

## THE EMBERHORN

Mar Nu Zar woke up slowly, his body aching in all the wrong places. He was old and close to his end. Usually he would muster the strength to get out of bed, eager to do as much as he could to prepare the next generation. But now...now he had nothing worth getting up for. His son, his heir, was dead, and his sect would not survive his death.

He had other children, certainly, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren, but none of them had ever shown anywhere close to the amount of talent that his heir had. His son was supposed to carry on where he had failed, to advance beyond the Heavenly Realm. And all of that had been taken away by that accursed Viper. Knowing that the man was most certainly dead did not bring Mar Nu any solace—the death of his son had not been accounted for.

He had everything planned so well. He was going to defend Ven'oran until the right moment, then kill the swarm leader along with the upstart Sect Head, turn on the other Black Viper—or whatever it was that they called themselves now—Sect warriors, then use the teleportation array to escape. The swarm would've destroyed the enemy sect, killed their warriors. It would've allowed his sect to reap the rewards, to kill the stragglers safely and harvest their corpses. The most gain, for the least amount of effort and resources spent. He would've taken over the enemy's territories and grown his sect, giving his son a sect that could stand against the aggression of the core sects seeking to expand.

And all of that had been crushed in an instant when the Viper had killed his son. It shouldn't have happened in that way. His son was a powerful Heavenly Cultivator, he shouldn't have fallen like that, and yet...

Mar Nu had underestimated Eerv, had seen that firsthand. He nearly lost his life as well. The only thing that made him feel better is that he'd managed to kill both Eerv and the upstart Sect Head.

Slowly he moved out of his bed and mechanically went about readying himself for the day. Without his heir, the sect would fracture upon his death. None of the others were strong enough to rule, nor would anyone he picked be able to hold the power. It would be civil war. Even if he raised someone to

Heavenly Realm, it would end there. None of them were talented enough to advance beyond that.

After he cleaned himself up and dressed, somewhat haphazardly, he left his chambers. He had stopped letting the servants dress him and look after him after his son died. He could barely suffer to look at them. One servant led him to a balcony where a table was already set up and filled with food.

Mar Nu sat and started eating, more from habit than any real hunger. The food barely tasted like anything to him. He glanced at his screens, looking at his path and the lack of an option to advance.

<b>Name</b>	Mar Nu Zar
<b>Race</b>	Demasi (Infinite Realm)

<b>Titles</b>		
Adventurer	Hunt more than 100 monsters	+5 to all stats, 5 Greater Essence
Hero of Promise	Save more than 10 people with a single action	+5 to all stats, 5 Greater Essence
One Against Many	Fight against more than 10 opponents and win	+5 to all stats, 5 Greater Essence
Lord	Achieve Lord Realm	+5 to all stats, 100 Greater Essence
Ruler	Become the sole ruler of a territory	+5 to all stats, 5000 Greater Essence, Small Mansion (Town Upgrade)
Monarch	Reach Monarch Realm	+10 to all stats, 1000 Greater Essence
True Understanding III	Evolve a skill to tier 6	+20 to all stats (Per tier 6 skill),

		20,000 Greater Essence
Monster Hunter	Kill 5000 different monster types	+50 to all stats, 50,000 Greater Essence
Heavenly	Reach Heavenly Realm	+30 to all stats, 50,000 Greater Essence
One Against Horde	Fight against more than 100 opponents and win	+10 to all stats, 10,000 Essence
Alchemical Tester	Use more than 10 alchemical concoctions to improve yourself	+2 to intelligence, 500 Greater Essence
Alchemical Experiment	Use more than 100 alchemical concoctions to improve yourself	+10 to intelligence, 5000 Essence
Skill Lord	Evolve three skills to tier 6 (4 skills evolved to tier 6)	For every 3 skills evolved to tier 6, gain 2% of all bonus stats counting as base stats

