

## The Witch 251

### Chapter 251: Illusory Liondrakes

The four-legged Fog Beasts that appeared and disappeared before them were the Illusory Liondrakes.

They had the body of lions and the wings and scales of dragons.

And like all Fog Beasts, the Illusory Liondrakes could shift its body between the material and immaterial, making them difficult to defeat with pure physical attacks.

Even the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon was suspected of being a type of Fog Beast.

However, the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon also seemed to be on a whole different level of power, according to Headmaster Tabitha's testimony.

"They're coming!" Vaan suddenly warned the group.

A split second later, multiple Illusory Liondrakes emerged from the fog and pounced on the group from different directions.

Ding!

Astoria immediately blocked two of the Illusory Liondrakes with a large square-shaped wall of light using her Light Fortification.

Light Wall!

After she blocked the two Illusory Liondrakes' attacks, she summoned another Light Wall behind them. The two Light Walls quickly rammed together in an attempt to crush the two Illusory Liondrakes to death.

However, the Illusory Liondrakes dispersed into mists and escaped the collision.

Bang!

The impact resounded.

At the same time, Aeliana entered her Dryad Transformation state and stomped the ground with a single step.

Weed Entanglement!

In that instance, the weeds growing in the gaps of the stone road proliferated at an accelerated rate, turning into towering rope-like stalks of grass before binding a few Illusory Liondrakes in them.

"How dare you raise your claws at my Lord!" Aeliana snarled before she rotated her hand with a flick, pointing upward with two fingers.

Numerous grassroots shot out of the ground like spikes and impaled the Illusory Liondrakes.

However, only a few grassroots managed to strike their intended target, spilling some fresh red blood from the Illusory Liondrakes; the rest missed a split second too late.

The Illusory Liondrakes had phased into the fog to escape their bindings.

Aeliana narrowed her eyes with a dangerous glint, visibly annoyed that such pests didn't drop dead in a single attack.

She quickly manipulated the grass roots and blades to lacerate everything in the area, dicing up the fog in a flurry of lashes like whips.

Nevertheless, her follow-up attack was ineffective against the Illusory Liondrakes in their fog forms.

Meanwhile, Hester, the weakest of the three witches, was the first to secure a kill on the Illusory Liondrakes.

She had impaled one to death with countless black iron spikes until it looked like a porcupine.

"Don't give them a chance to escape into their fog forms. They have to be killed in a single instant while they are still material," Hester informed the group.

Vaan didn't get a single chance to make a move. He was protected by Astoria and Aeliana.

The two ladies could have easily killed several Illusory Liondrakes if they hadn't used defensive spells to protect him first and foremost.

"You don't need to tell me twice," Aeliana coolly said.

She didn't intend to give the Illusory Liondrakes a second chance. Their death sentence had been decided when they raised their claws against her Lord.

Aeliana snapped her fingers, and the overgrown grass roots and blades under her control shattered one by one, turning into countless sharp fragments that floated in the air.

When the Illusory Liondrakes reformed their material bodies some distance away as they were about to launch another attack, they immediately breathed in the sharp fragments in the area.

In that instance, Aeliana diced their bodies into pieces from the inside out.

Meanwhile, Astoria left a pyramid-shaped light barrier behind with Vaan inside to protect him and slashed an Illusory Liondrake in half with a single swing just as it finished reforming its material body.

Red blood splurled from its bisected halves.

In several breaths, a dozen Illusory Liondrakes were slaughtered by the three witches before the remaining Fog Beasts fled into the thick fog.

They had abandoned their prey after realizing the overwhelming difference in strength.

"Light Magic didn't have the slightest effect on the Fog Beasts. They aren't creatures of the darkness attribute," Astoria thought aloud as she recalled her experience.

"I've only read about them, but I actually find it quite fascinating to see with my own eyes. To think such illusory creatures could spill fresh blood." Vaan inspected the remains with interest. "I wonder what kind of beings they are."

"That's something studied by many academics, and they still don't have answers to," Astoria replied.

"Fog Beasts are one of the strangest types of creatures known to date. No one knows how they could phase between the material and immaterial at will, much less the secret of their existence."

"More importantly, I think it's safe to assume that everyone in Misty Leaf Town is dead," Astoria mentioned.

"Not everyone," Vaan corrected.

"Oh?" Astoria glanced around with surprise before she asked, "There are still survivors, Teacher Raphna?"

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't need to answer.

A female survivor took the initiative to approach them after the market square at the town's center had been cleared of the Fog Beasts.

"Quickly, come with me!" the female survivor called them urgently and said, "Don't stay out here. It'll become very dangerous once the stronger Fog Beasts are attracted to this area."

Vaan and the ladies glanced at each other before they had a tacit understanding.

Without a word, they followed the female survivor, a Mid-stage Senior Witch, back to her home, a three-story building on the edge of the market square.

Shortly after everyone entered the building, the female survivor utterly sealed the entrance, preventing any form of fog from seeping into the premise.

Only then did the female survivor feel relieved. She had taken a significant risk by coming out to fetch them.

Vaan casually glanced at the windows and noticed they had all been covered by black cloths and reinforced with defensive measures, preventing any form of light from entering the building.

The only light source in the building was the softly-lit candlelight by the counter.

"All of you must have lots of questions," the female survivor mentioned before saying, "Follow me to the underground floor. We can talk there."

"Alright. Lead the way," Astoria gestured with a hand.

Chapter 252: Great House of Caelestis

Vaan's group calmly followed the female survivor down the stairs to the underground floor, a basement previously used to store wine.

However, it had been turned into a small refuge shelter in the present situation.

With Vaan's senses, he located three other survivors in the shelter, each occupying a space apart from one another and not saying a word. They were lost in their thoughts regarding the disaster and the status of their families.

At the same time, they were also conserving their energy.

With the town covered in fog and Fog Beasts on the loose in the area, they didn't know how long they had to hide before the situation improved.

Nevertheless, the three survivors immediately showed surprise when Vaan's group arrived under the female survivor's lead.

"I've brought some people who could help us get out of town," the female survivor said to the other survivors.

However, after a short glance at Vaan's group, one of the survivors quickly lost interest and dully stared at the ground.

"Don't joke around, Lady Bernadette. You only brought us extra mouths to feed. To get us out of here, we'll need a High Witch or Aura Lord at least," the man with a stubby beard replied pessimistically.

"As for changing the situation of Misty Leaf Town? Perhaps only Her Majesty can do it. However, we are all trapped in here with no way out. People come in, but no one comes out. The Fog Beasts will hunt anyone foolish enough to try."

"That also means no news can make it out of this town," the man added.

"I didn't risk my neck to bring these people over here just to listen to your pessimism, Sir Riordan. I've watched these three witches slaughter a dozen Fog Beasts in the market square," Bernadette coolly stated.

"They are definitely Peak-stage Senior Witch or higher."

"Seriously, Lady Bernadette?" the stubby bearded man named Riordan glanced back up at Bernadette with a pleasant surprise and asked, "You're not joking, right?"

At the same time, the other witch survivors also revealed hopeful expressions after learning of their feats.

"Do you think I'm that bored? Or do you think my eyes have gone bad, Sir Riordan?" Bernadette stared at him with narrowed eyes.

"Not at all, Lady Bernadette—"

"Tell us what happened to this town," Aeliana commanded authoritatively, disinterested in listening to the survivors' nonsense.

