

## The Witch 171

### Chapter 171: A Common Name

Vaan gave Dahlia a short kiss after she pulled her head towards him. But afterward, he pulled away and shook his head without any intention to proceed further.

"Not now, Dahli. Wash up and get dressed. I want to take you out to the city for breakfast. Of course, I'll also be the one to pay," Vaan stated. "It's not too late for us to play for a bit after."

"Oh?" Dahlia uttered with surprise at first, but then her eyes quickly lit up with excitement and anticipation the next moment. "Alright~! Give me a moment, Vahn."

Right after getting up, she cast a few spells to rinse her face and wash her body.

Afterward, she rummaged through her closet and picked out a lovely green and white renaissance dress before she turned to look at Vaan, who had pulled a chair over to sit down and watch her.

"Oh, don't mind me. Continue what you were doing, Dahli," Vaan said with a straight face.

In that instance, Dahlia's face turned red from embarrassment and shyness. She was seemingly more feminine and submissive.

"Don't look! I'm trying to change," Dahlia blushed.

"Why not? It's not like I haven't seen everything already," Vaan replied with a grin.

Dahlia was unable to refute. Not only had Vaan seen everything, but it was also normal for women to flash or walk around topless in some parts of the city. However, those kinds of women were confident, unlike herself, who was still learning to become more confident.

Nevertheless, Dahlia eventually changed in front of Vaan after some back and forward struggle and hesitation.

Afterward, they set out for the city together, leaving the academy early in the morning when most witches and servants were still fast asleep.

Vaan took everything with him, including the bag of clothes, weapons, and equipment.

Upon arriving in the heart of the central district, they had breakfast at one of the popular cafes under Dahlia's recommendation, Generous Morning Joint.

It cost Vaan sixteen silvers for two meals.

Although the food couldn't compare to the academy, it was better than most commoner food.

Vaan quickly understood that while it was a popular establishment, it was only considered so among commoners. It still fell behind by a margin in comparison to the truly top wealthy diners that actually served spiritual food.

Dahlia had chosen the place to not hurt Vaan's wallet, even though it was not necessary. Even so, it couldn't be denied that she was quite considerate.

Nevertheless, after they enjoyed their meals together, Vaan took Dahlia to the Witch Union Bank for another withdrawal.

It was then that Dahlia realized how much money Vaan possessed.

"Next time, there's no need to consider the cost of food, Dahli. We can afford to eat some spiritual food like wealthy people do, even without the academy discount," Vaan stated as they left the bank."

"Mmm, alright," Dahlia nodded before she asked, "What do you want to do now? Are we going back to the academy, or...?"

"Didn't you want to play?" Vaan slightly smiled and said, "Let's book a nice room to enjoy ourselves."

Shortly after, Vaan took Dahlia to the Peaceful Gentlemen Inn and booked a room for a day, costing him another ten silvers, which he easily paid in full.

Afterward, Vaan took Dahlia to their room to enjoy themselves...

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Helia's Castle

After everyone unboarded from their magic airships in the outer courtyard, the Grand Inquisitor's troops lined up into groups, the combat witches and the aura users, each consisting of fifty people.

None were weaker than Mid-stage Senior Witch and Mid Rank 2 Aura Masters.

"You've brought quite a fair bit of force for this punitive expedition, Marquis Ember," Helia Ashenborn welcomed Ember Killian and Astoria Braveheart's arrival. "Are you sure this will be enough troops?"

"Definitely enough to clear out the small fries obstructing our path in the Red Goblin Mountains. As for the doggies, Headmaster Astoria and I are the main fighting force for the job," Ember stated and added, "Besides, you planned to join us, did you not, Lord Helia?"

"I did," Helia nodded and said, "However, I didn't expect you to arrive so soon in the morning, Marquis Ember. How about joining me for some breakfast in the hall while my people rally the additional troops from the city?"

"If you're not in a hurry to venture into the mountains, I believe an additional two hundred—No, three hundred mercenaries for hire will prove helpful on this dangerous endeavor," Helia added.

"Three hundred mercenaries? Even if you want to help us, that won't cost you a small amount of wealth, Lord Helia," Ember mentioned with surprise. "Do you have too many mana stones to burn, or do you have something else to gain from this?"

"Well, what can I say? Conquering the mountain has always been a dream of mine," Helia smiled and said, "And I do happen to have a lot of mana stones to spare after my new business started blooming, especially thanks to Headmaster Tabitha."

"She paid me a lump sum just for some priority reading," Helia chuckled before suddenly pausing.

"Speaking of this matter, it's quite interesting. The Delarosa Household's representative, Vahn Cadieux, has a similar given name as Vaan Raphna from the book."

"What kind of person is this Vahn Cadieux? Since when did the Delarosa Household have such a person?" Astoria hurriedly asked, jumping right in Helia's face before Ember held her back.

"Calm down, Headmaster Astoria. It's just a similar name. You can't expect someone with similar sounding names to be the same person, right?" Ember calmly stated. "These sorts of names are all too common."

"That's right. It's as Marquis Ember says," Helia agreed before mentioning, "They are just variations of Varan, that monstrous Rank 5 Aura King of the Great Rathalos Dynasty."

"We don't speak of those names here, Lord Helia. If word spreads and people learn more about the south, you might just earn yourself an audience with Her Majesty," Ember warned.

"Right, that was my mistake," Helia quickly reflected. "...Anyways, what do you think about my earlier suggestion, Marquis Ember?"

"Sure, I'll be more than happy to join you for breakfast as we wait for the additional helping hands, Lord Helia," Ember replied and turned to Astoria. "What about you, Headmaster Astoria?"

"I am of the same opinion," Astoria replied half-attentively as her mind dwelled on the name Vahn Cadieux.

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## Chapter 172: Enlistment Competition

After Ember Killian and Astoria Braveheart joined Helia Ashenborn in the Great Hall and took their seat at the long table, they waited for the servants to bring out the food from the kitchen.

Nevertheless, Ember and Helia could see that Astoria's mind was not with them.

"Are you still thinking about the Vaan Raphna and Vahn Cadieux, Headmaster Astoria?" Ember calmly inquired before her lips curved into a smile as she teased, "Your obsession with a single man makes you seem like a maiden in love."

"A maiden in love, huh?" Astoria cracked a wry smile and thoughtfully said, "Perhaps you are right, Marquis Ember. I've never been so fixated on a man before. But it's hard not to be."

"Not only did Teacher Raphna's notes contain spell revisions and optimizations, but he also explored witch cultivation, laying out a firm foundation of magic knowledge all the way to the High Witch rank."

"You and I could be considered one of the few pioneers who managed to reach the rank of High Witch through our own trials and errors in exploring the truth of magic. Our efforts have got us far in life, but we must face the reality of our situation; we have all hit a bottleneck."

"Not a single High Witch has advanced to the middle stage or beyond. We have all been stuck at the early stage for the past hundred years."