<b>Perks</b>	
Fire Qi (Aspect Perk)	Your Qi passively enhances your body with the essence of Fire. Gain +10% fire resistance. Gain +20% to vitality and +20% to wisdom.
Meditative Mind (Path Perk)	Your mind is trained for extended periods of meditation. It allows you a great focus on your tasks, and allows for appearance of quick passage of time. You gain +50% to Essence draw-in speed. +15% to

	intelligence and +15% to wisdom.
Fire Forged Core(Path Perk)	Your Qi core is forged by the Essence of Fire. Core capacity is increased by 30%, Qi speed by 50%, Qi density reduced by 10%. Using techniques increases the temperature in the air around you. Gain +15% to intelligence and +15% to wisdom.
Qi Controller (Path Perk)	Your Qi control is nearly perfect. You are able to finely manipulate your Qi and use up to 3 techniques at the same time. Gain +15% to wisdom. Control depends on wisdom stat.
Aspect Manifestation: Fire Aura (Path Perk)	Manifest your Qi in the form of an aura around you, dealing <b>Fire</b> damage equal to <b>0.8x</b> (0.2x) your wisdom per second. Anything marked by the Fire Qi takes an additional one-half of total damage dealt over the next eight seconds. Gain +15% to wisdom.
Physical Appearance: Age (Path Perk)	You have reverted your body's age to its prime, and have gained an increase of 50% to your life span. (Upgrade: Your age has reverted by additional ten years) +15% to vitality, +15% to dexterity, and +15% to strength.
Ruler's Eyes: Spirit Sight (Path Perk)	Your have achieved great power, and your eyes reflect your achievement. Their appearance reflects your inner spirit, and allow you the ability

	to see spirits in the Ethereal realm. Gain +15% to intelligence and +15% to wisdom.
Well Core (Path Perk)	Your core is a well of fire. Your current total core size is increased by 25%, your Qi is 25% more effective, and your Qi density is reduced by 10%. +15% to wisdom.
Endless Source of Stamina (Path Perk)	Your stamina is strengthened. The effects of your endurance on your stamina are doubled. +10% to endurance.
Forging of Body and Aspect: Ember (Path Perk)	Your body is forged by your aspect and your path. You are immune to the damaging effects of Fire, and are highly resistant to Fire-type Qi. Your body can contain heat, and you can expel it according to your will. Your body gains a boost of up to +40% to all stats based on the temperature around you. The warmer it is, the higher the boost, but you also lose stats up to -40% in the cold and are more vulnerable to cold attacks. All Fire-based powers are 15% more effective and all fruit techniques deal 0.25% of their damage as soul damage. You gain +20% to intelligence and +50% to wisdom.

<b>Cultivation</b>	The Path of Fire (L)
<b>Stage</b>	Peak Heavenly
<b>Aspect</b>	Fire
<b>Base technique</b>	Fire Ward

<b>Branch technique</b>	Fire Lance
<b>Fruit technique</b>	Pillar of Fire

<b>Cultivation</b>	The Path of Spirit (E)
<b>Stage</b>	Peak Heavenly
<b>Aspect</b>	Fire
<b>Base technique</b>	Call Fire Spirit
<b>Branch technique</b>	Fire Spirit Explosion
<b>Fruit technique</b>	Fire Spirit Amplification

<b>Passive Skills</b>	<b>Active Skills</b>
Perfect Heat Resistance	Perfect Fire Manipulation
Heat Sense >> Enhanced Heat Sense >> Fire Sense >> Greater Fire Sense	Perfect Aim
Danger Sense >> Enhanced Danger Sense >> Threat Awareness	Perfect Fire Absorption
Mind Resistance >> Greater Mind Resistance >> Mind Shield >> Enhanced Mind Shield	Heat Regulation >> Enhanced Heat Regulation >> Heat Generation >> Greater Heat Generation >> Fire Generation

Enhanced Vision >>Varen Eye >>Enhanced Varen Eye >>Farsight	Meditation >> Greater Meditation >> Calm Mind >> Enhanced Calm Mind >> Tranquility
Enhanced Hearing >> Echolocation	