They were wasting her time and her Lord's.

"Of course, Lady..."

"It's Lord Aeliana to you."

"Right, Lord Aeliana... Huh?" Bernadette suddenly paused to stare back at Aeliana in shock before she stuttered, "L-Lord Aeliana? As in Lord Aeliana of Sunpeak Town? I heard you were..."

Bernadette wanted to continue her string of questions, but she quickly stopped when she saw Aeliana's patience growing thin.

"Ahem," Bernadette cleared her throat before she said with a serious look, "It all happened the other day, Lord Aeliana."

"It was just another normal day for Misty Leaf Town until two strange witches appeared through Spatial Magic and started questioning about the Thousand Fog Mountains. As people come to Misty Leaf Town to inquire about the Thousand Fog Mountains all the time, nothing seemed wrong up until that point."

"I'm not exactly sure about what actually went down, but one of the local folks must have offended the two witches or something," Bernadette mentioned. "After all, why would the two witches suddenly decide to massacre the town?"

"Two witches appeared in the town, asked some questions about the Thousand Fog Mountains, then decided to massacre the town?" Astoria summarized with a frown before she asked, "If the two witches killed the townspeople, then where did all this fog and Fog Beasts come from?"

"It came from one of the two witches, my Lady. The person was a space-attribute witch, probably at the High Witch rank at that," Bernadette replied with an assumption.

"After the other witch slaughtered everyone in the southern parts of town, the space-attribute witch opened a large spatial portal and brought the fog from the Thousand Fog Mountains to swallow the town."

"Since then, no one was able to leave without getting themselves killed by the Fog Beasts," Bernadette explained.

"I know a bit more about the story since I was somewhat in the area, my Lady," Riordan interjected while having his eyes glued on Astoria's beautiful appearance.

"Speak," Astoria calmly demanded.

"Yes, my Lady," Riordan acknowledged and said, "I remembered that before all hell broke loose in the southern part of town, I heard someone exclaiming 'Fallen Witches' in the area."

"As such, I think the two witches silenced the town to keep their identities hidden. The fog might be a means to stall for time until they finish whatever business they came to Thousand Fog Mountains for," Riordan speculated.

"Fallen Witches?" Astoria narrowed her eyes before she asked, "Did you see what they looked like?"

"I don't think I'd be alive if I did, my Lady," Riordan forced a smile.

"True. I don't think you would be either," Astoria agreed with a nod before she furrowed her brows in thought. "While space-attribute witches aren't rare, there aren't many at the High Witch rank..."

"Do you think it was done by the Great House of Caelestis, Headmaster Astoria?" Hester asked.

"The Great House of Caelestis, huh? They certainly have a few High Witches in their household," Astoria admitted with a thoughtful look before she added, "But a Fallen Witch in their ranks? Seems unlikely."

"Then Misty Leaf Town's situation is unrelated to them?" Hester wondered.

"That's also hard to say," Astoria replied before mentioning, "If a High Witch from the Great House of Caelestis was involved, they might have used Fallen Witches as a means to hide their involvement while creating atrocity here."

Astoria didn't really think the Great House of Caelestis was involved. But since it was mentioned, she couldn't stop thinking about it.



"Why are you fixated on the Great House of Caelestis?" Aeliana coolly asked and said, "Since the town had been reduced to this state by a space-attribute witch, it could be anyone. This includes those that live outside of the seven witch kingdoms."

"I can't help it," Astoria said with a shake of her head.

"After all, the Great House of Caelestis holds a grudge against our Black Rose Kingdom after some of its important members were killed within our territory after the last great expedition."

"It wouldn't be strange if they wanted to take revenge sneakily," Astoria stated.

Chapter 253: Dragon Roar

"That suddenly makes a lot of sense," Aeliana thought after listening to Astoria's point.

Nevertheless, Astoria suddenly turned to Vaan and asked, "What do you think, Sir Vahn?"

"I see your point, but it's quite unlikely," Vaan replied.

"The Great House of Caelestis is, after all, a powerful and famous household in the Scarlet Flame Kingdom with a long history dating back to even long before the founding of the seven witch kingdoms."

"If they wanted to cause damage to the Black Rose Kingdom, they would be more thorough in their actions to make sure no one could figure out their involvement," Vaan stated.

"I see. That is also a valid point," Astoria acknowledged with a nod before she asked him, "Do you think Fallen Witches did it then?"

"I am inclined to believe so, Headmaster Astoria," Vaan calmly replied before he added, "However, that is only based on what we have heard. There's no telling who is actually behind this attack."

"The more pressing issue is to resolve Misty Leaf Town's problem and figure out what the two witches are planning in the Thousand Fog Mountains. If Sir Riordan believed a single High Witch was only enough to help people flee the town and resolve its problem, there must be a bigger threat out there that hasn't been mentioned yet."

"Isn't that right, Sir Riordan?" Vaan glanced at the stubby-beard man who was an Aura Grandmaster.

However, the person didn't respond immediately.

It was in a state of shock with Bernadette and the other two witch survivors after they overheard Vaan and Astoria's conversation.

More precisely, they were shocked by Astoria's name.

Headmaster Astoria!

There was only one Headmaster Astoria in all of the seven witch kingdoms, the Battle Maiden of Holy Light!

Not only Lord Aeliana, but even Headmaster was here. They couldn't help but turn to Hester subconsciously, wondering which notable figure she was.

However, Hester waved her hand.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not someone famous like this these two. I doubt any of you have heard of the Witch of Black Iron," Hester stated self-deprecatingly.

Even so, the survivors were still shocked, nonetheless.

Just what kind of party have they come across? How did Lord Aeliana recover from her Abomination state? They didn't remember Headmaster Astoria being so free, either.

Furthermore, she was wearing black armor, which hadn't happened before.

They felt very behind on the news.

While the survivors continued to be in a state of shock, Aeliana's patience grew thin again before she snarled at the Aura Grandmaster for taking too long to respond.

"Answer Sir Vahn's question!" Aeliana barked.

"Y-Yes, Lord Aeliana!" Riordan quickly snapped out of it before admitting, "This gentleman was correct about a bigger threat."

"Although the two witches seemed to have left for the Thousand Fog Mountains, they left behind something very dangerous. The Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon, which was said to be invincible, is somewhere in the town's fog."

"You're telling me the space-attribute witch even managed to drag the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon from the upper regions and put in a small town like Misty Leaf Town?" Aeliana frowned.

"Don't listen to him, Lord Aeliana," one of the other witch survivors spoke before she explained, "The truth is we don't know if the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon is residing in town or not. No one here has seen it."

"There must be a reason why he suspected it at least, no?" Aeliana glanced at the Senior Witch in a red dress. "It shouldn't be a baseless claim."

"Well, that's because we heard a distinct dragon roar in the sky above the town," the Senior Witch stated.

Roar!

Shortly after, a distinct dragon roar was heard above the town.

Even though everyone was in the basement underground, they all heard the dragon roar as clear as day.

"That's the dragon roar I talked about, Lady Aeliana," the Senior Witch declared.

"A dragon roar, huh?" Vaan muttered with a thoughtful look.

He wondered if it was related to Eniwse.

Even if it turned out to be the real Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon that should only be encountered in the upper region, it was worth investigating.

"Shall we clear out the remaining Fog Beasts in town and look into the dragon's roar?" Vaan suggested.

"We have to help these people," Astoria nodded.

