

The Witch 371

Chapter 371: Vaan's Surprise

Vaan cleared the area and placed the black cube in the center before pressing the button to activate the magic tool.

In that instant, the black cube expanded, turning into a giant gateway with numerous blue runes lighting up and charging.

The surrounding mana was sucked into the center of the giant gateway before a spatial portal was opened, connecting to the other side.

Shortly after, Vaan stepped through and entered the Red Dragon Clan's First Peak.

At the same time, Astarot was quickly informed of the spatial gateway's activation and flew over as soon as possible to receive him.

"Welcome back, Supreme Leader!" Astarot greeted, though it had only been less than fifteen minutes since he had sent Vaan off. "Is there a problem on the other side?"

"There indeed some issues, but they aren't urgent. Still, I need an expert in information extraction," Vaan mentioned. "I've brought four prisoners for the information extraction. There's a high chance they contain some important knowledge related to the Devil's Contractors."

"However, two of them seemed to have something cast on their souls. It might be some sort of anti-confession spell. Thus, it'll be good if you have a way to bypass it. Even better if there's a way to extract information directly from their minds."

"After all, keeping their eyes and ears will only risk exposing the Red Dragon Clan if we use standard interrogation methods to extract information from them," Vaan stated.

"Don't worry, Supreme Leader. There is indeed a spell that can read their memory and extract information from their souls directly. So we don't require them to speak," Astarot assured.

"Also, I agree, Supreme Leader. If there's any chance they worship the seven Great Devils, it's best if we cripple their vision and hearing."

"I thought as much," Vaan nodded and said, "I'll be back."

Shortly after, he returned to the forest on the other side of the spatial gateway before ruining his prisoners' vision and hearing with fire.

Smiling Knife and the others naturally woke up from the pain, but Vaan knocked them all out with chops again.

Afterward, he brought them back to the Red Dragon Clan's First Peak.

"Well then, I'll leave them in your capable hands to extract all their information, Lord Astarot," Vaan stated, passing his human kebab stick to the first dragon lord.

"With honor, Supreme Leader. Just leave it to me," Astarot promised to get the job done perfectly before he asked, "Is there anything else you require?"

Right then, the dragon lords from the other eight mountain peaks arrived one by one after sensing Vaan's initial presence.

Vaan acknowledged their presence before nodding to Astarot's question.

"I do, actually," Vaan admitted before saying, "It seems I'll be requiring the service of the young elites sooner than expected."

"Has any young dragon achieved the adequate level?" Vaan directed the question to all the dragon lords.

However, the dragon lords all revealed apologetic looks.

"My apologies, Supreme Leader. Your talent is peerless and rarely seen in a chaos cycle. It's not easy for our young elites to reach Rank 5 in such little time," Astarot mentioned.

"However, my son, Zodreg, has the highest talent among the younger generations and has already reached the peak of Rank 4. With your blessings, raising him to Rank 5 in the shortest time would be possible."

"Then, we shall focus on him," Vaan acknowledged before asking, "What are the requirements to raise him to Rank 5?"

"If we can concoct a Rank 5 Fiery Lotus Potion enhanced with five drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence, any peak Rank 4 can be raised to Rank 5," Astarot answered.

"There should be a Rank 5 Fiery Lotus available. I'll be back," Vaan stated.

Shortly after, he made a quick trip to the Trial by Fire and procured the required resource from the black pyramid.

After he used Emerald's ability to create the seeds of new Fiery Lotuses and planted them in the blood essence pool, he returned to First Peak.

"One Rank 5 Fiery Lotus and ten drops of the Fire Dragon God's blood essence. Use what you need to raise Zodreg to Rank 5. You may keep the leftover blood essence as a reward," Vaan stated.

"Thank you, Supreme Leader! I won't fail you!" Astarot replied ecstatically.

The other dragon lords revealed their envy when they saw the good stuff go to the first dragon lord. Still, Vaan noticed their thoughts and made them a promise.

"You will all get equal opportunities," Vaan assured before glancing at Narvim. "Oh, right. Lord Narvim, I have left a surprise for you inside the memory crystal. Have you seen it?"

"A surprise inside the memory crystal?" Narvim revealed a doubtful look before he shook his head. "No, I have not."

"Then you should check it out when you get back," Vaan suggested before informing all the dragon lords, "I still have matters to settle in Sunpeak Town. So, I will return first."

"I will check back later when you have the information extracted from the prisoners and ready for me, Lord Astarot."

"Yes, Supreme Leader."

Shortly after Vaan returned to the forest north of Sunpeak Town, the spatial gateway closed, and the dragon lords dispersed soon after.

Khaleesi followed Narvim to his cave to check out the surprise together. They quickly found the memory crystal before Khaleesi dibbed the first look.

Knowing the Red Dragon Clan had twelve main dragon exercises, Khaleesi was immediately surprised to discover an unfamiliar thirteenth dragon exercise among the memory bubbles.

'Formless Dragon Exercise?'

The unfamiliar dragon exercise only contained texts and no demonstrations, but Khaleesi was quickly drawn to it.

The further she read, the more astonished she became.

Having mastered all twelve dragon exercises, she could tell the essence of the twelve dragon exercises had been skillfully incorporated into a single dragon exercise, making the Formless Dragon Exercise profound and unfathomable.

She wanted to memorize the text and put it into practice right away.

However, her deep concentration was suddenly interrupted when Narvim made a sudden outburst right next to her.

"K-Khaleesi!"

"What is it?"

Khaleesi glared at Narvim, causing the latter to hesitate for a moment. But he quickly mustered the courage to speak.

"I... I've been robbed! My mana stones are all gone!"

Chapter 372: I Can't Promise That

"Robbed? Who would dare a dragon lord? Besides, they are only mana stones. Those are nothing compared to..." Khaleesi closely stopped speaking as she recalled something.

"Vahn came looking for mana stones. I just didn't expect him to take everything..." Narvim said with a sigh. "Now, I have to make more."

Swoosh!

Suddenly, Khaleesi swiftly left the cave with the memory crystal, causing Narvim to be surprised for a moment before he chased after her.

"Hey! Where are you going, Khaleesi? You still haven't told me what you found inside the memory crystal. I only have one of those. Are you robbing me too?" Narvim wondered.

Nevertheless, Khaleesi didn't say anything and continued flying back to her cave. Before long, she reached her cave with Narvim not far behind her.

"Gone... All gone. I've been robbed too!" Khaleesi exclaimed with surprise after checking her empty mana stone coffer.

"Ahem," Narvim cleared his throat, feeling a little bit better after knowing he wasn't the only one. "What's the big deal? Mana stones are nothing, right? Those were your..."

Narvim immediately shut up after seeing his wife's glare. He would be courting death if he continued his pettiness.

"Hmph!" Khaleesi snorted before she agreed, "You're right, Narvim. It's just a little troublesome and inconvenient that they are all gone. Still, the mana stones are nothing compared to what Vaan left for us."

"What did he leave for us?" Narvim asked curiously.

After Khaleesi made a copy of the Formless Dragon Exercise and stored it in her own memory crystal, she returned Narvim's memory crystal back to him.

"Check for yourself," she said.

It didn't take long before Narvim's expression underwent multiple changes as he perused his memory crystal. From casualness to surprise, then astonishment to complete shock.

