently to Linley through their link.

Bebe was very curious as to what was inside the pouch.

Laughing, Linley accepted the pouch. It was a pitch-black backpack, also made from leather, but clearly of far higher quality than Linley’s own leather backpack. Most likely, it was made from the skin of some high-rank magical beast. He opened the backpack.

Seeing the items inside, Linley’s eyes lit up. Within the backpack, there was a

set of clothes, some dried rations, and a sack of gold coins. Inside the backpack, the largest space was reserved for a large sack of items. Opening up the sack, Linley couldn't help but suck in a cold breath of surprise.

"How many people and how many magical beasts has this assassin killed?" Linley was somewhat stunned. The contents of this large sack were all sparkling, rainbow-colored magicite cores, with even a few large magestones mixed in.

"So many magicite cores! There's got to be at least a few dozen cores here." Linley felt excited.

Linley immediately began to count the number of cores, and also differentiate them by value. Differentiating the amount of magical energy contained within a magicite core was quite easy for a magus. In a short while, Linley had completed his accounting of the various cores within the pouch.

"A total of 102 magicite cores and seven magestones. For the magicite cores, there are five magicite cores of the sixth rank, 26 magicite cores of the fifth rank, and 71 magicite cores of the fourth rank. No cores of the third rank. For the magestones, six are medium-grade magestones, while one is high-grade."

Linley could feel his heart beat frantically. What Linley didn't realize yet was that this assassin had also acquired magicite cores of the third rank; he just hadn't bothered keeping any of them.

As for the magestones?

Magestones were usually affixed to a magestaff to help the magus rapidly recover his mageforce. All of them had been acquired after the assassin had killed a magus and torn the magicite gem from his magestaff.

"The 102 magicite cores are probably worth around 13,000-14,000 gold coins, while the seven magestones are worth around 1600 gold coins at least. Altogether, the value of these things is about 15,000 gold coins." After reaching this calculation, Linley couldn't help but feel surprised and overjoyed. In a single backpack from an assassin, he had suddenly gained so much wealth.

As for his clan?

Previously, in order to acquire the funds to send his little brother Wharton off to the O'Brien Academy, the clan had virtually exhausted all of its savings. Even

if you asked the Baruch clan to produce just ten thousand gold coins, it would now be extremely difficult.

“This is just my first day in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and I’ve already acquired so much. How much will I have gained after two months?” Linley’s heart was filled with anticipation.

But Linley also knew quite well that there was no way he would constantly meet with such a ‘fat sheep’ for slaughtering. In addition, most ‘fat sheep’ were quite powerful as well. This time, Linley had nearly died. Thinking back to what had just happened, Linley couldn’t help but touch the wounds on his chest as well as the wounds on his face caused by the shattered straight chisel.

Linley suddenly turned to stare at the ten dead Windwolves.

“Ten or so magicite cores of the fourth rank, combined, are worth several hundred gold coins as well. Can’t let’m go to waste.” Holding the assassin’s knife in his hand, Linley went over to the Windwolf corpses and began digging out their magicite cores, one after another. Upon using the knife, Linley came to the realization that it was much sharper than the one he had been using.

Cruelty

Within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, next to a spring, Linley dressed his wounds as he also began absorbing earth elemental essence to heal his wounds. The ever-benevolent Mother Earth was always kind and selfless; standing on the earth, Linley felt his wounds slowly heal, filling his heart with peace.

By now, Linley had already exchanged backpacks. His own backpack, in terms of both the quality of the leather and quality of their workmanship, was far inferior to the assassin's. In addition, the assassin's backpack had an interior which was meticulously laid out. Once the lock was tightened, all of the items inside the backpack would be securely fastened, and the backpack itself would not impede movement in the slightest. And that assassin's black dagger was also extremely sharp, and Linley found that it was quite easy to wield.

“Whoosh!”

With a flicker, Linley's body moved, and he suddenly disappeared into the mountain forests. Linley didn't even bother to pay any attention to magical beasts of the first or second ranks. The most commonly-seen beasts were of the third and fourth ranks. But even if he ran into a magical beast of the fifth rank, Linley had confidence in at least giving it a good tussle.

As he drew deeper and deeper into the mountain ranges, Linley encountered one bloody, cruel battle after another. He experienced many ambushes and assassination attempts. After all of these battles, the wounds and scars on Linley's body grew more and more plentiful as well, while Linley's spirit grew more and more tenacious.

These life-and-death battles caused Linley's mind to become tougher, and his actions to become more merciless.

In the blink of an eye, a month had passed since Linley had entered the

Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.



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A month later, on top of a large tree located next to a mountain spring.

There was a long scar on the left side of his face. Linley's back was arched, and he was hidden on top of the tree like a panther lying in ambush.

Right now, Linley was hidden in the middle of many leaves, staring straight down at the ground. Just a few dozen feet away from the tree which Linley was hiding in was a small creek, and drinking water from the creek was a powerfully-built Bloodthirsty Warpig. A single, blood-colored horn protruded from above the Warpig's snout, and muscles bulged throughout its body, like the gnarled roots of a tree.

Bloodthirsty Warpig, a magical beast of the fifth rank, fire-element!

"This Bloodthirsty Warpig has a tough, thick skin. Its defensive abilities are exceedingly strong. Most likely, the earthen spear technique wouldn't be able to penetrate its skin."

Linley had a sudden insight, and began to formulate a plan. Immediately, his lips began to move silently as he soundlessly began to mouth the words to a spell. Slowly, the wind elemental essences around Linley began to swirl about him, forming into a bluish, translucent javelin in front of him. The translucent javelin's tip had gusts of wind flowing about it.

Wind-style magic of the fifth rank – Windhowl!

"Swish!"

A piercing sound could be heard as the Windhowl javelin shot downward with terrifying speed. At the same time, Linley jumped down from the tree's crown, leaping down with as much speed as the javelin.

Upon hearing the noise, the Bloodthirsty Warpig stopped drinking water and stared up, but the Windhowl javelin was simply too fast. In the blink of an eye, it traversed the distance and was only a few meters away from the Warpig. The

javelin's speed really was frighteningly fast, and its tip was covered with gusts of wind.

“Grrrr!” The Bloodthirsty Warpig let out an angry howl, and it used the horn above its snout to strike viciously at the Windhowl javelin.

“Crash!”

The javelin formed from the Windhowl spell crashed directly onto the horn of the Bloodthirsty Warpig. The Windhowl javelin immediately dissipated, but at the same time, after taking a hit from a spell of the fifth rank, the Warpig couldn't help but half-kneel from the force of the blow, with a bloody gash appearing on its forehead as well.

“Woosh!”

Before the Warpig had a chance to react, right behind the Windhowl javelin came Linley, who with all his might, struck down at the center of the head of the Warpig with his newly-acquired black dagger. The dagger penetrated directly into the skull of the Warpig, and as it did, Linley immediately dodged.

“Roar!”

Having been stabbed in a vital spot, the Bloodthirsty Warpig roared furiously. Flames began to rise on its body, and it also began charging forward with no regard for anything. But after rushing a few dozen meters, it collapsed. Its four legs quivered a few times before coming to a stop, and all of the fire on its body began to die as well.

“Amongst the magical beasts of the fifth rank, much like the Vampiric Iron Bull, the Bloodthirsty Warpig is considered a beast of rather low intelligence.” Linley walked to the corpse of the Warpig, pulled out his dagger, and removed the magicite core from within the Warpig's corpse.

Thinking back to his recent life in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, Linley couldn't help but admit to himself that although he was still a magus of the fifth rank and a fighter of the fourth rank, his actual combat ability had increased tremendously compared to when he had first entered the mountains.

After multiple life-and-death struggles, his body was covered with scars which symbolized painful lessons learned over this month.

Especially...

On his chest, there was an extremely horrifying wound. That time, he really was at death's door. In the end, it had been the little Shadowmouse who had once again saved the day.

This wound hadn't been given to him by a magical beast. It had been given to him by an extremely adorable young lady.

"Back then, I really trusted her. I really believed that her friends had all been killed, and that the only one left was her, injured and alone." Thinking back to the events of two weeks prior, Linley once again felt a stab of terror. That girl had seemed so kind, so pure.

When Linley had discovered her, three other men and another girl had all died. Only she had been left, filled with terror.

Linley couldn't help but go and comfort her, help her, and take care of her. That girl had seemingly suffered a huge mental blow. Every night, she insisted that Linley hold her, as only in Linley's arms did she feel safe enough to go to sleep. Every night, upon seeing the peaceful look on her face as she went to sleep, Linley felt joy in his heart. Three days passed in such a fashion. On the fourth night, she was once again sleeping quietly in Linley's bosom.

But suddenly, this adorable girl pulled out a dagger and stabbed directly at Linley's chest, with Linley caught totally off-guard.

And then, the enraged Bebe had suddenly, bizarrely, doubled in size. His enormous jaws had bitten off the girl's head with a single bite, killing her instantly. And then, Bebe had returned to his normal size.

But Linley couldn't staunch the flow of blood from the deep wound in his chest. In the end, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, had been forced to use some special darkness-type magic techniques to close the wound.

"Back then, I should've listened to Grandpa Doehring's advice. I lacked experience," Linley thought to himself and sighed. Originally, Doehring Cowart had warned him about the girl several times. In the end, seeing that Linley had been stubbornly set on assisting the 'helpless' little girl, there was nothing that Doehring Cowart could do. But he still tried to insist that even if Linley was

going to help her, that he absolutely must not allow her to get near him.

But at the time, the girl had been extremely 'terrified', and seemingly hadn't been able to fall asleep without Linley holding her. In the end, in order to comfort her, Linley had held her in her arms, and they had both gone to sleep.

"I really didn't expect that her acting abilities would be so good. I treated her so well, but she could still be so merciless towards me." Linley sighed again in his heart. When that girl had stabbed him in the chest, he had seen the vicious look in her eyes, and his heart had grown cold.

What had caused this girl to be so heartless and merciless?

Could it be that despite taking care of her for three full days, she hadn't been moved in the slightest?

"Fortunately, thanks to Grandpa Doehring warning me over and over again, I didn't reveal Bebe's true capabilities to her." Linley couldn't help but admit that his life had been preserved thanks to Doehring Cowart and Bebe.

"Linley, what are you thinking about? Are you thinking about that girl again?" Doehring Cowart appeared by Linley's side.

Seeing the look on Linley's face, Doehring Cowart was able to guess what he was pondering. That stab from the girl had injured Linley deeply, not just in the flesh, but also in his heart. From that day onwards, Linley would no longer easily trust others.

From the very beginning, Doehring Cowart had sensed that there were some problems with the girl. How could someone with the courage to enter the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts be so totally discombobulated by the sight of death?

Unfortunately, Linley had still been completely convinced by the girl's performance, and had really felt that the girl was very 'pitiable'.

"Linley, that girl's performing abilities were nothing. Back in my time, in the Pouant Empire, I saw so many plots from enemy countries, plots which involved decades of subterfuge and lies which were totally undetectable. Their acting abilities are beyond your comprehension." Doehring Cowart smiled faintly as he spoke. "Remember, don't easily lower your guard when dealing with a

stranger.”

Linley nodded slightly.

“Squeak, squeak!” The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, began to call out from next to Linley.

Linley looked up.

Right now, the little Shadowmouse was leaping up and down atop the Warpig’s corpse.

“Boss, when are we gonna go to the central areas of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?” Bebe mentally spoke to Linley in a somewhat unhappy tone. “In this current area, the strongest creatures that we can meet are magical beasts of the sixth rank. They aren’t much of a challenge. I want to challenge magical beasts of the seventh rank, boss! I want to challenge magical beasts of the seventh rank!”

Linley glanced at the little Shadowmouse. “That’s enough. Don’t get too cocky. You’re bragging that magical beasts of the sixth rank are too easy? Do you remember that Bluewind Hawk from the other day? Was there anything you could do to him?”

“That’s not my fault!” Bebe rubbed his head with his tiny paws as he said unhappily, “Boss, you saw yourself. That Bluewind Hawk stayed in the skies and refused to come down. He just kept on throwing magical wind knives at us, as though they didn’t cost him any mageforce at all. I couldn’t just let him attack me without end, could I?”

Linley laughed.

Over the course of the past month, Linley had become very familiar with the little Shadowmouse’s abilities. In terms of speed, Bebe had reached a terrifying level indeed. But because he was physically small and only had his claws and teeth as offensive weapons, although Bebe was capable of dealing with magical beasts of the sixth rank, he most likely would find it quite hard to deal with a magical beast of the seventh rank.

Just at this moment, Linley suddenly frowned. He cautiously turned his head and saw a blurred human outline appear in the wilderness.

“Linley, it’s actually you! This is great!” A happy voice rang out, and a skinny young man began jogging towards them at high speed. This youth was the skinny warrior whom Linley had met on his way towards the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. The other two people he had met, his classmate Delsarte and the big, burly Kava, had both died.

Back then, when facing the wind-style magus-archer, Linley had utilized the earth-style spell ‘Earthen Spear Array’. The skinny warrior of the fifth rank, Matt, had seized the opportunity to immediately flee. But Linley didn’t really care that he had run away. After all, he and Matt didn’t have any special relationship.

Honestly speaking, of the three people he had encountered, the only one Linley had genuinely felt friendly towards had been his own classmate, Delsarte. The big fellow, Kava, had also made a good impression on Linley, but Linley didn’t have any special feelings for Matt.

“Oh, it’s Matt. I didn’t expect that the two of us would meet again in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts after a month had passed.” Linley was still quite calm.

Matt appeared very excited. “This is wonderful. This month, on numerous occasions, I was almost overcome by the magical beasts here. Fortunately, my luck was not too bad. Whoah – is that a Bloodthirsty Warpig? Linley, you were able to kill a Bloodthirsty Warpig? You really are formidable!”

Linley smiled.

“I’m getting a bit hungry. I’ve heard that the flesh of both the Bloodthirsty Warpig and the Vampiric Iron Bull are both extremely flavorful, and that it has a wonderfully chewy texture as well. I haven’t had lunch yet. You wouldn’t mind sharing some Warpig flesh with me, would you?” Matt joked.

The Bloodthirsty Warpig was huge in size, with its corpse weighing at least several hundred kilograms. Even ten people wouldn’t be able to finish it all.

“Of course not.” Linley withdrew his knife and began slicing off parts of the Warpig.

“Linley, no need to trouble yourself. This Bloodthirsty Warpig corpse is part of

your spoils of war. How can I trouble you to butcher it as well? Let me do it. My roasting abilities are quite formidable.” Matt immediately headed towards the Warpig corpse and withdrew a knife from his side.

Playing with the knife, Matt began to expertly butcher the Warpig, although he only cut off the four legs, tongue, and tail. He then began to wash these pieces in the nearby spring.

“Boss, he seems to be quite skilled. He doesn’t seem to be any weaker than you in this respect.” The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, leapt onto Linley’s shoulders and mentally said to Linley.

Glancing at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, on his shoulders, Linley couldn’t help but sigh with gratitude. When others saw this little tiny black mouse, perhaps they would just think that it was an ordinary little Shadowmouse, of little threat. But in reality...

Linley could still recall the terrifying sight of how the enraged Bebe had so easily slaughtered that dark assassin, as well as that ‘kind’ young girl.

“Can’t judge a person by his appearance. Same goes for magical beasts.” Linley sighed to himself.

Matt quite quickly began to set up his roasting apparatus, and also withdrew some rough cooking salts and seasoning from his pouch. “Linley, these Warpig legs will definitely be very tasty. Its tongue, as well, is both soft and fragrant. The flavor of a Warpig tail is quite good as well.”

As he spoke, Matt had chopped both the tail and the tongue into multiple pieces. Linley watched as Matt used flint and steel to light a fire, not stepping in to help despite being in possession of fire-style mageforce. He watched Matt quickly and constantly roast each piece.

After a period of time.

“It’s about time. Have a taste.” Matt quite enthusiastically handed a large chunk of Warpig leg meat to Linley.

But in turn, Linley flipped the Warpig meat around and offered it to Bebe. Bebe immediately accepted it happily, and began to chomp away in earnest. This Warpig leg was perhaps three or four times larger than Bebe, but in a short

period of time, Bebe totally devoured all of the meat.

This sight caused Matt to gape in astonishment.

“He really is a magical beast. Even a little black Shadowmouse can eat so much.” Matt sighed while offering a piece of roasted Warpig tongue to Linley. “Linley, have a taste of my artisanship.”

Linley smiled as he declined. “No need. I’m not used to eating tongues. Some of that leg meat will do just fine.” Linley took one of the other legs and began to eat without any reservations. Next to him, Matt laughed. “Then I won’t force you. If you won’t eat it, I will. Haha.”

As though enjoying himself very much, Matt began to eat the roasted Warpig tongue and tail.

By the time Linley had finished eating the Warpig leg, Matt hadn’t taken a single bite of it yet.

“You are done already? Haha, fine then. I’m half-full now anyhow. I’ll save this Warpig leg for when I’m hungry.” Matt withdrew an oilcloth from his backpack and placed the Warpig leg inside it, then replaced the cloth within his backpack.

Linley glanced at Matt.

It seemed as though Matt wanted to travel alongside him.

“Matt, here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, I’m fine training by myself. Let’s part ways here,” Linley said directly.

Matt immediately frowned. “Linley, this place is extremely dangerous. It’d be much safer if we travelled together. Honestly speaking, during this past month, I’ve been frightened during every combat encounter. I’m not even able to sleep well.”

“Then do as you wish.”

Linley didn’t mince words. He immediately headed deeper into the mountains, while Matt, smiling, followed him. But when his gaze fell upon the backpack Linley was carrying, a slightly sinister light shone in his eyes.

“This backpack is different from the one Linley was carrying a month ago. And it seems much fuller as well.” Matt sneered to himself, but he still smiled in a

very friendly manner. Matt was not the same as Linley. Before entering these mountains, he had trained himself in other places for many times.

Matt sped up his pace. Smiling, he said, “Linley, you really are a wonderful fellow. Travelling with you, I feel much safer. After all, two people who work together are much stronger than two people who work separately. At night, the two of us can take turns sleeping. There’s no need for us to both be on full alert at night.”

Linley was silent. His gaze was always focused on his surroundings, carefully keeping an eye out for the magical beasts in these mountains.



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They slowly made their way north, as Linley no longer dared to go further east. If they travelled further east, they would be entering the dangerous parts of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Currently, in this area, Linley would only encounter magical beasts of the fifth or sixth rank.

The entire time, Matt followed by his side, seemingly quite happy.

Two days later.

It was late at night, and the world was dark. Linley and Matt continued going forward in single file.

“Linley, do you think it’s about time for us to go back yet? Honestly speaking, we’ve spent about enough time here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts,” Matt said in a soft voice as he followed Linley’s trail.

Linley just calmly shook his head, not making a sound.

Matt felt a hint of anger. “Every night, this Linley fellow is extremely careful. He isn’t giving me any opportunities at all.” Matt didn’t have any confidence in his ability to kill Linley. After all, being able to survive here for so long was proof of Linley’s abilities.

“Hrm?” Linley seemed to have noticed something special. He turned around and stared at a copse of trees not too far away. Within that copse of trees,

there was a hidden, indistinct shadow lying in wait.

Matt, next to Linley, saw him turn his head, presenting his back to Matt. A look of greed appeared in Matt's eyes, as well as a look of excitement. In a practiced manner, Matt suddenly drew his dagger and without any hesitation at all, stabbed towards Linley's back....

Linley suddenly turned and grabbed Matt by the wrist of his right hand, which was holding the dagger. At the same time, he stared coldly at Matt. His voice even colder, he asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

"You!" Matt was shocked. He couldn't believe that his attempted sneak attack had apparently been noticed and blocked.

Matt immediately smiled at Linley instead. "What do I think I'm doing? O mighty genius magus, let me tell you... I am going to kill you." Matt was totally confident in himself. With the two of them in such close proximity, how could he, a warrior of the fifth rank, be unable to kill a magus of the fifth rank?

Matt suddenly exerted some strength with his right arm, and he began to blaze with battle-qi, forcibly shaking off Linley's grip.

"Die!" Matt stared at Linley as he stabbed at Linley with his dagger again.

"Rawr!!!!"

A terrifying sound! "What?!" Matt heard the noise, and he couldn't help but shudder. And then, Matt saw a very small black shadow appear in front of him.

"What... what is this?" Matt could tell that this black shadow was actually the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, which spent every day on Linley's shoulders. The little Shadowmouse opened his mouth wide, revealing a mouth filled with a horrifying number of sharp teeth, and directly chomped down towards Matt's face.

"Nooo-!"

Matt immediately tried to retreat at high speed, while also jerking his head away.

"Crunch!"

The little Shadowmouse's speed was far faster than Matt had imagined. How

could Matt dodge? The little Shadowmouse reached out with his right paw, waving his sharp, knife-like talons at Matt's head. With but a single swipe, half of Matt's neck was removed from his body, and blood spurted out wildly.

“Urk... gurgle...” Clasp ing a hand to what remained of his neck, Matt's eyes were as wide as an ox. His disbelieving, terrified eyes were fixed on the little Shadowmouse, and in his heart, he was utterly shocked. “Shadowmouse? Is this a Shadowmouse?”

As he fell into death and as his consciousness dissipated, Matt was still filled with terror and disbelief. He had prepared so long to make this move, but he hadn't figured the little Shadowmouse into his plans.

A dark-colored Shadowmouse was the weakest level of Shadowmouse.

But at the moment of his death, Matt finally realized that the adorable little Shadowmouse was actually a terrifying monster.

“Thud!”

Matt's hands fell lifelessly from his throat to his sides, and then he himself collapsed as well. His fresh blood stained his clothes and stained the ground.

Bebe's Prowess

Standing in front of Matt's corpse, Linley couldn't help but heave a sigh. At the same time, he couldn't help but rub the scar on his chest.

The scar there was the one that had almost taken his life.

"Compared to Nina, you are far too inferior." Linley shook his head and sighed. This Matt actually didn't have much of a friendship with him, and they were nothing more than temporary travel companions who met on the road. There was no way Linley would place too much trust in him.

What was more...

After having experienced Nina, how could Linley so casually present his back to others?

"Squeak squeak!" The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, came over carrying the backpack which had been on Matt's back. He urgently said to Linley through their link, "Boss, hurry up and take a look and see how many magicite cores there are here. In this month, all of the other assassins combined didn't have as many magicite cores as that first assassin."

Doehring Cowart appeared by Linley's side as well.

"Linley, it seems like this little Shadowmouse that you've raised really enjoys counting magicite cores." Doehring Cowart chuckled.

"It does seem that way, just a bit." Linley accepted the backpack and opened it while joking with Bebe, "Bebe, this time when you killed that Matt fellow, I believe you used your claws, instead of your sharp teeth. Why didn't you use your fierce, little teeth?"

Bebe sat up straight, let out a few arrogant squeaks, then said mentally, "Boss, I, Bebe, have incredible prowess. My sharp claws are no less fierce than my teeth. And that Matt fellow was too vile. Biting him would have sullied my

teeth.” After saying this, Bebe intentionally put on a display of ‘spitting’ out a mouthful of saliva.

The image of the little Shadowmouse spitting out a mouthful of saliva was simply too human-like. Upon seeing this, Linley immediately started laughing.

“That’s enough, oi, Bebe. Look, that Matt fellow had a lot of magicite cores in his backpack. There’s around thirty. Looks like he didn’t waste much time during this month. But the best core in these thirty is just a core of the fifth rank.”

Linley carefully began inspecting the cores.

During these thirty days, he had killed a number of magical beasts, as well as some people who had wanted to kill him. All combined, he had nearly three hundred magicite cores, with a total valuation of perhaps around forty thousand gold coins!

“Forty thousand gold. If father knew... then...” Fantasizing about his father’s reaction when he gave him all that gold, Linley couldn’t help but feel overjoyed.

“It makes sense that you were able to acquire so much,” Doehring Cowart said. “Aside from those magical beasts you killed, of those three hundred magicite cores, virtually all of them came from other people’s backpacks.”

Linley nodded in agreement.

That very first assassin had ended up donating 15,000 gold coins' worth of magicite cores to him. The others, all combined, had had just a bit more than that first assassin.

“The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is extremely dangerous, so most people here have grouped up with others. But assassins are rarely willing to attack groups, because they generally specialize in killing someone instantly, which is why they prefer to fight one on one.”

Doehring Cowart suddenly began to laugh, his white whiskers floating about. “Linley, look at yourself. Yes, you might be tall and strong, but your face is still filled with a childish air. And that fuzz above your lips? All of these prove something...”

“You are just a kid!”

Doehring Cowart laughed uproariously. “Linley, in this huge mountain range, when those assassins find a kid here for his first training exercise, with such a childish face, how can they possibly not make a move against you? That’s why, in a single short month, you’ve run into so many assassins.”

“But those people travelling in groups might not encounter a single assassination attempt in a month. Of course, those five people we ran into that first day were exceptions. First of all, they were too weak. And secondly, their killer was really strong. But in the end, that assassin died by Bebe’s claws.”

Linley laughed and nodded as well.

He was only fifteen years old this year, after all. Although he was 1.8 meters tall, anyone with a good eye could tell that he was just a kid.

“Most magi of the fifth and sixth rank would probably only acquire a few thousand gold coins’ worth of magicite cores in a month here. And all of those cores would have been acquired through life-and-death struggles. After all, the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is incredibly dangerous.” Doehring Cowart sighed emotionally.

Linley nodded in agreement. “It is dangerous. I’ve stayed in the outer regions this entire time, and at most I have run into magical beasts of the sixth rank. But I’ve been injured several times already. If it weren’t for the Coiling Dragon ring, if it weren’t for the fact that I’m both a dual-element magus of the fifth rank and a warrior of the fourth rank, and if it weren’t for the fact that I have Bebe, I probably would’ve been done for, travelling on my own like this.”

He turned to look at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, who was currently playing with a magicite core.

Calming himself, Linley collected the various cores, and then headed off once again, with Bebe in tow. He was going to continue his training in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. After all, based on his original plans, he was going to stay here for two months.



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Each day, Linley would fight against local magical beasts, and his skill in merging his abilities as a magus with his abilities as a warrior grew better and better. He was also growing in practical experience in using earth-style and wind-style magic in battle. Gradually, Linley began suffering fewer and fewer wounds in battle. Naturally, as Linley gradually drew closer and closer to the core regions, magical beasts of the sixth rank began growing more and more plentiful, and Linley began to be more cautious as well.

On the 46th day of Linley's entry into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

"Swish!"

Ripples began to appear on the surface of the quiet little lake. A human figure suddenly emerged from within. It was Linley. Linley was using a piece of cloth to casually wash himself.

The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, stood on the shore, watching Linley bathe with an envious look in his eyes. After squeaking a few times, he began hopping up and down before diving directly into the lake. Seeing this, Linley couldn't help but chuckle, and then he continued to bathe himself.

"Haha, that's enough, Bebe, haha, that's enough!" Linley suddenly broke out into uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh, boss, you are afraid of being tickled?" The little Shadowmouse rose up to the surface of the water, guileless black eyes gleaming with a hint of mischief.

Chuckling, Linley walked onto the lakeshore. Removing a clean set of clothes from his backpack, he put the new clothes on. Changing clothes after a nice bath was a very luxuriant event. And then, Linley began to wash the just-removed clothes in the lake, then hung them onto a tree branch to dry off. With a leap, Linley landed onto another branch on the tree. Lying down, he watched Bebe mess around in the lake water.

He watched as Bebe joyfully leapt about in the water. Sometimes, Bebe would dive to the lake bottom, while at other times, Bebe would lie on his back on the lake surface.

"Rumble" "Rumble" "Rumble" "Rumble".

The ground suddenly began to shake ever so slightly. Based on the rumbling rhythm, Linley surmised that it should've been caused by something walking. Linley couldn't help but feel startled as he looked directly towards the south, in the direction the rumbles were coming from. He saw a large, indistinct shadow appear from within the woods on the southern side of the lake, and after a short period of time, Linley was able to see the figure clearly.

It was at least two stories high, and covered with large, flame-red, shield-like scales, which also extended over and covered its four limbs like scaly armor. Its long tail was roughly half as long as its entire body, as nimble and as agile as a whip. Its two sinister, ruby-like eyes, each the size of a lantern, stared at the surface of the lake. Two plumes of white smoke continuously wafted out from its nostrils.

Linley was in total shock, and his body froze, even as his heart sped up.

“Velocidragon. Magical beast of the seventh rank – Velocidragon!”

From his earlier years until now, the only magical beast that he had been genuinely fascinated with had been the Velocidragon, which he had seen that one time. That time, when the Velocidragon had demonstrated its terrifying power in the middle of the town of Wushan, it had seemed to be an invincible force. With its terrifying power, it had wiped out one house after another...

Linley couldn't help but feel his heart quake.

When he had been eight years old, Linley had just been a child. But now, at age fifteen, he was a dual-element magus of the fifth rank.

“Boss! Boss! This one is mine!” The excited voice of the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, rang out in Linley's mind.

Linley turned to look at the surface of the lake, and saw that Bebe was so excited that all of the hairs on his body were sticking up as straight and stiff as needles. Even all of the muscles on his body were pulsing with energy. His fierce claws and head had grown in size as well. The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, had previously been around twenty centimeters in size, but he had now suddenly elongated to a size of half a meter. This half-meter long size was the largest that Linley had ever seen Bebe grow to.

But despite this, the half-meter long Bebe was nothing more than a speck in comparison to the Velocidragon.

The Velocidragon's huge, lantern-like red gaze was fixed coldly on Bebe's form. It let out an angry snort that reverberated within the mountains. In reply, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also raised his head and let out a high-pitched shriek.

The sound of the low, growling snarl and the high-pitched shriek clashed.

Linley, who was watching all of this atop the tree next to the lake, suddenly felt as though the Velocidragon and the little Shadowmouse were two equally matched adversaries having a staredown.

"Raaaaaawr!" A thundering roar!

An all-encompassing, blazing flame suddenly erupted from the Velocidragon's maw, covering the entire area dozens of meters ahead of it in flame. The lake began to hiss as the surface water instantly began to boil. But Bebe didn't move at all, despite being bathed in flames; he just let the flame burn as it might.

From within the blazing flame, one could see that Bebe was not harmed in the slightest.

"Although Bebe is physically small, his defensive abilities are incredible. The power of this flame is approximately on par with a fire-style magus spell of the fifth rank, but it isn't able to harm him at all." Linley quietly watched. Despite having been in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for so long, Bebe had yet to meet a genuinely worthy opponent to do battle with.

Bathed in flames, Bebe was motionless. But then suddenly, he moved!

"Shkkkkkkkkreeee!"

With a terrifyingly high-pitched howl, Bebe transformed into a black shadow that sped towards the Velocidragon with vicious speed. The Velocidragon, which had continued to breathe out flames this entire time, suddenly widened its enormous, lantern-sized red eyes, while suddenly slapping forward with its long, whip-like draconic tail.

The incredible speed of the Velocidragon's tail actually approached the speed

of the little Shadowmouse's movement.

"Whoosh!" Bebe's movements were extremely bizarre, and he was actually able to dodge the hyper-fast attack of the Velocidragon's tail, and immediately tried to bite at the Velocidragon's throat. But the Velocidragon, in turn, immediately turned his head down and then tried to bite back at Bebe.

But clearly, Bebe was still a bit faster. As he gave the Velocidragon a vicious bite on the neck, a sharp 'crack' sound could be heard, as one of the thick scales on the Velocidragon's neck was actually broken, and then swallowed whole by Bebe. Bebe was a creature that was capable of even devouring stones and bones. This Velocidragon scale proved to be edible by him as well.

But just at this time, the Velocidragon's tail swept towards Bebe. "Thwack!" A high-pitched slapping sound could be heard, causing Linley to shiver. But Bebe had long since dodged and scurried away again.

"This Velocidragon has such a huge, thick neck. That bite Bebe gave it was nothing more than a light wound." Linley breathlessly watched this battle between creatures of totally different sizes. "This Velocidragon's tail moves in such an unpredictable manner, and it's able to twist and turn at high speeds as well."

The tail of a Velocidragon was not only fast, it was also agile and unpredictable.

"Shkreee!"

Bebe once more turned into a vicious black shadow. Erupting from the water, Bebe once more dodged the draconic tail. But just as he dodged, the tail suddenly changed directions in a rapid, unpredictable manner. With a sudden twist, it struck Bebe a direct blow.

The vicious black shadow was sent flying into the faraway woods.

"Bebe!" Linley's chest tightened.

But the Velocidragon only stared cautiously at the forest, as though keeping an eye out for a dangerous foe. Suddenly, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, came flying down at him from atop a particularly tall tree. The Velocidragon's tail immediately twisted to strike at him, but this time, Bebe had learned from the

previous painful lesson. With a twitch of his tail, he too suddenly changed directions in mid-air.

The little Shadowmouse was a blur. The draconic tail was also a blur!

The two blurred shadows chased each other about in mid-air. The little Shadowmouse would occasionally be sent flying by the Velocidragon, but every so often, he would also manage to land a vicious bite on the Velocidragon as well. They continued their fight, fighting all the way from the lakeshore to the forests. One mighty tree after another was knocked down by the Velocidragon's tail as the Velocidragon and the Shadowmouse continued to fight without pause.

"From what I can see, it seems as though Bebe has a slight advantage."

Linley nervously watched the fight. By this point in time, the huge Velocidragon had already lost seven or eight scales, and blood continuously flowed from seven or eight wounds, covering half of its body in blood. The Velocidragon's enraged roars continued unabated.

Its tail whipping back and forth, any tree touched by the Velocidragon's tail was snapped in half. One mighty tree after another toppled over, and an area with a diameter of approximately two hundred meters around the two combatants was totally cleared.

"But can Bebe keep on being hit like that, by the Velocidragon's tail?"

Linley began to worry. The offensive power of the Velocidragon's tail was very high. If it smashed into a stone, the stone would crumble; if it smashed into a tree, the tree would snap. This sort of offensive power made Linley's heart grow cold. Linley knew that if he was struck so much as a single time by that tail, his life would be gone.

"Whack!" Bebe was sent flying again, but in the blink of an eye, Bebe once more transformed into a furious black shadow as he charged into the fray again, screeching.

By now, the Velocidragon was covered with blood, with many damaged scales all over its body. It looked to be in a bad way.

"Raaaawr!"

With an angry roar, the Velocidragon actually turned and began to leave. At high speed, it began to run towards the core areas of the mountains. In a short period of time, the Velocidragon disappeared from Linley's vision. Bebe actually pursued it for a while as well before turning around and coming back to Linley.

Linley dropped down from his tree just as the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also ran over to him, his body shrinking back to its normal size.

"Bebe, are you okay?" Linley immediately asked him through their mental link.

Bebe jumped onto Linley's shoulder and stood erect on his hind legs, as he looked arrogantly at Linley with his beady little black eyes. "Boss, what sort of magical beast do you take Bebe to be? How could I be afraid of a Velocidragon?" Pride and self-delight suffused Bebe's adorable little face.

But suddenly, Bebe twitched his tail. Shaking himself, he said, "But that Velocidragon's tail really is a rather nasty piece of work. My entire body hurts."

Seeing this, Linley couldn't help but chuckle. The Velocidragon's tail wasn't just a 'rather nasty piece of work'. It was an extremely nasty piece of work. Linley was extremely glad that Bebe had been able to withstand so many blows from it without sustaining any serious injuries.

"And this Velocidragon's scales and meat really are thick. Even at my maximum size, I couldn't bite through him." Bebe sighed. "But I'm confident that if we kept at it, I, Bebe, could've bled him to death. This Velocidragon was pretty sly though. It kept on moving about, and never let me bite it on the same place twice."

Linley secretly laughed.

There was a huge gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank, in terms of combat ability as well as other factors. Most likely, that Velocidragon's intelligence was not much less than a human being's. How could it possibly allow the little Shadowmouse to bite it in the same place twice?

No matter how thick the scales and flesh of the Velocidragon were, it couldn't withstand being bitten by Bebe multiple times. This Velocidragon most likely also realized that he wouldn't gain any benefit from continuing to fight, which

was why it had fled.

“Bebe, want to give a magical beast of the eighth rank a go?” Linley mentally teased.

Bebe’s little eyes suddenly turned as round as the moon. “Boss, don’t mess with me like that. Dealing with that magical beast of the seventh rank was exhausting enough. I hear that magical beasts of the eighth rank are ten times as powerful as magical beasts of the seventh rank. Even if their movement speeds aren’t as high as mine, their attack speeds are most likely higher.”

Movement speed and combat attack speeds were two different speeds.

For example, the Velocidragon was perhaps much slower in terms of movement speed, but its tail was able to attack at an astonishing speed. Although some larger magical beasts appeared to be slow and clumsy, when they really started to fight, they were as fast as lightning!

After all, if they were mighty enough to be described as a magical beast of the eighth rank, they would definitely overmatch a magical beast of the seventh rank.

“Heh, looks like you know when to be humble after all.” Linley chuckled while stroking Bebe’s little head. “Alright, my clothes should be dry by now as well. Let’s go take a rest on top of the tree, then eat some food. After a while, we’ll continue onwards.” As he spoke, Linley leapt seven or eight meters up onto a branch, and then he continued to lightly jump up, before leisurely coming to a rest at about twenty or thirty meters above the ground.

The Black Dagger

The fifty first day in the mountain ranges.

“Do all of these killers think I’m easy meat?” Linley glanced at the corpse of the female assassin, dressed in black. This woman had only been a warrior of the fifth rank. Assisted by his magic, Linley had been able to kill her by himself.

Doehring Cowart laughed. “Anyone who sees you will be able to tell that you are just a kid, a stupid kid who doesn’t know how high the heaven is or how deep the earth is, a kid that dares wander these mountains alone. Why wouldn’t they want to get an easy kill like you?”

Linley felt helpless.

He was still just fifteen. Despite having the physical size of a fully-grown man, his face still betrayed his youth.

“This woman wounded me as she died. It’s not a big deal that I have another scar, but she ruined my clothes as well. Now I only have one set of clothes remaining.” Seeing the giant, gaping hole in his clothes, Linley didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

Linley had managed to acquire several sets of clothing from attempted assassins, but he had lost even more, here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

“Boss, the magicite cores in this person’s bag are worth a couple thousand gold coins. Can a set of clothes be worth that much?” Bebe immediately argued.

Hearing these words, Linley laughed.

After having spent well over a month in these mountains, the scars on his body had grown more and more plentiful, but so too had the number of magicite cores in his backpack.

“Forget it. From now on, I’m going naked from the waist up. I’ll save my last

set of clothes for when I go back. No one will see me anyhow, here in these mountains.” Linley determinedly tossed aside the ruined set of clothes, going bare-chested. His black dagger in hand, he marched onwards.

During this period of time, this black dagger had provided Linley with quite a bit of assistance.

After walking for a while, Linley began to casually murmur the words to a spell. After a short moment, a gust of wind began to swirl around the area, with Linley at the center. This was the Windscout spell once again. In an area with a diameter of three hundred meters centered on Linley, nothing could escape his attention.

Generally speaking, after walking for an extended period of time, Linley would be cautious and cast the Windscout spell. After walking for a while, Linley once again cast the Windscout spell.

“Ah, a group of people? Why are those people hiding on top of that tree?” Linley felt curious.

At this moment, about a hundred meters south of Linley, around ten or so people were hiding on top of an enormous old tree, with a girth so wide that seven people would have had to link hands to surround it. Curious, Linley couldn't help but quietly sneak closer.

Slowly, carefully, Linley crept into a patch of tall, thick grass, from whence he had a vantage point to peer at the ten people on the tree.

Those ten or so people were all wearing black clothes, and each of them had a black dagger sheathed at their waists.

“Black dagger?” Linley's gaze fixed upon one black dagger in particular.

In terms of both shape and coloration, it was identical to the one in Linley's hands. In addition, the ten or so people hiding on top of the tree gave Linley a similar, sinister feeling, very much like when Linley had encountered that first assassin.

“The same black clothes, and the same black dagger, and...” Linley noticed that the backs of all of these men were bulging slightly.

Linley couldn't help but think back to that first assassin, who had had his backpack tightly strapped to his back, beneath his clothes. It was only because Bebe had ripped the assassin's clothes open that they had discovered the backpack.

"They belong to the same organization." Even an idiot would come to this conclusion.

Linley's heartbeat involuntarily began to speed up. At this point in time, the people hiding on the tree were talking in a low tone.

"Why haven't #18 and #7 come back yet?" One of the black-garbed men asked unhappily.

"Possibly dead," another black-garbed man said coldly.

"Watch the time. We'll wait until night falls. If they aren't back by nightfall, then regardless of whether or not they're still alive, they will be considered to have failed," another black-garbed man said coldly. Hearing his words, the other black-garbed men fell silent.

Hidden within the grass below, Linley could guess that the person who had just spoken was the leader of this group of black-garbed men. He secretly felt startled. "The person who tried to kill me originally was a warrior of the sixth rank, specializing in the darkness-style. Most likely, their leader is even stronger."

Linley immediately moved to retreat, but after just taking a few steps back...

The leader suddenly frowned and swerved, staring directly at Linley.

"Swish!"

A black blur shot out at Linley at high speed, shocking Linley. He realized, "I've been exposed!" He immediately utilized the wind-style Supersonic spell, and at the highest speed he could muster, fled deeper into the forest.

As far as Linley was concerned, the deeper one went into the mountains, the more dangerous it was. His opponent, upon seeing him run into the deep, dangerous mountains, might hesitate and refrain from chasing him. Linley had already made up his mind that after going a bit deeper in, he would change

directions and leave.

Seeing the black backpack on Linley's back and the black dagger in his hands, the expression on the face of the leader of the group changed.

"#2, deal with him," the black-garbed leader ordered.

The higher the ranking number was, the stronger one was. The leader had already been able to accurately gauge Linley's strength from Linley's movements just then.

"Yes, lord." One of the black-garbed men immediately jumped down from the tree and began to pursue Linley with astonishing speed. But because Linley had a significant head start, and had been quite far from him to begin with, the two of them started off at a seventy-meter distance.

But this black-garbed man really was very fast, seemingly a bit faster than even the first assassin.

"What astonishing speed." Linley agilely made his way into the mountains, sometimes crawling, sometimes jumping.

But from behind, the black-garbed man continued to coldly pursue, and the distance between the two continued to shrink. Sixty meters. Fifty meters. Forty meters. Thirty meters. The longer Linley fled, the closer the pursuing assassin got.

Ten meters. Nine meters. Eight meters. Seven meters!

Apparently terrified out of his wits, Linley headed directly for the deepest parts of the mountains.

"Wind-style magus?" The black-garbed man could tell that Linley was being aided by wind magic. "Even aided by wind magic, he's so slow. Looks like he's a warrior of the fourth rank, at most the peak of the fourth rank." Totally confident in his ability to kill Linley, the black-garbed man continued to draw closer.

On the surface, Linley seemed terrified, but in reality, he was quite calm and steady.

"We've run a few kilometers. Those ten assassins shouldn't be able to see us

from here.” A cold look suddenly flashed through the fleeing Linley’s eyes, and at the same time, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, which had been crouched over, ‘terrified’ on Linley’s shoulders, suddenly moved.

Whoosh!

The little Shadowmouse suddenly expanded in size before the assassin’s eyes, and reached him in the blink of an eye. The assassin could clearly see the little Shadowmouse’s fiercely sharp teeth...

The dark-robed man, just five or six meters away from Linley, had considered the dark Shadowmouse beneath notice, but upon seeing Bebe’s amazing speed, his cold face showed an expression of astonishment. “What is this speed?!” The dark-robed man hurriedly waved his dagger to block.

Clearly, this dark-robed man was somewhat stronger than the original assassin. At least when facing Bebe, he had the presence of mind and speed to wield his dagger.

“Swish!” Bebe swung his sharp claws fiercely.

“Clang!”

As Bebe’s claws slammed into the assassin’s dagger, the black dagger exploded into fragments, while Bebe’s claws, undamaged, immediately slashed violently against the dark-robed man’s head, directly shattering it. The man died on the spot.

“The gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank really is enormous.” Seeing this, Linley couldn’t help but sigh.

Bebe was a terrifying Shadowmouse who could even force the mighty Velocidragon, a magical beast of the seventh rank, to flee. Based on the power of Bebe’s sharp claws and sharp fangs, killing a warrior of the sixth rank was as easy as eating rice.

“Rip!” Linley ran over to the corpse and tore the dark-garbed man’s clothes apart, immediately grabbing the hidden backpack. Without doing anything else, he immediately turned and fled northwards. Gusts of winds arose around his legs, and he began moving with such grace and agility that he left almost no trail in his wake.

After a while, a second group of dark-garbed men finally arrived. Seeing the injury on #2's head, all of them frowned.

“A magical beast?” The images of many different magical beasts suddenly began to swim about in the mind of one of the dark-garbed men. “A Blue Shadowmouse of the sixth rank? Or a Violet Shadowmouse of the seventh rank? Or a Gold Stoneater Rat of the seventh rank?” This fierce but tiny claw mark must have been left by a rodent-type magical beast.

In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, some people believed that the most terrifying possibility was encountering a magical beast of the eighth or ninth ranks. Others believed that it was encountering a terrifying swarm of pack-type magical beasts. But in the heart of the dark-garbed man, the most terrifying possibility was encountering a Stoneater Rat swarm or a Shadowmouse swarm.

The Stoneater Rat had formidable defense, sharp teeth, and sharp claws.

The Shadowmouse had high speed, sharp teeth, and sharp claws.

If a swarm of thousands or tens of thousands of Shadowmice or Stoneater Rats attacked, even an army might be totally devoured, much less the ten of them.

“We’re going back now!” Without hesitating in the slightest, the dark-garbed leader issued his order.



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Amidst towering mountains and ridges, Linley continued to run, winding his way atop a mountain peak. After having run over a hundred kilometers at once, Linley believed that his pursuers would no longer be able to catch him.

“Boss, hurry up and open the backpack and see what’s inside!” Bebe immediately urged.

Linley’s heart was filled with anticipation as well. The more powerful an opponent was, the more magicite cores he should have in his backpack. The original assassin had left behind 15,000 gold coins’ worth of magicite cores and magestones. How much would this second assassin, who had been addressed

as #2, have on him?

He opened the backpack.

“Two more sets of clean clothes.” Linley glanced at the clothes in the backpack, then withdrew two bulging pouches from within the backpack. This “#2” had been in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for a month longer, and was a bit stronger than the original assassin, so logically speaking...

Seeing how many magicite cores the pouches contained, Linley couldn't help but suck in a cold breath.

“So many? And most of them are magicite cores of the fifth rank. There're plenty of magicite cores of the sixth rank as well.” After having seen so many magicite cores, Linley was now capable of recognizing the general rank of a magicite core at a glance. Linley immediately began to do a careful accounting of the cores.

“Nine magicite cores of the sixth rank. Fifty-six magicite cores of the fifth rank. Twelve magicite cores of the fourth rank. Seven magestones. The total value, all together, would be roughly... 20,000 gold coins. Adding this to the 50,000 gold coins' worth that I already have, means that I should now hold at least 70,000 gold coins' worth of magicite on me.” After tabulating his total wealth, Linley couldn't help but take a deep breath.

70,000 gold coins!

If he placed this prodigious sum in front of his father, his father would most likely be stupefied.

Over the course of the 51 days he had spent in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, that assassin's organization alone had 'donated' 35,000 gold coins to him. The other attempted killers he had run into had 'donated' a further 30,000 gold coins, while he himself had killed enough magical beasts to earn 5000 gold coins' worth of cores as well.

Doehring Cowart appeared from within the Coiling Dragon ring, laughing as he watched the look on Linley's face.

“I finally understand why so many people in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts like to try and kill other humans. After spending a full month working so

hard, I only earned a few thousand gold coins, but when I killed someone else, I gained the fruits of their two months of labor.” Linley placed the two pouches into his own backpack, then tossed the extra backpack into the grass.

“Of these 70,000 gold coins’ worth of magicite, only 5000 came from me killing magical beasts. The rest all came from assassins and killers.” Linley shook his head and sighed.

Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard while chuckling. “Looks like your youth actually helped you. If you looked just a bit more mature and experienced, there probably wouldn’t have been so many killers trying their luck against you.”

“Hehe.” Linley couldn’t help but laugh.

“Grandpa Doehring, just now, based on the words being exchanged by the people in that squad, it seems like they were on a training mission here in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?” Linley was rather curious.

Doehring Cowart smiled faintly. “Linley, every single one of the major powers of the Yulan continent has to have its own base of martial power in order to maintain its strength. But martial power has to be trained and cultivated. Many of the larger powers will often send groups of their subordinates out to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts to train.”

Linley nodded.

“Linley, this continent has many powerful organizations which you don’t have a clue about. To be honest... even I don’t know about them. In the past five thousand years, all of the powers that existed in the era of the Pouant Empire have most likely collapsed,” Doehring Cowart said self-deprecatingly.

Linley didn’t ask too much. At this moment, Linley felt enormous pressure. The Yulan continent was far more complicated than he had imagined.

After organizing his possessions, Linley put on a shirt before continuing on his way. Making his way agilely through the mountain forests, sometimes skipping over fallen rocks, sometimes crawling over fallen trees, Linley pressed onwards. But after Linley crossed a particularly large mountain...

He saw that this mountain was hundreds of kilometers long. There were many

trees here. Standing at the peak of the mountain, Linley could tell that it was hundreds of kilometers from here to the next peak, if he wanted to fly directly across the gap.

“What a bizarre canyon.”

Linley noticed that the canyon walls of these two mountain’s cliffs drew closer and closer to each other at the edges. Linley immediately began to jog down from the mountain peak. The farther down he jogged, the closer the canyon walls appeared to be. After jogging for five or six kilometers, the gap between the two mountains was only a meter across. One could cross it with a single step.

“It’s like this on this side. What is it like on the other side? The same?”

With one foot on each cliff, Linley peered across. Off in the distance, he seemed to see the two cliffs draw even closer, then become one.

“Bizarre. Bizarre.”

Having been in these mountains for some time, Linley had seen many things, but he had never encountered such a weird canyon. Looking down through the canyon gap, Linley only saw a white fog, so blurry that he couldn’t see anything at all.

“Immeasurably deep.” Linley felt extremely curious, but was also rather wary of what lay within the belly of this mountain gulch.

Making his way along the edges of the canyon, Linley continued peering down, as though hoping he could see what was hidden by the white fog. Aside from how close the canyon walls were, there was another oddity to this ravine.

It seemed that the farther down the ravine was, the farther apart the canyon walls drew again.

For example, towards the top of the ravine, the distance between the canyon walls was perhaps a hundred meters or so, but from what Linley could tell, towards the bottom, the distance was perhaps a few thousand meters, or even tens of kilometers.

“Hrm? That’s...”

Linley looked as though he had been struck by lightning. He carefully stared at a small patch of grass that was hidden in the fog beneath him. The small patch of grass growing along the cliffside was dark green, but the patch of grass emanated a faint blue aura.

“Blueheart Grass. It’s Blueheart Grass!” Linley had seen a picture of Blueheart Grass at the Ernst Institute’s library, and he remembered it clearly. His eyes shone. That ultra-rare, precious grass growing from the cliff was able to counteract the harmful effects which live dragon’s blood would have on the body. Blueheart Grass!

The Foggy Gulch

If one desired to train using the 'Secret Dragonblood Manual', one must rouse the dragonblood in one's veins. But there were only two possible ways by which one could agitate the dragonblood in one's veins. The first was to have a certain minimum level of dragonblood density in one's veins. The second was to drink fresh blood from a live dragon.

But drinking blood from a living dragon was very dangerous.

Dragon's blood, even when applied topically, would cause terrible pain, to say nothing of drinking it. However, everything in the world has its equal opposite. Blueheart Grass, when paired with dragon's blood, made for an extremely potent mixture. But Blueheart Grass was extremely rare. Linley had previously asked about the price.

A single patch of Blueheart Grass was worth tens of thousands of gold coins. What was more, it was a rare item that often couldn't be bought even if one had the money. Doehring Cowart had once said: "Live dragon's blood is incredibly powerful. Usually, a single patch of Blueheart Grass is insufficient. If you are going to drink a large amount of live dragon's blood, you will need even more Blueheart Grass."

A single patch of Blueheart Grass was already that expensive. How could Linley afford it? Perhaps his entire fortune of 70,000 gold coins, acquired over this month, would only be enough to buy a single patch.

"Blueheart Grass, Blueheart Grass! Heaven is being so kind to me." Linley felt unspeakable joy.

Linley energetically leapt down directly, falling several dozen meters before landing against the cliff on the other side. And then, he immediately began to mumble the words to a spell. In a short time, Linley's entire body was surrounded by flowing air elemental essences, and flows of air began to

surround him as well.

Wind-style spell of the fifth rank – Floating Technique.

At his current level, Linley was only able to allow his body to float, rather than actually fly. Floating meant allowing himself to float up or down vertically. Taking a step forward, Linley stood in mid-air before slowly beginning to float down, gradually descending into the deep, foggy canyon. Bebe stood enviously on Linley's shoulder as they descended. Although Bebe was rather powerful, he wasn't capable of flight. He wasn't a flying-type magical beast, thus he would only be able to fly upon becoming a Saint-level magical beast.

This canyon was filled with white fog, which roiled about. The deeper Linley went, the greater the distance between the canyon walls became. Quite soon, Linley landed near the Blueheart Grass.

“Blueheart Grass is deep green in color, but emanates a faint blue light. Blueheart Grass is cool to the touch. When the blades of grass are torn apart, they will leak out a dark green fluid which is very cool when drunk.” Linley remembered this explanation about Blueheart Grass that he had read in the Ernst Institute library quite well.

Staring at the Blueheart Grass growing out from the cliff, rustling gently in the wind, Linley took a deep breath, then carefully uprooted it.

“It really is cold.” When he touched the Blueheart Grass, he felt as though he had touched a piece of ice. He immediately placed the Blueheart Grass into his backpack, and then looked all around. “I wonder if there is any more Blueheart Grass here?”

A place which was capable of giving birth to one patch of Blueheart Grass was capable of giving birth to a second.

Using the Floating Technique, Linley continued to drift downwards into the roiling white fog. At the same time, Linley kept a close eye out, despite the fog making everything blurry. He could make out countless vines twisting about the cliffs.

“That's huge!”

The farther down into the canyon he went, the more Linley realized how

enormous this place truly was. At the top of the canyon, the distance between the two walls was perhaps only a few hundred meters, but by now, Linley was certain that the distance was absolutely at least several thousand meters. He continued to float close to the wall. Using his vision, his flotation speed, and his angle against the wall, he was able to approximate this distance.

“Roar...”

“Grrr....”

All sorts of low-pitched growls emanated from below, occasionally sounding out. They came from all over the place. Just judging from the sound alone, there had to be over a hundred magical beasts below. Linley couldn't help but feel his heart quail. “Magical beasts. There are many magical beasts below!” Just from hearing the sound, Linley could tell.

Linley fixed himself against the cliff walls while gripping onto the vines with his hands as he descended more slowly and more carefully.

“Boss, I can sense great danger below,” Bebe suddenly said to Linley through their mental link.

Linley also felt as though his heart was tightening. The further down he went, the clearer the growls of the magical beasts became. Those low growls were powerful. Clearly, they were coming from magical beasts of a large size. Generally speaking, large magical beasts were not weak. Powerful magical beasts weren't necessarily large, but large magical beasts were generally powerful.

“Blueheart Grass!”

Linley suddenly saw that directly below him, far away, was another patch of Blueheart Grass. Surrounding the Blueheart Grass were many green vines and shrubs. As Linley was not a fearful person to begin with, upon seeing the Blueheart Grass, Linley began to float down while keeping his hands gripped to the rattan vines.

But at this point in time, Linley totally failed to notice something...

Coiled up amidst the green vines surrounding the Blueheart Grass was a giant green python snake, at least twenty meters long and thick enough that it would

take two men to put their arms around it. That giant python was very green and also coiled up like a rattan vine. Given that it was also covered slightly by the fog, Linley didn't notice that it was there at all.

As he descended, Linley drew nearer and nearer to the Blueheart Grass.

"Boss, careful! That's a monstrous python!" Bebe suddenly, urgently said to Linley through their link.

"Python?" Linley was startled.

Virtually all python-type magical beasts were exceedingly powerful. Even the weakest Trihorn Python was a magical beast of the sixth rank. Linley immediately surveyed his surroundings carefully. By now, Linley was roughly around a hundred meters away from the giant python. After carefully searching for it, he quickly located the giant python.

"Whoah." Linley sucked in a deep breath.

That thirty-meter long python, as thick as a water barrel, made Linley's heart quail. "Green Tattooed Python. A magical beast of the seventh rank – the Green Tattooed Python." The information he knew about this type of Python immediately sprang to mind.

By now, Linley also realized why it was that this canyon had so much white fog.

"The Mist Technique is just a water-style technique of the first rank. A single Green Tattooed Python, a magical beast of the seventh rank, can generate enormous, almost unlimited amounts of white mist in its surroundings. With this canyon having so much mist of such density, there's definitely more than one Green Tattooed Python here."

Linley immediately came to this realization.

The canyon had a depth and width of around ten kilometers. For such a huge canyon to be totally covered in white mist, one could only imagine how many Pythons were here. That Green Tattooed Python which lay hidden amidst the vines suddenly moved. Its enormous head turned to stare at Linley, and its two cold eyes stared death at him.

“Grrrr....”

A terrifying sound rumbled out from the Green Tattooed Python’s maw, and at the same time, it shot forward at high speed.

“Rawr!” “Hiss!” “Grrr!” The entire canyon began to fill with the calls of various beasts. At the same time, loud, sonorous sounds of movement could be heard. Glancing below, Linley saw that over ten enormous creatures were moving towards him. And Linley could tell that these ten made up just a tiny fraction of the creatures in this gorge.

“Flee!”

Faced with the attack by the Green Tattooed Python, Linley immediately began floating up at maximum speed. Controlling the force of the wind, he was able to make the flotation pressure exceed his body weight, causing him to rocket upwards at an astonishing speed. While flying upwards, Linley could already see a monstrously large Green Tattooed Python crawling up after him along the cliff walls, its cold, serpentine eyes staring at Linley, promising death while the serpent itself hissed nonstop.

“Screech! Screech!”

A high-pitched bird cry split the air, and from below, dozens of giant birds suddenly charged forward in pursuit of Linley.

“Dragonhawks! Those are Dragonhawks!” Linley’s face immediately turned paper white.

Over ten Dragonhawks, each larger than a Griffon, were flying in fast pursuit of Linley. Through the Coiling Dragon ring, Linley immediately expended his mageforce to make himself rise even faster, while at the same time beginning to mumble the words to the Earthguard spell.

“Whoosh!”

Only the roaring wind could be heard. Linley had long since left the Green Tattooed Python behind, but the Dragonhawks flew at an amazing speed, and were drawing closer and closer to Linley. Even after Linley flew out of the canyon, those ten Dragonhawks continued in hot pursuit, following him outside.

Running at his maximum speed, Linley made his way through the forest as quickly as possible, but no matter how fast his legs were, how could he compare with the speed of the winged Dragonhawks?

“Screeeech!” The Dragonhawks issued piercing cries.

The wingspan of a Dragonhawk, at maximum extension, was over twenty meters long. These ten-plus Dragonhawks blotted out the sky as they all flew directly at Linley. Linley felt as though the entire world was growing dark. As the Dragonhawks descended upon Linley, they all opened their beaks and belched forth plumes of flame at him, immediately turning the surrounding trees into blazing pyres.

Fortunately, the Earthguard armor which Linley had summoned continued to protect him, covering his entire body.

“Crackle, crackle.” The fires roared and blazed against the Earthguard armor. Earth-colored elemental essence swirled all around Linley.

Amongst the dragon-type creatures, Dragonhawks and Landwyrms were the weakest of their kin, but even they, the weakest of dragon-type creatures, were magical beasts of the sixth rank. What was more, Landwyrms and Dragonhawks were pack-type beasts. Faced with an aerial assault from over ten magical beasts of the sixth rank, even a warrior of the seventh rank would flee.

The Dragonhawks charged forward, descending upon Linley...

“Smash!” A Dragonhawk’s sharp talons dealt Linley’s Earthguard armor a mighty blow. The Earthguard armor shuddered visibly, and specks of golden light began to gently flicker on top of it.

“I can’t take those hits head on!”

That clawed attack terrified Linley. He scurried deeper into the forest at the highest speed he could muster, charging into the densest, hardest-to-traverse area. Jumping, leaping, crawling... Linley went all out in his attempt to flee, but those Dragonhawks continued to strike viciously at his head with their vicious claws.

“Hissss!”

Bebe let out a fierce screech of his own, and then he rose on his hind legs, suddenly transforming in size from twenty centimeters to half a meter tall. But compared to the Dragonhawks, with their twenty-meter long wingspans, Bebe was still just a small speck.

“Swish!” Bebe leapt off of Linley’s shoulders, transforming into a black blur as he shot directly towards the closest attacking Dragonhawk.

The terrifying sound of bones splintering could suddenly be heard, along with the agonized cries of the Dragonhawk. That Dragonhawk directly fell from the sky, but before it did, Bebe used it as a launchpad to leap at the next closest Dragonhawk. With two vicious bites, he directly bit this one to death as well.