<b>Strength</b>	521
<b>Dexterity</b>	522
<b>Vitality</b>	595
<b>Endurance</b>	517
<b>Intelligence</b>	977
<b>Wisdom</b>	1427

He had tried to advance for so long. He had even attempted to pay Immortal Realm Cultivators to share with him their inspiration. None had taken him up on the offer. People might be willing to raise others up to Heavenly, but Immortal... That was something else entirely. It was a realm of great power, making a person able to live forever. That was a long time to search for inspiration to advance beyond that. Only one person had been interested, but had asked for a price that Mar Nu was not willing to pay: a contract that might as well had been a slave collar.

His life's ambition had been reduced to nothing but ash.

He looked down on his plate somberly, pushing the food around, until he noticed a soft noise inside of his head. Immediately he recognized that his **|Threat Awareness|** skill was going off, the intensity of it slowly building up. He had evolved his skill to be a general kind, to detect threats against him personally. The last time it had gone off was when he met with the upstart Heavenly Realm Sect Master.

Mar Nu turned his head, looking around for any signs of a threat, and then a loud voice echoed throughout his city.

*“People of the Last Ember Sect, I am Ryun Nacht, Sect Head of the Twilight Melody Sect,”* the voice spoke, thundering in Mar Nu’s ears.

*“Your leader made an agreement that he broke, betraying my sect, and your warriors killed my people. For this, there is only one punishment. I give you all a single chance: lay down on the ground with your hands behind your heads and you will live to see another day. All those who stand in my way will meet their final end.”*

Mar Nu looked up at the sky, seeing a shape standing there. His eyes sharpened as he used his skill and he saw the man clearly. *Impossible! He should be dead.* Mar Nu’s attack had been more powerful than anything he had ever used. It was enough to bore a hole through a mountain, to pierce the sky. Nothing could’ve survived an amplified **{Pillar of Fire}**.

Before Mar Nu could even think to do something, the man’s eyes turned on him.

*“Emberhorn,”* the man said, his eyes two pools of total nothingness surrounded by white. *“For your treachery, you will die. The only question is how many of your people will die with you. Use the knife in your hand and cut your own throat now, and I will spare your people. Fight, and I will rip through your city, leaving death and destruction. Either way, you will die.”*

Mar Nu felt his blood go cold as his **|Threat Awareness|** ringed in his head. He glanced down at the knife in his hand and then the fire in his body reignited. He dropped the knife and glared back at the upstart who did not know his place. Mar Nu did not know how he managed to survive, but he had been Heavenly Realm Cultivator for barely a moment, and he could not stand up to someone like Mar Nu.

His Qi moved through his body as he used **|Perfect Fire Manipulation|** to intensify the fire across his city and prepare another **{Pillar of Fire}**. Before he could execute his technique, however, the enemy dropped from the Qi construct in the air, pushing off another and flying toward the ground.

Emberhorn cursed as the man landed in his city, and he turned around to see his warriors and servants standing behind him next to the open doors, waiting for his orders.



Mar Nu marched toward them, yelling out orders as he headed toward the armory, his warriors falling into formation around him. The sounds of battle filled his city and Mar Nu knew that he couldn't tarry.

Within minutes his servants dressed him in his battle robe, his items were brought from the vault and a box filled with potions were presented to him. He started downing the temporary potions, taking as many as he could before giving the rest to the warriors around him.

An explosion shook the palace, and Mar Nu heard screams filling the air. He and his warriors ran out of the palace, walking into the large courtyard only to see a hole in the walls where the gate used to be, and the enemy—Ryun Nacht—walking calmly toward them. He was covered in what looked to be armor made out of violet Qi, which kept all of him hidden. In his hand he had a black short and straight sword.