"This Formless Dragon Exercise could benefit the whole clan!" Narvim exclaimed with excitement.

Being the top talent in the past, he had more insight than Khaleesi. As such, he didn't need to practice the Formless Dragon Exercise to understand its effectiveness.

"Let us share what we have with the others."

"Mm."

Khaleesi quickly agreed with Narvim's suggestion before they two went to meet the other dragon lords.

The mana stones had completely slipped past their minds.

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North of Sunpeak Town

After Vaan returned from the Red Dragon Clan and deactivated the black cube, he stored it away and entered the town.

Moments later, a new barrier of blue flames was summoned again, sealing off Sunpeak Town once more.

Although the barrier of blue flames vanished every instance he left for the Red Dragon Clan, it was hard to say if anyone dared to Sunpeak Town during its downtime.

Nevertheless, the Assembly of Silent Night was not the only problem in Sunpeak Town; it was only part of it.

Vaan did not know the Assembly of Silent Night's true purpose, but he was confident they did not return the Kingdom of Black Rose purely for revenge.

'A hundred and twenty Rank 4s and two Rank 5s... This power is comparable to a witch kingdom, and it's what the Assembly of Silent Night has only revealed on the surface. What were they trying to achieve here in Sunpeak Town?' Vaan mused.

He didn't doubt the Assembly of Silent Night would have more S-rank Witch Hunters and possibly a leader who was even stronger than the S-rank Witch Hunters.

Considering he had the Witch Hunter System and the Assembly of Silent Night's members were called Witch Hunters, it would be strange if he did not think they had some relations to demons.

Nevertheless, he could only find out after Astarot extracted information from the prisoners and relayed the knowledge to him.

After Vaan returned to the lord's estate, everyone beside Silvaria greeted him.

Headmaster Astoria and Cyrena referred to him as a teacher, while Dahlia and Solana called him by name. Only Aeliana directly addressed him as her lord.

"Lord Aeliana, that isn't very appropriate, is it?" Silvaria couldn't help but blurt out after hearing Aeliana, a region lord in the Kingdom of Black Rose, put a man above her and call him a lord.

However, she immediately regretted opening her mouth. The man had displayed power beyond her imagination.

What was inappropriate about calling him a lord?

"Are you looking down on Lord Vahn? Who I call a lord is none of your concern, Lord Silvaria. You best keep that in mind," Aeliana replied with a cold look and exerted pressure on Silvaria.

"Yes, I have misspoken, and I apologize for that, Lord Aeliana and Lord Vahn," Silvaria lowered her head and admitted her mistake.

The odds were against her.

More importantly, she was startled by Aeliana's power, which seemed to be at the same level as hers but also felt even stronger.

Aeliana was still a Senior Witch before her abomination incident, and yet she had already caught up after her recovery.

Furthermore, that look in Aeliana's eyes bothered her. She appeared to worship the man.

'Lady Solana vaguely mentioned someone was responsible for Aeliana's recovery.... Could it be this person?!' Silvaria suddenly realized.

It was the only possibility that made sense.

While various thoughts raced through Silvaria's mind, Vaan turned to Dahlia and Solana and asked them to fill him in on the details of the situation.

"What happened in Sunpeak Town in the past month? Who harmed you, Dahli?" Vaan asked.

Shortly after, Dahlia and Solana recounted all the events and problems leading up to the present. When Vaan heard it, he frowned in thought. His anger was silent.

He knew there would be some problems, but he didn't think they would grow so far out of hand.

There was something more to the Sunpeak Region than its commercial value that prompted various forces to move to Sunpeak Town.

"How audacious these merchants are! Who gives them the courage to be so bold in my domain?!" Aeliana spouted after she suddenly smashed the ground, unable to contain her rage.

At the same time, Astoria glanced at Vaan with concern and said, "Teacher Raphna, I hope you can avoid killing witches and let me handle all issues related to them."

"I can't promise that," Vaan coolly replied.

It would be fine if the Assembly of Silent Night were behind Dahlia's attack since he had already delivered justice.

But if another party had been involved in the incident, there would be a great reckoning.

Chapter 373: Cyrena's Advancement

Vaan could imagine how close Dahlia was to death when he heard Solana recount the incident. She wouldn't have made it without Cyrena's recovery potions.

"Lord Vahn doesn't need to dirty his hands. I will slaughter them all myself!" Aeliana declared with a ruthless look.

Even before Sunpeak Town's decline, it had always been eyed by other lords and witches due to its ideal location.

If she doesn't kill a few people, others would think she's a pushover.

"You can't just kill merchants or any witches as you please, for that matter, Lord Aeliana. It's not a lawful thing to do. If they hold a noble rank, they must be tried before the law," Astoria mentioned.

"Not a lawful thing to do?" Aeliana snickered with contempt before she stubbornly and vehemently declared, "In my domain, my town, I am the judge, jury, and executioner!"

Not only Dahlia almost lost her life, but her mother was also bullied in their own town! How could she tolerate such insolence from the merchants?!

"I understand your frustration," Astoria acknowledged before saying, "However, if you kill a lot of merchants and blow up this matter, Her Majesty will not turn a blind eye to what happened here."

"Depending on Her Majesty's mood, you could be stripped of your status or even executed. Either situation doesn't help Teacher Raphna, Lord Aeliana," Astoria added.

After Aeliana heard that, she calmed down somewhat.

Meanwhile, Vaan shifted his attention to Cyrena and cautioned her to come closer to him before they talked.

"A month ago, I promised to cure you and let you practice magic like everyone else. But instead, I sent you to Sunpeak Town without treating your problem," Vaan mentioned before asking, "Do you blame me?"

"Not at all, Teacher." Cyrena vehemently shook her head and said, "I believe you wanted me to focus on potioneering and not be distracted by magic. As a result of that, I fully digested what you taught me and mastered Rank 1 potions."

"It was also thanks to my swift and solid mastery in potioneering that I was able to help Lady Dahlia recover from her wounds," Cyrena added.

She did feel resentful at the start. But looking back now, she could only be grateful for how everything turned out.

After Vaan heard Cyrena's reply, he nodded with acknowledgment. Then, he placed a hand on Cyrena's shoulder and brought her even closer until their foreheads made contact.

Cyrena was surprised by Vaan's action as she couldn't understand it, but then she felt a strange warmth inside her body.

Vaan used his Omni-Sense, powered by his Demigod-rank dragon soul, to locate every antimagic spore in Cyrena's body and burn them all.

Although he could have asked Aeliana to remove the antimagic spores, this would only benefit Aeliana.

Cyrena would lose her golden opportunity to catch up to her peers.

After all, the antimagic spores in her body had been filled to the brim with mana. Removing them was the same as stealing years of mana gathering.

Still, an Impurity Cleansing Potion would be needed to remove the impurity from Cyrena's body, but that could be worried about later.

Once the antimagic spores were removed, Cyrena felt her body overflowing with mana. And without even doing anything, the overwhelming mana started to converge towards her heart on their own.

However, the formation of the mana ring ultimately required her control. As such, Cyrena sat down on the spot and focused on forming her first mana ring.

The basics of witch cultivation were engraved in her memory.