Dragonhawks were just beasts of the sixth rank, while Bebe was able to force a magical beast of the seventh rank, a Velocidragon, to flee in defeat.

What was more...

There was a huge gap in difficulty to advance, as well as in power, from the sixth rank to the seventh rank. Bebe wasn’t capable of flight, but once he got into physical contact with a Dragonhawk, it was as good as dead. In a few short moments, three of the ten-plus Dragonhawks were dead.

The other Dragonhawks all flew higher in terror. Seeing them fly higher, there was nothing that Bebe could do either, as he himself could not fly.

Those Dragonhawks hovered around Linley for a while, before finally letting out a few mournful cries as they began flying back towards the canyon.

“What a terrifying gorge.” Only now did Linley finally let out a sigh.

While collecting the magicite cores of the three dead Dragonhawks, Linley pondered the question of the Foggy Gorge.

“Grandpa Doehring.” Linley suddenly called out, and Doehring Cowart flew out of the Coiling Dragon ring. Still appearing to wear a pristine, moon-white robe, Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke to Linley. “Linley, is there something you need?”

Linley had not yet calmed down.

“Grandpa Doehring, just now, I entered a foggy gorge. I didn’t expect the

place to be brimming with magical beasts. There was a Green Tattooed Python there, and huge crawling creatures. I didn't get a good look at them, but in terms of size, they definitely were not any smaller than a Velocidragon. There were Dragonhawks there as well... and I could tell that this was in just a small portion of the gorge. I have no idea how large the entirety of the Foggy Gorge was."

Thinking back, Linley felt a surge of fear again. He had actually stumbled into such a gathering spot for magical beasts in that gorge.

"Oh?"

Doehring Cowart seemed rather surprised. "This Foggy Gorge had so many magical beasts? Interesting. Generally speaking, only magical beasts of the same type will gather together, but the magical beasts you just mentioned were all of different types. They actually all gathered together in this Foggy Gorge? Interesting. How interesting. If I were still alive, I would most likely go inside and take a look myself."

Linley shook his head helplessly and laughed, "That gorge even contained Blueheart Grass. There was one patch that I didn't have time to gather. I was only able to gather one."

"Blueheart Grass?" Doehring Cowart's eyes lit up. "Any place where Blueheart Grass can grow is definitely no ordinary place. There must definitely be some sort of precious treasure within that Foggy Gorge, or perhaps some extremely powerful magical beast, such as a magical beast of the ninth rank, or even a Saint-level magical beast. However..."

Doehring Cowart began to frown. "Generally speaking, powerful magical beasts are very territorial. If there was a powerful magical beast there, they probably wouldn't permit creatures like Dragonhawks and Green Tattooed Pythons to live there as well."

"But Dragonhawks, Green Tattooed Pythons, and those huge crawling beasts you mentioned are all able to live there together? Bizarre. How bizarre." Doehring Cowart couldn't understand either. This Foggy Gorge seemed to be full of contradictions.

Linley laughed. "Grandpa Doehring, don't overthink it. When I become a

magus of the seventh rank, I'll be able to use the 'Soaring Technique'. At that time, we'll come for another investigation."

Upon becoming a magus of the seventh rank, his Earthguard would have reached the level of generating jadestone armor. The additional speed granted by the Supersonic spell would also dramatically improve. By then, Linley would have full confidence in his ability to deal with the Dragonhawks. And with the ability to use the Soaring Technique to fly, Linley would be able to easily enter and leave the gorge.

"Magus of the seventh rank? You are only a magus of the fifth rank right now. You have a long way to go," Doehring Cowart said, pouring cold water over Linley's enthusiasm.

In his heart, Linley knew this as well.

Perhaps becoming a magus of the sixth rank wouldn't be too hard, but there was a huge gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank.

"All roads are traversed one step at a time." Linley smiled. "It's been about two months since I entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. It is about time for me to go back. It'll take several days to get back anyhow. I'll use that time to do some more training."

With Bebe on his shoulders, Linley embarked on his return trip back home.

Her Name Was Alice

On the return journey, the magical beasts which Linley encountered grew progressively weaker. By the time Linley stepped into the outer regions, all of the monsters he encountered were of the third and fourth ranks. They posed no threat to him at all. But despite this, Linley didn't dare to relax his vigilance.

Doehring Cowart travelled alongside Linley, but in his mind, Doehring Cowart was worrying. Right now, Linley carried within him a steady, stable presence, but when he made his move, he showed no mercy at all. His eyes also carried within them a cold, forbidding aura.

Doehring Cowart still remembered how, when he had first entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, Linley's eyes had been filled with sincerity. He had been a very trusting person.

After hesitating for a while, Doehring Cowart mentally spoke to Linley. "Linley."

Making his way through the mountains, Linley turned his head to look questioningly at Doehring Cowart. "Grandpa Doehring, what is it?"

Doehring Cowart nodded as he spoke seriously. "Linley, before entering the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, I had warned you that people were not to be easily trusted, as people's intentions are not easily understood. I told you to be wary of others, to have a cautious mind."

Linley nodded. "Grandpa Doehring, your words were very correct. One really cannot easily trust others. If I had listened to Grandpa Doehring's words early on, my chest most likely wouldn't have this knife scar."

Doehring Cowart shook his head. "Although one cannot easily trust others, one also cannot be over-cautious. The way you are currently, how will you be able to interact with people in the future? Remember, you can't be too cold and callous towards others, even if you can't be overly trusting either. Trust is

something which is built up through a long period of time. Do not easily trust the words of others.”

Linley was very smart. Both at home and at the Ernst Institute, he had read many books. Upon hearing Doehring Cowart’s words, he somewhat understood. But the merciless life he had experienced over these past two months, the human cruelty he had witnessed and experienced, was something he had seen so clearly. For him to trust people again would be very hard.

“Doehring Cowart, I understand.” Linley nodded.

Doehring Cowart secretly sighed, but at the same time, he was also happy. “It’s a good thing that Linley has this little Shadowmouse, Bebe, for a companion, as well as those friends of his at the Ernst Institute. At least he shouldn’t become excessively unfeeling.”

Doehring Cowart could still remember how, thousands of years ago, when the Pouant Empire had still been around, there had been another Saint-level combatant of the Pouant Empire who had also dressed in white. That white-robed man had been a famous Sword Saint, and he had also been an extremely proud, reclusive person.

“Grandpa Doehring, when father sees all of these magicite cores, what do you think his reaction will be?” Linley suddenly looked at Doehring Cowart, smiling as he asked his question. At this moment, Linley’s eyes were filled with eagerness for his father’s praise.

He looked just like a kid who had just performed excellently on a test and was awaiting his father’s praise.

“Linley, are you planning to give all of this money to your father?” Doehring Cowart asked with a smile.

Linley nodded. “Of course. These magicite cores are worth around 70,000 gold coins. All I need is enough to feed myself. A few dozen coins each year is enough. But father needs to manage all of our clan’s affairs, and also provide for Wharton’s tuition. Of course I’ll give these magicite cores to father.”

Linley didn’t want to personally sell these magicite cores. After all, in terms of buying and selling, he had no experience at all. He probably wouldn’t even

know if he got cheated.

“Haha, I trust your father will be so excited that he’ll be jumping up and down,” Doehring Cowart said, laughing loudly.

Linley couldn’t help but grin as well. He immediately sped up the pace on his journey back.

By now, Linley couldn’t even be bothered to kill magical beasts of the third and fourth ranks. He quickly made his way through the mountains. When he arrived next to a small creek, he paused as he heard the furious bellows of a magical beast, intermixed with the shouts of humans engaged in battle with it.

“Hrm? If they dare come to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, they must be at least combatants of the fifth rank. But in the surrounding areas, the local beasts are of the third or fourth ranks at most. How could the battle sound so prolonged and frenetic?” Linley was rather curious.

Within the inner areas of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, where beasts of the fifth, sixth, and sometimes even the seventh rank would appear, there would often be many frantic battles. But in the outer areas, this was quite rare. Battles would generally end extremely quickly.

With a jump, Linley leapt seven to eight meters up. Landing on a tree, he began tree-walking his way towards the scene of the battle.

Upon arriving, Linley surveyed the battle from his position on the tree.

He saw that there were two young men and two young women engaged in a bloody battle with a Bloodthirsty Warpig. One of the youths wearing white armor was shouting out loudly while directing the course of battle. “Second bro, don’t run around so wildly! Protect Alice! I’ll draw this stupid pig’s attention away. Niya, don’t panic, aim your arrows at its vitals!”

These four people were clearly very inexperienced. Upon encountering danger, they had panicked. Only the leader wearing the white armor seemed a bit more capable.

“These four really have some guts. That youngster in white armor should be a warrior of the fifth rank, while the other three are just combatants of the fourth rank at best.” Linley shook his head. Those other three really were daring, to

come here without even having reached the fifth rank.

A red-haired youngster began to shout frantically, “Big brother Kalan, didn’t you say that the outer regions only had magical beasts of the third or fourth ranks? This is a magical beast of the fifth rank!”

The leader of the group of four, the fifth ranked warrior Kalan, also felt helpless. As a warrior of the fifth rank, it shouldn’t have been a dangerous affair for him to bring a number of friends to the outer regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. But he didn’t expect to run into a magical beast of the fifth rank.

“Whoosh!” More than ten earthen spears suddenly erupted from the ground beneath the Warpig, and three of them even pierced into the Warpig’s body, but they were all broken and shattered by the Warpig’s tough hide.

“Roar!”

The Bloodthirsty Warpig immediately turned its enraged attention upon the only magus in the group, before charging forward at the magus rapidly. The Warpig’s charge was truly too fearsome, and what was more, flicks of flame could be seen coming from its nostrils. Immediately, it caused the remaining youngster to panic.

“Run! Alice, quick, dodge!” Kalan shouted loudly.

The girl named Alice had a head full of long, golden hair and a pair of hazy eyes. Seeing the danger, Alice, too, tried to flee in panic, but the Bloodthirsty Warpig was a magical beast of the fifth rank, after all. Although it was not very intelligent, it was much smarter than a normal animal.

The Bloodthirsty Warpig chased after Alice.

Seeing the Warpig charge after her, Alice was going to flee, but as she did, she slipped and tripped on a vine and fell face-forward into the ground. Turning her head, she saw the furious eyes of the Warpig draw closer and closer to her. Based on Alice’s weak physical conditioning, the Bloodthirsty Warpig probably was capable of killing her with just one stomp.

Alice was struck dumb with terror.

The other two boys and the girl were also stupefied, not knowing what to do. There was no way they could rescue her in time.

“Alice!” The youngster called Kalan shouted loudly with anguish. Although he was a warrior of the fifth rank, he simply didn’t have enough experience.

“Rumble!”

Seven or eight sharp earthen spears suddenly jutted out of the ground. Although the Bloodthirsty Warpig, a magical beast of the fifth rank, did have thick skin, two of the spears still managed to penetrate its thick skin and sink into its flesh, causing fresh blood to flow from the wounds.

But alas...

The earthen spears only pierced its flesh. They didn’t actually cause any injury to its vitals or organs.

“Grrrrrrrrr!” The Bloodthirsty Warpig lifted its head and bellowed in pain.

“Swish!” A black dagger suddenly fell down from above, piercing into the Warpig’s eye like a bolt of lightning. The Warpig’s eyeball exploded, and the black dagger penetrated directly into the Warpig’s brain. Agonized, the Warpig’s entire body shuddered as it collapsed. Shortly afterwards, it no longer moved.

Kalan, Niya, and Alice were all so terrified that their hearts almost leapt out of their bodies.

They watched as a powerfully-built young warrior dressed in blue used the knife to extract the magicite core of the Warpig in a very practiced manner, and then turned to leave. But Kalan was the first amongst the four to recover, and he immediately shouted out, “Friend, please stay!”

“Hrm?” Linley turned around, frowning.

Kalan immediately walked over to thank Linley. “My name is Kalan. I would very much like to thank you for your support. If it weren’t for you, Alice most likely would’ve died just then.”

That girl named Alice ran over as well. Clearly, she was still panicked, and she was panting so heavily her chest rose and fell with each breath. But her soft,

hazy eyes were fixed on Linley. “Thank you for saving my life. I’m Alice. My full name is Alice Straf. I’m also a magus of the earth-style.”

Linley’s gaze paused on Alice for a moment.

He had to admit, Alice was a very refined-looking young lady. She had an aura which would naturally make men want to cherish and protect her. She was the sort of girl who didn’t need to use her voice or cosmetics to improve herself.

“Linley, when you see people in danger in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, you usually don’t assist, right? What’s going on today?” Doehring Cowart’s jesting voice rang out in Linley’s head. “Oh, I get it, you must have taken a fancy to that Alice girl.”

Linley frowned.

“Grandpa Doehring, in the past, it wasn’t that I didn’t want to help them. It was that within the inner regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the monsters which people were dealing with were at least magical beasts of the sixth rank, sometimes even the seventh rank. I didn’t have the ability to help them. Killing a beast of the fifth rank isn’t too hard, which is why I went ahead and helped.” Linley immediately explained to Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart chuckled and no longer spoke.

“My name is Tony. Milord magus, what is your name?” The other male youth also spoke.

Linley calmly glanced at this group of people. “How long have you been in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?”

“This is our first day,” Kalan admitted helplessly. “I didn’t expect that on our very first day, we would encounter a magical beast of the fifth rank. We really were too unlucky. Based on what the books said, the outer region should only have magical beasts of the third and fourth ranks. The four of us shouldn’t have been in any danger.”

“Foolish.” Linley shook his head and spoke.

That female archer named Niya immediately got angry. “Hey, why are you being so cocky? You saved Alice, but that doesn’t give you the right to insult

people!”

“Niya!” Kalan immediately shouted.

Linley directly explained, “I really admire your courage very much, that all of you dare to barge into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts like this. But at the same time, I have to say that you are very lucky. You didn’t run into any bandits on your way to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.”

“Bandits?” Kalan and the others looked at each other. They really hadn’t encountered any bandits.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was over ten thousand kilometers long, after all. There were many routes by which one could enter. To not encounter any bandits was very normal.

“Let me tell you this. If you don’t want to die, then depart these mountains immediately,” Linley said directly.

“Why? Are there a lot of magical beasts of the fifth rank in the outer regions as well?” The youngster named Tony asked curiously.

Linley calmly explained, “In these mountains, especially in the outer areas, the most danger comes not from magical beasts, but from other humans. The four of you are both weak and inexperienced. I trust that certain greedy people will not let you slip away. I expect that the only reason why you haven’t been discovered yet is because today is your first day in these mountains. Otherwise, the four of you would have been killed by now.”

“The most danger comes from other humans?” Kalan frowned, but shortly afterwards, his face changed.

Kalan respectfully said to Linley, “Milord magus, we just entered these mountains, and only know a little bit about this area. We made a private decision to come here. I hope you can assist us, milord magus, and escort us out of these mountains.”

Linley couldn’t help but frown.

He hated trouble. But if these people were to encounter bandits on their way home, they really would be in for it.

“Milord magus, we beseech your aid.” Alice also begged.

Linley glanced at Alice. Seeing the look of appeal in her eyes, and imagining her being killed by bandits, Linley’s heart softened. Nodding, he said, “Fine. I’m headed back anyways. I’ll take you along with me. But if we really do encounter bandits on the way back, I can only promise to try my best. If you end up getting killed, there’s nothing I can do.”

Kalan immediately joyfully nodded. “For you to be willing to aid us, milord magus, we are extremely grateful already.”

Linley nodded, then immediately headed forwards. His back towards the four of them, he said, “Follow me.” Kalan and the other four began following Linley. Under Linley’s protection, they departed the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts and headed in the direction of the city.



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On the road back, Kalan and the others learned Linley’s name. Alice, who was also an earth-style magus, was filled with admiration for Linley. She, too, was only fifteen years old, and she was considered the number one genius at the Wellen Institute.

But despite this, Alice was only a magus of the fourth rank. This sort of accomplishment, at the Ernst Institute, would only be considered average.

A break in the journey. Linley, Kalan, Alice, and the others were all eating. Linley and Alice were seated together.

“Big brother Linley, you really are too amazing. You became a magus of the fifth rank when you were fourteen. I will probably be twenty when I reach the fifth rank.” Alice stared worshipfully at Linley.

“I’m nothing. The number one genius at our institute, Dixie, became a magus of the fourth rank when he was nine, and a magus of the fifth rank when he turned twelve,” Linley said casually. He didn’t disclose... that when he was thirteen, he had also been a magus of the fourth rank. But by age fourteen, he had become a magus of the fifth rank.

In just one short year, he had advanced as much as Dixie had in three.

“A magus of the fourth rank at age nine? I’m fifteen, but I just became a magus of the fourth rank. And I’m considered the top genius at my school. Our Wellen Institute really can’t compare at all to your Ernst Institute.” Alice sighed.

“Big brother Linley, to me it felt like your Earthen Spear Array was very powerful and formidable, even more so than the other magi of the fifth rank at my school. Why is that?” Alice was also an earth-style magus. Naturally, she noticed the differences in Linley’s spell.

Linley smiled faintly. It wasn’t just power. The speed at which it erupted was also very fast.

“The origin of earth-style magic lies in the essence of the world...” Linley began explaining to Alice. To be honest, in terms of understanding earth magic, Linley had a much deeper grasp and understanding than even the earth-style instructors of the Ernst Institute. After all, he had a Saint-level Grand Magus as his personal tutor.

Alice stared at Linley, totally focusing and concentrating on him.

One listened while the other spoke. As they talked, the two of them drew closer and closer to each other. Totally absorbed in magical theory, Linley only noticed after taking a break that their faces were now so close that only a fist’s worth of distance separated them.

Linley was startled. This was his first time being so close to a girl. Being so close, he could clearly see Alice’s two hazy, soft eyes, her pert nose... Linley even thought that he could feel her breath on him and smell the fragrance of her body.

“Big brother Linley, why’d you stop talking?” Alice asked curiously. But moments later, Alice realized what happened. She immediately pulled back, and her face immediately flushed as red as an apple.

Linley forced himself to calm down, and then stood up to face the others. Pretending that nothing was amiss, he said, “Alright, everybody eat up. We’re going to continue to travel soon. Let’s do our best to arrive at the city early.”

Violet in the Night Wind

On the Greenleaf Road of Fenlai City, the capital of the Kingdom of Fenlai, a member of the Holy Union, there were many noble manors clustered together. In front of one particular manor, over ten people were clustered together.

“The Debs clan would like to thank you, Linley, for your assistance. If it weren’t for you, this child of ours, Kalan, would have no doubt suffered greatly.” A distinguished-looking old man with flowing silver hair smiled towards Linley. By this old man’s side were Kalan, Alice, Tony, and Niya. Behind them were the servants of the Debs clan.

Turning around, the old man nodded at one of the servants, who took out a small golden sack from within his clothes.

Taking the gold sack, the old man turned to Linley with a smile. “This is a hundred gold coins. Although it isn’t much, it represents the gratitude of our Debs clan. I hope, Linley, you will accept it.”

“No need. It didn’t take any effort on my part,” Linley said quite courteously. “I should be heading off now.”

The old man didn’t persist. Smiling, he watched Linley depart.

“Tony, you three should go home as well. Your parents are no doubt extremely worried.” Smiling, the old man spoke. After bidding farewell, Alice, Niya, and Tony all headed back to their own homes.

When Kalan and the silver-haired old man returned to their own living room, the old man’s face suddenly turned cold. In a voice filled with frozen rage, he barked out, “On your knees!”

With a thud, Kalan immediately fell to his knees. “Second Grandpa, it was wrong of me. This time, I brazenly took three of my friends to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts without clearly investigating all of its associated

dangers. Second Grandpa, please punish me.”

“Hmph! Brazen?”

The old man’s cold glare stared daggers at Kalan. “Kalan, you are already an adult. In addition, you are the heir and successor to our Debs clan. How could you make such a foolish, such an utterly moronic mistake? How could you possibly imagine how dangerous the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is? You dared to traverse it without so much as even informing the clan? Hmph! I’ll let your own father decide what punishment would be suitable. Just let me remind you of one thing – in the future, if you continue to act so foolishly, even if the clan is handed over to you, you will wreck it!”

Hanging his head, Kalan didn’t dare to speak.

The Debs clan could be considered one of the top three clans in the Kingdom of Fenlai. The reason the Debs clan was so powerful was not because it had a high rank of nobility; it was because the Debs clan was the direct trading partner of the Dawson Conglomerate in Fenlai, one of the three greatest trading unions in the Yulan continent.

The wealth of the Dawson Conglomerate could match an entire kingdom’s wealth. Its business stretched across the entire continent.

Any of the three trading unions on the Yulan continent possessed a terrifying amount of both wealth and power. Here in the Kingdom of Fenlai, many clans wanted to do business with them, because being able to do business with the Dawson Conglomerate meant being able to ride atop a titanic war-machine.

For the Debs clan to be able to do business with the Dawson Conglomerate was an extremely impressive thing.

After all, even the two major alliances and the Four Great Empires had to do their best to watch their step around the trading unions, and to do their best to make them happy.



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After departing Fenlai City, Linley took the road towards the Ernst Institute.

Bebe was perched on Linley's shoulders, keeping watch, while Doehring Cowart was also walking side by side with Linley.

"Grandpa Doehring, have you ever felt that this world is a terrifying place?" Linley asked mentally.

Doehring Cowart nodded, but he didn't speak. He just quietly listened.

"In the past, when I visited Fenlai City, I didn't notice anything. But upon returning from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, I've learned so much. The ruthlessness and mercilessness of the mountains is naked and open. It's bloody, without any concealment."

"If we look at the high-ranking magi and warriors, as well as the nobles, of Fenlai City, on the surface, they all seem to be polite and courteous. They make the entire Fenlai City seem so splendid. But the class system in Fenlai City is so severe, so callous."

"Even the law itself gives nobles far more privileges than the commoners. Although Fenlai City is very prosperous and gaudy, filled with laughter, its unspoken rules are far more binding than those of the mountains. In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, there are no such things as nobles or commoners, only the strong and the weak."

Linley was slowly beginning to understand the world.

In this world, the nobles had all the advantages, while the commoners were trampled upon. No matter how gentlemanly and refined the nobles acted, or how benevolent they behaved, there was no way they could alter the severe inequality that existed in the world as a whole. If you wanted to have status as a commoner, your only choice was to become a powerful warrior or a powerful magus.

If you didn't strive hard, you would be discarded.

"Human society is far more complicated than the world of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. They just hide the same brutality which exists in the mountains under a beautiful set of clothes. But sometimes, this set of beautiful clothes can be very useful." From the bottom of his heart, Linley felt contempt for those nobles who pretended to be kind but really were not.

After seeing the cruelty of the mountains, as well as the splendor of Fenlai City, Linley's mentality had begun to change upon seeing the great contrast.

"Are you afraid of struggling?" Doehring Cowart suddenly asked.

Linley smirked. "Afraid? No. I enjoy it. If there were no struggles in the world, and everything was calm and peaceful, how boring would that be? I like struggle, especially struggle that is exciting. Dancing on the edge of a knife... that's the sort of life which is the most exhilarating."

"Squeak squeak!" Bebe let out two cries as well.



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They stepped into the Ernst Institute.

After having travelled into the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and after having witnessed the cruelty of mankind, Linley cherished the genuine friendships he had formed at the Institute even more than before. Upon entering his dorm, he heard these words...

"Boss Yale, Linley still isn't back yet. Could he have run into a dangerous situation in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

"Shut your stinking mouth, fourth bro. Third bro will definitely come back to us safely. Come on, let's go eat..." As he raised his head, Yale saw a familiar shadow standing in the doorway. He paused, stunned. George and Reynolds were stunned as well. But then, immediately afterwards, the three of them charged forward towards Linley.

"Haha, third bro, you finally came back!" Yale was the first to reach Linley, wrapping his arms around Linley in a bear hug.

Reynolds also shouted out happily, "Wow, Linley, did you know that Boss Yale and George have been muttering about you every day? They were all worried about you. I was the only one who was totally sure you'd make it back safe."

"Fourth bro." George stared at him. "Just now, you were talking about being worried that Linley had encountered something dangerous."

“Me?” A look of ‘confusion’ was on Reynolds’ face. “Did I say such a thing?”

Seeing his three bros together, Linley’s heart instantly felt warm. Yale immediately waved his arm ostentatiously and said, “Alright, enough chitchat. Third bro’s safe return from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is a major event! Let’s go have a good celebration!”

“Second bro, fourth bro.” Linley laughed as well. “Let’s go. We have to all go and have some drinks. My treat!”

“Whoah.” Reynolds stared at him. “Your treat?”

Yale laughed loudly. “Right, Third Bro has to treat us. Don’t forget that a while back, those representatives from the Proulx Gallery contacted us and send us that letter of invitation. Those three sculptures of Third Bro’s managed to sell for over 4000 gold coins. We have to have a good celebration.”

“A letter of invitation from the Proulx Gallery?” Linley was startled.

Yale hurriedly explained, “Third Bro, your sculptures sold for high prices. The Proulx Gallery has already totally recognized your abilities as an expert sculptor, which is why they are now inviting you to start up a private booth at their ‘Hall of the Experts’. Right, let me give you the letter.” Yale immediately ran towards the interior of the dormitory.

Reynolds said in a very secretive way towards Linley, “Linley, you wanna know something? Ever since that guy from the Proulx Gallery came to our school, the news that you’ve been invited to have a private booth at the gallery has spread across the entire institute. Your fame has increased tremendously.”

“It’s been spread across the entire institute?” Linley was somewhat numb with surprise. He himself had just found out, after all.

“Right. In the entire institute, you might be the last one to know about this, actually.” George chortled as well.

“Linley, this is the letter of invitation the Proulx Gallery sent us.” Yale came running out of the dormitory with a white enveloped that had a golden seal affixed to it.

Night time. The four bros of dorm 1987 were walking along a dark, silent

street of the Ernst Institute, casually talking about what had happened over these past two months.

“As vicious as that?” Reynolds, amazed, tugged Linley’s shirt aside. Seeing all the crisscrossing scars across Linley’s chest, he couldn’t help but hold his breath. The nearby George also went silent. Only Yale was able to laugh, “Haha, you guys have no experience. When I was a kid, I saw way worse than this.”

“Boss Yale, are you serious?” Reynolds said in astonishment.

Yale smiled cockily. “Of course I’m serious. And I’ve seen more than a few as well. For example, killing prisoners by torture. Or real people fighting against magical beasts with their bare hands. When they fought barehanded against the beasts, they were surrounded by a ring of rich spectators. The sight was really bloody.”

Hearing Yale’s words, Linley was able to picture the scene in his mind.

“It’s good to be on campus,” George sighed.

Linley also nodded in agreement. By this time of night, many couples could be seen walking together on the road, some holding hands, others seated together on the back of a magical beast. Campus life was very leisurely.

“Right. Boss Yale, aren’t you going to go spend tonight with your girlfriend? Why aren’t you getting ready to leave?” Reynolds suddenly asked.

Yale said with dissatisfaction, “Girlfriend? My bro has just come back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts after encountering so many near-death situations. And I’m going to go spend time with my girlfriend? Reynolds, you have to remember these words: Bro’s are like your arms and legs, while girls are like your clothes. They’re just good for playing with.”

A look of contempt immediately appeared on Reynolds’ face.

“Linley!” A surprised voice suddenly rang out from far away.

Linley and the others all turned their heads and watched as a tall, slender, beautiful young woman with golden hair ran towards them happily. Upon reaching Linley, she exclaimed in surprise, “Linley, you’re back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts? This is wonderful. You disappeared for two

full months this time. I was so worried. Are you injured?”

“Delia, I’m fine,” Linley laughed as he responded.

Delia was also someone who Linley had met just as he had enrolled in school. They were on very close terms with each other. When he was together with Delia, Linley felt as though he could totally relax, and be without any mental pressure. It was just like when he was with his three dear bros.

“Delia, Uncle’s carriage is outside waiting for us. Let’s not waste any time.” A cold voice rang out.

Turning his head, Linley saw a youth dressed in long robes standing some distance away. It was Delia’s elder brother, Dixie, one of the two geniuses of the Ernst Institute. Dixie’s robe was extremely clean and neat, without a single blemish or stain. His eyes also seemed very clear and tranquil.

“Oh.” Letting out a disappointed sound, Delia looked at Linley. “Linley, father asked me and my brother to go back. Our carriage is outside waiting for us. I have to go back now.”

“Alright, Delia. We can chat when you come back.” Linley smiled as he replied.

“Right. Bye.” Delia clearly felt rather disappointed at not having more time to chat with Linley. Dixie walked over to them as well. He only glanced at Delia, and Delia immediately began walking towards him. But then, Dixie turned to look at Linley. “Linley, I heard you successfully returned from your training exercise in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Congratulations.”

Linley was stunned.

This Dixie was actually speaking to him?

Dixie’s coldness and aloofness was legendary at the Ernst Institute. Most people would feel themselves to be under enormous pressure next to Dixie, especially when his cold, clear eyes fell upon them. That sort of psychological pressure was enough to cause some to break under the strain.

“Oh. Thanks.” Linley replied.

Dixie barely nodded, and then escorted his sister Delia to the school gates.



*

Austoni looked carefully at Linley, sighing in amazement, “Linley, I must say, you really are a genius, a super genius! A fifteen-year-old youngster who is a genius amongst the geniuses at the number one magus academy in the entire Yulan continent, and also someone who has reached an incredibly high level in the art of stonesculpting.”

“For you to be able to accomplish all this is a miracle.”

“Putting aside the fact that you are a genius magus, even in the world of artists, in this day and age, most sculptors who qualify to be invited by us to open a private booth in the Hall of Experts are at least forty years old. You are the youngest one. Even in our entire history, there are only two unparalleled geniuses who are a match for you. But the difference is... not only are you a genius sculptor, you’re also a genius magus. Wow... what a genius.”

Austoni’s words of praise caused Linley to be embarrassed and not know what to say.

“Austoni, stop wasting time. Hurry up and finish. We four bros are going to go out and have some fun.” Yale urged.

Only now did Austoni seem to come to himself. He hurriedly pulled over a stack of documents and withdrew a silver magicrystal card. Smiling, he presented it to Linley. “Linley, this silver magicrystal card was specially designed by the Golden Bank of the Four Empires. It shows that you are one of our expert sculptors. In the future, any and all proceeds from sales of your art will be directly transferred by us into the balance for this card.”

“Right now, this silver magicrystal card doesn’t have an owner imprinted. Use your fingerprint to bind it to you. In the future, only you can use it.” Austoni respectfully handed the magicrystal card to Linley, then said in an eager voice, “Linley, might I ask if you brought any sculptures for us this time?”

Linley nodded his head slightly. “I have. Three in total.”

Austoni’s smile immediately became even more radiant.



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Night time. Within the Jadewater Paradise. Linley, George, and two courtesans were there by themselves, drinking while talking and laughing. By now, Reynolds and Yale had long since retired to their rooms with their courtesans.

“Jeeze, those two, Boss Yale and fourth bro...” Linley drank a cup of wine as he spoke to George, who was in the middle of laughing and chatting with his girl. “Second bro, my head is getting a bit dizzy. I’m going to go out to cool off a bit.”

“Sure.” George replied, then continued to chat with his companion.

Heading downstairs, Linley directly left the Jadewater Paradise. Upon departing the lively premises, Linley suddenly felt a cold, refreshing night wind blow past him, helping him clear his mind. Compared to the Jadewater Paradise, the outside was much calmer and more tranquil. Linley began to take a casual walk around the streets of Fenlai City.

The cool night breeze was very refreshing.

There were some noble estates lining the streets, but compared to the Greenleaf Road, the estates on this street, Dry Street, were clearly on a lower level. And on the balcony of one two-story estate in particular, Alice was standing, enjoying the night breeze.

Staring up at the bright moon in the empty sky, Alice couldn’t help but think about Linley, who had saved her life.

At that moment, when she had fallen into despair, he had descended from the heavens and vanquished that Bloodthirsty Warpig and saved her life. That action had shaken her deeply. It could be said that that event had left a deep impression on her soul.

“Big brother Linley is a bit taciturn, but when he gets into discussing magic, he’s rather handsome.” A faint smile appeared on Alice’s face as she reminisced.

Suddenly, Alice saw a figure walking on the streets below. His frame seemed very familiar. Taking a closer look, she immediately recognized him, and a smile lit her face up. She hurriedly waved while shouting, “Big brother Linley, big brother Linley!”

Linley, who was walking on the street while enjoying the cool night, looked up suspiciously as he heard someone calling his name.

A distant balcony, a shadowy form dressed in violet, the bright moon illuminating it from behind. The violet clothes fluttered in the night breeze, and under the glow of the moon, seemed to radiate. Long hair fluttering alongside the violet clothes. Suddenly, Linley seemed to smell Alice’s fragrance.

That fragrance, was so mesmerizing...

“Alice...” Linley couldn’t help but walk towards that balcony.

Part IV

The Dragonblood Warrior

Coming Home

The walls around Alice's manor were not too high, only around two meters high. Walking to the walls, with a single jump, Linley leapt on top of the walls. Then, with a single leap, he descended in front of Alice, as though he had flown to her.

"Quick, lie down." Alice urgently tugged at Linley.

Suspicious, Linley obediently sat down.

"Shhh." Alice cautiously looked around before finally letting out her breath as she turned to Linley. "Good thing everyone's asleep. If someone saw something, then I would be in for a lot of trouble."

Linley suddenly understood.

"Let's sit down. If we talk while sitting down, the wall will prevent anyone from seeing us." Alice smiled delightedly, like a sly little fox. She casually wiped down the floor with a nearby cloth, then sat down alongside Linley.

Linley was also very delighted to be able to run into Alice again.

"Big brother Linley, what are you doing out here on the streets so late at night? Right, didn't you say you were a student at the Ernst Institute? What are you doing here in Fenlai City?" In one breath, Alice asked several questions.

Why was he in Fenlai City?

Linley felt rather awkward. After all, he couldn't say that he had come here to visit the Jadewater Paradise with three friends, could he?

"I came with a few close friends to have fun in the city. At night time, I thought it was really stuffy inside, so I came out for a stroll." Linley could only give this rather unclear answer.

Alice nodded.

“Alice, what are you doing up awake so late at night?” Linley asked.

Alice chewed her lower lips helplessly. “I fell asleep really early, but just as I was enjoying my rest, I got woken up out of a beautiful dream by my father, who drank too much and was totally smashed. You don’t know how excessive my father is. He goes gambling and drinking every day. After getting drunk, he causes trouble at home. I’m so annoyed!”

“To have a father like this, all I can say is that I’m unlucky. How about you, Linley? What’s your father like?” Alice was looking at Linley, who was seated across from her.

“My father?” Linley couldn’t help but think about his own father. “My father doesn’t gamble. Although he does drink, he doesn’t get drunk. But my father is extremely strict. He’s been like that since I was young.”

Alice sighed with jealousy. “Big brother Linley, you are so lucky. Unlike me.”

Under the moonlight, a young man and a young woman were chatting happily on a balcony. From the topic of fathers, they switched to education, then to their schools, and then to each other’s friends. Finally, they started talking about things they did with their friends...

Linley was very happy while chatting with her. The more they chatted, the more Linley began to understand what Alice’s life was like.

Slowly, the night wore on, and the first rays of light began to peek out from the east. The entire earth began to be filled up with the fresh morning air. But Linley and Alice, both happily immersed in conversation, didn’t notice the passage of time at all. Only when the sky was bright did the two of them realize how much time had passed.

“Oh, it’s day already.” Only now did Linley notice the time.

Alice finally realized as well. “I’m so embarrassed, big brother Linley. I’ve forced you to keep me company all night.”

Suddenly, Linley and Alice stopped talking. They felt a bit awkward.

“Right. Time for me to go.” Linley could feel that the atmosphere was a bit strange. He couldn’t help but suddenly feel nervous, and so he immediately

stood up.

“Big brother Linley, in the future, will you come back to Fenlai City?” Alice asked.

“I will, as long as I have free time.” Gripping the railings with his hands, Linley somersaulted over, landing on the wall, then with a leap, jumped down to the street below, almost ten meters away from the wall.

Linley didn't look back, just casually, weakly waving goodbye.

Alice watched as Linley departed. Only after he disappeared into the streets did she rather forlornly return to her own room.



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The summer sun in August was like a huge ball of flame, baking the land. After having lunch with his three bros, Linley headed directly towards his hometown, the town of Wushan. He carried his backpack, with over 70,000 gold coins' worth of magicite cores, with him.

“Squeak squeak.” On Linley's back, Bebe began to squeak excitedly as well.

Linley glanced at Bebe, then began laughing as well. He mentally said, “Bebe, you're excited to be going back to the town of Wushan as well, eh? Right, I've never asked you before, but how and why did you appear in my family's courtyard, back then?”

“I dunno either.” Bebe helplessly shook his little head. “As far back as I can remember, I was there in your family's back courtyard. I don't know who my parents are either. But I do remember one thing; a voice, which seemed to say, ‘Stay here, don't run around.’”

“Stay here, don't run around?” Linley heart throbbed.

Could that voice have been that of Bebe's father or mother?

“At the beginning, I just ate rocks. I obeyed that voice, so I didn't leave your family's courtyard. But then, boss, you found me and fed me a wild hare. In the whole wide world, there isn't anybody who treats me better than you, boss. I

don't want to ever leave ya, boss." Bebe wrinkled his little nose.

Linley, too, reminisced about what had happened before.

Back then, Bebe really did hesitate for a while at the entrance to the town of Wushan, but in the end, upon seeing that Linley really was going to leave, Bebe had made the decision to bite Linley and initiate their soul-binding contract.

"Alright, Bebe, we'll always be together, okay?" Linley lovingly stroked Bebe's little head, and Bebe, comforted, closed his little eyes happily.

Linley didn't walk too fast, traveling around twenty kilometers per hour. By the time he arrived at the borders of the town of Wushan, it was already night. As he made his way into town, he heard a familiar voice...

"All of you, straighten up and tighten up those waists! Don't bend! If anyone's buttocks touches those branches and gets stained by the dye, they'll be considered to have broken the rules. Double training for them!" Hillman's voice could be heard from far away.

Linley stared towards him.

On that familiar, empty field on the east side of the town of Wushan, next to a row of trees, a group of kids from age six to sixteen were standing in three divisions. Under the strict supervision of Hillman and the other two, they were engaged in tough training. Sweat had totally drenched all of the children's clothes.

"Back in the day, I did this training as well." Seeing this, Linley felt very moved.

"Linley?" Hillman saw Linley from far off. After giving some instructions to Roger and Lorry, he immediately ran over towards Linley, immediately giving him a big bear hug.

"Uncle Hillman, long time no see!" Linley was very happy as well.

"Haha, let's go! Let's go home first. Lord Hogg will be so happy to see you." Hillman chortled as he spoke, and then led Linley into the town of Wushan proper.

"Young master Linley." Roger and Lorry greeted Linley warmly from afar.

“Uncle Roger, Uncle Lorry.” Linley also waved at them happily, and then followed Hillman towards his own manor.

“Linley, you brought a backpack with you? It seems heavy. What’s inside?” Hillman noticed the backpack on Linley’s back, and asked with a laugh.

Linley smiled mysteriously. “A present, a present for my father!”

Within the Baruch clan manor, Hogg was reclining in a chair, carefully reading an exceedingly thick book.

“Lord Hogg, dinner is prepared,” a female servant said respectfully.

Ever since Housekeeper Hiri had gone off to accompany Wharton to the O’Brien Empire, the Baruch clan no longer had any servants in their employ. But Hogg was the clan leader of the clan of the Dragonblood Warriors. He couldn’t do all the servant’s work himself, right? So he had forced himself to hire a female servant.

“Oh.” Hogg closed his book and glanced at the female servant. In his heart, he sighed, “Fortunately, now that these other nobles know that my son is a genius magus at the Ernst Institute, they are willing to loan me money again. Otherwise, life would be even tougher.”

Based on the low taxation rate in the town of Wushan, Hogg was only able to just barely pay his bodyguard’s salary and also pay his yearly tithe to the kingdom. Hogg felt unhappy just thinking about it. By the time the clan had fallen into his hands, virtually everything of value had already been sold off.

Fortunately...

He, Hogg, had two sons, two wonderful sons.

“Linley is already a magus of the fifth rank. He will graduate soon. By then, I can hand the position of clan leader to him, and I’ll be able to do some things I have always wanted to do.”

Hogg stood up, preparing to head towards the dining room, when suddenly...

“Lord Hogg, Lord Hogg!” Hillman’s voice rang out from afar.

Hogg looked questioningly towards the main gate. In a short period of time, Hillman ran in, and right beside Hillman was a tall, sturdily-built young fellow.

Upon seeing the young fellow, a smile blossomed on Hogg's face. Laughing loudly, he advanced. "Linley, you are back. Haha, this is wonderful. This is an enormous surprise!"

"Agatha, please prepare a more sumptuous dinner." Hogg intimately patted Linley on the shoulders. "Nice, kid. You are almost as tall as me now. Oh, right. I thought you were usually only allowed to come back at the end of each year. This time...?"

Linley smiled secretly. "Father, I'll tell you later, during dinner."

"So mysterious?" Hogg intentionally frowned at Linley.

Hillman, next to them, laughed, "Lord Hogg, Linley wouldn't tell me either, but he's prepared a mysterious gift for you. I asked him what, but he refused to say."

"Uncle Hillman!" Linley frowned at Hillman.

"Alright, I'll be quiet, I'll be quiet." Hillman laughed loudly.

Darkness fell upon the world, blanketing the earth in shadow, but the Baruch clan manor's dining room was brightly lit with many lanterns. After finishing dinner, the serving girl Agatha cleared the table, leaving only Linley and Hogg in the room. Only now did Linley place the backpack in front of his father.

"This is?" Hogg stared suspiciously at Linley.

"We'll open it in a bit." Linley stood up and closed the door to the room. Hogg couldn't help but chuckle. "As secretive as all that? You even went to close the door."

Linley sat down confidently. "Father, you can open the backpack now."

"Hrmph, let me see just what you have in here." Hogg curiously opened the backpack, but much to his surprise, there was another sack inside the backpack. The mouth to the large sack was closed tightly, and it was bulging with the magicite cores that were hidden within it.

Rubbing his hands against the sack, Hogg said suspiciously, "What a large sack. It doesn't feel like gold inside. Can it be pebbles?" Hogg didn't understand what was going on. As he spoke, he opened the sack.

As soon as the sack opened...

Gaudy, beautiful, multicolored magicite cores all gleamed with rainbow light. Hogg couldn't help but feel dazed upon seeing them. This sack was filled to the brim with magicite cores. In all his life, Hogg had never seen so many.

"These are magicite cores?" Hogg's eyes were round, and he stared at Linley in astonishment. And then, he slowly swallowed. Hogg had seen magicite cores before, but he had never seen so many in one place. So many magicite cores in one sack really did have the capacity to astonish its viewers.

Linley nodded. "Right. This bag is filled almost exclusively with magicite cores. There's a very small number of magestones inside as well. Based on what I read, these magicite cores should be worth a total of around 70,000 gold coins."

"Seventy thousand gold coins?" Hogg felt his heart pump frantically.

All these years, Hogg had been suffering from the restrictions of money. By now, even if one just wanted Hogg to produce 500 gold coins, Hogg would probably have to go borrow money. One could imagine how dire their straits were.

Seventy thousand gold coins!

What sort of wealth was this? 70,000 gold pieces could definitely keep the entire Baruch clan fed for over a hundred years.

"Of course, 70,000 is just the book estimate, and these prices were old prices. I expect that this will be enough to reach 80,000 gold pieces," Linley said honestly.

Staring at the gaudy magicite cores, Hogg felt as though he were living in a dream. His entire body was floating.

"Haaaaah. Haaaaah."

Hogg took two deep breaths, finally calming himself down.

"Linley, where did you get these magicite cores?" Hogg finally thought of this. He stared at Linley with a deadly stare. "Did you go to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

Linley nodded. "Yes, father. I got all of these from the Mountain Range of

Magical Beasts.”

“You... you...” Hogg was somewhat angry now. “The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is one of the most dangerous places in the entire continent. Entering it is a major endeavor. Why didn’t you discuss it with me first before going inside? Do you know how dangerous it is in there?”

Just as he finished speaking, Hogg began to laugh at himself.

Linley had gone inside, after all. He definitely now knew how dangerous it was.

Hogg lowered his gaze, and was silent. Seeing Linley with an earnest ‘listening to himself being lectured’ expression on his face, he couldn’t help but shake his head and sigh. “Linley, it’s not that I, your father, want to yell at you. But you must know that you are currently a genius magus studying at the Ernst Institute. In the future, your potential will be limitless. The heavy burden of stewarding the Baruch clan will rest on your shoulders. After all, your brother is still young. Who knows how long it would take before he becomes a real Dragonblood Warrior? All my hopes rest on you for now, as well as all of the hopes of the Baruch clan. This is why you can’t treat your life as a joke.”

Linley didn’t dare to speak.

“Take off your clothes. Let me see if you have any injuries,” Hogg said suddenly.

Take his clothes off?

Linley hesitated. Others couldn’t tell with his clothes on, but Linley himself knew very well how terrifying the sight of all the crisscrossing scars on his body was.

Hogg frowned. “Take them off.”

After hesitating another moment, in the end, Linley still undressed, taking off his shirt and baring his upper body. Upon his robust chest, there were countless scars, and even several wounds that appeared to be fatal wounds!

Seeing the terrifying scars on Linley’s body, Hogg could feel his own heart quivering.

Hogg reached out towards Linley's chest with a quivering hand. Seeing those near-fatal wounds on Linley's chest, Hogg couldn't help but feel his heart turn sour. How much pain had his son had to endure, how many near-death experiences had his son experienced? Hogg didn't even want to think about it.

"Linley, you..." Hogg choked up.

"Father, look, I'm fine," Linley immediately said comfortingly.

Hogg stared at the pile of magicite cores, which represented a huge sum of money, then turned to look once more at the terrifying scars on Linley's body. Hogg's entire body began to quiver.

He was filled with hate!

Hate for himself for being useless, for being incapable!

Taking a deep breath, Hogg finally fell silent, staring at the sky. In the end, he finally said in a low voice, "Linley, you've spent an entire day on the road. You must be tired. Go get some rest."

"Yes, father."

Linley quietly left, leaving Hogg alone, sitting quietly by himself, in that dining hall lit by candles...

Hogg

The next morning, while seated at the dining table in their dining hall, Linley was astonished to see his father looking radiant, with energy levels seemingly like Linley had never seen.

Putting down his knife and fork, Hogg smiled as he looked at Linley. “Linley, this time you should stay at home a bit longer. It’s been quite some time since I have seen you. The two of us, father and son, need to spend some quality time together.”

His father was asking him to stay at home longer?

Linley was a bit astonished. After all, in all these years, his father had never said these types of words to him. Originally, Linley was planning to go back to Fenlai City to stroll about and maybe visit Alice. But upon hearing his father’s words, he put all thoughts of visiting her aside.

“Okay, father.” Linley nodded happily.

Hogg nodded with pleasure, but in Hogg’s eyes, there seemed to be a hint of something indecipherable.



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This time, Linley stayed in the town of Wushan for ten full days. Even when the start date for the next semester at the Ernst Institute arrived, he still didn’t go back, and Hogg didn’t rush him either.

Upon the mountain peaks of Wushan, rain clouds drifted hither and to. Linley was seated in a meditative pose, refining mageforce.

Earth elemental essence and wind elemental essence swirled around Linley, entering his body from every direction and being absorbed into his muscles, his

skeleton, and his veins, improving his body's strength. After a part was absorbed, the rest was transformed into mageforce and stored in his central dantian.

Like an ocean being fed by a hundred rivers, all of the flows of elemental essence in his body would eventually end up here.

Linley just sat there for half a day. By the time Linley opened his eyes, it was already sunset.

"Time to go back to school." Linley rose to his feet and took a deep breath. "Ever since I gave those magicite cores to my father, my father has changed for the better. He's been much closer to me as well."

These ten days Linley had spent here had been the closest ten days he had ever spent with his father.

"What caused father to change so much? The magicite cores? I don't think father would change just because of money. Perhaps... it was the scars on my body?" Linley pondered the matter, but in the end, he still couldn't fully understand why his father's attitude towards him had changed so much.

'Asking if one was cold, worried that one might be hot'; this idiom expressing concern perfectly captured how considerate and caring Hogg had been towards Linley.

After entering the Baruch clan manor, Linley immediately saw his father, book in hand. "Father, it's getting dark. Why don't you finish the book tomorrow?"

"Oh, Linley's back." Laughing, Hogg closed the book. "Your words have merit. I'll finish it tomorrow."

"Linley, after spending all this time training, you should be thirsty." Hogg poured a glass of hot water from the tea carafe he kept by his side. "Here, have something for your throat. The temperature of this water is just right, not too cold, not too hot."

"Thanks, father." Linley's heart felt warm.

This was how Hogg had treated Linley during these past ten days; incomparably well. While in the past, Hogg had always been strict and solemn.

Rarely would he show his affectionate side.

While drinking the water, Linley said, “Father, I’ve been at home for some time now. I’m planning to go back to school tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Hogg paused for a moment, seemingly stunned, but then nodded. “Alright. Come back earlier for your end-of-the-year holiday this year.”

“Sure.” Linley assented.

Hogg said in a soft voice, “Linley, your father doesn’t have much ability. In the future, our clan will depend on you. By giving me these magicite cores, your little brother’s tuition expenses are guaranteed as well. I am already extremely satisfied. But in my mind, I still constantly think about our family’s humiliation. I hope that you will never forget that our ancestral heirloom is still in the hands of others.”

Linley could sense his father’s faith being placed in him. Taking a deep breath, he nodded slightly.

“Right now, I don’t have any other desires. I only hope that before my death, I will be able to see the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ with my own eyes.” Hogg’s voice became even quieter.

Linley could feel that something was amiss. He immediately said, “Father, don’t be so gloomy. You are only forty years old this year. You have lots of time left. I have confidence that within ten years, I can definitely bring our warblade ‘Slaughterer’ back, and once more place it within the ancestral hall in our manor.”

“Ten years. Good, good.” Hogg nodded gently.



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The second day, after lunch, Linley departed from the town of Wushan. That night, in the main hall at the Baruch manor, two people sat together. Hogg, and Hillman. The door to the hall was closed, and on the main table in the hall, the sack of magicite cores was on display.

Hillman had been totally stupefied by this sack of magicite cores. Finally, Hogg spoke. “Hillman, I plan to sell off these magicite cores. I want to entrust that gold into your safekeeping.”

Hillman immediately recollected himself. He hurriedly said, “Lord Hogg, no. How can you hand such a vast sum of money to me? Why don’t you take care of it?”

“Hillman, don’t call me Lord Hogg. You can just address me as big brother Hogg again.” Hogg laughed in a very kind way.

Suddenly, Hogg stood up, facing the east. “Me, take care of it? Haha... Hillman, perhaps there is nobody besides you who knows more about the affairs of the Baruch clan... and about me.”

Hillman started. He didn’t know why Hogg had suddenly said this.

“That affair has been buried in the deepest reaches of my heart for eleven years now. For eleven years, I’ve felt as though my heart has been chewed on by ants. I’ve been suppressing it all this time. Suppressing it, one day after another, one year after another... and in the blink of an eye, eleven years went by.”

Hogg’s entire body began to tremble.

Hillman’s face changed. He suddenly stood up, saying in astonishment, “Lord Hogg, are you going to...?!”

“Right. I am going to investigate what happened that year. I must get vengeance for Lina.” Hogg’s face was fierce and violent, filled with a baleful aura.

“Lord Hogg,” Hillman said hurriedly. “Didn’t we investigate it back in the day? The opponent has tremendous power. Just the small part of it that we encountered was already terrifying. If you keep investigating, it’ll mean the death of you.”

Hogg let out a low growl. “Death? You think I fear death? Hillman, you have no idea how much pain I’ve been in these past eleven years, the sort of mental torment I’ve been under. I’ve had enough. The value of the magicite cores should be worth around 80,000 gold coins or so. This will totally be enough to

pay for Wharton's tuition. With this sum of money, I have no worries or cares at all now."

"All these years, I've been suppressing myself. Why? Because of my two sons. Now that Linley has grown up, and Wharton has reached the O'Brien Empire, I have nothing to worry about anymore."

Hogg tightly clenched Hillman's shoulders with his hands, staring into Hillman's eyes. "Hillman, although you have always addressed me as Lord Hogg, after all these years, the two of us have developed genuine brotherly affection towards each other. For the sake of that brotherly love, I hope you can help me."

"Hogg, you..." Hillman was frantic.

Hillman knew very well that once Hogg really went to investigate that affair, he would very likely lose his life.

"My mind is set. Hillman, you must understand, this life I have been living is worse than death." Hogg's eyes were turning red. Seeing Hogg like this, Hillman felt helpless. He could understand how Hogg felt.

Why was it that over these years, Hogg had become so solemn, so cold?

Others might not know, but Hillman knew very well. Before the birth mother of Linley and Wharton, Lina, had died, Hogg had been a very easy-going, open-minded person. But after Lina's death, Hogg's character and disposition had changed.

Although Hogg had told others that Lina had died in childbirth, Hillman and Housekeeper Hiri knew the truth.

"Hillman, don't try to persuade me. I just want to ask you — will you help me, or won't you?" Hogg fixed his gaze upon Hillman.

Staring at Hogg, in the end, Hillman let out a long sigh. "Fine. I'll help." A hint of a smile blossomed on Hogg's face. The smile of relief and liberation.

The Price of a Sculpture

On the Dry Road of Fenlai City, Alice was standing on the balcony of her two-story house. Her hands cupped her face as she stared down at the street and the people on it.

Ever since Linley had departed, Alice would come here almost every day to watch the people on the street, hoping that Linley would come again. But...

“School starts again tomorrow. I have to go back today,” Alice secretly sighed, taking another glance at the street.

She had hoped that Linley would come see her again, but over the past ten or so days, Linley hadn't come even a single time. By this time, the voice of her good friend, Niya, could be heard from below. “Alice, hurry up.” Niya, Tony, and Kalan were all down at her door, waiting for her.

Kalan, Niya, and Tony were all students at war academies, and their school was located fairly close to Alice's magus institute. Given that, and the fact that all four of their families were located in Fenlai City, they were on very good terms.

“Okay, coming!”

Alice glanced at the street one last time before putting her backpack on and going downstairs.



*

On the third night after Alice had departed the city, Linley arrived in front of Alice's residence. Raising his head to look up at the little balcony, he saw that no one was there.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” A middle-aged guard in front of the

residence shouted at Linley.

Turning his head, Linley smiled as he replied, "Hello. I'm from the Wellen Institute. Alice is a good friend of mine. Is she still at home?"

"Oh." Hearing these words, the guard was immediately all smiles. "Miss Alice has already left for school three days ago. She's long since headed back to school."

"Oh, got it. Thanks," Linley said courteously.

Turning around, Linley left via the Dry Road. After departing on the Dry Road, he turned his head and glanced at the balcony on the second level of the house. In his heart, he felt a bit helpless.



*

On the road in front of the Ernst Institute.

A white light shone out of the Coiling Dragon ring and transformed into a white-robed old man, the white-bearded Doehring Cowart. Smiling, Doehring Cowart said to Linley, "Linley, you've fallen for Alice?"

"A bit." Linley didn't deny it.

Doehring Cowart stroked his beard, laughing loudly. "I didn't think that you, you little punk, would finally fall for a girl! But Linley, you and Alice are at different magus institutes. With the two of you living in separate places, it will be very hard for your relationship to advance."

"I know. It's up to fate. If we are meant to be, we will be. If not, then forget it." Linley couldn't help but think about what being together with Alice would be like.

He thought back to that terrified look on her face during the battle with the Bloodthirsty Warpig.

On the road back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, that shy look on her face as the two of them talked.

And under the moonlight, her moving appearance, seemingly the goddess of

the moon herself.



*

“This must be what one’s first crush is like,” Linley said to himself self-deprecatingly. By his age, all the other bros in his dorm had dated, with Yale and Reynolds having found girlfriends long ago.

As far as relationships went, Linley was actually somewhat excited about it.



*

At the Ernst Institute, Linley was still as studious and as hard-working as ever. Every day, he would spend at least part of his time training in the Straight Chisel School of sculpting. In terms of both spiritual essence and mageforce, his power continued to grow both stably and quickly.

In the blink of an eye, a month passed.

Per their previous arrangement, Linley and his bros brought three new sculptures to Fenlai City, where they were received at the Proulx Gallery by manager Austoni.

“Almost 15,000 gold coins? That much?” Linley was somewhat astonished by the price his three previous sculptures had fetched.

Austoni laughed loudly. “Linley, this is normal. The value of the works of most expert sculptors is around a thousand gold coins. But the Proulx Gallery would of course introduce you and your status as a fifteen-year-old genius magus who is also an expert sculptor. Just based on your personal status alone, the value of your artwork will be multiplied.”

“More importantly than that though... your sculptures have a very unique aura. Although other people’s sculptures are also beautiful, in terms of smoothness, there will always be some flaws. The lines of your sculptures are very smooth. For example, when comparing where you used the straight chisel and where you used the butterfly chisel, people actually can’t tell. They flow

together very perfectly.”

Linley couldn't help but laugh upon hearing this.

Traces of switching tools?

From start to finish, his sculptures were carved with the usage of the straight chisel. He didn't use any other tools at all. Naturally, the lines would be very perfect and smooth.

“This unique point, along with the innately lofty, arrogant aura your sculptures possess, and combined with your personal status, caused each sculpture to rise to the price of five thousand gold coins. The only thing preventing the price from rising even further was that there were still some minute imperfections in your patterns,” Austoni explained and praised.

In his heart, Linley understood.

“Minute imperfections?” Linley mentally shook his head. He only used a straight chisel. Although he could manage to carve out some unique patterns with it, in terms of effectiveness, it would naturally not be able to compete with specialized tools such as the butterfly chisel or the oblique knife.

At the same time, Linley couldn't help but sigh.

Those three sculptures were able to reach a price of 15,000 gold coins. This money came so easily. If Linley spent all his time carving, in a month, he could definitely produce ten sculptures.

Ten sculptures meant 50,000 gold coins!

“In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts I spent two months, encountered countless dangers and experienced countless life and death situations. After killing all those assassins, I ended up with just 70,000 gold coins or so. Being a sculptor is like stealing money.” Linley couldn't help but sigh.

The value of Linley's sculptures was considered high even amongst experts.

“If expert sculptors are practically stealing money, then grandmaster sculptors...” Linley couldn't help but be moved.

The deeper Linley began to understand this profession, the more amazed he was. The circles of sculptors had an incredible disparity in terms of income. In

the entirety of the Holy Union, there were perhaps just a hundred or so expert sculptors. One could imagine how rare they were.

“Linley, work hard. I have faith that one day, you will become an amazing grandmaster sculptor,” Austoni said encouragingly.

Not only did grandmaster sculptors possess amazing wealth, they also had an exceedingly high social status. They stood at the very top of this ancient artistic form. Even most powerful nobles, upon meeting them, wouldn't dare to be arrogant.

Grandmaster!

This was a very incredible designation.

It wasn't something one could acquire through money or power. Only when a person had received universal acclaim as being on top of a particular field would one be honored with the designation of 'grandmaster'.

The Rose in Winter

That evening, Linley and his bros all walked out of an inn together. Per their usual habits, they would head to the Jadewater Paradise together.

“Boss Yale, you three go on ahead without me. I’m going to take a walk,” Linley said to them after leaving the inn.

Yale, Reynolds, and George all stared at Linley in surprise.

“I really don’t like the atmosphere at the Jadewater Paradise all that much. You guys go on ahead. I’ll meet up with you in about two or three hours,” Linley explained, and then Bebe, standing on top of Linley’s shoulders, let out two squeaks. Mentally, Bebe said, “Boss, you headin’ to Alice’s?”

Since he was always by Linley’s side, of course Bebe knew everything.

Although Bebe didn’t seem to grow larger, his intelligence by now was the match of any human youth.

“You little...” Linley glanced at Bebe, annoyed.

“Alright, Third Bro, you go out for your walk. But don’t walk for too long.” Yale laughed. Linley bid his three bros farewell, then started to walk in the direction of the Dry Road.

The Dry Road didn’t see too much traffic, and thus it seemed very quiet. On both sides of the road were various restaurants and inns, with most of the customers inside being locals.

As he drew close to Alice’s residence, Linley looked up at the balcony on the second floor.

The balcony was still empty.

Linley laughed at himself. In all honesty, he had only held a shred of hope that she might be there. Linley immediately turned and headed into a nearby bar,

selecting a window seat. Through the window, Linley could see Alice's balcony.

"One bottle of jade wine and two cups," Linley ordered casually.

"Yes, sir."

Although the servant was rather curious as to why Linley wanted two cups, he didn't ask.

"Bebe, drink slowly." Linley poured a cup for Bebe and set it to the side. Bebe immediately hopped onto the table and, imitating Linley, began to sip the wine.

Holding his cup of wine and staring at the balcony, Linley sipped slowly.

Just like that, the two of them, a man and a magical beast, drank quietly, polishing off three bottles over the course of two hours. Only then did Linley pay his tab, and the two of them left the bar.

"Boss, are you really disappointed?" On Linley's shoulder, Bebe messaged him mentally.