"If it is your wish," Aeliana replied.

"I did agree to help you on your journey, Sir Vahn. Thus, I'm fine with whatever decision you make," Hester spoke.

"Then, it's decided," Vaan nodded.

After receiving the ladies' approval, they thanked the survivors for their information and prepared to leave the building together.

A few moments later, Bernadette escorted them out and resealed the door. The survivors relaxed with a sigh after Vaan's party was gone.

"I hope they can eliminate all the Fog Beasts and remove the fog smothering the town," Riordan said with a hopeful look.

"Since Headmaster Astoria is here, I believe they have a good chance of succeeding," Bernadette said. "It's just the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon that worries me. Even Headmaster Astoria might not be able to defeat it."

"That's if Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon is in town. It might be the only dragon we know, but it doesn't mean the dragon roar belongs to it," the red-dressed Senior Witch stated.

"Is no one going to say anything about Headmaster Astoria's black armor or Lord Aeliana's recovery?" the last survivor broke her silence before asking with doubt, "How can we be sure they are what they say they are?"

"Well, Lady Bridget," Riordan glanced at her and said, "A lot of crazy things have happened recently."

"No one would expect the Fallen Witches to be so bold as to massacre an entire town, nor would anyone believe they could summon the fog and bring Fog Beasts out of the Thousand Fog Mountains in the past."

"Thus, whether it's a black-armored Headmaster Astoria or Lord Aeliana's recovery, I would believe anything at this point. Heck, if you told me the earth was flat, I would also believe it," Riordan stated.

#### Chapter 254: Behind the Dragon Roar

Shortly after Vaan's group returned to the town's center, they discovered the Fog Beasts had returned to the feeding ground.

It was the same group of Illusory Liondrakes that had previously fled after a dozen of its kind were slaughtered by the three ladies.

If it weren't for the wounds on their bodies that were still fresh, Vaan and the others would have mistaken them for a new group of Illusory Liondrakes.

"These Fog Beasts are back already?" Aeliana furrowed her brows and wondered, "Do they have short memory retention or something?"

"That's what most people around the Thousand Fog Mountains have assumed," Astoria casually answered.

"Don't worry about me. Quickly eliminate the Fog Beasts. There may be other survivors in town. The sooner we eliminate the Fog Beasts, the safer they will be," Vaan stated.

Nevertheless, his mind wasn't completely with them.

He was still thinking about the Great House of Caelestis they had previously discussed, but for a different reason.

Given it was a powerful household comprised of space-attribute members, there was a high chance that he may have related to them.

After all, he had caught wind of news that the Great House of Caelestis also participated in the Third Great Expedition and had a few important members killed during and after the expedition.

Nevertheless, the Great House of Caelestis was situated in the Scarlet Flame Kingdom.

He could only look into his family's origins after he settled his matters in the Black Rose Kingdom.

After Vaan put aside his thoughts on the Great House of Caelestis, he studied the fog with Omni-Sense.

He had a feeling that it wasn't normal fog, and as it turned out, it wasn't.

There were traces of magic in the fog.

'Perhaps the entire fog spanning across the Thousand Fog Mountains is invoked by a grand magic spell,' Vaan thought before he wondered, "In that case, who set it up? And for what reason? What is hidden in the mountains?'

While Astoria and Hester went to deal with the Illusory Liondrakes, Aeliana remained by Vaan's side.

Even though he said their protection wasn't needed, they still didn't feel assured unless they had at least one of them guarding him.

"My Lord, stick close to me. No harm will come your way," Aeliana spoke earnestly, but she took that chance to hug his arm intimately.

Furthermore, she couldn't wipe the smirk off her face; she was truly enjoying the present situation.

However, only people of her level could take it easy in the fog-filled town overrun by Fog Beasts. Others would be too nervous and on edge to even be thinking of taking advantage of the situation like she did.

Vaan was a little speechless.

Aeliana was a little too obsessed with him—Not that he minded the two soft cushions pressing against his arm.

Nevertheless, Astoria and Hester quickly finished off the remaining Illusory Liondrakes in the town's center. Especially Astoria, who took the chance to adapt to her new greatsword.

Each Illusory Liondrake was cleanly cleaved in half by her; the Fog Beasts didn't stand a chance with her as their opponent.

On the other hand, Hester didn't give her foes any chance of retaliation either. She skewered them all with black iron spikes.

It was clear that she had many black iron spikes stored in her Magic Domain.

"This place has been cleared. Let's move on to the next area," Astoria suggested before she added, "I doubt these are all the Fog Beasts in Misty Leaf Town."

"Probably not," Vaan acknowledged and said, "However, it's a little abnormal that we've only encountered Illusory Liondrakes. After all, Illusory Liondrakes aren't the only type of Fog Beasts in the Thousand Fog Mountains."

"Furthermore, they are on the rarer side. And yet, we've come across more than two dozen already," Vaan added.

"Perhaps in the middle region, they are rare. But in the upper region, they might be more common," Astoria thought.

"That would mean there's a chance that the space-attribute High Witch opened a spatial portal directly to the upper region," Hester mentioned before she added, "That also means that the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon might really be here."

Roar!

Right after Hester spoke, the dragon roar resounded in the thick fog above them again.

In that instance, Vaan immediately swept out with his Omni-Sense. Although he failed to locate the source of the dragon roar, he found its general direction.

"That's the dragon roar. Let's follow it," Vaan urged.

Without waiting for the three ladies to respond, he dashed ahead. That prompted them to chase after him.

"Teacher Raphna, wait up! It's dangerous for you to run off on your own! We're talking about a potential Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon here!" Astoria warned.

"You seemed to have forgotten what I am capable of, Headmaster Astoria," Vaan coolly replied before adding, "I know how to take care of myself."

He was doing fine before she found him, and he will continue to do fine—with or without her.

That said, he did not mind her protectiveness, but he needed to draw the line where her protection was warranted.

Over-protectiveness would become a hindrance in the Thousand Fog Mountains, a place where each of them definitely had to pull their own weight.

He couldn't keep sitting back and letting the three witches handle everything.

Perhaps the witches were used to being in charge and taking care of things because it was a matriarchal society.

However, they had to understand that things were run differently with him around; he was the party leader.

"Sorry, Teacher Raphna," Astoria apologized.



"Don't be," Vaan shook his head and earnestly said, "Your concerns are appreciated, Headmaster Astoria."

Nevertheless, after the three witches followed Vaan's lead, they soon found themselves exiting the town's northern gate.

With Vaan far in the lead, all the Illusory Liondrakes encountered along the way were swiftly dealt with by him using the Rank 4 Black Sword in his possession.

Astoria was startled by his physical prowess.

However, she didn't have time to dwell on it before everyone had their attention drawn to the creature flying northward in the open sky after it flew out of the town's fog.

"That's... a True Dragon!" Hester exclaimed with widening eyes.

Chapter 255: Rescue & Kill

At the sight of a True Dragon, everyone was both shocked and amazed.

At the same time, Vaan was also a little disappointed.

It was neither Eniwse nor the Thousand Fog Illusion Dragon, a Fog Beast. Instead, it was an actual True Dragon.

Furthermore, it was a red dragon that specialized in the fire element.

"Oh my lord, I've only heard the story, but this is my first time actually seeing a True Dragon," Hester commented with a look of awe.

There were all sorts of legends associated with True Dragons.

They were said to be the kings of all dragon species and possessed unmatched strength, magic, age, and wisdom.