Within a short time, Cyrena had already finished forming her mana ring smoothly without a problem. Next, she used the remaining mana to stabilize and saturate her mana ring.

Mid-stage True Witch... Late-stage True Witch...

Cyrena saturated her mana ring with little-to-no obstruction, allowing her to soar through the True Witch rank. The mana in her body quickly depleted, but her momentum showed no sign of slowing.

As such, Vaan took out some mana stones and placed them around her. Cyrena's body devoured them all within seconds like a starved beast that hadn't eaten for years.

The mana absorption rate shocked even Astoria, Solana, and Silvaria.

Sometime later, Cyrena's advancement momentum finally came to an end after she reached the peak of the True Witch rank.

'Peak-stage True Witch...' Silvaria's eyed bulged with disbelief.

Within a matter of minutes, a non-witch was transformed into a Peak-stage True Witch. She had never witnessed such swift advancement in her years of practicing witch magic.

Meanwhile, Vaan gave Cyrena a satisfied nod before focusing on more important matters at hand.

"Lord Silvaria, was it? If you're not one of us, I ask that you leave us. We have private issues to discuss here," Vaan calmly informed.

"Ah? Please let me stay. I'm like totally on your side. Right, Lady Solana? Lady Dahlia? We just survived a life-or-death situation together," Silvaria shamelessly stated.

She would be a fool if she wasted the opportunity to become closer to such a powerful figure who was so casual in strengthening witches.

"I think we can trust her. We owe her our lives for surviving as long as we did," Solana spoke for Dahlia and herself.

"Very well," Vaan calmly acknowledged with a nod before continuing, "I have, more or less, grasped the general situation. Right now, it's safe to say at least four forces are interested in Sunpeak Town and its development."

"The Assembly of Silent Night was only one of them. The scholar group is another force gathered in Sunpeak Town, but they can be considered neutral for the time being. The last two forces are all merchants."

"However, they can be divided into two independent groups; local merchants and foreign merchants. We know at least one of these forces is responsible for ambushing Dahlia," Vaan stated.

"Unfortunately, you already wiped out the Assembly of Silent Night, Vahn," Solana mentioned with a frown. "So even if they were the culprits, we would never find out for certain."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Vaan argued with a slight smile. "It's true that I wiped out the Assembly of Silent Night, but not entirely. I left four survivors in capable hands for information extraction. We will know if it was them in due time."

"But why have they all set their eyes on Sunpeak Town, Teacher?" Cyrena couldn't help but ask after joining their conversation late.

"Well, that's because..."

Chapter 374: They Will Come To Us

"...Sunpeak Town is the most central settlement in the Kingdom of Black Rose; it's the center of the spider web," Vaan answered.

"If Queen Henrietta didn't make Blackthorn City the capital of the kingdom to combat the threats of Gehenna in the north or if Gehenna didn't exist, Sunpeak Town would have been the ideal location geographically."

"The fastest route from one end to the opposite end of the kingdom would mostly pass through the Sunpeak Region. That's why Sunpeak Town is attractive as a city of trade. It has high traffic," Vaan stated. "Of course, I'm sure you already know this fact."

Cyrena nodded.

However, that wasn't why she asked the question. She felt like there was more to Sunpeak Town that attracted the various forces.

"Since the invention of magic airships and access to flight magic, fewer people have taken the ground route around the kingdom," Astoria mentioned thoughtfully. "At the very least, upper-class members deign to travel by foot."

"Even so, the upper-class members are only a minority. Most people still traverse the ground route around the kingdom. As such, Sunpeak Town remains attractive as the main trade city in the kingdom."

"But to attract forces besides merchants and scholars... It must be information," Astoria guessed.

"That's right. The key is information." Vaan nodded before continuing, "As Sunpeak Town develops, all sorts of people will pass through or stay. Thus, it'll be the best place to gather news throughout the kingdom."

"However, Blackthorn City could be considered an independent country within the kingdom; little information leaves or enters it. Thus, we can conclude that the Assembly of Silent Night and possibly the foreign merchants' interests lie in the rest of the kingdom and not the capital."

"The Assembly of Silent Night is one thing... But if foreign merchants are more interested in collecting information than profit, they would be spies for other witch kingdoms," Astoria frowned.

The witch kingdoms' borders were closed off to the outside world. However, travels between each witch kingdom weren't restricted.

"What if the spies aren't limited to the other witch kingdoms?" Vaan casually raised the question, causing Astoria and the others to pause with frowns.

It wouldn't be surprising if the Kingdom of Black Rose had spies planted in other witch kingdoms and beyond. Thus, logically thinking, the other witch kingdoms and beyond would also be interested in putting spies in the Kingdom of Black Rose.

"That shouldn't be possible... is what I would like to say," Solana uttered with a wry and helpless smile.

"But seeing how the Assembly of Silent Night managed to infiltrate the kingdom after the purge, I guess it wouldn't be surprising if spies from other countries could also sneak into the kingdom."

"Wouldn't that make the kingdom's security too lacking? What the hell have the border lords been doing?" Silvaria frowned.

While listening to the conversation, the Lord of Wolfwater slowly began to realize something was at play that involved not only various forces but also various countries.

"Considering if war ever breaks out, the border lords of each country would be the first to be wiped out. It wouldn't be strange if these border lords achieved a tacit understanding and made secret deals with each other for their own benefits," Vaan mentioned.

The room went silent for some time.

While everyone felt the looming threat of war with other countries, Vaan pondered the enemies' objectives.

He believed it was related to the Third Great Expedition, which was ultimately related to him.

The Kingdom of Black Rose was forced to divide Fuhengir's carcass with other witch kingdoms. But they were coincidentally ambushed and robbed before they could bring their share back.

If the greatest treasure of Fuhengir got lost during the chaos, the various parties involved would undoubtedly be looking for it.

Still, considering the stone containing the Witch Hunter System was kept by him for many years without getting stolen, there was a high chance that they didn't know exactly what they were looking for.

After all, no one recognized the stone's value.

"Nevertheless, it doesn't matter what the various forces are trying to achieve here in Sunpeak Town. If they hinder our progress, I will eliminate them all the same," Vaan calmly stated.

The Assembly of Silent Night and the other forces weren't the only ones who wished to establish a base in Sunpeak Town for gathering information.

He was also interested.

After all, he knew too little outside the Kingdom of Black Rose. Only by grasping the situation of the kingdom and its surroundings would he know where to direct his focus and attention.

Exploration discoveries weren't made with one's eyes closed.

"Right now, I only have two concerns: finding the culprits behind Dahlia's attack and developing the properties in the central town area. Other matters come after," Vaan mentioned shortly after.

"Some truth will be shed on the culprits behind Dahlia's ambush once we receive the information extracted from the survivors. Thus, we can put that aside for the time being. That just leaves us with Sunpeak Town's central development to worry about," Astoria mentioned with some complicated feelings.

She found it strange that she, an academy headmaster, would be involved in the development of another town. She was abandoning her duties back at Blackmoon Academy to assist Vaan.

"We've been trying to develop the central town area while you were gone, but the merchants have been hindering our progress," Solana mentioned before stating, "If we can't gain their honest cooperation, gathering construction materials will be troublesome."

"Shall I go and kill a few to make them more honest?" Aelianna suggested as her eyes glimmered with a cold light.