"At our level, blindly exploring the path ahead is like walking blindfolded through a hazy region filled with explosive mines. One wrong step and a single explosion will set off the rest, forfeiting our lives. We have already lost over three dozen good High Witches in the past hundred years for trying to advance to the middle stage."

Advancing to higher ranks was a dangerous endeavor. Such was the way of the world.

While the existence of mana had evolved the human race, granting them unimaginable powers and long lifespans, it also gave birth to new terrifying dangers or evolved existing ones to match them.

It was as if the universe invoked the law of causality to suppress the human race so they couldn't grow uncontrollably like cancer.

"In the past, I was also unclear about the path ahead like everyone else. But after reading through Teacher Raphna's notes, I feel like I know the way now," Astoria stated. "Can you believe it? A man who cannot use magic knows even more about magic than us."

"Headmaster Astoria, you... you're not planning to take the next step, are you?" Ember asked with a startled look before she added, "I would hate to lose another High Witch and friend like you."

"You don't have to worry about that, Marquis Ember," Astoria calmly replied.

"Naturally, taking the next step is no joking matter. I wouldn't gamble with my life like that. I still need to further research my path forward. If only I could consult Teacher Raphna, I would more likely gain more insights in one session than in a year of self-study."

"That's why Vahn Cadieux's name sort of sticks to me. While name variations of Varan are pretty common, it's only so among the noble households. As for commoner households, not so much. There must be something special about Vahn Cadieux."

"My sixth sense is telling me so," Astoria stated.

"Your sixth sense, huh?" Ember smiled wryly and said, "We High Witches have indeed started developing such a sense upon reaching this rank, but it's not very reliable, Headmaster Astoria. At the very least, that name isn't giving me any reaction with my sixth sense."

"If I may, I agree with what Headmaster Astoria said," Helia suddenly interrupted and said, "Vahn Cadieux is indeed someone special."

"I shouldn't be saying this since it's meant to be a secret... But Vahn Cadieux is someone especially groomed by the Delarosa Household to be Marquis Delarosa's eldest daughter's husband. Thus, it's no surprise if he was given a name variation of someone monstrously powerful like Emperor Varan."

"That said, I'm more interested in Vaan Raphna's background. Someone with such terrifying learning potential and knowledge must have a rather remarkable physique or talent and come from some very well-known noble household."

"However, I haven't heard of any prestigious noble household by the name of Raphna. Furthermore, I can't guess what the attribute of such talent or physique is, especially when we don't even know if his wealth of knowledge is a result of a special physique or talent," Helia added.

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As Lord Helia, Marquis Ember, and Headmaster Astoria had their discussion over breakfast, Hester had gone into the city with a group of retainers to carry out the enlistment.

The market square was filled with street stalls, but they were quickly cleared out for the enlistment process once the news was spread.

Several booths were quickly set up around a large platform, which had been set up a day earlier.

"Those who wish to join the Red Goblin Mountains' expedition with Lord Helia and the Grand Inquisitor, line up in front of a booth if you want to sign up!" Hester announced in a resounding voice that everyone in the market square could hear.

She did not waste her breath on providing additional information regarding recruitment and wage. Such information had been released a day prior.

In a short instance, the market square was quickly filled up with hundreds of interested Senior Witches and Aura Masters.

"Quickly, the expedition enlistment has already started! If we're slow, others will take up all the slots!" a Mid Rank 2 Aura Master hollered to his mates.

However, another Mid Rank 2 Aura Master shook his head and nonchalantly said, "There's no need to rush. Even if the slots are taken up, there's no guarantee that the early birds will keep their spots."

"Huh? What do you mean?" the first Mid Rank 2 Aura Master paused with confusion.

"Did you forget the latter half of yesterday's announcement? Lord Helia only wants the strongest mercenaries on the expedition. A battle platform was set up in the market square. No doubt, people that arrive late will be given chances to compete with others for the spots."

"This..."

The Mid Rank 2 Aura Master was stunned by the news.

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Inside a room on the second floor of Peaceful Gentlemen Inn, clothes were scattered over the floor.

Vaan and Dahlia lay in bed together, enjoying each other's warmth after finishing a short session of dual practice. Their peace was quickly disturbed by the commotion outside.

In that instance, Vaan's eyes flickered.

'It's time.'

### Chapter 173: Aura Cultivation

The commotion outside marked the beginning of the enlistment process. There was some time from then until the enlistment competition began.

"Dahli, I have a very important task to entrust to you," Vaan mentioned while hugging Dahlia's head close to his chest before he asked, "Do you think you can do it for me?"

"Anything for you, Vahn. If it's something I can do, I will do it," Dahlia firmly replied after a brief pause.

"Anything? Even though I haven't told you what I needed you to do for me?" Vaan further inquired with a calm smile.

"You said it was something very important to you, Vahn. In that case, I will definitely do it even if it might put my life in danger," Dahlia said with determination.



"You have done so much for someone like me, Vahn. Since you came to me, the library has never been messy, even if it's only been a few days. All of my problems were solved one by one, and my magic circle has grown at an alarming speed."

"I can feel that I am getting close to becoming a Mid-stage Senior Witch, even though it hasn't been long since I've risen to the ranks of Senior Witches. I've always felt indebted to you these past few days. I'm glad you finally gave me an opportunity to repay you," Dahlia stated.

"I see. So I mean that much to you, Dahli," Vaan calmly uttered with a slight smile despite knowing full well about her feelings. "However, it's nothing serious as risking your life for me. I need you to cover for me. Pretend I've been with you the whole time and turn away anyone looking for me."

"Just that? That is definitely something I can do," Dahlia agreed first before she asked with surprise, "But what are you planning to do, Vahn?"

"I will be joining the punitive expedition to the Red Goblin Mountains under a different identity since there is no way Lord Helia will allow me to join, given my importance."

"What? But that's too dangerous! You can't go, Vahn."

Without surprise, Dahlia quickly expressed her strong objection to Vaan joining the punitive expedition.

However, Vaan persuaded her with his eloquent tongue, reassuring her that it was not as dangerous as she thought. With the Grand Inquisitor, Headmaster Astoria, and Lord Helia being part of the expedition, not to mention hundreds of troops, the danger was relatively small and controllable.

Furthermore, Vaan partly boasted some of his strength, reminding Dahlia of his duel with Bram Krauss.

"Fine. Since you are so sure, I won't stop you. However, how can you join without being recognized by Lord Helia and the others?"

"That's... a secret," Vaan replied with a sly smile.

Dahlia pouted with an unhappy look, but she chose not to pry into Vaan's secrets. She feared that doing so would make him unhappy with her. She wouldn't want something like that to happen.

Sometime later, Dahlia got dressed and left under Vaan's request.

Right after Vaan confirmed Dahlia was gone and that no one was spying on his room, he shut the windows. Then, he waved his hand over his items, storing all his clothes and weapons in his storage space.

'Before joining the enlistment competition and competing for a spot, I need to do something.'

Right after having that thought, Vaan took out a low-rank spirit stone and directly popped it into his mouth.

Ding!