If they weren't the most powerful creatures in the world, then they were definitely among the strongest.

Few could rival the True Dragons.

As everyone continued to watch the red dragon flying northward until it disappeared into the fog over the Thousand Fog Mountains, Vaan narrowed his eyes.

"The red dragon must have come to Misty Leaf Town to investigate the situation," Vaan speculated before adding, "We were fortunate enough to catch a sight of it."

"So the rumors were true. There was a tribe of dragons hidden in the Thousand Fog Mountains, and there was even a True Dragon among them. Perhaps the fog was created by them," Astoria guessed.

"I had the same thought," Vaan asserted before casually asking, "How strong do you think the red dragon was, Headmaster Astoria?"

"It was too far. I couldn't tell," Astoria shook her head and said, "However, if anything about the True Dragon's tales rings true, we can assume it was at least a Mid-level Rank 4 being or higher."

"Mid-level Rank 4 or higher, huh? I felt it was at least Peak-level Rank 4 or higher," Vaan muttered.

"Peak-level Rank 4 or higher?" Astoria was slightly taken aback before she nodded with a serious look, "In that case, it truly deserves to be one of the strongest beings in the world."

"More importantly, now we know there are real dragons in the Thousand Fog Mountains. Could the two potential Fallen Witches that devastated this town be going after them?" Astoria wondered.

"I hope so," Vaan replied, his brows knitted together with concern.

"You hope so, Teacher Raphna?" Astoria glanced at him with surprise before her eyes flashed with realization. "Right... The dragons aren't the only creatures hidden within the Thousand Fog Mountains. Wise Scholar Eniwse is also in there."

"And if we think about the nature of Fallen Witches, they aren't restrained by morals. They are willing to delve into all kinds of dark and forbidden research as long as it serves their goals. Catching a Wyvern-type Abomination sounds more plausible," Hester interjected thoughtfully.

"Or so you say, but we can't ignore the rarity of a True Dragon," Aeliana retorted and said, "I'm sure Fallen Witches would be interested in learning the secret of their strength, wisdom, and longevity."

"Hm... Lord Aeliana has a point. A True Dragon does make a more valuable test subject," Astoria acknowledged with a nod before adding, "Assuming they are Fallen Witches, that is."

"Furthermore, you are missing the most important point, Lord Aeliana. In order to make a True Dragon a test subject for their research and experiments, they must first have the strength to capture one."

"As such, going after Wise Scholar Eniwse still seems more likely. But of course, once again, this is all based on the assumption that they are Fallen Witches. We might even be entirely wrong," Astoria mentioned.

"That's why blind speculations won't do us any good right now. We need to wrap up the problems in Misty Leaf Town quickly and supply ourselves necessities before we enter the Thousand Fog Mountains," Vaan said objectively.

"Can't we just go now, Sir Vahn? I mean, time is of the essence, is it not?" Hester thought.

"I also want to leave right away, but how long will we last in the Thousand Fog Mountains without supplies? Furthermore, Headmaster Astoria also cannot ignore the people in need of saving back in town," Vaan mentioned with a wry smile.

"You seem to know me quite well, Teacher Raphna," Astoria said with a slightly bashful smile.

She truly wanted to save the townspeople before leaving.

"Well, what can I say? I have indeed read many stories about you, Headmaster Astoria. However, I would rather judge your character in person than believe in the one depicted in the stories," Vaan calmly stated.

"As expected of Teacher Raphna. Stories that glorify my character and feats can't fool you," Astoria casually praised before asking, "Then, are you saying you already know what kind of person I am?"

"Not at all," Vaan straightforwardly admitted. "I only know you want to save the townspeople. Your frown gave you away."

"My frown did?" Astoria uttered with surprise.

It was true that she had frowned when Hester suggested leaving right away. However, Vaan wasn't facing her at that time.

Does he have eyes in the back of his head?

"Anyway, let's move," Vaan urged.

...

Shortly after receiving everyone's agreement, they quickly re-entered Misty Leaf Town's northern gate.

Afterward, they resumed their hunt for Fog Beasts in town while searching for survivors.

With Vaan's superhuman senses, finding survivors wasn't a challenge. He easily located a group of witches hiding in the basement of an inn in the northern parts of town.

However, when Vaan opened the basement door, he wasn't welcomed with joy but anger.

"What are you doing here?! Get lost! We don't have spare room and supplies to accept a lowly man like you! Find somewhere else to hide!" a High-level True Witch furiously barked before firing a water bullet at him without warning.

Vaan was struck on the shoulder, but no harm had befallen him. The water attack spell of a mere High-level True Witch meant nothing to him.

Nevertheless, it was witnessed by Aeliana and Astoria right behind him, and Aeliana's eyes glinted with a crimson hue.

"Hold it. We are not here to—"

"Die!!!"

Swoosh!

Before Astoria could finish speaking, Aeliana fired an incredibly fast and sharp wooden spike past Vaan.

The wooden spike quickly struck the True Witch right in the heart and nailed her body to the wall at the other end of the basement.

"Lord Aeliana, you..." Astoria was immediately stunned.

Chapter 256: Aeliana's Shamelessness

Astoria hadn't expected Aeliana to be so decisive and ruthless in her kill. It also became transparent to her that Aeliana was not in a normal state of mind.

The malevolence and killing intent she displayed was out of control—or so she thought. But after the True Witch was killed, Aeliana's malevolence and killing intent vanished, replaced with concern.

"Are you hurt, Lord Vahn?" Aeliana inquired.

"I'm fine," Vaan calmly replied before adding, "That level of attack was far from enough to harm me. After all, I didn't even budge."

Shortly after it was mentioned, Aeliana and Astoria confirmed the truth with their own eyes. Vaan's shoulder, though slightly wet, wasn't damaged in any shape or form. His outfit was in perfect condition.

The True Witch's water attack spell was meant to push rather than penetrate.

Although Aeliana's reaction was within his expectation, it also came with a surprise.

Ding!

<You have been issued an Elimination-type Witch Hunt>

<You have completed an Elimination-type Witch Hunt>

It was only his second Elimination-type Witch Hunt, but it was also likely to be the fastest Elimination-type Witch Hunt completion he would ever achieve.

After all, even if he received another Elimination-type Witch Hunt due to another sudden attack, he would first consider the consequence and doability of the witch hunt before committing to it.

On the other hand, such considerations wouldn't cross Aeliana's mind. Her natural instinct was to kill first and worry later.

Unfortunately, it didn't look like he could collect his prize with so many witnesses around. He would have to abandon the mana inside the dead witch's body.

Moving on, Vaan anticipated that Astoria would criticize Aeliana for killing the True Witch. And as it turned out, he was right on the mark.

"Lord Aeliana, how could you just kill her like that? She may have been wrong, but she doesn't deserve death," Astoria stated.

"You're wrong, Headmaster Astoria. Anyone who raises a hand against Lord Vahn deserves death," Aeliana coolly refuted before feigning ignorance, "And did you mean how I could kill her like that? I didn't kill anyone. She was killed by a Fog Beast."

"..." Astoria was struck speechless by Aeliana's shamelessness.

Not only did she kill a witch without batting an eye, but she also lied with a straight face. She was certainly not the same Lord Aeliana from three years ago.

That, Astoria was sure.

"D-did you really just kill a True Witch over a lowly man? W-What do you all want from us?" one of the True Witches nervously asked after she witnessed her friend killed in cold blood.