"That won't be necessary," Vaan shook his head and said, "They will come to us."

"If they aren't stupid, they should already know what happened in the central town area. Coupled with my flame barrier preventing them from leaving, we can expect merchants to be lining up for forgiveness sometime tonight to early morning."

"They'll definitely act more honest and cooperative then," Vaan stated.

After Solana, Dahlia, and Cyrena heard that, they couldn't help but look forward to it. The merchants had given them so much trouble in the past month.

It would be nice to see them grovel pathetically for a change.

"Is that so? It's a bit embarrassing to say, but I'm a little excited to see that happen," Solana spoke with a shy smile.

Chapter 375: Two Visitors

Meanwhile, Astoria was more concerned about Vaan's reveal of power.

"As I thought, the blue flames are created by you, Teacher Raphna. Don't you think this will attract too much attention?" Astoria asked.

She did not need to ask how Vaan could control the blue flames, believing they were most likely related to the Fire Dragon God's inheritance.

On the other hand, Aeliana did not care how or why Vaan could control such powerful blue flames. She only needed to know that he could.

As for the others, they were all curious, like Astoria. However, they felt asking and intruding on Vaan's secret was rude.

"I've already attracted all the attention there was to attract in Sunpeak Town when I decimated the Assembly of Silent Night's forces," Vaan casually said.

"Revealing any more power won't change anything. News will eventually spread about me once the people in Sunpeak Town are permitted to leave. But that isn't to say there was no purpose or benefit in revealing too much power."

"It can act as a deterrent and make others think twice before crossing me," Vaan stated.

However, this so-called deterrent wasn't for him to avoid troublesome matters. Instead, it was to protect the people on his side.

He possessed the power to bring the whole kingdom to ruin. Still, he couldn't protect everyone unless his opponents were completely aware of his power.

Although Astoria understood Vaan's intent, she could not help but worry for the future of the kingdom.

The Kingdom of Black Rose spearheaded humanity's defense against Gehenna's invasion. If it destabilized due to in-fighting, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Sometimes, Astoria felt like the burden of protecting humanity was too much for her.

Gehenna was obviously much more powerful and dangerous than all of humanity. The demons of Gehenna would not hesitate to kill, plunder, and enslave humans if given a chance.

And yet, humans remained divided, governed by self-interests, instead of unifying their efforts to overcome the worldwide threat.

Humanity had so much potential, but they were unable to make full use of it.

Astoria recalled her talk with Vaan on Ninth Peak and wondered if it was better to throw away her responsibilities and think for herself.

After all, if the various human countries couldn't think about the bigger picture, why should she care?

Alas, it wasn't easy for her to change due to her upbringing.

'I wonder if the choices I've made throughout life had been the correct ones,' Astoria silently wondered, questioning herself.

Meanwhile, Vaan was not privy to Astoria's complicated thoughts.

"It's getting late. You all had a tough battle earlier and must be exhausted. So get some rest for tonight; Sunpeak Town's development can wait for the morning," Vaan said to Solana's group after seeing their tired expressions.

Only Cyrena was in good condition due to her multiple advancements. Solana, Dahlia, and Silvaria were all exhausted from maintaining the water barrier in their battle.

Although Dahlia received Vaan's blood and recovery potions, it wasn't enough. The human body still needed rest.

The mind could only perform certain maintenance on the body when it was in a rested state.

"Alright," Solana's group readily agreed.

With Vaan's presence and the overwhelming sense of security he provided, they finally got the chance to sleep well.

"You don't plan to go back, right? I will arrange a room for you, Lord Silvaria."

"That would be most appreciated, Lady Solana."

After Solana and the others left, Aeliana and Astoria remained behind with Vaan as they were far from tired.

"Let us clean up a bit," Vaan suggested, glancing at the mess inside the lord's estate and outside.

Aeliana and Astoria didn't have any complaints about Vaan's suggestion. With their light and wood magic, the cleaning process was swift and simple.

Just as they completed tidying up the lord's estate's ground floor and patching up the surface outside, they received their first batch of visitors.

"Oh? It looks like we have guests tonight after all," Vaan mentioned as he was beginning to think they wouldn't come until the morning. "You're the town's lord, Aeliana. You deal with them."

"Yes, of course, Lord Vahn," Aeliana replied with the sweetest smile before turning to the two approaching witches with a vicious and menacing glare. "What the fuck do you two want, coming here in the dark of the night?!"

"State your names and businesses quickly before I wring your heads and make your flesh and blood fertilizers for the forest!" Aeliana threatened impatiently.

Vaan almost staggered as he made his way back to the lord's estate. At the same time, the corners of Astoria's lips twitched.

Still, Vaan didn't intend to intervene.

"Lord Aeliana... So it's true that you've recovered..."

High Witch Beth and the Lord of Eastcliff retreated a step simultaneously, startled and surprised by Aeliana's heavy killing intent that was borderline demonic.

At the same time, they felt the mana pressure of her Early-stage High Witch's power, which was shockingly much more intense than theirs and could be compared to the Mid-stage High Witch rank.

"I am High Witch Beth, and this is the Lord of Eastcliff City, Annette Borges. We came to pay our respects to Lady Solana and also see you. However, since we have confirmed the rumors of your recovery and you don't seem to welcome us, we'll take our leave now," High Witch Beth stated.

However, just as Beth and Annette turned around to leave in a hurry, Aeliana stomped the ground, causing countless tendrils and vines to grow out and obstruct their path.

"Beth and Annette, was it? I want you both to kneel and apologize to my mother!" Aeliana shouted, exerting greater pressure on the two witches.

"Don't go too far, Lord Aeliana. We are both lords," Annette turned around and said with a frown. "You should treat me with proper respect."

"Respect? Did you respect my mother? How dare you ask her to come out and meet you with a letter! You had no respect for the local authority. Why the hell should I give you my respect?" Aeliana replied coldly.

Beth was about to speak up for Annette, but then she realized she had no right. She had indeed sent a letter like Annette.

Nevertheless, she feared they would be in big trouble if she couldn't resolve the problem peacefully.

"Lord Aelianna, we also have our own difficulties in this matter..."

Chapter 376: Disrespect & Humiliation

"Difficulties? What difficulties could you, a High Witch, possibly have?" Aeliana snorted, giving Beth a chance to explain herself.

"Lady Solana offended too many merchants and witches. We couldn't meet her without offending all of them as well. Thus, we could only express our intentions to meet through a letter," Beth explained.

However, her explanation didn't appease Aeliana in the least. On the contrary, it only served to fuel her anger.

"Such nonsense," Aeliana spat condescendingly as the cold light in her eyes intensified. "A High Witch would fear offending a group of Senior Witches? Do you think I am a fool?! Just be straight with it and say you'd rather offend my mother than offend all those merchants!"

"Lady Dahlia almost lost her life after leaving to purchase materials elsewhere, yet you had the audacity to call my mother out to meet you despite the dangers. That's no different from wishing for my mother's death!" Aeliana glared murderously.

"Please calm your anger, Lord Aeliana." Beth did her best to control her unsettling emotions and remain calm and reasonable. Then, she continued to explain, "We've only arrived in Sunpeak Town today and weren't privy to Lady Dahlia's incident and Lady Solana's dire situation."

