

The Witch 411

Chapter 411: Helia's Appearance

After another day went by, the second six-hundred-foot building was completed.

Then, Vaan left the rest of the work to Astoria and the more skilled artificers as they built a magic tower-like spire on top and enchanted the whole building.

Ultimately, the second building reached a grand height of seven hundred and fifty feet, a whole hundred and fifty feet taller than the last completed building project.

Nevertheless, they were still minor projects compared to the ten-thousand-foot tower Vaan planned to build. Even so, the minor projects were necessary for enriching Sunpeak Town and speeding up its development.

Only after developing Sunpeak Town could they focus on the ten-thousand-foot tower project.

After all, there was no point rushing the ten-thousand-foot tower project if its surrounding land was underdeveloped.

The crowd eventually dispersed from the central town area with emotional sighs. Unexpectedly, they had wasted a whole day watching the construction.

But given a chance, they would definitely do it again; it wasn't something they could see every day.

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At nightfall, Vaan returned to the lord's state and joined the others for dinner.

The original dining table was replaced by a bigger one due to the increasing number of members after Eniwse and Hester completed their training and joined them.

At the same time, the dining table had become their regular meeting spot due to the rapid changes in Sunpeak Town. It was the only time they were all gathered in one place to update each other on their day.

"Now that the second building is completed, what plans do you have for it, Vaan?" Eniwse enquired over the dining table. "I heard the first building would be used to accommodate visitors seeking temporary residence. Will the second building be the same?"

"Most likely, but it won't be up to us to decide that in the end," Vaan casually replied before adding, "It's been some time since we sent the news to the capital. So we should be expecting an influx of people soon. Among them should be some figures with wealthy backgrounds."

"As such, tomorrow evening would be a good time to hold an auction for the second building," Vaan mentioned.

"After all the effort and resources poured into that second building, you're just going to sell it off, Sir Vahn?" Solana asked with a startled look. "I'm not sure the short-term benefits outweigh the long-term benefits of keeping the building."

"Selling?" Vaan glanced at Solana before he replied with a smile, "Who said anything about selling it? We'll be leasing it to the highest bidder. As you said, the long-term benefits of keeping the building are much greater than the short-term benefits of selling it."

"However, we are severely lacking in human resources to run it, let alone protect it from troublemakers during and outside of business hours. As such, leasing the property to other people is in our best interest."

"This way, we are guaranteed a steady flow of revenue without worrying about business cost and security. The business expenses, human resources, and security are things for the other party to be concerned about."

"Furthermore, if our property incurs damages or destruction, they will have to compensate us," Vaan stated.

After listening to Vaan, everyone at the table nodded with approval.

Leasing the second building did seem to be the best choice to make, given their situation; it was the simplest way to secure a lifelong flow of funds with minimum responsibilities.

Furthermore, the second building only occupied one of many plots of land under Vaan's name; it wasn't even the best location for commerce either.

They still had many opportunities to build bigger and better properties with far greater market value.

Nevertheless, after the group finished discussing real estate, they moved on to other topics related to Sunpeak Town's development.

Given the town's rapid changes and the influx of people, crime was unavoidable.

However, thanks to Aeliana's golden hammer of judgment and zero-leniency policy, the number of crimes committed on a daily basis was within an acceptable range.

Moving on, Astoria, as the headmaster of Blackmoon Academy, introduced the idea of sending interested students to Sunpeak Town for work experience.

If they trained the young students well, they could cultivate their loyalty and also make up for the lack of human resources. After all, the young students would be given opportunities to grow and offered stable jobs.

It was a win-win situation for both sides.

Furthermore, considering young people were easier to train and adopt certain mindsets, Astoria's idea received positive approval from everyone.

Vaan had thought about bringing up the idea, but it appeared Astoria also had the same idea and beat him to it.

"I am somewhat of a celebrity in Blackmoon Academy and Redpine Academy. So we can certainly expect a good number of students to be interested in joining the program," Vaan confidently stated.

"Not just in Blackmoon Academy and Redpine Academy, Vahn," Dahlia corrected before handing over a newspaper to him. "Take a look at what it says."

On the front page of the newspaper, the hottest and most controversial news was about him, Vaan Raphna, becoming the first man ever in the seven witch kingdom to receive the scholar title of Venerable Sage.

Furthermore, the textbooks produced from his original notes on magic had become so popularized in magic academies across the whole Kingdom of Black Rose that practically every scholar and student knew his name.

Considering Vaan was currently known in Sunpeak Town for his immense power, it would come as a great shock to the people once they realized he was that exact Venerable Sage.

After all, he was pronounced dead.

"Well, this could become interesting," Vaan commented with an amusing smile after he finished reading the newspaper's front page.

However, there was no need or rush to announce his identity publicly; it would only reduce the number of troublemakers to exploit.