Linley reached out to stroke Bebe's little head. Laughing, he 'berated', "You little punk." And then Linley began walking towards the major roads of Fenlai City, towards the direction of the Jadewater Paradise, enjoying the night scenery.

On the second day, September 30th, Linley and his three bros left the city and returned to the Ernst Institute. That night, Alice, Kalan, and the others returned to Fenlai City.

The reason for this 'coincidence' was that the Ernst Institute and the Wellen Institute had different break days for their students.

The break days for Ernst Institute students were on the 29th and 30th of each month, while for Wellen Institute students, it was on the 1st and 2nd of each month. Thus, Alice only got home on the 30th.

Sadly...

Although Alice stood there on the balcony, watching the crowded streets, occasionally getting excited when someone who looked similar to Linley walked by, in the end, she was always disappointed.

The afternoon of October 2nd, she had no choice but to return to school.



*

October 29th, Linley once again went into town to deliver three more stone sculptures. At night, Linley once again went to that bar on the Dry Road. He once more selected the same window seat, ordered the same jade wine, and began drinking with Bebe.

“Boss, looks like you’re gonna be disappointed again.” Bebe looked at Linley, his beady little black eyes rolling as he spoke mentally.

“No big deal. I guess it wasn’t meant to be.” Throwing his head back, Linley polished his cup of wine off. By now, he and Bebe had finished two bottles of jade wine. But on the balcony, Linley still could not see the figure he was waiting for.

By now, the server came over.

“One more bottle of...” Halfway through his sentence, Linley paused, and his eyes lit up, his gaze focusing on that little balcony on the second floor of Alice’s house. A female figure dressed in white had suddenly appeared.

“Bill, please.” Linley immediately stood up.

The server, already preparing to grab another bottle of wine, was momentarily baffled, but he quickly recovered. After paying the bill, Linley walked out, with Bebe leaping from the table to his shoulders.

By now, it was almost eight at night. The Dry Road was getting dark. Because it wasn’t a main road, there were very few people there at night.

“It’s Alice.” Linley was absolutely certain.

“Whoah, Boss, you’re finally gonna meet that beauty again. Haha! Are you happy? Are you excited? Are you impatient?” On Linley’s shoulders, Bebe continued speaking delightedly.

Linley didn’t even pay attention to Bebe. Quite agilely, he flipped over Alice’s wall, and with a push of his hands, he transformed into a black blur, landing

directly onto the balcony.

Alice had been watching Linley make his way over to her past the wall this entire time.

“Big brother Linley!” Alice immediately recognized him. Her heart rate immediately sped up and, nervous, her face turned red as well. But in her heart, she was filled with joy.

Last time, she hadn’t managed to catch Linley. Upon returning to the Wellen Institute, she had asked around and found out that the Ernst Institute’s vacation days were on the 29th and the 30th. Thus, Alice had skipped class and come home two days early.

“Big brother Linley, what a coincidence,” Alice said with a smile.

Linley was briefly stunned. “Alice, yeah, what a coincidence.”

Alice couldn’t help but laugh, before she recovered and immediately tugged Linley to sit down. “Quick, sit down, don’t let anyone see you.” Linley sat down. The two of them hid in the corner of the balcony, quietly chatting with each other.

Doehring Cowart appeared at this time.

“Linley, Linley.”

“Doehring Cowart, what is it?” Linley was a bit unhappy.

Doehring Cowart laughed loudly. “Kid, don’t talk too much with this girl about irrelevant things. Be a bit friendlier, a bit more forward. You idiot. Judging from the look of her, this Alice girl is interested in you too.”

“No rush, no rush.” Although Linley had no fear of death, at this moment in time, he was a bit unsteady and a bit wobbly, mentally speaking.

“You really are stupid,” Doehring Cowart said impatiently.

Linley began to totally ignore Doehring Cowart’s advice, only talking to Alice about irrelevant, casual topics.

Watching the two of them, in the end, Doehring Cowart could only shake his head and disappear back into the Coiling Dragon ring. While chatting with Alice,

Linley didn't notice the passage of time in the slightest.

"Big brother Linley, you are so amazing! You must have lots of girls chasing after you at the Ernst Institute, right?" Alice intentionally said these words in a casual manner, but upon hearing them, Linley's heart began to beat faster.

"Not too bad, not too bad." While chatting with Alice, sometimes Linley spoke without thinking.

"You idiot." Doehring Cowart's voice rang out in Linley's mind.

Together with Alice, Linley felt truly joyful from the bottom of his heart. In this manner, an entire night passed away. Neither Linley nor Alice felt tired at all, despite having been up all night.

As the sun began to rise, the horizon began to glow with a soft, blue color.

"The sun is rising. Alice, I have to go." Linley stood up.

"Okay," Alice replied.

Alice also stood up, looking at Linley with a somewhat reluctant to part expression. Linley grinned, waved at her, then floated down to the street like a leaf, his body surrounded by flows of air.

After Linley arrived at the Jadewater Palace, he waited for his bros to get out of bed, at which point he was 'interrogated' by Yale and the other two.

After returning to the Ernst Institute, Linley continued to be as studious as ever. But when he was relaxing, he would often think of Alice. Linley had a certain feeling; he had been struck in the heart by the gods of love.

Yulan calendar, year 9997, November 29th. Evening.

Alice had gotten up very early to wait outside her family's door. After waiting for a while, she saw Linley's familiar figure making his way up from the Dry Road. Immediately, she ran to him.

"Big brother Linley." Alice shouted rather excitedly. They hadn't seen each other for a month. After finally being able to see him, Alice was somewhat unable to control her excitement.

In his heart, Linley was feeling excited as well. After all, it had been a month

since they had last met. But today, he felt especially happy. “Even though I didn’t tell Alice when I would see her again, she came outside to wait for me today.”

Last time, after chatting with Alice, Linley had discovered that the Wellen Institute’s vacation days were on the 1st and 2nd of each month. Alice was skipping class in order to meet with him. Linley fully understood what that meant.

“Linley, keep at it! This time, you have to be a bit braver,” Doehring Cowart’s voice sounded out in Linley’s mind.

Linley secretly also made up his mind. After all, he didn’t want to wait another month.

“Alice, why are you outside today, instead of on your porch?” Linley and Alice were walking side by side on the street.

Alice laughed. “We can’t always be hiding on my balcony, can we?”

Thinking back to how the two of them had been hiding in the corner of a balcony, Linley couldn’t help but laugh.

“Right. If you don’t go back home at night, isn’t your father going to be worried?” Linley asked.

“Him?” Alice pouted. “My father is a drunken sot, and also a compulsive gambler. He might not even know when he himself will be home, much less me.”

“Big brother Linley, I grew up in Fenlai City as a child. Fenlai City is a very big city. You probably haven’t been to many places. Come on, I’ll show you around.” Alice laughed.

Linley and Alice walked together on the streets. It was winter now, and on the Yulan continent, December and January were the two coldest months of the year. The night wind was very cold as well. There weren’t too many people on the streets.

But as Linley and Alice walked and chatted, they totally ignored the people who were on the streets.

“Oh, it’s snowing?” Alice raised her head up to stare at the night sky and watched as white flecks gently drifted down. “I love snow. This is the first snow of this year’s winter.”

“I also like snow.” Linley lifted his head, allowed the snow to collect and then dissolve on his face.

To be able to take a walk with the girl he liked on a snowy night was quite romantic. The two of them continued their slow stroll along the streets of Fenlai City.

“Big brother Linley, do you have a girlfriend?” Alice suddenly asked, before saying in a soft voice, “Big brother Linley, you are so amazing, you must have one already.”

“I do not, definitely do not,” Linley quickly said.

Hearing his words, Alice fell silent.

“Alice, do you have a boyfriend?” Linley dithered for a while, but finally got the question out.

Alice’s face immediately turned red. Even her neck turned red. But in the dark night, there was no way for Linley to see. “How could I have a boyfriend? Who would want me as their girlfriend?”

“Oh.”

Linley took a deep breath, then suddenly said, “Then how about, you be my girlfriend?”

“Um...” Alice looked up at Linley in surprise, as though she had been stunned silly. Linley had just been chatting normally with her earlier. All of a sudden, he asked this question of her, catching her totally off-guard.

In the Holy Union, it was very normal for young people to have boyfriends or girlfriends. Many of Alice’s female classmates already had boyfriends, and she had also thought about having one.

But she didn’t expect that Linley would ask her in such a direct manner.

“You want me to be your girlfriend?” Alice asked.

Right now, Linley felt that his heart was pounding so frantically that it was going to burst out of his chest. Even when facing life-and-death battles in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, he had never been so frantic. “Yes. Are you willing?”

Alice’s face was totally red by now. She stared at Linley. “Big brother Linley, honestly, maybe I’m not as good of a person as you think I am.”

“I trust my judgment. Alice, I asked you already. Are you willing?” Linley was about to go crazy. He wanted to know Alice’s reply right away. Even Linley’s voice was quivering.

Alice was quiet for a moment, and then she gently nodded.

“Yes.”

Excited, Linley couldn’t help but enfold Alice in a deep embrace. Embarrassed, Alice buried her face against Linley’s chest. Just then, Linley noticed that there was a flower shop next to them.

Moments later...

“Alice, here.” Alice lifted her head in response, and as she did, she saw a brilliantly beautiful rose in front of her.

Her face blushing, Alice accepted the rose. Looking at Alice, Linley thought that the red rose complimented her blushing pink face perfectly. She was an unspeakably moving picture. This image was burned into Linley’s mind forever.

Holding Alice by the hand, the two of them continued their walk.

The snowflakes continued to fly about. The two youths slowly strolled about the night streets of Fenlai City. The rose in Alice’s hand was so beautiful, so vibrant.

In one of the upper rooms of the Jadewater Paradise, there were seven people; Yale, George, Reynolds, and four beautiful ladies.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into Third Bro. He went missing for an entire night last time. This time, he hasn’t come back even now.” Yale shook his head helplessly.

“Hey, that guy looks like Third Bro.” Reynolds, who was seated next to the

window, suddenly let out a surprised shout. “And he’s holding hands with a girl. Damn! Third Bro managed to find himself a beauty behind our backs.”

“Whoosh!” Yale and George also ran to the window, staring down at Linley below them.

At this moment, Linley, who was drunken in the beautiful throes of young love, didn’t even notice that they had reached the Jadewater Paradise! Linley and Alice walked right past the Jadewater Paradise, continuing on to the Fragrant Pavilion Road.

“Man, when did Third Bro become so formidable?” Yale’s eyes were sparkling.

George and Reynolds were both excited as well. Reynolds immediately suggested, “Haha, when Third Bro comes back, we have to give him a proper interrogation.”



*

The next morning, Linley happily returned to the upper room in the Jadewater Paradise. Per their usual habits, Reynolds and Yale should’ve each retired to their own private rooms with their beauties. But...

Upon opening the door, Linley stared inside with surprise. “Boss Yale, why are you all here?”

“You ask me why we are all here?” Reynolds began to chortle. Scheming looks were on the faces of George and Yale as well, and they began to creep closer to Linley.

“Tell!” Reynolds stared at him. “Who was that beauty who was with you last night?”

“Quick, tell!” Yale and George also demanded.

“Whu... you guys...?” Linley was totally flabbergasted.

Experts Everywhere

Under the forced interrogation of his bros, Linley was very honest and revealed the entire story behind him and Alice. This story made those two playboys, Yale and Reynolds, sigh in amazement.

Ever since becoming boyfriend and girlfriend with Alice, although he was separated from her physically during the school term, they made an agreement to meet with each other at the end of every month.

In the blink of an eye, another month passed. December 28th, Linley was in an exceptionally good mood, because he was going to meet with Alice again in Fenlai City.

“Hey, Linley.”

“Yo, David.”

Walking along the road within the Ernst Institute, Linley greeted a number of familiar faces in a friendly fashion.

“Boss, you’re as happy as this, just because you sealed the deal with Alice?” On Linley’s shoulders, Bebe wrinkled his nose. Condescendingly, he said, “Look at that stupid grin. This entire month, you’ve been smiling like an idiot.”

In the past, although Linley wasn’t exactly cold and emotionless, he wasn’t particularly friendly either. But this month, Linley was in an extremely good mood, and so he was often laughing and smiling.

“You little punk, what do you know?” Linley glared at Bebe before strolling casually into the library. After flipping through two books on wind-style magic, Linley entered a reading booth and began to read.

The reading room was extremely quiet, and in the entire reading room, there were perhaps just twenty or thirty people, spaced far apart from each other.

Linley selected a location off to the side and began to read. At the Ernst

Institute library, Linley would read almost anything regarding history, magical beasts, politics, and magic... but most of his time was still spent on wind magic.

After all, Linley primarily relied on earth-style and wind-style magic. His earth-style magic had a Saint-level Grand Magus for a personal trainer in the form of Doehring Cowart, but the same couldn't be said for his wind style magic.

While reading, Linley continued to learn and improve, and he often nodded unconsciously.

In the reading room, two hours passed by very quickly. Linley closed the book in front of him. "Grandpa Doehring, it would be a very difficult task to understand all of the profundities of wind-style magic, much less devise a brand new spell of my own."

When casting magical spells, one would usually need to have the assistance of a magical incantation to stabilize and launch the spell. Generally, one would just recite the incantation as taught, without needing to understand it. But if one was able to understand the principles behind a spell, or perhaps even refine the words to an incantation, or perhaps further refine the usage of spiritual essence, one could allow the efficacy and power of one's mageforce to reach new heights.

"Naturally. Do you think spells are so easily created?" Doehring Cowart's voice sounded in Linley's mind.

"Forget about inventing them for now. I wish I could at least see or learn some spells of the seventh rank. Unfortunately, the Institute is too stingy. Spells of the seventh, eighth, and ninth ranks are restricted and not open for public viewing at all." Linley was rather dissatisfied, but he also knew very well that behind the Ernst Institute was the Radiant Church. The Radiant Church was not willing to disseminate its most powerful spells to people from other countries.

Linley was fortunate. Thanks to Grandpa Doehring's guidance, at least for earth-style magic, he had nothing to worry about.

Flipping through the other book on wind magic, Linley continued to read...

"To summarize, all styles of magic, including wind magic, share a commonality in that their spells are formed from mageforce. For example, our wind-style's

‘Wind Blades’, the higher level ‘Chain of Wind Blades’, or the even higher level ‘Wild Dance of Wind Blades’, all the way up to the ninth level spell, ‘Void Extermination Technique’, are all considered to be part of a single chain of spells. But of course, if the ‘Wind Blades’ spell is developed and advanced in a different direction, down that path, in the end, it will transform into the ‘Dimensional Edge’ spell, that fabled forbidden spell...”

Upon reading this portion which provided details on the ‘Wind Blades’ spell, Linley grew interested.

This book was written from a viewpoint at the highest levels of magic that sought to classify it systemically. This book was extremely useful to someone who had a narrow grasp of the fundamentals, as it would help them gain a more complete, thorough, systemic grasp of magic.

“The Floating Technique is actually a very simple technique, but using it isn’t simple. That’s because this technique has a strong emphasis on one’s elemental affinity for wind essence. The higher the affinity, the easier one will find it to control wind mageforce and wind elemental essence. This will allow their Floating Technique to be much faster. But by comparison, the ‘Soaring Technique’ is a level higher than this technique. The Floating Technique only allows one to levitate up or down, while the Soaring Technique allows one to soar and fly in the air. Although it looks like it’s omnidirectional, in reality, the Soaring Technique just has a few extra components compared to the Floating Technique, allowing the user to also go forwards, backwards, left, and right. For example, if you want to fly down and right, all you have to do is to control yourself to go both down and right. Frankly speaking, from this line of training, and based on the incantation the Floating Technique uses, in principle it should be fairly easy to figure out what the incantation to the Soaring Technique is.”

Upon reading this, a light went on in Linley’s mind.

Right. The Soaring Technique, compared to the Floating Technique, really just added the additional directional components of left, right, forward, and backward. In essence, it was still controlling wind elemental essence around one’s body to propel oneself in the various directions.

“Right, it just adds the components of forwards, backwards, left and right. If

this hypothesis is correct, it shouldn't be too hard to extrapolate the incantation for the Soaring Technique." Linley immediately began to try and mentally work out what the incantation should be.

But of course, whether or not the extrapolated incantation would be correct was something which only experimentation could prove.

Previously, Linley had been under the impression that the Soaring Technique had to allow a person to fly in any which way, and thus thought that the incantation would be quite complex.

But now, given that it just had four more directions compared to the Floating Technique, the level of difficulty for extrapolating the Soaring Technique was much lower.

Linley continued to read, excited.

"Of course, high-level magical incantations that could be easily extrapolated are in the minority. For example, a higher level variant of the Soaring Technique is the Airwings spell, which forces the surrounding air elemental essences to form giant, invisible wings around the caster. This is far more difficult, and its incantation is very different from that of the Soaring Technique. There's simply no way to extrapolate it at all."

Linley nodded as well.

The more he read, the more confident Linley was that the author of this book was an expert in researching magical spells, because the explanations this book gave were almost all rooted solidly in the fundamentals of magical theory. It gave advice on how to truly understand the mechanisms behind controlling elemental essence and in understanding each magical incantation. But it didn't say anything about how to improve the power of one's spells.

Most people, upon seeing how deep and in depth this book went with regards to magical theory and usage of elemental essence, wouldn't bother to read further.

But Linley understood that if he could understand the reasoning behind each spell, he would naturally also learn how to better control his magic. At that time, the power behind each of his spells would be greater.

“Linley.” Just as Linley was getting absorbed with this book, a clear voice sounded out by his side.

Lifting his head, Linley looked off to the side, where he saw a tall, slender, beautiful girl standing next to him. It was Linley’s good friend, Delia. But the expression on Delia’s face wasn’t too happy.

“Hey Delia, what’s up?” Linley laughed.

Delia bit her lower lips. She was silent for quite a while, before finally asking, “Linley, I hear... you have a girlfriend?” Delia’s eyes, beautiful and large, were firmly fixed on Linley.

Linley was slightly startled. He hesitated. In his mind, many thoughts flashed by. But in the end, he still nodded. “Yes. Her name is Alice.”

Delia’s eyes immediately turned red. “Congratulations.”

Delia hurriedly turned away, unable to prevent her tears from coursing down her face. She quickly ran out of the reading room.

But Linley himself did not see Delia’s tears.

“Sigh.” After directly telling Delia the truth, Linley felt restless and annoyed. But at the same time, he also felt relaxed.

After this event, Linley had no desire to keep reading. After noting down the name of the book, he returned it to the shelf.

On his way back to his dormitory, Linley couldn’t help but feel rather grumpy.

“Boss, I get it. You also like that Delia girl, right?” Bebe said, engaging in a bit of schadenfreude. “You know, I think Delia’s a great gal. She’s better than Alice, y’know.”

“Shut your mouth.” Linley yelled at him mentally.

“Hrmph, hrmph, I was right on the money, wasn’t I?” Bebe said delightedly.

Linley let out a deep sigh. After a while, a hint of a smile appeared on his face. “Forget it. Since I’ve made things clear to Delia, this won’t be on my mind anymore. Mm, right. I’m meeting with Alice again tomorrow. I have to prepare a present.”

As he began thinking about Alice, Linley felt much happier and more relaxed.



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December 29th. Evening. Linley split apart from Yale and his other bros, and headed off by himself to Alice's house for his rendezvous. This time, Linley was going to be able to spend some extra time with Alice.

The first day of the first month of each year was known as the 'Yulan Festival'. This was the biggest holiday in the entire Yulan continent. On this day, the Radiant Church would organize a huge religious mass every year.

As Fenlai City was known as the 'Holy Capital', with the headquarters of the Radiant Church located in West Fenlai City, the religious mass in Fenlai City would naturally be the largest one in the entire Yulan continent. When the time came, the Holy Emperor himself would officiate over the proceedings. This was always an incredible mass, and many, many people attended each year.

January 1st.

West Fenlai City, the headquarters of the Radiant Church. The Radiant Temple. This was a huge building that rose up nearly a hundred meters. Anyone at any place within Fenlai City could see it in the skyline.

In front of the Radiant Temple was an enormous city plaza, over a thousand meters in length. The plaza was paved with smooth, equally-sized white stones. At this moment, the plaza was filled with a sea of people, and Linley and Alice were amongst them.

Many mounted knights of the Radiant Church were there as well, keeping order amongst the crowd. But in general, all of the people there were very orderly and obedient.

"Big brother Linley, at eight o'clock, a group of high-level officials of the Radiant Church will appear, including the Holy Emperor himself," Alice said to Linley in a soft voice.

Linley nodded, glancing at the knights of the Radiant Church maintaining order. "Alice, look at all of the guardian knights here. There's got to be at least a

few thousand of them, and from the looks of it, none of them are weak.”

“Of course. This is the Yulan Festival. The ones who are guarding the event are the elite knights of the Radiant Church. Every single one of them present is at least a warrior of the fifth rank.” Alice, having grown up in Fenlai City, clearly knew much more about it than Linley.

Linley’s heart skipped a beat.

All knights of the fifth rank or higher? Such a powerful troop of knights, consisting entirely of knights of the fifth rank, would possess inconceivable power. As a mere magus of the fifth rank, he was nothing in front of their might.

Alice pointed at some magnificently-dressed people in front. “Look, many of the highest-ranking nobles have come today. In a bit, the royal clans of the six nations of the Holy Union will come as well.”

Time passed very quickly. In the blink of an eye, it was eight.

Suddenly, the hundred-meter high Radiant Temple began to radiate light, bathing the plaza in white. The enormous statue of an angel, located in the middle of the plaza, also began to glow dimly. At the same time, the entire plaza was suddenly filled with a beautiful song that seemed to have come from the realm of the gods.

At this point in time, a group of people walked out from a building to the side of the Radiant Temple. In front of them were several rows of men clad in gleaming white armor and helmets with red plumes. These were the guardian knights of the Radiant Temple itself. Each and every one of them was a majestic, knightly sight to behold. This group of nearly a hundred knights all marching in perfect unison made for an awesome, high-pressure sight which quickly silenced the entire crowd.

“I didn’t realize the Radiant Church had this much power. Those hundred or so knights must all be warriors of the seventh rank at least.” Doehring Cowart appeared next to Linley, carefully inspecting the people present. “And there are even Saint-level combatants here today? Forget it, best I hide inside the ring.”

And then, Doehring Cowart promptly disappeared again.

“Saint-level combatants?” Linley couldn’t help but also carefully inspect that group of people.

Behind those hundred guardian knights of the Radiant Temple, there were ten or so people dressed in long, flowing white robes. And behind them, surrounded by several Cardinals wearing crimson, was a bald-headed old man dressed in silver robes.

“The Holy Emperor!”

Clearly, the bald-headed old man dressed in silver was the center and heart of this group of people. Linley couldn’t help but focus all of his attention on this man. The Holy Emperor was a tall man, perhaps almost two meters tall. In his left hand, the Holy Emperor was wielding a scepter that was nearly as tall as he himself was.

Behind the Holy Emperor and the Cardinals, there were four old men all dressed in black, as well as over a hundred warriors dressed in violet. This group of people walked in an orderly fashion to the center of the plaza. None of the hundred thousand people gathered in the plaza dared to make a sound.

“Grandpa Doehring, you said there are Saint-level combatants present. Which of those are Saint-level combatants?” Linley asked mentally.

“I could tell at a single glance. That Holy Emperor, as well as one of those four old men in black, are both Saint-level combatants. They’re quite self-confident, it seems; they didn’t attempt to mask their power in the slightest. I didn’t expect that after five thousand years, that little Radiant Church which was hiding within the Pouant Empire would develop to such a level.” Doehring Cowart sighed nonstop.

“Not mask their power?”

Startled, Linley looked at the group of people again. Honestly speaking, when looking at the Holy Emperor, the Cardinals, and the four old men in black, Linley only felt they were imposing and majestic, but he didn’t sense any powerful aura emanating from them at all.

But Doehring Cowart had just said... that those two Saint-level combatants weren’t masking their power at all?

“Linley, you have a long way to go. In the Yulan continent, a magus of the fifth rank isn’t much. Only upon reaching the seventh rank are you qualified to be considered ‘powerful’. But a combatant of the seventh rank, in front of one of the mightiest forces on this continent, is only a small fry as well.”

“On this continent, the Radiant Church, the Cult of Shadows, the Four Great Empires, and various other secretive organizations, all combined, have far more experts than you can imagine. Right now, you have very little power. You haven’t had any contact with people of this level. In the future, you’ll understand.” Doehring Cowart chuckled as he spoke. “Your biggest advantage is your youth. The strength of those powerful people was cultivated over many years of constant, bitter training. In the future, you will also become powerful.”

Linley nodded slightly.

Because at the Ernst Institute, he was praised as a genius, in his heart, Linley really did think rather highly of himself. But these words by Doehring Cowart startled him and woke him up. In comparison to the Yulan continent as a whole, Linley really didn’t count for much.

By the time the Holy Emperor’s group arrived, everyone on the plaza began conversing amongst themselves quietly.

“Big brother Linley, look. The six royal clans have all arrived. That one in front is the royal clan of our Fenlai City, while that big, golden-haired man is his Royal Majesty, who also happens to be a powerful warrior of the ninth rank.” Alice whispered quietly into Linley’s ear.

Cracks

“His Royal Majesty?” Linley looked over.

Dressed in resplendent golden armor, built tall and muscular, the king was a middle-aged man with a full head of lion-like golden hair. This man was not only the king of the Kingdom of Fenlai, he was also a warrior of the ninth rank. This was inconceivable.

As a citizen of the Kingdom of Fenlai, Linley had long ago heard others speak reverently about the pride of Fenlai, the legendary ‘Golden Lion’, Clayde. For a kingdom to have a king that was an extremely powerful warrior was, without a doubt, a huge source of pride to the citizens of that country.

At the Radiant Temple’s plaza, over a hundred thousand people were there, watching. In front of the angel statue, the Holy Emperor, the Cardinals, the white-robed attendants, and the guardian knights of the Radiant Temple, all stood quietly. Among all of those people, without a question, the Holy Emperor was the most dazzling figure.

The members of the six royal clans of the six kingdoms, as well as all the dukes of the various duchies, all quietly stood there as well.

Suddenly.

With the Holy Emperor at the center, a wave of pure, billowing light suddenly emanated outwards, spreading across the entire plaza. The entire plaza full of people fell silent, and on everyone’s face, a calm, peaceful smile appeared, as they felt their hearts and minds be comforted.

“How terrifyingly powerful, for him to be able to so easily emit a wave of light that covers over a hundred thousand people.” As a magus himself, Linley could immediately tell how mighty this Holy Emperor really was.

The entire plaza was now so quiet that the sound of wind could be heard.

“In the name of the Lord!” The Holy Emperor said quietly, but his voice penetrated everyone and shook everyone’s souls.

Everyone present at the plaza could sense the majestic presence now emanating from the Holy Emperor. Linley, too, didn’t have any chance to resist this pressure, and he bowed obediently. The strength of this awesome presence emanating from the Holy Emperor was even more terrifying than the presence which emanated from those two Saint-level combatants who did battle in the sky over the town of Wushan, and more terrifying than that Black Dragon as well.

This sort of presence did not need to compel others to do anything. Its very nature caused people’s souls to feel worship and veneration towards it.

It was a deity’s presence!

In the entire plaza, aside from the Holy Emperor, everyone else, including all of the hundred thousand onlookers, the Cardinals, and the kings, all bowed reverently to hear the Holy Emperor speak.

“May you be blessed with the love, the kindness, and the benevolence of the Lord.”

The Holy Emperor’s voice didn’t seem to be too loud, but it shook the heavens and the earth, causing everyone’s souls to tremble.

Countless patterned rays of holy light suddenly emanated from the top of the Radiant Temple, bathing every single person in its radiance. Everyone in the plaza felt their hearts suddenly grow calm, and their bodies feel more comfortable than they ever had before. Everyone was extremely solemn and respectful.

“May the Lord bless you with peace and love.”

At the same time, a glorious aura began to emanate from the Holy Emperor himself. “Children of the Lord, let us admit our sins. Let us genuinely reflect and repent for our mistakes in thought, action, and speech. May the Lord take pity on us and pardon us our sins, and grant us eternal life.”

Instantly.

The entire world seemed to be filled with the sound of a holy song, which all the adherents of the Radiant Church immediately began to chant along with. The sound of the adherents' singing, combined with the holy song emanating from the heavens, filled everyone's hearts with reverence and solemnity.



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The mass was an extremely complicated one. It started with repentance, proceeded to God's pity, went on to songs of praise, was followed by prayers, then words of thanks, before finally ending with a choir.

The vast majority of the people on the plaza were followers of the Radiant Church, and bathed by the radiant glow from the Radiant Temple, almost everyone was silent. Even those people who didn't really believe in the Radiant Church were sincerely moved by the sight. When the choir songs came to an end, everyone finally woke up. By now, it was mid-day.

With the mass concluded, everyone present began to leave.

Hand in hand, Alice and Linley were walking together. "Big brother Linley, how do you feel? Don't you feel very comfortable?"

But Linley shook his head. "I was influenced by the atmosphere, to the point where I couldn't even think clearly. Perhaps those who are not mentally strong and need something external to rely upon would really like that feeling, but personally speaking, I do not. I dislike being influenced by outside factors."

He had to admit, during the mass itself, Linley had been affected, and he had lost himself within that comfortable, embracing aura.

But Linley had, after all, fought his way through and survived the deadly Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. After the mass ended, he immediately woke up. Thinking back to what had just happened, he was terrified. The seductive power of the Radiant Church was really too frightening.

"Influenced? No. The Lord is like our father and mother. We are all the Lord's children, and we are all blessed with the Lord's benevolence and love. Big brother Linley, how could you think such a thing?" Alice was somewhat

unhappy.

Alice had grown up in Fenlai City since she was little. As the Holy Capital, each year during the Yulan Festival, Fenlai City would put on this sort of large-scale mass. The vast majority of the citizens in Fenlai City were followers of the Radiant Church. Alice, as well, had been a believer in the Radiant Church since she had been a child. This sort of spiritual belief was not something that would be easily changed.

“Alice, you can’t think of it like that. The power and abilities you currently have, aren’t they all a product of your own hard work and training? How can they have been bequeathed to you by the Lord? If the Lord is benevolent to you, why would he give you a father and mother like the ones you currently have?” Linley knew very well what Alice’s family situation was like.

Alice couldn’t help but fall silent. She stared at Linley.

“Big brother Linley, I’m going home now. There’s no need for you to walk me back.” Turning, Alice immediately headed in the direction of her home. Watching Alice depart, Linley felt unhappy and stifled. Turning his head, he looked back at the Radiant Temple, which rose into the clouds. “This Radiant Church really does cause lots of harm.”



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It was quite normal for young lovers to quarrel. By the next time Alice and Linley met, they were madly in love with each other again. Both of them wisely decided to refrain from discussions of religion. While they had originally met twice a month, at the depths of their ardor, they even upped it to meeting four times a month. Their relationship grew so close that they even began sleeping together, although they never did break that final barrier.

Per Alice: “My first time has to be on my wedding night.” That second year, during the first half of year 9998 of the Yulan calendar, was a high point in the relationship between Linley and Alice.

But of course, any long-term relationship would have some small problems.

Year 9998 of the Yulan calendar, September 29th.

“Eh... there’s something Alice is hiding from me and doesn’t want to tell me.” Linley was walking with his three bros on the streets of Fenlai City. Thinking back to the unhappy parting him and Alice had had last time, Linley felt very helpless.

Alice and Linley had grown up in very different circumstances, and also had many different thoughts on things. Most importantly of all... Alice was a very independent, strong-minded girl. She definitely wasn’t the sort that would easily compromise with others. What made Linley the most helpless of all was that Alice was a closed gourd who hid her thoughts.

“Third bro, you and Alice are quarreling again?” Yale teased from the side.

George and Reynolds began to chuckle as well. Reynolds patted Linley on the shoulders and said, “Linley, I feel like you care a bit too much about this Alice. Careful that you don’t let your heart be hurt too badly if you break up. Look at me; I’ve had over ten different girlfriends by now. How relaxed and easy my life is!”

Linley glanced at Reynolds, speechless.

“Fourth bro, watch your words. Third bro is intending on making Alice his wife.” Yale chortled. Afterwards, he patted Linley on the shoulders as well. “But Third Bro, I have to say, as a man, there’re plenty of women out there waiting for you. No need to restrict yourself so much.”

Linley smiled but didn’t speak.

Within Fenlai City, Linley bid farewell to his three bros and headed towards the Dry Road and Alice’s residence.

“Uncle Hudd.” Linley warmly called out to the guard who stood in front of Alice’s house. Over this period of time, Linley and Alice had grown extremely close, and so he had also gotten acquainted with the guard.

Hudd laughed as he saw Linley. “Oh, it’s Linley. Are you here to see Miss Alice? Alas, Miss Alice isn’t back yet. She should have been back already. I’m not sure what’s going on.”

“Not back yet?” Linley was stunned.

But then, Linley smiled at Hudd. “Then I’ll just wait for a while over here. I bet she’ll be back soon.” Linley then headed straight for the bar located next to Alice’s residence, made an order of his preferred jade wine, and then began to drink while quietly waiting.

The sky grew dark, but Linley continued to sit there and slowly drink. Alice still did not show up, and the people in the bar grew fewer and fewer in number. By his side, Bebe was very much enjoying all the alcohol, as normally, Linley didn’t let him drink too much. This was the first time that he was able to drink to his heart’s content.

“Sir, we are about to close,” the waiter said respectfully to Linley.

“Close?” Linley was startled.

“Oh. What’s the bill?” Linley stood up, but he was feeling very woozy.

Linley had already finished six bottles of jade wine. Fortunately, Linley had a strong constitution and was able to hold his liquor. An ordinary person probably would’ve collapsed long ago. Next to him, Bebe had drank an even more ridiculous amount, polishing off a full dozen bottles.

After paying his tab, Linley left the bar. By now, it was late at night. The Dry Road was almost deserted and devoid of people.

“This was the first time that Alice missed our appointment.” Linley let out a long sigh.

Taking one final look back at the two-story house shrouded in darkness, Linley headed directly for the Jadewater Paradise.

At the Jadewater Paradise.

“Third Bro’s probably having fun with his girl right about now.” Yale, George, and Reynolds were all chatting, laughing, and enjoying their wine.

“Hey, Boss Yale... do you think Linley’s still a virgin?” Reynolds chuckled.

Yale wrinkled his nose. Quite confidently, he said, “That goes without saying. Just by looking at him, you can tell that he’s a 100% virgin. Bah... Fourth Bro, let’s go get some rest.” As he spoke, Yale pulled his beauty by the hand and

moved to leave the room, quickly followed by Reynolds.

“Crack.”

The door to their room suddenly opened.

Yale and Reynolds stared in surprise. Shocked, Yale said, “Third Bro, why’d you come back?”

“No reason. Come on, Boss Yale, Fourth Bro, Second Bro, keep me company and have some drinks with me.” Linley’s voice was a bit low and quiet.

Reynolds, George, and Yale all looked at each other. Yale was the first one to laugh and say, “Wonderful. It’s rare to see Third Bro in such a frank and straightforward mood. Tonight, we bros are gonna keep you company and drink with you.” Yale, Reynolds, and George all sat down and began to drink with Linley.

The next day, Linley once more went to Alice’s house, but once again, Alice did not show up.



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Within the Ernst Institute.

“Is Alice really mad at me this time?” Linley was walking on the roads within the Ernst Institute, and his mood was not very good.

While walking, Linley noticed a particular shop located in the middle of the Institute, and saw various notices and advertisements outside of the shop. Linley’s gaze suddenly fixed upon an advertisement for a crystal ball. In his mind, he suddenly remembered some words Alice had once said to him. “Big brother Linley, we’re living in different places. Every time I see other couples on campus, I’ll think about you and miss you, but it’s so hard for us to meet each other. Alas... how wonderful it would be if the two of us could always be together.”

Linley’s heart suddenly moved.

Heading directly to the shop counter, he spoke with the storekeeper. “How

much do the memory crystal balls here cost?”

“800 gold coins.” The storekeeper’s eyes lit up. Memory crystal balls were extremely luxurious items. “We have some extremely high quality memory crystals here. These memory crystals were specially manufactured for us by water-style magi of the eighth rank, right here in the Institute.”

Linley had a thorough understanding of the fundamentals behind the construction of a memory crystal ball.

The water-style’s “Floating Scryer Technique” would be embedded into the crystal ball through the usage of alchemical methods. When the memory crystal ball was activated through a small amount of mageforce, the spell would automatically activate and record a long scene. After the recording was completed, the next time mageforce was used to activate the memory crystal ball, the crystal ball would automatically play back the previously recorded scene.

After negotiating over the price, Linley managed to procure two memory crystal balls at the price of 1200 gold coins.

“I’ll use one memory crystal ball to record what I do at the Institute, while I’ll give the other to Alice and let her do the same. That way, even if I’m not able to see her, I’ll be able to watch her through the memory crystal ball.” Seeing the two crystal balls in his hands, Linley couldn’t help but let a smile blossom.



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Stonesculpting in the dormitory, training in the mountains, attending classes at the Institute... Linley recorded everything down, until the memory crystal itself was totally filled up and could not record any more. And then, excited, in the middle of October, Linley took the two memory crystals with him to Fenlai City, only to find... that Alice had still not shown up.

October 29th.

The four bros once more headed together towards Fenlai City. Within the city, Linley separated from his three bros.

Reynolds, Yale, and George watched as Linley departed, the expressions on their faces solemn.

“In the past seven years that I’ve known Third Bro, he’s always been an outstanding genius, both in the field of magic as well as in the field of stoneshaping. But clearly, Third Bro highly values the relationship between him and this Alice. If this results in heartbreak, I’m afraid that Third Bro will be deeply hurt.” Yale frowned as he spoke.

Reynolds nodded as well. “I have the same feeling. That Alice girl hasn’t shown up for three of their meetings now. I’m afraid there must be some trouble.”

“Honestly, breaking up isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” Yale laughed. “As a man, if you don’t experience the pain of a breakup, how will you mature? I’ve always felt that Third Bro dotes on that Alice too much. If it was me? Shit. If a girl acts up towards me, I’d drop her in a heartbeat.”

George laughed. “Boss Yale, honestly, I rather appreciate how Third Bro behaves. Your point of view is really a bit too…” George shook his head.

“I myself am inclined towards how Boss Yale thinks.” Reynolds smirked.

“Enough chitchat, let’s go to the Jadewater Paradise.”

Yale, Reynolds, and George headed directly to the Jadewater Paradise, but halfway to their destination, Reynolds suddenly, secretively nudged Yale and George. “Boss Yale, George, wait a second. Take a look over there. See who that is?”

Yale and George both turned to look in the direction towards which Reynolds was gesturing. Immediately, the expressions on the faces of both Yale and George changed.

A Meeting

The Fragrant Pavilion Road was filled with people, but Yale, George, and Reynolds could clearly and distinctly recognize a certain female, not too far away from them. Since Linley and Alice had been together for a long time now, Yale, George, and Reynolds had all been formally introduced to Alice. Naturally, they recognized her.

“It’s Alice,” George said in a low voice.

Right at this moment, Alice was walking hand-in-hand with another young man, a hint of a smile on her face. If Linley were here, he would definitely have been able to recognize that this young man was Kalan.

“Bastard.” A murderous look was on Yale’s face.

Reynolds was furious as well. “These past two months, Linley has been going to her home time and time again, waiting bitterly for her. He’s been recording all of his activities down in a memory crystal as well, like an idiot. And he even told us that in the future, he was going to marry this Alice. Fuck this!”

“In what way is our Third Bro not worthy of her?” George was starting to get upset as well.

Yale let out a sneer. “It’s not convenient for us to interfere. We’ll go to the Jadewater Paradise, and we’ll talk to Third Bro about it when he comes back. The most important thing for us to do now is to help Third Bro mentally prepare for this. If he doesn’t prepare? I’m afraid that he won’t be able to take this blow.”

George and Reynolds all nodded as well.



Within their private room at the Jadewater Paradise, Yale, George, and Reynolds all sat, frowns on their faces. They didn't ask for any courtesans to accompany them, and the only thing in their cups was juice. They were afraid that they might get drunk, and would not behave appropriately when dealing with Linley.

"I know Third Bro all too well," George said worriedly. "He normally doesn't say much, and he's very hard-working as well. There are so many girls at our school who are pursuing him. He's never accepted a single one of them. But a guy like him, once he falls for someone, he will fall much harder than you, Boss, or you, Fourth Bro."

Yale and Reynolds both nodded.

To Yale and Reynolds, losing a girl just meant getting a new one. It was no big deal at all. But in this past year, every day, when they were joking with Linley, they could tell from Linley's reactions that he had really developed genuine feelings for Alice.

"This is pissing me off." Yale drank all the juice in his cup at one go.

Reynolds snorted. "Boss Yale, don't be too pissed. It's just a girl. Third Bro will be in a lot of pain this time, but after he's over it, everything will be fine."

Yale nodded as well.

Yale, Reynolds, and George were all members of large clans, and thus they had been influenced accordingly since their youth. For Reynolds and George, it wasn't too bad, as their clans had strict rules. But Yale had been buried in women since he had been a kid.

Time passed, one second at a time, one minute at a time. Yale and the others all sat there quietly.

One in the morning. With a creak, the door swung open. Linley walked in, reeking of wine. "Hey. All of you guys are still here?"

Yale laughed loudly. "We were waiting for you."

"Third Bro, you weren't waiting for that Alice this entire time, were you?" George said in an intentionally casual manner.

Linley nodded silently, and then sat down. “You guys aren’t drinking alcohol tonight?” Bending down, Linley retrieved a flagon of strong liquor from a chest, and immediately poured himself a cup.

“Third Bro, we need to talk to you about something,” Yale said with a grin.

“Talk.” Linley was in a very foul mood.

Yale said softly, “Tonight, when we were on the streets, we saw a girl. She looked a lot like your Alice. Honestly. We were a bit far away, so we couldn’t clearly tell. But that girl was holding hands with another guy.”

“Lies,” Linley said in a steely tone that brooked no argument.

Yale couldn’t help but start.

Reynolds clapped Linley on the shoulder with a laugh. “Third Bro. We’re all men. As men, how can we let women ride on our heads? Alice hasn’t shown up several times now. If I were you, I would’ve thrown her off a long time ago. Even if she knelt in front of me, I wouldn’t pay her any mind.”

“Fourth Bro, you’re just a punk ass kid. What would you know?” Linley said with a laugh, and then he drank a large cup of liquor. “Come, enough chitchat. I’m in a foul mood. Drink with me.”

Reynolds, Yale, and George all exchanged glances. They couldn’t do anything besides sit down and drink with Linley.

Early next morning, Linley, Yale, George, and Reynolds were all sleeping, stretched across the table. Linley was the first one to wake up.

Seeing his three dear friends, a bitter smile was on Linley’s face. In his heart, he murmured to himself, “Boss Yale, Second Bro, Fourth Bro... all of you accompanied me in drinking and said so many words of encouragement to me. I understand what you guys are thinking. For Alice to miss our appointment these past two, three times, I too had a bad feeling, but... I don’t believe it. I’m not willing to.”

Linley walked over to the window, looking down.

It was five or six in the early morning. The City of Fenlai seemed to have just woken up as well. Only a small number of people were walking about, preparing

to work. The vast majority of people were still sleeping.

“Linley.” Doehring Cowart flew out from within the Coiling Dragon ring.

Doehring Cowart was forever dressed in those pristine, long white robes. His white beard was forever long.

“Grandpa Doehring.” Upon seeing Doehring Cowart appear, Linley suddenly felt as though he himself was a lonely boat that had finally reached the harbor.

Glancing at the sleeping dorm mates, Doehring Cowart laughed. “Linley, you have three really good friends. As for the affairs of the heart between men and women? I can only say this. In the 1300 years when I was alive, from what I’ve seen, perhaps only one time out of ten would I see a person be successful in his first love.”

“Grandpa Doehring, I get it,” Linley barely nodded. “But... I trust her.”

Doehring Cowart nodded as well. He no longer spoke.



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In the middle of November, Linley put on his backpack, making sure to secure the two memory crystals within, and then headed towards Fenlai City again, once more arriving at the two-story house.

“Uncle Hudd, has Alice come back yet?” Linley said courteously to the guard named Hudd.

Hudd shook his head. “No. It’s been over a month since Miss Alice has come back. She hasn’t returned a single time.”

“Not a single time?” Linley frowned, furrows appearing in his forehead. “Then Uncle Hudd, I’ll head out now.” Linley courteously bid farewell.

Walking alone on the Dry Road, Linley walked over to the bar, but did not enter. Bebe mentally said to him, “Boss, don’t be so worried. For Alice to not appear, maybe she just has some important things going on? For example, maybe she went to do training. That’s always a possibility. Don’t stand here thinking idle thoughts.”

“Right. Maybe she’s busy dealing with something and can’t get free.” Linley’s eyes suddenly came alive again.

Seeing this, Bebe couldn’t help but wrinkle his little nose. “Boss, you are so love-struck that you’ve gone dumb. Just a few words of encouragement and you’re incredibly excited.”

“You little punk. No alcohol for you today, as punishment.” Linley didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

But Linley also had to admit that after joking around with Bebe, his mood had improved a little.



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November 29th. This was a blizzard day, and snow covered everything in white. Linley, Reynolds, Yale, and George were all seated within a carriage. The driver was someone belonging to Yale’s merchant clan, and behind them there were several knights escorting Linley’s sculptures.

“Third Bro. In the next few days, the end-of-the-year exams will be coming. I wonder if that fellow who was once proclaimed the number one genius of our institute has become a magus of the sixth rank yet.” Yale chuckled.

George and Reynolds were all extremely proud.

Because in the previous week? Linley had reached the realm of the sixth rank.

In truth, Linley had reached the fourth rank when he was thirteen, the fifth rank when he was fourteen, and by now, he was almost seventeen. After two and a half years, Linley had finally made the transition from being a magus of the fifth rank to a magus of the sixth rank.

Two and a half years!

What about that Dixie, who was previously regarded as the ultimate genius of the Institute?

Dixie had become a magus of the fifth rank when he was twelve, but now he was also around seventeen. It had been five years. Honestly speaking, Dixie’s

progression was also extremely fast. However, compared to Linley, who was assisted by the Straight Chisel School's technique of stonecarving, he was much slower.

If, at the end-of-the-year exams, Linley had reached the sixth rank while Dixie had not, then Linley would be known as the indisputable number one genius of the Ernst Institute.

"Third Bro, try and smile. Becoming a magus of the sixth rank is something you should be happy about," Reynolds said encouragingly.

Linley quirked his lips.

"You call that a smile?" Reynolds intentionally tried to tease Linley.

Linley finally let out a smile. "Alright, Fourth Bro, let me be quiet for a while." Linley had already decided that this time, no matter what, he was going to meet Alice. If he couldn't see her in Fenlai City, he would go directly to the Wellen Institute to look for her.

No matter what, he had to have a face-to-face with Alice and sort things out.

Opening the carriage window, Linley let a cold gust of air inside. He couldn't help but squint. Outside, everything was blanketed in white, and the sky itself was filled with feather-like plumes of snow. While enjoying the winter scenery, the time passed quickly, and they soon arrived at Fenlai City.

After delivering the three sculptures to the Proulx Gallery, the four of them had a meal, then temporarily parted ways.

By now, Linley's income was very high. Almost each month, he was able to collect around 20,000 gold pieces. Thus, Linley didn't really care much about money anymore. Carrying his backpack with two memory crystals, Linley headed directly to Alice's home.

"Boss, if I recall correctly, this is the fourth time that you've headed to Fenlai City with these memory crystals, right?" Bebe said disapprovingly. "How about you give them to Delia instead? I rather like Delia."

From October until now, this indeed was the fourth time that Linley had carried these memory crystal balls to Fenlai City.

“That’s enough, Bebe,” Linley said with a frown.

Walking on the snow-covered street, crunching noises could be heard with each step Linley took. In short order, he arrived at that familiar, two-story house.

After seeing and briefly speaking with Hudd, Linley could only turn and depart.

“Once again, not back.” Linley was frowning severely. “Wellen Institute!” Linley immediately decided to head off to the Wellen Institute.

Fenlai City. The Fragrant Pavilion Road.

Alice was walking on the streets, holding hands with Kalan. Kalan gently asked, “Alice, are you not planning to make things clear to Linley?”

“Maybe later.” Alice shook her head.

Kalan nodded and no longer spoke.

His eyes on Alice, who was holding hands with him, Kalan couldn’t help but smile. He had grown up with Alice and had been childhood sweethearts with her. In his heart, he had always liked Alice, but he didn’t expect that Alice would get together with Linley so quickly.

When he had first discovered that Alice and Linley had started dating, Kalan had exploded with rage.

Ever since he had been a kid, Kalan had always regarded Alice as his. Even if Linley had previously helped him, when it came to love, Kalan wasn’t going to back off. Thus... he had used a few small tricks to achieve what he wanted.

“Love at first sight? The hero rescuing the damsel in distress?” Kalan was filled with contempt. “When faced with reality, all of that is as flimsy as a piece of white paper.”

Holding Alice’s hand, Kalan was totally content.

“Alice, when do you think you’ll make things clear to Linley?” Kalan asked again. Kalan really didn’t want Alice and Linley to stay entangled much longer.

Alice shook her head. “I don’t know either. But I believe that if I don’t meet

with big brother Linley for a long period of time, in time, his feelings will fade. By then, if I say goodbye to him, he won't have as strong a reaction."

"You're right. After all, Linley saved us once." Kalan nodded.

As they walked, they reached the intersection between the Dry Road and the Fragrant Pavilion Road. Kalan noticed that Alice suddenly came to a halt. He couldn't help but look curiously at Alice, but Alice, looking stunned, was looking at a place on the Dry Road. Her face was ashen. Kalan also turned his head...

A young man, dressed in a moon-white robe, was standing there, not moving in the slightest. He was staring at them, stunned. His face was devoid of all color, as white as snow.

"Linley!" Kalan immediately frowned.

The Desolate Snow

Alice had previously believed that she no longer held too deep of an affection for Linley, but when she saw him once again face to face, especially when she saw the disbelieving look on his face, she felt pain in her heart.

“Big brother Linley.” Alice called out to him.

Linley’s snow-white face held not a speck of blood. He stood there, stunned, for a long time.

“Swish!” Letting out an enraged scream, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, transformed into a vicious black blur and charged directly towards Alice and Kalan. Although Bebe was now highly intelligent, he was still a magical beast, and still possessed the vicious cruelty of beasts.

He could keenly sense the disbelief and despair in Linley’s heart. He was going to get revenge.

Bebe’s body suddenly enlarged by one size, and in the blink of an eye, appeared by Kalan and Alice. Bebe’s sharp claws gleamed with cold light, freezing the hearts of those two. They didn’t even have the chance to dodge or to speak!

“Come back!” Linley’s voice suddenly rang out.

The dark blur that was Bebe shuddered, then landed on the snow, brushing right by Kalan’s face. Bebe turned his head to stare at Linley. “Squeak squeak!” He called out, while at the same time he began to argue mentally with Linley.

Linley slowly, but firmly, shook his head.

Bebe glanced at Alice and Kalan with his cold, cruel eyes, then turned. Once more mysteriously shrinking back to his usual size, he transformed into a cruel shadow once more and leapt onto Linley’s shoulders. Just judging from his superficial cuteness, no one could’ve imagined how terrifying he actually could

be.

“Huff, huff.” Only now did Kalan begin to gasp for breath. Sweat was beaded on his forehead, and with terror, he stared at Bebe, perched on Linley’s shoulders.

Alice also stared at Linley. She took a deep breath. “Big brother Linley, I know that right now, in your heart, you must be in a lot of pain. It’s not convenient for us to talk about this on the street. Let’s go to a nearby tavern and have a good talk there. Okay?”

Linley nodded. He did not speak.



*

On the Dry Road, within a lavish hotel. Linley and Alice each sat on opposite sides of a table. As for Kalan, he quite intelligently ran off to sit in a corner of the room, not daring to get close enough to disturb them. He had just barely escaped with his life from Bebe’s near-assault. Kalan really was terrified of Linley.

The table was made of polished black marble. On it were two cups of warm fruit wine.

Linley and Alice were facing each other silently.

After a long silence, Alice let out a tiny sigh. “Big brother Linley. I’ve wronged you terribly in this affair. This entire time, I’ve refused to meet with you because I wanted you to be mentally prepared. At the very least, I didn’t want the two of us to part ways as enemies.”

“Enemies?” In his heart, Linley laughed bitterly, but he didn’t speak. He just quietly listened, looking at Alice.

Alice continued. “Big brother Linley. I admit that in the beginning, I really, really liked you. I had also thought about us getting married and having kids. But after being together for a long time, I realized that in many ways, we really weren’t a good fit.”

Linley finally spoke. "In many ways? Alice, I don't just like your strengths, I also accept your weaknesses. I believe that when two people are together, they should make allowances for each other and try to understand each other. No two people will be a perfect, flawless couple without a hint of discord."

Alice bit her lips. With her two hands, she picked up her cup of fruit wine and took a sip.

"Back when we were younger, when we first met, I was fifteen." Alice spoke only after a long period of collecting her thoughts. "In my heart, you were the hero who saved me, descending from the heavens. I once thought you were my earth, my sky, my whole world, but I now realize that isn't the case. Aside from these things, family is important as well."

Linley was startled.

"Big brother Linley, you've always been so filled with vitality, and you are also very good to me. You are very hard working as well. I must admit that you are very perfect. But... this isn't enough. For example, this time, when my father went gambling, he lost several hundred thousand gold coins! But all big brother Kalan had to do was ask his family to help, and the matter was easily resolved."

Alice looked at Linley. "Big brother Linley, this is something you aren't capable of doing. Although my father is a gambler and an alcoholic, he's still my father."

"Just because of this?" Linley said gently.

"No," Alice continued. "Not just this. I've discovered that big brother Kalan has always been very good to me as well. He grew up alongside me, and I'm very familiar with him. But with regards to you, I've always felt as though you've been shrouded by a layer of mist. I can't see you clearly."

"You are a genius magus at the number one magus institute in the continent, and at age fifteen, you were able to have your own private exhibition booth at the Proulx Gallery. By the sound of it, you are very perfect, but because of that perfection, I feel like I can't see you clearly."

Alice's voice grew lower. "The most important thing is, the two of us are always in separate places. At the beginning, it wasn't so bad, but as time went on, I got tired. I'm used to always having someone by my side, just like how big

brother Kalan is always by my side.”

After saying all of these things, Alice fell silent.

Linley was silent as well.

After a long time passed, enough for the wine to grow cold, Linley spoke. “Alice, do you remember what we once said to each other? I once said to you, I can directly come live with you. But you told me no. You didn’t want to interrupt my training.”

“But now, you say that I’m never with you?” A very pained smile was on Linley’s face.

Alice wanted to speak, but there was nothing she could say.

Everything she had just said was just excuses.

Looking at Alice, Linley continued. “Alice, do you remember that first time we were together in a hotel, you said to me, you hoped that if my love for you disappeared, I would tell you and wouldn’t hide it from you. You would quietly leave me.”

Linley suppressed his agitation, forcing himself to remain calm. “Back then, I also said, if you ever feel like you’ve lost your feelings for me, I too would hope that you would tell me directly and not lie to me. I, too, would quietly leave.”

Alice’s eyes grew moist.

“It isn’t a big deal that you are now with Kalan. But I wish you hadn’t deceived me. For you to now be with Kalan behind my back and not openly explain things to me, to let me continue to harbor hope in my heart, to let me wait for you time and time again.... do you know how it feels to wait for someone like that?”

Linley’s body began to tremble. “September 29th, that was the first day you missed our meeting. I waited from midnight until nearly dawn. Every minute, every second, was hard to endure. When I returned to school, I was thinking, was it because I made you angry the previous time? So I wanted to make you happy. Like an idiot, I went to buy memory crystals to record the scenes of all the places around the Institute. I hoped that when we were not together, when you missed me, you could watch me.”

“Carrying these two memory crystal balls, in mid-October, I once again went to you, my heart filled with hope. But once again, you weren’t there.”

“In my heart, I started to grow restless. But I held firm. Because I remembered that promise that we made each other. I believed that if you were going to leave me, you would let me know first. That’s why I held firm. The end of October, mid-November, I went as well. But in the end...”

Linley stood up, regarding Alice with a bitter smile on his lips. “I came again today. But I’m lucky. This time, you didn’t continue to deceive me.”

The tears were welling up in Alice’s eyes.

“Big brother Linley—”

Linley opened his backpack and removed the two memory crystal balls. As he did so, Linley couldn’t help but think back to how he had gone everywhere in his school to record scenes. Thinking back on it, he felt himself to be such a fool.

“These two memory crystals, I’ve carried from the Ernst Institute to Fenlai City four times now. But now... they are meaningless.”

Linley was holding a memory crystal ball in each hand. Those two crystal balls suddenly collided....

“Smash!”

Countless cracks appeared on the surface of each crystal ball. Linley’s hands went limp, and the two crystal balls dropped to the floor. “Crash!” With a splintering sound, they each split into over ten pieces, rolling about on the floor of the hotel. The splintering sound was very clear and high, and caused all the patrons of the hotel to turn and look at them.

Alice could no longer restrain her tears, which began to pour down her face.

“Big brother Linley, in the future, will we still be friends?” Tears blurring her vision, Alice raised her head to look at Linley.

On his feet, Linley looked at Alice, but he didn’t answer her question. After a while, a faint smile appeared on his face. “Alice, if I’m not mistaken, we started our relationship on November 29th of last year. Today is also November 29th. It’s been a full year. Thank you. At least you’ve given me some beautiful

memories.”

Suddenly turning, Linley directly left via the front door of the hotel.

The entire hotel was silent. Kalan, previously in a corner, hurriedly ran over to Alice. As he did so, he ran over and stepped on some pieces of the shattered crystal balls. The crystalline sounds of the memory crystals being further shattered echoed in the hotel.

“Alice, are you okay?” Kalan embraced Alice comfortingly.

But by this time, Alice had been reduced to a puddle of tears. Despite being in Kalan’s arms, she still turned her head to watch as Linley departed. At this moment, in her mind, she began replaying every moment she had spent with Linley, but Alice knew....

From this moment onwards, Linley would never treat her like that again. Perhaps he would never see her again.



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The Fragrant Pavilion Road was covered with white snow, and some snowflakes still fluttered about in the air.

Walking on the Fragrant Pavilion Road, Linley’s shadow seemed very desolate. Raising his head to look at the sky, Linley allowed the snow to cover his face with a layer of coldness. Right now, Linley’s heart was trembling. He couldn’t help but fiercely clutch at his chest.

His heart hurt. Deeply.

The pain penetrated his heart!

Within Linley’s mind, one moving scene after another floated through his consciousness.

That set of violet clothes. That beautiful, spirit-like appearance under the moon.

Hiding in the corner of the balcony, warmly talking to him in soft tones.

While the snow flew about, she had hidden her face bashfully in his chest.

At the hotel, she had lain coquettishly in his embrace.



*

Linley had once believed that he would forever be together with Alice. But today, his dream was shattered. And with it, Linley's resilient, tough heart shattered as well.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Standing in the middle of the Fragrant Pavilion Road, Linley couldn't refrain from letting out a pain-filled howl. That howl was like the howl of a wolf separated from his pack, a howl of desolation, of despair. All the people nearby looked at him in shock, and all of them slowly backed far away from him.

These people all looked at him as though he were an idiot.

Two rivers of tears flowed silently down Linley's face.

Idiot. He really was an idiot.

An idiot who believed in promises!

"Smash!" Linley suddenly, painfully, knelt to one knee, clutching his chest hard.

His heart hurt. Hurt so bad, it was as though it had been stabbed with needles.

Hurt so much, even his hand started to hurt. Hurt so much his ten fingers had lost all feeling. Linley could only tightly clutch at his chest with his hands. It seemed as though this was the only way he could lessen the pain.

"Haha!"

Tears flowing down his face, Linley suddenly stood up and started laughing wildly. Laughing at his own stupidity. Laughing at his naiveté.

At this moment...

That savage pain in his heart caused Linley to begin coughing, so hard that he

felt like his chest was being stabbed by knives. But Linley continued to cough, so hard that he curled up in the street like a caterpillar.

“Cough, cough!”

With a particularly vicious cough, a mouthful of bright, fresh blood was splattered onto the snow.

Staring at the fresh blood on the snow, Linley suddenly felt that this blood was like a rose, a blood-colored rose. In Linley’s mind, he couldn’t help but think back to an image from a year ago, an image of Alice holding a red rose.

“The moon’s reflection in the water, the flower in the mirror, the man in a dream. In the end, all of it is illusory, is reduced to nothingness. Haha...” Linley began laughing wildly on the Fragrant Pavilion Road, as though no one else was there. But his laughter was so desolate...

Doehring Cowart, dressed as ever in his snow-white robes, stood quietly by Linley’s side. He didn’t speak, only looked sadly at Linley. In his heart, he sighed, “Oh, Linley... in the end, you’re still just a kid.”

This year, Linley was only sixteen years old.

“Third Bro!”