"We wouldn't have sent our letters to Lady Solana if we knew. But, more importantly, it's not the merchants we fear offending, but the ones backing them," Beth stated. "Please understand our situation."

"Hahaha..." Aeliana laughed maniacally.

"Understand your situation? I say, to hell with your situation!" Aeliana spat with contempt and said, "You sent meeting letters without understanding my mother's situation, but you know who is backing those unscrupulous merchants?!"

"I'm tired of listening to your excuses. Kneel for me!" Aeliana roared.

Her mana raged, accelerating the growth of her tendrils and vines as they weaved to ensnare Beth and Annette.

Although the two quickly tried to flee with abrupt changes in their expressions, they were still too slow, caught by Aeliana's sudden attack.

The lustrous green tendrils and vines formed an inescapable net, sealing off all their paths and constricting to limit their movements.

Beth and Annette immediately used their magic to cut open a path. Alas, they quickly discovered their level of magic had limited effect on Aeliana's tendrils and vines.

They only managed to damage the tendrils and vines, not destroy them.

As such, the tendrils and vines quickly regenerated, undoing whatever damage Beth and Annette had inflicted upon them.

The tendrils and vines were extremely tenacious and full of vitality.

As the tendrils and vines continued to constrict and restrict their movements like snakes, Beth and Annette joined hands to conjure a fire barrier to obstruct them from tightening further.

"Do you think you will get away with this, Lord Aeliana?! We came to apologize, yet you have slapped away our kind intentions!" Annette roared before shifting her gaze to Astoria. "Do you condone these disrespectful actions of hers, Headmaster Astoria?! I'm disappointed in you!"

Astoria did think Aeliana was going too far. But after hearing Annette's words, she no longer cared enough to intervene. Her gaze turned cold before she walked away.

"Hmph!" Astoria snorted, and the pressure of her power briefly seeped out.

"Mid-stage High Witch..." Beth uttered blankly, having sensed Astoria's power during that brief moment. Then, she reprimanded, "Dammit, Lord Annette! You just made us offend a Mid-stage High Witch! A Mid-stage High Witch!"

"We apologize for everything, Lord Aeliana. Please cease this madness at once!" Beth pleaded shortly after.

She realized that even though Aeliana was an Early-stage High Witch, her power was comparable to Mid-stage High Witches.

"If you were going to apologize, then you should have apologized sincerely from the start! I have given you a chance, yet all I received were excuse after excuse! Now, I'm tired of listening," Aeliana coldly said.

"Do not resist and just grovel on the ground like the worms you are until I am satisfied. Otherwise, the one you'll be facing won't just be me but the master of those blue flames!"

Once Beth and Annette heard those words, the flames of anger in their defiant hearts immediately diminished, replaced by wariness and fear.

Their eyes darted around, trying to locate the master of the blue flames.

However, they couldn't begin to guess who could wield such powerful blue flames from such a distance if the person was nearby. Furthermore, the blue flames seemed inexhaustible, as if the spellcaster had limitless mana.

After all, some time had passed since the blue flames sealed off Sunpeak Town, yet they showed no sign of weakening or disappearing.

Checking out the identity of the blue flame caster was their hidden agenda for paying the lord's estate a visit in the night.

Although they had yet to figure out the person's identity, they confirmed the person was indeed on Lord Aeliana's side.

In front of such unparalleled power, it was indeed a foolish mistake to side with the merchants instead of the acting lord of Sunpeak Town.

If only they had known Lady Solana possessed such powerful backing, they would have made different choices.

As Beth and Annette's rebellious wills weakened, they bit their lips and dispelled the fire barrier.

The burning tendrils and vines immediately entered, constricted them, brought them down to their knees, and eventually pressed their faces into the ground.

Beth and Annette gritted their teeth as they endured the pain of the burning tendrils and vines searing their flesh and burning away parts of their clothes, leaving them partially exposed in humiliating positions.

It's been a long time since they felt so powerless.

"How long must we stay like this to appease your anger and earn your forgiveness, Lord Aeliana?" Beth asked, hiding her indignance under a humbled look.

"How long?" Aeliana glanced down at the two witches under her control before she coolly replied, "As long as it has to; it's not up to me. Unless my mother makes the request, you two can stay like that for all I care."

"I see..." Annette clenched her fists tightly as she forced a smile and asked, "And when will Lady Solana see us?"

"When? My mother went to bed. She'll see you in the morning. Or maybe she won't. Who knows?" Aeliana replied nonchalantly, turning her back to leave and head inside the lord's estate to rest.

"Feel free to try escaping during the night. However, I won't be responsible for the consequences."

Beth and Annette weren't sure how to reply to that.

Chapter 377: Another Talk With Astoria

In the lord's estate, Vaan was found fiddling with his spoils from his battle with the Assembly of Silent Night's forces.

A-rank Witch Hunters and S-rank Witch Hunters had a lot of good stuff. Their equipment and weapons were mostly Rank 4, but there were some Rank 5 exceptions.

Although Vaan couldn't tell if such high-quality gears were the norm outside the seven witch kingdoms, he could at least tell they had better standards than the Kingdom of Black Rose.

Nevertheless, he wouldn't learn much about the Assembly of Silent Night until Astarot extracted the information from the prisoners.

Vaan disassembled the equipment one by one and studied them, acquiring glimpses of forging knowledge used in their making.

"You did pretty well restraining yourself," Vaan casually commented after Aeliana returned to the lord's estate, fully aware of the situation outside with his Omni-Sense. "You didn't kill them."

"They have been the least involved in Sunpeak Town's matters as they have only arrived today. So killing them doesn't make any sense, my Lord. I am content with humbling them for disrespecting my mother," Aeliana calmly replied.

If she killed Beth and Annette for simply being disrespectful, she would have to kill every merchant.

After all, they were the ones that made things truly difficult for her mother and deserved to die more than anyone else.

Still, if her mother wanted Beth and Annette dead in the morning, she would kill them all the same.

Nevertheless, Vaan gave Aeliana a nod of approval.

She handled the matter well. Despite her extreme emotions, she did not lose her sense of reasoning and had it under control.

"My Lord, you should also get some rest," Aeliana thoughtfully suggested.

However, Vaan shook his head.

"You don't need to worry about that. At my level, sleep is only a choice and no longer a necessity," Vaan calmly stated before sending her off, "Go and rest. I am still expecting someone."

"Yes, my Lord," Aeliana obeyed with a bow.

Shortly after, she took her leave, heading for her sleeping quarters without trying to persuade Vaan further. Her lord had already spoken.

Vaan did not lie about sleep being a necessity for him.

At his level, his Peak-level Demigod-rank dragon soul gave him unprecedented control over his body. He could simulate the maintenance process of the mind on the body without actually sleeping.

At the same time, the natural recovery of his mental strength was higher than its consumption from simply being awake. Thus, unless he engaged in mentally-exhausting activities, he no longer needed to sleep.

Being a semi-divine being wasn't just for show.

"Will you not sleep as well, Headmaster Astoria?" Vaan casually asked, casting a glance at the person sitting in the corner of the room staring back at him.

"Do I even need to answer that question, Teacher Raphna?" Astoria replied, sitting in a curled-up position with her head resting on her knees. "I'm sure you can already guess why I do not dare go to sleep."