<You have acquired a small quantity of pure mana>

<A list of options is available>

<Please select one of the following options>

<Option 1: Feed the small quantity of pure mana to the Heaven-Swallowing Space and expand the subspace>

<Note: There may be unexpected gains or nothing at all>

<Option 2: You may input your own improvement plan with clear instructions for the system to follow>

<Note: There's a high risk of suffering injuries, even death, if instructions are vague, not detailed, or the improvement plan is flawed from the start>

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'As expected, the option is there. No doubt about it, the system is evolving along with me,' Vaan's eyes flickered at the conclusion.

From another perspective, it could simply be the system giving him more control over it.

However, from Vaan's experience with the system until now, the system was more like an artificial intelligent assistant than anything else.

Nevertheless, although Vaan was slightly surprised by the first option, which was usually the last option, he didn't find it too surprising either, given the available options.

Depending on how the second option is used, he could reap the greatest gain with the limited mana he ingested or incur the worse consequences from a flawed improvement plan.

Nevertheless, Vaan was precisely going to choose the second option.

Ding!

<You have selected the second option>

<Please input your instructions>

Shortly after, Vaan delivered the instructions with his mind as if he was seeing a real-time simulation of his own inner body and how the pure mana would interact with his blood.

The system guided the pure mana accordingly, which followed the same circulation pathway as the mid-rank aura circulation method, The Way of the White Tiger.

Eventually, the pure mana fused with Vaan's blood.

Ding!

<You have successfully produced some aura>

<You have become an Aura User>

<Your status has been updated>

=====

«Cultivation»

Aura Circulation Method: The Way of the White Tiger (Mid rank)

Cultivation Level: Low Rank 0 Aura User

Aura Power: 1

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«Physical Attributes»

[155 Defense] [0 → 1 Aura (↑1)] [Mid-level Rank 2]

[101 Strength] [0 → 1 Aura (↑1)] [Low-level Rank 2]

[83 → 85 Speed (↑2)] [0 → 1 Aura (↑1)] [High-level Rank 1]

=====

'As expected, I can use the pure mana from mana stones to increase my aura cultivation like this,'  
Vaan mused.

With the system's help, his cultivation speed could be considered monstrous.

Other aura users needed months of extreme physical exercise and specific martial movements to guide their blood flow through the same circulation path.

However, Vaan could skip all that by simply using the system.

Nevertheless, The Way of the White Tiger was just a temporary aura circulation method.

As long as he obtained more aura circulation methods of the same rank or higher, he was confident in formulating a better aura circulation method.

Aura circulation methods weren't fixed. Thus, he didn't have to worry about backlashes from changing aura circulation methods mid-way.

'Aura will be able to disguise my sturdy body and strength, but this amount is too lacking. I still need more,' Vaan mused.

#### Chapter 174: Rowdy Competition

Since Vaan's second visit to the Witch Union Bank, he carried over 200 low-rank mana stones and 50 mid-rank mana stones on him.

Although the balance surprised him, he never doubted the business prospect of the Pore Stimulation Potion.

'Mid-rank mana stones are less common and easily draw attention if used for large purchases. I should consume them to grow my aura and keep the low-rank mana stones for necessities,' Vaan mused.

Shortly after, he took out five mid-rank mana stones and ingested them at once.

Ding!

<You consumed 5 mid-rank mana stones>

<You have acquired a moderate quantity of pure mana>

<...>

Right after the system's reward options surfaced, Vaan repeated the same process to fuse the pure mana into his blood and produce more aura.

Ding!

<You have successfully produced some aura>

<Your status has been updated>

=====

«Cultivation»

Aura Circulation Method: The Way of the White Tiger (Mid rank)

Cultivation Level: Low Rank 0 Aura User → Low Rank 1 Aura Warrior

Aura Power: 1 → 26 (↑25)

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After checking the increase in Aura Power, Vaan furrowed his brows slightly. The improvement slightly fell short of his expectation.

A single low-rank mana stone was used to produce 1 point of Aura Power, but five mid-rank mana stones, worth fifty low-rank mana stones, only produced 25 points of Aura Power.

Evidently, the value of mana stones depreciated as his aura power grew.

Nevertheless, Vaan went ahead and consumed another 35 mid-rank mana stones, saving himself the last ten for emergencies.

Ding!

<You have successfully produced some aura>

<Your status has been updated>

=====

«Cultivation»

Aura Circulation Method: The Way of the White Tiger (Mid rank)

Cultivation Level: Low Rank 1 Aura Warrior → Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior

Aura Power: 26 → 95 (↑69)

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Seeing he was so close to reaching a hundred points in Aura Power, Vaan consumed another 55 low-rank mana stones to reach his goal.

Ding!

<You have successfully produced some aura>

<Your status has been updated>

«Cultivation»

Aura Circulation Method: The Way of the White Tiger (Mid rank)

Cultivation Level: Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior → Early Rank 2 Aura Master

Aura Power: 95 → 100 (↑5)

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«Physical Attributes»

[155 Defense] [95 → 100 Aura Power (↑5)] [Mid-level Rank 2] [Total Defense: 255 (Low-level Rank 3)]

[101 Strength] [95 → 100 Aura Power (↑5)] [Low-level Rank 2] [Total Strength: 201 (High-level Rank 2)]

[85 Speed] [95 → 100 Aura Power (↑5)] [High-level Rank 1] [Total Speed: 185 (Mid-level Rank 2)]

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In a short instance, Vaan had raised his aura cultivation by leaps and bounds. However, the large consumption of mana stones was not small either.

It wasn't farfetched to say that fast power growth burns a lot of wealth.

'This sort of cultivation speed is enough to make anyone die from envy. Fortunately, I have a good source of income to support it,' Vaan mused.

However...

As a man, he couldn't keep withdrawing mana stones from the Witch Union Bank. His large withdrawals would eventually draw suspicions.

'System, using your numerical measurement system, compute the human power system with my current known knowledge,' Vaan instructed.



Ding!

=====

«Power System (Human)»

[Rank 0 Ordinary Human: 0 – 24 Power] [Normal Witch] [Aura User]

[Rank 1 Special Human: 25 – 99 Power] [Apprentice Witch] [Aura Warrior]

[Rank 2 Super Human: 100 – 249 Power] [True Witch] [Aura Master]

[Rank 3 Ascended Human: 250 – ??? Power] [Senior Witch] [Aura Grandmaster]

[Rank 4 Extraordinary Human: ??? – ??? Power] [High Witch] [Aura Lord]

[Rank 5 Transcendent Human: ??? – ??? Power] [Transcendent Witch] [Aura King]

=====

'Thanks to my swift rise in aura cultivation, my true combat power is almost comparable to other Senior Witches and Aura Grandmasters...' Vaan mused.

The enlistment mainly targeted the Aura Masters, so he was more than qualified to compete for a spot.

Furthermore, he shouldn't have a problem securing it.

After all, Senior Witches weren't reliable in the region affected by the Curse of the Purple Umbala. On the other hand, there weren't many Aura Grandmasters either.