Suddenly, a frantic shout could be heard. Yale, Reynolds, and George all ran over from not too far away. It wasn’t too far from this place to the Fragrant Pavilion Road, and so the three of them had also noticed Linley standing in the middle of the road. Upon seeing Linley spit out a mouthful of blood, all of their faces changed.

“Third Bro, are you okay?”

“Linley.”

George, Yale, and Reynolds all hurriedly propped Linley up.

Linley looked at his three bros. He minutely shook his head. “I’m fine. Don’t be worried about me.” Linley looked up at the sky. “In the past, I liked the snow. But now, I feel as though the snow is very desolate, very cold.”

“You guys can stay here. I’m going back.” After speaking these words, Linley headed directly towards the end of the Fragrant Pavilion Road.

Yale, Reynolds, and George all looked at each other, their eyes filled with concern and worry. And then, all three of them chased after Linley...

That day, the snow continued to fall. Gradually, that rose-shaped stain of blood was covered up by the snow, with no traces of it left behind.

Ten Days, Ten Nights

Upon returning to the Ernst Institute, Linley just got his usual backpack from his room, then directly headed to the mountain behind the Ernst Institute. Within the backpack, there was just his clothes, his magicrystal card, and a straight chisel.

“Second Bro, Fourth Bro, look after Third Bro,” Yale instructed.

George and Reynolds both nodded. They, too, were worried about Linley.

“Boss, what are you going to do?” Reynolds asked.

Yale’s eyes flashed with a frozen look. “Me?”

“I’m going to investigate and see why Alice, that blind girl, decided to betray Third Bro. And I’m going to see what little bastard dared to steal my bro’s woman.” As he spoke, Yale stood up. “I’m heading to Fenlai City right now. You guys help me take care of Third Bro.”

“Got it.” Reynolds and George nodded.

And then, Yale left, taking with him his clan’s guardsmen, heading directly out of the Ernst Institute to Fenlai City. As for Reynolds and George, in the middle of this icy winter night, they hastened to the mountain behind the Ernst Institute.



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Riding a fine stallion, Yale led his guards charging across the snowy plains. Quite soon, they returned to Fenlai City. Upon entering the city, Yale headed directly to one of his clan’s headquarters in Fenlai City.

This was a nine-floor building, a famous hotel in Fenlai City.

Behind the hotel, there were a number of small buildings that were not open

to the public. Yale directly charged into a smaller, two-story red building. As he did, five extravagantly dressed middle-aged men came out. Upon seeing Yale, they all respectfully called out in unison, “Young master Yale!”

“Walt, where is my Second Uncle?” Yale immediately asked.

Among the five middle-aged men, there was one named Walt. He was the only one of them dressed in long black robes. Walt respectfully replied, “His lordship returned to our main headquarters seven days ago. For now, our affairs in the Holy Union are under my management.”

Walt knew very well that ever since this second young master had become a pupil of the Ernst Institute, his position within the clan’s hierarchy had skyrocketed.

Yale was not like one of the ordinary clan members, because Yale was in the direct line of descent. Even Walt’s highest supervisor, the ‘Second Uncle’ in charge of all of the affairs of the Holy Union, wouldn’t dare to be discourteous to Yale.

“Young master Yale, if you have anything you need handled, please just let me know,” Walt said respectfully.

Yale was quiet for a moment, then gave direct instructions. “Go and do some investigations for me. On Fenlai City’s Dry Road, there is a girl called Alice. She should be sixteen years old this year. She’s also a student of the Wellen Institute. Recently, she’s been together with a man. Provide me with all the information you have regarding this man.”

“Yes, young master Yale.” Walt smiled slightly. “Young master Yale, do you like this Alice? If you do, then I can...”

“No need.” Yale’s face was cold and dark. “What I need is information, as fast as you can provide it. Understood?”

“Yes.” Walt could sense that this young master Yale seemed to be truly enraged this time.



That same night. Candles flickering.

Yale was sitting at a table, pouring himself a cup of wine, his face unhappy. But clearly, his mind was elsewhere and not on the wine.

Suddenly, urgent footsteps could be heard. Walt suddenly hurried inside, along with a woman in her twenties who looked as cold as ice. Upon entering the room, Walt bowed respectfully. “Young master Yale, we have investigated this Alice and her male friend clearly.”

“Speak,” Yale said coldly.

Walt looked to the cold woman, who bowed respectfully. “Young master Yale, this Alice has two male friends. The first one is named Linley Baruch, who was born in the town of Wushan...”

“Stop. Discuss the second one.” Yale frowned.

“Alice’s current boyfriend is named Kalan Debs. He was born in Fenlai City, and is currently seventeen years old. He’s a student at the Wellen Warrior Academy, a warrior of the fifth rank! This Debs clan is a major clan in the Kingdom of Fenlai, and Kalan Debs will be the direct successor to the clan leader.”

“Kalan Debs... the Debs clan?” Yale frowned. “Just a small clan within a kingdom?”

Walt, seeking to ingratiate himself with Yale, said, “In the Kingdom of Fenlai, the Debs clan can be considered a major clan. But of course, in the Yulan continent as a whole, it can only be considered a very unremarkable little clan.”

“Oh. I want to severely punish this Debs clan. What would you recommend?” Yale looked to Walt.

“That’s easy!”

Walt began to laugh. “Young master Yale, you don’t know this, but this Debs clan is actually the working partner of our Dawson Conglomerate here in Fenlai. In the Kingdom of Fenlai, the Dawson Conglomerate makes the big money, while their Debs clan gets some of our scraps. After all these years though, those scraps have fattened up the Debs clan.”

“Oh, this Debs clan is actually the working partner of our Conglomerate here in the Kingdom of Fenlai?” A hint of a smile appeared on Yale’s face.

Walt nodded. “Yes, young master Yale. You should know very well that our Dawson Conglomerate doesn’t seek to gain all the benefit from every single trade. In the Four Great Empires and in the dozens of various kingdoms, we always have a working partner. Naturally, we have to give them some benefits as well.”

Yale nodded.

He knew this very well. The Dawson clan controlled the Dawson Conglomerate, which was one of the three titanic trading unions in the Yulan continent. Even the Four Great Empires and the two alliances did not dare to look down on them. This was the reason why Yale had been able to enroll in the Ernst Institute.

Behind the Ernst Institute was the Radiant Church. On the surface, they claimed that the enrollment standards were fair and open.

How could an ordinary clan manage to get someone in through the backdoor of the Radiant Church?

The creed of the Dawson Conglomerate was this: “When there’s money to be made, everyone gets a share.”

In the Four Great Empires, the two alliances, and the various other kingdoms and duchies, the Dawson Conglomerate would always have some trading partners, and would allow them to make some profit as well.

To be able to work alongside the Dawson Conglomerate was the same as getting on top of a massive money-making war machine. In the Kingdom of Fenlai, the Debs clan only gets a small fraction of what the Dawson Conglomerate makes, but it was enough to make them fabulously wealthy by the standards of the Kingdom of Fenlai.

“Young master Yale, there are always many clans in the Kingdom of Fenlai who clamor to replace the Debs clan as our local partner here. The only reason we still work with the Debs clan is because they have been fairly decent partners, which is why we haven’t given any other clans the opportunity.” Walt

smiled.

Yale understood Walt's intentions.

"Immediately change our local partner here in the Kingdom of Fenlai. As for the Debs clan? Suppress them!" Yale's voice was as cold as ice.

"Yes, young master," Walt replied respectfully.

This was nothing more than an issue of working partners in a small kingdom. Even Walt, who was just the second-in-command of the Dawson Conglomerate here in Fenlai, had the authority to make this decision. Much less Yale, a clan member who was in the principal family branch.

"Poor Debs clan," Walt said to himself.



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In the mountain behind the Ernst Institute, the snow covered everything with a layer of silvery white clothes. Within the dense trees, there were some large stones. At an empty spot in the mountain, Linley was standing quietly, eyes closed, on top of one of those giant stones.

The Shadowmouse, Bebe, was next to him, standing in the snow, quietly protecting Linley.

George and Reynolds looked at each other with concern.

"George. What is Linley doing? He's been standing there on that boulder for a full day and night now. When we call out to him, he has no response. And he hasn't eaten or drank anything. If this continues..." Reynolds was starting to grow frantic.

George slowly shook his head. "Don't be impatient. Third Bro is a magus of the sixth rank, and a warrior. His body is extremely strong and tough. It has been fortified by the absorption of nature's elemental essences. Even if he goes several days without food or water, it shouldn't be a problem. Let's just watch him for now. I trust that Third Bro isn't the sort of person who cannot recover from a setback."

Reynolds nodded slightly.

None of them had any idea as to what Linley's current condition was like.

In fact, Doehring Cowart was there, by Linley's side as well. Only Reynolds and George could not, of course, see him. Doehring Cowart quietly watched Linley. In his heart, he was secretly surprised. "This Linley fellow seems to have entered a higher mental realm." As a grandmaster sculptor, Doehring Cowart was able to guess what sort of state Linley had entered.

Linley was staring at a boulder. This boulder was over two meters tall and three meters wide.

He was staring at the lines on the boulder. The rocky lines and craggy patterns covering this boulder were all extremely complex. But as Linley continued to stare at them, a number of those lines and patterns seemed to drift off from the boulder and rematerialize in Linley's mind.

These lines and patterns seemed to form into five human images.

Suddenly, those five images transformed themselves into Alice. All sorts of scenes appeared in Linley's mind as well. In his mind's eye, this boulder suddenly transformed itself into various sculptures. In the end, it was transformed into five female statues.

"George, look! Third Bro is moving!" Reynolds said in surprise.

From within his backpack, Linley retrieved his straight chisel. Wielding it in his right hand, staring at the boulder, Linley suddenly began to move. The straight chisel transformed into a blur, and immediately, excess stone and rubble began to fly off from the boulder.

His soul had become one with the earth, had become one with the wind.

Linley's soul could clearly sense every single crevice, every single line of that boulder. He wielded the straight chisel as though it were like the wind, blowing pieces of excess stone away from the boulder. Every single chop of his chisel seemed to be perfect in its movements, not too much, not too little, accurate to the point of perfection.

Sometimes, the straight chisel would move slowly, while at other times, it

would move very quickly. Sometimes, it would leave traces and lines as it flowed through the stone; at other times, it would directly chop off an entire piece of rock.

“I still remember how you looked that year, that pitiable look when you were being attacked by the Bloodthirsty Boar.”

A perfect mental image of that scene and of Alice formed in Linley’s mind. All of his emotions and feelings were concentrated into his chisel. The snow began to settle and coalesce around Linley, and as it did, Linley felt his soul merge with the earth and with the wind as it never had before, as earth elemental essence and wind elemental essence rapidly began to enter Linley’s body.

Linley didn’t think about anything else. Right now, he was focusing on those bygone feelings.

Slowly, the leftmost 20% of the statue began to transform into the image of a woman. The basic structure of the sculpture was beginning to take shape. Linley neither ate nor drank, continuing to carve nonstop. Occasionally, he would wield his chisel several dozen times in a row. At other times, he would spend several minutes carefully carving a single, perfect line.



*

Linley, having totally subsumed himself and his feelings for Alice within his straight chisel, totally failed to notice that this was the first time he had entered such a state since he had first started to learn carving.

In the past, regardless of whether or not it was his early days or his later days, Linley wouldn’t be totally, 100% subsumed into the carving.

At the very least, he would spend several days carving a statue. He could stop at any time and continue the next time.

But this time was different. Linley was totally submerged in those bygone feelings, and totally subsumed into energetically carving. He didn’t even think about stopping, couldn’t even notice that he hadn’t eaten or drank anything. This sort of total immersion and concentration caused Linley to become one

with nature as he never had before.

That sort of absolute oneness with nature caused Linley's spiritual energy to rise at a terrifying, previously unseen speed.

Right now, Linley's growth in spiritual energy was rising a thousand times more rapidly than an ordinary person's.

"He's totally become one with nature, and has reached the level of forgetting oneself. What a wonderful surprise." Doehring Cowart's eyes lit up.

One day after another passed, with Linley still fully absorbed in his work. Earth elemental essence and wind elemental essence still continuously poured into his body, replenishing the energy that he had lost.

In the blink of an eye, ten days passed, with Linley absorbed in sculpting the entire time.

"Puff!"

With Linley at the center, the snow suddenly swirled outwards in all directions. Straight chisel in hand, Linley stared quietly at the giant sculpture in front of him. Linley had put all of his effort into making this sculpture. This was the largest sculpture he had ever made, and it was also the most successful one.

This sculpture was made up of five images of a woman. In all five images, the woman was the same. Alice.

There was one showing the pitiable look she had had when she had faced danger.

There was one showing the adorable look on her face when she had been secretly chatting on the balcony.

There was one showing the look of shyness on her face when they had first started dating.

There was one showing how mesmerizing she had looked when they were in the throes of their love for each other.

And there was one showing that hint of heartlessness on her face when they had broken up!

“In a year’s time, everything has passed on, as though it were nothing more than a dream. But now, the dream has come to an end. Let this sculpture, then, be called ‘Awakening From the Dream’.” Staring at his sculpture, Linley felt his spirit was more at peace now than ever before. It was as though all of his previous emotions had been entrusted within this sculpture.

‘Awakening From the Dream’. This sculpture had been brought into the world!

Liquefy

Reynolds, George, and Yale all stared dumbly at the statue. They had been totally awed by this stone sculpture, and to their eyes, the five human shapes in the statue seemed to all have souls.

The image on the left carried within it a soft, tender, vulnerable air that made anyone who saw it feel pity.

The second image carried within it a cute, adorable air that stirred the hearts of its viewers.

The third image seemed to be just like a real girl, who was blushing with shyness right in front of you.



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All five of the figures within this statue carried their own unique auras.

Linley stared at the sculpture, and as he did, he felt like he was seeing a fantasy. These five figures seemed to be figures from his dreams. But now, he had awoken.

“Linley.” Doehring Cowart walked over to him. His moon-white robe was still spotless, without a speck of dust.

Linley looked at Doehring Cowart.

A look of gratification was on Doehring Cowart’s face. “In terms of stonesculpting ability, you have already reached the level of a master. And this statue of yours that you just created is worthy of being a sterling paragon of an example of our Straight Chisel School’s sculpting. After having experienced this, I believe that your understanding of stonesculpting has also dramatically deepened.”

Linley nodded slightly.

Only after completing this sculpture did Linley realize why it was that each master sculptor might perhaps only have a single work of art which would be acclaimed and passed down throughout the ages. It wasn't due to them not having enough ability; rather, it was because those 'divine' sculptures were something which occurred out of nowhere and could not be forced.

For example, Linley had just completed this statue, 'Awakening From the Dream'. But if you were to ask him to do another one like it, it would perhaps be impossible.

When a 'divine' sculpture came into existence in the world, it did so only through a unique combination of exquisite skill, marvelous inspiration, and sudden, all-encompassing emotion. Only when someone was absolutely emotionally moved, 100%, could a 'divine' sculpture be born. Because only then would they hold nothing back and produce such a stunning, soul-stirring sculpture.

Linley had completed this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'. But who could possibly guess as to how long it would be before he might be able to produce another one of this quality?

However....

Throughout those ten days of non-stop carving, Linley's soul had already been clearly and keenly attuned to that perfect sensation of being one with the universe. And thus, in terms of sculpting ability, Linley had dramatically improved. If Linley were to carve another sculpture right now, although it wouldn't be able to match the quality of this 'Awakening From the Dream', it would be much better than his previous sculptures which were worth around 5000 gold each.

"Linley, have you felt the change in your spiritual energy?" Doehring Cowart asked with a delighted smile.

Linley started.

Spiritual energy?

This sculpture had forced him to exert far more spiritual energy than he

normally did, and now, his spiritual energy was far stronger than before. If ten days ago, Linley's spiritual energy were like a small tree, by now, it was like a gloriously flourishing giant oak.

"How could it have increased this much?" Linley was totally amazed.

Doehring Cowart laughed delightedly. His white beard flourishing, he said, "Ten times! Your spiritual energy increased by ten times! It's received such an incredible boost; in ten days, it has increased by about ten times! In ten short days, the benefit you gained was equivalent to what others might get after decades of training. Your level of spiritual energy has directly leapt out of the level of the sixth rank and has reached the level of a magus of the seventh rank at one go."

Linley, as well, felt that this was inconceivable.

It increased by way too much! Ten times!

"The effect is quite good, right? Hrmph, the effectiveness of Doehring Cowart's Straight Chisel School is unquestionable and unfathomable. However... I really am jealous of you." Doehring Cowart was grinning as he looked at Linley. "Linley, you should know that upon entering a state of absolute emotion, where your soul totally becomes one with nature, is extremely rare and extremely hard to achieve."

Linley nodded in agreement.

If that sort of state was easy to enter, then perhaps a 'divine' sculpture would be commonplace.

"In the 1300 years of my life, I've only entered that state three times, and during those three times, I completed the three sculptures which I am most proud of." A look of pride was on Doehring Cowart's face as he continued. "But the sculptures that I made, each took me two, three, and four days respectively. Altogether, I only spent nine days in that state, which was less than this one session you had."

Only upon hearing Doehring Cowart's words did Linley realize that he had spent ten days and ten nights during this stonesculpting session.

"This sort of state is the fastest way through which members of the Straight

Chisel School can increase their spiritual strength. This sort of state usually sees you grow a thousand times faster than normal people! This state is what we dream of. The longer you can remain in this state, the better, and therefore the larger a statue you are inspired to carve, the greater the benefits are to you.”

Linley agreed in his heart.

The ‘Awakening From the Dream’ was a giant work of art, encompassing fully five different figures. This was a statue of a size that was very rarely seen.

Doehring Cowart let out a long sigh. “But when your soul has been moved to produce a certain type of sculpture, you really have no control over it at all.”

Linley understood.

Just like how when he had seen that giant rock and saw those lines and patterns on it, when combined with his already agitated condition, his mind naturally summoned forth the image of five people. That was a sort of energy and excitement which allowed him to forget everything else in the world, including himself. The only thing remaining was the sculpture!

All of his energy, all of his emotions, were poured into the sculpture.

Upon entering this state, he had no excess energy to think about anything else, such as, ‘I want to work on a large statue’. He couldn’t divide any attention at all. If he had divided his attention, then he would have shattered that perfect state.

“Linley, I want to ask you a question. Does this sculpture have a name?” Doehring Cowart asked.

“Awakening From the Dream.” Linley replied.

Doehring Cowart mused for a while, then nodded slightly. “Well done. Good name.”

That rarely seen blizzard had finally come to an end. The world was blanketed in white, and the entire mountain was covered with a thick layer of snow, as high as one’s knee. This sort of snowstorm was rather rarely seen. After the snow, the temperature dropped further.

Yale, George, and Reynolds had erected a tent to ward off that freezing

weather. Yale had ordered some servants to deliver food to them regularly, and they had waited there, watching over Linley.

At this moment, Yale and the other two were still staring speechlessly at Linley's carving.

"Boss Yale, Third Bro has successfully completed his carving. Why is he still standing there?" Reynolds was getting a bit worried. He had no idea that Linley was mentally chatting with Doehring Cowart, and of course none of them could see Doehring Cowart's spirit form.

Yale shook his head slightly. "I don't know either. But this sculpture of Third Bro's can definitely be considered to be almost on par with the sculptures of Grandmaster Proulx."

At least in Yale's eyes, Linley's sculpture was earthshakingly brilliant, capable of stirring men's souls.

"Boss Yale. Second Bro. Fourth Bro."

Linley's voice suddenly rang out, causing Yale, George, and Reynolds all to be startled. Reynolds immediately shouted back excitedly, "Linley, you finally speak! It's been eleven days, eleven full days! You haven't eaten or drank anything for eleven days!"

Linley had first stood there silently in front of the boulder for a full day, and then had spent ten more on his carving. This was, in fact, the eleventh day.

An ordinary person who didn't eat or drink for eleven days would've died by now. Even an ordinary magus of the fourth or fifth rank would be extremely weak after not eating or drinking for that long. But right now, Linley only felt slightly thirsty, and he didn't feel uncomfortable in the slightest.

Because upon entering that special state, upon becoming one with the universe, earth and wind elemental essence had constantly entered his body, nourishing him and replacing all of his spent energy while strengthening Linley's body at the same time.

"Eleven days, eh? Yeah, I am a bit hungry." Linley laughed.

"Hungry?"

George was the first one to excitedly rush to the nearby tent, where he pulled out two fur-wrapped cases. Those furs were used for temperature control. Removing the furs, he pulled out two metal boxes from inside. Inside those two metal boxes was a sumptuous feast.

“Wait, we can’t eat without having any wine to drink, can we?” Yale laughed loudly.

Watching one of his bros scurry around preparing the food, while another ran around preparing the rice, and a third pour wine, Linley suddenly felt an unspeakably warm feeling.

They had accompanied him for eleven days. How could Linley not be moved?

But Linley hid all of these feelings deep in his heart.

“Boss, Second Bro, Fourth Bro. We will be good brothers for all our lives,” Linley said determinedly.

“Third Bro, come, eat up!” George said warmly.

“Alright!”

On top of the snow-covered mountain behind the Ernst Institute, Linley and his three bros began to eat and drink, and the laughter and merriment they shared continued unabated. Next to them, the Shadowmouse, Bebe, also happily began to eat and drink.

After eating.

“Boss Yale, please help me store this sculpture.” Linley stood up, casting his gaze upon their snow-white surroundings. “When I was fifteen, I went for training in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Logically speaking, in July and August of my 16th year, I should’ve gone for training again. But because of Alice, I didn’t go. Right now, I’ve made up my mind to go and get some good training done.”

George, Yale, and Reynolds were all stunned.

“Third Bro, you are heading to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?” Yale grew frantic. Reynolds and George as well.

To them, Linley had just suffered a huge emotional blow, and had gone eleven

days without food or water. Just as his mood had improved slightly, he was going to go off to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, one of the three most dangerous places in the entire Yulan continent? How could they not be worried?

Linley laughed. “Alright, don’t be worried. I’m very level-headed right now. If I hadn’t walked past my pain, I would’ve gone ahead and destroyed this ‘Awakening From the Dream’ sculpture.”

As he spoke, he turned his head to ‘Awakening From the Dream’.

Staring at it, Linley felt as though he was staring back at bygone days. Linley felt absolutely calm and peaceful in his heart.

“This is nothing more than a memory, nothing more than a setback in my life. Because of Alice, I had already slowed down my pace of training. I can no longer afford to waste any time.” Linley smiled at his three bros, then picked up his backpack. “I’m going to head out immediately. I won’t go back to the Institute.”

“Boss, Second Bro, Fourth Bro.”

Linley stared at his three good friends, smiling slightly. “I really am grateful to all of you. I, Linley, am so fortunate to have three good brothers like you.”

After speaking, Linley put on his backpack, picked up Bebe, and began to walk east, away from the mountain.

Yale, Reynolds, and George all watched as the image of Linley’s back grew more and more distant, until it finally disappeared into the snowy white landscape.



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Within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Tall, majestic trees. Dense vines and rattans. Wild grass and shrubs. Dried leaves. The entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was so primeval, so natural. Linley was seated in the meditative position, absorbing wind and earth elemental essence from the world and transforming it into mageforce.

Linley's spiritual energy had already reached the level of a magus of the seventh rank, but his mageforce was still only that of a magus of the sixth rank.

Linley had already spent a full month within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Within the past month, Linley sometimes would kill magical beasts, while at other times he would analyze the seventh level wind-style spell, the Soaring Technique. The rest of the time, he spent in the meditative state gathering mageforce.

The Ernst Institute didn't teach or train anyone in spells of the seventh rank. But since the Soaring Technique was virtually identical in principle with the Floating Technique, according to the book on magical theory that Linley had found in the library, Linley had constantly been applying wind-magic principles to test out the Soaring Technique using various magical incantations.

After a full month of research and tests, Linley could already easily fly about in the sky.

Although Linley didn't know if the magical incantation he had puzzled out was identical to the one used by the rest of the world as a whole, Linley was already fairly satisfied with his current speed of flight.

There was a huge gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank, but the biggest part of that gap lay in increasing one's spiritual energy. Since Linley had already increased his spiritual energy, all he needed to do was to spend some time refining more mageforce.

As Linley's elemental affinity was exceptional, his speed of refining mageforce was also extremely quick.

The Shadowmouse, Bebe, was cautiously walking around the area near Linley, protecting him as Linley remained in the meditative position, gathering mageforce.

Within the central dantian in Linley's body.

Those specks of earth-colored elemental essence and bluish-jade elemental essence had already reached an astonishing density, but for now, they still remained in a gaseous form within his central dantian. But as the density of the

particles grew still greater... the density of the gaseous elemental essences had reached a critical point.

A drop of earthen-colored liquid and a drop of bluish-jade liquid suddenly coalesced within Linley's central dantian.

And then, more and more drops of liquid began to form, as one drop turned into ten, and ten drops turned into a hundred, a thousand...

The biggest difference between a magus of the sixth and the seventh ranks was this – the condensation of mageforce into liquid form!

Returning to the Foggy Valley

Beneath him was a roiling, watery white mist. Standing at the precipice of the cliff, there was simply no way to see the bottom.

Straight chisel in hand, Linley was peering down into the Foggy Valley. Linley had spent three thousand gold coins to purchase a new straight chisel, and in terms of sharpness, it even exceeded the black dagger that Linley had previously used. After all, to Linley, the straight chisel was more suited to his hand than daggers.

Linley had already been inside the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for over a month and a half. He felt that right now, he was at the peak of his strength, in the best possible condition.

A dense layer of earth-elemental essence began to swirl around Linley as Linley softly chanted the words a magical spell. Finally, it formed a seemingly simple set of armor, but if one took a closer look at it, one would find that the material it was formed from looked very much like jadestone, with the only difference being that this jadestone armor emanated earth elemental essence.

Earth-style spell of the seventh rank – Earthguard armor (Jadestone level).

A magus of the seventh rank was far more powerful than a magus of the sixth rank. The power of their defensive spells alone multiplied tenfold.

“Now, if I run into those Dragonhawks again, just using my jadestone armor, I’ll be able to easily handle their blows.” Linley felt very confident. Next, Linley began to mutter the words to a wind-element spell. Air began to swirl about Linley’s body, until finally, Linley was lifted up into the air and began to drift into the Foggy Valley.

Linley was actually quite confident when it came to investigating the Foggy Valley.

“I now have both jadestone armor and the Soaring Technique. In addition, my physical fitness level is that of a warrior of the fourth rank. When aided still further by a Supersonic spell of the seventh rank... survival should not be a problem.” Linley slowly made his way through the Foggy Valley, not at all rushing.

This was because...

Of the Blueheart Grass!

Blueheart Grass was extremely important to Linley. Aside from procuring Blueheart Grass, Linley was also extremely curious as to why so many magical beasts were all living here, especially given that they all belonged to different categories of beasts.

“Boss, be careful. Don’t forget how you were almost hunted down last time.” Bebe mentally reminded him.

“Don’t worry.”

The further down Linley flew, the greater the gap between the two cliffs grew. Clearly, this valley was astonishingly large. Within the misty fog, Linley flew very carefully while inspecting his surroundings. Bebe was also watching with extreme caution. Both of them were looking to find more Blueheart Grass.

The first target Linley aimed at was naturally the place where he had seen the Blueheart Grass last time, when he had not had the chance to gather it.

Hugging the cliff, Linley proceeded forward with caution.

“Boss, I see Blueheart Grass. It’s right there!” Bebe’s eyes were very sharp. Linley took a look as well, and his eyes instantly lit up.

The grass blades were green, but a faint current of blue emanated and flowed throughout them.

“There aren’t any Green Tattooed Pythons, are there?” Linley didn’t dare to be too rash. Although he no longer feared the Green Tattooed Python, once he began to fight with one, many other magical beasts would most likely be drawn here as well. He definitely didn’t have sufficient confidence in dealing with an army of magical beasts.

As the Green Tattooed Python was green in color, it was very easy to miss it in the surrounding green vines, so Linley had to be absolutely careful.

After closely inspecting his surroundings and verifying that there were no Green Tattooed Pythons nearby, Linley carefully flew closer.

Gathering the Blueheart Grass, Linley once more felt its icy cold in his hands. A hint of a smile appeared on Linley's face. This chilling sensation was proof that this grass was indeed Blueheart Grass. Linley carefully stored it inside his backpack, and then continued to make his way forward in search of more.

“Growl...”

“Shriiiiiek...”

All sorts of howls from magical beasts emanated from below. Their wild, mixed roars caused Linley's heart to quiver. Those howling sounds came from below. Just judging from the roars alone, there must be an enormous number of magical beasts below!

Peering through the thinning white fog, Linley could now vaguely make out the rich grassland below.

“Boss, be careful. I don't want to be attacked and chased and flee in all directions,” Bebe reminded.

“I know.” Linley was at maximum alertness, and his eyes constantly scanned his surroundings, especially the green vines near the cliff walls. Linley was very much concerned that a Green Tattooed Python might be hiding amidst the vines. Being discovered by a single magical beast was the same as being discovered by all of them.

“Dragonhawk.” Linley discovered that far away, a large, flying magical beast was lazily soaring through the air. Hurriedly, Linley flew away from it.

Fortunately, the valley was filled with white fog, causing distant objects to have only a faint silhouette. The Dragonhawk was huge and easy to notice, but Linley was comparatively much smaller. Naturally, he had something of an advantage in this regard.

“Shriek, shriek!” Suddenly, a series of strange howls could be heard, and even

worse, the howls were heading in Linley's direction.

"Not good." Linley's facial expression changed.

Linley, who had been in close contact with Dragonhawks before, knew that this was the call of a Dragonhawk. Looking in the direction of the origin of the noise, he saw the hazy outlines of roughly two or three dozen giant Dragonhawks flying in his direction.

The Dragonhawks were simply too huge in size. Twenty or thirty of them flying in a row made for a formation that blotted out the sun and covered the skies.

With so many Dragonhawks present, there was virtually nowhere Linley could hide.

Right now, Linley had three choices. The first was to do battle with these Dragonhawks. The second was to fly up and flee for his life. The third... was to fly down, deep into the belly of the mountain.

"Whoosh!"

Without hesitating at all, Linley immediately threw himself downwards, blazing his way through the white mist. In the space of a breath, Linley had transformed himself into an arrow, shooting himself into the middle of the grassy plains. And then, not moving in the slightest, he threw himself face-down, hiding in the grass.

Linley carefully began to crawl to the edge of the plains. At the edge of the grass, he peered out, carefully assessing the valley.

This was an enormous valley, filled with rivers as well as huge grassy fields, appearing like a pristine utopia. But, this pristine utopia was filled with countless gigantic crawling creatures.

Two stories tall, and thirty meters long, with rocky, stone-like carapaces, each scale the size of half a person.

The relevant information immediately sprang to Linley's mind. "Landwurm. Magical beast of the sixth rank. Fire element."

"If there were only one Landwurm, it wouldn't be much of a threat, but..."

Linley scanned the area. “There’s over a hundred Landwyrms here. If a hundred Landwyrms all attacked, there’d be no way to block them.”

“But they aren’t fast enough. To me, they shouldn’t pose much of a threat.” Linley looked towards the other magical beasts.

Within the valley, Landwyrms only made up a small part of the total magical beast population. There were also a large number of... Velocidragons. Velocidragons were not pack animals, and so most of them were spaced out in various places in the valley. At the same time, the skies were filled with Dragonhawks. If one looked carefully, within the various grassy plains, gigantic boas could also be seen slithering about.

And these were just what Linley could see at a glance.

“Just from that short glance, I can at least be sure that this valley runs from east to west. In the north, I can just barely make out the cliff walls.” Linley turned his head and looked back. From the west, he could also see the cliff walls. It was only the cliff walls to the east that he could not see clearly.

Especially that east-west running river, which was continuously flowing to the east.

“Bebe, you be careful too.” Linley executed the supporting wind-style Supersonic spell, and then carefully made his way through the grass. There were many grassy areas within this valley, possibly because all the magical beasts here were carnivores which did not eat grass.

While carefully making his way forward, Linley suddenly noticed something.

“What an extremely high density of natural elemental essence. The density of the natural elemental essence here is at least six or seven times higher than in the outside world.” Upon entering the valley, Linley was extremely keyed up, and actually hadn’t notice this fact until now.

“I wonder what has caused this place to have such a high elemental density.”

Linley carefully crawled eastwards through the valley. Landwyrms, Velocidragons, Green Tattooed Pythons, and Dragonhawks were all exceedingly large creatures. Thus, the little speck which was Linley, in comparison to them, wasn’t very visible at all.

“This valley is really long!”

After crawling nearly twenty kilometers eastwards, Linley still hadn't come to the end of the Valley. At the same time, Linley had discovered some new magical beast packs.

Magical beast of the sixth rank, Winged Pegasus. Magical beast of the seventh rank, Thunderwing Pegasus.

All sorts of pegasi were flying about in the air, while others slowly walked about in the valley, eating the grass.

“Boss, there's all sorts of underbrush here. How should we get across?” Bebe was worried.

Linley was starting to frown as well. The underbrush in front of him was all over the place, and it rose up half the length of his leg.

“The distance on the ground is too long. There's no way to crawl through there. I'll have to go by air.” Linley carefully backed up about a few hundred meters, as far away from the pegasi flocks as possible, and then exercised the Soaring Technique.

“Whoosh!”

Directly soaring into the air, Linley immediately scurried into the dense white fog. Within the dense white fog, only occasionally would a pegasus draw near. After all, pegasi were fairly small and didn't take up too much space, thus when they did draw near, Linley could dodge them.

Carefully flying eastwards, Linley kept close to the southern wall while carefully inspecting the cliffs for Blueheart Grass. But as Linley continued going forward, he began to frown again.

“Aside from that first patch of Blueheart Grass, I haven't found any more at all.” Linley was starting to grow impatient.

But Linley continued flying eastwards. After flying roughly ten kilometers, Linley noticed that he was seeing pegasi more frequently in the upper reaches, and so he once again descended to the valley floor.

“Linley, there's all sorts of magical beasts here. Many of the creatures here

normally never travel in packs, such as the Velocidragon or the Black Bear, or the agile Dragoncat.” Doehring Cowart wafted out of the ring, appearing by Linley’s side as they went forward together.

Linley carefully snuck forwards, while Doehring Cowart leisurely walked with him.

“Ah!”

As though struck by lightning, Linley suddenly halted and stood there stupidly. Roughly fifty meters ahead of Linley, in a knoll of grass with a diameter of roughly seven or eight meters, there was one patch of green-colored grass after another.

The fact that the grass was green was not a surprise. What mattered was... these grassy patches all emanated a blue aura.

“Blueheart Grass. All of it is Blueheart Grass!”

At this moment, Linley’s very heartbeat stopped. Heavens. A single patch of Blueheart Grass was worth tens of thousands of gold coins, and it would be considered a priceless item that would rarely even be seen on the market. But fifty meters in front of him, within that seven-or eight-meter wide patch of grass, there were at least a hundred patches of Blueheart Grass.

“So much! I could grab them seven or eight at a time!” Linley sucked in a deep breath.

Doehring Cowart’s eyes lit up. “Linley, for the purposes of drinking live dragon’s blood, four or five patches of Blueheart Grass would most likely be enough. To have so much Blueheart Grass in one place is inconceivable. However... the area around the Blueheart Grass is empty, with no place to hide. How will you get there?”

Perhaps Blueheart Grass was inimical to normal grass.

In a thirtymeter area around the Blueheart Grass, there wasn’t a single blade of normal grass.

“There aren’t too many magical beasts around here, and the ones that are here are not pack beasts. They’re scattered all over the place.” Linley carefully

observed the large cluster of Blueheart Grass and also the surrounding area. “There’re only seven magical beasts located near the Blueheart Grass. As long as I move fast enough, I shouldn’t have any problems escaping with my life.”

Linley forced himself to calm down, letting himself reach his maximum state of readiness.

“Boss, are you stupid? Have you forgotten about me, Bebe?” Bebe suddenly said to Linley mentally.

Linley started. Turning to look at Bebe, he saw Bebe delightedly winked at him. “Boss, my speed is much faster than yours, and my body is much smaller as well. How about I go do the gathering? There won’t be any problems at all. All you have to do is open your backpack and wait to get the grass.”

“Whoosh!”

Transforming into a black blur, in the blink of an eye, Bebe scurried into the middle of the grassy patch, and then using his sharp little claws, Bebe began agilely and voraciously digging up all the Blueheart Grass. As his little claws danced, that grassy patch became totally empty quite quickly, while next to Bebe, there was now a pile of Blueheart Grass that was almost as tall as Bebe himself was.

Forbidden Skies

Still lying down in the middle of the grass, Linley held his breath as he watched. “That mound must have at least fifty or sixty patches of Blueheart Grass.” Linley forcibly tamped down on the wild joy he was feeling. But the thing which astonished Linley the most was...

Bebe seemed to feel that wasn't enough, and continued to pull out more and more Blueheart Grass.

“Will Bebe be able to carry that huge mound over with those two small claws of his?” Linley was growing confused. He immediately reached out to Bebe mentally. “Bebe, that's enough. Get back here.”

Bebe raised his head and glanced at Linley, then wrinkled his cute little nose. “No rush. There's a lot more to go.”

Right at this moment, a Velocidragon which was drinking water by a nearby river just so happened to look over in his direction. Its gaze falling upon Bebe, it clearly noticed him, and it rose from the water, snorting out a plume of smoke as it fixed its icy cold gaze upon the little Shadowmouse.

“Not good.” Linley's heart immediately tightened.

If Bebe began an all-out battle with the Velocidragon, perhaps even more magical beasts might be attracted here. By then, the situation would become even worse.

Bebe also noticed the Velocidragon. Upon seeing it, Bebe seemed to be terrified, and immediately hid near the Blueheart Grass, ‘trembling’.

“Growl...” The Velocidragon let out a satisfied roar, and then immediately lay back down again and continued to drink water from the river.

“What a big stupid lump. It's so easy to fool it.” Bebe delightedly spoke to Linley mentally.

At this moment, Linley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. He hadn't expected little Bebe to 'feign weakness'. Linley knew very well that a year and a half ago, Bebe had been capable of forcing a Velocidragon to flee. After another year and a half of growth, Bebe should now be even stronger.

Bebe definitely had no fear of a Velocidragon.

But Bebe was also very smart. He knew that if he caused too much of a ruckus, Linley would be easily exposed.

Humans!

Magical beasts were very antagonistic towards humans.

In the eyes of that Velocidragon, Bebe was nothing more than an extremely small and weak magical beast. Seeing how terrified Bebe was, it naturally wouldn't bother to kill him. After all, the Velocidragon knew that amongst Shadowmice, only the lowest level mice had black fur.

But the Velocidragon had no idea that one of his 'comrades' had been mauled quite badly by little Bebe.

"Formidable." Linley gave Bebe a big thumb's up.

Bebe laughed delightedly. "Naturally. I, Bebe, am an extremely intelligent Shadowmouse." Taking a look at the large pile of Blueheart Grass next to him, Bebe suddenly expanded his body size dramatically, from twenty centimeters to nearly half a meter.

Now that his size had increased, Bebe was able to easily use his two large paws to press the pile of Blueheart Grass against his chest. Then, with a flex of his legs...

Whoosh!

Bebe suddenly landed in the grass, directly next to Linley.

"Boss. All in all, there's 160 clumps of Blueheart Grass here. Having me, Bebe, take action was the perfect, flawless plan." Bebe arrogantly puffed out his little chest.

Linley lovingly rubbed Bebe's little head, and then put all of the Blueheart Grass into his backpack.

“Let’s keep going. I’m growing more and more curious about this valley.” Linley’s eyes shone as he looked east. “For this valley to have so many magical beasts, and also to have such a thick density of elemental essence... mmm, I feel like the elemental density here is even higher than when we first came down. The elemental essence density here is about ten times higher than in the outside world.”

Linley had a feeling...

Whatever strange factor was causing the elemental essence in this valley to be so much higher than normal, must have come from the eastern side of the valley.

Linley continued heading east, making his way through the dense grass. With the assistance of the supportive wind-style spell Supersonic, Linley was able to move at a very fast speed. A seventh-level magus using the Supersonic spell was capable of allowing someone to move three times faster than normal!

Three times Linley’s normal speed as a warrior of the fourth rank.

“Whoosh. Whoosh!”

Linley quickly scurried from one hiding spot to another, dodging one magical beast after the other. Fortunately, aside from that area which had an abundance of pegasi, the rest of the valley was filled with abundant grass, tall enough to hide Linley within it.

“From the point where I entered the gorge until now, I’ve perhaps gone almost a hundred kilometers east.”

Linley was very astonished.

The entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was around a thousand kilometers or so wide, so for a valley to be over a hundred kilometers long was very astonishing. Based on the distance he had travelled, Linley should have begun to draw very near to the core regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

“Hey, Boss. There’s very few magical beasts here.” Perched on Linley’s shoulders, Bebe was constantly scanning in all directions as well.

Linley nodded.

In an area around them with a radius of several kilometers, only two magical beasts could be seen. It was very strange for the density of magical beasts to be so low here. The two magical beasts present were both gigantic Velocidragons. Most importantly... these two Velocidragons were both resting on the ground, apparently asleep.

“Just two Velocidragons, and sleeping besides.” Linley laughed in a self-mocking way. “This section will probably be the easiest section to traverse ever since I got in here. But I must say, these two Velocidragons are rather different compared to your average Velocidragon.”

Linley noticed that these Velocidragons' bodies were even larger than that of most Velocidragons. Because they were lying down, it was hard to be certain, but these two Velocidragons, even while lying down, were almost as tall as most Velocidragons were while standing up. In addition, their body length was double that of an ordinary Velocidragon.

While lying down on the ground, those two large Velocidragons looked very much like two small mountains.

In order to be extra cautious, Linley went so far as to carefully pass the two large Velocidragons via a patch of grass that was over twenty meters away from them. But Linley didn't notice that when he passed through the grass, making a soft 'swishing' sound, the ears of the two Velocidragons twitched, even though their eyes remained closed and they didn't move.

When traveling through grass, there would of course be some noise.

But Linley didn't pay too much heed to that, because as Linley saw it, even the wind blowing through the grass would cause some swishing sounds. It would only just be a bit quieter than the sound of a person traveling through the grass, was all. Linley had crept through the grass for so long now without any trouble.

“Swish!”

A sudden blur sliced through the air and smashed directly towards Linley. Linley, even while boosted by the Supersonic technique, was only able to just barely stop in time.

“Whack!”

A long dragon tail, as fast and as flexible as an iron whip, heavily struck the ground right in front of Linley, perhaps just half a meter in front of him. The earth itself split apart from that blow, as a meter-wide crevice appeared in the ground. Linley hurriedly exerted force with his legs and began to run.

“I’ve been discovered.” Linley’s heart shuddered.

“Growl!” “Growl....”

Two roars in succession. The two Velocidragons that had been sleeping suddenly both rose to stand up. Both of them were four stories tall, and their body length alone was around forty meters, with their tails making up another forty meters in length. Their size was absolutely astonishing.

“They are so huge! These must be elites amongst the Velocidragon race. Most likely magical beasts of the eighth rank.” Linley’s heart trembled.

These were the first magical beasts of the eighth rank which Linley had met here in the valley. As a magus of the seventh rank now, Linley had confidence to tussle with even magical beasts of the seventh rank. But upon encountering a magical beast of the eighth rank, he didn’t even dare to entertain the thought of fighting, because at the higher ranks, the differences in power for each rank grew even more pronounced.

Just from the value of their magicite cores, one could tell.

A magicite core of the sixth rank was worth about 1000 gold coins.

But a magicite core of the seventh rank could be worth up to 50,000 gold coins! The gap between the sixth and the seventh ranks was thus easily imagined.

A magicite core of the eighth rank? The price could reach up to 500,000 gold coins!

As for a magicite core of the ninth rank? The value was an astonishing 5,000,000 gold coins!

“These were just the general estimates based on the books in the libraries. In reality, the magicite cores of some particularly large and powerful magical

beasts are extremely rare, and thus even more valuable. Often, you won't even be able to find them on the market."

A magical beast of the eighth rank was far more powerful than a magical beast of the seventh rank.

"Growl." "Growl!"

The two Velocidragons of the eighth rank exchanged glances. A look of amusement actually appeared in their eyes, and then they turned, charging at Linley at high speed.

The intelligence of a magical beast of the eighth rank was definitely no less than that of any human being.

"Whoosh!" At maximum speed, Linley began to frantically run eastwards while immediately beginning to chant the words to the wind-style Soaring Technique spell. But since it was a magical spell of the seventh rank, the incantation was quite complex as well, and thus took quite a bit of time to perform.

At this point in time, Bebe didn't dare to try and show off either.

He could defeat a Velocidragon of the seventh rank, but a Velocidragon of the eighth rank? Just based on their size alone, which was a full size larger than ordinary Velocidragons, Bebe knew very well that his teeth might not even be able to bite through the scales and reach their flesh.

Their huge size signified that they had thick scales as well. Each scale of these Velocidragons of the eighth rank was more than half a meter thick, and beneath that was an even thicker layer of muscles.

To injure them was an extremely difficult proposition.

Possessing the speed of a warrior of the fourth rank boosted by the Supersonic supportive spell, Linley's traveling speed was still somewhat faster than the rather slow Velocidragons. These huge creatures were rather slow and lumbering, but each step they took covered a large amount of distance. Each step of theirs covered as much distance as ten of Linley's.

Most importantly...

The iron-whip-like tails of these Velocidragons of the eighth rank. Possessing the speed of lightning, they were even faster than the tails of Velocidragons of the seventh rank. With a flash and a flicker, they could move dozens of meters, and were approximately on the same level as Bebe's own speed.

The earth shook as those two huge, ponderous creatures continued to chase after Linley. Every so often, the two of them would exchange a strange look with each other.

“Whoosh!”

Linley suddenly flew into the sky. He had finally completed the incantation for the Soaring Technique.

“I'm finally safe.” Linley quickly flew higher. Seeing the two enormous Velocidragons beneath him, Linley finally let out a sigh of relief. “These two Velocidragons of the eighth rank were really sinister. They intentionally feigned sleep in order to lure me in.”

Actually, what Linley didn't realize was that the two Velocidragons were not baiting him in at all, earlier.

But these two Velocidragons of the eighth rank were extremely sensitive to their surroundings. They were very used to the sound of the wind rustling through the grass. When they heard the frequency of the rustling suddenly change, of course they would immediately become suspicious.

“Growl...”

The two Velocidragons of the eighth rank watched as Linley flew away. They didn't appear angry in the slightest. Instead, they raised their heads high and roared. That roaring sound seemed almost... happy.

Linley was able to differentiate between a roar of rage, and a roar of pleasure.

“Growl...” “Growl...” “Growl...” “Growl...”

Suddenly, the air above Linley was split with draconic roars as well, one draconic roar following the other. Just from the number of roars, one could tell that there was an extremely large number of magical beasts present.

“They're above me.” Halting in mid-air, Linley looked up, startled. From within

the white, foggy mists, one enormous draconic beast after another began to emerge, every single one of them around seventy or eighty meters long, and with an enormous wingspan of around fifty or sixty meters long as well.

Multiple huge, draconic figures hovered there in the white mist. Linley couldn't tell at a glance how many there were.

“At least a few dozen.” Linley felt as though he couldn't breathe.

One enormous flying draconic beast after another descended from the skies. Their flame-colored scales were very resplendent, and flames seemed to flicker around their entire bodies.

“Fire Dragons!” Linley knew that the situation had just become catastrophic.

Fire Dragons were considered middle-class dragon-type beasts. Most Fire Dragons were magical beasts of the eighth rank, while elite members of the race could reach the ninth rank in power.

“Two magical beasts of the eighth rank were able to give me so much trouble for so long. Now, I'm dealing with ten that can fly.” Linley felt extremely miserable right now.

And right at that moment....

“Growl...” “Growl!”

Another series of roars began to emanate from a different direction. And then, one flying creature after another, each approximately the same size as a Fire Dragon, began to spread their massive wings and fly in his direction. These enormous, flying draconic beasts had dark green scales that were as clear as jasper.

These flying draconic beasts with green jasper scales were not the slightest bit fewer in number when compared to the Fire Dragons.

The two Velocidragons of the eighth rank below Linley began to roar in amusement as well, their eyes filled with a sinister maliciousness.

“Now I know why when I entered this area, I only saw the Velocidragons of the eighth rank and didn't see anything else.” Linley felt miserable. “Most likely, only magical beasts of the eighth rank are permitted to reside in this area.

Magical beasts of the seventh rank don't dare to enter. These Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons are all pack-type draconic beasts of the eighth rank. Most likely, these two Velocidragons were just toying with me this entire time. When they saw I was about to fly away and escape, they immediately roared out to have the Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons come as well."

Over a hundred massive flying dragons were circling above him in the sky. Only now did Linley realize what was going on.

But by now, the way out through the skies was forbidden to him!

"Boss, what are we gonna do?" Bebe's pitiful voice rang out in the back of Linley's mind.

The Gloomy Depths

His head raised, Linley watched the more than one hundred dragons circle above him. The flames surrounding the Fire Dragons raised the temperature around them, while those jasper-scaled Emerald Dragons seemed to emanate a soul-chilling aura.

An amalgamation of opposites, frost and flame!

Beneath Linley, those two enormous Velocidragons were watching him with amusement. Right now Linley, who was seventy to eighty meters above the ground, had nowhere to flee. At the same time, those hovering, circling dragons also watched Linley with amusement.

The intelligence of a magical beast of the eighth rank was definitely not inferior to that of a human. Linley knew all too well that to these countless flying dragons, he was like nothing more than an ant. His opponents weren't at all concerned with whether he lived or died, only... whether or not he could provide them with a bit of amusement.

A game!

Just like how humans might like to play with ants. When they were bored, they would crush him to death.

"Bebe, I don't want to be an ant." Linley glanced at Bebe. "Get ready to run."

"Swish!"

Linley's body shot downwards, allowing his natural body weight to combine with the Supersonic spell to rocket him forward towards the ground, and then, just before hitting the ground, he brought his body to a sudden halt. This sort of sudden change from high speed to a halt disrupted the flow of blood in his body, causing him so much pain that he spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Good thing I'm not just a magus, I'm also a warrior of the fourth rank and my

body can take it.”

Right now, there were two enormous Velocidragons behind him, while above him there were over a hundred giant flying dragons. He didn't have the time to care about anything else. Linley immediately began charging towards the empty wasteland in front.

“Roar...” The two Velocidragons began to roar.

“Roar!” “Roar!” “Roar!”

Over a hundred dragons swooped down from the skies. The Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons were roaring, and the two giant Velocidragons began chasing after Linley, the earth shaking with each step. The more than one hundred dragons were also swooping towards Linley, causing the sky to darken as they blotted out the sun.

A single dragon was already enormous, to say nothing of a hundred. They completely covered the sky with their mass. And then, the dozens of dragons all opened their giant maws and began blasting giant balls of flame at Linley.

“Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!”

One giant fireball after another, each the size of Linley or larger, began smashing down from the heavens. The ‘fireballs’ generated by the Fire Dragons were not like ordinary balls of flame; they contained within them a mixture of magic as well as the innate dragonflame which all Fire Dragons held within them. Their temperature was so high that even the tough scales of Velocidragons of the seventh rank would most likely crack from the heat.

“Boom!”

A particularly large fireball just barely brushed past Linley. The fleeing Linley instantly could smell the odor of burning hair.

“Boss, your hair got burnt.” Bebe's voice rang out in Linley's mind.

Linley himself knew very well that his hair hadn't actually been touched by that ball of fire. It was just that the temperatures the fireballs generated were way too high.

Just by passing by him, the temperature had been raised high enough that his

hair had been burnt. Like an agile little monkey, Linley began to run about in unpredictable patterns, constantly dodging those fireballs.

Those Fire Dragons also didn't just charge forward to kill him. They were just playing around, using fireballs to toy with Linley.

"The difference in power is too great. Even though I'm a dual-element magus of the seventh rank, when facing a magical beast of the eighth rank, I would definitely be destroyed." Linley could sense how terrifyingly hot those fireballs were, and yet those Fire Dragons could casually blast them out from their mouths, one after the other.

Fortunately, the Fire Dragons weren't actually trying to kill him as quickly as possible.

Suddenly, Linley felt a cold aura. His body, which had just begun adjusting to the heat, suddenly clenched with the cold.

"Swish!" A translucent, faintly green spear passed by Linley, and then shattered, releasing a terrible, cold aura that forced Linley to instantly and quickly dodge away.

In the skies above, those dozens of Emerald Dragons had also opened their maws and begun vomiting frozen arrows at Linley. To the enormous Emerald Dragons, these projectiles were perhaps just arrows, but to the comparatively small Linley, these three-meter long projectiles were not arrows; they were terrifying frozen spears.

With balls of flame and spears of ice raining down on him from the skies, Linley had to use all of his wits to constantly dodge and dart about in all directions.

It was exhausting!

Linley was feeling mentally exhausted. His mental energy was being worn down to the point of exhaustion. For a short period of time, this level of energy expenditure was fine, but in the long run, he would definitely suffer from mental exhaustion. Linley also had to expend enormous amounts of physical energy in sprinting around so frantically.

"Boom!" A ball of fire clipped Linley on his left shoulder.

A shattering sound could be heard as the Earthguard jadestone armor covering Linley began to splinter and crack. Earth elemental essence began to swirl about the armor, attempting to repair the damage.

“The attack power is terrifying. If struck head on, I expect my jadestone armor will only be able to take one blow.” Faced with certain death, Linley’s latent potential seemed to explode, and he once more upped his speed as he ran about and dodged wildly.

Even Linley himself was amazed at his dodging abilities.

This really was Linley at his absolute peak performance. But unfortunately, even at his peak, there was no chance of success when faced with over a hundred dragons.

“Roar!” “Roar!”

The hundred plus Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons in the sky watched Linley with amusement. Seeing him constantly dodge, they felt more and more interested in him. Even the two Velocidragons chasing after Linley would occasionally wave their tails to threaten him.

At this point in time...

Linley was like an ant, an ant being toyed with by an entire group of giants.

If he made just the slightest mistake, Linley would die. These titanic dragons didn’t care in the slightest about whether Linley lived or died; they only cared about one thing. “How long will this little human creature be able to hold on?”

Five minutes! Linley had managed to survive for five entire minutes as they toyed with him!

Five minutes. Three hundred full seconds. It sounded like a short period of time, but Linley felt as though it had passed extremely slowly. Every single second was a second in which his life was on the line.

“These bastards. If I didn’t dodge fast enough, I would have been killed by them, and then they would have left without caring in the slightest, continuing with their leisurely lives.” Linley knew very well that he was nothing more than a slight diversion for these giant dragons.

In actuality, Bebe possessed even higher speed than those giant dragons. If he were alone, he would definitely be able to escape. Bebe was currently perched on top of Linley's shoulders, his eyes staring at the fireballs and ice spears falling from the skies, telling Linley where the danger would be.

"Boss, careful! Three fireballs!" Bebe urgently warned.

Linley's facial expression changed.

"Boom!"

A fireball directly struck Linley on his back, and then exploded. The jadestone armor covering Linley suddenly shone with an earthen light, and then with a crack, shattered into its component elemental essence.

"Hiss!" Linley's hair was, in the blink of an eye, all burnt, and his face was painfully scorched by the heat.

Without the protection of the jadestone armor, if Linley took another blow, regardless of whether it was a fireball or an icy spear, he would definitely die.

"I won't be able to hold out much longer." Linley could feel all his muscles quivering, and even his head was splitting. Linley knew that he had already reached his limit. If he continued under these circumstances, he would definitely collapse."

"Linley, up ahead, 120 meters, there's a twenty-meter high hill. Beneath it is a very deep tunnel. The hill doesn't actually block the tunnel completely; there's enough space to fit two people in. Hurry and flee there, it could save your life." Doehring Cowart's voice rang out.

While he was being pursued by the dragons, Doehring Cowart hadn't said a single word, but as soon as he did, Linley found new life and new hope.

Somehow, unbelievably, Linley managed to increase his speed even further. The hope of survival brought incredible things out of people.

Those hundred plus Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons circling above all stared at Linley with rather odd looks.

"Hrm?"

When they realized where Linley was going, those hundred plus dragons,

previously amused, all roared with fury. Without any coordination, they simultaneously began to angrily blast out balls of fire and icy spears at the same time, covering an entire area of 20-30 meters.

“Ah!”

At Linley’s current speed, in about two to three seconds, he managed to reach the hill. It was just about at this time that the fireballs and icy spears arrived as well.

“There’s the crack!” Linley instantly saw the two-meter wide cave entrance. Without any hesitation, Linley dove inside.

But before he managed to make it inside, a large ball of fire came blasting down at him. The fireballs travelled at much higher speeds than the icy spears. By the time the fireball came within 20-30 centimeters of Linley, Linley’s clothes began to burn.

“Screech!”

Bebe suddenly enlarged himself, and then used his own body to accept that vicious blow from the fireball. Only then did Linley luckily manage to make it inside the tunnel. But Bebe, in turn, was buried by an avalanche of those fireballs and icy spears.

“Oof!”

Linley fell all the way down, perhaps seventy or eighty meters, before smashing into the tough ground. This place was very gloomy and dark, with the only light coming from that small hole up above. But Linley had excellent vision, and that dim light was enough for him to see his surroundings. And right now...

Linley’s hair had been burnt, and there were two or three spots on his face which had also been burnt black.

His face had been ruined, and he had been scarred!

But right now, Linley couldn’t bother to care about these things. The only thing he was worried about was Bebe.

“Swish!” A black blur fell down, smashing directly in front of Linley. “Yeowch! That was comfortable! First cold, then hot. That felt so incredibly nice.” Bebe’s

voice rang out in Linley's mind.

Linley joyfully embraced Bebe. "Bebe, are you okay?"

Bebe's face was extremely dirty, but he still wrinkled his nose delightedly. "Of course! I, Bebe, am much stronger than I was a year ago. Even if I were to fight head on with a magical beast of the eighth rank, I wouldn't be afraid, much less a few fireballs or ice spears."

Linley laughed. Now that he knew Bebe was fine, Linley was no longer worried.

"Then why didn't you go out and tussle with those giant dragons a bit?" Linley teased.

Bebe said unhappily, "How could I, Bebe, be afraid of them? But their scales are simply too thick, and my size is too small. My mouth is also small. I can't bite through those scales. It's too hard for me to kill them, but they can forget about killing me as well."

Linley began to chuckle.

"Boss, your face... your face is ruined!" Bebe's mental shout suddenly reminded Linley.

Stretching out his facial muscles, Linley felt a fiery pain. He had no choice but to sneer at himself, "Bebe, although I've trained my physical strength, no matter how much I train, I can't possibly strengthen my facial muscles. My defensive abilities weren't strong enough."

"Oof, Bebe, let me rest for a bit, I'm so tired."

Linley let go of Bebe, then lay down on the ground.

Just then, Linley had stretched himself to the absolute limit, both in terms of physical energy as well as mental energy. It wasn't so bad when facing danger, but now that he was safe, Linley felt endless waves of exhaustion crashing upon him. Linley wanted to rest.

Within the valley. Those hundreds of giant, coiling dragons and those two Velocidragons of the eighth rank were all staring at the hill.

"Growl..." Suddenly, a particularly large Fire Dragon let out a roar.

All of the giant dragons and Velocidragons retreated. Only that large Fire Dragon remained, staring at that hill with a mixture of terror and alarm in his eyes.

One of the main entrances to that underground area had previously been extremely large, large enough for even a dragon to go inside. But then, the Fire Dragons and the Emerald Dragons had received an order to move a small hill to block that tunnel off.

To those enormous dragons, that two-meter wide crevice was nothing. Based on their size, there was no way they could get in.

But to Linley, it was very easy to slip inside.

“Having entered the forbidden area, this human will die without question.” That particularly large Fire Dragon rose directly into the air and flew away.

This was the forbidden area of the Foggy Valley. Forget about humans; even Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons dared not trespass there.

Nothing which went in would come out alive. This was the iron rule of the Foggy Valley.

The Armored Razorback Wurm

Within the underground cave, Linley laid down and rested for a while. After feeling that he had recovered, he stood up. That situation just now, where he had been attacked by over a hundred flying dragons, was the most dangerous situation Linley had ever been in. Virtually every second, he had been in fear for his life. After escaping from that calamity with his life, Linley had finally managed to take a breather, but in his heart, he also had an ardent desire — the desire to increase his power!

In front of those giant dragons, he was nothing more than a toy. He had no ability to resist at all.

“Boss, there’s no way out from above. The only option we have is to keep going down. Next to us, there’s a very wide path,” Bebe mentally transmitted to Linley while jumping on Linley’s shoulders.

Off to Linley’s side, there was a very wide, crooked road, several dozen meters wide and almost ten meters tall. But this road was curved and crooked, heading off into an unknown location in the east. After pondering silently for a while, Linley decided to venture forth with Bebe into that gloomy darkness.

The cave tunnel grew darker the further in they went. After a while, nothing could be seen but darkness. Linley couldn’t even see the tunnel, and so he had to carefully make his way forward by feeling his way along the wall.

“Boss, where the heck are we? Why was this tunnel covered up by that hill?” Bebe asked Linley.

Linley shook his head.

“There’s over a hundred flying dragons overhead. If we go up, we’re just committing suicide. We can only keep going down.” Linley also didn’t have the ability to tunnel his way through to escape this maze-like rocky tunnel. His only choice was to follow it to whatever unknown destination it led to.