Mar Nu looked at him, and saw only arrogance. To walk into the city of your enemies, alone, to stand before a rival Sect Head surrounded by his own warriors while you had none—it was lunacy. Mar Nu did not know if the man was insane or if he just didn't care for his life, but he didn't stop to think about it. He reached with his **{Call Fire Spirit}** technique, sending his Qi into the braziers placed all over his home. He could not call higher spirits, but the lower ones dwelled in his home in great numbers.

Mar Nu called to them and they answered, crossing over from the Ethereal realm. The braziers lit up and spirits in the shapes of monsters made out of fire stepped out and charged. Mar Nu prepared his **{Fire Spirit Explosion}** even as he manipulated the fires in the braziers to burn hotter, sending half of them as waves of flames toward the enemy and pulling the other half to himself, using **|Perfect Fire Absorption|** to absorb them into his body. His warriors, a dozen of his best Monarchs, attacked at the same time.

The enemy didn't move. The spirits attacked and Mar Nu triggered his technique. They exploded and the attacks from his Monarchs and his own hit. The place where the enemy stood became a maelstrom of fire as their attacks landed on target.

Mar Nu's eyes narrowed as he waited, but his **|Threat Awareness|** did not stop going off, and soon they could see their foe as the fire cleared.

He stood there with a smile on his face, as his armor was cracked and his skin burned.

For a moment Mar Nu was stunned. The man's wounds were visibly healing, but then he saw a light flash from the ring on his finger and then over the man, and his wounds were healed nearly in an instant. His body was covered in violet lines that misted faintly; his fingertips were violet and almost crystalline. His body looked as if it had crystallized Qi peeking out from beneath the skin. Mar Nu had to admit that he didn't know much about the man's power, as he had never thought it important enough to find out. He had seen what he had done when fighting the swarm, so he assumed that it was a path focused on boosting one's stats. The fact that he had been unable to control his own power only told Mar Nu that the man barely had any idea how to use his power, as he had already assumed. He was a young Heavenly Realm Cultivator, probably raised by someone else. He shouldn't have been able to match Mar Nu in any scenario. But now, he saw that grin on the man's face and his body and Mar Nu knew that the man had risen to Peak Heavenly Realm, as his body made clear. Mar Nu paused in shock at the revelation.

Then, the man started to speak.

"Do you know what a life is?" the man asked, and Mar Nu snapped out of his inaction. He made a gesture with his hand and his Monarchs started moving, surrounding the man. The man made no move, so Mar Nu let him talk. If he was going to let himself be surrounded, then he was even more foolish than Mar Nu had thought.

"I am sure that you will enlighten me," Mar Nu answered, slowly releasing the heat he had accumulated around himself, increasing his own stats.

The man's grin widened, and something about it made Mar Nu's threat skill go insane, ringing inside his head.

"A life is a journey, a quest, a story. It is shaped by a person's decisions. It is like navigating through dark waters at night. Every decision you make could be your last, for you do not know where it will take you. Because of this, it is important that you understand what the consequences of your decisions could be. For example, you decided to break your word, to kill my people, to

kill my friend. I do not have many friends; not nearly enough that I can afford to lose them.”

“We are all members of the sects. This is how things are done. You were weak and undeserving of your position. You lost,” Emberhorn said as Qi moved through his body, the fires around him heating up as his Monarchs created more of them. They knew what he needed—the more fire around him, the stronger his **{Pillar of Fire}** would be. He sent the spirits into the fires, preparing his **{Fire Spirit Amplification}**, which would make his **{Pillar of Fire}** burn even hotter. The fires all around his palace were burning higher, filling up his **|Greater Fire Sense|**.

This was going to end in a single moment. The more the man talked the more certain his death.

“Ah.” The enemy sighed and shook his head. “This is your problem. You are so twisted that you cannot recognize power when you stand before it. Now, this is the moment of your final end, and I only hope that you realize your mistake as you die. You made a decision, and it has led to this moment.”

“You are awfully confident for someone surrounded and about to die,” Mar Nu said as he prepared to unleash his technique.