As such, the majority of the hired mercenaries on the expedition would be comprised of Aura Masters.

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Shortly after Vaan completed what he needed to do, he left the Peaceful Gentlemen Inn and visited the nearest public restroom. He ensured Lord Helia's spies weren't tracking him before he entered.

Moments later, a different person exited the public restroom.

The man had a middle-aged face with a few jarring scars and wore a black winter coat outfit that was made of high quality and was seemingly new.

However, there were minor cuts and the dry bloodstains of several different beasts on the black outfit, which seemed to have been there for several days but, in fact, had only been a few breaths.

Undoubtedly, Vaan had used Heat Manipulation to alter its state.

Nevertheless, with a face that wasn't handsome nor ugly and an outfit that slightly stunk, Vaan made his way to the enlistment competition while carrying his White Unicorn Spear wrapped in a ragged cloth.

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As Vahn approached the market square, the roaring cheers of thousands of people could be heard, and the tremoring ground of their beat-like steps could be felt.

"Beat him! Beat him! You can do it, Kaspar!"

"No, Goran! How can you get hit like that?! You're stronger than him!"

The massive crowd continued to roar with excitement.

It wasn't just interested parties presented for the enlistment but also curious spectators that came to watch the competition.

A displeased look immediately appeared on Vaan's face as he recalled the blasting music of the nightclubs in his past life.

If not for the deafening noise that wouldn't let him hear shit when people talked to him, he would have enjoyed the environment and experience much better.

Alas, now that he had multiple enhanced senses, the noisy environment of the market square as Aura Masters competed on the battle platform provided even more discomfort.

Vaan briefly closed his eyes and took a deep breath to attune his sense.

He may not like the noisy environment, but it was also an opportunity to train and sharpen his senses.

The surrounding noises steadily went quiet as he focused his hearing on the battle platform while making his way closer to join the battle queue.

Boom!

One of the topless Early Rank 2 Aura Masters on the battle platform suddenly flew off after receiving a solid kick to the chest...

Chapter 175: Securing a Spot in the Expedition

As the topless Early Rank 2 Aura Master flew towards the crowd standing out of the battle platform, they quickly scurried out of the way.

Thud!

The topless Early Rank 2 Aura Master landed on the ground with a heavy thud, and the crowd immediately exploded with cheers and disappointment.

"Yeah, Kaspar! We knew you could do it!"

"No, Goran! How did you fall for such an obvious feint and get kicked out off the platform like that, you donkey!?! My money was on you, you bastard!"

Amid the cheers and disappointment, Goran, who was already unhappy with his loss, overheard the criticism and derogatory terms hurled at him.

"What the fuck did you just call me?" Goran glared at one of the spectators, a less burly handsome man at Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior level.

The hotheaded person immediately paled, and the spectators around him also drew their distance in an instance.

"S-Sorry, Sir! It was just a misunderstanding!" the Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior quickly apologized.

"Fuck your misunderstanding! Do you think I will believe your bullshit?!" Goran roared angrily as he picked up the Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior and hurled him onto the battle platform. "Since you sounded like you could do better, why don't you go ahead and show everyone!"

After landing on the platform, the Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior stared at Kaspar with cowardice.

However, Kaspar had already secured his spot on the expedition team. Thus, he didn't see a reason to fight again unless someone formally declared their challenge towards him.

Seeing Kaspar walk away, the Peak Rank 1 Aura Warrior heaved a sigh of relief and climbed down from the battle platform to rejoin the crowd awkwardly.

Nevertheless, Goran didn't pursue the matter either and rejoined the battle queue with a snort.

As the battle queue moved forward, a number of smartass Low Rank 2 Aura Masters tried to challenge the Mid Rank 2 Aura Masters to secure their spots, thinking they wouldn't have many challenges if they succeeded.

However, they overestimated themselves and got their asses beaten terribly.

The Mid Rank 2 Aura Masters also didn't go easy on their challengers either. They broke their challengers' bones and left them in bedridden states.

As a result, no one below Mid Rank 2 Aura Master dared to rechallenge them.

The Low Rank 2 Aura Masters challenged the other Low Rank 2 Aura Masters, who only occupied fifty out of the three hundred available spots for the expedition.

Meanwhile, Vaan watched the battles one by one as he moved up in the battle queue.

Ding!

<You have learned the attack-type martial art, Swift Eagle Claw (Low rank)>

<You have learned the movement-type martial art, Seven Illusion Steps (Low rank)>

<You have learned the attack-type martial art, Hundred Shadow Palm (Mid rank)>

<You have learned the attack-type martial art, Raging Bull Charge (Low rank)>

<You have learned the...>

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Vaan continued to pick up numerous new martial arts, even some aura circulation methods of the low rank, as he watched the Aura Masters battle.

In a single match, he learned at least three skills. Longer matches let him learn at least five.

Eventually, he accumulated tens of low-rank martial arts of each type.

'Even if my memory bank is near infinite as I continuously expand the Heaven-Swallowing Space, there's no need to waste my memory space on these low-rank martial arts,' Vaan furrowed his brows.

He randomly picked ten low-rank martial arts of each type, took their essence, and combined them one after the other.

'Combine!'

Ding!

<You have created a new attack-type martial art, Great Unity Fist (Mid rank)>

<You have created a new movement-type martial art, Illusory Lightning Steps (Mid rank)>

<You have created a new attack-type martial art, Seven Sweeps of the Swallow (Mid rank)>

<You have created a new defense-type martial art, Great Earthen Boundary (Mid rank)>

<You have created a new aura circulation method, Way of the Big Dipper (Mid rank)>

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By the time it was Vaan's turn to climb the battle platform and pick a spot-holder to challenge, he had already created a whole set of new martial arts for himself.

Even if he used them, no one would recognize any of them. It was just perfect for his new mercenary—No, hunter identity.

"State your name and who you want to challenge," a Mid-stage Senior Witch instructed after Vaan hopped onto the battle platform.

"My name... is Van Helsing, and I challenge the current 250th spot-holder for the expedition," Vaan declared with a rough and uncouth voice, seemingly lacking in etiquette but outright disrespectful to the Senior Witch.

In that instance, the crowd of spectators cheered with a wave of new energy. It had been some time since another challenger picked one of the Mid Rank 2 Aura Masters.

Finally, they have another good show to watch.

"Hmph!"

The 250th spot-holder, a burly Mid Rank 2 Aura Master named Eliphas, snorted with a displeased look, having been challenged at least five times. He hopped onto the battle platform and stared at Vaan with a dark look.

"I'm going to make you regret challenging me!" Eliphas threatened.

"No weapons are allowed for the duel," the Senior Witch overseeing the match reminded Vaan.

"You don't need to worry. I won't be using it," Vaan calmly said before he declared arrogantly, "One fist is enough."

"I see. Then you may begin."

Swish!

As soon as the Senior Witch declared the start of the match, Eliphas lunged at Vaan pre-emptively, fully cloaked in his red mana as he intended to crush him instantly.