But before the True Witch could breathe another breath, Aeliana shot out another wooden spike and killed her on the spot.

"Lord Aeliana!" Astoria thundered.

"Oops, my hand slipped," Aeliana foolishly poked her tongue out before she punished her hand with a soft slap on the back of her hand. "What a naughty hand."

"That True Witch didn't raise a hand against Teacher Raphna!" Astoria said with the corner of her lips twitching.

"I forgot to mention that anyone who disrespects Lord Vahn also deserves death," Aeliana nonchalantly said before she glanced at the remaining survivors in the basement. "You all better choose your words wisely."

The remaining witches couldn't help but shiver in terror under Aeliana's warning gaze, which was no different from a bloodthirsty demon.

No, her gaze was even more terrifying than a bloodthirsty demon!

Nevertheless, Astoria softly sighed with mixed feelings. Although she disagreed with Aeliana's killing, she didn't really feel bad for the True Witches' deaths.

"Listen carefully. We are here to rescue all of you, so obediently follow us. We will escort you out of town," Aeliana informed the survivors in a non-negotiable tone.

However, the survivors were hesitant to follow her.

Her words weren't very convincing when she killed two of their friends. They weren't sure whether she had come to save them or to kill them.

"I am Astoria Braveheart. I can assure you that we are here to save all of you and escort you out of town. As long as you don't say or do anything to antagonize Lord Aeliana, no one else will have to die by her hands," Astoria said with a sigh.

"Astoria... Braveheart? The Battle Maiden?" the witches uttered with surprise before expressing their doubts.

Astoria did not match her famed appearance of wearing silver armor.

That said, they didn't have much choice. They were afraid that they would be killed if they didn't comply.

As such, they simply accepted who she claimed to be.

"Then, we'll be in your care, Headmaster Astoria," the witches surrendered their lives to fate and whatever it had in store for them.

After the group left the inn's basement, they made their way back to the town's center to round up the survivors.

When the witches realized they were heading to the feeding ground, they truly believed they were walking towards their deaths.

However, they quickly rejoiced when they found the corpses of the Illusory Liondrakes.

"There's no need to worry about the Fog Beasts. We have all eliminated all the Illusory Liondrakes in this area," Astoria assured them.

Shortly after leaving the witches with Bernadette and the other survivors, Vaan's group searched for other survivors in the northern half of town.

Along the way, they found more straggling Illusory Liondrakes roaming the area. Of course, not a single Fog Beast was spared during their encounter.



Vaan's group rounded up the survivor groups hiding in buildings one by one and gathered them in the town's center.

Surprisingly, the number of survivors quickly reached the hundreds.

Afterward, they searched the southern half of town, which they had previously passed. The number of survivors they found was, more or less, the same as the northern half of town.

However, none of the survivors were found near the main road, which the group had previously taken.

It was also why they didn't encounter any survivors on their way to the town's center when they had just arrived.

After spending a couple of hours rescuing the survivors, Vaan's group led over seven hundred survivors out of the southern gate, away from the fog-filled town.

There, they set up a temporary survivor camp on the grassy field south of Misty Leaf Town with all the necessities brought with them.

Astoria observed the survivors being self-reliant in the camp before she softly said with a sigh of relief, "Our work is, more or less, done here."

"Then, let's collect some supplies and be on our way," Vaan decided.

Chapter 257: Ready for the World

Even without the Lord of Misty Leaf Town, who had unfortunately been killed, the survivors were able to operate the survivor camp just fine.

They did not need the Lord's leadership.

Instead, the survivor camp was quickly led by five Late-stage Senior Witches.

Each managed over a hundred survivors, setting up their gangs in the camp and taking charge of their ration distribution.

At the same time, messengers were sent out to inform the surrounding human settlements about the tragedy of Misty Leaf Town to request reinforcement and aid.

After the important matters were settled, the survivors gathered around campfires with their rationed meals, sharing their nightmarish experience during the town's massacre.

Around that time, mentions of Lord Aeliana's recovery and black-armored Headmaster Astoria also surfaced in their conversations.

But more importantly, the survivors were more interested in the man that accompanied the two.

"I wonder who that man was... What was his name again? Sir Vahn? Teacher Raphna? Lord Vahn? Vahn Raphna?"

"Something like that. Headmaster Astoria referred to him as Teacher Raphna, and Lord Aeliana called him Lord Vahn. That's not normal."

"Right? I was thinking the same thing. You should have seen the look of surprise on my face when I heard Lord Aeliana refer to a man as her Lord. It makes one wonder about the history between them."

"Maybe the man has something to do with Lord Aeliana's recovery? No one has ever returned after becoming an Abomination before... If the man had that kind of ability, he would have achieved an impossible feat worthy of the highest respects."

"But how is that possible, though, right? I mean, he's a man, after all."

"A very knowledgeable or wise man, that is. Don't forget Headmaster Astoria acknowledged him as her teacher. To be the teacher of the Battle Maiden, how deep does his wisdom have to be?"

...

As the survivors gossiped over the campfires, Vaan's group departed for the Thousand Fog Mountains after stocking up on their supplies of dry food and seasonings such as salt.

"Was it alright to reveal your identities to the survivors, Sir Vahn?" Hester casually asked as they approached the fog territory.

"People were bound to learn about it sooner or later," Vaan calmly replied before he added, "We've only sped up the process to our advantage."

"Oh? What kind of advantage is that? I can only smell trouble once the supremacists catch wind of your abilities and feats," Hester said with interest.

"With the massacre that happened in Misty Leaf Town, there's a chance that the survivors will choose to migrate to a safer settlement to settle down. And since they also know who saved them, there's a good chance that Sunpeak Town will be their choice," Aeliana explained.

"That doesn't sound right," Hester furrowed her brows and said, "A bigger city would offer better protection and security. So why would they choose Sunpeak Town over Redpine City, Hundred Night City, or even Blackthorn City?"

"There's a simple answer for that; they can't afford the cost," Vaan calmly said.

"Compared to the bigger cities, which have very high living standards, the cost of living in Sunpeak Town is so low anyone can afford it. If the people aren't stupid, they will realize the poor living condition in Sunpeak Town is only temporary."

"With Aeliana's recovery and the curse over the region lifted, there are plenty of incentives for people to move to a great trading town," Vaan added.

"Damn," Hester exclaimed and said, "Doesn't that mean I would have struck the riches if I took a loan from the Witch Union Bank and invested in Sunpeak Town? Can I still make it if I head back now?"

"It's too late for that, Lady Hester. I've already sent someone to buy out the best land and properties in Sunpeak Town. If people aren't stupid, they would have caught wind of such large purchases and made their way over to get their hands on the remaining plots," Vaan casually said.

"That's unfortunate..." Hester expressed her regret.

However, her disappointment only lasted before she glanced at Vaan as if he was a bag of endless wealth.

"Sir Vahn is going to be extremely wealthy in the future. And if I remember correctly, you are engaged but not married yet. What do you think about taking me in as a lover? Even being a mistress is fine with me."

Right after Hester said that, she felt two sharp gazes from Aeliana and Astoria, causing her to be taken aback.

"Actually, never mind. Hahaha... It was just a joke," Hester chuckled with a forced smile at Vaan, but her words were intended for Aeliana and Astoria.

'Tough competition... Tough competition...' she thought wryly.