As the group continued their meeting over dinner, Helia suddenly arrived after using the teleporter in her city.

"Oh? What suddenly brings you here, Lord Helia?" Solana enquired as she greeted and acknowledged her arrival. "You appear to be in a rush."

"I just received some crucial news from the southern border lords that I believe I should share with everyone; it's about the Holy Knight Empire," Helia stated.

"Oh?"

Helia's statement quickly caught everyone's attention.

Chapter 412: Preparing for War

Solana clapped her hands, gesturing for a servant to bring another chair over and offer Helia a seat at the dining table.

"Please take a seat, Lord Helia."

"Alright."

Helia accepted Solana's offer and made her way toward her seat.

On the way, her gaze briefly landed on Cyrena before her eyes flickered with visible shock, realizing her youngest daughter had recently become an Early-stage Senior Witch.

The time it took Cyrena to reach the Early-stage Senior Witch rank from having zero power was unprecedented.

If Cyrena's rate of progress were known, it would shock the whole kingdom, and they would recognize her as a great genius.

Evidently, Cyrena was living well by Vaan's side.

Helia had also noticed the power of every other witch around Vaan; they had all made startling progress—enough for her to feel envious.

Even her subordinate, Hester, had become a Mid-stage High Witch.

But no matter how much Helia wished for it, she knew she wouldn't receive the same opportunity given to them. Aeliana's warning gaze was the most obvious proof that she had no chance.

Helia could only softly sigh as she took her seat at the end of the dining table.

Then, she shared the information she received from the southern border lords via the long-range communication-type magic tools granted to every region lord.

The southern border lords informed her of the Holy Knight Empire's demand for the kingdom to hand over the imperial princess within seven days. Otherwise, the Holy Knight Empire would use force to retrieve their imperial princess.

"Imperial princess? Since when did Baron Chalfont's daughter also become the emperor's daughter? Don't tell me those two were... Uh... I'm not questioning the emperor's special preferences, but how is that even possible...?" Hester uttered with a dumbfounded look.

"I won't deny the possibility of such a situation if magic was involved. However, it's not what you are thinking, Lady Hester," Vaan chuckled amusedly before putting on a more serious expression. "It's likely that the empire recently elevated Dorothy's status to an imperial princess."

"Of course, they wouldn't share this information to put more pressure on our kingdom. That said, the empire's intentions are quite clear," Vaan stated.

Without a doubt, the Holy Knight Empire wanted war with the Kingdom of Black Rose.

Vaan didn't need to say it directly in order for everyone to understand the implication behind his words.

"It seems Baron Chalfont does not cherish his daughter's life as much as we thought," Silvaria commented with a frown.

"No, we shouldn't be wrong about Baron Chalfont's love for his daughter," Vaan shook his head and said, "But between a potentially hostile kingdom and the empire, it's clear which side Baron Chalfont would place his trust in."

"We gave him a chance to keep his daughter alive, but unfortunately, he blew his chance," Vaan said with a ridiculing look.

"If we hand over Dorothy as the empire demanded, wouldn't we be able to avoid a war?" Dahlia asked.

"No, you're looking at it too simply, Dahlia," Astoria shook her head with a soft sigh. "Since the empire wants a war, they don't really want us to hand Dorothy over to them within the seven days. Heck, they might even want her dead."

"And that's just might for the empire. If we are talking about Marquis Salazar alone, he will definitely want Dorothy dead to ensure the war happens," Astoria explained.

"Exactly," Vaan agreed with a nod and said, "Even if we hand Dorothy over, there's no guarantee that she will stay alive, especially when they have a snake like Marquis Salazar on their side. I can even confidently say Dorothy is much safer in our hands."

"But of course, if the empire truly values Baron Chalfont and his desire to save his daughter, they would most likely send an elite force to infiltrate the kingdom and rescue her. If they succeed, they will hide her for seven days and start a war under the pretense that we failed to hand her over during the stipulated time they demanded."

"As such, doing our best to keep Dorothy for seven days before handing her over to the empire with a bit of surprise will be in our best interest," Vaan stated.

"Right," Solana nodded before saying, "Since war is inevitable, seven days would buy us time to prepare for it."

"However, we don't know much about the Holy Knight Empire. Thus, it's hard to predict what methods they would use to infiltrate the kingdom and when they will make their move," Solana added with a frown.

"It doesn't matter if they fail to locate and retrieve Dorothy; I will send her to a secret location to keep her safe. Then, after those seven days, we will give Baron Chalfont and the empire a nice surprise," Vaan said with narrowed eyes.

There was no need to worry about Dorothy. They only needed to worry about themselves. That said, everyone couldn't help but feel curious about Vaan's surprise.

However, he only gave them a vague response when asked.