Following Linley, Bebe was also on maximum alert, inspecting his surroundings out of fear that a magical beast might pop up out of nowhere.

“There’s light up ahead.” Within the darkness, Linley saw a dim glow coming from up front. He unconsciously sped up his pace to head towards it. Slowly, Linley discovered the exit to the tunnel, and that it was the exit which was glowing with a dim red light.

Suddenly...

“Haha, Sartius, weren’t you very arrogant? Those things you did to me three hundred years ago, I will repay you manifold today.” An extremely deep voice rang out from the exit, sounding as deep and powerful as a peal of thunder.

Linley couldn’t help but feel shocked. “A person!”

“No matter what, it’ll be easier negotiating with a person than with a magical beast. And I have no other path I can take. But this fellow’s voice is really loud.” Sticking next to the tunnel walls, Linley walked towards the exit. But when he got within twenty meters of the exit, he could already see what was going on at the other side through the exit hole.

This was the end of the tunnel. There was an extremely large cave here.

This cave was at least several kilometers wide, and at least several dozen meters high. But what shocked Linley was...

From his current vantage point, Linley could clearly tell that there was a huge black bear standing in mid-air, at least ten meters high, with all the fur on his body appearing as though it were made from steel. This black bear was covered with countless violet tattoo-like patterns, making him look very bizarre.

This black bear that was standing in mid-air was the source of the ‘human’ words Linley had heard.

“This... this...” Linley couldn’t breathe.

It was as though his consciousness was being repeatedly struck by lightning.

“A Saint-level magical beast!” Linley instantly understood.

Upon reaching the Saint level, magical beasts would usually be able to fly, and also be able to speak using human languages. These were the defining

characteristics of Saint-level magical beasts. Saint-level magical beasts were extremely terrifying creatures. Most human Saint-level combatants were not capable of defeating a Saint-level magical beast. Only the strongest Saint-level human combatants had enough power to kill a Saint-level magical beast.

A Saint-level magical beast was capable of shrinking his physical size; a hundred meter large Saint-level magical beast could shrink himself to the size of a small snake.

Naturally, though... there was no way for a Saint-level magical beast to assume the form of a human being.

Perhaps only a magical beast which possessed the power of a deity would be able to assume human form.

“A Saint-level magical beast. I’ve actually encountered a Saint-level magical beast.” Linley didn’t even dare to breathe loudly. He carefully watched the cave opening. “This is a Violet Tattooed Bear. Violet Tattooed Bears are magical beasts of the ninth rank.”

Violet Tattooed Bears were considered a very powerful race of magical beasts. Naturally, they were capable of reaching the Saint level in some cases.

“But this Violet Tattooed Bear is blind in one eye.” Linley suddenly noticed the terrifying injury that covered the left eye of the Violet Tattooed Bear that was standing in mid-air. Clearly, this bear was half-blind.

“Sartius, all these years, I’ve been waiting for my chance to get revenge. Haha, so what if you ended up seizing this place for your own? Although the elemental essence density here is a hundred times higher than that of the outside world, I was still the first to reach the Saint level. Haha.”

Clearly, the Violet Tattooed Bear was extremely excited.

“Where is this Sartius that this bear keeps talking about?” Linley stealthily retreated, then crept closer to the other wall of the tunnel. Indeed, from the other side of the tunnel, he was able to see another magical beast. This one was a magical beast that made Linley’s heart shudder yet again.

This magical beast was ten meters long and three meters high.

Its entire body was densely covered with pitch black scales, and all of the scales on its body were patterned in a very orderly, regimented manner. Every single scale was roughly the size of a human palm.

But the densely patterned scales were arranged together in such a way that for some reason, they struck fear into the hearts of whoever saw them.

On its back, there were many sharp spikes that were thirty centimeters long, which spread all the way from its back to its neck.

The most terrifying of all were its eyes...

Its eyes were a dark gold color, so cold that they could cause someone to utterly freeze.

“The Armored Razorback Wurm, the most terrible dragon-type beast of the ninth rank.” Linley’s heart began to tremble, and within his mind, he naturally began to recollect the information he had previously acquired on Armored Razorback Wurms.

Armored Razorback Wurms: Magical beasts of the ninth rank, darkness-type. The smallest dragon-type beast in physical size, among dragon-type beasts of the same rank, the Armored Razorback Wurm possessed the most powerful defense, the highest agility, and also possessed extremely sharp claws with incredible offensive power.

Without question, among dragon-type beasts of the same rank, the Armored Razorback Wurm would definitely be one of the most powerful creatures.

“It’s actually an Armored Razorback Wurm!” Only now did Linley finally understand everything.

A Violet Tattooed Bear was an extremely terrifying combatant. Not only did it inherit the massive strength inherent to all bear-type beasts, it was also extremely nimble.

Amongst magical beasts of the ninth rank, there weren’t many which were more powerful than a Violet Tattooed Bear... but an Armored Razorback Wurm was, without question, one of them.

The Armored Razorback Wurm swept its icy gaze across Linley.

Linley felt as though the season had turned to winter, and that in the midst of that winter, a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head. The fear he now felt far surpassed the fear he had felt when he had been a child in the town of Wushan and seen that Black Dragon of the ninth rank.

Although the Armored Razorback Wyrms had discovered Linley, it didn't pay him any mind. Because right now, its greatest opponent was this Violet Tattooed Bear in front of it. Although among magical beasts of the ninth rank, an Armored Razorback Wyrms was indeed an indomitable tyrant, when faced with a Saint-level magical beast...

"Growl..." The Armored Razorback Wyrms let out a deep growl.

"Sartius, you say that I'm just a new Saint-level beast? That you aren't afraid of me? Haha, true, I just recently entered the Saint level. As soon as I entered the Saint level, I became consumed with the urge to kill you! Hmph, even if I've just entered the Saint level, you still aren't a match for me." The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had a look of total confidence on its face.

"Armored Razorback Wyrms. You really are a species of dragons which advance very slowly. You've dominated this place for so long, and enjoyed the benefits of a location where the elemental essence density is a hundredfold that of the normal world. But you still remain at the peak of the ninth rank and still haven't been able to take that final step. But today, I will let you know the power of the Saint level." The Violet Tattooed Bear's aura began to dramatically increase in power...

Although the Violet Tattooed Bear talked a big game, in his heart, he knew very well how terrifying an Armored Razorback Wyrms could be.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms had the strongest defensive abilities among dragon-type creatures. What was more, Sartius was at the peak of the ninth rank, only one step away from becoming a Saint-level Armored Razorback Wyrms. In terms of defensive ability, Sartius definitely could compete with most Saint-level dragons. But aside from his defensive power, there was also his offense to watch out for!

The twin talons of the Armored Razorback Wyrms were incomparably sharp!

"Nonetheless... I have entered the Saint level, after all." The Violet Tattooed

Bear was very confident in himself.

“Upon reaching the Saint level, one advantage is the ability to fly, while the second advantage is that I’m able to send the power of my soul outside of my body. Most magical beasts rely upon their vision to do battle, but Saint-level combatants are able to use their soul sense to clearly detect their opponent’s movements in battle. Thus, in combat, they definitely have a big advantage.”

Most importantly, upon reaching the Saint level, one’s offensive power would also increase.

Barely breathing, Linley continued to watch through the exit hole as the two terrifying magical beasts stared at each other.

An Armored Razorback Wyrms at the peak of the ninth rank, against a Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. Linley could feel his blood begin to boil. For some reason, whenever Linley saw those icy, merciless eyes of the Armored Razorback Wyrms, Linley felt that he was more afraid of the Wyrms than of the Bear.

“It’s begun.” Linley’s eyes lit up.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear landed on the ground, while at the same time, it began to emanate a roaring sound. All of the muscles on the Bear’s body began to swell, while at the same time beginning to emit crackling, popping sounds. The Violet Tattooed Bear, previously around ten meters in height, suddenly increased its height by two meters. Twelve meters tall now, it had the same waist as before, but its legs were now a full size larger.

“Die, Sartius!”

With a mighty growl, the Violet Tattooed Bear swept toward Sartius in a blur, appearing directly in front of the Armored Razorback Wyrms. The Wyrms, which had been in a state of readied action this entire time, suddenly, viciously smacked the earth with its tail, sending its entire body flying far away through the tremendous counterforce which had been released.

A gigantic, meter-long paw slammed viciously into the ground where the Armored Razorback Wyrms had been just a heartbeat ago. “Bam!” Linley could clearly see that the ground itself rippled for at least two or three meters in a

radius around the Bear's paw, and within that area, the stone floor itself was partially turned into dust, to a depth of half a meter. And outside of that area, within a radius of several dozen meters, the ground itself split, with seven or eight terrifying large cracks appearing.

"How terrifying." Linley's heart had gotten stuck in his throat.

The Violet Tattooed Bear suddenly turned around, focusing its bizarre, red gaze upon the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms just stared back at it with its cold, dark golden eyes, not actively attacking at all.

"Sartius. You are afraid." The Violet Tattooed Bear laughed delightedly. And then, its entire body began to dimly emanate a dark aura. "Whoosh!" With a strong kick to the floor, the Bear launched itself into the air, and then began to descend in a bizarre pattern, directly at the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms stared at the Violet Tattooed Bear with its cold eyes. And then, its iron-whip-like dragon tail suddenly swept out...

"Swish!" It sliced through the air, causing a screaming sound so high that Linley's ears were hurting. "This draconic tail is far more powerful than the tails of those Velocidragons. I bet even I, Bebe, couldn't take a blow from it." At this time, Bebe's eyes were as round as round could be.

The Violet Tattooed Bear's left paw, glowing with that strange dark energy, reached out to snatch at the dragon's tail directly. A Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear's paw had incredibly powerful offensive power, and it also was extremely strong defensively as well.

"THUD!"

The dragon's tail collided directly with that huge paw with an incredibly deep striking sound. The Violet Tattooed Bear's giant left paw shuddered slightly, and the dragon's tail retreated as well.

But when they had exchanged blows just now, the Violet Tattooed Bear's right paw had already struck out and arrived at the Armored Razorback Wyrms' body. The Armored Razorback Wyrms did not try to dodge. Instead, it inclined its body and pointed that row of sharp spikes on its back towards the paw.

This Armored Razorback Wyrms and the Violet Tattooed Bear were old foes. Naturally, the Bear knew how fierce this particular tactic by the Wyrms was.

Not only did the Armored Razorback Wyrms possess extremely high defensive power, its body was also designed extremely well. If the opponent smashed down on it with a palm, the Armored Razorback Wyrms could easily move its body and dissipate the strength of the blow across its entire body.

“Sartius. I’m no longer that old magical beast of the ninth rank.” A malicious, cruel look appeared in the eyes of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. Suddenly, a freezing black light emanated from the giant paw of the Violet Tattooed Bear, and that extremely fast paw began to move even faster than before, viciously striking down on the spikes of the Armored Razorback Wyrms with even greater force than before.

“Bang!” The Armored Razorback Wyrms’s entire body was smashed deep into the ground by that blow, and in a radius of a hundred meters around it, the stone floor splintered and shattered. On the dense row of sharp spikes on the back of the Armored Razorback Wyrms, a single spike had been shattered by the force of the blow. And from the mouth of the Armored Razorback Wyrms, a mouthful of fresh blood was suddenly spat out.

Viciousness

“What a waste! That’s dragon’s blood from a magical beast of the peak of the ninth rank!” Linley couldn’t help but say to himself upon seeing the blood splash onto the ground. According to the Secret Dragonblood Manual, blood from a living Saint-level dragon could definitely rouse the dragonblood in his body, while blood from a dragon of the ninth rank would have a somewhat lower chance of success.

This Armored Razorback Wyrms was, after all a dragon-type beast of the peak of the ninth rank, just one step away from becoming a Saint-level dragon. What was more, Armored Razorback Wyrms were considered one of the most powerful types of dragons. When faced with any dragon of the same rank, the Armored Razorback Wyrms would be more powerful.

“This Wyrms is both at the peak of the ninth rank and is an exceedingly powerful type of dragon. The effect of its blood shouldn’t be much weaker than that of a Saint-level dragon. Unfortunately, there’s no way for me to get it.” Linley didn’t dare at all to step within this cave, because if he did, any random blow from these two combatants which happened to land on him would crush him to a pulp.

“Boss, is this Armored Razorback Wyrms gonna die? It seems like he isn’t able to defeat that big stupid bear,” Bebe said mentally to Linley.

Linley didn’t make a sound. He just stared fixedly at the cave, watching the battle between these two major magical beasts.

“Haha...” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear let out an excited laugh, while at the same time, struck out with his massive, furry black paw, turning it into a fist as he did. That meter-long fist carried with it almost 15,000 kilograms of force, and it forcefully smashed against the Armored Razorback Wyrms which was buried underground.

While it was ill, go for the kill!

“Bang!”

The giant furry fist smashed into the middle of the ground, causing the entire cave to shake and rubble to fall down.

“Hrm?” The lone remaining eye of the Violet Tattooed Bear began to glow with a red light.

Right now, the Armored Razorback Wurm, which had been smashed deep into the ground by the Bear, was now burrowing through the ground like an earthworm, scurrying about at the speed of lightning. Wherever the Armored Razorback Wurm passed, the stony ground itself would tremble and crack.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had missed with his punch, only landing a hit on the Wurm’s tail, allowing the Wurm to immediately burrow underground.

“Haha, Sartius. Are you actually going to just hide underneath the ground and not come out?” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear stared at the ground as he laughed.

The Violet Tattooed Bear knew that when it came to underground burrowing, even though he had reached the Saint level, he wasn’t a match for the Armored Razorback Wurm. Thanks to its sinuous, spiky body and its razor-sharp claws, the Wurm was much better at burrowing than the Bear was. If the Armored Razorback Wurm really decided to stay underground and not come out, then the Violet Tattooed Bear really would have no recourse.

However, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear believed that Sartius wouldn’t have been scared to the point of hiding underground and not daring to come out and do battle.

This was because... Sartius was an Armored Razorback Wurm.

“Everyone always says that you Armored Razorback Wurms are extremely arrogant and won’t allow yourselves to suffer any humiliation at all. Even in the face of certain death, you’ll still make up your mind to fight to the death with your opponent. But now, from the looks of it, that doesn’t seem to be the case. You, Sartius, are an absolute coward,” the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear said in a bright voice. Right now, he was using words to agitate his opponent.

Hiding within the tunnel, Linley just quietly watched this affair progress.

“Dragons are generally very arrogant and very conceited. Armored Razorback Wyrms, in turn, are the most conceited and the most arrogant of dragons.” Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

“Grandpa Doehring, why don’t you come out?” Even as Linley asked the question, he laughed at himself.

His head was totally muddled. Doehring Cowart’s aura could easily be detected by a Saint-level combatant, and the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was of course such a combatant.

“Can’t come out. Right now, in their eyes, you punk, you’re just an ant. Although they’ve both noticed you, they can’t be bothered to care about you. But if I come out, once they sense my aura, then you’ll be in trouble.” Doehring Cowart remained hidden within the Coiling Dragon ring.

Linley nodded slightly, but his gaze was still firmly locked on the cave.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was engaged in nonstop ridicule, but the Armored Razorback Wurm seemed to have disappeared completely, as there was no sign of it at all.

“It’s laughing?” Watching the battle, Linley noticed that there was a delighted smile on the face of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear, but he didn’t understand its meaning.

Suddenly, the dragon tail which had been compressed into a drill shape suddenly burst out of the ground at high speed, piercing through the air with a terrifying hissing sound as it directly stabbed at the Violet Tattooed Bear’s waist.

The speed was so fast that there was no time to react at all.

“Whap!”

However, the Violet Tattooed Bear seemed to have foreknowledge of this attack. Just as the tail burst out of the ground, the huge bear quickly retreated, while at the same time reaching out with its huge furry paws and grabbing onto the tail.

“Haha...”

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear began to laugh wildly. Its hands firmly fastened around the tail, with a mighty tug, it forcibly ripped the Armored Razorback Wyrms from the earth, then, after waving it about in the air, began to viciously slam the Wyrms directly into the stony ground.

“Bam!”

Like a dancer performing with a whip or a ribbon, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear brandished the Wyrms in the air, slamming it into the ground time and time again.

“Bam!” “Bam!” “Bam!” “Bam!” “Bam!”

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear brandished the Armored Razorback Wyrms wildly, smashing it into the ground without pause. The body of the Armored Razorback Wyrms turned into a blur, as in the time it took to take a single breath, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear slammed it into the ground over a hundred times.

The constant, high-velocity impacts made Linley’s heart quail.

“And it’s still not dead?” Linley couldn’t help but feel nervous.

“Haha, Sartius, this is for your arrogance, for taking one of my eyes. Haha...” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear continued to laugh wildly as its two-meter wide hands continued to wave the Armored Razorback Wyrms about, slamming it into the ground.

More and more cracks appeared on the ground, and countless crevices over three meters deep began to appear.

The stony ceiling of the cave had also begun to shake loose rocks, but those falling rocks weren’t of the slightest hindrance to the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear.

“I hope he doesn’t collapse the tunnel.” Pebbles began to fall down on Linley’s head as well, causing him to silently curse at this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. The only option he had was to silently murmur the words to the Earthguard spell to summon a jadestone armor to protect his body. Only then

was his physical safety assured.

“Growl...” “Growl...”

One roar of fury and pain after another erupted from the Armored Razorback Wurm. Based on its terrifying defensive power, logically speaking, the rocky ground shouldn't cause any harm to it at all, but being slammed into it at such a high speed was a different matter!

A rock by itself didn't have much offensive power, but when the same rock was propelled to extremely high speeds, it could even penetrate a steel board.

Speed was also a form of offensive power!

Bear-type magical beasts were all born with tremendous strength, so naturally the strength of this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was terrifyingly high. Based on this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear's terrifying wrist power, when slamming the Armored Razorback Wurm into the ground, it could produce an astonishingly high speed. And so, at high speed, the Armored Razorback Wurm continued to make contact with the ground.

This sort of slamming attack was extremely terrifying.

The Armored Razorback Wurm was continuously coiling around like a snake, allowing the impact to be spread across his entire body.

“Dragon's blood, dragon's blood everywhere.” Linley saw how the Armored Razorback Wurm was leaving blood all over the ground.

To the Armored Razorback Wurm, however, the physical injuries were a smaller matter. The more important problem was that it was starting to get extremely dizzy!

Being whipped around at such high speeds was starting to make the Armored Razorback Wurm's mind go blank. If this continued, even if its body was able to hold on, its mind wouldn't be able to.

“Sartius, you idiot, did you think that by ambushing me from underground, I wouldn't be able to react in time? Haha. Have you forgotten? Saint-level combatants all have the ability to soul sense outside of their bodies. I saw every single movement you were making underground. And you thought you could

ambush me? Haha...”

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was unspeakably delighted with itself.

For over three hundred years, it had nursed this hatred. Every time, when he looked into the water and saw the reflection of his ruined eye, his heart would be filled with unspeakable rage. He had stewed in this hate, in this rage, for over three hundred years, until he had reached the Saint level.

“Crack!”

A strange noise was heard, and suddenly, the Armored Razorback Wyrms’ body flew out in the air, colliding with the wall several hundred meters away, creating a giant crater before it landed onto the ground.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear only stared at the dragon tail in its hand in astonishment.

“You... you broke off your own tail?” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was very astonished, but after recovering, it began to laugh uproariously. “Haha, Sartius, you were actually in such a pathetic state that you chose to break your own tail off. Wonderful! Wonderful!” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was extremely delighted at having been able to force the Armored Razorback Wyrms into such a state.

Linley also stared at the Armored Razorback Wyrms in astonishment, that it was ruthless and cruel enough to break its own tail. The importance of the tail to a dragon could not be understated. Breaking off its own tail carried and required the same courage and viciousness that a human cutting off his own hand would have to have.

Behind the Armored Razorback Wyrms’ posterior, there was nothing aside from a round meter-wide injury. This was where its long tail had previously been connected. This enormous wound was leaking out a huge amount of blood. But the Armored Razorback Wyrms’ dark golden eyes were still as cold as ever, fixing the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear with its deathly glare.

“How vicious. But there’s no doubt that you are still going to die.” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear casually threw the tail away with a wave of its giant paws, his face filled with confidence.

No tail, and suffering from severe blood loss.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms had suffered a huge loss in combat power. In such a situation, if the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear still was not able to kill the Armored Razorback Wyrms, it would be a huge joke.

“Roar!” A low growl. The Armored Razorback Wyrms flexed its four limbs and transformed into a cruel blur, throwing itself at the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s two huge paws once more glowed with a dark aura, and then the Bear struck viciously at the Armored Razorback Wyrms with them.

Based on the power of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s paws, it should definitely be able to send the Armored Razorback Wyrms flying.

However...

Faced with the oncoming strike from the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s paws, the Armored Razorback Wyrms opened its jaws and viciously launched onto one of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s arms. The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s arms were extremely durable; although the Armored Razorback Wyrms was able to bite into them, it wasn’t able to bite through them.

“Ahhh!” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear let out a howl of pain, as it definitely had not expected the Armored Razorback Wyrms to do this, because by doing this, it was as good as offering its head to the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. “You want to die!” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear roared with rage as it slammed its other paw towards the Armored Razorback Wyrms’s eyes.

Once the meter-long fingers penetrated into the Armored Razorback Wyrms’s eyes, it would shatter the Armored Razorback Wyrms’s brains and kill it.

But right at that moment...

“Swish!” “Swish!” “Swish!”

The Armored Razorback Wyrms’s entire body began to clatter, and then, like water being released from a sieve, every single spike on its back all flew out, piercing into the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s body like so many bolts of

lightning.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear's entire body was riddled with spikes now, and even its face had a spike put through it.

"Ah! Sartius, you..." The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear's eyes were filled with disbelief.

The Armored Razorback Wurm's two most formidable aspects were its "armor" and its "razorback". The word 'armored' reflected its astonishing defensive capabilities, while "razorback" referred to that line of dense spikes on its back, which most people didn't even know had a use.

If it needed to defend? It's powerful, thick carapace was more than enough.

If it wanted to attack?

How could the razor spikes on its back be used to attack? Even if it wanted to, it would have to do so in a passive way.

There were very few magical beasts that knew that the Armored Razorback Wurm had this technique of shooting out all of the razor spines along its back at once, which was the technique an Armored Razorback Wurm would use when it intended to perish alongside its opponent. Those spikes shot out with such speed that its penetrating power was even greater than that of its claws.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had no idea at all that this Armored Razorback Wurm actually possessed such a technique. With the two of them so close to each other, and with the spikes shooting out at such a high speed, there had been no way for him to dodge at all.

"Gurgle..." Its body riddled with spikes, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear could feel as its life began draining away from its body. Unwilling to die like this, it raised its head and roared with rage.

The Draconic Crystal's Transformation

Even Doehring Cowart, back at the height of his powers as a peak Saint-level Grand Magus, didn't have any real means of preserving his life after his body had been destroyed.

Once the body was destroyed, one would definitely die.

Only someone with the power of a god would be able to repair his body easily.

The life ebbing out of his body, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear could also feel his soul being called to the nether realm, and could sense that in a few minutes, it would enter it. "Sartius!" The very last action the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear took on the Yulan continent was to wildly smash its two massive paws against the skull of the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

One of the Armored Razorback Wyrms' eyes was smashed, while the scales around its neck and forehead were totally smashed, and fresh blood began to leak out.

But the Armored Razorback Wyrms didn't try to resist in the slightest, because the Armored Razorback Wyrms had also reached the end of its road. After having shot out all of its razor spikes, the life force was beginning to ebb out of the Armored Razorback Wyrms as well.

"I am unwilling to die!"

A furious howl!

"Thud!" That massive, twenty-meter tall body slumped over, falling to the ground. By now, the soul of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear could no longer resist the call of the nether world, and it forever vanished from the physical realm of the Yulan continent.

Linley looked at the fallen Violet Tattooed Bear, and then at the Armored

Razorback Wyrms that was still biting at the Bear's arm. "Is this a double defeat?" The Armored Razorback Wyrms was also at death's door. Fresh blood constantly flowed out, both from its severed tail as well as from its neck. Its eyelids slowly closed as well.

Then suddenly.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms opened its one remaining eye. That remaining dark golden eye remained as cold and emotionless as ever, and it was focused on Linley.

"Ah!" Faced with this cold gaze, Linley's heart began to beat frantically.

Both the Armored Razorback Wyrms and the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear both had noticed Linley long ago. Only, they hadn't bothered with him.

However...

The Armored Razorback Wyrms didn't want its body to be defiled after its death by this human. Dragons were a proud race, and Armored Razorback Wyrms were the proudest, most conceited dragons in existence. Even in death, it wouldn't want its opponents to get off too easy, much less allow its corpse to be mutilated by a human.

"Not good." Without hesitating at all, Linley immediately turned tail and began to run.

"It's almost dead, and it still wants to kill." Linley was feeling rather pissed.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms stared a deadly gaze at Linley with its one remaining dark golden eye. And then, emitting the most furious roar it had ever let out in its existence, it transformed into a blur and appeared next to Linley almost instantaneously, sweeping its merciless claws towards him.

Feeling the sudden rushing air from behind, Linley instinctively wanted to lie down, as he knew that a dragon claw would come swiping in. When it did, even a magical beast of the ninth rank would perish, much less him. That jadestone armor on his body would not prove to be any deterrent to the Armored Razorback Wyrms's sharp claws.

"Swish!"

Emitting an ear-piercing shriek, Bebe's tiny, weak little body collided head-on with the Armored Razorback Wyrms' sharp claws.

"Bebe!" As he was spiritually linked with Bebe, as soon as Bebe had moved, Linley sensed it, and Linley's heart instantly began to tremble with fear.

"Whap!"

A clear striking sound. Bebe's body was sent flying by the Armored Razorback Wyrms' vicious claws, and he was shot backwards at an incomprehensible speed, smashing into the tunnel wall a few dozen meters away, creating a deep crevice.

On the outside of that crevice, there was a spot of bright blood.

"Bebe's blood." At this moment, Linley was filled with boundless pain, pain which was a thousand, no, ten-thousand-fold the pain he had felt upon losing Alice.

Within his mind, one image after another of him and Bebe together swam to the forefront.

He remembered the first time they had met, how Bebe had hidden behind that decrepit old stone house and stared at Linley in terror.

He remembered Bebe's self-satisfied look, and how adorable Bebe looked when he wrinkled his nose.

He also remembered how Bebe would lie down for a nap inside his clothes, and how cute he looked asleep.



*

From when Linley was eight, until now.

The one who had truly always been by his side was Bebe. Although he liked to boast and brag, and also liked to mock, in Linley's heart, Bebe had occupied an extremely important position.

"Graaaaaw..." That huge maw of the Armored Razorback Wyrms bit down at Linley.

“Aaaaargh!” Linley let out a deep howl, his eyes now totally bloodshot. When the Armored Razorback Wurm’s giant fangs drew near to him, Linley’s speed attained a previously-unreached level, and he opened his own mouth wide and bit down at the Wurm’s neck as well.

“Crunchh.” A large part of the flesh on Linley’s shoulder was bitten off.

But Linley’s own teeth were also firmly locked onto the wounded area on the Armored Razorback Wurm’s neck!

“Die, die, die with me!”

Having entered a berserk, crazed state, Linley wildly drank the blood of this living dragon and wildly bit at the exposed flesh.

“Aaaargh!”

When the dragon blood splashed onto Linley’s body, Linley felt as though all of the skin on his body had been painfully scalded by boiling water. But this was only a secondary thing. The dragon blood that he drank into his stomach made Linley’s entire body jerk, spasm, and tremble.

Pain! Incredibly fierce pain!

The pain of dragon blood splashing on his body, Linley could withstand. But the dragon blood entering his stomach, entering his body? One’s internal organs, after all, were much more vulnerable than one’s skin. This sort of pain was an internal, constant, non-stop, stabbing pain.

He was in agony. But Linley had forgotten about what agony was, at this point.

The last, desperate, full-strength attack of this peak ninth rank Armored Razorback Wurm... one could imagine how terrifying it was. The fierce sharpness of the Armored Razorback Wurm was legendary. Even a magical beast of the ninth rank would be rent by it. And Bebe?

Linley could still see that bloodstain on the tunnel wall.

Once Bebe’s tiny body had its protective fur and skin torn apart, how could he survive? Most importantly of all, Linley could already sense that Bebe’s life force had already grown so weak as to be all but undetectable.

“Arrgh!” His heart filled with grief, Linley savagely bit at the dragon’s flesh, drank the dragon’s blood. He allowed the blood to boil as much as it wanted of his organs, allowed his entire body to be in such agony that it shuddered. Linley simply didn’t care.

“Linley, stop, stop!” Doehring Cowart was howling at him. “Use the Blueheart Grass, quick, use the Blueheart Grass! If you keep doing this, your body will fall apart!”

But it was useless. Linley continued to devour the dragon’s blood. Suddenly, some sort of icy cold crystalline entity entered Linley’s throat, then passed into his stomach. Instantly, the pain intensified still further, and Linley’s entire body began to convulse uncontrollably.

Pain?

Linley wanted himself to feel pain. This sort of physical pain was able to, just barely, lessen the terrible pain he felt in his heart.

“Linley!” Doehring Cowart was at his wit’s end.

“Bo... Boss!” A very weak voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

Linley’s entire body trembled. He suddenly came to a stop, no longer chewing at the dragon’s flesh, nor drinking any more blood.

“Bebe?”

The entire tunnel was silent, now. Stunned, Linley stared at Bebe, who was inside the deep crevice created by his impact. He could feel that Bebe’s life force was beginning to strengthen. Seeing Bebe’s body slowly crawl out of that deep crevice, Linley felt an unspeakable joy. But immediately afterwards, another terrifying wave of pain engulfed Linley’s very soul.

“Quick, eat the Blueheart Grass!” Doehring Cowart roared with rage.

Only now did Linley react. He ferociously tore the backpack open, grabbed a large handful of Blueheart Grass, and directly swallowed it. This handful contained at least ten patches of Blueheart Grass. When he ate it, Linley only felt a cool sensation enter his body, and that earlier, intense burning pain began to lessen.

But Linley could feel that in one part of his stomach, there was still an incredibly intense pain. After the burning sensation in the other parts of his body had lessened, the intense pain in that location became all the more pronounced.

Without hesitating at all, Linley grabbed another handful of Blueheart Grass and quickly ate it as well.

Immediately afterwards, Linley assumed the meditative position and allowed the Secret Dragonblood Manual's inscriptions on how to rouse the dragonblood of the Dragonblood Warriors come to mind. He began to agitate his blood in accordance with the instructions in the book, and as he carried out these secret techniques, the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors which lay deep in Linley's veins began to show itself.

"Success."

The chance of success through using the blood of a dragon of the ninth rank was a bit lower than using the blood of a Saint-level dragon. But the Armored Razorback Wurm was both a peak ninth rank dragon, and also an extremely powerful dragon. Its small physical size also was an indicator that the quality of the blood it had should have been extremely high.

"Woosh." "Whoosh." The dragonblood in Linley's veins was beginning to transform as well, as wave after wave of it was being transformed into dragonblood battle-qi.

But whenever he reached that part of his stomach which hurt the most, for some reason the pain remained the same, no matter how much Blueheart Grass he ate. What Linley hadn't realized is that what he had actually swallowed was, alongside everything else, the draconic crystal of the Armored Razorback Wurm.

Realistically speaking, that crystal was ten thousand times more terrifying than dragon's blood. Even after having eaten so much Blueheart Grass, all it served to do was to blunt the bad effects. The pain it was causing was incredible.

However, the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors was no ordinary bloodline either!

The lineage of the Dragonblood Warriors hailed from the very first Dragonblood Warrior, Baruch. In the past, when Baruch had mastered his abilities, he was even able to kill a peak Nine Headed Serpent King of the Saint level. That sort of power he had, to walk about the Yulan continent totally unmatched, was incredibly great.

Even the mighty dragon race didn't want to do direct battle with Baruch and his clansmen, despite the fact that Baruch had captured several live Saint-level dragons and fed their blood to his clansmen.

This was the terrifying true power of the Dragonblood warriors!

As far as the secret manual handed down in the Baruch clan, where it said that no one could drink dragon blood and live, this was just a case where the truth had been hidden because of the dragon race. Baruch had actually used this method to produce a great many Dragonblood Warriors.

The unique blood of the Dragonblood Warriors and their descendants, when compared even to the noble blood of dragons, was far nobler.

Even when just a little bit of it was hiding in one's veins, it was capable of allowing a human to potentially reach the level of being a Saint-level combatant. From this, one could imagine how powerful the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors was!

And right now, the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors was beginning to stir. When the Dragonblood Warrior blood met with the draconic crystal of the Armored Razorback Wurm, a strange transformation occurred! A draconic crystal was the purest distillation of a dragon's energy, making this crystal the pure, distilled essence of an Armored Razorback Wurm at the peak of the ninth rank... while the density of dragonblood in Linley's veins was too low...

"Pant, pant."

Vicious pain erupted from every fiber of Linley's body, and Linley painfully reared his head and howled. On top of Linley's skin, bizarre black scales began to emerge, and those sharp little black scales split Linley's clothes apart.

Linley's thighs and arms also saw these scales slowly emerge. This sort of absolutely inhumane pain caused all of the veins in Linley's body to protrude

outward, and his facial expression was contorted to a terrifying degree.

Suddenly, another wave of even greater pain crashed down upon Linley, as a sharp, keen spike erupted from Linley's forehead...

The Dragonblood Warrior

Linley's entire body was in such pain that it was convulsing. Linley's very spine was straining as if it were trying to pop out of his body, and then one small spike after another did begin to slowly grow out of his spine, piercing through his skin and flesh and rising to form a line on his back.

This extreme pain caused Linley to begin letting out guttural howls. His entire body was covered in sweat, but even as the sweat came out, so too did one black scale after another, each and every scale very similar to the scales of the Armored Razorback Wurm. The only difference was that they were smaller in size.

Grinding his teeth, his throat trembling with every guttural, pain-filled roar, Linley did his best to forcibly will himself to begin utilizing the secret methods contained within the Secret Dragonblood Manual.

The draconic crystal was being constantly eroded away by the dragonblood in Linley's veins, and it was slowly growing smaller. At the same time, the dragonblood in Linley's veins was constantly devouring the astonishing darkness-type elemental force contained within the draconic crystal. The pace of his body's evolution actually began to pick up even further...

"Graaawr!" A blood-covered, black-scaled draconic tail slowly began to protrude from Linley's tailbone. This draconic tail was of the size and hardness of a steel whip.

"What, what is going on?" Feeling his entire body transforming, especially those spikes popping out from his spine, and those black scales, Linley was totally flabbergasted.

Per the records of the Secret Dragonblood Manual, a Dragonblood Warrior had three forms.

Under the third form, 'Dragonform', the Dragonblood Warrior's entire body

would be covered with azure scales, and a horn would sprout from his forehead as well. This was the most powerful form available to a Dragonblood Warrior... but currently, Linley's physical transformation was totally different from that which was described in the Secret Dragonblood Manual.

The scales which were covering Linley's body were all black, not azure. The spikes protruding from Linley's spine should not be there. Linley couldn't help but suddenly think of the Armored Razorback Wurm.

The second form, 'Demidragon', was not quite as strong as the 'Dragonform' transformation, as it only allowed part of his body to transform.

As for the first form, that was the normal human form. In most situations, a Dragonblood Warrior would be in this form. This was also the weakest form available to a Dragonblood Warrior.

Per the Secret Dragonblood Manual, the first time a Dragonblood Warrior successfully trained the usage of Dragonblood battle-qi, his body would uncontrollably enter the third form, the Dragonform. This first transformation would be incredibly painful, but afterwards, the transformations would no longer hurt at all.

Within Linley's body...

A surge of deep blue liquid seemed to have merged with a black liquid and spread itself throughout his body. Every single muscle, every single vein was constantly absorbing energy from these liquids, causing Linley's physical attributes to all start improving at a terrifying pace. But this rapid strengthening of the body was causing Linley excruciating pain as well.

"Damnable dragons." Linley was beginning to curse at them mentally. "It must have been you guys. Otherwise, our clan definitely would have written about the aftereffects of drinking live dragon's blood and the things to be careful about in much greater detail."

The more Linley thought about it, the angrier he became.

His own clan's Secret Dragonblood Manual was clearly filled with contradictions. If it was true that no one had ever successfully used live dragon's blood to rouse the dragonblood in their veins, then why would the

book be so confident that this method would be successful? This was a clear contradiction.

And how could Linley know what the situation in the clan had been four to five thousand years ago?

“It must have been due to the pressure of the entire race of dragons that our ancestors were forced to skimp on the details of this method of using live dragon’s blood to rouse the dragonblood in our veins.” Right now, Linley had no idea what he should do.

His ‘Dragonform’ was clearly different from the authentic ‘Dragonform’ which had been mentioned in the Secret Dragonblood Manual.

“I am far too mentally resilient. I really hope I’ll faint soon.” Linley was actually begging for himself to faint, as once he fainted, his pain would be over.

“Aaaargh...”

Linley’s entire body trembled once again. All ten fingers and all ten toes were suddenly wracked with a bone-deep pain, as his fingernails and toenails suddenly began to grow sharp, like miniature dragon claws. The pain of sharp claws forcibly growing out of his fingers and toes really, finally, caused Linley to begin to lose all consciousness.

As his head grew foggy, Linley’s eyes began to close, and then all consciousness fled.

“Thud.”

Linley’s body collapsed to the ground.

“He’s passed out.” Doehring Cowart stood next to Linley, watching him. He couldn’t help but let out a small sigh. “How bizarre. I can’t imagine how Linley’s ancestor, Baruch, could have developed such a strange ability of transforming into this ‘Dragonform’.”

Frowning, Doehring Cowart mumbled to himself, “Honestly speaking, it’s bizarre. It seems that, aside from the Dragonblood Warriors, there’re also three other bloodlines of Supreme Warriors. But when I had been alive, there was no such thing as a Supreme Warrior. But shortly after I died, these four bloodlines

arrived on the scene.”

Despite his thousand plus years of experience and wisdom, Doehring Cowart was unable to puzzle out how and why this had occurred.

“If he was able to slay a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor, then in all likelihood, Linley’s ancestor, Baruch, was no weaker than I was, and perhaps stronger.” Doehring Cowart knew full well how powerful a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor was. Nine-Headed Serpents were an extremely formidable race of magical beasts, and for a Nine-Headed Serpent to receive the title of ‘Serpent Emperor’ meant that, without question, it was a peak Saint-level magical beast.

Even he himself would not have the confidence to say that he could slay a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor.

“And that little Shadowmouse is no ordinary creature either.” Doehring Cowart turned his head to stare at the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, who was still lying and resting in that crevice his body had created earlier. “An Armored Razorback Wurm is among the most powerful dragon-type beasts of the ninth rank, and this Sartius fellow was at the peak of the ninth rank. His dying blow should be able to shatter the bones and rend the flesh of magical beasts of the ninth rank, but somehow, this little Shadowmouse managed to survive it.”

Doehring Cowart couldn’t help but feel astonished.

In fact, he was starting to suspect...

“Could it be that this little Shadowmouse isn’t a Shadowmouse, and is actually a Stoneater Rat?”

Doehring Cowart knew very well that of the two major rodent-class magical beasts, the Stoneater Rats were far more populous than the Shadowmice. The weakest Stoneater Rat was of the first rank, while the most powerful was of the seventh or eighth rank. As for Shadowmice, although they started at the third rank, they also topped out at the seventh or eighth rank.

The advantage of the Shadowmouse lay in its speed and its sharp claws, while the strength of the Stoneater Rat lay in its defensive abilities and its sharp claws.

“The Stoneater Rat is physically small, but its defensive ability is the most

powerful of any magical beast at the same rank. The defensive power of a Stoneater Rat of the eighth rank could most likely compare with the defensive power of an Armored Razorback Wurm!” Doehring Cowart knew very well how terrifying Stoneater Rats could be.

Although physically small, the defensive power of its fur was formidable to an extreme.

Across all the myriad types of magical beasts, be it dragon-types, bear-types, serpent-types, or any other type, the tiny little Stoneater Rat had the highest defensive power at the same rank!

“Bebe’s power should be at the eighth rank now. If he’s a Stoneater Rat of the eighth rank, I would find it conceivable that he could take a hit and not die. But he’s not a Stoneater Rat. A Stoneater Rat of the eighth rank should have golden fur.” Doehring Cowart’s mind was full of questions.

“Black fur and terrifying speed, and also such amazing defensive power? How bizarre.”

Suddenly, Doehring Cowart’s eyes glazed over.

A terrifying name suddenly appeared in the back of his mind!

“Could it be that this little Shadowmouse is... is related somehow to ‘that one’ in the Forest of Shadows, in the northeast of the Yulan continent?” Doehring Cowart was trembling with fear now. Back in the days when Doehring Cowart had been alive, in the Yulan continent, there were only two entities powerful enough that he wouldn’t have any hope of fighting against them.

In those years, Doehring Cowart really had been ranked amongst the top five most powerful figures in the Yulan continent. However, aside from the first and the second, there wasn’t much difference among the rest of the five in terms of power.

But the power of the number one and number two experts of the Yulan continent was without question.

As for who exactly was number one and who was number two, nobody knew for sure. One of the two was the pillar and foundation of the Yulan Empire. As long as he was alive, even if the Yulan Empire grew weak and decrepit, it would

never fall.

And the other, was the one who lived in the Forest of Shadows.

The Yulan Empire had unified the entire Yulan continent, and had also initiated the Yulan calendar that year, year one. After almost ten thousand years, the continent had now fragmented to its current state, resulting in the two major alliances and the Four Great Empires. And even as far back as when the Yulan Empire had ruled over the entire continent, that human expert's name had been famous throughout the world.

"That one in the Forest of Shadows is the undisputed strongest magical beast in the world. I heard that he is extremely fond of rodent-type magical beasts. Could it be that this strange little Shadowmouse was brought up by him?" Doehring Cowart was wondering to himself.

But Doehring Cowart also knew that the information he had about the experts of the Yulan continent was five thousand years out of date.

Five thousand years ago, the Yulan continent had exactly two ultimate super-combatants; one human, and the other a magical beast. The other Saint-level combatants could only admire them from afar.

But five thousand years later?

"Perhaps there have been mutations to the rodent-type beasts. That's also a possibility." Doehring Cowart consoled himself.

Doehring Cowart once again glanced at Linley and Bebe, then nodded. "A descendant of the Dragonblood Warriors, and a mutated Shadowmouse. What will the two of them accomplish together?" Doehring Cowart was rather excited to see. Perhaps, by Linley's side, his future days wouldn't be too lonely either.

The entire tunnel was absolutely silent.

The unconscious Linley's body was still transforming, and the Dragonblood battle-qi was slowly gathering three inches beneath his navel, crystallizing into a pattern similar to that of a draconic crystal. Bebe's wounds, in turn, were also slowly healing.



Three days later.

Linley opened his eyes and suddenly rose to his feet.

Right now, Linley was absolutely naked. All of the clothes he had previously been wearing had been torn asunder long ago by that first Dragonform transformation he had undergone. But now, after having returned to human form, Linley seemed no different from any other human.

“I’ve finally changed back.”

Although according to the Secret Dragonblood Manual, a Dragonblood Warrior was able to transform back into human form, only after it actually happened did Linley feel at ease. After all, his ‘Dragonform’ and the authentic ‘Dragonform’ as described in the manual were different.

“Boss, you woke up.” That bright, chipper voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

With surprised delight, Linley turned his head to look, and as he did, Bebe jumped into his arms. Embracing Bebe, Linley finally felt that his heart was at peace. When Bebe had suffered that vicious wounding deathblow of the Armored Razorback Wurm, Linley had truly been afraid.

He had been afraid that the little Shadowmouse he had grown up with was dead.

“Bebe, are you okay?” Linley carefully inspected Bebe’s body. Upon doing so, Linley saw an unassuming scar directly on Bebe’s chest... but Linley could also tell that the reason this scar appeared unassuming was because the fur on Bebe’s chest was blocking much of it.

Bebe chortled, “I’m fine. How could I, Bebe, be afraid of a little worm?”

“Boss, hey! Your body no longer has any scars? Same with your face. You don’t have any scars at all, now!” Bebe suddenly said in astonishment.

Only now did Linley pay some attention to his own body.

“Ah, so this is indeed as the Secret Dragonblood Manual described. The first time one undergoes the Dragonform transformation, one’s entire body is transformed, and even the skin is changed.” Right now, there wasn’t a single

scar anywhere on Linley's body, and it was in perfect condition.

Sensing the boiling power now within his body, Linley couldn't help but feel excited.

"What tremendous physical power." Linley could feel that his current power was at least several dozen times greater than before. After having roused the dragonblood in his veins, the physical characteristics of his body had all been tremendously enhanced. Even in his human form, he was much stronger than before he had roused the dragonblood.

Clenching his fist and generating a field of Dragonblood battle-qi, Linley suddenly delivered a powerful punch to the nearby stone wall.

"Bang!" As though struck by a steel rod, a large hole was punched into the stone tunnel wall as rocks began flying in every which way.

"Sixth rank. Linley, in your human form, you already have the power of a warrior of the sixth rank!" Doehring Cowart flew out of the Coiling Dragon ring, laughing as he spoke to Linley.

Part V

The Godsword Bloodviolet

The Mysterious Magical Formation

Linley, too, could feel that his body was now far stronger than it had been in the past. Previously, his body had been that of a warrior of the fourth rank, but now, he had suddenly reached the sixth rank. This was the inherent ability of the Dragonblood Warriors. Thinking back to the pain he had just suffered to reach this, Linley couldn't help but shiver.

"Linley, give your Dragonform a test," Doehring Cowart said with interest.

"Boss, give it a test!" Bebe was excited as well.

Linley nodded slightly. He too wanted to get a sense of what level of power his body now possessed when under the Dragonform transformation. Immediately, Linley began to exert his control over the Dragonblood battle-qi that had been compressed into a quasi-crystal in his dantian, below his navel. Suddenly...

One stream after another of black liquid began to flow from his dantian to his body, his limbs, and his bones.

"Rrrrrgh." Letting out a deep growl, Linley watched as a dense layer of small black scales began to sprout on top of his skin, while at the same time, a row of spikes began to appear on his back, and a long, iron-whip-like tail sprouted from his tailbone.

Compared to the Armored Razorback Wurm, those spikes running along Linley's spine were slightly fewer in number and slightly shorter.

"I feel as though my body is filled with limitless power." Linley couldn't help but begin to grow excited. He felt so incredibly powerful. The Dragonblood Warrior, one of the Four Supreme Warriors of the Yulan continent. He had just begun his training in this area, but he already possessed enormous strength.

The Supreme Warriors really lived up to their name!

“The power I have right now must be several tens of times greater than the power I had in my human form.” Linley stretched out his right arm, which was currently covered with scales, and saw that his fingernails were now as sharp as knives.

Linley suddenly leapt off the ground with a mighty kick...

As fast as a streak of fire, Linley charged into the middle of the wide cave, then delivered a powerful blow to the cave wall. With an earth-shaking sound, rocks begin to fall down from the cave walls. His arm pierced all the way into the stone wall, and to Linley, it felt as though it was as easy as piercing his arm into soft mud.

Such incredible power.

“Harrgh!” Letting out a loud, excited shout, Linley lashed out at the wall with two mighty kicks as well, immediately blasting a huge hole into it, causing rocks to rain down from even the ceiling.

With a kick of his legs, Linley sent himself flying in the air...

And then, with his twin fists, Linley gave the cave ceiling a mighty smash.

“Bam!” The ceiling of the cave cracked like the shell of a turtle, and one giant boulder after another began to fall down from the ceiling. But Linley wasn’t afraid in the slightest. These boulders wouldn’t do any harm at all when slamming into his body. The black scales protecting his body right now were far more powerful than even the jadestone armor his Earthguard spell provided.

“Swish!” “Swish!” “Swish!”

Linley’s body transformed into a vicious black blur. Sometimes he would land on the ground, while at other times, he would rise into the air. Sometimes, he would use all of his strength while smashing his legs into the wall with ferocious kicks, while at other times he would viciously pummel the cave ceiling with his fists and allow the rocks to fall on his body.

After a while...

Linley landed on the floor, then directly leapt to the tunnel entrance.

“Grandpa Doehring, what do you think?” He asked.

Most people would find it very difficult to accurately assess a warrior's strength unless a battery of tests was used. Linley, at least, didn't have the ability to make this assessment. But the highly experienced Doehring Cowart should have been able to estimate his strength through the destructive power he had just unleashed.

"In terms of power alone... you should have just crossed over the threshold of being a warrior of the eighth rank." Doehring Cowart seemed a bit uncertain. "But your movement speed was very fast. Perhaps you have inherited the high movement speed inherent to Armored Razorback Wyrms. Your speed should be on par with highly agile warriors of the eighth rank. As for your defensive abilities, there's no way for me to judge at this time, since there was nothing to see."

Linley nodded slightly.

He knew that this Dragonform of his had some sort of connection with the Armored Razorback Wyrms, so it made sense that this Dragonform of his was similar in many ways to the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

"For the Dragonblood Warriors of our clan, the more powerful one is, the less of a difference there is between the three forms. Right now, I'm a warrior of the sixth rank, and so my Dragonform can reach the early eighth rank in power. According to the books that I read, once a Dragonblood Warrior has reached the early ninth rank of power in human form, then in Dragonform, he will possess the power of an early Saint-level combatant. But once his human form reaches the Saint-level, then in Dragonform, he will still only be a Saint-level combatant. His battle ability, however, will be somewhat improved."

Linley was quite clear about the nature and origins of the Dragonform ability.

The purpose of assuming the Dragonform was because early on, a normal human being would not be able to utilize all of the power held within the dragonblood in his veins. Only after using the Dragonform would they be able to summon forth all of their power.

But once they reached the Saint-level, and had totally mastered and harnessed the effective power of their dragonblood, then when they assumed the Dragonform, their increase in power would be fairly small.

“Linley. Hurry up and dispose of the corpses of those two magical beasts. The two of them have a Saint-level magicite core and a draconic magicite core of the ninth rank,” Doehring Cowart immediately urged.

Linley’s heart suddenly shuddered.

Cores of the ninth rank and Saint level?

Linley knew that the value of a magicite core of the ninth rank was worth up to five million gold coins, an incredible amount of money. In Fenlai City, some of the relatively large clans’ entire net worth might be around that much.

But the core of a Saint-level magical beast? That was a priceless treasure.

“Right.” Maintaining his Dragonform, Linley immediately rushed over to the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s corpse. Because Linley had caused so much damage to the walls and the ceiling, even the Bear’s corpse had been buried under falling rubble.

With a wave of his black-scale-covered right arm, Linley knocked over ten large pieces of rubble away, revealing the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s upper torso and head.

Using his set of two knife-sharp claws, Linley directly tore at the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s fur.

“Oooof!” Linley used as much force as he could, but the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s fur wasn’t damaged in the slightest.

“Linley, this is a Saint-level magical beast. Even under the effects of the Dragonform, you are only a warrior of the early eighth rank. If you want to split open this Bear’s fur, there’s no way you can do it alone.” Doehring Cowart laughed.

Linley was forced to admit that this was the truth.

“But Linley, look. There are many sharp spikes on the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s body. These spikes are all extremely sharp. Based on your current ability, there’s no way you can use the spikes to cut open the fur either. But there’s a spike located very close to the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s eyes. What you need to do is pull that spike out, then stick your claws into that

wound and go digging. I'm confident that you should be able to pull out that Saint-level magicite core." Doehring Cowart instructed.

To the enormous Armored Razorback Wurm, these spikes were nothing more than spikes!

But to the much smaller Linley, these spikes were like massive drills that were twenty centimeters in length. After pulling the spike out, a huge, gaping wound would be revealed near the eyes of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. Going digging for the magicite core through that gaping wound should be an easy task indeed.

After all, as tough as the fur of a Saint-level magical beast might be, its brain and organs weren't too tough.

Using all his strength, Linley forcibly tugged out the giant 'drill', and then extended his black scaly arm into the wound, digging for the magicite core. This Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear's head was really large as well, over a meter long. Linley had to extend his arm into the wound all the way past his elbows before he was able to locate and pull out the Saint-level magicite core.

The Saint-level magicite core was still covered in blood and gore.

A black, fist-sized magicite core.

"It actually doesn't have even a hint of darkness-style aura." Linley was very surprised. If he hadn't already known that this fist-sized black stone was the magicite core of a Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear, he would've never been able to guess.

"The energy within a Saint-level magical beast's magicite core is highly dense and reserved. Frankly speaking, the magicite core of a magical beast of the ninth rank is as well," Doehring Cowart explained.

Linley nodded.

"The entire body of a Saint-level magical beast is a treasure. For example, the leg bones of this Saint-level magical beast definitely possess an astonishingly resilient strength." Doehring Cowart let out a sigh. "Unfortunately, you simply don't have the ability to break through the powerful defensive barrier of its fur."

Linley also nodded helplessly.

This Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was simply too huge. He didn't have the ability to bring the corpse of this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear back either.

"What a waste," Bebe said intentionally, off to the side.

Linley chuckled. "We've already done quite well. The most valuable part of a magical beast is its magicite core. A single Saint-level magicite core is already a truly priceless treasure. I am already very satisfied at having acquired it. What's more, I also have a draconic crystal of the ninth rank." Linley laughed as he walked over to the Armored Razorback Wyrms' corpse.

The corpse of the Armored Razorback Wyrms had a gaping wound on its head. Finding the draconic crystal shouldn't be too much of a problem.

Linley plunged his sharp claws directly into the wound on the Armored Razorback Wyrms' head.

"Eh?"

After carefully sifting around in the Armored Razorback Wyrms' skull for a while, Linley couldn't find anything. This made Linley feel suspicious.

"Why is there no draconic crystal? What bizarreness is this?" Linley frowned.

"Impossible. A magical beast can't live without a magicite core, and this dragon must absolutely have a draconic crystal as well. After a magical beast dies, there's no way that the magicite crystal will disappear." Doehring Cowart couldn't believe it either.

But Linley suddenly remembered something...

Earlier, when he had been raging and drinking the dragon's blood from this Armored Razorback Wyrms, he had swallowed an icy cold object into his stomach. But at that time, due to his rage and his sorrow, he hadn't paid it any attention. And then, when he had eaten the Blueheart Grass, the pain in the rest of his body had faded, except for that one place where the object was.

"No way... was that the draconic crystal?" Linley thought to himself.

Linley could still recollect the sensation of having that ice cold object pass through his throat into his stomach.

“I ate a draconic crystal? This... how could this have happened? In the Secret Dragonblood Manual, there is only a discussion on drinking dragon’s blood. Can it be that eating a dragon’s draconic crystal core also works?” Linley simply didn’t know what was going on. But no matter what, it seemed that he had indeed swallowed the core, and from the looks of it, he wasn’t suffering from any particularly bad aftereffects.

Linley chuckled.

“What I ate wasn’t just a draconic crystal core. It was five million gold coins.” Linley sighed to himself.

“Boss, lu, lu, look!” Bebe’s excited voice rang out.

Linley glanced at Bebe, who was standing in the middle of a pile of rubble, staring dumbly up at the ceiling of the cave. Linley immediately left the tunnel and returned to the cave, and also looked up at the ceiling.

“...What is that?”

At the top of the cave, a large, circular black platform had been revealed. This circular black platform had been embedded into the ceiling, and even now, a large part of it was covered with stone. Clearly... Linley’s wild attacks on the ceiling earlier had caused so many rocks to fall that the circular black platform had been revealed.

Linley wasn’t too surprised by the black platform. What did surprise him was...

On the black platform, there was an extremely complicated pattern of magical marks. All sorts of marks were on the platform, and the pattern was complicated to an extreme. Clearly, there was some sort of magical array formation on the top side of the black platform, but Linley had never before seen such a complicated magical array formation.

If one described the magical array formation covering the front gates of the Ernst Institute as a single ‘wind blade’, then this mysterious magical formation was the ‘Annihilating Tempest’ spell.

In particular, in the direct center of this black circular platform, there was a violet-covered sword plunged into it.

“This magical formation... how is this possible?” Doehring Cowart appeared by Linley’s side as well. Lifting his head up and staring, he said, “Impossible. How could there be a magical formation such as this here, and with this bizarre sword as a focus?”

Doehring Cowart, who in the past had always been calm and composed, had now totally been shocked. In his more than one thousand years of life, he had never seen such a terrifying magical formation. Although this magical formation was currently dormant and not active, he could already tell what terrible power this magical formation contained.

“Grandpa Doehring, is this magical formation very powerful?” Linley asked.

Doehring Cowart looked at Linley. “Very powerful? We can’t even use the word ‘powerful’ to describe it. The power of this magical formation is even greater than that of any forbidden spell. You tell me, is it ‘powerful’? In my entire life, I’ve never seen such a complicated magical formation, such a powerful magical formation. And what’s more, it is borrowing power from that strange sword to supplement the power of the formation itself. What, did the creator feel the power of this formation alone was not great enough?”

The Four Higher Planes

Linley was totally stunned by Doehring Cowart's words.

"Grandpa Doehring was a Saint-level Grand Magus of the era of the Pouant Empire. If even he has never seen such a complicated, powerful magical formation before, and is certain that the power of this formation is even greater than that of forbidden spells, then..." Linley felt a thread of trepidation.

What exactly was this mysterious magical formation doing here?

"Linley, take a closer look and try to get a feel for the formation, as well as that violet longsword," Doehring Cowart said to Linley.

Linley nodded slightly. He immediately gathered wind elemental essence to him and used it to sense the aura of that magical formation and the violet longsword. Closing his eyes, Linley could sense an aura of weight and density emanating from the black platform's magical formation, so heavy and oppressive it was stifling.

At the same time, this black platform, or perhaps the magical formation anchored on the platform, emanated waves of incredibly dense elemental essence.

"No wonder the elemental essence here is so dense, almost a hundred times that of the outside world. So this is the reason." If he hadn't directly and clearly attempted to probe the black platform, Linley wouldn't have been able to understand that the platform was the origin, as the elemental essence constantly came down in waves.

In actuality, the center of the cave was where the elemental essence was the densest.

"Amongst the seven elemental essences, the darkness-type elemental essence is the strongest. No wonder both the Armored Razorback Wyrms and

the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear both liked this place. Both of them were darkness-type magical beasts.” Linley nodded to himself.

“That violet longsword.” Linley carefully tried to sense any details from the violet longsword plunged into the middle of the black platform. “Darkness-type element... but so reserved and introverted.”

Stroking his beard, Doehring Cowart smiled at Linley. “Linley, I can tell you one thing. The value of that violet longsword is most likely not at all inferior to that of a Saint-level magicite core.”

Linley stared at Doehring Cowart questioningly.

Linley knew very well that, generally speaking, a warrior’s weapons were not very valuable. As long as some extremely hard metals were used along with some other alloys, a weapon could be made. Even his Baruch clan’s family heirloom, the warblade ‘Slaughterer’, had only cost a few tens of thousands of gold coins to make.

Afterwards, the successors to the Baruch clan had sold the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ for 180,000 gold coins, but that was primarily because of its connection to the famous Dragonblood Warriors.

Unfortunately, it had been many years since a Dragonblood Warrior had surfaced, and thus the fame of the Dragonblood Warriors was no longer worth as much. If it had been sold in the days when the Dragonblood Warriors had roamed and dominated the lands, its price would have been much higher.

The weapons of warriors weren’t worth much. But the magistaff of a magus was a different matter.

The higher quality a magistaff was, the more precious the materials for making it needed to be.

For example, the ‘divine treasures’ used by a Saint-level Grand Magus, such as a powerful magistaff, would use the magicite core of a magical beast of the ninth rank, or a Saint-level magical beast, to serve as its energy source. Next, complicated and powerful magical formations would be carved onto the magistaff, in order for it to reach its maximum potential.

A magistaff that was hailed as a ‘divine treasure’ was definitely priceless.

After all, a Saint-level magicite core by itself was considered a priceless treasure.

But of course...

When discussing the relative worthlessness of warrior's weapons, that was with respect to material weapons forged in the Yulan continent. If a weapon came from another place, such as one of the Four Higher Planes, then its value would be different.

"This violet longsword has a very unique aura. If my guess is correct, it should come from one of the Four Higher Planes. Most likely, the Infernal Realm," Doehring Cowart said musingly.

"The Four Higher Planes?" Linley asked curiously.

His white beard fluttering, Doehring Cowart said, "If we consider the Yulan continent as a whole, at your current level of power, you can nominally be considered to be in the upper tier. I can begin telling you a few things now. Linley, you should know by now that in this universe, there is more than just one plane of existence."

Linley nodded. "Of course I know. For example, the Netherworld."

"You know very little." Doehring Cowart shook his head. "In reality, within this vast, infinite universe, there are countless planes, with material, physical planes being just one of the most basic, elementary types of planes. Amongst all of these countless planes, there are Four Higher Planes of existence. These planes are the Netherworld, the Infernal Realm, the Life Realm, and the Celestial Realm," Doehring Cowart explained carefully.

Linley listened attentively, as this information was perhaps known only to the absolutely most powerful people on the Yulan continent.