Vaan did mention he was expecting someone.

"Well, it's not bad to have a companion to keep me company," Vaan calmly smiled before he suggested, "Why don't we chat a little, Headmaster Astoria?"

Astoria's heart suddenly skipped a beat before it started racing, causing a slight flush on her face. She glanced at Vaan nervously and recalled their last talk during the night on Ninth Peak.

"What do you want to talk about, Teacher Raphna?" Astoria asked apprehensively.

"Why don't we start by changing how we refer to each other?" Vaan casually suggested before saying, "Addressing each other by title seems so distant. Considering we are quite close now, why don't we use more intimate terms? Besides, I believe you also have feelings for—"

"Ahh!"

Before Vaan couldn't finish speaking, Astoria interrupted him with a panic scream.

"Is something wrong, Headmaster Astoria?"

"Ah? Nothing is wrong. What were you saying again, Teacher Raphna?"

"As I was saying, I believe you have feelings—"

"Ahh!"

Astoria interrupted Vaan again with another one of her panic screams. Her heart raced so nervously she could hear it beat like drums.

Her reaction amused Vaan.

Despite Astoria's age, she was quite innocent and pure in matters of the heart, like a young maiden from the old era. She appeared in denial and couldn't come to terms with her feelings—or rather, she vehemently rejected them.

Vaan sensed there was a special reason behind her rejection, and it was also the wall that prevented their relationship from progressing further.

After picking up his disassembled equipment, Vaan stood up and approached Astoria, startling her at the same time.

When he took a seat right beside her, basically touching shoulders, Astoria immediately turned to ice, becoming frozen stiff like a statue in order to hide her erratic breathing and loud beating heart.

"Why do you try so hard to reject your true feelings? Do you hate me that much?" Vaan asked with a seemingly calm yet sad tone, causing Astoria's heart to tremble.

"N-No, I don't!" she replied.

"Then why?" Vaan stared into her eyes seriously as if he was trying to peer into her soul just to understand her. Astoria wanted to get away, but he immediately grabbed her soft hand, forcing her to look at him. "Answer me."

Originally, Vaan intended to take things slow with Astoria. He figured she would be able to come to terms with her only feelings if he gave her time.

However, he understood she would never open up unless he acted more forcefully. Sometimes, a small push was necessary.

When Astoria was forced to stare into Vaan's serious eyes and saw his growing disappointment, her heart trembled with the illusion that she would lose him forever if she stubbornly kept her feelings to herself.

Astoria sighed, resigning herself to the situation as she peeled her gaze away from Vaan and stared at the ground with her head lowered.

"I don't hate you; I just hate the circumstances that lead to these feelings. It's far from my ideal first love..." Astoria spoke in a soft and tiny voice as if she had become a tiny person herself.

"I always dreamed of a pure love, untainted by worldly benefits... But I suppose it's not the same for everyone else, given the kind of world we live in now. All men desire my beauty and body, and you're no different."

"Hmm, is that so?"

Vaan hummed before leaning back, resting his head on his hands, and lazily peering up at the night sky through the opening in the lord's estate.

He finally understood Astoria.

She vehemently rejected her feelings because accepting them would mean shattering her dream of pure love and making her no different from everyone else who entered relationships purely for the benefits they provided.

After all, she did not start liking Vaan because he was just him but because he had peerless talent and knowledge—or so she believed.

"Perhaps, you're right," Vaan didn't deny Astoria's statement. But then, he added, "But if you ask me who I have the highest chance of falling in love with out of all the women I've met, the answer would be you."

"Not Lady Eniwse?" Astoria was startled by Vaan's reply, but she figured it might just be him trying to sweet-talk her. Still, she couldn't help but ask in a small voice, "Can I ask why?"

"Curious?" Vaan smiled. He casually patted the spot beside him, urging her to lay down and stargaze with him before continuing, "Let me tell you a story..."

Chapter 378: Vaan's Story

"Let me tell you a story of a young boy who lived in a world completely different from the one we know. In that world, there were no monsters or magic. Humans advanced their civilization with the power of technology."

"They conquered the seas and skies with their knowledge and steel, even reaching out for the stars beyond. No doubt, they had the potential to conquer the realm of stars one day. They weren't the strongest race, physically. But they used their intelligence to dominate the world and stood at the very top of the food chain."

"The young boy lived in one of many large cities with populations reaching millions and buildings hundreds of meters tall into the sky. The young boy wasn't anyone impressive that contributed to the advancement of human civilization; he was just an ordinary person. Still, he also had a dream of pure love similar to yours, but not exactly the same.

"In the era that he lived, society had become so toxic that even chivalrous or gentlemanly acts could be seen as the foolish and desperate actions of a man trying to win over his love interest. The only value in the bond of marriage is no more than a piece of paper that could be torn apart at any time."

"The increasing accessibility to knowledge and information allowed people to connect easier than ever, no matter their locations in the world. And yet, at the same time, people become even more disconnected and distanced."

"How strange and ironic it is that humanity seemed to advance and decline at the same time. Rather than understanding and accepting our flaws, people readily abandon them to chase after perfection. Traditional values and respect are lost with each new generation."

"Love is obsolete, and trust is nonexistent. Relationships are no more than games of psychological manipulations for physical or material gains. People only know how to use each other. It was a world corrupted and driven by money and greed."

"Despite the world being the way that it was, the young boy still dreamed of a pure first love that would not fail; he imagined he would be with his first love until death did them apart. Then, growing up, he met someone he thought could be that person."

"However, the reality was cruel. There was no beauty in their relationship. Like waking up from a sweet dream, happiness was short and momentarily. Only endless arguments and emotional abuse followed after."

"Still, the young boy was naïve and hopeful. For his dream, he wanted to believe he could make their relationship work. His first love still meant the world to him, no matter how poorly he was treated. Alas, he was not capable enough to keep her. She eventually left him, and it broke him."

"His world shattered, and time stopped for him. While his first love moved on quickly, only he remained behind, reminiscing their happy memories and his promise of eternal love. It was said that time healed all wounds, but after ten years, the young boy grew into a young man, entered society, and still couldn't move on it."

"He buried his pain in work and allowed the black company he worked for to take advantage of him, stingy with his wage but generous with his overtime. Still, the young man didn't mind working like a dog for the black company because work was his only friend, his anesthetic to numb his suffering."

"Eventually, his heart gave out. He died of overwork. People would have called his love foolish, something that held no meaning. Was there something wrong with him? Or was there something wrong with the world?"

"He was just an insignificant person living among billions of others, and his story was only one of many failed love stories. However, I would like to think his love had meaning, that it was something special—Something precious the world should hold onto but no longer do."

"If everyone could love like him, perhaps there would be less conflict between humans, and humanity wouldn't be so divided."

"Throughout the young man's life, the quality of living had improved so much that it was practically heaven compared to the past. But to the young man, it was no different from hell. So at the end of the young man's life, he could only feel relieved from the burden of living. To live was to suffer."

"Unfortunately, what awaited him at the end of his life was not peace but an even greater hell in the form of another world, another life. Magic brought endless possibilities to this world, but men had no chance to wield it. The danger was greater, and women were in power."

"The world was very different from his last life, but some things didn't change and even became more apparent. Relationships were still distant or, perhaps, even nonexistent. Only material or physical gains mattered."