However, Vaan reacted even faster as he covered his body with his aura and enhanced his strength and speed to Mid-level Rank 2.

Illusory Lightning Steps!

Using the new mid-rank movement-type martial skill that possessed both evasion and speed, Vaan easily shifted to the side of Eliphas, evading the pre-emptive strike, and followed up with a counterattack.

Great Unity Fist!

An aura-coated fist headed towards Eliphas's left ribs while pulling the person towards it with a suction force.

Bang! Ka-cha!

The fist landed right where Vaan intended, breaking Eliphas's ribs as he sent the person shooting off the battle platform.

"Thanks for letting me win," Vaan said apathetically.

A deathly silence quickly filled the crowd. Everyone was stunned by what had happened, not expecting the fight to end in a mere instance.

#### Chapter 176: Helia's Plan

It was only for a split second, but the person called Van Helsing had also demonstrated the strength of a Mid Rank 2 Aura Master, the same level as Eliphas.

Yet, despite their seemingly equal strength, their fight ended in a mere instance. Van had won by a landslide; he had utterly decimated his opponent.

It was a difference in skill execution and battle experience.

Just by looking at Van Helsing's middle-aged face, the crowd could quickly tell that he was a person with plenty of battle experience.

After all, even if male witch descendants couldn't live as long as witches, their lifespan was still longer than a normal human being.

Male witch descendants that looked like ordinary middle-aged men were most likely already entered their first hundred years of age.

After the crowd's initial shock, they erupted with cheers and amazement and started gossiping.

"Van Helsing... was there such a skilled Mid Rank 2 Aura Master in the city?"

"Skill Mid Rank 2 Aura Master? At his age? Most aura users in their 100s would have reached Rank 3 Aura Grandmaster by now. He might be skilled, but he is untalented."



"Untalented? You don't even know if he had shown his full strength. For all we know, we had only seen a glimpse of it. Perhaps, Van Helsing really is a Rank 3 Aura Grandmaster."

"Ugh, you do have a point..."

Seeing the Senior Witch overseeing the matches had yet to announce the winner, Vaan glanced at her and urged, "The winner?"

"Oh, right. The winner is Van Helsing!" the Senior Witch recovered her wits and made the announcement.

Shortly after, she handed the token marking the 250th spot to Vaan after taking it from the previous spot-holder.

The following matches continued after Vaan stepped off the battle platform.

...

On a tall building away from the market square, a few high-profile figures watched the enlistment competition from afar.

At the start, it was just Hester overseeing the enlistment process. But along the way, Helia, Ember, and Astoria quietly joined her on the rooftop.

"You had us wait over something like this, Lord Helia?" Ember furrowed her brows as she stared at the ongoing match on the battle platform.

"While it might delay the expedition a bit, this screening process is necessary if we want to ensure we have the strongest mercenaries," Helia calmly explained.

"The Red Goblin Mountains isn't a place we can venture into with ill preparation, Grand Inquisitor. If the remnant forces of the Assembly of Silent Night are only hiding in the outer region, then we have nothing to worry about."

"However, if they ventured deep into the core region to hide and still manage to survive the goblin horde, then it's best that we have all the manpower we can muster to enter the depths of the mountain to eliminate them," Helia stated.

"You speak too seriously, Lord Helia. We have the butcher of ten thousand demons on our side. The Red Goblin Mountains is nothing to fear," Ember coolly dismissed Helia's warning. "We only need the extra troops to clear out small fries and conserve our strength."

"Please wrap up the enlistment asap, Lord Helia. We don't have time for this," Ember requested.

Helia softly sighed.

If the Red Goblin Mountains were so easily conquered, they would have been conquered ages ago. The danger in the depth of the mountains was hard to estimate.

Nevertheless, Ember Killian had already given her word. She had no choice but to obey.

"Alright. If the Grand Inquisitor wills it," Helia replied.

...

Shortly after Helia went down to the square, the enlistment competition was swiftly brought to an end, much to many people's disappointment. Vaan was fortunate enough to grab a spot before it happened.

Even so, many Rank 2 Aura Masters were disgruntled by the missed opportunity.

However, there wasn't anything they could do about it. No one dared to appeal to the Lord of Redpine City herself.

"All unrelated parties may leave! As for the rest, you have an hour to prepare everything you need for the punitive expedition and gather in front of the southern gate!"

"Yes, Lord Ashenborn!"

The crowd of spectators and hired mercenaries obeyed after receiving Helia's instructions.

Since Vaan made his preparation beforehand, he headed straight for the southern gate along with a few other organized individuals who had also prepared everything before enlisting.

...

One hour later, Helia's three hundred hired mercenaries, fifty private troops, and Ember's hundred inquisition force arrived outside the southern gate.

Moments later, Helia, Ember, and Astoria also arrived overhead on the three magic airships managed by their own crews, only roughly two hundred feet above the ground.

Seeing everyone was gathered, Ember and Helia gave out individual instructions to their own people.

"We set out for the Red Goblin Mountains."

"We leave for the Red Goblin Mountains!"

Right after everyone heard the orders, the large group of four hundred and fifty people set forth for the foot of the mountains ahead.

But while Ember's forces and Helia's private troops moved in an organized formation, the three hundred hired mercenaries traveled like a chaotic mob without order or discipline.

As Ember observed the troops' movement from the sky, she could clearly see the problem.

"Our combined forces consist of a hundred and twenty Senior Witches, thirty Rank 3 Aura Grandmasters, and three hundred Rank 2 Aura Masters," Ember suddenly mentioned to Helia.

"I intend to use the three magic airships to scout the mountains from the sky and have a real-time understanding of the situation. However, seeing how disorderly these hired mercenaries are, they don't look like those who can follow orders properly. I doubt my plan will work with them."

"You were the one who hired them, Lord Helia. How do you intend to use them?" Ember inquired shortly after.

Helia glanced down at the ground route the troops were taking toward the Red Goblin Mountains and paused in thought.

"Since I'm paying them for their services, we should make full use of them by sending them ahead to sweep out the pests and clear a path for our main force," Helia suggested after much contemplation.

#### Chapter 177: Close Encounter

Sometime later, the punitive expedition group reached the northern outskirts of the Red Goblin Mountains.

The area was filled with dense trees from the forest and wasn't ideal for a large camp spot due to the poor visibility.

However, Helia descended from one of the magic airships and felled many trees with a single [Water Slash] spell in a short instance.

"Pitch camp! We will set up our base here! The logs are yours to use!" Helia stated.

As everyone started setting up their own camps, Vaan scouted the edges of the cleared land.

His Omni-Sense spread out and picked out multiple life signals of goblins lurking deeper in the forested mountains. Among them, some were not far from the edge of the campsite.

However, the green goblins did not make any move on the people from the camp. They only secretly watched while staying out of sight.

Given the cowardly nature of the green goblins, they wouldn't dare to ambush such a large group with so few numbers.