"Linley, by now, you should know what a so-called 'god' is, right?" Doehring Cowart grinned as he looked at Linley.

Linley nodded. "Those who have surpassed the existence of 'Saints' are what we call Deities or Gods." Having read many books, Linley knew that in many books discussing power which transcended the level of the Saints, this level of power was described as the power of the Gods. A power that was so great, it

was irresistible.

“Right. But above the level of the Deities, are the Sovereigns. And above the Sovereigns, there are the Overgods!” Doehring Cowart sighed. “These Four Overgods are truly eternal presences which surpass everything else in existence.”

This was the first time Linley had ever heard of the existence of the Four Overgods.

“Overgods? Are they more powerful than the Radiant Sovereign?”

“Haha, the Radiant Sovereign?” Doehring Cowart began to laugh. “Regardless of whether we are discussing the ‘Radiant Sovereign’ of the Radiant Church or the ‘Shadow Sovereign’ of the Cult of Shadows, they are nothing more than Sovereigns. To us, and to any ordinary Deity, a Sovereign is an all-powerful entity. But they still require the power of faith from their followers.”

“But the Four Overgods are different. They neither require followers nor faith. Their power is all-encompassing and all-ruining. Sovereigns such as the Radiant Sovereign or the Shadow Sovereign would most likely only be worthy of being servants for the Four Overgods. And that would be only if the Overgods found them worthy.” Doehring Cowart spoke with absolute certainty.

Linley’s heart trembled.

“The Netherworld, the Infernal Realm, the Life Realm and the Celestial Realm. These Four Higher Planes were created by the Four Overgods. In the past, I had once had the chance to sense the aura of these Four Higher Planes, which is why, immediately upon seeing that violet longsword, I felt certain that it hails from the Infernal Realm.”

Doehring Cowart stared suspiciously at the violet longsword plunged into the round black platform. “But I, too, am suspicious. How did something from the Infernal Realm come to be here?”

“Linley, think about it. This is a magical formation which is more powerful than even forbidden spells. For it to rely on this violet longsword as a supplemental source of energy, in terms of energy levels, this sword should at least be on par with this magical formation. I strongly recommend... that you

drip your blood on it and see if you can bind it to you.” Doehring Cowart’s eyes were gleaming.

“Bind it?” In Linley’s heart, there arose a desire to acquire this treasure.

“Don’t be afraid. No matter what this magical formation is meant to do, for such a huge formation to be activated would take a long period of time. This will give you enough time to run far away. First drip your blood onto it and see if this sword already has a master. If it has no master, you can take it away with you. There definitely won’t be a problem, and no one will find out,” Doehring Cowart said with absolute confidence.

A divine sword which could be bound with blood was no ordinary thing.

When worn, nobody would be able to tell what it was. In the eyes of others, it would be as ordinary as the Coiling Dragon ring.

“Alright.” Linley exerted control over his Dragonblood battle-qi, and instantly, the scales on his arms and his upper body began to vanish.

The second form of the Dragonblood Warriors: the Demidragon form.

Linley could now perfectly control which portion of his body would transform. The rest of his body was now the same as a normal person. After using his teeth to cut his finger, Linley directly leapt up and flicked a drop of blood onto the violet longsword, which had been there for who-knows-how many years.

The drop of Linley’s blood landed on the dust-covered violet longsword, which had been there for countless years. It absorbed his blood like a sponge, easily drinking it in. At the same time...

“Ting!” The violet longsword rang out with a clear sound, and at the same time began to tremble.

All of the dust stuck to its surface suddenly flew away, and at the same time, a strange, bloody aura began to circulate on top of the sword, as though fresh blood was flowing all around it.

“An item with no master.” Seeing this, Doehring Cowart felt surprised and pleased.

Doehring Cowart knew very well that if this sword had a master, then Linley

would've had no hope at all. But if the sword had no master, then in the future, Linley would possess an extremely useful tool.

“Linley, quick, pull the sword out, and then leave this place immediately!” Doehring Cowart urged.

“Got it.”

Linley once more leapt up, this time directly grabbing the violet longsword and giving it a powerful tug. “Shrrrring!” With a clear ringing sound which seemed to carry boundless joy, it came out.

Earlier, when Linley's blood had been absorbed by the violet longsword, Linley immediately knew... that this was a flexible sword!

But upon exerting battle-qi, mageforce, or any other sort of force through the sword, it could instantly become firm and rigid! It could be flexible or hard!

Pulling the sword from the black platform, Linley landed on the ground. As he landed, with the flick of his wrist, Linley wrapped the violet longsword around his waist, using it like a belt!

“Bebe. Let's go.”

Picking up his backpack with one hand, Linley immediately ran for the tunnel exit. At the same time, he began to cover his entire body with scales once more. Bebe, as well, instantly jumped atop Linley's shoulders.

In Dragonform, Linley possessed the power of a warrior of the early eighth rank. But in terms of speed, he was a match for a particularly fast warrior of the eighth rank.

“Seventh rank Supersonic!” Linley immediately cast the wind-style supportive spell, ‘Supersonic’.

A Supersonic spell cast at the seventh rank could increase the speed of a warrior of the fourth rank by up to three times. However, Linley's current base speed was already extremely fast, and so even with the assistance of the Supersonic spell, his speed only improved by another 50%.

But even a 50% increase was already terrifying.



*

The white fog continued to flow about in the air above the Foggy Valley. As for those giant flying dragons that had previously been circling about in the air, aside from a very small number of them still in the air, all of the dragons were now resting on the ground. However, without question, all of them were staying far away from that small hill.

The tunnel covered up by that hill was a forbidden ground!

These giant dragons still remembered how, days ago, that pitiful human had entered the forbidden grounds. Most likely, that pitiful human had died long ago.

“Whoosh!”

A black blur suddenly shot out from within the tunnel, and then rocketed directly into the sky.

“What was that?” Those hundred-plus dragons all noticed the human-sized blur.

A fast warrior of the eighth rank could definitely match the speed of a giant flying dragon of the eighth rank. And now, with Linley utilizing the Supersonic spell to assist himself, his speed had been increased by 50%. Right now, Linley’s speed was definitely on par with a warrior of the ninth rank. Even compared to Bebe, he wasn’t much slower.

“Roar!”

Those hundred-plus dragons immediately began to roar with rage.

A human had actually dared to trespass on the territory of the dragons? One giant dragon after another spread their wings, taking off and chasing after Linley, but Linley’s current speed was simply too fast. Even the largest Fire Dragon could do nothing save watch as Linley’s form grew farther and farther away from them. In just a short amount of time, Linley had thrown them off and disappeared from their sight.

“That doesn’t seem to be a human.” That largest Fire Dragon coiled about in mid-air, musing to itself, confused.

Although it hadn’t been able to catch Linley, it could tell quite clearly that this creature had been human-shaped, but covered with scales.

“A human-shaped magical beast?” The Fire Dragon wondered to itself.



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Within the underground cave, atop the black platform, the countless crisscrossing lines and patterns of the magical formation slowly began to glow. Each line seemed to have a line of glowing silver emanate from it. Slowly... the entire magical formation began to shine, so brightly as to hurt one’s eyes.

“Boom!”

A deep rumbling sound could be heard, and the magical formation began to grow even brighter. Those rumbling sounds grew more and more frequent, more and more urgent. “Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!” Like a series of drumbeats, the booming sounds continued, and the mysterious magical formation continued to grow brighter.

“CRACK!” The black pavilion, made out of an unknown material, suddenly cracked, with three cracks appearing.

Piercing the Heavens

After the three massive cracks appeared on the round black platform, the light from the entire magical formation suddenly flashed as the drumbeat-like booms reached a crescendo, beating faster and louder.

“BOOM!” “BOOM!” “BOOM!” “BOOM!”

Like a series of unabating thunderclaps, capped off with one final “BOOM!”, the entire round black platform exploded into fragments. Naturally, the magical formation atop it disintegrated as well. Suddenly, one patterned crack after another began to appear in the air itself, clear and visible to the eye, spreading out in all directions.



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While the flying dragons of the Foggy Valley were still busy wondering about that man-shaped aberration, they suddenly felt the ground itself tremble. All of the giant dragons were startled, and immediately spread their wings and took to the air. Just a few moments later...

“BOOOOOM!”

The ground for kilometers around suddenly exploded. The entire hill which had sealed off the underground tunnel was reduced to smithereens.

“Growl...” A deep roar emanated from underground.

Where the round black platform had been, space itself was suddenly ripped apart like a piece of paper, revealing a gaping hole of nothingness. And from within that hole stepped forth a handsome, devilish-looking young man, wearing a long, dark gold robe and carrying three little kittens in his arms.

At this moment, the young man looked to be in quite bad shape, and his face

was covered with blood.

“Whoosh!”

The gaping hole in reality suddenly vanished. The space nearby, however, was still very unstable, and wild bolts of energy would occasionally appear and disappear.

“I... have finally escaped.” The young man stared at the unstable space, a look of wild joy on his face.

“Haha... how many years, now? I’ve finally escaped that damnable place.” Right in the middle of the young man’s forehead, there was a slit that appeared almost like a knife wound. Suddenly, that ‘scar’ opened, revealing a gold-colored third eye.

This golden eye radiated light every which way.

“This is... this is actually the Yulan continent?” The devilish young man began to laugh in amazement and joy. “This is just wonderful.”

“Father, I’m hungry,” one of the little kittens in the young man’s arms suddenly said.

“I’m hungry too.”

The other two kittens also echoed.

Kittens that could speak?

Could they actually be Saint-level magical beasts?

“Alright. Haha, there’s around a hundred or so little dragons flying up ahead. You guys can go and have a good meal.” The devilish young man laughed loudly.

“Oooo!”

The three little kittens began meowing in excitement. Suddenly, they transformed into three bolts of lightning and streaked into the sky. As they flew, their bodies suddenly expanded as well, growing larger and larger... smiling, the devilish young man took a single step, and appeared in the middle of the Foggy Valley.



*

Within the Foggy Valley, over a hundred giant dragons were circling in the air. They had no idea as to what had caused the earth to explode just then.

“What’s that?”

They saw three huge blurs streak into the air above the Foggy Valley. Each of the three creatures were over thirty meters tall and a hundred meters long. They looked like lions, only magnified by several dozen times. But these creatures were not, in fact, lions, because these three creatures each had a pair of enormous wings, and also had six eyes each.

Six eyes, two wings. Physically as large as one of those legendary Behemoth creatures.

But even Behemoths were not as terrifying as these three creatures.

“RAWR!” Those three strange creatures opened their bloody maws wide and let out a mighty roar. Instantly, their mouths seemed to have turned into vortexes, generating an astonishing pulling force directed towards the flying dragons.

The hundred-plus dragons wanted to flee in terror, but the sucking force was simply far too strong. The strangest thing was, the pull seemed to only affect them, and didn’t disturb any of the rocks on the cliffs near them in the slightest.

“Roaaaar!”

The hundred-plus dragons began to bellow in fear and rage, but in the face of that terrifying attractive force, they were helplessly sucked away. One giant dragon after another fell into the gaping maws of those six-eyed monsters.

The thing which scared the dragons the most was...

The bellies of these monsters seemed to have an unlimited capacity. Although the dragons were slightly smaller in size than these monsters, one should be more than enough to fill their stomachs. But as soon as one dragon was sucked into a monster’s belly, the monster would begin sucking in another.

One dragon... another dragon...

The pulling force from the maws of those three monsters was simply too terrifying. The eighth-ranked dragons were totally unable to resist it. One dragon after another was sucked into the bellies of those six-eyed aberrations. In a short period of time, every single one of them had been devoured by these three monsters.

“That was great!” One of the aberrations laughed loudly. “It’s been so many years since I’ve had a proper meal.”

“I thought I was going to die in that damnable place and never come out again. Unfortunately... number four and number five...” Another one of the aberrations said with a low sigh.

All three of the aberrations fell silent.

They thought back to the thousands of years they had spent in that damnable place. They couldn’t help but feel their hearts grow cold. No future. No hope. They could’ve died at any time. If it hadn’t been for their father, the three of them most likely would’ve been killed long ago. But even despite the efforts of their father, their fourth brother and fifth brother, the weakest of the five, had both died.

“Father’s coming.”

The three aberrations watched as the devilish young man walked towards them in midair. Their bodies shrinking, they once again transformed into three ordinary little kittens. The only thing was, their fur was now rainbow-colored and beautiful to behold. Their two little wings were also much more beautiful than the wings of the dragons.

But those three sets of eyes would still shock anyone who saw them.

“Father.” Those three aberrations excitedly flew to their father’s side. By now, there was no longer a hint of blood on the devilish young man’s face, and the dust on the dark golden robe he was wearing had all disappeared as well. A smile was still on his face.

“Did you have a good meal?” The devilish young man laughed. “Oh, and there’s two more magical beasts of the eighth rank here as well.”

The devilish young man looked towards the west side of the Foggy Valley, while at the same time, a burst of quad-colored energy radiated west. In a short time, the burst of energy had wrapped around those two giant Velocidragons, and pulled them over in mid-air.

Those two Velocidragons seemed to know that the end was nigh. All they did was moan in a low voice, begging for mercy.

They were Velocidragons. Although they were also magical creatures of the eighth rank, like Emerald Dragons and Fire Dragons, due to the fact that they were different races of dragons and also did not fly, they usually stayed far away from the Emerald and Fire Dragons.

When those three aberrations had been happily devouring the flying dragons, they hadn't paid any attention to those two far-away Velocidragons.

"Over a hundred flying dragons were just devoured." The hearts of the two Velocidragons were trembling.

Their opponent was far too strong, and those three kittens, now at a 'normal' size, could even talk.

"You wanted to flee?" The devilish young man smiled at the two Velocidragons.

The two Velocidragons were physically huge. The devilish young man was just a tiny speck by their side. And yet, the hearts of the two Velocidragons were quailing, and they were panting hoarsely nonstop. In the language of the dragons, they said, "Lord, we wouldn't dare, we wouldn't dare."

The devilish young man seemed to understand the draconic tongue. Smiling, he nodded. "Very good. I've just arrived in this plane, and I'm in a very good mood. I'll spare you two. You two... shall serve me now."

The energy chains around the two Velocidragons disappeared, causing the two of them to land heavily on the ground. Upon smashing into the ground, they traded glances, then immediately prostrated themselves flat on the ground, their heads lowered in a sign of obedience.

Dragons were extremely arrogant creatures, but in the face of such overwhelming power, they had no choice but to submit.

Facing this devilish young man, these two Velocidragons strongly suspected that they could be killed with a single wave of his pinky.

“The Yulan continent.” The devilish young man surveyed his surroundings, his face all smiles. “What a wonderful place. I trust that I won’t be as unfortunate as I was five thousand years ago.”



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Within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Having returned to his human form, Linley was only wearing a pair of slacks and an undergarment. This was the beginning of February, when the temperature was extremely low. But Linley was only carefully inspecting the violet sword.

Right now, Linley had no idea what a huge calamity he had unleashed upon the world by pulling out this violet longsword!

The ignorant knew no fear!

But while Doehring Cowart did have some idea as to what would happen, to Doehring Cowart, no matter how great the disaster might be, thought it wouldn’t have too much of an impact on Linley. After all, even if the heavens collapsed, the ultimate experts of the Yulan continent would be able to stave off calamity. What was there to fear?

Only an idiot would see a treasure there for the taking and not take it.

“Grandpa Doehring, what do you think these two words here mean?” Linley asked Doehring Cowart.

On the hilt of the violet longsword were two angular characters, written with many complicated strokes.

“This...” Doehring Cowart’s eyes lit up upon seeing these two words. “These words are from the common tongue used in the Infernal Realm. Years ago, shortly after I became a Saint-level magus, I studied this tongue. These two words should be ‘blood’ and ‘violet’, respectively.”

“Blood Violet?” Linley murmured quietly. “Can it be that the name of this longsword is Bloodviolet?”

Linley inspected the flexible sword, Bloodviolet, carefully. Bloodviolet was as thin as a cicada’s wings. Precisely because it was so incredibly thin, even though it was made from special materials, it was quite light, perhaps only five pounds or so. To Linley, a five-pound sword was absolutely nothing at all.

As he channeled the dragonblood battle-qi from his body into the sword, Bloodviolet instantly became hard and straight.

With a wave of the hand...

“Swish!” The whisper-thin Bloodviolet very easily sliced through a huge tree with a trunk that would require three men holding hands to surround. Despite being cut through, the tree didn’t budge at all. But Linley knew very well that in reality, the tree had been cut into two halves.

But Bloodviolet was too fast, too sharp, which was why the tree didn’t move at all.

With a mighty leap, Linley flew into the air, and then kicked at one of the branches of the tree in mid-air. Immediately, the tree began to tremble. After smashing several large branches, the entire tree slowly slid and fell to the ground.

Linley took a glance at the place where Bloodviolet had made its cut. “How smooth.” The cut area didn’t have any coarseness or any splinters.

“That sword is awesome.” Munching on a roast duck he was carrying, Bebe stared with wide eyes.

Linley chuckled, then turned to stare at the flexible sword, Bloodviolet. In his mind, he said, “With such an agile, sharp weapon, even if I encounter a thousand or ten thousand foes, I won’t fear them.” Linley immediately began to brandish the flexible sword about.

With incredible agility, Linley danced amidst the forest, easily waving Bloodviolet to and fro amongst the trees.

Sharp! Fast!

As thin as an insect's wings! This caused Bloodviolet to be virtually unimpeded by air resistance, allowing its speed to reach terrifying heights. And its lightness allowed Linley to transform even more of his physical strength into a fast swing speed.

“Linley, although this flexible sword, Bloodviolet, is quite sharp, its sharpness isn't all that shocking.” Doehring Cowart's appraising skills were much better than Linley's. At one glance, he could tell what the true strength of this Bloodviolet sword was.

Linley couldn't help but stare suspiciously at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart laughed. “If you just want to use this Bloodviolet sword to chop down an ordinary tree, then of course it would be unstoppable. But in facing an expert opponent, such as a warrior of the seventh rank using a shield infused with battle-qi, I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to cut through it so easily.”

Linley was startled.

“The true value of this Bloodviolet longsword lies in two different areas. The first is that it can be either firm or flexible, and thus it will be extremely hard for an opponent to defend or protect against it in battle. And the second is... its durability! Most weapons aren't able to withstand too much battle-qi, as they would crumble. But this precious sword of yours will not,” Doehring Cowart explained.

Linley nodded slightly.

A sword that was very sharp and very hard would probably also be fragile and unable to take too much force. This Bloodviolet flexible sword was very sharp, but not ridiculously so. Its true strength lay in it being both flexible and firm, while possessing astonishing speed and innate durability.

“Speed? Flexibility?”

Linley's heart was moved. He no longer channeled his Dragonblood battle-qi into the sword, and instead began to channel his wind-element mageforce into it.

At the same time, he began to brandish the sword about. After having been

filled with wind-style mageforce, the already fast Bloodviolet sword was able to reach an even higher level, while the trajectory of its movement also became erratic and unpredictable. The sword was sometimes straight, sometimes curved, causing one to not know how to handle it.

Linley instantly understood.

“For me right now, this is perhaps the most suitable way to utilize this flexible sword, Bloodviolet!”

Grandmaster Sculptor?

Shortly after the Ernst Institute began the new school semester, Hillman arrived at the Ernst Institute in search of Linley.

In front of the Ernst Institute's main gate, Hillman was frowning while pacing. Clearly, he had a belly full of bad thoughts. The Ernst Institute was under very strict management, and as an outsider without any particular status or power, he didn't have the qualifications needed to enter.

After a while, Yale and Reynolds, both dressed in sky-blue robes, stepped out and walked towards him.

"You are Linley's Uncle Hillman, right? I met you before." Yale spoke out warmly.

Hillman had previously seen Linley's three bros before. Upon seeing Yale and Reynolds, he immediately went over and asked them, "Hey... I know that you guys are Linley's classmates, and I wanted to ask, why didn't Linley come back to celebrate the New Year? Every year in the past, he would come back."

"Uh..." Yale and Reynolds exchanged glances.

That Linley had his heart broken wasn't a happy event. It wouldn't be good for them to reveal it to Linley's elders.

Reynolds reaction speed was the fastest. Smiling, he said, "Uncle Hillman, Linley's totally focused on his training, and long before the end-of-the-year examinations, had already reached the rank of magus of the sixth rank. And then, he once more entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for training. Man, he's so hard-working... he didn't even bother coming back for the yearly examinations. That Dixie fellow was assessed as a magus of the sixth rank this year. Some people are now saying that Dixie has surpassed Linley."

"Third Bro has no care for these superficial things. Right, Uncle Hillman, Linley

headed off to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts last December. He should be back very soon. Is there something important? If there is, you can tell us. We'll definitely let him know when he comes back," Yale said very courteously.

Hillman was silent for a while, then shook his head, a smile on his face that didn't seem like a smile. "No... nothing important. It was just that Linley had always come back every year, and so this year, when he did not, the family grew worried and wanted to check up on him. Since we now know that Linley has entered the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, we're satisfied."

"Uncle Hillman, don't worry, when Third Bro comes back, I'll definitely tell him to go home early so that you won't be worried," Yale immediately said.

Hillman shook his head. "No need, no need to rush him back. Let him focus on his training. When he has some free time, he can come back then. Nothing big is going on back home anyways. Thanks, the two of you. I'll head off now."

Watching Hillman depart, Yale and Reynolds smiled, then turned to leave as well.

Suddenly...

"Young master Yale, young master Reynolds!" From far away, an exceedingly friendly voice called out.

Yale and Reynolds turned to stare outside of the Institute. From far away, they could see a parked carriage guarded by four armored knights. Frowning, Yale said questioningly, "Who is calling out to me? Oh. It's Austoni." Yale saw Austoni poke his face out of the carriage.

Austoni was the first out of the carriage. He smiled humbly at Yale, and then respectfully stood off to the side. At this time, the screen door to the carriage was once more pushed open, and a very distinguished-looking bald gentleman with a cane slowly made his way out.

Yale and Reynolds exchanged glances.

"Who is this old geezer? Seems distinguished," Reynolds said beneath his breath.

Yale shook his head. Also beneath his breath, he said, "I don't recognize this

old geezer either. But based on Austoni's actions, he should be an important individual. Austoni is a high-level manager at the Proulx Gallery who has a fairly high status himself."

Accompanied by Austoni, that distinguished-looking old man walked over to them, smiling.

"Little Yale, hello." The bald man smiled as he spoke to Yale. "I ran into your father not long ago. Your father was full of praises for you. Haha, for Mr. Dawson to have a son such as yourself at the Ernst Institute is a very proud thing."

Yale looked questioningly at the bald man.

"He says he knows my father? And seems to be close to him?"

Austoni said from the side, "Young master Yale, this is the managing director of our Proulx Gallery. You can call him Director Maia."

"No need, just call me Uncle Maia. I've been friends with your father for decades," the bald old man said with a smile.

Yale felt secretly shocked.

The Proulx Gallery was the holy land for the arts. Every single large city in the Yulan continent had a branch of the Proulx Gallery. Even here in Fenlai City alone, the total value of all the sculptures stored at the local branch of the Proulx Gallery would come to an astounding figure.

And that wasn't the half of it.

The most important thing was status. To be the managing director of the holy land for the arts meant that the circles this Director Maia travelled in were composed of the highest tier of people in the entire Yulan continent, and he might even be on friendly terms with Saint-level combatants. How could anyone look down on someone like this?

What was more, the Proulx Gallery had an extremely formidable armed force, as otherwise, how could they protect their valuable treasures?

"Uncle Maia." Yale said humbly.

The bald Director Maia turned to look at Reynolds. "And this is?"

“This is a good bro of mine — Reynolds.” Yale immediately replied. Quite elegantly, Reynolds also said, “Very pleased to meet you, Director Maia.”

Director Maia nodded slightly. From Reynolds movements, he could tell that Reynolds had received an excellent tutelage from when he was young.

“Uncle Maia, why have you come here, if I might ask?” Yale asked.

Although he was asking, in his heart, Yale already suspected the answer. “80% chance he’s here because of that sculpture of Third Bro’s – Awakening From the Dream.” The last time the Ernst Institute had had a holiday break, due to the fact that it had been quite some time since Linley had sent any sculptures to the Proulx Gallery, Austoni had come over to see what the situation was.

But upon arriving at Linley’s dormitory, by chance, Austoni had caught a glimpse of that sculpture, which they had placed in the dorm.

Upon seeing it, Austoni had been totally stunned.

As a high-level manager of the Proulx Gallery, Austoni’s eyes were exceedingly sharp. From that glimpse alone, he was absolutely certain that this sculpture of Linley’s was qualified to be described as standing at the pinnacle of the entire art of stonesculpting. It definitely was qualified to stand on the same pedestal as the Ten Great Sculptures.

The most important thing was that this sculpture of Linley’s was enormous, on par with five separate sculptures of most people.

Just like in the art of painting, the value of a sculpture was related in part to its size. Such an enormous sculpture would’ve required an incredibly large amount of effort. This sculpture which contained five lifelike images of people already contained within it a unique soul and was on a totally different level.

Seeing that sculpture was the same as seeing five real-life beautiful women.

In the entire Yulan continent, there were very few master-level sculptors. But this sculpture by Linley had already surpassed the level of ‘masters’; it was qualified to be ranked among the works of the most venerated grandmaster sculptors in history, such as Proulx, Hope Jensen, and Hoover.

Those who were granted the title of master were able to produce sculptures

of exceedingly high quality, with their own distinct aura and the ability to stir the souls of its viewers.

But their works, when compared to the works of Proulx, Hope Jensen, and the other sculptors who had received the title of 'Grandmaster', was still slightly inferior. Although the gap was very small, it still determined a difference in status.

Stonesculpting had a history of hundreds of thousands of years, and during that period of time, the vast majority of sculptures had been destroyed by the passage of time. Only a few special statues made of special materials could survive and be passed down to the present generation. Thus, of the so-called Ten Grandmasters, nine of them had lived within the past hundred thousand years.

Ever since the Yulan Empire had unified the Yulan continent, there had been only two sculptors that could be put on the same level as those ancient grandmasters: Proulx and Hope Jensen.

Hoover was a Grandmaster from over a hundred thousand years ago, and his famous sculpture, the Bloody-eyed Maned Lion, had survived all those years due to the unique properties of the material it was made from, thus ensuring that Hoover's fame would live on.

In the past ten thousand years, there had only been two Grandmaster sculptors. Now, of course, Proulx was actually the most formidable sculptor in all of history, and three of the Ten Masterpieces belonged to him. Not all of the Ten Grandmasters had produced sculptures which numbered amongst the Ten Masterpieces.

Of course, this was just the judgment of the later generations. In terms of actual sculpting ability, all of the Ten Grandmasters were about the same.

A new Grandmaster had been born... and he was a seventeen-year-old youth!

What an amazing event this was! And this was the reason why the managing director of the Proulx Gallery himself had hurried over here, all the way from the Proulx Gallery located in the Dark Alliance.

"No rush. Let's go to a private room in a hotel and have a nice, quiet chat."

Director Maia wasn't in too big of a rush.

A Grandmaster sculptor?

What a joke!

Although Austoni's eyes were keen, whether or not a sculpture was capable of being passed down through the ages required extremely formidable judgment. The difference between the work of a master sculptor and that of a Grandmaster lay in its unique aura and soul.

Whether or not a work of art was qualified to be considered a Grandmaster-level piece of art was an extremely deep field of study.



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Within a deluxe room at the hotel.

In front of the four of them, there was a kettle of light tea. Laughing, Director Maia said, "This kid, Austoni, upon seeing Linley's sculpture, insisted that it was on par with the Ten Masterpieces. Haha, isn't that the same as saying that we now have a seventeen-year-old Grandmaster?"

'Grandmaster' was a title representing a certain status, representing that someone was at the peak of this art form.

But in casual conversation, most people would address someone as 'master', for example, 'Master Proulx'.

"Grandmaster sculptor?" Yale was somewhat amazed. "I don't know if Linley's sculpture qualifies or not. After all, my experience is limited. But I am absolutely sure that this sculpture of Linley's is, at the very least, comparable with the sculptures you have on display in your hall of the masters."

"Oh?" Director Maia laughed. "Well-spoken. After all this chitchat, I suppose it's best that I take a look. I don't know where this sculpture is. May I take a look?"

"Of course." Yale smiled.

"Little Yale, even if this sculpture isn't at the level of the Ten Masterpieces, I'll

wager it isn't too far off. You have to protect it and make sure it isn't stolen." Director Maia reminded.

Yale confidently said, "Uncle Maia, please set your mind at ease. Right now, I've secreted the sculpture into a secret underground room within the Huadeli Hotel, and I have experts of the Dawson Conglomerate protecting it. What's more, there are very few people who even know of the existence of this statue to begin with."

"You've moved it to the hotel?" Austoni was somewhat surprised. The last time he had seen it, it had been in their dormitory.

Yale pursed his lips. "I trust my bros, but I don't trust you."

Austoni could only let out a few awkward chuckles.

"Uncle Maia, let's go. I'll lead you there," Yale said warmly.

The Huadeli Hotel was actually a property under the banner of the Dawson Conglomerate. This was the reason why the upper-level management of the Huadeli Hotel knew Yale's status.

Within a large stand-alone room inside the Huadeli Hotel, there were several seats as well as three experts who had been standing guard every day.

"Young master Yale." The three warriors of the seventh rank bowed respectfully.

Yale nodded and smiled slightly. "Uncle Maia, please look to your heart's content." As he spoke, Yale gave the heavy covering over the sculpture a sharp tug, revealing the enormous work of art. Those five beautiful women were incomparably immaculate and fine. One an image of tender love, another an adorable innocence, a third all bashful and shy, the fourth passionate and stirring, and the last... heartless.

Each of them seemed to be as real as an actual person.

Seeing these five human shapes within the sculpture, Director Maia's mouth hung open, and he stared at it, stunned, for a long time.

After a long time...

"Incredible. Incredible." Only now did Director Maia awaken from his stupor.

“This sculpture is at the master level, at the very least. A sculpture which links together five different human figures, all totally lifelike? How much effort did this cost? In terms of carving time alone, at least a year must have been spent on it.”

Director Maia knew very well how much effort sculpting took.

It took so much effort that sometimes, in the middle of carving a sculpture, a master sculptor might suddenly vomit blood and pass out from the exertion. In history, there were people who died in the middle of their sculpting. Sculptures such as this were formed from blood and effort.

“For a seventeen-year-old to be able to produce this sculpture is simply... simply...” Director Maia was at a loss for words. He excitedly walked closer to the sculpture for a closer examination. “Whether or not this sculpture is on par with the Ten Masterpieces requires further inspection from multiple angles.”

As he spoke, Director Maia glued himself next to the sculpture, beginning to carefully inspect every single carved line.

Sword Training

Without making any sound, Director Maia carefully inspected every single inch of this sculpture, *Awakening From the Dream*, as though he had been possessed.

“Boss Yale, it’s been two hours already.” Reynolds looked at Yale with an unhappy expression.

Yale shook his head and said softly, “Don’t be impatient. Let Uncle Maia make a close inspection. As the managing director of the entire Proulx Gallery, he must be one of the descendants of Master Proulx himself. I believe that his abilities at judging sculpture must be extremely high. I wonder what level this sculpture of Third Bro’s has reached.”

Reynolds nodded slightly as well.

After over three hours had passed, Director Maia straightened his waist, letting out a long breath.

“I hear that the name of this sculpture is *Awakening From the Dream*?” Director Maia asked.

Yale nodded. “Correct. Third Bro gave it this name himself.”

Director Maia let out a soft sigh. After taking another good look at the sculpture, he praised, “I must say, this brother of yours, Linley, is without question a genius sculptor. A genius who is comparable to Master Proulx himself.”

“Although on a technical level, his sculpture is just a tiny bit weaker than Master Proulx’s, in terms of the soul or the aura of this sculpture, Linley has definitely reached the same level.” Director Maia sighed with praise.

“Technical level?” Yale said questioningly.

Director Maia nodded. “Right. But although this sculpture does have minor

technical flaws, at the same time, it has amazing strengths of its own.”

“The flaws are that some of the indentions and some of the soft lines were not handled with perfect adroitness. But this sculpture of Linley’s is extremely smooth and flowing as a whole, and the feelings it invokes are definitely on par with several of Master Proulx’s finest. And most importantly of all, this sculpture is huge.”

Director Maia sighed in praise. “For a sculpture to be passed down throughout the ages, it requires a tremendous amount of effort in every single aspect. A single error can ruin the entire sculpture. To be able to sculpt a single human-shaped sculpture is already quite an accomplishment. But Linley was able to sculpt five! The most admirable thing is that all five of the people in this sculpture have their own unique aura, but yet everything is still linked up in a story. If I guess correctly, your brother must have suffered a romantic heartbreak.”

Based on Director Maia’s astuteness, he could clearly tell the story behind these five figures at a single glance.

“Awakening From the Dream. It is really amazing that Linley was able to carve a sculpture such as this.” Director Maia couldn’t stop praising it.

“Director Maia, tell me, what level is this sculpture of my bro’s at, exactly? Is it on par with the sculptures of Master Proulx?” Reynolds asked.

Director Maia frowned. “To be frank, I’m not sure either. Let me put it to you like this. On the technical side of things, this sculpture can only be considered to be an expert level sculpture, despite being on the same level with Master Proulx in terms of evoking emotions and telling a story. But there is a unique point about it...”

“The carving strokes of this sculpture were very clean, very agile. From start to finish, it can be said that these five figures were inseparable parts of a flawless whole. This unconventional feeling is something I have never even heard of before, much less seen.” Director Maia praised.

Yale said urgently, “Uncle Maia, so what level is this sculpture at?”

Director Maia was helpless. “I can’t say for certain. From a traditional

evaluation standpoint, this sculpture should be considered to be on the master level. After all, the uniqueness of its aura is unquestionable, and the quality of the work is on clear display from the grace the statue emanates.”

“From a traditional evaluation standpoint?” Yale and Reynolds both looked questioningly at Director Maia.

Director Maia nodded. “The traditional evaluation method has been universally agreed upon as a fair, impartial evaluating mechanism for countless years. But I feel that... when actually viewing Linley’s sculpture, it appears to be a very perfect whole, without any apparent flaws.”

“The whole point of having sculptures is for viewing them. The actual viewing determines everything. Let me put it this way. Linley perhaps cannot be termed a Grandmaster sculptor, but the value of this sculpture will most likely be incredibly high, on the same level as the Ten Masterpieces.” Director Maia laughed.

A sculpture not produced by one of the Ten Grandmasters with a valuation on the same level as the Ten Masterpieces. This was something totally unheard of.

But Director Maia couldn’t help but admit that this was very likely to occur.

“Oh.” Yale and Reynolds nodded.

This was the one flaw of the Straight Chisel School, honestly speaking. When just using a single tool, the straight chisel, in terms of precision when carving out certain curves, couldn’t match some more specialized tools. The technical appearance created by Linley’s usage of the straight chisel was perhaps comparable with a normal expert sculptor.

When judging it against the standards of a master sculptor, the weaknesses became readily apparent.

But the Straight Chisel School had its own strengths as well. For example, the continuity of the carving, and the fact that others, when carving, had to constantly switch tools, but the Straight Chisel School only required an earth-style magus to become one with the earth as he carved, which actually increased the speed at which he raised his spiritual energy.

“Where is Linley?” Director Maia asked.

Yale shook his head. “Third Bro is a student magus, after all. The vast majority of his time is spent in training. Right now, he is engaged in a practical excursion in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and we’re not sure exactly when he’ll be back.”

“Then, Yale, can you act on behalf of Linley in permitting our Proulx Gallery to auction this sculpture off?” Director Maia suggested.

“Can’t be done.” Yale was very blunt. “Without Third Bro’s express permission, it isn’t convenient for me to make that decision.”

Director Maia frowned, then continued. “Then what about exhibiting it? There shouldn’t be too much of a problem in allowing our Proulx Gallery to exhibit it, would there? After all, Linley’s previous sculptures were all exhibited in our Proulx Gallery before being auctioned off.”

But Yale knew very well how much symbolic importance Linley placed on this sculpture.

This represented an extremely painful period of heartbreak in Linley’s life. It was hard to say if Linley would have agreed to exhibit it if he were here. He didn’t want to make Linley uncomfortable.

“Can’t be done. I’m only responsible for safeguarding this thing. As far as exhibiting it or selling it, we’ll have to wait for Third Bro to return.” Yale’s voice was resolute.



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Within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Exactly two months had passed. During this time, Linley had been immersed in studying the Bloodviolet sword. The Bloodviolet sword was the finest sword Linley had ever seen. Just based on its sharpness alone, most magical beasts of the sixth rank couldn’t handle it. But the sharpness was only a small specialty of the Bloodviolet sword.

The strengths of the Bloodviolet sword were — Unpredictability, speed, and also a certain baleful aura.

That's right. A baleful aura.

Linley only discovered this baleful aura after killing quite a few magical beasts. The material making up this Bloodviolet sword contained within it a unique energy. With each chop of the blade, a unique baleful aura was released.

This baleful aura was very similar to a dragon's terrifying presence. Naturally, it wasn't nearly as terrifying, but in battle, this baleful aura could be put to very good use.

Night. In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, surrounded by a pack of hundreds of Windwolves. The Windwolf pack leader stared at Linley with its greenish-yellow eyes. Letting out wild howls, one Windwolf after another pounced towards Linley. But moving as agilely as the wind, Linley slipped through the attacks of the pack, the sword in his hand glowing with a blue light.

After being activated by wind-style mageforce, the Bloodviolet Godsword's speed increased even more. The Godsword flickered about, not impeded by air resistance in the slightest.

"Whoosh!"

Within the darkness, a streak of violet intermixed with blue was flickering about at high speed. It floated about in bizarre patterns, and every time it flickered, a Windwolf was split into two parts. Windwolves, after all, were only magical beasts of the fourth rank. In this pack of Windwolves, some of the stronger ones were beasts of the fifth rank, and only the two leaders were beasts of the sixth rank.

Right now, Linley remained in human form, in which he possessed the power of the sixth rank.

Frankly speaking, even a warrior of the seventh rank might not dare to fight directly with a pack of hundreds of Windwolves, much less a warrior of the sixth rank. After all, a hero could still be brought down by numbers, and Windwolves possessed extremely sharp claws. Even Linley's body, when scratched by a Windwolf, would most likely bleed. Unless, of course, he entered the Dragonform.

"Howl!" A Windwolf leapt at him with high speed, bloody maw wide open.

“Swish!”

The Bloodviolet Godsword flashed. The Windwolf was instantly bisected from head to tail.

“Perhaps this Bloodviolet Godsword of mine would have some problems piercing the armor of a Velocidragon. But you guys?” The Bloodviolet Godsword in Linley’s hands was beginning to move even faster and even more agilely.

The reason why a pack of Windwolves was a terrifying thing was because of their speed, as well as their numbers. If over ten Windwolves suddenly snapped at you, even a warrior of the seventh rank would be hard pressed to block them all at once. His only option would be to use his battle-qi to tank the blow.

But Linley was different.

“Swish!” The Bloodviolet Godsword flashed again, and yet another Windwolf was cut in two.

The Bloodviolet Godsword was simply too fast, so fast that all the Windwolves could see was a blur. After Linley had slaughtered over a hundred Windwolves without suffering any injury at all, the pack of Windwolves finally began to be filled with fear.

They weren’t afraid of death, but they weren’t willing to die senselessly either.

“Hooooowl!” Those two large Windwolves that had been hiding in the back finally began to howl angrily. All of the remaining Windwolves lowered their heads, then turned and retreated at high speed. Their angry, saddened howls could be heard from far away. Clearly, it was caused by the fact that they had lost so many of their comrades, but had gained nothing at all.

With a flick of Linley’s wrist and a violet flash, the Bloodviolet Godsword wrapped around Linley’s waist into a belt shape again.

“Against the likes of them, there’s no need to use Bloodviolet’s real power.” There was a hint of blood on Linley’s robes, but all of it came from the Windwolves.

During the entire battle, from start to finish, the Bloodviolet Godsword had

been straight. Against the likes of a Windwolf pack, just relying on the sharpness of the Godsword was already enough. But once the Bloodviolet Godsword began to fluctuate between being straight and being flexible, its offensive power would multiply.

“Boss, you are starting to get more and more powerful.” Bebe was lying on Linley’s shoulders.

Linley laughed. “You aren’t weak either.”

After taking a deep breath then releasing it, Linley glanced around at his surroundings, then took a look at the three bags on his back. In the past two months, through analyzing and training with this Bloodviolet Godsword, Linley had already filled up three sacks with magicite cores.

“After spending two months in training, I’ve already reached a bottleneck in my ability to use Bloodviolet. If I want to get better, for now, I’ll have to rely on improving my own arm strength and wrist strength.”

During these two months, Linley had trained in the movements of drawing the sword, striking with the sword, cutting with it, stabbing with it, hacking with it, and all sorts of other skills. The purpose of Linley’s training had all been to improve his speed, to as high a level as was possible. What was more, with Linley’s proficiency in wind magic, Linley could discern the secrets of using the sword with relative ease.

Just now, when faced with over a hundred Windwolves, Linley wasn’t injured at all. This was the result of his accomplishments.

In the past, Linley wouldn’t have dared to imagine what it would be like at this level.

“Now that I’m at a bottleneck, there’s not much more point to me being in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Time to go back.”



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Morning. The early rays of the sun shone upon the earth. With Bloodviolet wrapped around his waist, carrying three sacks of magicite cores and wearing a

slightly blood-stained blue robe, Linley arrived at the main entrance to the Ernst Institute, Bebe on his shoulders.

“Finally back.” Seeing the main gate to the Ernst Institute, Linley felt that his heart was at peace.

The Ernst Institute and the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts were two opposite extremes. Here, no one dared to kill wantonly, and everyone was amiable. But the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was a world which belonged to magical beasts. The strong were revered, while the weak were cast out. Murder could happen at any time.

“It’s Linley.” The guardians at the main gate of the Ernst Institute all recognized this famous figure, Linley. Naturally, they would not stop him.

Linley nodded slightly towards the guards, then walked into the Ernst Institute. On the roads within the Institute, quite a few students on their way to classes began to talk amongst themselves in hushed tones when they saw Linley.

“Look, it’s Linley. He’s covered in blood. He should’ve just gotten back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. I heard that last year, he went to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts and skipped the end of the year assessment. It’s been four months since then. He’s so amazing, to be able to survive there for four full months.”

“Dixie was assessed as a magus of the sixth rank last year. But Linley didn’t go for an assessment at all.”



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Hearing these hushed murmurs, Linley only smiled as he headed towards his own dormitory. Right at this moment, Yale, George, and Reynolds were preparing to breakfast together.

“Oh, Third Bro, you’re back.” Reynolds was the first to excitedly call out to him.

Yale, George, and Reynolds all excitedly rushed over to him. Linley, as always,

grinned upon seeing his three bros.

Applying for Graduation

Within the Huadeli Hotel.

Linley, George, Yale, and Reynolds were all casually seated at a long table, which was covered with over ten exquisitely-prepared dishes. Next to the dishes were fruit wine, liquor, and more. Right now, the four bros were drinking wine while casually chatting about recent events.

“Linley, last year, you should’ve attended the end of the year testing ceremony before going to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Last year, during the examination, Dixie showed that he had also reached the sixth rank. But you didn’t attend at all. Some people are saying that you are inferior to Dixie. Damn. Only the four of us know that you reached the sixth rank long ago,” Reynolds grumbled.

Linley drank a cup of wine, chuckling.

Magus of the sixth rank?

Ever since he had entered that rare state of oneness and carved out the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, over the course of ten days and ten nights, his spiritual energy had increased tenfold, helping Linley to vault almost directly from the sixth rank to the seventh rank.

In fact, just looking at spiritual energy, Linley would be an above-average magus of the seventh rank.

“Fourth Bro, you should know by now that Third Bro doesn’t care about this sort of stuff at all. If he cared, then he wouldn’t have skipped the annual competition every year.” Yale chortled. “Right, Third Bro, when this school semester just started, your Uncle Hillman came looking for you.”

Linley started. Looking at Yale, he immediately asked, “What did Uncle Hillman want?”

In the past, Linley had always gone home for the New Year. This previous year was the first and only year in which Linley had spent the end of the winter and early spring in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

“Nothing really. Most likely, he was wondering why you didn’t go back for the New Year and was worried something had happened to you,” Yale said casually, then added, “Right. Something else we have to tell you. That same day your Uncle Hillman came to visit, the managing director of the Proulx Gallery came as well. The purpose of his visit was to see that sculpture of yours, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.”

Linley coughed in shock. “The managing director? How did he know about ‘Awakening From the Dream’?”

Somewhat embarrassed, Reynolds said, “It’s all my fault. When Yale instructed people to carry your sculpture out of the mountain, I figured nobody knew how valuable it was, so I just had them leave it in our dormitory. That way, we bros could admire it from time to time. But I didn’t expect that Austoni would come looking for you, and come directly to our dorm. He managed to catch a glimpse of ‘Awakening From the Dream’, and then he informed the managing director of the existence of your sculpture.”

Linley nodded slightly.

“Linley, the managing director wants to know if you’d be willing to auction off your sculpture within the Proulx Gallery? If you aren’t willing to auction it off, he still hopes that you would be willing to put it on display in the Proulx Gallery. Will you agree?” Yale looked at Linley.

Without hesitating in the slightest, Linley shook his head.

“For now, I don’t wish to publicize the existence of ‘Awakening From the Dream’. And I don’t need money either.”

To Linley, ‘Awakening From the Dream’ represented a period of love and loss. But of course, after completing this sculpture, Linley had mentally transformed as well.

Especially during this period of time within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. He had experienced the siege of over a hundred giant dragons, then

watched two extremely powerful magical beasts battle to the death, and then nearly died himself before successfully drinking dragon's blood and transforming into a Dragonblood Warrior.

After having experienced so much, the affairs between him and Alice seemed to be nothing more than a distant memory.

Linley had also learned to cherish the present.

"If Father knew that I could now assume Dragonform, how excited would he be?" Linley thought of his father.

Hogg's greatest lifelong desire was to see one of his sons become a Dragonblood Warrior. The density of dragonblood in Little Wharton's veins was sufficiently high, true, but Linley was capable of Dragonform, and even of reaching the eighth rank of power in Dragonform.

If this news reached Hogg, that his son had become a Dragonblood Warrior, he would be bursting with pride, no doubt.



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Linley could guess as to how much this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', would be worth. He also knew very well that storing such an enormous sculpture in the town of Wushan would not be safe. This was why he had asked Yale to help him safeguard this sculpture.

To the enormous Dawson Conglomerate, this was nothing but a trifle.

After leaving the hotel, Linley and his bros were walking on the Shady Grove Street.

"Boss Yale, Second Bro, Fourth Bro. There's something that I must inform you about." Linley spoke after a period of silence.

Seeing how serious Linley looked, Yale, George, and Reynolds all focused their attention on him.

"Within these next few days, I intend to apply for graduation." With difficulty, Linley forced out these words.

Graduating meant leaving the Ernst Institute and leaving his three bros behind. Linley had entered the Ernst Institute when he was nine years old. He was now seventeen. He had spent eight years here. Friends made during these innocent years, without any consideration of gain or ulterior motives, would always be true, genuine friends.

Linley couldn't bear to part from his bros.

But in life, one must have some accomplishments. Upon graduating, he would have the chance to begin to gain titles, writs of nobility, a fiefdom, and perhaps an army. By then, he would be able to advance himself in leaps and bounds.

"Graduate?"

Yale, George, and Reynolds were all stunned. Yale was the first to recover. "Third Bro, why are you in such a hurry to graduate? What's the big deal about graduating from the Ernst Institute early anyhow? Isn't it great, we four bros being together here? And the Ernst Institute is far more peaceful than the outside world."

George and Reynolds also hurriedly tried to dissuade Linley.

Linley shook his head. "Nah. We can't always be hiding within the walls of the Ernst Institute and not interact with the outside world."

"Third Bro, right now, you are only a magus of the sixth rank. Although a magus of the sixth rank is considered an expert in the outside world, there are many people who are stronger than you. How about... you wait until you reach the seventh rank, and then you graduate?" George suggested.

Based on what George knew, there were two major hurdles for a magus to overcome in his training. The biggest hurdle, of course, was crossing from the ninth rank to the Saint level. But the second biggest hurdle was advancing from the sixth rank to the seventh rank.

From the ninth rank to the Saint level, even if one had sufficient spiritual energy and had a powerful reserve of mageforce, one could still spend countless years without being able to break through that last hurdle. It was something which required luck and opportunity, a stroke of luck which allowed someone to suddenly comprehend the way.

And from the sixth to the seventh ranks, even geniuses would normally need ten or so years.

“I am already a magus of the seventh rank,” Linley told them directly.

“A magus of the seventh rank?”

The three bros of Linley stared at him, seemingly thunderstruck. Even a genius such as Dixie had only become a magus of the sixth rank upon turning sixteen. If he worked extremely hard, perhaps when he was around thirty years of age, he would reach the seventh rank.

But Linley...

Linley was only seventeen years old!

“Third Bro, did you just say that you’ve reached the seventh rank?” Yale couldn’t believe it at all.

“Third Bro, you better not be tricking us.” George was also in disbelief.

Reynolds was silent. He only stared at Linley, not saying a word.

“Squeak squeak!” Bebe, on Linley’s shoulders, began to squeak excitedly towards Linley’s three bros while baring his fangs. Linley could hear Bebe’s voice in his head. “Boss, these three punks think you’re lying! Boss, use a spell of the seventh rank on’em, show’em!”

Linley glanced at Bebe. “Bebe, enough.”

A ‘wronged’ look on his face, Bebe glanced at Linley then fell silent.

“Bebe’s performing skills are pretty good, actually.” Linley secretly laughed, and then he looked at his three close friends. “Boss Yale. You three don’t believe me. When I go tomorrow to apply for graduation, you’ll see.”

Yale, George, and Reynolds all knew what sort of person Linley was. Linley wasn’t the type of guy to lie.

“Third Bro, you really accomplished it?”

Linley nodded slightly. “How about I show you the Soaring Technique.” Linley began to mumble the words to a magical incantation, while Yale and the others quietly watched. After a while, wind-type elemental essence began swirling

around his body, lifting Linley into the air.

Linley rose very slowly, hovering perhaps only twenty centimeters above the air. Someone looking from far away wouldn't be able to tell that he was in mid-air at all.

"This is the Floating Technique," Reynolds said.

The Floating Technique only allowed one to rise up and down.

"Watch closely." Linley suddenly shot up into the air at an incline. Upon reaching the height of several tens of meters, he suddenly dropped down at high speed again. But once he reached the height of twenty centimeters, he once more came to a halt, maintaining a hovering height.

After maintaining this state for a few moments, Linley landed.

"The Soaring Technique?" Yale and the others were truly astonished.

Although this demonstration of Linley's was seemingly simple, it also showed one thing very clearly. Being able to rise at an incline was definitely something only the Soaring Technique would allow.

"Hey, Linley! Long time no see! Didn't imagine that I'd find you here, showing off your jumping skills." From far away, a young man laughed as he walked over. From far away, Linley's movement did indeed seem like he was jumping in the air.

To a very powerful warrior, jumping several dozen meters was not too difficult.

And a large majority of the people at the Ernst Institute knew that this genius, Linley, was not only a magus, he was also a mighty warrior. There had been many people who had seen him easily carry a thousand-pound boulder inside his dormitory.

Linley, Yale, and others exchanged pleasantries with the fellow, as he was a neighbor living next door to them.

"Third Bro, you've really become a magus of the seventh rank. This can't... can't be possible. But just now, I..." George was the first one to speak excitedly after the neighbor left.

“A seventeen-year-old magus of the seventh rank. My heavens. Has there ever been such a genius in the entire history of the Yulan continent?” Reynolds was getting excited as well.

Looking at Linley, Yale’s eyes were shining. “Even I am starting to look forward to Third Bro’s graduation ceremony. I want to see the looks on the faces of those examiners...”



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The next morning. On the empty magical ability examination fields of the Ernst Institute, thirty instructors were standing in a line. In truth, four magus instructors were enough for a graduation test, but most instructors at the Ernst Institute had a lot of free time. Upon hearing that Linley was going to apply for graduation, they all came over to watch the fun.

After all, generally speaking, most students would only apply for graduation after being confirmed as a magus of the sixth rank. After spending some time at the sixth rank, only then would they apply for graduation. In a situation like that, there was no need for an actual graduation examination. Thus, a graduation examination was quite a rare event.

Thirty instructors, plus three students — Yale, George, and Reynolds.

Amidst the thirty or so instructors, there was even Vice Chancellor Deland, who came here out of interest. As Deland had put it, “If one of the two greatest geniuses of our Institute is applying for graduation, of course I must be here to witness it.”

“Linley, utilize the earth-style spell, ‘Earth Spear Array’. Based on the size and speed of the earthen spears, we will be able to assess your level,” one of the examiners said.

If the power of his spells had reached the sixth rank, then he would naturally be able to graduate.

Linley shook his head slightly.

All of the onlookers couldn’t help but feel suspicious. Vice Chancellor Deland

spoke out. “Linley, aren’t you applying to graduate? What’s going on?”

“I want to use wind-style magic,” Linley said with a smile.

Vice Chancellor Deland and the onlookers all laughed. They knew that Linley was a dual-element magus of wind and earth. But the test of magical strength was primarily a test of spiritual energy. It made no difference which element was tested; the underlying spiritual energy wouldn’t change.

“Go ahead.” Vice Chancellor Deland and the thirty-odd instructors all grinned at Linley.

Linley immediately began to mutter the words to the seventh-ranked wind-style spell, ‘Soaring Technique’. After a while, a gust of wind began to swirl around Linley’s body. Linley’s body soared into the air, and then he began to agilely glide about in the air, sometimes turning, sometimes diving, sometimes flying straight at high speeds.

“So... Soaring Technique?!”

The thirty-odd magus instructors were all shocked. They all knew what was implied by Linley’s usage of the Soaring Technique.

“A seventeen-year-old, dual-element magus of the seventh rank. This...” Vice Chancellor Deland immediately understood that the quiet Ernst Institute would perhaps no longer be quiet for a long, long time.

Second in History

A dual-element magus of the seventh rank, compared to the Yulan continent as a whole, could only be considered someone who had just stepped into the field of powerful figures.

But if you added the words ‘seventeen-year-old’ in front of the words ‘dual-element magus of the seventh rank’, the effect was totally different. The Radiant Church probably wouldn’t care too much about a dual-element magus of the seventh rank; after all, there were plenty of powerful figures in the Yulan continent.

However...

A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank? Leaving the Radiant Church aside for now, perhaps each and every major power on the Yulan continent would be jealous to possess this.

“Genius. Genius!” Vice Chancellor Deland, a magus of the eighth rank, was extremely excited.

All of the watching magus instructors were in shock as well. All of them understood exactly what a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank represented. This was a miracle! At the very least, it was the Ernst Institute’s miracle!

“Heh heh.” Yale, George, and Reynolds all started to snicker.

They had all been anticipating the expressions on the faces of these magi. And it was as priceless as they had hoped.

In terms of power, Vice Chancellor Deland couldn’t even rank amongst the top three here at the Ernst Institute, but he had a significant amount of experience. He was quickly able to tamp down his excitement, and was the first to walk to Linley’s side. “Linley, do you know what being a seventeen-year-old

dual-element magus of the seventh rank represents?”

“Heh, does he have to ask?” At this time, Doehring Cowart flew out of the ring, delightedly stroking his long, white beard. “How could the pupil of I, Doehring Cowart, not be outstanding?”

All of the teachers currently present were quite far from the Saint level. Naturally, none of them were able to detect the presence of Doehring Cowart’s spirit.

“Seventeen years...” Deland sighed with praise. “In the entire history of the Ernst Institute, based on age, among all of the students to attain the seventh rank, you, Linley, are the youngest. The previous record holder, a genius who attained the seventh rank at age nineteen, went on to become a Saint-level Grand Magus.”

A silver-haired elder next to him spoke out. “Let’s not discuss the Ernst Institute for now. If we look at the Yulan continent as a whole, and look at the records of the continent as a whole, you are the second-youngest genius in all of recorded history to reach the seventh rank.”

The Yulan continent as a whole had been around for countless years, and also covered a huge amount of territory. There was no way for the Ernst Institute to match it in terms of records.

“The second in history?” Linley was rather surprised as well.

How many countless geniuses had the Yulan continent produced, over these years? For himself to be able to be the second youngest in history was a terrifying accomplishment.

“The youngest magus in the entire history of the Yulan continent to reach the seventh rank was a Saint-level Grand Magus who lived over eight thousand years ago. He became a magus of the seventh rank when he was sixteen years old. The previous second youngest, who has just become the third youngest, became a magus of the seventh rank when he turned eighteen. In the end, he topped out at the ninth rank. This was because afterwards, he suffered a huge setback, and his personality changed. We can put it like this... aside from you, of those top ten young geniuses who reached the seventh rank earliest, six of them became Saint-level Grand Magi, while the other four became arch magi of

the ninth rank.”

Generally speaking, a magus of the seventh rank was given the title of ‘Senior Magus’.

A magus of the eighth rank would be respectfully titled ‘Master Magus’.

A magus of the ninth rank would be honored with the title of ‘Arch Magus’.

And a Saint-level magus could be venerated as a ‘Grand Magus’.

“Put another way... based on your talent, becoming a magus of the ninth rank is going to be virtually no problem at all. All you need is time. But if you continue to strive hard, you have the great potential to become a Saint-level Grand Magus. After all, you are the second youngest magus of the seventh rank in all of history.” That silver-haired elder looked at Linley solemnly.

Linley had some degree of eagerness towards eventually becoming a Saint-level magus, but that eagerness wasn’t too excessive.

This was because Linley knew very well that it was even harder for a magus to advance in power than it was for a warrior.

True, warriors and magi both needed spiritual energy. But they had different requirements as to how much spiritual energy was needed.

Magi didn’t train their bodies, focusing exclusively on spiritual energy. The vast majority of their time was spent building up their spiritual energy, because spiritual energy impacted their ability to gather mageforce, as well as to direct and control elemental essences. A mighty magus also needed a terrifying amount of spiritual energy.

But warriors were different.

To a warrior, the most important thing was still their body. Spiritual energy and battle-qi were both secondary. Only once they had a powerful body would they be able to contain lots of battle-qi. Spiritual energy was only used to more finely control the usage of that battle-qi.

If you compared a magus of the seventh rank and a warrior of the seventh rank, the difference in spiritual energy could be as much as ten times more for the magus.

“Even if, in the future, I reach the level of Saint-level Grand Magus, I surely would have taken a tremendous amount of time. By contrast, based on my inherent talent as a Dragonblood Warrior, I will reach the Saint level at a much faster pace.” Linley knew his clan’s history very well. Dragonblood Warriors usually only needed a few scant decades to reach the Saint-level of power.

What was more...

A Dragonblood Warrior who had reached the Saint level in power was extremely formidable. Even among Saint-level combatants, a Dragonblood Warrior would be considered an ultimate-tier combatant.

“Linley, you are the most successful student in the entire history of our Institute. For these next few days, we ask that you please remain here at the Institute. We will invite some of the absolute best painters and sculptors to come and paint paintings and carve sculptures of you, which we will keep in the Institute as mementos,” Vice Chancellor Deland said immediately.

As the second youngest magus to reach the seventh rank in the entire history of the Yulan continent, Linley was naturally the pride of the entire Ernst Institute.

“A painting?” Linley was stunned.

He realized that in front of these painters and sculptors, he would have to stand still for a very long period of time. As he realized this, Linley couldn’t help but think to himself, becoming the second youngest magus to reach the seventh rank in the entire history of the Yulan continent was perhaps not as wonderful as it sounded.



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The number one genius in the history of the Ernst Institute, and the number two genius in the history of the Yulan continent. A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. This astonishing news quickly spread across the entire Ernst Institute.

“A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank? How is that

possible?”

“There’s no way this news is fake. So many of the Institute’s teachers were present at the time, and Vice Chancellor Deland has even invited painters to come and paint pictures of Linley, with the intention of forever enshrining his image within our Institute.”

“My heavens, a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. Based on this speed, he should reach the eighth rank in ten years, and the ninth rank in twenty. He’ll be ninth-ranked Arch Magus in his forties. Most likely, within a century, he will become a Saint-level Grand Magus.”

“I just flipped through some of the books in the library. Aside from Linley, of the top ten geniuses in history, six became Saint-level Grand Magi, while the other four all became Arch Magi of the ninth rank. Linley is way too incredible.”



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The entire Ernst Institute was shaken upside down by this news. If a student was perhaps just slightly better than his peers, perhaps he would be viewed with jealousy. But once a student’s achievements reached a level as high as this, becoming the second youngest magus to reach the seventh rank in the entire history of the Yulan continent, they would only be filled with respect and veneration.

In their eyes, Linley’s future prospects were limitless. There was no way for them to compare with him.

In the past, there had still been some people who had claimed that Dixie was the number one genius of the Institute. Now, no one said such a thing.

Without question, the number one genius of the Ernst Institute was Linley. And it wasn’t just now; Linley was the number one genius of the Ernst Institute in all of its five-thousand-year-long history. Dixie was currently just a magus of the sixth rank. Who knew how long it would take before he reached the seventh rank?