"More importantly, only women, children, and animals were still loved unconditionally. A man is still only loved under the condition that he is able to provide something, whether that be the strength of his background or simply his pleasure skills. A handsome man with no skills can only be momentarily appreciated and used, but not valued."

"As such, even though the young man became younger, he was already physically and mentally worn out, past and present. He had no will to live his new life as a slum rat and compete with others for the scarce leftover food discarded in the slums."

"The young man just lay among the garbages in the slum and awaited his second death for three days and three nights. By the third night, he was completely and utterly exhausted and famished."

"The rain came that night, but he refused to drink. Food was also surprisingly offered, but he refused to eat. And in all unlikelihood, the angelic-like person who offered him the food was a person of high status and peerless beauty, someone who should not have been passing through the slum."

"Do you know what that person said that rainy night to awaken the young man's will to live and make him eat the loaf of bread in front of him?" Vaan asked at the end of his story.

Tears continued to run down Astoria's cheeks, even after she finished listening to Vaan's story. She understood the young man in the story was Vaan.

Still, it was the tragic story of one person; there were many other tragic stories, told and untold. After all, countless people have been born into the world and suffered due to their powerlessness.

And yet, Vaan's story made her heart hurt so much that she shed tears for him.

He didn't become the man he was today because he was born or chosen to be but because he was forced to be.

"I know not what you have suffered nor why for you to have such disappointed and hopeless eyes. However, this cruel world still has its beauty and endless possibilities. You have not seen everything to be giving up here. If you want the strength to take back from the world and change anything, you need to eat," Vaan repeated the words Astoria said to him that night two years ago.

They were simple words and didn't hold any deep meaning, but those words did make him decide to give his second life a chance.

He would struggle again and see what the new world had to offer. It wouldn't be too late for him to decide to die then.

Two years had passed since then, and he was grateful for the decision he had made back then.

"The fact that you can shed this many tears for me proves that you can sympathize with me on a spiritual level and feel very sad for me. Believe me when I say that these feelings of yours aren't that of someone who only likes me for my talent and wisdom," Vaan assured.

He placed a hand on Astoria's cheeks and looked into her eyes sincerely.

At the same time, Astoria raised her hand and pressed his hand even closer to her cheeks, feeling his warmth while being astounded by the miraculous work of fate that brought them together.

After learning Vaan was a transmigrator, she felt even more strongly that some great power was at work, guiding the hands of destiny.

There was some sort of purpose to Vaan's existence.

"I can't believe you were that runt from back then. Your eyes back then pissed me off so much I really wanted to give you a beating," Astoria recalled with a soft chuckle, clenching her fist.

"Others work so hard to keep living even when they're old. On the other hand, you were still so young yet already given up."

"However, if I hit you back then, you would have actually died. Still, I really didn't expect a few words and a loaf of bread would make you obedient and willing to live again, Vaan," Astoria added.

Vaan had long, messy hair, and his face was covered in dirt, making his appearance unclear back then. Thus, she never realized she had met him before.

"It wasn't just any loaf of bread." Vaan wryly smiled and said, "That loaf of bread contained some mana, which helped me realize my talents."

"Fate works in mysterious ways, huh?" Astoria uttered with a thoughtful look.

After confirming her feelings, she became more courageous and interlocked her fingers with Vaan, holding his hand.

However, her courage meter quickly dropped to rock bottom due to nervousness after making her move. Her hand shook wildly to the point of being uncontrollable that she flailed Vaan's arm and body around.

The moment was ruined by her brute strength.

Chapter 379: Rare, But Not Unprecedented

Vaan got flailed around weightlessly, but he did not attempt to resist. He understood Astoria wasn't doing it on purpose.

It wasn't hard to guess from her completely flustered face.

Astoria tried to calm down her nervousness. But the more strength she put into controlling it, the harder she flailed Vaan around.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Vaan slammed into the ground repeatedly, cracking the floor tiles and wooden planks. Nearby tables and chairs also got smashed.

Although he wasn't harmed, it caused quite a disturbance.

...

Outside the lord's estate, Beth and Annette continued to lay bound to the ground by Aeliana's tendrils and vines.

"Should we flee while no one is paying attention to us?" Annette suggested.

"Flee?" Beth cranked her head sideways and glanced at Annette before she asked, "Flee where? We are trapped by the flame barrier."

"We could try flying over it, but the master of the blue flames could be watching us. If the person suddenly raises the flames while we are crossing, it'll be too late for us to regret our choices."

"Then are we supposed to wait for death here?" Annette argued before mentioning, "Didn't see that look in Lord Aeliana's eyes? There's something wrong with her. I think she really wants to kill us. We don't know if Lady Solana would spare us."

"Why wouldn't she? All we did was sent letters to meet her. We haven't participated in whatever mess Sunpeak Town has found itself in," Beth stated before reminding Annette, "Remember Lord Aeliana's warning. We've already been warned. If we stay, we might live. But if we flee, we will definitely die."

"How troublesome..." Annette sighed helplessly. "I just came to see the rumors about Lord Aeliana's recovery. I didn't expect it would come with such a hefty price and risk. This trip was not worth it..."

Boom... Boom... Boom...

The sudden disturbance within the lord's estate immediately caught the two High Witches' attention.

"Are they fighting among themselves? Is this our chance to escape?" Annette wondered.

"I don't think so... Unless Her Majesty arrived in person, I don't think anyone would dare challenge the power of those blue flames," Beth thought before guessing, "It might be a trick to test us. We better stay put and behave..."

"Alright..." Annette agreed, believing Beth's assumption was reasonable.

Although their current predicament was humiliating and shameful, they were powerless to resist. They could only endure if they wanted to survive.

...

Meanwhile, the disturbance in the lord's estate eventually calmed down as Astoria no longer flailed Vaan around with her misbehaving hand.

"Finally calmed down?" Vaan asked with a smile as he looked at Astoria.

However, Astoria couldn't face him. She was too ashamed of what had happened. At the same time, she didn't want Vaan to see her flustered face and sense her pounding heartbeat.

It was too embarrassing; it didn't fit her usual image.

"It seems you are not repulsed by the fact that I am a transmigrator, Astoria," Vaan casually mentioned, changing the topic to help Astoria adjust her emotion.

However, his words only went through one ear and out the other. Astoria only heard Vaan call her by name before her mind went blank, and butterflies filled her stomach.

Still, she only savored the sweet and buttery feeling for a short while before she vehemently shook her head and broke out of it.

'Dammit, Astoria. You've lived over three centuries, slaughtered thousands of demons, and become an academy headmaster. You've been admired and pursued by many men before. What are you being so shy for? Get your head on straight, girl!' Astoria silently told herself.

After she took a deep breath, her emotions finally calmed down somewhat.

"Transmigration isn't actually an unbelievable thing. Although rare, there have been multiple instances of people claiming to be reincarnators and transmigrators in the past," Astoria mentioned, recalling the stories she heard outside the seven witch kingdoms.

"Some were even more amazing than you. One claimed to be a king of a powerful nation, while another claimed to be a planetary ruler. Still, neither of them had been able to achieve anything great in their second life."

"Why is that?" Vaan asked.