"Hey, you there! What are you doing over here?" a Late-stage Senior Witch under Lord Helia suddenly called out and questioned Vaan.

When Vaan turned to look, it wasn't just the Late-stage Senior Witch but also, Lord Helia, Marquis Ember, and Headmaster Astoria making their way over together.

"I am scouting the area in case we get ambushed by goblins. There's a few lurking in the area," Vaan calmly replied, even though he wasn't expecting the expedition's big shots to directly approach him.

"Oh?" Helia smiled with interest and said, "I didn't expect someone else to have this thought."

Shortly after, Helia signaled her people to enter the forest and root out the green goblins in hiding.

Although the magic airship had excellent visual coverage of the region from the sky, the dense trees made it hard for them to see much past it.

"Why aren't you setting up your camp like Lord Helia instructed?" Headmaster Astoria asked with a hint of curiosity.

"I have no need for a camp, my Lady. I am fine with sleeping in the open. The comfort of sleeping in a camp or in the open makes no difference to me. It can't be compared to the comfort of a real bed," Vaan calmly replied.

However, he secretly admired Astoria's beauty.

As expected, even among witches, Headmaster Astoria's beauty was first class, a true beauty among beauties. It wasn't just her physical appearance but her overall air and temperament.

Although he had stayed at Blackmoon Academy for a year, Headmaster Astoria was someone he could rarely meet. But that also meant that she had never met him. They had belonged to two different worlds.

If he took off his realistic face mask, he doubted Headmaster Astoria would recognize him.

Of course, it was a different story for Lord Helia beside her, who had seen his face plenty of times recently.

"You seem like a veteran hunter, so it would be strange if you didn't know that very easy to get sick, poisoned, or even killed if you are bitten by too many insects at night, especially in a place like the Red Goblin Mountains."

It wasn't just humans that evolved after the appearance of mana. Insects and all other living creatures also evolved due to mana, even nature itself.

"That's what I have this leather pouch of insect repellent powder for," Vaan slightly smiled.

After showing his insect repellent powder pouch, Helia and Astoria became curious about what his other pouches contained.

"Excuse me for a sec," Ember suddenly said to Helia and Astoria as she pushed forward.

She raised the special detection magic tool towards Vaan, which emitted a weak but increasingly stronger glowing heat as it got close to him.

Swoosh!

In that instance, Astoria drew her sword on Vaan. At the same time, Helia also took a defensive stance, ready to fire her water spells at a moment's notice.

"Wait!"

Ember stopped Helia and Astoria from making rash moves before she could determine something.

While Vaan was caught off guard by the sudden turn of events, Ember waved the special detection magic tool in front of him before settling on a patch of dried blood on his left shoulder.

"What kind of blood is this?" Ember interrogated.

"It should be blood from one of the beasts I've hunted," Vaan listed several beasts, with Phantom Wolf being one of them. "May I ask what this is all about, Grand Inquisitor?"

"It's nothing much, just a false alarm," Ember nonchalantly shook her head and said, "This tool is used to detect people who have injected themselves with Furehengir's blood."

"However, it can be a little faulty as it also picks up the blood of all other wolf bloodlines."

"I see..."

Vaan's eyes subtly flickered as he quickly understood why he was approached.

At the same time, he could not help but feel fortunate. He was almost unlucky enough to be caught as a member of the Assembly of Silent Night even though he wasn't one of them.

'Furehengir's blood... Looks like the special detection-type magic tool only works rank five wolf bloodline and below. To think they had something like this... How fortunate,' Vaan thought.

The unknown was always terrifying.

Nevertheless, after Ember confirmed Vaan wasn't a member of the Assembly of Silent Night, she left him alone.

"You're free to go," Ember coolly stated.

Astoria retracted her giant greatsword, and Helia also eased up. They followed Ember into the forest to scout afterward.

Nevertheless, Vaan remained on the spot with a thoughtful look.

'Furehengir's blood... Furehengir's blood... If I had such quality wolf blood, I would have a much greater chance at awakening my Immortal Lycan Bloodline,' Vaan mused.

Looks like he had multiple objectives to achieve on this expedition.

...

Roughly half an hour later, everyone finished setting up their camps. However, before they could relax, Helia summoned all the hired mercenaries to the front of the camp.

"Although I hired all of you for this expedition with the promise of a fixed payment, I do appreciate those who contribute more. I will reward extra for those who hunt more goblins, so do remember to collect their left ears as proof of your kills."

"That is all I wanted to say. You may enter the mountain and start hunting immediately. Clear a path for the main force, and immediately report back if you find anything suspicious on the mountain!"

"Ohhh! Praise the Lord!"

A portion of the Rank 2 Aura Masters cheered after hearing about bonus rewards and felt pumped with excitement.

Some even charged into the mountain immediately after receiving the permission, making the start of the hunt.

Chapter 178: Entering the Cursed Region

While some people charged into the mountain thoughtlessly, others took a more careful approach.

"Looking for one Mid-level Aura Master to join our group. Anyone?"

"We need one Aura Master skilled in defense-type martial arts to take the vanguard position in our group. Is there anyone?"

The hired mercenaries started forming groups for their goblin hunts.

Although the goblins were mostly Rank 1 monsters, even Rank 2 Aura Masters wouldn't dare to take on a horde of them alone. After all, the terrain was unfavorable to them. They could be ambushed from different directions, surrounded, and overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

They also had to be mindful of goblin poison.

"Van Helsing, right? I saw your fight a while back. You were very impressive. Would you like to join our team?" a Mid Rank 2 Aura Master approached Vaan.



However, Vaan shook his head.

"I prefer to work alone," Vaan indifferently stated.

Shortly after, he ventured into the forested mountains alone without giving the Mid Rank 2 Aura Master a chance to persuade him.

Although sending all the hired mercenaries into the mountain was not a wise move in the grand scheme of the punitive expedition goal, it worked well for Vaan, who wanted to freely move on his own without restrictions.

Nevertheless, Vaan could understand why Lord Helia made such a decision.

Such a large group of hired mercenaries was no different from a gathering of thugs; they lacked order and discipline. They would only disrupt the formation of other troops if the big shots tried to command them like a regular trained military.

However, scattering their forces in the mountains increased the higher chance of casualties.

And if hired mercenaries died before the expedition's completion, Lord Helia wouldn't need to pay them for their services.

The hired mercenaries were cannon fodders, especially those who blindly rushed ahead to secure more kills. They were either too arrogant or oblivious to the dangers of the Red Goblin Mountains.

"You... Wait! Let's talk about this—!"

The Mid Rank 2 Aura Master wanted to chase after Vaan, but he was quickly stopped by a fellow teammate, a High Rank 2 Aura Master with a moderately large build and a buzz cut.

"Forget it. Lone wolves like him won't work well in our team. He would only affect our coordination. We are better off without him."

"Haiz, I guess it can't be helped. I really wanted him on the team. He seemed like someone with a lot of experience."

"That's just how it is. Teams also have their own disadvantages and hassles, such as disputes over the spoil distribution."