Since Hester backed out, Vaan simply responded with a slight smile.

Nevertheless, Hester suddenly recalled that they hadn't addressed the problem with the witch supremacists.

"Hold on. What about the supremacists? You haven't said anything about them. What will you do if they come to trouble you, Sir Vahn?" Hester asked.

"With Lord Vahn's present ability, what trouble can't he solve? Lord Vahn is prepared to deal with the trouble that may arise. Perhaps, the supremacists will even be his stepping stones," Aeliana said devotedly.

Nevertheless, Astoria slightly furrowed her brows before she mentioned, "Don't forget that demons are the real enemies of humanity."

"I'm well aware of that, Headmaster Astoria. You don't need to worry about where I will stand if there's another Holy War," Vaan calmly assured her.

Since he had already reached an adequate level of strength, he was ready to take the next stage forward onto the larger world stage.

The supremacists will not be able to hinder his path.

Given the time that had passed, his title as Venerable Sage should have been approved by seven headmasters and made official.

All that was left to do was to pop the inflating balloon and let everyone know he was still alive.

Between what he could offer the kingdom and the supremacists, he was curious about whose side the Transcendent Witch would pick.

Even if she stood on the sideline, that was more than enough.

With the Venerable Sage title, he would have the right to retaliate against anyone going after his life, even if they were witches.

#### Chapter 258: Volcan Wolves

Vaan had only read about the Thousand Fog Mountains in the past. But after seeing the fog domain, it was truly an unnatural phenomenon.

In fact, everyone would believe so at a glance.

The thick, white, towering fog covering the entire Thousand Fog Mountains and its surroundings looked like one enormous cloud mountain.

From another perspective, it also looked like an inverted tornado of epic proportions as the fog slowly but surely revolved around the center, preventing the fog domain from expanding or dispersing.

"This isn't a normal fog formation, alright," Vaan commented as he inspected the border of the fog domain.

"Many believe it was formed by a grand magic spell or a treasured oddity of unparalleled might that may have fallen from the heavens," Astoria casually mentioned. "That's why many Peak-stage Senior Witches are willing to take on the risk to search for opportunities in the Thousand Fog Mountains."

At the same time, she also inspected the border of the fog formation beside Vaan.

"Well, after we've all witnessed the red dragon, I'm sure everyone will be more inclined to believe in the latter," Vaan stated.

"But a grand magic spell capable of summoning the fog of this magnitude... It would have to be at least Rank 5 or higher."

"Agreed," Astoria acknowledged with a nod and said, "There isn't a single High Witch in the kingdom capable of covering this much land with a grand magic spell. We don't even come close to this level."

"This also shows the enormous gap between Rank 4 and Rank 5," Astoria added.

"Let us proceed," Vaan urged.

...

Shortly after the group advanced into the thick white fog, Astoria summoned a shining orb of white brilliance with Light Magic to increase the group's visibility in the fog.

Although the fog didn't disappear, the light pierced through it. As such, the illuminated fog was semi-transparent enough for the group to peer through it.

Nevertheless, the range was only limited to a hundred-yard radius of the light orb. Even so, a hundred yards were enough for the group to see plenty.

"What do you think is the shortest route to the upper regions, Headmaster Astoria?" Vaan casually asked, but his mind was on alert, frequently scanning the area with his senses for hidden dangers.

Astoria contemplated for a moment before she replied, "I've heard of a route frequently used by many Peak-stage Senior Witches who sought to reach the middle and upper regions quickly."

"Are you talking about the water stream by a wolf den mentioned in the beginner guide book to the Thousand Fog Mountains, Headmaster Astoria?" Vaan sought her confirmation.

"That's right, Teacher Raphna," Astoria admitted with a nod.

"The water stream is the most commonly used and publicly-acknowledged quickest route to middle regions from the southern side of the Thousand Fog Mountains. We should be able to reach the middle regions without taking any detours fairly quickly if we can locate the wolf den and follow up the water stream."

"However, we have to locate a different water stream once we reach the middle regions if we want to reach the upper regions. Well, more specifically, we'll reach the halfway point on the seventh mountain," Astoria stated.

"So we're going to take this path after all, huh?" Vaan muttered.

"Well, that depends on which mountain you want to scale, Teacher Raphna." Astoria glanced at him and said, "But if we just want to reach the upper regions, following the water streams to the seventh mountain should be the best route to take."

"It was rumored that the nine inner mountain peaks had a clear sky and were free from the dense fog," Astoria added.

"However, not many people had made it far beyond the halfway point. Thus, a rumor is just a rumor," Vaan calmly stated before he nodded. "That said, we do have better luck finding Eniwse if we can reach the top of any of the nine mountain peaks."

The Thousand Fog Mountains had over thirty mountains, but the nine inner mountains were the tallest.

Considering Eniwse became a Wyvern-type Abomination, a flying creature, there was a higher chance of finding her in the upper regions.

That is why they have decided to head to the upper regions directly to look for her.

"Hold on. Wouldn't we encounter a lot of monsters and beasts if we followed up the water stream? Just the constant battle will delay our journey," Hester mentioned.

"Not necessarily." Astoria shook her head and said, "The water streams have high sulfuric content. Although it's not enough to make the water toxic, it does give the water streams a terrible rotten egg smell."

"Thus, beasts generally avoid the water streams unless they really need to hydrate themselves," Astoria stated.

"Is that so? I guess that makes more sense," Hester thought.

After all, the water streams wouldn't be the most commonly used and publicly-acknowledged quickest route to the middle and upper regions if they had many beasts camping them.

Nevertheless, after the group's direction was decided, they found their heading towards the wolf den mentioned in the Thousand Fog Mountains guidebook.

But along the way, Aeliana suddenly paused.

"Don't wolves have a strong sense of smell? How can they stand the stench of the sulfuric water stream? And they even have a den next to it?" Aeliana wondered.

"They're Volcan Wolves; the strong stench of sulfuric water is normal to them," Astoria explained before adding, "They're also quite territorial."

"But according to the guidebook, they are also intelligent and prideful," Vaan mentioned.

"They will permit us passage without trouble if we pay the tribute of food. Many people have done so over the years. Thus, the Volcan Wolves have become quite accommodating and friendly to humans."

"Of course, they'll probably snarl at us if we don't offer them anything while passing through their territory," Vaan added.



"That bear looks like it'll make a fine tribute," Aeliana suddenly pointed out just as a ten-foot-tall grizzly bear with grey fur entered the range of their vision. "It'll probably feed the whole pack."

Right after Aeliana finished speaking, the grizzly bear also noticed them due to the bright orb of white light stinging its eyes.

Roar!

The grizzly growled and charged at them.

Chapter 259: Bloodline Suppression

The grizzly bear wasn't just angry but also hungry, making it highly aggressive and hostile. Even so, its strength was no higher than Mid-level Rank 2.

Anyone in the party could easily deal with it.

"Guess it has been decided," Vaan uttered.

He pointed a single finger at the incoming grizzly bear with the intent to kill it with Rock Bullet, but Aeliana reacted quicker.

She killed the grizzly bear with a single wooden spike impaled through its head.

Vaan wryly smiled.

As he glanced at Aeliana, he could see her staring back at him intently. He could picture her wagging a tail, waiting for praises.

"Good job."

"Hehe."

Aeliana giggled foolishly after receiving Vaan's praise.

Moving forward, Astoria grabbed the grizzly bear by the leg and dragged it along the way with brute strength.