“Linley, a magus of the seventh rank?” Having just completed his meditative

training, Dixie fell silent upon hearing this news from his sister Delia.

After having ‘surpassed’ Linley when he had become a magus of the sixth rank, Dixie had felt some sense of satisfaction. But this new bit of news seemed to push him into a deep abyss. Linley’s speed of improvement was simply too astonishing. Even when he chased after Linley with all his might, it seemed like he was still being thrown farther and farther behind by Linley.

“Big brother,” Delia said in a soft voice. She was a bit concerned about her big brother.

Delia knew all too well that ever since he was young her big brother had been an extremely proud person. He was very cold to others, and also extremely strict with himself. Her big brother never submitted to anyone, but ever since Linley had rocketed up from the fourth rank to the fifth rank, her big brother had felt threatened.

Her big brother had worked extremely hard, and in the previous year had managed to cross the threshold of the sixth rank.

But Linley actually...

“Don’t worry. I’m fine.” Dixie slowly shook his head. “Delia, I suddenly feel as though there’s not that much point in remaining here at the Institute. I also plan to apply for graduation. In the upcoming days, I’ll return to the Empire and return to the clan.”

Delia was startled.



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Within a private area inside the Huadeli Hotel, there were four bedrooms and two living rooms. It was quite large. Linley and his three bros were currently living here.

Ever since the news that Linley had become a magus of the seventh rank had spread out, dorm 1987 hadn’t had a single peaceful day. Huge amounts of people came to pay their respects to Linley, forcing Linley to hide here, within the Huadeli Hotel. Due to the deep background and connections possessed by

the Huadeli Hotel, few people dared to trespass here.

“Third Bro, when you are quiet, you are very low-key, but when you finally make your move, by the heavens do you cause a ruckus!” Yale sighed.

Linley chuckled.

Actually, this was a decision which he had arrived at after serious discussion with Doehring Cowart. After all, currently, the Baruch clan was still weak. If they wanted to strengthen it rapidly, the best way to do so was to quickly spread the word that he already possessed the might of a magus of the seventh rank.

A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank! This would cause every organization in the continent to send people inviting him to join them. Naturally, they would offer exceptional conditions as well.

And thus, Linley would do better and better in the future.

“Third Bro, I’m no longer going to hide this information from you. The Dawson Conglomerate, one of the three great trading unions in the Yulan continent, belongs to my clan. Are you interested in joining the Dawson Conglomerate?” Yale looked at Linley. In all honesty, Yale was very much hoping that Linley would become a member of the Dawson Conglomerate.

The number two genius in the entire history of the Yulan continent. If a genius like this entered the Dawson Conglomerate, his future status would unquestionably be very high. Naturally, this would also be hugely beneficial to Yale’s status within his clan.

“The Dawson Conglomerate?!” Reynolds let out a startled yelp. “Wow, Boss Yale, I always knew you were a member of the Dawson clan, but there are way too many clans with the name ‘Dawson’. But the Dawson clan you belong to is actually the Dawson clan behind the Dawson Conglomerate? The Dawson Conglomerate! My goodness, you are rich!”

George also looked at Yale.

“Boss Yale, this...” Linley hesitated.

“Don’t worry. You are my bro, first and foremost. I won’t force you.” Yale laughed. “I can’t guarantee other things, but what I can guarantee is that if you

do decide to join the Dawson Conglomerate, then money will not be an issue. At the very least, we can provide you with a hundred million gold coins.”

“A hundred million gold coins?!” Linley, George, and Reynolds were all flabbergasted.

A hundred million gold coins. What a terrifyingly large sum that was.

Perhaps all of the combined assets of the richest clan in Fenlai City wouldn't add up to a hundred million gold coins.

“Linley, the clan of this bro of yours is really too wealthy. A hundred million gold coins, damn...” Even Doehring Cowart was stunned.

Even a master sculptor's most famous, legacy-making sculpture would only be worth a million gold coins at most. This was already a terrifying sum of money, and how many master sculptors were there?

“Third Bro, I can honestly tell you that, aside from the other two trading unions, in the entire Yulan continent, not even the Four Great Empires or the two major alliances would be able to produce such a vast amount of money at once. As for those kingdoms... hmph.” Yale was very certain of his words.

The Four Great Empires and the two major alliances both had their own Saint-level combatants. But the Four Great Empires and the two major alliances had to pay the upkeep for their huge armies as well as provide for the entire country. Although they were wealthy, asking them to produce a hundred million gold coins all at once would be very difficult for them. At the very least, it would require lengthy, complicated internal deliberations.

For someone who wasn't — yet — a Saint-level combatant? They wouldn't be willing to do it.

Only the three major trading unions, with their terrifying amount of wealth, would. Although they possessed a staggering amount of money, in terms of military power, although they were strong, they were much weaker than the Four Great Empires and the two major alliances. Thus, they all urgently needed experts to join their ranks.

“Knock! Knock! Knock!”

Suddenly, the sound of their door being knocked on could be heard.

Yale frowned and walked over to the door. Opening it, he said, "I thought I gave instructions for us not to be disturbed?"

The manager of the Huadeli Hotel said awkwardly, "Young master Yale, a Cardinal of the Radiant Church, along with three clerics and a troop of Knights of the Radiant Temple have arrived outside the hotel."

Yale started.

One of the Cardinals, whose position and authority in the entire Radiant Church was second only to the Holy Emperor himself? The rank of each and every Cardinal was much higher than that of one of the kings of a kingdom. If a Cardinal had personally come, leading a troop of people, there was no way that he, a young master of the Dawson Conglomerate, could possibly block the way.

"Looks like Third Bro has quite a powerful appeal!"

The Upper Classes of the Yulan Continent

Within the formal reception area for the Huadeli Hotel, two seventh-ranked Knights of the Radiant Temple were standing on each side of the main hallway, while Linley and the other three entered the formal reception area from another entrance. Their footsteps on the smooth marble floor, so polished that it could serve as a mirror, produced clear, ringing sounds.

When Linley, Yale, and the others stepped into the reception area, the seven people already inside the reception area turned to look at them.

“A Cardinal, three Vicars, and three Knights of the Radiant Temple.” Linley could immediately tell each person’s status, and could also immediately sense that all seven of these people were extremely powerful. Based on what Linley already knew...

Within the Radiant Church, the position of the Cardinals was second only to the Holy Emperor himself. In order to become a Cardinal, one needed to not only have sufficient fame, but also have the power of an Arch Magus of the ninth rank.

“An Arch Magus of the ninth rank?” Linley couldn’t help but carefully scrutinize this Cardinal in front of him.

This Cardinal appeared to be a middle-aged man, with a head full of curly silver hair. His nose was high and sharp, while a hint of a smile played about his lips. He seemed quite amiable.

“Hello, Linley. And you, young Yale.” The Cardinal smiled as he rose to his feet. “Let me make some brief introductions. These three Vicars are my assistants, while these three Knights of the Radiant Temple belong to the ‘Glory’ division. They are, respectively, Commander Marcus and his two Deputy Commanders. As for myself... you can just go ahead and call me Guillermo.”

Cardinal Guillermo.

Linley had previously heard that the Holy Union had a total of eight ace regiments of knights. One of them was the 'Glory' division. Each of these Eight Ace Regiments was extremely powerful and possessed astounding offensive ability.

"Lord Guillermo, Lord Marcus. All the other lords present. Might I ask why you have come?" Linley said with humility, while at the same time, Linley began to check out Marcus.

Marcus was an extremely powerful-looking bald man. Sitting there, the impression he gave was that of a mountain at rest, immovable by any outside force. In this seven-man delegation from the Radiant Church, Marcus and Guillermo held the highest ranks. Marcus, in his capacity as the Commander of one of the Eight Ace Regiments, was most likely not any weaker than Guillermo, and his personal status would be roughly on the same level as well.

Marcus' lips cracked open, and his deep, weighty voice rang out. "I heard Guillermo say that our Holy Union has produced an incredible genius. A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. I was very curious what this genius looked like. Today, now that I've had a chance to see for myself... haha... I like what I see."

Based on Marcus' experience, at a glance, he naturally could tell that Linley was a warrior as well.

"Kid, what rank are you as a warrior?" Marcus asked directly.

Guillermo just sat there 'obediently', seemingly not at all displeased by Marcus' interruption.

Linley modestly said, "This year, I just reached the sixth rank as a warrior."

"Oh." Marcus' eyes lit up. "A seventeen-year-old warrior of the sixth rank. That's already extremely impressive. I, Marcus, am rarely in awe of anyone, but I must admit that you definitely are a genius. Not only have you become an incredibly talented magus, you are an excellent warrior as well."

Linley smiled very humbly.

The two Knights seated to each side of Marcus also had looks of surprise on their faces.

Guillermo chuckled. “Enough, Marcus. Yes, it is quite impressive that Linley is a warrior of the sixth rank at age seventeen, but let’s be honest, we can find one or two of those in virtually every single warrior academy. His true worth still lies in his talent as a magus.”

The training difficulty for a warrior was somewhat lower than that of a magus to begin with.

For those who trained hard and worked out since they were young, and — if they came from good families — trained in battle-qi since their youth, becoming a warrior of the sixth rank at age seventeen wasn’t too difficult.

“Linley, as a member of our Holy Union who possesses such astounding abilities, you make me, a Cardinal of the Radiant Temple, feel extremely proud. I want to ask you, have you given any consideration to joining the Holy Union? I think, based on your natural ability, if you join us, I can guarantee that you will immediately receive the rank of Vicar of the Radiant Temple. In the future, becoming a Cardinal should not be a problem.” Guillermo put his offer directly on the table.

The number two super-genius in all of history. There should be a better than 90% chance that Linley would end up becoming a Saint-level Grand Magus. The 10% chance only existed because it was possible that, due to suffering some sort of mental setback, Linley would decide to stop improving.

A potential Saint-level combatant. Even if Linley didn’t train very hard, becoming an Arch Magus of the ninth rank should be guaranteed. A talent like this had to be absorbed.

“Lord Guillermo, to me, this news is a little too sudden.” A modest, shy smile had appeared on Linley’s face. “I’m only seventeen years old this year. I haven’t given a lot of thought to these affairs. A high rank and great power also symbolize heavy responsibilities which I’m currently afraid to take on. Could I... wait a few years?”

Linley was declining.

Guillermo frowned.

The number two genius in the entire history of the Yulan continent, a person

who would most likely become a Saint-level combatant in the future. Even if they couldn't make use of him, they wouldn't allow enemies to make use of him either.

“Linley, I know that you are young, but you are a member of the Holy Union, and you are a genius. As a genius, you should get used to and accept the fact that your dazzling brilliance will bring you burdens, rather than try and decline them.” Guillermo reproved him kindly.

“In addition, you can become a Vicar under my direct authority. I can guarantee that you will have the freedom to do whatever you please. As long as you do not act against the interests of the Radiant Temple, I definitely will not interfere with your freedom of action. Is this acceptable to you?”

“In addition, you can also join any single kingdom belonging to the Holy Union, and we can even guarantee that you will receive a Dukedom.” Guillermo, it must be said, was acting in a very sincere manner.

Linley was silent for a while.

Guillermo's three assistant Vicars were beginning to frown, but Guillermo continued to smile, watching Linley with a gaze filled with hope.

This gaze alone made it very hard to refuse him.

Next to Linley, Yale, Reynolds, and George were all silent. At a point in time like this, even Yale didn't dare to make a noise. This was a Cardinal of the Radiant Church!

In the pyramid-like hierarchy of the Holy Union, the Cardinals stood at the very apex. Their power exceeded that of any king, and even Yale's father wasn't comparable to them. How would he, a young master of a trading union, dare to butt in?

Linley was thinking nonstop, while Doehring Cowart had begun advising Linley as soon as they had entered the room.

The Four Great Empires and the two major alliances were constantly struggling for advantage in very fierce, cruel ways. ‘If I cannot have it, I cannot allow my enemies to have it either.’ This was a fairly common point of view.

“Lord Guillermo.” Linley finally spoke.

Guillermo’s eyes lit up. Smiling, he said to Linley, “You’ve decided?”

Linley nodded. “Lord Guillermo, I’ve grown up in the Kingdom of Fenlai since I was a child, so naturally, I am a member of the Holy Union. I can guarantee that as long as the Holy Union doesn’t turn its back on me, I definitely will not betray the Holy Union either. I definitely will not join any foreign power, no matter who they are.”

“What do you mean to say?” Guillermo looked questioningly at Linley.

Linley continued, “What I mean to say is, right now, I don’t want to make a decision in a hurry. Please allow me to discuss this matter with my father, and then I’ll tell you my choice. What I can guarantee is... I definitely will not join with the Four Great Empires, or the Dark Alliance.”

Smiling, Guillermo nodded slightly. “Right. Such an important decision must be discussed with your father. I’ll wait for your reply.”

As he spoke, Guillermo rose to his feet. The three Vicars by his side, as well as Marcus and his two Deputy Commanders, also stood up. “Since we’ve come to an agreement, then I won’t disturb you any further. The Radiant Temple’s sincerity is true and genuine, and so is our patience. I only hope that you, Linley, won’t end up making me wait ten or twenty years for your decision. Haha...” As he spoke, Guillermo began to laugh.

Linley and the other three stood up as well, watching Guillermo and the others leave.

Only after the delegation from the Radiant Temple had departed did Linley and his bros finally calm down.

“Whew. I was scared to death just now. I didn’t even dare to breathe out loud.” Reynolds let out a long sigh.

George nodded as well. “Although that Cardinal behaved in a very friendly fashion towards us, I still felt that my heart couldn’t settle down.”

Yale began to laugh. “Naturally. After all, he is a Cardinal, one of the most powerful people in the entire Holy Union. Hey, Third Bro, what are you

thinking? The Radiant Church isn't easy to fend off. After all, we are in the territory of the Holy Union and are under their control."

"No rush, no rush." Linley laughed. "When you see the power of others, you also need to see your own strengths. Although I can't compare to them, as long as I don't throw in with those five other groups, the Radiant Church won't move against me. After all, I did say I was going to discuss it with my father. As long as I don't go meet with my father right away I can drag this out a while longer, right?"

As he spoke, he looked at Yale. "Yale, I want to ask a favor of you."

"Speak." Yale looked at Linley.

Linley said in a low voice, "This is somewhat humiliating to say. One of the ancestral heirlooms of the Baruch clan, the weapon of our very first clan leader, the warblade 'Slaughterer', should be in the hands of one of the larger noble clans of the Kingdom of Fenlai. I hope that you can help me investigate who is currently in possession of the warblade 'Slaughterer'."

"An ancestral heirloom? This absolutely must be found. Third Bro, do you want me to directly acquire it for you?" Yale immediately said.

Linley laughed. "Boss Yale, if you can help me locate it, that would be more than enough. What's more, right now, money is not a problem for me." By nature, Linley hated owing others.



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Two days later. Early morning.

Part of Linley's room was covered with a layer of earth-colored light. This earth-colored light did not cover a very large area, only perhaps a circle with a circumference of two or three meters. Anyone who stepped into that area would sense a tremendous gravitational force.

Earth-style magic – Supergravity Field!

Having reached the seventh rank as a magus, the power of Linley's

Supergravity Field was now much stronger than before. The strength of the local gravity field within the circle was four times normal gravity. Under four times the normal gravity, even the blood vessels in one's body would suffer severe damage, to say nothing of the rest of the body.

Linley wasn't using any earth magic to counteract the force of this gravity field. Instead, he was using his body's physical strength alone to resist that terrifying gravity. Right now, his entire body was upside down, and he was holding himself up with his fingers alone, constantly exercising his finger strength and wrist strength.

"...725. 726."

"Drip. Drip." Beads of sweat were constantly rolling down from Linley's temples, falling onto the ground.

The door to the room suddenly banged open, and Yale excitedly charged into the room. "Hey, Third Bro, I have news regarding the search for the warblade 'Slaughterer' that you entrusted me with." As he spoke, Yale accidentally entered the area of the Supergravity Field.

"Yale!" Slapping the floor with his palms, Linley immediately flipped himself upright and immediately pulled Yale out of the Supergravity Field.

"Huff... puff..." Yale was breathing heavily. Staring at Linley in surprise, he said, "Third Bro, you created a Supergravity Field inside your bedroom? I got caught by it. That feeling just now was absolutely terrible. It felt like my heart was about to stop."

Fortunately, the time he had spent within the field was miniscule, as otherwise, Yale's body would indeed have suffered negative consequences.

"Right, Boss Yale, didn't you just say something about the warblade 'Slaughterer?'" Linley's attention was totally fixated on that mention of his ancestral heirloom. For his father's entire life, his father's greatest desire had been the recovery of this ancestral heirloom which had been passed down from five thousand years ago.

Yale nodded slightly. "Oh. I just received word that your clan's warblade, 'Slaughterer', is in the hands of a large clan within Fenlai City itself. That clan is

called... uh..." Yale couldn't help but frown, as he momentarily couldn't recall the name of the clan.

"Hey, Third Bro, Boss Yale! Director Maia came in person again," Reynolds' voice called out from beyond the doorway.

Abduction

Within the living room.

“My deepest apologies, Director Maia,” Linley said humbly, “But for now, I really do not wish to put this sculpture on auction, nor do I wish to display it. But I can guarantee that if in the future I do desire to auction it off, or to put it on exhibit, I will beseech the Proulx Gallery to assist me.”

Leaning on his cane, Director Maia smiled at Linley. “Oh, that’s fine. This time, asking you to consider displaying your sculpture in our gallery was only a secondary purpose. My primary purpose was to come see this sculpting genius, the likes of whom we might see once in a trillion years.”

Just at this time, the manager of the hotel came over.

This manager humbly smiled towards Director Maia, then turned to Linley and Yale. “Young master Yale, young master Linley, representatives from the Rhine Empire are outside the hotel. They wish to meet with young master Linley.”

“Haha.” Laughing, Director Maia stood up. “Linley, seems like you’re quite busy nowadays. Then I won’t disturb you for now. I’ll take my leave.”

As he spoke, Director Maia led his attendants out of the hotel.

Linley looked at the hotel manager. “Please help me block them. Right now, I do not wish to meet with representatives of the Four Great Empires or the Dark Alliance.” Linley very bluntly refused to meet with any of the people who had come to see him. Linley knew very well that if he were to meet with representatives of the Four Great Empires or the Dark Alliance, that would cause great dissatisfaction with the Radiant Church.

After all, as soon as he met with them, even if he refused their offer in the end, the Radiant Church would still be suspicious of him, as they would have had no one present during the meeting.

And the Radiant Church had tremendous power throughout the Yulan continent. It was no weaker than any of the Four Great Empires. There was no need for Linley to join the Four Great Empires or the Dark Alliance.



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Three days later. Within a carriage headed towards Fenlai City were Linley and Yale, while Reynolds and George remained at the Institute.

“Third Bro. You are wise indeed. These past two or three days, representatives from the Dark Alliance and the Four Great Empires constantly tried to meet with you.” Yale laughed. The people who had come to meet with Linley were all people with some authority and influence within their respective organizations, although they were based in the Holy Union.

None of those people, however, were major figures. After all, the news of a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank would take a fairly long period of time before making its way to the Four Great Empires and the Dark Alliance. This was because the distance was simply too far.

All of those people who attempted to meet with Linley had made the decision to contact him on their own authority.

Unfortunately, all of them were stopped at the door by Linley’s directive.

“Yale, that family which collected the ancestral heirloom of my clan, that “Lucas” clan... if I try to get the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ back from them, is it really going to be that difficult?” Linley was heading off to Fenlai City for the express purpose of taking care of this affair.

Yale nodded. “Right. At first, I was so eager to share the news that I didn’t look any deeper into this clan. But now, it appears this Lucas clan is quite extraordinary.”

Linley nodded slightly.

A clan which had purchased his own clan’s ancestral heirloom hundreds of years ago was clearly not a recently-established minor clan.

“The Lucas clan is also a fairly ancient clan, with about a thousand years of history. In the entire Kingdom of Fenlai, their wealth can only be considered middling, but in terms of influence among the nobility, they are quite powerful. Most importantly of all... the clan leader of the Lucas clan is an extremely obstinate old man, and a serious hoarder. That ancestral heirloom of your clan was the personal weapon of the very first Dragonblood Warrior. Although it’s been over a thousand years since a Dragonblood Warrior has appeared, this weapon is still something quite special. And what’s more, that weapon of your clan is worth at least a few hundred thousand gold coins.”

“But even if you had the money, based on the obstinate nature of the clan leader of the Lucas clan, you most likely will still find it hard to acquire it.”

Yale sighed as he spoke.

Some people couldn’t be moved by money alone.

“Linley, if my Second Uncle lends a hand and utilizes the connections that our Dawson Conglomerate has, giving that old geezer some pressure, then the level of difficulty would drop significantly,” Yale suggested.

Linley knew that Yale spoke out of good intentions, but Linley truly did not wish for anyone else to assist in this matter.

“Let me try first. If I absolutely cannot convince him, then I’ll ask you, Boss Yale, to help out.” Linley laughed.

Suddenly, Linley felt a shudder next to him. And then, Bebe’s tiny form popped out from the side, staring sleepily at Linley and Yale. At the same time, Bebe mentally said to Linley, “Boss, this carriage is so slow. I’ve slept for a good while now, but we still aren’t at Fenlai City yet.”

Hugging Bebe, Linley said, “Alright, that’s enough. After a while, we’ll be there.”

Suddenly...

“Aaaah!” A miserable scream. The carriage came to a sudden halt.

Seated within the carriage, Linley and Yale both felt the carriage suddenly shake. The look on Yale’s face changed. “Not good.”

“We would like to invite young masters Linley and Yale to step out,” a rather piercing voice rang out from outside.

Linley and Yale exchanged glances. For their opponent to be able to surround and stop them without them even knowing demonstrated that the opponent clearly was more powerful than them. Without any resistance, they stepped out of the carriage.

Right now, their two bodyguards of the seventh rank had both collapsed onto the ground, staining it with their blood. Even the carriage driver had collapsed. For a warrior of the seventh rank to be killed without even being able to react was a clear indication of their opponent’s strength.

“Young masters Linley and Yale, we come without any ill intentions. We just want to invite Linley to come be our guest for a little while. As for you, young master Yale, naturally we won’t harm you.” Not far away, three men were standing in greenish-black clothes. Their leader, a man covered in knife scars, was the one who had spoken.

Yale was furious at the deaths of his bodyguards of the seventh rank, but he didn’t give vent to his rage. After all, he could tell how much stronger these opponents were.

The scarred man smiled towards Linley. “Linley, don’t resist. My subordinates can easily capture you, let alone myself. Right now, the only thing you have to do is to obediently follow us. Are you willing? Or must we use force?”

Linley glanced sidelong at Yale. Linley really did not want to cause Yale any misfortune.

“Third Bro, don’t go with them,” Yale said frantically.

In his heart, Linley knew very well that these three combatants were either from the Dark Alliance or the Four Great Empires. Based on their strength, even if he and Bebe went all out to resist them, it most likely wouldn’t be enough. What was more, the purpose of these people in seeking him out was to have him join them, so they probably wouldn’t go so far as to harm him.

“Alright, I’ll follow.” Linley nodded.

The knife-scarred man couldn’t help but grin. “That’s great to hear. Young

master Yale, we hope you'll forget all about what just happened here." As he spoke, the knife-scarred man glanced at the two next to him. Those two instantly scurried at high speed next to Linley.

"Let's go," the knife-scarred man instructed.



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Holding onto Bebe, Linley began heading southeast under the escort of those two men by his side.

"Boss, let's kill these two guys. I'm confident in my ability to kill the two surrounding you. But as to that knife-scarred guy, I'm not so sure," Bebe said mentally.

Linley knew that Bebe's senses were usually extremely accurate.

He, too, was able to extrapolate that these two people by his side were most likely warriors of the eighth rank. And that knife-scarred leader of theirs was most likely a warrior of the ninth rank. An organization capable of sending out a warrior of the ninth rank and two warriors of the eighth rank was no ordinary organization.

"Bebe, don't be rash." Linley held him back.

"Where on earth did all these experts start popping out from?" Linley felt helpless.

Doehring Cowart appeared by his side, grinning as he glanced at Linley. "Right now, your status is different from the past. Naturally, the experts you encounter will now also be at a higher level. I told you long ago that only upon attaining the seventh rank will you be considered to have entered the countless ranks of the strong. In each and every one of the Four Great Empires, there might only be a few Saint-level combatants, but there will be at least a few dozen combatants of the ninth rank. Mobilizing one of them for the purpose of dealing with you is no big deal."

An Empire or one of the major alliances would have hundreds of millions of citizens.

For there to be a few dozen combatants of the ninth rank amongst hundreds of millions of people meant that for every ten million or so, there was one combatant of the ninth rank. In honesty, combatants of the ninth rank were still quite rare.

“Where are they heading to?” Linley stared questioningly at Doehring Cowart.

“If my guess is correct, these three should belong to the Dark Alliance. Most likely, they are trying to first enter the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, and then change directions from there to go directly south, hurrying towards the border with the Dark Alliance,” Doehring Cowart said quite confidently.

Linley thought for a while, then agreed.

The Four Great Empires and the Dark Alliance both had some military units stationed in each other’s territory, but none in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. After all, to most magical beasts, ordinary soldiers were nothing more than food.

To an ordinary warrior, the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was extremely vicious.

But to a warrior of the ninth rank and two warriors of the eighth rank? It was a very easy path to traverse. As long as the three of them didn’t enter the central areas of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, there shouldn’t be any danger.



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Where the battle had occurred just now, Yale remained, staring at the corpses of the three men. Letting out a long sigh, he began to head towards Fenlai City. But just as he left, a man dressed in black suddenly appeared. The man in black glanced in the direction where Linley had been taken, then immediately withdrew a vertical black flute from his clothes.

“Swiiiiish.” A strange, piercing sound emanated from the flute.

This sound was extremely strange. If four people in four different locations were to hear it, the one standing in the direction of Fenlai City would hear it a

thousand times more loudly than the one standing on the opposite side, away from Fenlai City.

This flute seemed to concentrate all sound in one direction, and it in fact didn't seem to rely on sound; rather, it relied on a unique vibratory mechanism.



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Holding Bebe, Linley followed those three men very obediently. The knife-scarred man was very satisfied with Linley's cooperativeness.

But once they reached a location approximately three kilometers away from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the expression of the knife-scarred man changed.

"Huh." The knife-scarred man instantly retreated to Linley's side, and then stared icily at his surroundings. "Come out."

Instantly, six men in tight black clothes showed themselves. The knife-scarred man didn't seem to care too much about these six men, as his gaze was fixed upon the distance, where an old man dressed in black and an old man dressed in burlap were slowly making their way over.

"Linley is a member of our Holy Union. You, a Judicator of the Dark Alliance, dare to seize a member of the Holy Union? Aren't you disrespecting the Radiant Church just a little too much?" The old man dressed in black said icily.

The knife-scarred man chuckled. "I didn't expect to draw your personal attention, Deputy Arbiter. Oh, and you've even invited an Ascetic to come as well. And several judicial Executors. Looks like you fellows really value this Linley very highly."

The knife-scarred man was very clear as to the power of his opponents, but he didn't seem frightened at all.

"All I wanted to do was invite Linley to come have some fun with us in the Dark Alliance, but since all of you have come to prevent that, then forget it." The knife-scarred man looked at the black-robed elder. "Deputy Arbiter, I want you to agree to something. I'll spare Linley, and you spare my two subordinates.

What do you say?"

The black-robed man knew very well that the knife-scarred man in front of him was a Judicator of the Dark Alliance, someone with tremendous power who would be extremely hard to kill by himself. But this time, he had also invited an Ascetic of the Radiant Temple to come along with him. To kill this opponent wouldn't be too hard.

But... Linley was in the opponent's hands.

"Fine. I guarantee by my own personal honor that you and your subordinates will be permitted to leave. But Linley must stay behind." The black-robed old man didn't really want to get into a major fight with these opponents right now either.

"Fine. We'll go."

The knife-scarred man immediately turned to leave, while at the same time saying warmly to Linley, "Linley, if you have some free time and the opportunity, you can come visit us at the Dark Alliance whenever you wish. Haha... our Dark Alliance will always welcome you."

After finishing these words, the knife-scarred man and his subordinates suddenly moved at high speed, transforming into three human-shaped blurs as they vanished.

Status

Linley turned to look at his group of saviors. That leader, the black-robed elder, and the ‘Ascetic’ by his side were both exceedingly strong. Otherwise, that Judicator of the Dark Alliance wouldn’t have fled without even fighting.

The black-robed elder seemed to emanate a chilling aura.

“Deputy Arbiter? After all these years, it seems like the Radiant Church hasn’t changed its internal structure. This Deputy Arbiter should belong to the ‘Ecclesiastical Tribunal,’” Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind. “Comparatively speaking, that ‘Ascetic’ fellow is more formidable.”

Ascetic?

Linley couldn’t help but turn his gaze towards the ‘Ascetic’.

Wearing clothes made from rough hemp, that barefooted, long-haired old man emanated a simple, ancient aura. When this ‘Ascetic’ looked at Linley, Linley seemed to sense the warmth of the spring breeze.

“Truly powerful,” Linley thought to himself.

Looking at Linley, a rare smile appeared on the face of the black-robed elder. “Linley, why don’t you come back with us to the Holy Capital? When you reach the Holy Capital, those organizations will not dare to bother you.”

Fenlai City, the Holy Capital of the Holy Union. The Radiant Church was based in Fenlai City. Both in the open as well as in the shadows, it possessed tremendous latent power. Neither the Dark Alliance nor the Four Great Empires would dare to cause trouble in the Holy Capital.



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East Fenlai City. Within a manor on Greenleaf Road, Linley and Yale were

seated in the living room discussing the issue of the warblade 'Slaughterer'.

"Third Bro, I've already sent some people to make inquiries. That clan leader of the Lucas clan is totally unwilling to sell the warblade 'Slaughterer'. Per his words, his clan doesn't lack for money." Yale frowned. "I think it might be better if you personally went and paid a visit. But of course, first he would have to be made aware of your status."

The second greatest genius magus in the history of the Yulan continent, someone who had a high chance of becoming a future Saint-level Grand Magus, was someone whom perhaps even the clan leader of the Lucas clan, no matter how obstinate, would have to give some face to.

"Then tonight, I'll pay a visit to this leader of the Lucas clan." Linley viewed the warblade 'Slaughterer' as something which absolutely had to be claimed.

How could the ancestral treasure of the clan continue to remain outside the clan? What was more, recovering it was the long-standing desire of both his father and his ancestors.

The words which his father had said to him when Linley had first left his home and headed to the Ernst Institute still rang out in Linley's mind.

"Linley. Remember the centuries-long desire of generations of the Baruch clan. Remember the shame of the Baruch clan!"

"After you graduate, you will at least be a magus of the sixth rank. As long as you work hard, becoming a magus of the seventh rank won't be too hard. What's more, you are a dual-element magus! A dual-element magus of the seventh rank is definitely going to be a major figure in the Kingdom of Fenlai. In the future, you will definitely have the potential to recover our ancestral heirloom. If you do not recover it, even in death, I will not forgive you."



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"Even in death, I will not forgive you." His father's words hammered at Linley's consciousness.

Linley did not dare to forget these words. As long as he had the ability to do

so, he would recover the warblade 'Slaughterer', no matter the cost. This wasn't just for the sake of the clan. It was also for his father's sake.

"No matter what, I have to reclaim it." Linley's mind was set.

If soft persuasion didn't work, he would take harder measures.

But of course, it would be better if he could reclaim his ancestral heirloom openly and above-board. He would do his best to have the current owners hand it back.

"Boss. How about you just have me act instead and just take it back?" Bebe suddenly piped up in Linley's mind.

Linley glanced at Bebe, napping on Linley's legs. He couldn't help but pat Bebe's little noggin. "Don't make trouble." Bebe couldn't help but wrinkle his nose. With a 'hmp', he laid back down on Linley's leg and went back to sleep.

At this moment, footsteps could be heard from outside. A blue-robed middle-aged man entered and bowed. "Young master Yale, a Minister of Fenlai Kingdom, Lord Calvin, is outside. He wishes to meet with young master Linley."

"Calvin? Who's that?" Yale frowned.

Yale generally didn't bother with meeting an ordinary kingdom's Minister.

"Young master Yale, recently, haven't you been focused on the Lucas clan? This Calvin is a member of the Lucas clan as well." The blue-robed man chuckled. "The current leader of the Lucas clan is, in fact, his uncle."

Yale's eyes lit up. "Quick, let him in."

"Third Bro, it seems as though your chances of recovering your clan's ancestral heirloom just went up." Yale chuckled at Linley.

In his heart, Linley was feeling rather pleased as well.

Linley was looking towards the door as well. A short moment later, a golden-haired man stepped inside the room, smiling. Upon seeing Linley and Yale, he immediately bowed courteously. "Calvin pays his respects to young masters Linley and Yale."

"Calvin, why have you come to meet with my bro?" Yale asked bluntly.

Calvin didn't mind in the slightest. Smiling, he said, "The purpose of my visit was to serve as the representative of his Majesty. Young master Linley, have you given any consideration to serving as a court magus for the Kingdom of Fenlai? His Majesty would also be willing to enfeoff you with the title of Marquis and the territory to match."

Linley laughed.

He still remembered the conditions offered by that Cardinal of the Radiant Church; he could choose to serve in any kingdom of the Holy Union, and even receive a Dukedom. He didn't have to have any responsibilities, just to enjoy life.

"Calvin, I must say, when I was at the Ernst Institute, a Cardinal of the Radiant Church personally came to invite my bro to join the Radiant Church, and the conditions he offered were much higher as well!" Yale smirked.

Calvin chuckled and continued, "Conditions can always be negotiated. His Majesty only hopes that Linley can remain within our Kingdom of Fenlai."

After all, each of the six kingdoms in the Holy Union had different amounts of power. If the Kingdom of Fenlai acquired Linley's support, then in the future, Fenlai's status within the Holy Union would be further solidified.

After all...

The Radiant Church had the authority to depose any king within the Holy Union, or even exterminate an entire royal clan! The power of the Church far exceeded the power of the royals.

Thus, it was extremely important for a royal clan to have a powerful base of support.

"Calvin."

Linley finally spoke.

Calvin immediately bowed slightly, appearing to listen very carefully.

"You belong to the Lucas clan, correct?" Linley immediately went to the principal topic for him.

Calvin nodded. A trace of pride on his face, he said, "Correct. The clan leader

is my uncle.”

“I belong to the Baruch clan.” Linley looked at Calvin. “An ancestral heirloom of my Baruch clan, known as the warblade, ‘Slaughterer’, has been lost to my clan for centuries now. Right now, I hope to recover this warblade, ‘Slaughterer’. Based on what I know, my clan’s ancestral heirloom is currently residing within your Lucas clan.”

After saying these words, Linley no longer spoke.

Calvin couldn’t help but frown.

“The warblade ‘Slaughterer’, the weapon of the original Dragonblood Warrior?” Calvin looked at Linley.

Calvin was silent for a while, then said, “Young master Linley, honestly speaking, the person with the most authority in the clan is my uncle, but my uncle is getting on in years. He isn’t responsible for most of the clan’s affairs. His biggest hobby is being a collector. This warblade, ‘Slaughterer’, is an item which he often shows off to visitors. This treasure which is worth nearly a million gold coins is the most valuable item in our clan’s collection as well. It would be fair to say my uncle values this item as much as his life. To have him give it up... this will be difficult.”

Linley frowned.

The warblade ‘Slaughterer’ had originally been sold for only 180,000 gold coins. Although due to inflation, the value of gold centuries ago was much more than it was now, at most the selling price would be equivalent to nearly 400,000 gold coins today. But Calvin had just claimed that its value was nearly a million gold coins.

From the looks of it...

That ‘disgrace to the family’ who sold the warblade, had sold it far too cheaply.

“Calvin. This warblade, ‘Slaughterer’, is after all the ancestral heirloom of my clan, passed down over five thousand years. You can imagine the importance my clan places upon it. To outsiders, it might merely be a collectible item, but to my clan, the loss of this heirloom is a humiliation.” Linley’s face was dark and

forbidding as he spoke.

“I absolutely must wipe this stain off of our clan’s honor. In order to recover this warblade, ‘Slaughterer’, I am willing to pay any price. Do you understand what I am saying?” Linley stared at Calvin.

Calvin sensed that things were heading in a very wrong direction.

He, too, had heard of the history of the Baruch clan. After all, his clan had several items related to the Baruch clan.

To a clan which had once dominated the entire Yulan continent, the importance of their ancestral heirloom could be imagined. In the past, the Baruch clan was too weak and could be ignored with impunity. But now, this Linley had appeared out of nowhere... forget about the future Linley, even the present Linley would not find it too difficult to deal with their clan.

If Linley said just a few words to the Radiant Church, suggesting that he wanted to recover the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ to cleanse this humiliating stain on his clan, the Lucas family would most likely have to obediently hand it over.

But once the Radiant Church got involved in this matter, things would get more complicated for everyone involved.

“I understand your meaning, young master Linley.” Calvin was growing a bit nervous.

Smiling, Linley looked at Calvin. “I hope the Lucas clan can understand the difficult position I am in. As a descendant of the clan, I have no choice here. Calvin, why don’t you go back and have a chat with your uncle first. Tonight, I will personally pay a visit to your clan.”

“Our Lucas clan will gladly welcome young master Linley’s arrival.” Calvin was already beginning to mentally map out the way by which he would persuade this obstinate uncle of his.

Watching Calvin depart, Linley felt a slight sense of superiority.

Although he hadn’t taken up any official position, just based on his fame, with a few words, he was able to unsettle a kingdom’s Minister’s mind. This was all due to his status, and his status came from his personal power.



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That very night.

The welcoming room of the Lucas clan was extremely tastefully adorned, and the ten people within it were, without a doubt, ten extremely important people within the Kingdom of Fenlai. The lowest ranked amongst them was a Count. And the reason all of them were here, was to meet with Linley.

Linley, the newest star of the Kingdom of Fenlai.

Although Linley was only seventeen, and although Linley had not received a writ of nobility, not even the Dukes of the kingdom dared to treat him lightly.

After all, no matter how high their stations were, they were only capable of displaying their power within the Kingdom of Fenlai. But Linley? This was a person who was highly valued by the Four Great Empires and the two major alliances. Perhaps a few decades from now, Linley would become a Cardinal of the Radiant Church, with a status higher than even their king.

It was best for them to build good relations with Linley while he was still of comparatively low rank. And building good relations with Linley was naturally an important matter.

Among those ten or so people, only the clan leader of the Lucas clan, Marquis Jebbs, felt rather uncomfortable. He was already getting on in years, and didn't have any other hobbies. The thing which he loved the most was that weapon of the first Dragonblood Warrior. It was his pride and joy.

But... the descendants of this weapon's clan had come to retrieve their treasure.

"Mr. Linley, please enter."

"Mr. Yale, please enter."

The voices of the attendants outside could be heard. Instantly, all of the ten or so people in the room turned to smile at the door. Even the unhappy Marquis Jebbs squeezed a smile onto his face.

This was the first time Linley had been addressed as 'Mr.', a title he was a bit unused to. He saw an old man with gleaming silver hair walk over to him, beaming as he said very courteously, "I'm very happy to welcome Linley and Yale to my clan's home. As the leader of this clan, I, Jeb, feel deeply honored."

Linley couldn't help but show a hint of a smile on his face.

It looked like there was a chance!

A Lack of Money

Within the audience hall of the Lucas clan, the room was dazzlingly lit, and beautiful serving girls brought out tray after tray of delicacies. Everybody was toasting each other and chatting quite amicably.

Since he was young, Linley had received strict instruction from his father, and so he knew how to comport himself. On the surface, he was engaged in idle conversation with the nobles, but in his heart, he was still rather impatient with it all.

“Duke Bonalt, by your leave.”

Linley bid farewell to this Duke Bonalt in front of him, then headed directly to the Lucas clan’s leader, Marquis Jebbs. Seeing Linley walk in his direction, he knew that he could no longer avoid the topic of the warblade, ‘Slaughterer’.

Linley and Marquis Jebbs both took seats at a table in a corner of the audience hall.

“Marquis Jebbs, I expect your nephew has already informed you as to why I came here today,” Linley said courteously.

Marquis Jebbs sighed. “Linley, I’m already an old geezer. I really can’t bear to part with my collector’s items.”

“Marquis Jebbs, my Baruch clan has over five thousand years of history, and I have always been proud of the fact that I am a descendant of the Baruchs. But for the ancestral heirloom of our clan, the warblade ‘Slaughterer’, to be lost to us, is a humiliation. Marquis Jebbs, I can openly assure you that for centuries now, our clan has labored to recover the warblade ‘Slaughterer’. One of the main reasons why I trained so hard since my youth was out of my desire to recover our ancestral heirloom.”

Although Linley’s voice was very calm, the ‘absolute resolve’ in his voice was

unmistakable.

“I understand, I understand.” Marquis Jebbs, with a major effort, produced a smile.

Of course the Baruch clan would want their ancestral heirloom back. Marquis Jebbs also understood that if he was dead-set on refusing to return the warblade ‘Slaughterer’, then his Lucas clan would truly draw the ire of this seventeen-year-old young man.

Marquis Jebbs was fully aware of how much influence this young man now possessed.

Even putting the Radiant Church aside for now, the Dawson Conglomerate alone could easily devastate his family.

“Linley. The warblade ‘Slaughterer’ is an extremely valuable treasure. In the past, someone offered me a million gold coins to buy it from me, but I couldn’t bear to part from it.” Marquis Jebbs turned to the subject of ‘money’. “Our Lucas clan is an ancient one, but to be frank, we actually don’t have a huge amount of money.”

Linley understood this point quite well. Based on what Yale had said, the Lucas family was a very old one, with a great deal of influence within Fenlai City. But in terms of financial resources, they were far and away less wealthy than, say, the level of Kalan’s Debs clan.

To force a not-so-wealthy clan to suddenly hand over a treasure worth a million gold coins as a gift wasn’t too realistic.

“So he wants money for it?” Linley relaxed.

If it was just a matter of money, things wouldn’t be too difficult.

“Marquis Jebbs. In the past, your clan spent good, solid gold in order to acquire this warblade, ‘Slaughterer’. Naturally, I too must give you a figure that would satisfy you. But of course, I do hope that Marquis Jebbs won’t try to take a huge lion’s bite out of me,” Linley chortled as he spoke.

A hint of a smile was revealed on the face of Marquis Jebbs.

No matter what, he would eventually have to hand the warblade ‘Slaughterer’

over. At the very least, though, he had to get some gold for it.

“Linley, since you have acted so sincerely towards my Lucas clan, then my Lucas clan also has to give you face. Although this warblade ‘Slaughterer’ is worth around a million gold coins, as long as you can offer us six hundred thousand gold coins, then you can take the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ away with you,” Marquis Jebbs said forthrightly.

Six hundred thousand gold coins?

Compared with the actual value of the warblade, ‘Slaughterer’, this really was not a high price.

But right now, Linley had only managed to procure around two hundred thousand gold coins from his work as a sculptor. This trip to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, he did indeed obtain a large amount of magicite cores. But the value of these cores was only around a one hundred thousand gold coins or so. He didn’t have enough money.

The most valuable thing Linley possessed was...

Blueheart Grass and the magicite core of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear!

Linley had over a hundred clumps of Blueheart Grass left, and each clump was worth several tens of thousands of gold coins. But of course, the price of the Saint-level magicite core was incomparably more valuable. A Saint-level magicite core was an invaluable, priceless treasure, worth far more than the magicite core of a magical beast of the ninth rank.

In the past, according to what the books Linley had read said, the standard valuation of a magical beast of the ninth rank’s magicite core was around five million gold coins. In reality, these days the price would nearly reach ten million gold coins!

But as far as a Saint-level magicite core went, perhaps even if one tried to offer a hundred million gold coins, it still wouldn’t be enough.

A priceless treasure!

Naturally, Linley was not willing to simply sell off the Saint-level magicite core. At the same time, the Blueheart Grass was going to be very important to the

future of his clan. Every single clump was to be cherished.

The sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'!

Linley's mind suddenly drifted to the stone sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'. Linley felt very torn about it, and in fact usually didn't even want to look at it. This was why Linley had continued to let Yale safeguard it.

"Sell it." Linley suddenly came to this decision, and in fact, in the bottom of Linley's heart, this thought flashed by: "I wonder what Alice will think, once she sees this sculpture?"

Linley consulted with Doehring Cowart.

"Linley, it's best if you go ahead and sell off this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'," Doehring Cowart advised. "You don't want to look at it, but if you keep it with you, you'll always have it on the back of your mind. Best to just sell it off. Also... this will serve to broaden the fame of the Straight Chisel School that I founded."

Linley chuckled.

"Marquis Jebbs, rest your mind. Very shortly, the six hundred thousand gold coins will arrive. I only hope that while you are waiting for me, you won't sell off this warblade, 'Slaughterer', to anyone else," Linley said with sincerity.

Marquis Jebbs hurriedly replied, "Linley, be at ease. Even if someone else offered me two million gold coins, I still wouldn't sell it."

Indeed, if it weren't for Linley's particular status, how could Marquis Jebbs bear to part with it?



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Within the office of Manager Austoni at the Proulx Gallery.

"What?! You are willing to auction off that sculpture?" Austoni's eyes were wide with amazement and wild joy.

Linley nodded slightly. By his side, Yale cast a helpless look at Linley.

Yale had grown up alongside Linley, and so he understood Linley's temperament very well. Linley was a person who cared deeply about friends, and was extremely loyal to them. But at the same time, Linley hated owing others. This time, Yale was preparing to loan Linley a few hundred thousand gold coins.

But, as Linley put it, "I don't want to see this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', anymore. Best that I sell it."

Yale secretly thought to himself that if this sculpture was auctioned off, Linley's fame would be broadcast far and wide, which would also improve Linley's status. This was a good thing. Thus, Yale didn't try to force Linley to accept his money.

"Wonderful. Wonderful." Austoni was extremely excited. "Linley, don't worry one bit. For this sculpture of yours, our gallery won't collect so much as a single gold coin in transaction fees."

"I need to auction this sculpture off within the next seven days." Linley directly stated his requirements.

Austoni said confidently, "Be at ease. Starting tomorrow, our Proulx Gallery will arrange for a five-day major exhibition event, as well as spread the news of this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', to every single wealthy clan. On the seventh day, we will begin the auction."

Linley nodded.

"Boss Yale, let's go." After formally handing the sculpture over to the Proulx Gallery, Linley could feel something missing in his heart, but at the same time, Linley also felt as though his mind was a bit more relaxed now.



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Within the main hall of the Proulx Gallery.

Count Juneau still visited the Proulx Gallery virtually every morning. First, he would admire the sculptures in the main hall, before progressing to the hall of the experts and the hall of the masters. But this morning, once Count Juneau

stepped into the main hall, he discovered...

“Hey, why are there so many people congregating over there at the hall of the masters?” Count Juneau felt a bit puzzled.

The hall of the masters always had just those few sculptures that everyone had seen before. After being on display for so long, the number of viewers had become rather low. Unless, of course, a new work had been produced by a master sculptor. Only then would the hall of the masters become a bit more lively.

“Can it be that a new work has been produced by a master?” Excited, Count Juneau also headed directly to the hall of the masters.

Currently, it was eight in the morning. Logically speaking, there shouldn't be many people at the Proulx Gallery. But there were already several dozen people squeezed into the hall of the masters. What was more, all of these people were staring in astonishment at a sculpture placed dead center in the hall of the masters.

What was more, this exhibit had eighteen powerfully-built guards standing around it.

“So popular? I wonder which master has produced a new work.” Count Juneau forced his way to the front to take a closer look.

Count Juneau's eyes immediately widened, and his gaze locked onto the sculpture in front of him. For an instant, Count Juneau thought that he was looking at five living persons. A person madly in love, an adorable person, a shy person, a mesmerizingly beautiful person, and an icy, heartless person.

Count Juneau remained in that half-drunken stupor for a long moment before awakening.

“What a godly sculpture! The work of a Grandmaster!” Count Juneau's mind instantly became agitated.

Based on Count Juneau's hundred-plus years of appraising art, he naturally could sense how spiritually stirring this sculpture was, but upon taking a closer look, Count Juneau's eyes began to shine. “This sculpting style... isn't it that of that genius magus of the Ernst Institute, Linley?”

Just from the sculpting style alone, Count Juneau could tell who had carved this sculpture.

Count Juneau was very familiar with Linley, because the first time Linley had placed three sculptures for sale in the Proulx Gallery, he had been the one to purchase them. And then, when Linley's artworks began appearing in the hall of the experts, the price of each sculpture had reached six thousand gold coins.

The genius of the Ernst Institute who was only seventeen years old!

On that business transaction alone, Count Juneau had turned a profit of over ten thousand gold coins. Naturally, Count Juneau would pay tremendous attention to Linley.

"It really is him." Count Juneau saw the two characters for 'Linley' written on the lower corner of the statue.

And on the placard next to the sculpture, there was an explanation of who Linley was...

"The sculptor of this sculpture is named 'Linley'. This year, he is seventeen years old, a graduate of the Ernst Institute, and a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. In this day and age, he is, without a doubt, the number one genius magus in the entire Yulan continent, and even if we look at the history of the Yulan continent as a whole, he is still the number two genius magus in all of history."

"But Linley isn't just a genius magus. In the field of sculpting, he also has made amazing accomplishments. Although only seventeen, this sculpture of his, 'Awakening From the Dream', already carries the grandeur and the spirit of a Grandmaster-level sculpture, especially considering the fact that this sculpture is so huge. Naturally, its value is all the more priceless. When you factor in the reality that this seventeen-year-old sculptor is also an ultimate genius magus... the value of this sculpture is simply unimaginable."

"Our Proulx Gallery has the privilege to be authorized by Linley to exhibit this sculpture for five days. On April 21st, after the exhibition has ended, the Proulx Gallery will carry out the auction."

Seeing this introduction, Count Juneau understood...

“The various nobles, magnates, and royals will all be moved and intrigued...” Count Juneau knew very well that this sort of sculpture definitely wasn’t something which a person of his level could hope to purchase.

“A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank?” Upon rereading this part of the introduction, Count Juneau couldn’t help but sigh in amazement as well.

At the same time, Count Juneau’s admiration of this Linley deepened.

A person who was able to achieve such accomplishments in two different fields was definitely worthy of admiration.

“This sculpture should be on roughly the same level as the sculptures of Grandmaster sculptors. Plus the fact that it is huge... and the status of the sculptor, a seventeen-year-old who is the number two genius magus in the entire history of the Yulan continent... the price is going to be sky-high.” Count Juneau made a mental prediction.

“April 21st!” Count Juneau was already beginning to anticipate this day.

As time passed, the people coming to visit this hall of the masters grew more and more in number. Many of the extremely wealthy families in the Holy Capital began to receive word of this as well.



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Within Austoni’s office.

“Please inform his Majesty, King Wylder, that I don’t have the authority to make this decision. If his Majesty would really like to purchase this sculpture, we would like to invite him to attend on the 21st.” Austoni sent off the royal herald from a king.

When that herald left, Austoni’s face sank.

“What a joke. He actually dared to offer just a million gold pieces to directly buy this sculpture? In his dreams! Just yesterday, his Royal Majesty, King Clayde of the Kingdom of Fenlai, offered three million gold coins!”

After being on exhibition for just three days, over ten important personages had made offers to directly buy the sculpture.

“On the 21st, I’m afraid that we really are going to see a sky-high price,” Austoni secretly mused.

Rage

Within the Debs clan's private garden, Alice and Kalan were sitting together and discussing the question of marriage.

"Alice." Kalan's face was all smiles. "I've already discussed this with my father. Our engagement ceremony will be on June 18th, and our actual wedding ceremony will be on January 1st of the next year. Which is to say, it will be on the Yulan Festival day of next year."

A hint of a smile appeared on Alice's face as well.

"Next year, next year will be the year 10000 of the Yulan calendar, right? For us to hold our wedding on the Yulan Festival of year 10000 of the Yulan calendar, that'll be... so, so perfect." The more she spoke, the happier she felt. Alice, too, began to beam.

Seeing Alice smile so happily, Kalan felt very content.

"Alice, hurry up and discuss this with your father, then prepare the list of guests from your family's side for me so I can make arrangements as soon as possible," Kalan urged.

"Okay." Alice nodded slightly.

Kalan gently stroked Alice's soft hair, his heart content.

But when he thought about the dire circumstances his clan was in, Kalan's heart began to grow frantic. Not long after he and Alice started their relationship, the Debs clan suffered a painful blow like they had never suffered before. The Dawson Conglomerate had cut them off!

The current success and glory of the Debs clan was inextricably linked to their relationship with the Dawson Conglomerate.

But then, last December, the Dawson Conglomerate had publicly announced the dissolution of their business relationship with the Debs clan. What was

more, they had also reached out to every business union and trading clan within Fenlai City and informed them that they were looking for someone to replace the Debs clan in their previous position.

Additionally...

The Dawson Conglomerate's actions weren't just limited to that. The Dawson Conglomerate even began to suppress the business activities of the Debs clan, causing every single business operated by the Debs clan to suffer losses.

"Why is the Dawson Conglomerate suppressing my clan like this? The Debs clan hasn't offended the Dawson Conglomerate." Kalan felt extremely vexed. As the next heir and successor to the clan, Kalan naturally cared greatly about this affair.

And because these issues had occurred soon after Kalan and Alice started their relationship, there were quite a few clan members who now believed that Alice was the bearer of disastrously bad luck.

Otherwise, why would the Dawson Conglomerate, whom they had worked with for so many years, suddenly turn on them?

Fortunately, over all these years, the Debs clan had managed to accumulate massive wealth. Although their losses were great, the foundation of the Debs clan was still intact. But the leader of the Debs clan was aware that, due to unclear reasons, the Dawson Conglomerate was now suppressing their businesses. This was causing the Debs clan to lose all hope in the 'business' side of their activities.

After all, no one was willing to offend the massive behemoth which was the Dawson Conglomerate.

Thus, the only choice the Debs clan had was to embark on a certain other route.

Shaking his head and casting these thoughts aside, Kalan laughed as he looked at Alice. "Alice, I heard that yesterday, the Proulx Gallery began to exhibit an extremely incredible work of art. Supposedly, it's on the Grandmaster level. Many people have gone there to take a look. Would you like to go with me?"

Alice was feeling bored as well. "Alright."



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Kalan and Alice were riding towards the Proulx Gallery in a carriage.

“This sculpture is supposedly extremely extraordinary. These past few days, I’ve been so busy arranging our engagement and wedding that I haven’t had the chance to take you to check it out.” Kalan was the first to leap off the carriage, and then, in a very gentlemanly fashion, helped Alice out as well.

Side by side, Alice and Kalan walked towards the Proulx Gallery.

“Big brother Kalan, look at all those people!” Alice’s eyes were shining as she pointed.

Deep within the Proulx Gallery, at the hall of the masters, there was a sea of people. But within the hall of the masters, everything was extremely orderly, people entering from one door and exiting from another. Every person was only permitted three minutes or so of viewing time.

After three minutes, the people currently in the hall of the masters were forced to leave. If they wanted to view it again...

Fine! Go back and wait in line again!

“What a long line.” Kalan felt somewhat amazed as well. In all these years, he had never seen the Proulx Gallery so packed with people before.

Kalan and Alice both obediently got in line and waited for nearly twenty minutes. Only then was it their group’s turn to go and enter the hall of the masters. In one large group, they were ushered into the hall of the masters. Immediately, all of them headed towards the front.

Curious, Kalan and Alice naturally rushed to the front as well.

But in that moment when Alice first spotted the sculpture, she froze as though she had been struck by lightning. Standing there, she stared stupidly at the enormous sculpture. Those five beautifully, immaculately carved female figures, each of them carrying a unique aura of their own.

Others were absorbed in contemplating the meanings hidden within this

‘Awakening From the Dream’.

But when Alice saw this giant sculpture, her mind couldn't help but begin to replay memories of every single event she had previously experienced with Linley.

The first time, just as she was despairing, Linley had descended like a god from the heavens.

On the balcony, the two of them hiding in the corner and chatting an entire night away.



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One scene after another played in her mind. Alice was totally dumbstruck. She really had no idea that this famous Grandmaster-level sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, had her as the subject.

“Lin... Linley...” Alice’s current emotions were extremely complicated.

She stared at the introductory text on the side.

“The sculptor of this sculpture is named ‘Linley’. This year, he is seventeen years old, a graduate of the Ernst Institute, and a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. In this day and age, he is, without a doubt, the number one genius magus in the entire Yulan continent, and even if we look at the history of the Yulan continent as a whole, he is still the number two genius magus in all of history.”

“But Linley isn’t just a genius magus. In the field of sculpting, he has also made amazing accomplishments. Although only seventeen, this sculpture of his, ‘Awakening From the Dream’...”

Seeing those lines of words, Alice was dumbfounded yet again.

“It’s Linley. It’s Linley.” Alice stared at the placard unbelievably. “A dual-element magus of the seventh rank? He’s already a magus of the seventh rank? But... but just last year, he was just a magus of the fifth rank.”

Alice had no idea that before they had broken up, Linley had become a magus

of the sixth rank. Only... Linley had never been given the chance to let her know.

“‘Awakening From the Dream’. This sculpture is called, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.” Staring at the five female figures in the sculpture, especially that last one with the slight aura of heartlessness, Alice suddenly understood the true reason why Linley had given this sculpture the name, ‘Awakening From the Dream.’

“The dreamer... has awakened?” Alice felt that her mind was a total mess.

As the first man she had ever truly cared for, in the bottom of Alice’s heart, there was always a special place reserved for Linley. But when she discovered that Linley had given this sculpture the name, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, she suddenly felt as though something had disappeared from her heart.

That sort of feeling... was very difficult to bear.

Alice suddenly noticed that by her side, Kalan’s fists were knotted, and an extremely unpleasant look was on his face. His veins were bulging out, and his face was terrifyingly grim. His eyes flashed with dark light as he stared a deathly gaze at this sculpture.

“Big Brother Kalan!” Worried, Alice called to him.

But Kalan paid her no mind.

“Linley, you... you go too far.” Kalan was filled with boundless, fiery rage. In the past, Kalan had been rather well-disposed towards Linley. But in the depths of his heart, Kalan somewhat looked down on Linley. As far as Kalan was concerned, no matter how hard Linley worked, he would never be able to match Kalan’s clan.

After all, his clan was hitched to the enormous war machine that was the Dawson Conglomerate.

But in what, just five months?

His Debs clan had been abandoned by the Dawson Conglomerate. And Linley? Out of nowhere, he became a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. What was more, he was acclaimed as the number one genius magus of this age.

Even in the long history of the Yulan continent, there was only one person slightly better than Linley.

“A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank, and a sculptor approaching the level of the Grandmasters.” Kalan suddenly felt enormous pressure.

This person was simply too incredible.

But shortly after, Kalan only felt boundless fury.

Because the inspiration for this sculpture was his fiancée!

“Hey, take a look. Isn’t this girl really similar to the woman in this sculpture?” A voice suddenly rang out within the hall of the masters, and instantly, over ten heads turned to stare at Alice. The hall suddenly became a hotbed of commotion and discussion.

Linley’s sculpting abilities were simply too amazing. He had totally captured Alice’s grace and charm in this sculpture.

From their very first glance at Alice, those viewers had the feeling... that the girl in front of them and the female carved into ‘Awakening From the Dream’ were incredibly similar. In fact, they could totally be considered the same person. That unique gaze. That slightly sharp, arched nose.

“Miss, dare I ask what your relationship is with Master Linley?” An old man with a head full of white hair, at least a century old, asked very courteously towards Alice.

In the field of sculpting, Linley had already reached the level of a master.

Linley’s skill in sculpting was enough to cause these collectors who had decades or centuries of experience in sculpting to prostrate themselves in admiration. Respectfully addressing him as ‘Master’ was something which came from their hearts. Based on this old man’s century-plus years of experience in appraising stone sculptures, he naturally could tell that the woman carved into the sculpture was most likely a person with whom Linley had shared a period of turbulent love.

Alice felt rather awkward, and couldn’t help but turn to look at Kalan.

“Oh, Kalan, you are here as well.” The old man looked at Kalan. Old people naturally being as sly as foxes, the old man naturally could tell that Kalan and Alice’s relationship was not a simple one. “Kalan, who is this young lady?”

Although Kalan felt extremely unhappy, he still modestly bowed and said, “Milord Duke Berner, this is Miss Alice, my fiancée.”

“Fiancée?” Duke Berner cast a meaningful glance at Kalan and Alice, then laughed, asking no more.



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Pulling Alice by the hand, as though running for his life, Kalan quickly fled back to the Debs clan’s manor.

The leader of the Debs clan, Kalan’s father, Bernard, stared at his son in disbelief. “What did you just say? The inspiration for that sculpture being exhibited in the Proulx Gallery is Alice?”

Bernard was generally rather doting towards his son.

When his son had said he was going to marry Alice, Bernard hadn’t objected. But just a few days after his son had firmed up his relationship with Alice, the Dawson Conglomerate had suddenly decided to break off relations with the Debs clan for no apparent reason at all. With regards to this affair, Bernard had been constantly begging to meet with the upper level management of the Dawson Conglomerate for a meeting.