...

Shortly after Vaan entered the thick mountain forest, he made his way uphill, venturing deeper and deeper into the depths of the Red Goblin Mountains.

Several goblin bodies lay scattered on the ground and in bushes with fresh dripping blood as the path ahead was already cleared by the earlier hired mercenaries that entered.

Every single goblin corpse had its left ears removed without an exception.

Further up ahead, the sounds of battle could be heard in numerous locations. However, such battles did not last long before the green goblins were decimated by their invaders.

The green goblins lurking in the Red Goblin Mountains' outer region were few and easily overwhelmed in both strength and numbers.

"Kree! Kuhk—?!"

Green goblins cried and gurgled as they were quickly slaughtered.

Vaan's Omni-Sense gave him omnidirectional awareness of the situation happening all around him, including several surviving green goblins in hiding that the people ahead had missed.

Some hid up in the trees, and some in thick bushes behind trees. Their bodies shivered with fear at the cries of their fallen brethren.

Puchi!

Vaan unclothed his White Unicorn Spear and thrust it to the side as he passed a tree on his left, stabbing right into the head of a green goblin.

Blood spurted as he quickly retracted his spear just as fast and moved on.

He had zero interest in collecting their left ears, but he was also aware that not doing so would make him seem strange in the eyes of others.

Swoosh!

Vaan hurled his White Unicorn Spear at his next target, hidden on one of the big tree branches, roughly thirty yards ahead.

The white spear impaled the green goblin in the throat with precision. There wasn't enough force to directly penetrate straight through it but more than enough to knock it off its tree branch.

As it fell, Vaan caught its knife with one hand before he gripped his white spear with the other and stepped on the green goblin's chest.

With a quick twist, he ended the goblin's life before he cut off its left ear and tossed it in his quick-made ragged cloth bag, which was previously used to wrap his spear.

Ding!

<Your spear mastery proficiency has increased>

<Your throwing mastery proficiency has increased>

...

At the same time, a team not far behind Vaan witnessed his actions and moved towards one of the trees he had passed with doubt. They quickly discovered an intact dead goblin with surprise.

After sneaking a few glances around, they cut off the green goblin's left ear for themselves.

Although Vaan was far ahead, their action was no surprise to him. Given Lord Helia's prestige, she could easily incite simple-minded mercenaries to steal and rob left goblin ears from each other for her vague promise of additional rewards.

Nevertheless, Vaan continued to advance and only killed the green goblins in his path. The deeper he ventured, the fewer hired mercenaries in his surroundings.

As everyone ventured deeper into the depths of the Red Goblin Mountains, they gradually spread out like casting a wide net to hunt all the goblins caught within without interfering with each other's work.

However, the distance created between the mercenaries was also due to distrust. Just because they were on the expedition together didn't mean they were allies.

Anything could happen in the wild if they could get away with it.

...

Ding!

<Antimagic spores have entered your body>

<Antimagic spores have been removed from your body>

'Kyu!'

Along with the system messages, Vaan received a telepathic message from Topaz, one filled with a mixture of joy and annoyance.

Nevertheless, Vaan understood he had entered the cursed region.

## Chapter 179: First Casualty

Unlike the antimagic spores in Cyrena's body, which were filled to the brim with mana, the antimagic spores in the Red Goblin Mountains were like near-empty vessels.

There wasn't much mana in them.

As a result, they had a greater effect on witches and aura users once they latched onto their bodies.

Vaan had given it some thought and concluded that it wasn't difficult to treat people affected by the Curse of the Purple Umbala as long as it hasn't evolved to the second stage like Lord Helia's hands.

As long as a witch could pump enough mana into the antimagic spores and fill them up to the brim, the antimagic spores would stop affecting the flow of their mana and, in turn, stop affecting the activation of their magic spells.

At the same time, it was also possible to flush the antimagic spores out of the body through this method. Such was a solution to treating Cyrena.

However, it wasn't a complete treatment solution as it would only flush out a portion of the antimagic spores in her body, not to mention a large amount of mana was required for the undertaking.

Ding!

<Antimagic spores have entered your body>

<Antimagic spores have been removed from your body>

'Kyu!' Topaz mentally sounded again.

The little earth spirit fairy seemed even more frustrated and annoyed, as if she had just cracked open a bunch of candy wrappers only to find a small fragment of the candies inside.

Vaan smiled slightly at her little tantrum.

Nevertheless, his smile quickly disappeared in the next moment. He was getting an ominous feeling from the cursed region.

'It's been a few years since Lady Aeliana turned into a Plant-type Abomination and disappeared into the depths of the Red Goblin Mountains,' Vaan recalled.

Although Lady Solana had been researching a cure for her daughter, she hadn't contacted her daughter once in those years—Or rather, she couldn't.

The core region of the Red Goblin Mountains wasn't a place just anyone could enter. That's why Lady Solana had honed her swordsmanship and body.

However, the issue was that no one knew about the Plant-type Abomination's situation or how strong it had become in those years.

'To others, the antimagic spores are mana drainers. But to the Plant-type Abomination, the antimagic spores are its mana collectors,' Vaan furrowed his brows.

Puchi!

Vaan suddenly stabbed a thick bush on the left with his White Unicorn Spear without looking as he passed it, causing a goblin's cry to be heard.

He casually retracted his spear and continued onward as if he had done something trivial.

Ding!

<Your spear mastery proficiency has increased>

<Antimagic spores have entered your body>

<Antimagic spores have been removed from your body>

...

<You have caught the Plant-type Abomination's attention>

<The Plant-type Abomination is watching you>

...

As Topaz continued to devour the antimagic spores that entered his body and consumed its mana for herself, the Plant-type Abomination became more aware of his existence until it finally started watching him.

However, Vaan couldn't locate which direction the Plant-type Abomination was watching him from. It seemed to be coming from every direction.

'The antimagic spores are spiritually linked to the Plant-type Abomination,' Vaan's eyes flickered.

Nevertheless, despite losing its antimagic spores, the Plant-type Abomination simply watched Vaan. The system didn't detect any anger or killing intent from it.

As such, not even an Elimination-type Witch Hunt was triggered.

Understanding that much, Vaan thought of two likely possibilities after ruling out the rest; either the loss of antimagic spores didn't harm it in any way, or it was experiencing a much greater pain, and the loss of antimagic spores was inconsequential in comparison.

The ominous feeling became stronger.

'There's something wrong in this place,' Vaan furrowed his brows with a deep look.

However, the incoming group of five Rank 1 Green Goblins ahead quickly attracted his attention. They weren't resorting to ambushes.

"These goblins are becoming bold because I am alone," Vaan muttered.

Unfortunately, the goblins had overestimated themselves. They tried to confront an opponent whose strength they failed to properly gauge.

One of the goblins fired an arrow with his bow, but Vaan easily dodged it by an inch with a slight body shift. Despite the arrow being laced with poison, he was unfazed by it.

The arrow from a Rank 1 Green Goblin with a crude bow was too slow to pose a threat. The arrow's trajectory had been completely calculated.