"We've just passed the Red Maple Tree marked with the cross. The wolf den shouldn't be far from here," Vaan mentioned.

His judgment was further proven by the sound of running water several hundred feet up ahead.

"Lower the brightness to avoid provoking the Volcan Wolves."

"Alright, Teacher Raphna."

Shortly after Astoria dampened the brightness of the light orb hanging above them, they drew closer to the wolf den.

"Why do people need to give the Volcan Wolves such considerations? Can't we just kill them and be done with it if they attack us?" Aeliana wondered.

"Volcan Wolves have steel stomachs and can eat anything living or growing in the Thousand Fog Mountains' lower regions, Lord Aeliana. Thus, they are great for keeping the ecosystem in check and preventing the spread of diseases caused by the corpses of other monsters and beasts," Astoria explained.

"I see..." Aeliana uttered thoughtfully.

She had discovered quite a few piles of bones on the ground along the way. However, none of them carried any foul stench or fleas.

All the meat had been cleanly devoured.

Furthermore, the land was quite vibrant with life as plants and weeds grew everywhere. There wasn't a single patch of barren land, which was a surprise considering the thick fog blocked the sunlight.

There was truth in Astoria's words.

The Volcan Wolves stink, but they keep the rest of the environment clean and healthy.

'No wonder people preferred to pay tribute to the Volcan Wolves rather than kill them,' Aeliana thought.

Wiping out the Volcan Wolves ruins the ecosystem; it wasn't a sustainable option.

True Witches and Aura Masters would eventually have no monsters and beasts to hunt for battle experiences and skill refinement if the lower regions were turned into wastelands.

Awrooo!

A sudden wolf cry resounded when Vaan's group approached within two hundred feet of the wolf den, which prompted them to pause their steps.

Within the next few moments, several more wolf cries were heard as if the Volcan Wolves were being slaughtered.

"Someone's killing the Volcan Wolves!" Hester assumed.

However, Vaan furrowed his brows. Based on the feedback from his senses, there weren't any other beings besides the Volcan Wolves in their den.

Rather, the Volcan Wolves seemed to be turning on each other.

After Vaan's group quickly reached the wolf den, a group of trees with burrowed holes underneath their trunks, they quickly found several Volcan Wolves running around and biting other Volcan Wolves.

They behaved like rabid wolves.

However, they were only cubs. Thus, they were no match for the adult wolves, who headbutted them away.

Even so, a few adult Volcan Wolves had scratches and bite marks on their bodies. Then, within moments, those adult Volcan Wolves also displayed rabid behaviors and turned on their kind.

Nevertheless, it stopped when Vaan's group arrived. They became the bigger targets for the rabid Volcan Wolves.

"Didn't you say the Volcan Wolves were friendly to humans now?" Aeliana mentioned as she prepared her wooden spikes.

However, Vaan raised a hand to stop everyone from attacking the incoming rabid Volcan Wolves.

At the same time, he directed a stern glare at the rabid Volcan Wolves; his gaze carried a strong trace of his intent and warning.

'Begone!'

In that instant, the rabid Volcan Wolves froze in their tracks as their trembling bodies screamed with fear.

At the same time, their fogged eyes, laced with killing intent, momentarily cleared up.

They cowered and backed away in the next moment, completely intimidated and suppressed by Vaan, a person with a superior wolf bloodline.

"This..." Astoria and Hester revealed their surprises.

Nevertheless, Vaan quickly shifted their attention with his following words, "These rabid Volcan Wolves don't seem to be in their right state of mind. They seem to be affected by something."

"Leave the bear and try casting a cure spell on them, Headmaster Astoria," Vaan instructed.

At the same time, he brought his hands together and summoned an earthen cage to contain the rabid Volcan Wolves in one place.

"Alright, Teacher Raphna," Astoria agreed with a nod.

Curative Light!

A soft, warm, white light enveloped the seven rabid wolves and cubs in the earthen cage, mending their wounds.

However, the spell failed to relieve them of their rabid states as their eyes remained tinged with a reddish hue.

Upon seeing that, Astoria cast a different spell.

Cleansing Light!

Once the second veil of white light enveloped the rabid wolves and cubs in the earthen cage, the reddish hues in their eyes gradually faded.

Astoria's eyes flickered before she said, "I thought they were afflicted with rabies, but they seemed to have been poisoned instead."

"Poisoned?" Hester raised an eyebrow before she mentioned, "I thought Volcan Wolves could eat anything living and growing in the lower regions."

"Yeah, but that's only limited to the lower regions," Vaan raised a point while staring at the water stream next to the wolf den.

Hester and the other two ladies followed Vaan's gaze before she uttered, "The water stream was poisoned?"

"Or contaminated," Vaan casually added.

With a wave of his hand, the earthen cage crumbled and returned to the land, freeing the cured wolves and cubs.

Aeliana's gaze turned sharp when the other Volcan Wolves approached them, led by a much bigger Volcan Wolf, who seemed to be the leader of the pack.

However, they paused a short distance away and lowered their heads to express gratitude for their timely aid.

"It's the first time I've heard or even seen Volcan Wolves behaving like this," Hester commented with surprise, taken aback by the scene before her.

It also seemed like they were being worshipped.

#### Chapter 260: Wicked Poison

After the Volcan Wolves offered their respects and gratitude, the mother wolves went up to their cubs and groomed them by licking off the residual blood and dirt.

Awroo! Awr, awr, awroo!

Shortly after, the leader of Volcan Wolves communicated with its pack before one of the adult Volcan Wolves that was previously poisoned approached Vaan's group.

Awr!

The wolf barked once and spun around before moving over to the water stream. There, it sat down with its tail wagging, seemingly waiting for them to follow them.

"It seems like we just got a guide," Vaan commented with a slight smile.

"A guide, huh? I suppose it can help us avoid monsters and beasts with its keen sense of smell. Though, I'm not sure how useful that will be since we'll be following the water stream anyway," Astoria voiced her opinion.

"Of course, if we want to investigate the source of the water stream contamination, then I think the Volcan Wolf will be very useful."

"Since it's on the way, and the Volcan Wolf is offering its help, there's no reason to turn it down," Hester said before she added, "Well, that's what I think."

"Let's just move on," Vaan urged before stating, "If the contamination source doesn't require us to take too big of a detour, it's worth investigating. Otherwise, we will continue what we set out to do; find Eniwse."

"That said, if the water contamination was related to the two witches that turned the Misty Leaf Town upside down, it might very well be worth looking into. After all, we still don't know for what reason they have come to the Thousand Fog Mountains."

The two witches could be going for the dragons, or they could be going for Eniwse in her Wyvern-type Abomination form.

Thinking about it, Vaan rather not take any chances; he had to stop the two witches.

After all, they had a space-attribute High Witch among them. If they successfully capture Eniwse, there's no telling where they would take her.

Nevertheless, after Vaan's group proceeded to the water stream, the Volcan Wolf stood up excitedly with its tail wagging.

Shortly after, it turned around and went a few dozen yards up the water stream before it turned back and barked at them, urging them to follow it.

"I know it's grateful to us, but doesn't it seem a little too enthusiastic? If I didn't know it was a Volcan Wolf, I would have mistaken it for a pet dog," Hester mentioned.

"Let it be," Vaan calmly said before commenting, "Who knows what it was experiencing while under the poisoned state?"