Considering his case and Eniwse's, he knew the possibility of other reincarnators and transmigrators existed. However, it was the first time he heard of others.

"That's because they all died young," Astoria casually answered as if it wasn't anything special.

"I heard the egos of their past lives were too great. They weren't willing to bow their heads and lay low until they became capable. So they ended up offending too many people and got themselves killed—or so I've heard."

"That doesn't sound too surprising," Vaan briefly laughed before his expression suddenly turned solemn. "That would imply there's a chance there are even more reincarnators and transmigrators in this world than we are aware of."

The stupid ones would have gotten themselves killed early, but the truly intelligent ones could have already become powerful people.

"Yeah," Astoria agreed. Still, she was more curious about Vaan's life. "How old were you when you died? If you don't mind me asking, Vaan."

"Twenty-nine. I should be thirty-one years old mentally now if there's no issue with my memory," Vaan calmly replied.

Astoria was actually happy when she learned Vaan could be older. However, his answer made her slightly disappointed.

"Thirty-one?" Astoria repeated before muttering in a quiet voice, "So, you're still a baby to me..."

"A baby that you like," Vaan added with a cheeky smile.

When Astoria heard that, her face flushed with embarrassment and shame; she wanted to bury herself in a hole to hide.

However, Vaan grabbed her wrist and pulled her into his embrace before she could escape, hugging her over the shoulders from behind.

"Hahaha..." Vaan softly chuckled as Astoria tried to break free. Then, he made her a solemn promise, "I can't love you like how I loved my first love. But if it's alright with you, I will care for you for the rest of my life."

His feelings can't be sincere, but he would still provide everything else a lover would. Astoria understood him and realized her feelings had sprouted from the time she read his notes.

Speaking one's feelings was not as important as the act of expressing them. Love didn't need to be spoken but shown.

After all, saying "I love you" but doing the opposite would not make others feel the love. And if love couldn't be proven through actions, the words held no meaning.

Vaan said he couldn't love her like his first love, but if he could sincerely care for her for life, that in and of itself was the greatest love he could give her.

Actions spoke louder than words, and only time could prove it.

Astoria slowly stopped resisting and gave him a silent and shy nod while still feeling jittery inside.

Chapter 380: First Kiss

"Can you say my name again?"

"Astoria."

"Again, please?"

"Astoria."

...

Astoria requested to hear her name called by Vaan repeatedly as she listened and savored the warm fuzzy feeling it gave her.

Their relationship didn't turn out how she imagined it would be, but the current situation was also not bad. She felt blissful being held by Vaan and found happiness in the simplest of things, such as getting her name called.

Nevertheless, after Astoria learned about Vaan's transmigration, she understood him better. Yet, at the same time, she also realized she knew very little about him.

Although Astoria enjoyed Vaan's touch, she also found it uncomfortable due to her armor. Thus, she pulled herself away from him to unequip it.

Shortly after, the two sat on the ground, cuddled together while holding hands, and enjoyed a short period of silence.

At first, Astoria's heart thumped excitedly, and her body trembled nervously, causing small tremors in the ground.

However, she could not flail Vaan around again as he restrained her with his strength. Eventually, she calmed down and found peace.

In that instant, her burdens and worries were the last things on her mind. She just wanted time to freeze so they could stay and enjoy the moment forever.

Still, she wanted to learn more about Vaan.

"What was your old world like? Do you miss it? What about your first love?" Astoria asked with a cautious tone, uncertain if she was being too invasive with her questions.

Nevertheless, Vaan thought nothing of it and shook his head.

"My old world had many great things," Vaan spoke.

"There were so many useful inventions promoting quality of life that it was actually scary. New technology was all about reducing work and increasing leisure and comfort. Humans didn't have to worry about survival so long as they had money. Everything revolved around money. And because of the insatiable greed of humans, people don't hesitate to become monsters for money."

"There was a time when men would willingly lend a hand if they saw a lady in need of help. In the later years of my life, men stopped lending their help due to fears of being called a creep or having ulterior motives."

"People didn't mind risking their lives to fake injuries in road accidents and workplaces to claim money under medical liabilities, even if it meant destroying other people's lives and livelihoods. In less developed countries, drivers wouldn't even hesitate to run people over after hitting them to avoid such medical liabilities since they couldn't pay it.

Everything was always about money and using each other to acquire money or destroying each other to avoid losing it."

"So, no. I do not miss such a world. It's even truer for my first love. I will always have a soft spot in my heart for her, but our relationship has long ended, and our paths no longer intersect. We are no different from strangers now."

"I may wish her happiness with her life, but that's the extent of it. We have nothing to do with each other anymore. She was a beautiful memory and part of my past now. You, on the other hand, are my present and... maybe my future, Astoria," Vaan stated with a short pause near the end.

In the last part, Vaan's every word was like honey to Astoria, sweet, making her feel happy with butterflies in her stomach, at least until the very, very last part.

"Hm?" Astoria scrunched her brows together, making a sulky frown as she turned her head to face Vaan. "Why is it only a 'maybe' your future?"

"Well, that depends on you, of course." Vaan smiled cheekily before saying, "I'll care for you if you stay. But if you suddenly decide to leave, you can't continue to be part of my future, right?"

"Hmph! Who's thinking of leaving?" Astoria pouted, knowing Vaan was teasing her. She made a small fist and pounded his chest to express her discontent. "Do you think I am the same as the people from your old world?"

"If there's a problem, we'll talk until we work it out. I won't just give up and leave. Hmph, hmph! Even if you want me to leave, I won't. It's too late for you to regret it now, Vaan. I'm sticking to you for life—"

While Astoria was hammering Vaan's chest softly with her fist, throwing her tantrum like a cute little girl, Vaan suddenly grabbed her wrist with a smile and snuck in a kiss on her lips, catching her by surprise.

Astoria temporarily froze on the spot before she subconsciously tried to get away from him.

However, Vaan's experienced and passionate kiss quickly made her feel weak until she gave up all forms of resistance to savor the sweet moment.

Still, her inexperience in such acts was shown as she forgot to breathe throughout their long and ongoing kiss, causing her face to become puffy and red.

Shortly after their lips parted, Astoria immediately gasped for air, thinking she could have died from suffocation if they had kept going without stopping.

"You need to breathe," Vaan reminded with a soft chuckle.

"Of course, I know that," Astoria pouted before smacking her lips, thinking Vaan's kiss was quite dangerous. She could get addicted. "It was too sudden, so I was surprised. It won't be like that next time," she made an excuse.

"O-ho? So, you're already thinking about a next time," Vaan teased with a soft chuckle, causing Astoria to become flustered again.

She couldn't think of anything to say and defend herself. As such, she resorted to violence to get out of the situation by pinching Vaan's hip and twisting it, even though it had no effect on him.

"Is it fun to tease me?"

"Hahaha... Forgive me, Your Highness."

...

Vaan and Astoria spent the whole night awake, enjoying each other's company and warmth. During that time, Solana had snuck out of her bed, intending to spend the night with Vaan.

However, she noticed he already had Astoria's company. Thus, she could only return to her room and plan her visit another time.

When the first ray of sunlight came in the early morning, a frown appeared on Vaan's face. The person he was expecting never came.

"It looks like Her Majesty didn't come," Astoria commented, noticing it could be a problem.