Shortly after, Vaan hurled his Rank 2 White Unicorn Spear forward, impaling the goblin archer in a single strike and taking out the goblin group's only ranger.

Right after, he lunged forward with the goblin knife he had previously acquired.

Although it was also a low-quality weapon that the goblin had most likely obtained from a bandit, it was good enough to do its job.

With his superior physical finesse, Vaan weaved through the remaining four goblins, slitting all their throats in a single wavy motion.

Blood spurted from their throats, and before their bodies dropped to the ground, he hacked off all their left ears and caught them with his ragged cloth bag.

Shortly after, he went to retrieve his white spear, which had impaled the goblin archer's heart.

At that moment, the goblin archer had yet to draw its last breath.

Instead of pulling out the white spear, he gave it a slight twist, increased its cutting power with Heat Manipulation, and hacked upwards, slicing straight through its upper left chest to its left ear for collection.

The goblin archer's fearful eyes dimmed shortly after, and Vaan proceeded indifferently.

There was no compassion for monsters in a kill or be killed zone.

Moments later, a human cry resounded roughly seventy yards from Vaan's location after an Early Rank 2 Aura Master was struck in the knee by a goblin archer's poisoned arrow.



"Fuck—!!! God damned goblin archers ahead! Watch yourselves, everyone!" the Early Rank 2 Aura Master yelled before he requested, "Guard me!"

The person quickly snapped the arrow, pulled the arrowhead out from the other end, and applied disinfectant to his wound.

"Dammit, Frewin! How can you be so careless?! You're going to slow us down!" another Early Rank 2 Aura Master cursed.

#### Chapter 180: Astoria's Feeling

Over at the camp, Marquis Ember sent off a small portion of her troops on the three magic airships to scout and monitor the entire Red Goblin Mountains from the air.

At the same time, she waited for the survey team to arrive and give her an update on the situation.

"I was expecting the survey team to be present when we arrived, but it seems like they don't even have an outpost," Helia casually commented.

"Lord Helia must be joking. The survey team belongs to another inquisitor, and their numbers are not high or their strength. Stretching their forces thin to monitor the borders of the Red Goblin Mountains leaves them vulnerable. They would only die in a direct clash with the doggies in the mountains," Ember explained coolly.

"Ah... You're right, Marquis Ember. I have spoken thoughtlessly," Helia replied with a wry smile.

"That being said, Inquisitor Rosedriah most likely did set up an outpost. However, it wouldn't be here; it should be somewhere to the west of the Red Goblin Mountains. After all, she did bring her forces from the western side to assist me," Ember added.

"Anyhow, her survey team should have already received the signal from the magic airships. Although Inquisitor Rosedriah won't be coming as she needs to maintain command of the survey team, she should have sent someone closer to our side."

As they waited some time, Astoria suddenly started moving, intending to enter the mountains.

"Where are you going, Headmaster Astoria?" Ember quickly asked.

"I can't just sit around here and wait. I will join the mercenaries and wipe out the goblins occupying the mountains to clear us a path to the core region," Astoria stated decisively while holding up her greatsword.

"You're our main fighting force against the wolf-men, Headmaster Astoria. If you exhaust your strength in eliminating pests, there'll be a greater danger when we face the wolf-men," Helia knitted her brows and said, "I don't really understand. Please expel my doubts, Headmaster Astoria."

"You seem to be more interested in recovering Vaan Raphna's body than eliminating the wolf-men for the safety and security of the kingdom. We don't even know if they have Vaan Raphna's body or if they know where they sent his body."

"I haven't read everything in the Book of Solomon Raphna. Perhaps the person was truly amazing and invaluable, but that was when he was alive. Now that he is dead, the knowledge he left behind is more important than his body."

"I don't understand why you are going so far for his body," Helia voiced her doubt.

Ember also glanced at Astoria with similar doubts sprouting in her heart. She wondered if Astoria really fell in love with Vaan Raphna, which in and of itself seemed ridiculous.

After all, Headmaster Astoria had survived the gruesome Holy War against the demons of Gehenna and had lived for over three hundred years without being in any relationship.

No matter how great Vaan Raphna was when he was alive, it would be strange for Headmaster Astoria to fall for him when they had never interacted.

Recovering Vaan Raphna's body was a must, but Headmaster Astoria had already shown them beyond simple respect for the person.

"Maybe it is as Marquis Ember said before. Maybe I am in love."

"But that's ridiculous."

"Perhaps. I don't really understand it myself," Astoria uttered blankly before she added, "But it's hard not to feel touched after reading Teacher Raphna's notes."

"What do you mean, Headmaster Astoria?" Ember and Helia furrowed their brows.

"People who read Teacher Raphna's notes would only notice how profound his magic knowledge or how advanced his research was. But only I can see past that... because his research notes are directly related to me."

"There are two main types of light-attribute magic: offensive and healing. Everyone should know that I have no offensive magic capability as a healing-type light-attribute specialist, which is why I picked up the sword."

"However, no-attribute magic can be used by every witch regardless of their attribute specialty. Of course, you can all think it was just a coincidence that Teacher Raphna delved into no-attribute magic research extensively, and not for my sake."

"But no-attribute magic research was just the start. If you had read further, you'd see that the following magic theories focused on the application of healing-type light-attribute magic and physical body improvement."

"Now that you mentioned that, Headmaster Astoria, it does sound like Vaan Raphna's research notes were related to you," Ember inputted, seemingly half convinced. But then she added, "But if you think about it from Vaan Raphna's perspective, he could have just been researching your path to find a way to improve his own physical body."

"That's also true," Astoria gave a half smile.

Of course, her final piece of certainty was the last part of Teacher Raphna's notes. It was about an advancement path for High Witches, which she had written in a thesis but ultimately abandoned because she thought it wouldn't work.

However, Teacher Raphna found it, researched it, and expanded on it enough to convince her that her idea had been right all along and just lacked depth.

Alas, the notes ended there. It was still incomplete.

If anyone else had achieved as much as Teacher Raphna did but without his intellectual talents, they would have dedicated half a century of their life to it.

And when Astoria thought about someone dedicating half a century's worth of magic research for her sake, she would naturally feel moved by it.

Nevertheless, she didn't need to discuss this further with Marquis Ember and Lord Helia as it felt personal.

...

Sometime later, a member of the survey team finally arrived after locating their camp.

"My deepest apologies for making you wait, Grand Inquisitor!" the survey team member, an Early-stage Senior Witch with long black hair, quickly knelt in front of Ember Killian.

"There's no need for that," Ember dismissed the person's words with a wave of her hand and coolly said, "Just give me an update on the situation. Has there been any strange movements in the Red Goblin Mountains in the past two days?"

"Reporting to the Grand Inquisitor, the survey team has indeed discovered something strange in the mountains," the black-haired Senior Witch replied.

"Oh?" Ember's eyes flickered with seriousness before she demanded, "Continue."

"Yes, Grand Inquisitor!"