The man shook his head, the white of his eyes suddenly bleeding into red. “Do you know what all lives have in common?” the man asked, his face a blank mask of indifference. Mar Nu’s **|Threat Awareness|** went off like crazy, and he raised his hand to trigger his technique in response.

And then pain filled his being as something punched through his chest. Mar Nu glanced down only to see that a clawed hand had ripped out of his chest with his heart gripped in it. The last thing Mar Nu heard was his enemy, Ryun Nacht, answering his own question.

“They end.”

Then there was only darkness.

## ERECLAW

Ereclaw pulled his hand back, ripping it out of the Emberhorn’s chest, and then he grabbed the dying man’s horn in one hand and his shoulder in

other. He pulled and ripped the man's head off. He felt the Essence of the man flow into him, and then to Ryun. Ereclaw did not have the ability that Ryun did, but a portion of it did fill Ereclaw's body. Every kill he made gave more Essence than it usually did—not nearly as much as Ryun could get, but enough.

The enemies around him immediately snapped into action, but it was too late. His eyes saw the flashes of their techniques activating. He did not see in the same way that Ryun did, but he could see more now. Ryun advancement had made Ereclaw strong, far stronger than he had ever thought he could be.

The enemy tried to fire their techniques at Ereclaw, but they never got the chance. Ryun moved, and a mist of red filled the courtyard and the slaughter began. Ereclaw shuddered as his stats increased but he quickly got that under control. He joined Ryun and they killed the warriors.

Ereclaw looked down at the dead, the head of the Sect Head of the Last Ember Sect. His downfall was his arrogance, and Ryun's planning. It was a simple plan, but it had worked. Fighting the Emberhorn in a prolonged battle would not have been wise—he was an old hunter and they did not go down quietly. Giving him an opportunity to fight would've been folly. Who knew what tricks the old hunter had? It was a testament to Ryun's respect for the man that he decided that he shouldn't meet him in single combat. The man had lived for far too long of a time, and had gotten comfortable with his power, while Ryun had only just attained his.

The plan had always been to draw focus on Ryun and his rampage through the city, to force all eyes on him as Anrosh and Nayra cleared as much of the warriors as they could. The attack on the palace was loud and arrogant by design. Ryun drew the Emberhorn's eyes to him as the greatest threat. It was easy for Ereclaw to climb the walls when everyone was focused on the destroyed gate and the lone man was standing there in full view of everyone.

From there, his powers allowed him to move without being seen, to kill the enemy leader. It was a good hunt, in Ereclaw's opinion. His pack had distracted their prey and he had made the kill. It made him feel better than

he had in a while, the thrill of outsmarting his opponent, of succeeding in their plan. It was...satisfying.

Ereclaw's ears picked up the sounds of running feet long before they came into view. Both he and Ryun turned and looked at the hole in the wall as Nayra and Anrosh walked in with their warriors.

"He is dead?" Anrosh asked when they came near.

"He has met his final end," Ryun said.

Anrosh nodded her head and looked around. "We starting the next phase?"

Ryun nodded. "Clear the palace. Anyone not on the ground dies. Find the Interface and claim it."

Both Anrosh and Nayra nodded and then moved, entering the palace. Ryun closed his eyes for a moment and then looked at Ereclaw.

"There are a few pockets of Last Ember Sect warriors still in the city," Ryun told him.

"Take care of them?" Ereclaw asked.

"Yes, our people are holding the gates, but there are still a lot of Last Ember Sect warriors outside of them, and they will get over the walls eventually. Better that we deal with them all now. But first," Ryun said, and jumped in the air, soaring high above the city and landing on one of his Qi constructs.

*"People of Emberhill, your Sect Head is dead. By the right of conquest, all that was his now belongs to me. Warriors of the Last Ember Sect, surrender, and you will live. To everyone else, do not stand in the way of my people or you will die. This is now Twilight Melody Sect territory."*

Ryun dropped back to the ground once he finished his speech. "Now, let's see if they are going to listen."

Ereclaw nodded his head and the two of them headed out into the city.