Over the past few months, Bernard had been busy dealing with this issue, and had been so busy that he hadn’t even had the free time to bother going to view the sculptures at the Proulx Gallery.

“Alice. The inspiration is Alice?” The expression on Bernard’s face immediately grew ugly.

Kalan nodded. “Yes, father. Although Alice and I haven’t yet gotten formally engaged, once we do, Alice will be formally introduced to many of the nobles in the Holy Capital. That sculpture of Linley’s, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, will definitely make us the laughingstock of the city.”

Bernard was silent for a while, and then frowned as he asked Kalan, “How bad is it? Is there anything shameful or degrading about this sculpture?”

“Father, in the past... for a period of time... Linley and Alice, they ...” Kalan briefly explained in a fuzzy manner. “And this sculpture is about the affairs of Linley and Alice.”

Bernard no longer spoke. He only began to frown severely.

After a while, Bernard said to his son, “Kalan, if I ask you to give up Alice, would you be willing?” Kalan resolutely shook his head. After all, he was only eighteen years old.

Bernard nodded slightly. “Don’t worry about Alice. I will handle this matter. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Kalan nodded, then suddenly he gritted his teeth. Staring at his father, he said, “Father, Linley is definitely unhappy at the fact that Alice and I are together. What’s more, Linley’s potential is too great. I think... that we should perhaps consider if we can figure out a way to kill Linley?”

The Old Master

“Kill Linley?” Bernard looked at his son. “Kalan, why should we kill this Linley? He’s just a master sculptor. Will he impact the Debs clan somehow?”

The news of Linley becoming a magus of the seventh rank hadn’t yet been widely publicized in Fenlai City. In addition, Bernard had recently been absorbed in dealing with the frustrating affairs of his clan, which was why he didn’t know anything about Linley.

Kalan nodded. “Father, Linley is seventeen years old this year, but he’s already produced a Grandmaster-level sculpture. More importantly... he is currently the number one genius magus of the Yulan continent. Even looking back at all of history, he is still the number two genius magus of all time on the Yulan continent. Because he... is a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank.”

“A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank?”

Bernard sucked in a cold breath of air. His intuition was telling him that this Linley would be a threat to his clan.

“This Linley cannot be permitted to live,” Bernard said immediately.

Hearing these words from his father, Kalan couldn’t help but smile. But then, a heartbeat later, Bernard frowned. “Wait. The number two genius magus of all time will definitely be an extremely incredible person in the future. How could the Radiant Church, the Cult of Shadows, and the Four Great Empires possibly let someone like this slip through their fingers? It’s quite possible that Linley has already struck up a relationship with the Radiant Church.”

“Kalan, this Linley, cannot be killed by us.” Looking at Kalan, Bernard spoke in a serious tone.

“Father, he’s just a dual-element magus of the seventh rank.” Kalan’s face

was a mask of urgency. Suddenly, he lowered his voice. “Father, we don’t need to necessarily dirty our own hands to get rid of Linley. We can spend some money to invite others to do the deed. Just like when we killed that Court Minister.”

Bernard was silent for a moment. “Kalan, you don’t need to interfere in this matter anymore. I will handle everything.”

Bernard wasn’t saying that he would kill Linley. This made Kalan extremely irritable and unable to be at ease.



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The dark of the night. Bernard had arrived at a pre-reserved deluxe room within a hotel, and there was a white-haired old man there waiting for him.

“Mr. Bernard.” Upon seeing Bernard, that white-haired old man couldn’t help but grin at him.

Bernard nodded. “Mr. Bayonet. This time I have come to see you for the purpose of asking your assistance.”

“Speak, speak. You are an old customer.” The white-haired old man was still beaming.

Bernard spoke bluntly. “Two things. First, I hope you can destroy that ‘Awakening From the Dream’ sculpture currently on display within the Proulx Gallery for me.” Bernard was quite clear that actually spiriting this sculpture out of the Proulx Gallery was an impossibility.

But destroying it was a task of much lower complexity.

“Destroy the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’?” The white-haired old man said, startled.

“What, is your organization, ‘Saber’, not capable of carrying this mission out?” Bernard laughed lightly.

Of the four major assassin’s guilds of the Yulan continent, each was unique in their own way. This one, Saber, possessed an exceedingly strong force. As long

as the price was enough, they would even dare to assassinate a Cardinal.

But of course, if the contract was to assassinate a Saint-level combatant, that was perhaps a level of difficulty that was a bit too high.

“Could it be that even you are afraid of offending the Proulx Gallery?” Bernard was somewhat suspicious.

“No. Of course we don’t care about a branch of the Proulx Gallery. Go ahead and advise us as to your second requirement,” the white-haired old man suddenly said.

An assassin’s guild, by its very nature, was going to offend people. They even dared to offend the Radiant Church. Who wouldn’t they dare to offend?

Bernard suppressed the curiosity in his heart. “The second matter is, I hope that you can assassinate Linley.”

The white-haired old man finally laughed helplessly. Shaking his head, he said to Bernard, “Mr. Bernard, please forgive us, but we won’t be able to accept either of your two missions. My deepest regrets.”

“Unable to accept?” Bernard rose to his feet violently, staring at the white-haired old man in disbelief. “Mr. Bayonet, I know how much strength your organization has. Since when did you become unwilling to dare to accept a small mission such as this?” Bernard totally could not accept that this was the end result of his trip here.

After all, this organization dared to even assassinate senior ministers of the Four Great Empires and Cardinals of the Radiant Church. But they didn’t dare assassinate Linley?

“It isn’t that we don’t dare, it’s that we don’t wish to accept this mission. As for the reason why, our organization has no need to tell you, right?” The expression on the white-haired old man’s face had turned cold.

Bernard hurriedly smiled. “Forgive me, Mr. Bayonet. Since you are unwilling to accept this mission, then I must take my leave.”

The white-haired old man nodded.

After Bernard departed, the white-haired old man slowly rose to his feet,

mumbling to himself, “This Bernard. Out of all the missions he could ask us to perform, why did he have to try and destroy a sculpture? And he even wants to assassinate Linley? I absolutely must report this affair to the Old Master. I imagine once the Old Master learns that we turned this mission down, he will be quite pleased.”

The white-haired old man was one of the founding elders of the Saber organization.

However, precisely because he was too old, he didn't carry out any missions anymore. Most of the time, he spent his life enjoying everything this megacity, Fenlai City, had to offer. On occasion, he would receive visits from some of the wealthier nobles.

But as for the ‘Old Master’ he was referring to...

Within the Saber organization, the Old Master was a person of legend. Even when the guild leader of Saber met the Old Master, he would very respectfully hail him as ‘Old Master’. In the entirety of this organization, there was perhaps no one who had more seniority than this Old Master.



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Within the Proulx Gallery. The fourth day of the exhibition of the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream.’

In the middle of the hall of the masters, something quite bizarre was happening. Based on the usual rules of the Proulx Gallery, each visitor to the hall of the masters should only be allowed three minutes of viewing time per visit before leaving to allow someone else to come in. If they wanted to view the sculpture again, they would have to get in line again.

But within the hall of the masters, one particular guest had already been there for nearly two hours. This was totally against the rules!

This guest appeared to be thirty or forty years old. He wore a loose-fitting long robe, and his arms were hidden by the sleeves of the robes and crossed over his chest. That long, black robe was casually loosened, and he appeared to

be very much absorbed in viewing the sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream.'

And right now, the several extremely powerful-looking guards standing in front of 'Awakening From the Dream' were all discussing this black-haired man in a low voice.

"What sort of relationship does this man have with Mr. Austoni? We were actually instructed not to shoo him away. For him to be here for such a long period of time in the hall of the masters is against the rules."

"Don't worry about it. Let's just quietly protect the statue."

"What are you afraid of? The Gallery has set up a magical defensive formation around the sculpture. It is totally impossible for someone to attempt to steal it, especially given how large it is. Who could possibly steal such a large sculpture out from under our eyes?"

The guards were all in a relatively relaxed mood.

After all, stealing this huge sculpture would be an extremely hard task, while damaging it was of no benefit to anybody. Who would do such a thing?

"Wow, what an excellent sculpture. It really has flavor." The thirty-to forty-year-old man knitted his brows as he carefully inspected the sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'. And then, he glanced once more at the introduction. "A seventeen-year-old kid. I really anticipate his future progress."

Time passed. One group of people after another entered the hall of the masters.

But this man continued to stand in that one spot, carefully viewing and enjoying the sight of this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'.

"What smoothly flowing lines and marks, so clean, without any sign of hesitation." A slightly enchanted look was on this man's face. "How absolutely mesmerizing. And this girl! Her unique characteristics were completely drawn out by the sculptor, to the point of being more attractive than a real person."

Within the hall, groups of visitors continued to arrive and depart.

Many of the visitors were lining up multiple times and viewing the sculpture multiple times. A Grandmaster-level sculpture such as this, to those genuine

aficionados of sculpture, was something they could admire for an entire day without feeling bored.

“Time’s up! Next group!” The employee of the Proulx Gallery called out loudly. Instantly, a large group of people began heading for the exit obediently, while the next group of people began to come in. But just at this disorderly moment...

“Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!”

Several explosive sounds could be heard, and suddenly, the hall of the masters was covered with a layer of thick fog. The previous guests began to run totally wild, screaming in fear or cursing angrily. The air was filled with noise.

At this time, the guards charged with protecting the sculpture also grew nervous.

“Not good.” Seeing this spectacle, the guards knew that something was happening.

“Goddamit.”

The man dressed in a loose robe frowned, cursing in an annoyed manner. His previously drowsy eyes cleared and scanned forwards. At this time, four blurs suddenly charged towards the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.

When these four blurs made their charge, the guards had already drawn their weapons, while at the same time, many experts of the Proulx Gallery hidden around the area came charging forward as well. If the sculpture currently on display within the Proulx Gallery were destroyed, it would be an unmitigated disaster!

“Whoosh!”

One of the four blurs, a white blur, moved in an extremely bizarre manner. Like a piece of white paper, he floated about, easily dodging past the attempted blockade by the guards. At the same time, he stretched out with his black dagger, aiming a stab at the sculpture.

Based on his attack power, with this stab, the entire sculpture would be shattered.

“Thud!” ‘Awakening From the Dream’ suddenly glowed. The dagger landed on the glow surrounding the sculpture, but did not damage it.

“Lightguard?” The white blur muttered. The dagger in his hand suddenly flushed with a layer of blood-red color, and he stabbed at the sculpture with it once more. Instantly, a clear ringing sound could be heard as the Lightguard spell was totally shattered.

“Not good.” The four guards were getting desperate. Even the protective magic set up by a light-style magus of the seventh rank had been so easily broken. And, because the situation was too chaotic, many of the Gallery’s experts were not able to reach or block the intruders in time.

But these guards next to the sculpture were being blocked in turn by the other three blurs.

The man in a loose-fitting robe, who hadn’t moved this entire time, suddenly radiated a fierce look from his previously drowsy-looking eyes.

“Swish!”

A very soft noise could be heard, while at the same time, the white-colored blur suddenly twitched. Then, with a ‘rip’ sound, he suddenly split into two pieces, and fresh blood spurted out from his bifurcated body. Even the three people entangling the bodyguards suddenly split into two pieces. All of them were as dead as dead could be.



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Shortly afterwards, the Proulx Gallery returned to normal, while the man in a loose robe slowly departed from the Proulx Gallery. Outside the Proulx Gallery, there was a carriage waiting for him, and another person as well.

It was the person whom Kalan’s father, Bernard, had addressed as ‘Mr. Bayonet’.

Upon seeing this thirty-or forty-year-old man come towards him, the elder immediately said in a voice of respect, “Old Master.”

“Mm. You did a good job this time.” The thirty-or forty-year-old man laughed as he praised. But then, he said in an unhappy voice, “I didn’t expect that the Bloodrose organization would sink to such depths. Could it be that they don’t know what a huge sin it is to attempt to destroy such a precious work of art?”

The Bloodrose organization, like the Saber organization, was one of the four primary assassin’s guilds.

“Old Master, where should we head to today?” Mr. Bayonet asked.

The man thought for a while, then said, “It’s been a year or two since I’ve visited the Jadewater Paradise. In the past, I’ve always had those girls come out to my place instead. This time... I shall visit the Jadewater Paradise in person. Only when I spend some time with young ladies will I, as well, feel young at heart. Haha...” He began to laugh loudly.

“Yes, Old Master,” the white-haired old man said courteously. In Mr. Bayonet’s heart, he had actually always been curious about one thing: how old, exactly, this middle-aged man was. This was because, among all the assassins produced by the Saber organization, he himself was in the final group of assassins to be personally trained by the Old Master himself.

As for the very first group of assassins trained by the Old Master, they had either all been killed, or they had died of old age!

“What are you thinking about? Move it!” From within the carriage came the sound of the man’s voice.

Mr. Bayonet immediately began to drive the carriage forward, heading towards the Jadewater Paradise.

The Auction

Within the private reading room of Bernard, leader of the Debs clan.

“What? You failed?” Bernard stared at the woman in the red robes. “Even if you failed, why can’t you continue making further attempts? Since when did the Bloodrose organization give up so easily?”

Bernard was extremely dissatisfied.

When he went to ask for the help of the Saber organization, he was refused. He had successfully enlisted the services of Bloodrose, but Bloodrose was only willing to agree to destroy the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’. As for killing Linley, the price they demanded was far too high, as high as the price for an assassination of a Cardinal! Such an astronomical price, the Debs clan was unable to pay.

Per the words of Bloodrose, assassinating Linley would cause them to simultaneously offend both the Radiant Church as well as the Dawson Conglomerate.

What was more...

Nowadays, Linley was a master sculptor. A master sculptor held an exalted societal status, and many people with rank and power esteemed master sculptors. Killing Linley meant killing a master sculptor, which would generate a degree of hatred towards Bloodrose among those sculpture aficionados.

This was why the cost they had demanded to assassinate Linley had actually been on par with the cost to assassinate a Cardinal.

“We are no longer willing to accept this assignment. We are willing to return the compensation you gave us,” the red-robed woman said, her face cold.

“Can you tell me the reason why?” Bernard had no idea what was going on.

The destruction of a sculpture shouldn’t be too difficult. How could they give

up after failing just a single time?

“If we tell you the reason, then we will no longer return the fees you provided to us. Do you agree?” The red-robed woman said calmly.

An assassination organization was also a type of information broker. They were willing to sell information as well.

“Done.” As the leader of the Debs clan, Bernard could afford to be magnanimous.

The red-robed woman said softly, “I can tell you this. Among the admirers of that sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, there is a person who our organization definitely does not wish to offend. And this person is not someone whom your Debs clan is able to offend either.”

“Alright. My report is complete.” With a smile, the red-robed woman immediately departed.

Bernard was incredibly angry.

This red-robed woman wasn't even willing to disclose the identity of this person Bloodrose didn't wish to offend. But Bernard understood one thing: Someone capable of causing trepidation for Bloodrose was definitely an incredible person. A report on such a person would definitely also be incredibly expensive.



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Year 9999 of the Yulan calendar, April 21st. Within the dedicated auction hall at the Proulx Gallery.

This auction hall was split into three levels. The first level had ordinary seats, while the second level had stand-alone booths which only major nobles and extremely wealthy people were qualified to enter. The price to enter those booths was terrifyingly high. As for the third level, it was just a single, extremely large hall, also decorated very lavishly.

At this moment, the hundreds of seats on the first level were beginning to get

filled up, despite the fact that the price of each seat here was a hundred gold coins. As for the ten or so private booths on the second level, based on the locations of the seats, the prices varied from a thousand to ten thousand gold coins.

But the third level? That wasn't opened to the public at all.

The fame of this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', was extremely resounding now. Many of the people currently in the auction hall were some of the wealthiest, most powerful noble families on the Yulan continent. But precisely because there were only so few seats while there were so many nobles present, these standard seats, which supposedly cost a hundred gold coins each, were being sold by scalpers outside for a ridiculous sum of money.

The Debs clan, as a local clan, had a special relationship with the Proulx Gallery, and were able to acquire seats in the private booth with the poorest positioning.

In truth, aside from the Debs clan, all of the others who were present in the second level booths belonged to extremely famous and wealthy clans throughout the Yulan continent. They were far more powerful than the Debs clan. For example... the Dawson clan of the Dawson Conglomerate. Even they were only on the second level. But of course, the representatives of the Dawson clan here were not members in the direct line of descent and succession.

"Alice, walk on the inside."

This time, six people had come from the Debs clan. Alice was walking between Kalan and Kalan's mother, and was even wearing a hat that was pressed down on her head. Very quickly, the six of them reached the second level.

Within this second level were the greatest clans of the Yulan continent.

Upon seeing who was in the second level hallway, Bernard, leader of the Debs clan, immediately began to modestly greet everyone present. Here, the Debs clan meant absolutely nothing. It was like the evaluation Yale had once given them in private; they were a 'minor clan'.

Right. In the eyes of these clans whose influence spanned the entire Yulan

continent, if a clan's area of influence was limited to a single kingdom, then that clan was nothing more than a minor clan.

The six people from the Debs clan entered their booth.

"There will come a day when my Debs clan will be like those clans. No; we will be even stronger," Kalan said to himself.

For the Debs clan, during this trip, failure was not an option.

No matter what, it was better to have this sculpture located within their own manor, rather than in the manor of an outsider. After all, in June, Kalan would be having his engagement ceremony with Alice, and by then, many people would know that Alice was becoming a member of the Debs clan. But even though 'failure was not an option', in reality, their financial ability to succeed was a major issue as well.

"Big Brother Kalan." Alice took a seat next to Kalan.

In a place like this, surrounded by hugely powerful clans, Alice, too, felt rather constrained and pressured. After all, in this place, even the Debs clan counted for little, much less a minor noble like Alice and her clan.

"Don't worry. Inside this booth, the people below won't be able to see you at all. That Linley really has gone too far. He actually..." Whenever Kalan thought of that sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', he would burst with rage. Anyone with some understanding of sculpture would be able to guess that Linley and Alice had a romantic history together.

After all, if they hadn't shared a period of true love, how could Linley have produced such a godly work of art?

If Kalan were to really marry Alice, there would most likely be many people who would secretly speculate about what the relationship between Alice and Linley was like. For someone of Kalan's social status, how could he bear such embarrassment?



The third level of the auction hall.

Inside, there were only four people. The Proulx Gallery's Managing Director Maia, Austoni, Linley, and Yale.

"Haha, Director Maia, which one is Linley?" A loud, exuberant laugh boomed out.

Leaning on his cane, Director Maia went over to welcome the man, while Linley and Yale both immediately went to welcome him as well. "Your Majesty!"

The person who had come was the king of the Kingdom of Fenlai. He was the pride of the kingdom; the Golden Lion, King Clayde. Being both the king of Fenlai as well as mighty a warrior of the ninth rank was indeed something worthy of admiration.

Linley carefully inspected this Clayde.

This king was built extremely muscularly, and his head of long, golden hair billowed about him wildly, giving off the aura of a lion with enormous explosive power. His entire person naturally radiated a domineering aura that made hearts quail in fear.

Clayde looked at Linley. "If my guess is correct, this one must be Master Linley."

"Your Majesty, please, just call me Linley," Linley said immediately.

As a matter of fact, Linley felt quite helpless. Ever since the sculpture 'Awakening From the Dream' had been put on display, many people, upon seeing Linley, would humbly address him as 'Master Linley'. This was not feigned courtesy. Even Marquis Jebbs of the Lucas clan, who really was not willing to part with the warblade 'Slaughterer', was still filled with the utmost admiration for Linley.

"Good enough." Clayde was extremely blunt. "And this must be Yale, right? Yale, how's your father doing?"

"My father is doing very well. Unfortunately, he isn't currently within the Holy Union, as if he was, he definitely would've come in person," Yale said modestly.

Clayde nodded slightly.

“Director Maia, who else has come today?” Clayde called out casually.

Director Maia smiled. “Let’s wait a while longer. I expect that Cardinal Lampson and Cardinal Guillermo will be arriving as well.”

Generally speaking, the third level was only used for welcoming guests which the Proulx Gallery held in the highest regard.

The windows of the third level were made of a special type of glass. Those on the outside were unable to see inside, but those on the inside could clearly see the outside. This sort of glass was specially designed and produced by alchemists, and was extremely expensive. Most places weren’t able to afford such materials.

“Lords Guillermo and Lampson have arrived.” Director Maia’s position allowed him to see the outside hallway.

Linley, Yale, and even King Clayde all went to welcome these two men with great warmth and enthusiasm. In a group, they went to greet these two Cardinals of the Radiant Church. Cardinal Guillermo and Linley had met once before, while Cardinal Lampson was rather pudgy. When he laughed, his eyes turned into thin slits. He seemed very adorable.

“Linley. Right?” Lampson immediately gave Linley a big, warm hug.

“Lord Lampson,” Linley said respectfully.

And then, the seven people within the third floor, being Cardinal Lampson, Cardinal Guillermo, Maia, Yale, Austoni, King Clayde, and Linley all sat down together, peering out of the windows at the spectacle below.

From their vantage point, they could even see into what was going on in the booths on the second level.

“Third Bro, look.” Yale lightly nudged Linley by the arm and nodded below.

Following Yale’s gaze, Linley looked over as well. Suddenly, he discovered that within one of the second level booths, Kalan and Alice were both present. Right now, Alice and Kalan were holding hands while seated together on a sofa, engaging in conversation.

“I didn’t expect her to come,” Yale said softly to Linley.

Linley only smiled calmly.

“Linley, what are you guys talking about?” The pudgy Cardinal Lampson chortled at Linley.

“Nothing.” Linley shook his head.

Guillermo patted Clayde on the shoulder. “Clayde, I must say, your management of the Kingdom of Fenlai has been stellar. You’ve actually managed to produce an incredible talent like Linley. Before this, I really had no idea that this genius magus, Linley, had also reached such an incredible level of achievement in the art of stonesculpting.”

Yale, Linley, Clayde, Guillermo, Lampson, and Director Maia continued to engage in idle conversation while watching the activities below.

All of the seats on the first floor of the auction hall were now filled.

On the main platform, the sculpture ‘Awakening From the Dream’ was placed, covered with a piece of cloth. On the platform, a beautiful serving girl stood on each side of the sculpture, while a golden-haired gentleman walked onto the platform with a smile. Looking around himself, he said in a bright voice, “Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome all of you to this auction for Master Linley’s sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream.’”

This middle-aged man behaved extremely leisurely. Slowly, he said, “Every single guest who has come today has a grand reputation. In particular, our Gallery was fortunate enough to be able to invite Lord Cardinal Guillermo to attend as well.” This middle-aged man bowed slightly towards the third level.

Instantly, everyone below rose to their feet, filling the auction hall with the sound of their applause.

“We also have Lord Cardinal Lampson present.” Another round of energetic applause.

“His Majesty, the ruler of our Kingdom of Fenlai, has arrived as well.”

“Additionally, the genius magus and genius sculptor, Master Linley, is present today.”

This auctioneer rattled off one name after another, and each time he did,

there was a storm of applause. To these nobles, a Cardinal of the Radiant Church, the ruler of a kingdom, and that genius of a level which the Yulan continent would rarely see in its entire history, all were worthy of their admiration.

“Master Linley?”

Within her booth, Alice stared out of the window at the third level, but unfortunately, all she could see was black glass.

But on the third level.

Linley could clearly see Alice’s face... and the slightly lost look in her eyes.

A Sky-High Price

Standing in the middle of the platform, the golden-haired, middle-aged man continued to boast, “When discussing the Ten Masterpieces, in this day and age, the lowest valuation of one of the Ten Masterpieces is 5.28 million gold coins, while the highest is the ‘Bloody-eyed Maned Lion’, which was recently auctioned off in the Proulx Gallery branch in the Yulan Empire for a price of thirteen million gold coins!”

All of the nobles and wealthy merchants below grew silent.

These prices were downright terrifying.

“The materials for the sculpture, ‘Bloody-eyed Maned Lion’, were collected from an actual, Saint-level ‘Bloody-eyed Maned Lion’, while the sculptor was Grandmaster Hoover from over a hundred thousand years ago. In the past ten thousand years, our Yulan continent has produced just two Grandmaster level sculptors; Master Proulx, and Master Hope Jensen. These two both reached the level of Grandmaster.”

The golden-haired man let out a sudden laugh.

“However, from what I know, every single Grandmaster sculptor in history... no... let’s not discuss Grandmasters for now... even the vast majority of master sculptors were only acclaimed as ‘masters’ after their first century of life. Even if they hadn’t reached a hundred, they were at least in their seventies or eighties. Has there ever been anyone who became a master before the age of thirty?”

The golden-haired man looked at his audience. “In the past, no. But now? There is.”

“The incredible Master Linley is a genius. He is seventeen years old! He is a seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank. In the field of magic, he is the number two genius in the entire history of the Yulan continent. But his accomplishments in the field of sculpting, despite only being seventeen

years of age, are well known by everyone here as well.”

As he spoke, the golden-haired man turned to stare at the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.

The two female attendants stepped forward and removed the covering cloth, revealing the actual sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.

“This is the sculpture produced by Master Linley. Based on the investigation performed by our Gallery, this sculpture was completed last December, during the days of that huge blizzard. In other words, it was completed when Linley was still sixteen years old.” The golden-haired man laughed. “At the time, I had been wondering why that blizzard was so unnaturally fierce. But now, thinking back, I imagine it must have had something to do with the impending birth of this sculpture of Master Linley’s.”

Instantly, all of the nobles and magnates below laughed.

“Alright, enough with the small talk,” pointing at the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, the golden-haired man said, “This sculpture has absolutely reached the Grandmaster level. More importantly, this sculpture is extremely large. To be absolutely honest, we could actually chop it into five pieces and auction each piece off separately.”

The wealthy nobles below all roared in laughter as they began to chatter.

“I’m just joking, of course. Each of the figures pictured in this sculpture has its own aura and charm. When put together, they seem to form a wondrous love story. I believe many connoisseurs of stonesculpting who are present can sense the sad but beautiful love story behind this sculpture.”

The golden-haired man sighed. “Each of these five figures have been carved at the Grandmaster level. When put together, they will give the viewer a very unique, very special sensation. I am absolutely unable to guess what the price for this sculpture will be.”

“And most importantly of all, when Master Linley finished this sculpture, he was sixteen! Just sixteen years old!” The golden-haired man’s voice began to boom. “I have never, in my life, found myself at such a loss for words. I have no way of verbally expressing the admiration I feel for Master Linley. He... is a true

genius!”

These words caused yet another commotion amongst the watching nobles.

For a sixteen-year-old to complete a sculpture like this was nothing short of a miracle.

But in their booth, the Debs clan was totally silent.

“That detestable bastard.” Kalan was filled with rage and hatred towards this golden-haired auctioneer. After that little speech of his, the bidding war for this sculpture was sure to become even more extreme.

“I simply cannot imagine Master Linley’s future accomplishments. And that is precisely why this sculpture, the first sculpture made by Master Linley to shock the world, is so valuable! Alas... unfortunately, I myself don’t have much money, as otherwise, even if I had to sell off all my family’s possessions, I would still buy this sculpture,” the golden-haired man said with a laugh. “Alright, let’s start the auction. Bids will start at one million gold coins. I trust no one will object?”

A million gold coins!

That was the starting point for this auction?

Many of the lesser nobles who had been hoping to get lucky were suddenly brought to their senses. If they weren’t members of an extremely wealthy, powerful clan, they shouldn’t even think about trying to fight over this sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.

“Each bid must be at least one hundred thousand gold coins higher than the last,” the golden-haired man added. “Alright. The auction for Master Linley’s sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, now officially begins!”

Immediately, the auction hall fell silent.

“1.5 million!” A noble seated in the bottom row immediately made a bid.

Linley was watching the bidding going on below from the third floor. From Linley’s clothes, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, also stuck his head out to watch the proceedings.

“Boss, in the future, I can eat all the roast chicken and roast duck I want, and drink all the wine I want as well.” Bebe’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

“No problem.” Linley rubbed Bebe’s little head.

As far as he was concerned, Bebe was just like a brother to him.

“Yeah! In the future, life will be sweet.” Bebe was so excited that his eyes gleamed. Craning his neck, he leaned over to look down. “Whoah. Two million gold already. Higher, higher please.” Bebe constantly urged the price to go higher. Watching Bebe, Linley couldn’t help but laugh.

King Clayde, the king of the Kingdom of Fenlai, warmly clapped Linley on his back. “Linley, let me help give you a boost!”

“Austoni, five million gold coins!” Clayde instructed Austoni.

Austoni walked over to a speaking platform, then said in a bright voice, “His Majesty, Clayde, bids five million gold coins!”

“Thank you, Majesty,” Linley said immediately.

“Haha, no worries.” Clayde put his arm around Linley’s shoulders in a friendly manner. “Linley, regardless of whether or not you choose to join me, there’s no reason for us to constantly maintain decorum as ruler and subject.” Clayde spoke very casually and freely.

Linley was beginning to feel well-disposed towards Clayde.

He truly was a very magnetic, charismatic leader.

“Your Majesty, please forgive me, but I would like to go back and consult with my father first. If nothing out of the ordinary happens, I intend to remain in the Kingdom of Fenlai,” Linley said with a smile.

“Yes, you should absolutely talk this over with your father.” Clayde frowned very slightly. “But Linley, from what I hear, your father has left the town of Wushan. I spent some time investigating, but couldn’t figure out where your father has gone to. It is as though... he’s disappeared.”

As soon as Linley’s fame had exploded, as part of his plan to pull Linley to his side, Clayde sent some people to meet with Linley’s family.

But Hogg was no longer in the town of Wushan.

“My father isn’t currently in the town of Wushan?” Linley felt a bit suspicious,

but then he laughed. “Perhaps my father has gone somewhere else for a while. Father can’t always be in the town of Wushan.”

“Perhaps.” Clayde didn’t continue with this topic.

Hogg truly had hidden himself quite well. Otherwise, if the ruler of a kingdom wished to find someone, how could they fail to do so?



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Within a private booth on the second level.

“Five million gold coins?! Dogshit!” Kalan swore foully, something he rarely did.

Bernard, clan leader of the Debs clan, had a gloomy look on his face. He said in a low voice, “Kalan, you should know what sort of situation the clan is currently facing. Right now, the clan’s future is uncertain. We can’t waste too much money on this affair. Based on our clan’s deliberations, we can at most spare eight million gold coins for you. This is our bottom line.”

Kalan nodded.

Kalan knew very well that his clan’s entire total net worth was only around a hundred million gold coins, and most of that net worth was bound up in illiquid assets. Their liquid assets were, at most, around twenty million gold coins or so. The clan couldn’t possibly waste all of their liquid reserves on a single sculpture.

It was already very kind of the clan to not force Kalan and Alice to separate.

“5.3 million gold!” Someone in another second-level booth made a bid.

The golden-haired middle-aged man began to grow excited. “5.3 million gold coins! The lowest valuation of one of the Ten Masterpieces was 5.28 million gold coins, but now, the list of the Ten Masterpieces has changed. I can formally announce that the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, has officially joined the ranks of the Ten Masterpieces!”

“Young master Yale of the Dawson Conglomerate bids six million gold coins!” Austoni once again announced from the third level.

Upon hearing this price, Kalan's face began to turn black.

The price had reached six million gold coins so quickly. This truly exceeded Kalan's expectations. Based on Kalan's predictions, given that the cheapest of the Ten Masterpieces was valued at 5.28 million gold coins, the eight million gold coins he had prepared should have been more than enough.

But...

Kalan wasn't a true collector. He didn't have a deep understanding of the field of stonesculpting.

Those true connoisseurs could totally sense the unique, soul-stirring aura of this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', especially when viewing all five images together. Such a thing was extremely rare. In the entire history of the Yulan continent, there had never been a case of five figures carved into a single sculpture, especially in such a manner as to evoke a sad, beautiful feeling in the viewer.

What was more, the sculptor was only sixteen years old when it had been completed. And he was a genius magus!

"I cannot allow the price to continue rising like this." Kalan frowned.

He knew that if the price continued to rise slowly, his chances of winning the auction would grow slimmer and slimmer.

"Eight million gold coins!" Kalan's loud voice announced his bid.

From six million gold coins to eight million gold coins. A sudden increase of two million gold coins. This sort of explosive increase was enough to stun everyone present. After all, even the Ten Masterpieces were only worth so much. Even those three precious sculptures by Proulx were only worth around seven million gold each.

True collectors didn't collect just for the sake of collecting; they had a keen eye for value as well.

Otherwise, if they just wildly threw their money around, they would bankrupt their clans.

The golden-haired middle-aged man immediately shouted loudly, "The Debs

clan bids eight million gold coins! Such a nice, tidy, neat increase to eight million gold coins. From this, one can tell that they are determined to win this auction for this sculpture! I can already imagine how, in the future, once Master Linley becomes a Saint-level combatant, this sculpture's price will no longer just be eight million gold coins. Most likely, by then, it will be worth sixteen million gold coins!"

This golden-haired man's promotional ability was really very fierce.

But none of those who were present were fools. All of them were pondering... after all, even if they had money, it had to be spent in a meaningful way.



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On the third level of the auction hall, Linley, Yale, King Clayde, Cardinal Guillermo, and Cardinal Lampson were all engaged in idle chatter and laughter as they watched the events below.

"Third Bro, that Kalan has made his bid," Yale said in a low voice.

Linley couldn't help but turn to look at Kalan's booth. He could clearly see Kalan holding hands with Alice inside their booth. Judging from Kalan's expression, he was very agitated.

"Third Bro, let me give him a bit of pressure. No matter what, we can't allow your sculpture to fall into his hands," Yale said in a soft voice.

"No need." Linley slowly shook his head.

Linley was staring directly at Alice. Sitting there in the booth, Alice looked like a pitiable little girl who had suffered some sort of mistreatment. All of the other members of the Debs clan were looking at Alice with a hint of dissatisfaction in their eyes. After all, their clan was spending an enormous amount of money for Alice's sake.

"If they really want it, let them have it," Linley said emotionlessly.

Sitting next to him, Guillermo and Lampson exchanged glances, then chuckled.



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Within the private booth.

All the members of the Debs clan were feeling very nervous. But of course, Alice and Kalan were the most nervous of all.

“Relax, Alice. Eight million gold coins is already an extremely high price. It won’t get any higher.” Kalan comforted Alice... but who was going to console him? Because the clan had only authorized him to bid up to eight million gold.

That golden-haired middle-aged man lifted up a small hammer. “The Debs clan has bid eight million gold. Is anyone going to outbid them? If not... I am going to begin the countdown.”

“Ten million gold.”

A rather lazy voice sounded out from one of the seats in the middle of the first level. Up till now, virtually all of the bids for this sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’, had come from those extremely powerful clans seated on the second level. They were the ones who were really engaged in this bidding war. Those nobles sitting below were just there to watch the excitement. Nobody expected one of them to make a bid as well.

“None of you have any insight. From what I can tell, this ‘Awakening From the Dream’ can be considered to be the start of an entirely new style of stonesculpting. Its carving style is totally different from every other sculpture, and what’s more, it has five images with totally unique yet connecting auras. It is definitely worth ten million gold coins,” the man who bid ten million gold coins said casually.

From the loose, baggy long robes of this thirty-to forty-year-old man, everyone could sense his lazy, indolent nature.

“Ten million gold coins?”

Within their private booth, Alice and Kalan were both stunned.

An Owner Found

“Big brother Kalan,” Alice called out in a low voice, looking at him with urgency in her eyes.

Perhaps others would feel pride at being the inspiration for a Grandmaster-level sculpture. But this ‘Awakening From the Dream’ of Linley’s was different. Anyone who had ever spent any time analyzing sculptures would easily be able to tell from the aura given off by those five figures that there was a romantic history between Linley and Alice.

If Alice had just married into a small clan, that wouldn’t be as much of an issue.

But... she was marrying into the clan of Kalan Debs.

Kalan was the future successor to the leadership of the Debs clan, and the Debs clan was one of the top three clans of the entire Kingdom of Fenlai.

“Calm down, calm down.” Kalan comfortingly held Alice’s hand.

But Alice could feel that Kalan’s hand was covered in sweat.

“Father...” Kalan turned towards his father, Bernard, then looked at his mother. His parents both doted on him exceedingly, which was why they were willing to spend eight million gold coins on Kalan’s behalf. After all, even to the Debs clan, eight million gold coins was an exceedingly large sum.

“Kalan, don’t even think about it. The clan can’t possibly hand over ten million gold coins just for the sake of your fiancée,” Bernard said, his face extremely solemn.

Kalan was stunned. Even Alice turned her head to look at Bernard, her eyes filled with worry and a hint of supplication.

“We’ll act in accordance with our previous discussion.” Bernard totally ignored Alice’s silent appeal as he coldly pronounced his judgment.

Kalan froze for a long moment, while by his side, Alice tightly clutched his hands, staring into Kalan's eyes. Alice fully understood what Bernard meant by his words just now. Alice was extremely unwilling to accept this result.

Kalan glanced at Alice. He let out a helpless sigh, then slightly shook his head.

"Big brother Kalan, I'm not willing..." Alice said in a small voice.

Kalan clasped Alice's hands. He gently shook his head again. "There's no other way. Alice... I am the heir to our clan. I have to put the considerations of the clan first. I hope you are willing to sacrifice a little bit for me as well. I promise you that my heart towards you will never waver."

Alice fell silent.

The heir to the clan!

These five simple words guaranteed that every single action of Kalan's would reflect upon the honor and glory of the Debs clan. Although Bernard loved and doted on his son very much, no matter what, he could not permit Alice to become Kalan's principal wife.

That's right. There was no way she could become the principal wife.

In other words, any children which Alice bore Kalan in the future would not be able to become heirs, or be considered to be in the direct line of descent.

In truth, ever since the 'Awakening From the Dream' had been viewed by many people, the elders of the Debs clan had been constantly urging Kalan to give Alice up. Even if Kalan insisted on marrying her, they didn't wish for Alice to become his principal wife. But Kalan had remained steadfast.

In the end, Bernard, the doting father, had compromised. He decided that if they were able to purchase this 'Awakening From the Dream', then this matter would more or less be at an end.

But from the looks of it...

"Big brother Kalan!" Alice looked at Kalan, her eyes turning moist. At the same time, she turned to look at the other members of the Debs clan. But at this moment, neither Kalan, nor Bernard, nor Kalan's mother, paid Alice any mind.

At that moment, Alice felt her heart grow cold.

She suddenly thought back to everything she had experienced with Linley, how Linley had protected her and unstintingly cherished her. In the past, she had always taken Linley's constant yielding to her for granted, but at this moment, how she longed for that feeling!

Raising her head, her gaze passed through the glass window to stare at the third level. But all she could see was the black glass.

"Ten million gold! Ten million gold! Is anyone willing to bid higher?" The golden-haired man was calling out from the platform.

The man dressed in the loose robes casually glanced around. And then, he addressed that golden-haired auctioneer directly. "Hey, stop wasting time. Hurry up and start counting." The nobles nearby all began to laugh.

How could an auctioneer possibly obey the commands of one of the bidders below?

Based on their understanding of this golden-haired auctioneer, they knew him to be someone who would constantly escalate the bidding wars until the price reached an extremely high level.

But upon hearing the words of the man in the loose robes, the auctioneer seemed to have been hypnotized. Very naturally, he said, "Okay, then I'll start counting! Three, two..."

"10.1 million gold coins!"

An ancient-sounding voice rang out from one of the second-level private booths.

Everyone's attention turned towards that booth. Even the man dressed in the loose robes turned to stare at that booth in astonishment. In that second-level booth, aside from the Debs clan, every single clan present was one of the major, world-spanning clans of the Yulan continent.

The wealth of those clans was far higher than that of the Debs clan.

"Whoah, so there's someone here who appreciates value after all. But raising it by just one hundred thousand is a bit too stingy. 10.3 million gold coins," the

man in the loose robes said casually, grinning.

Linley and the others on the third level all noticed the man in the loose robes now, but from their current angle, they could only see the man from the side, and were unable to see his face clearly.

“Hrm?”

Cardinal Guillermo and Cardinal Lampson of the Radiant Church both suddenly rose to their feet. Frowns on their faces, they walked to the opposite end of the glass, carefully looking down at the loosely-attired man below.

Just at that moment...

The loosely robed man seemed to have discovered the presence of the two Cardinals, as he raised his head upwards and glanced towards them.

“Him?”

The faces of the two Cardinals suddenly turned bone white.

Guillermo and Lampson exchanged glances, then they both shook their heads. In truth, the Radiant Church had already come to a decision about this auction. They had decided to spend a very large sum of money to purchase this sculpture, and thus improve the relationship between them and Linley.

But upon seeing this man, both Guillermo and Lampson silently decided to change their course of action.

“It’s best that we not get into a bidding war with this madman,” Cardinal Guillermo said softly.

Cardinal Lampson nodded as well. “I definitely don’t want to agitate that madman either.”

Although they both referred to this person as a ‘madman’, the fear they felt towards him was fear which was etched into their bones. Both Lampson and Guillermo were very much aware as to how terrifying that thirty-or forty-year-old man could be. Lampson, in particular...

Because if it hadn’t been for this madman, Lampson probably wouldn’t have had the opportunity to be promoted to the rank of Cardinal.

There were only five Cardinals at any time within the Radiant Church. Precisely because this madman had casually killed one of the previous Cardinals, Lampson had the opportunity to be promoted to his current position. But even though he had killed a Cardinal, the Holy Emperor was still unwilling to be enemies with this madman.

“10.4 million gold coins.” That old voice rang out once again from the second level.

The loosely-robed old man raised his head, glancing up with a frown. “You really are irritating. eleven million gold coins.”

“eleven million, this gentleman is willing to bid eleven million gold coins. Is anyone willing to bid any higher?” The golden-haired auctioneer was growing excited. After all, even the ‘Bloody-eyed Maned Lion’ sculpture, the greatest of the Ten Masterpieces, was only worth thirteen million.

On the third level, Guillermo asked Lampson quietly, “Lampson. Do you know which clan is situated in that booth? They actually dare to struggle with that madman? Are they tired of living?”

“Director Maia.” Lampson called over Director Maia, who was seated not too far from them.

Director Maia immediately came over.

“Director Maia. Do you know which clan is located within that booth?” Lampson asked. “The one where the leader is a young woman, I believe.” Being on the third level, Lampson naturally could see the people seated on the sofas in the second-level booths.

As for that elderly man, he seemed to be that woman’s servant.

Director Maia took a glance, then laughed. “Lord Lampson. Lord Guillermo. This young lady is a female in the principal line of inheritance for the Leon clan of the Yulan Empire. That booth was reserved under the name of the Leon clan.”

“The Leon clan?” Lampson and Guillermo were both startled.

In the Yulan Empire, the most ancient Empire in the Yulan continent, the Leon

clan was ranked fifth amongst the major clans. A clan which could rank in the top five of the Yulan Empire was capable of easily destroying the Debs clan.

What was more, the majority of the descendants of the Leon clan all lived within the Yulan Empire, and thus in the Yulan Empire, they had an enormous web of influence.

“Guillermo, I believe that in our Ernst Institute, there was someone formerly known as the number one genius of the Institute by the name of ‘Dixie’. He seems to be from the Yulan Empire’s Leon clan, correct?” Lampson asked.

Guillermo was comparatively more familiar with the affairs of the Ernst Institute.

“Right, and not just Dixie. He has a sister as well, whose name I can’t recall. These two siblings both requested to be allowed to study at our Ernst Institute. Just a few days ago, though, this Dixie applied to graduate.” Guillermo directly revealed what he knew.

Lampson nodded as well.

“Seems like this girl is Dixie’s younger sister.” Lampson looked towards that booth.

Within the Leon clan’s booth on the second level. Dressed in violet and blue, and seated on the sofa, Delia had a tranquil expression on her face. Through the window, she stared down at the sculpture, ‘Awakening From the Dream’.

“Miss, stop fighting. That person below isn’t someone that you can afford to anger.” The old man was beginning to grow frantic.

As one of the elite clans of the Yulan Empire, the Leon clan was very clear regarding the various super experts, as well as the hidden powers. They knew very well that although they were an elite clan, there were some people who they simply could not afford to offend.

For example... that thirty-or forty-year-old man below.

The old man knew very well that although he himself was already four hundred years old, , the loosely attired man below looked the way he currently did even before he had been born.

“Don’t worry, Grandpa Shaw. Just help me send this letter to him, ok?” Delia took out a pen and quickly wrote a few words down on a piece of paper, before handing it to the old man next to her.

The old man received the piece of paper. Upon seeing its contents, he was stunned.

“Miss, you... this...” The old man was totally flabbergasted by this letter.

“Don’t worry about it. Just hand that letter to him.” Delia didn’t hesitate in the slightest. The old man did, but after a moment, he still left the booth and headed to the first floor.

“twelve million gold coins!”

Delia’s clear voice rang out from within the booth.

The loosely attired man below frowned, and a baleful aura seemed to gather between his furrowed brows. But just at this moment, the old man named ‘Shaw’ walked over to the loosely attired man. Upon reaching his side, he respectfully bowed. “Milord, I am a servant of the Leon clan. This is the letter my young mistress has sent to you.”

Furrowing his brows with surprise, the loosely attired man accepted the letter with some curiosity.

“Uh...” Upon seeing the contents of the letter, the loosely attired man’s eyes lit up, and then he began to laugh.

“Fine, fine, I won’t fight it, I won’t fight it.” The letter in the loosely robed man’s hands turned directly to dust, and then he sat back down again, grinning. He even raised his head to look up at Delia, seated on the sofa within her booth on the second level.

At this moment, within the third level of the auction hall.

Upon hearing that clear voice call out the words ‘twelve million gold’, both Linley and Yale were stunned. That voice was simply too familiar. Linley had known the owner of that voice since the first day he had entered the Ernst Institute.

“It’s Delia,” Yale said with amazement.

Linley immediately walked forward towards the glass, to a vantage point where he could look into Delia's booth. Indeed, Delia was dressed in a conservative violet outfit and seated on a sofa, staring at the sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'.

"Three... two... one..." "Bang!"

The golden-haired man slammed the mallet down, then excitedly called out, "Congratulations to the Leon family for using twelve million gold coins to win this auction and acquire this sculpture of Master Linley's. I now have the honor of announcing that this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream', has the third highest price among the Ten Masterpieces. Only Master Hoover's 'Bloody-eyed Maned Lion' and Master Proulx's 'Hope' have valuations surpassing that of 'Awakening From the Dream'."

The entire auction hall began to be filled with commotion, and a raucous applause could be heard as well.

But Linley continued to stand there, next to the window on the third level, staring at Delia. And then, he turned to look at Alice, seated in the other booth. Both of these women were seated on sofas, but on Delia's face, there was a hint of a smile, while Alice's face was drained of all color.

Going Home

Both sides of the auction hall were filled with wealthy nobles. The groups of nobles separated into two sides in order to open a corridor for the departure of the Cardinals Guillermo and Lampson of the Radiant Church, King Clayde of Fenlai, Director Maia of the Proulx Gallery, young master Yale of the Dawson Conglomerate, and of course, the genius magus and genius sculptor, Master Linley.

These people walked through the middle corridor, chatting and laughing amongst themselves as they headed towards the exit of the Proulx Gallery.

“Lord Guillermo. Lord Lampson.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Master Linley.”



*

All of the surrounding nobles and magnates were smiling and greeting them with modesty and goodwill. The Debs clan, however, had been squeezed into a corner. Her head covered firmly by her hat, Alice couldn't help but raise her head and take a peek at Linley, who was buried within a sea of well-wishing nobles and magnates.

In this day and age, Linley had become a legendary genius.

A seventeen-year-old dual-element magus of the seventh rank, whose achievements in the field of sculpture rivaled that of Proulx, Hope Jensen, Hoover, and the other Grandmasters. A genius such as he would naturally be viewed as the most glittering star in the sky, worthy of everyone's admiration. Slowly, the two Cardinals, King Clayde, Linley, Yale, and the others disappeared

into the distance.

Only then did all of the nobles and wealthy moguls leave as well.

“You must be Alice.” A clear voice suddenly rang out.

Several members of the Debs clan looked behind them into the hall.

A beautiful, golden-haired woman walked over to them, while by her side was an old man with a warm smile on his face. But both this woman and the old servant had an aura of nobility that emanated from their bones, naturally making others feel inferior to them.

Seeing her, Bernard immediately said modestly, “Lord Shaw, this must be Miss Delia. I’ve long heard that the Leon clan’s legendary Miss Delia is so devastatingly beautiful that she can cause the downfall of a kingdom. Today, upon seeing her, I must say that she is even more beautiful than the legends say.”

The influence of the Debs clan was limited to the Kingdom of Fenlai. Compared to the continent-spanning Leon clan, they were incomparably minute.

“Oh, clan leader Bernard of the Debs clan?” Delia glanced at Bernard.

Bernard modestly nodded.

“And this must be your son Kalan’s fiancée, correct?” Delia looked at Alice, who was hiding behind Kalan.

Bernard immediately smiled. “Her? No, she’s not the principal wife of my son Kalan.”

“Not the principal wife?” A cold smile appeared on Delia’s face, and she walked slowly towards Alice. Bernard didn’t dare to block her way. When Delia neared Kalan, Kalan actually puffed out his chest and tried to courageously block her path.

But when he met Delia’s frosty gaze, Kalan suddenly felt his heart grow cold.

When he reminded himself that this was a young mistress of the Leon clan, Kalan felt all the more uneasy. Right now, the relationship between the Debs clan and the Dawson Conglomerate was already terrible. If they offended the

Leon clan as well... it would be simply too easy for the Leon clan to deal with the Debs clan.

“Alice.” Delia stared into Alice’s eyes.

Alice raised her head, forcing herself to match Delia’s gaze, doing her best to calm her beating heart.

But Delia only laughed. In a soft voice, she said, “Alice... I really don’t know why Linley fell for you.”

Alice’s face grew pale, but she replied, “That’s none of your business!”

“None of my business?” Delia let out a calm chuckle. “Right. It’s none of my business. But I really feel pity for you. You actually gave Linley up, but what was the result of that? You aren’t even going to be a principal wife within this Debs clan. I imagine you feel regret... but unfortunately, you’ll never have that chance again. Because a person like you will never, ever have the chance to interact with Linley again. In the future, you two will belong in different worlds. Do you understand?”

Delia totally ignored the ugly look on Kalan’s face, and she turned directly to look at Bernard.

“Forgive me for disturbing you,” Delia said extremely courteously.

Bernard immediately bowed modestly. “Miss Delia, by your leave.”

The old man by Delia’s side cast a look at Kalan, who still had that ugly look on his face. With a cold sneer, he followed Delia out. But Bernard continued to watch them leave with a courteous smile on his face. Only after Delia and her servant had left did he turn, fixing Alice and Kalan with a deadly glare.

“Absolutely disgraceful!” Bernard snapped at them viciously.

Neither Kalan nor Alice dared to make a sound. Under this aura of oppressiveness, the Debs clan returned home.



*

Within the Lucas clan’s mansion in Fenlai City.

“Master Linley, no, no, there’s no need.” Marquis Jebbs was hurriedly trying to refuse Linley. “There’s really no need for the six hundred thousand gold coins. Master Linley, I am so incredibly sorry. I really had no idea that you had reached such an incredible level in the field of sculpting.”

Jebbs, that obstinate old man. Right now, when he looked at Linley, his eyes were filled with something akin to veneration for an idol.

Marquis Jebbs didn’t have many hobbies. The one thing he loved to do was collect items.

Naturally, he felt deep veneration for those Grandmaster-level artisans of each field. Perhaps even if the King of Fenlai were present, he wouldn’t feel as much awe as he did now towards Linley.

“How about let’s just set the price at 180,000 gold, is that fine? My clan originally bought it for 180,000 gold coins, so that would still be fair. Master Linley, I really am not willing to make money off of you. If I took advantage and earned money from you, Master Linley, I wouldn’t be able to sleep well at night.”

The adorable old man, Marquis Jebbs, was extremely stubborn.

“Marquis Jebbs, in the past, when your Lucas clan bought this warblade ‘Slaughterer’ from my clan, the price you paid was 180,000 gold coins, true. But after all these centuries, due to inflation, the 180,000 gold coins you paid then is worth much more now.” Linley wasn’t willing to take advantage of the Lucas clan either.

But Marquis Jebbs only stared stubbornly at Linley.

“Haha, you guys... you guys are just so...” Next to them, Yale was laughing so hard that he was clutching his belly. “The seller is frantically trying to lower his product’s price, and would rather give it away for free. But the buyer is trying to raise the price higher. I have never seen something like this before.”

Linley let out a helpless laugh as well. “Marquis Jebbs, how about this? Centuries ago, those 180,000 gold coins had a purchasing power comparable to around 360,000 gold in this era. Let’s just go with 360,000 gold coins. Don’t refuse any longer! If you do, I’ll just throw down my magic crystal card and

leave.”

Linley withdrew his magicrystal card from his breast pocket.

Marquis Jebbs looked unhappily at Linley, but finally nodded. “Fine, then.”

Linley couldn’t help but laugh.

Marquis Jebbs suddenly laughed a bit shyly as well. “Master Linley, I have a small favor to ask, if I might?”

“Go ahead.” Linley laughed, looking at the Marquis.

Marquis Jebbs gestured at his servants, who quickly carried an erect stone tablet over from deeper within his mansion.

“Master Linley, I only hope that you can put your signature on this tablet. If you do, I will treasure this forever.” Marquis Jebbs looked at Linley with hopeful eyes.

Linley chuckled, then withdrew his straight chisel from his breast pocket.

With a casual flick of the wrist, the chisel began to fly about in a blur as stone dust began to fall from the stone tablet. In the time it took to take three breaths, Linley was finished and withdrew his chisel. Gently blowing air on the tablet, all of the remaining dust flew away from it, revealing a name artistically written, as though it were a flying dragon or a dancing phoenix.

LINLEY

Staring at that word, Marquis Jebbs’ eyes were shining. “What an elegant carving technique, and what beautiful letters. This word is far more valuable than 360,000 gold coins.”

Hearing this, Linley didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.



*

On the road from Fenlai City to the town of Wushan, the path was lined with redwood trees on either side. Riding a large stallion, Linley was galloping forward with a huge case on his back. This case was several hundred pounds

heavy. Fortunately, this stallion was a particularly fine one that had been provided by the Dawson Conglomerate. Normal horses wouldn't be able to move quickly when carrying such a burden.

Behind Linley, a troop of over a hundred Knights was following him.

This troop had been gifted to Linley by the Radiant Church via Cardinal Lampson and Cardinal Guillermo. What the Radiant Church claimed was that Linley's safety was of paramount importance to them, which could be seen from the recent abduction attempt. The weakest member of this troop was a warrior of the fifth rank. It belonged to one of the ace regiments of the Knights of the Radiant Temple.

Over a hundred warhorses galloped behind him, kicking up a cloud of dust.

From far away, the image of the town of Wushan drew closer and closer to Linley's sight. In his mind, he couldn't help but think back to the events of his youth, such as the training he had undergone in the training grounds, as well as the terrifying sight of that Velocidragon.

In the past, in Linley's eyes, a Velocidragon had been the symbol of utter invincibility. But now, to Linley, a Velocidragon was no longer much of anything.

"Rumble, rumble."

The earth shook as this troop of elite knights and warhorses continued on their way. The shudders could be felt from far away.

"What a mighty troop."

While walking through the middle of the town of Wushan, Hillman couldn't help but turn and stare. The sound of their hoofbeats was orderly, fast and forceful, striking fear into Hillman's heart. Even when he had been in the army, he had never encountered such a high-quality force of knights.

The lowest of the knights present was a warrior of the fifth rank. How could a troop belonging to one of the ace regiments of the Radiant Church be of low quality?

The sound of their warhorses galloping alone could strike fear into many.

"Who is that?" Hillman instantly saw that there was a person riding ahead of

the troop.

“Linley.” The expression on Hillman’s face changed, and he quickly ran at high speed towards the Baruch clan manor.

After entering the bounds of the town of Wushan proper, Linley instructed his troop of knights to lower their speed. Linley alone continued to move towards his clan’s manor at a relatively fast speed. Seeing that vine-wrapped, scarred wall from afar, Linley thought back to one event of his youth after another.

“The Baruch clan, my roots, my foundation!” Carrying the warblade, ‘Slaughterer’, on his back, Linley’s heart was filled with pride.

Linley could still clearly remember the first time he had left for the Ernst Institute, what his father had said to him. Linley believed that he would never, ever forget these words from his father.

“Linley, remember the centuries-long desire of generations of Baruch elders. Remember the shame of the Baruch clan!”

“After graduating, you will at least be a magus of the sixth rank. As long as you train hard, becoming a magus of the seventh rank shouldn’t be too hard. In the future, you will definitely have the ability to regain our clan’s ancestral heirloom. If you fail to do so, even in death, I will not forgive you.”

“Even in death, I will not forgive you!”



*

That voice reverberated in Linley’s mind. But this time, feeling the weight of the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ on his back, Linley only felt a surge of pride.

“Father, I’m coming back”!

“Father, I have brought back our warblade, ‘Slaughterer’!”

Linley flew off his horse’s back and charged directly into his clan’s courtyard.

“Father!” Linley shouted loudly.

“I’m back! I brought the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ back!” Linley was filled with

joy and excitement. The elders of his clan had labored for centuries. His father had pined for it his entire life. And now, he had finally fulfilled his father's desire!

"The warblade, 'Slaughterer'?" A voice rang out.

Linley turned and looked behind him. It was Hillman.

"Uncle Hillman, where's father? Quick, have him come out. Haha, I've finally brought back the warblade 'Slaughterer'. Honest! I have the ancestral heirloom of our Dragonblood Warrior clan. I've finally brought it back. Quick, tell me where my father is. Once my father finds out, he will be so ecstatic. Tonight, we are absolutely going to get drunk. Uncle Hillman, don't worry, tonight, I'm not going to shirk my duty. I'll definitely get drunk with you. If we aren't drunk, we won't stop!"

Linley was so excited, he continued to babble without stopping. He even removed the case from his back, holding it in his arms as he stared at Uncle Hillman.

But...

There was no hint of joy on Hillman's face. In fact, there was a hint of misery.

"Un... Uncle Hillman?" Linley began to frown. Staring at Uncle Hillman, he said, "Uncle Hillman, where is my father?"

Looking at Linley, Hillman forced out a smile. "Linley, you've brought back the warblade, 'Slaughterer'? If your father knew, he definitely would be ecstatic. Definitely."

"Where is my father?"

"Your father. He. He passed away three months ago," Hillman took a deep breath, then finally, slowly said these words. As he did, his eyes turned moist.

Linley suddenly felt as though countless thunderbolts had gone off by his ears. His brain went blank.

"CLANG!"

The case in Linley's hands fell heavily to the ground. The lid to the case flew open, revealing a giant warblade which emanated a killing aura and was tinted

with a slight, bloody red color. That cold, killing aura and that bloody aura filled the entire hall in an instant.

“Dead?”

Linley stared disbelievingly at Hillman.

Hillman nodded slightly.

Suddenly, Linley laughed. “Haha, Uncle Hillman, you must be lying to me. Haha, I’ve brought back the warblade ‘Slaughterer’. Look, Uncle Hillman, I’ve brought back the warblade ‘Slaughterer’. How could my father be dead? He is going to view this warblade first.”

With one hand, Linley reached out and picked up the warblade ‘Slaughterer’. Instantly, that bloody aura filled even Hillman’s heart with trepidation.

“Uncle Hillman, look. I brought back the warblade ‘Slaughterer’. And I have to tell my father that I am now capable of transforming into a Dragonblood Warrior.” Scales began forming around Linley’s hands, and in a short while, Linley’s hands transformed into draconic claws.

Grabbing onto Hillman’s shoulders with his two draconic claws, Linley stared into Hillman’s eyes. “Uncle Hillman, look, I can already transform into a Dragonblood Warrior. I’ve brought the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ home to our clan. It’s true. Where is father? My father!”

“I am going to show the warblade ‘Slaughterer’ to him!”

“I haven’t yet had the chance to tell him that I can become a Dragonblood Warrior!”

Those draconic claws gripped Hillman by the shoulders, but the owner of those claws, Linley, stared beseechingly into Hillman’s eyes.

“Uncle Hillman, I’m begging you, tell me, where is my father?” Like a poor, lost orphan child, Linley stared at Hillman, his eyes begging. Like a drowning man clutching at a stalk of grass, Linley clutched at Hillman.

Hillman gently shook his head. “Linley, your father... is dead!”

Linley laughed. Laughed so desolately. “No... no way. I have to show him the warblade ‘Slaughterer’. I have to tell him that I can transform into a

Dragonblood Warrior. And tonight, I'm going to drink wine with him."

As he spoke, tears began to cover Linley's face.

Staring at Linley, Hillman couldn't help but lower his face, and then two rivers of tears began to flow down his own face.

"Impossible. Impossible!"

Gripping onto Hillman fiercely with his two claws, Linley stared a deathly stare at Hillman. His eyes even took on that same, icy, dark golden color of the Armored Razorback Wurm. The entire hall was suddenly filled with a baleful aura that was even more terrifying than the one emitted by the warblade 'Slaughterer'.

A low, hoarse growl emitted from Linley's throat...

"Tell me... where is my father?"

For the rest of the Coiling Dragon Saga

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