"More importantly, we don't know what contaminated the water stream. However, we do know that it produces rabid and cannibalistic behavior in its victims," Vaan mentioned.

"Perhaps the work of a Fallen Witch," Astoria assumed before adding, "There are those among them who research poison and medicine for various reasons such as cure, kill, and self-enhancements."

"Then those two witches are really Fallen Witches," Hester guessed.

"We don't know that definitely. But given the circumstances, the chances are very likely," Vaan stated with a deep look.

As long as it wasn't 100% certainty, even 1% uncertainty could become 100% incorrect.

A skilled gambler could turn a 1% probability into a 100% probability in a game of chance, whether it was done with skills or underhanded means.

Thus, while Vaan was inclined to believe the two witches were Fallen Witches, he wouldn't believe it until he saw undeniable proof.

The worse thing a strategist could do was make blind assumptions.

Blind assumptions lead to mistakes, and mistakes can be very punishing.

As Vaan's group traveled along the water stream with the Volcan Wolf taking the lead, the ladies had their noses covered due to the foul stench of sulfuric water.

Meanwhile, Vaan studied the water stream to determine the source of contamination.

"Even the Volcan Wolves known for their steel stomachs were affected by the contaminated water stream. It's hard to imagine what it would be like for all the other beasts that rely on the stream's water," Astoria mentioned along the way.

"Can you determine what contaminated the water by studying the stream, Lord Vahn?" Aeliana asked shortly after.

"No." Vaan shook his head and said, "It's too diluted. We have to be closer to the contamination source to get an accurate judgment."

"That said, there does seem to be a very faint scent of blood in the water stream," Vaan mentioned his discovery.



"A faint scent of blood?" Astoria furrowed her brows and wondered, "What kind of blood can be so toxic that it causes rabid and cannibalistic behaviors in other beasts?"

"No, perhaps whatever the blood belonged to, it was already affected by the poison?" Astoria suddenly thought shortly after.

"We'll find our answer soon enough," Vaan said.

Considering the contaminated water stream could affect the Volcan Wolves, the source shouldn't be too far away.

As the group followed the Volcan Wolf, it suddenly stopped and barked at them, directing their attention to the water stream.

"There's a beast carcass in the water stream," Astoria informed the group.

Nevertheless, everyone could see the beast's carcass with their own eyes due to the shallow water. Most of the carcass was exposed above the water surface.

It was a four-legged creature of the feline family, had black fur, was over nine feet long, and weighed more than two hundred pounds.

"It's a Shadow Leopard," Vaan determined the dead beast at a glance.

"An adult Shadow Leopard like this one would usually have the strength of a Mid-level Rank 3 being at least. But judging by the number of scars, it must be quite veteran and old, even among Shadow Leopards. Its muscles are also well built."

"Its overall strength should be around High-level Rank 3," Vaan concluded after studying the Shadow Leopard's features.

Of course, he could also check its tooth decay to determine its age, but there was no need for such a detailed assessment of the Shadow Leopard.

After all, Shadow Leopards were natives of the middle regions.

"What is a beast from the middle regions doing here in the lower regions?" Astoria frowned and said, "Shadow Leopards rarely leave their habitat. The beasts from the lower regions don't have enough nutrients to interest them."

"Moreover, purple blood is oozing from the Shadow Leopard's neck. Someone had poisoned it, slit its neck, and dumped its carcass here on purpose. If I wasn't certain before, then I am definitely certain now. This a Fallen Witch's doing," Astoria claimed.

Everyone could see the poisoned carcass of the Shadow Leopard slowly changing complexion under the influence of the purplish poison.

Its flesh darkened, and its veins ruptured—No, they were breaking down as if they were decomposing at an alarming rate.

However, it wasn't just the veins.

After the veins broke down, the purplish poison worked on breaking down the flesh and bones to produce even more purplish poisoned blood.

The poison didn't just cause beasts to become rabid and cannibalistic; it also caused its host's cells to attack each other and break down to multiply the poison.

"Such a wicked poison... I am of the same that this is the work of a Fallen Witch," Hester concurred.

Awr!

The Volcan Wolf alerted the group that more Shadow Leopard carcasses were further upstream.

It wasn't just one carcass but dozens; possibly an entire leap of Shadow Leopards had been slaughtered to poison the water stream.

"With this quantity of poisoned blood contaminating the stream, the person was set on causing chaos in the lower regions. They wanted to incite the beasts, most likely to hinder people from venturing into the Thousand Fog Mountains," Vaan said with narrowed eyes.

Whatever the mastermind was planning, they obviously didn't want people to follow them after the Misty Leaf Town incident, even if it meant poisoning the water stream to cause irreversible damage to the life and land.

The person clearly had no care for anything but their own agenda for visiting the Thousand Fog Mountains.

Vaan wouldn't want Eniwse to fall into the hands of such a person.

"We need to remove these carcasses from the stream and purify the poison to prevent further damage from spreading in the lower regions," Astoria stated.

Shortly after she spoke, the group quickly got to work.

"Don't touch the carcasses with your hands, Lady Hester," Astoria quickly warned. "The poisoned carcasses are much more potent than the diluted poison I previously treated with Light Magic."

"If you get poisoned, a normal Cleansing Light might not be enough to treat you," Astoria said solemnly.

"I see," Hester uttered with surprise before nodding. "Don't worry. I'm not that careless."

Hester and Vaan used Earth Magic to move the Shadow Leopard carcasses to land before Astoria used Fire Magic to incinerate them.

However, her Fire Magic was surprisingly weak and failed to reduce the Rank 3 carcasses to ashes. As such, she only managed to scorch the carcasses until they were charcoal-black.

Fire Magic wasn't her specialty, nor did anyone in the party also specialize in Fire Magic.

Nevertheless, the intensity of her Fire Magic should have been enough to get the job done. Alas, the poison was surprisingly persistent.

Patches of blackened flesh crumbled apart before purplish poison blood oozed out of the carcasses.

Astoria's eyes narrowed immediately.

"The poison persisted even when the carcasses have become charcoal? It's surprisingly enduring," Aeliana said with a frown. "Imagine the damage it would cause if it were used to contaminate the water source in a big city."

"Definitely wouldn't be a pretty sight to see," Vaan commented before saying, "Allow me to get rid of it."

Shortly after stepping forward, Vaan took out a flask of green liquid and checked the quantity before he hurled it at the pile of charcoal carcasses.

The glass flask shattered on impact, and the green liquid content poured over charcoal carcasses, mixing with the purplish poison blood that oozed out of the pile.

In that instant, the two solutions were quickly sucked towards each other like a magnetic attraction before they lit up with a bubbly and muddy grey light.

"Oh, that doesn't look good," Vaan commented at the scene, but his expression remained casual and indifferent.

However, Astoria's expression abruptly changed along with the other two ladies before she quickly raised her hand.

Boom!

The pile of charcoal carcasses exploded with the same force as a Peak-level Rank 3 explosion spell, splattering black goo everywhere.

Fortunately, Astoria's timely light barrier protected everyone from being hit by the shock of the explosion and stained by the black goo.

Although the black goo scattered everywhere, there wasn't a single trace of poison within them. It was as if a counteracting agent had nullified the poison.

"T-Teacher Raphna?!" Astoria glanced back at Vaan with a startled look and asked, "What the heck did you chuck in the pile of carcasses?"

"Hmm, poison," Vaan replied.