Moving forward, the group left the task of informing the southern border lords of their decision to Helia. At the same time, she was required to arrange a meeting between them to discuss defensive measures against the empire.

Even if the southern border lords didn't agree with their decisions, they would be forced to agree. The southern border lords didn't have a choice in the matter.

With Henrietta's whereabouts unknown, Vaan intended to assume the position of supreme commander for the war. After all, there was no one more qualified than him.

As such, he had seven days to force everyone to submit and recognize his position and authority in the kingdom. Then, make preparations to defend against the Holy Knight Empire's invasion.

It was not a lot of time, but time was never on their side.

Shortly after the group meeting ended, Vaan handed Dorothy over to the Red Dragon Clan. Then, he took Zodreg with him and headed south to study the kingdom's southern lands and scout the empire's borders.

They needed to confirm the empire's intentions.

Meanwhile, the other three Rank 5 young elite dragons were left behind to defend and watch over the central region during their absence.

Chapter 413: The Southern Border Regions

Vaan sat on the top of Zodreg's head as they soared through the skies, making their way southward with sonic speed.

But despite the strong winds brushing against Vaan's face like the force of a tempest, they continued to shoot through the sky soundlessly and unseen.

Zodreg had deployed a multi-layered bubble that absorbed all the sound produced within, preventing them from escaping the bubble. At the same time, everything inside appeared invisible as the bubble reflected the background.

Nevertheless, as they covered great distances, Vaan's gaze remained fixed on the surface below, memorizing every terrain without missing anything.

Thanks to his great memory, a single glance was all it took to engrave the images.

Within a short time, they passed the Blackmoon Region and entered the Delarosa Marquisate, which was thrice the size of the Blackmoon Region.

Although the marquisate was a large territory, it didn't possess any unique terrain like the Blackmoon Region.

However, it had a good balance of thriving forests, mineral-rich mountains, and fertile plains, allowing the territory to function stably.

Nevertheless, after the Delarosa Marquisate, Vaan and Zodreg passed the Auchendinny Barony, Norwich County, and Wolfpine Region, each with their own unique qualities.

The environmental changes brought by the existence of mana were apparent. In fact, their special terrains made the Delarosa Marquisate appear strange for being normal and not possessing any unique qualities of their own.

However, that was not true.

The Delarosa Marquisate was far more developed and industrialized than any of its neighboring regions. All of its natural resources had been capitalized, which resulted in a change to its terrain.

Nevertheless, Vaan and Zodreg eventually reached the kingdom's southern border regions, Whitebridge, Ironhaven, and Dragontail.

The three border regions possess special terrains running along their edges that form the natural borders dividing the Kingdom of Black Rose from the Holy Knight Empire, Kingdom of Verdant Woods, and Kingdom of Scarlet Flames.

For example, the westernmost border region, Dragontail Region, was situated next to the thinnest end of the mountain range with active volcanoes that the Kingdom of Black Rose and the Kingdom of Scarlet Flame.

Coincidentally, the border region on the Kingdom of Scarlet Flame's side of the mountain range was also called Dragontail Region.

As such, the two were known as Western Dragontail Region and Eastern Dragontail Region.

South of the Eastern Dragontail Region was the Violent Tributary, a river of boiling water running between the Kingdom of Black Rose and the Holy Knight Empire.

The Violent Tributary was connected to the Treacherous Sea in the far west and Stormwind Lake in the east, southeast of the Eastern Dragontail Region, and south of the Whitebridge Region.

Further east was the Sleeping River, full of calm water, the opposite of the Violent Tributary.

The Ironhaven Region north of the Sleeping River was a mineral-rich mountainous region full of steep rocky cliffs.

If the Kingdom of Verdant Woods wished to procure large amounts of minerals and increase its production of rare metals, Ironhaven Region would definitely be on their list of territories to claim.

Nevertheless, Dragontail, Whitebridge, and Ironhaven would be the first three territories to fall under attack should the Holy Knight Empire invade.

Of course, it was a different story if they also considered the potential use of spatial magic or if the Kingdom of Verdant Woods granted border access to the Holy Knight Empire's army.

If that happened, the Kingdom of Black Rose would also have to watch its eastern borders, not just the south.

Although the Kingdom of Scarlet Flames was unlikely to do the same, getting attacked from the west was still a slight possibility that shouldn't be ignored.

The western borders might not be easy to cross due to the large mountain range region with active volcanoes, but Vaan had to account for all variables.

After Vaan finished studying the southern border regions, he continued southward with Zodreg, entering the territory of the Holy Knight Empire.

Without surprise, they immediately noticed an unusually larger number of carriers and troops moving into the border cities compared to their last visit.

In fact, Equinox City had hit its occupation limit. Thus, the Holy Knight Empire's forces had to pitch camp outside of its city walls.

After Vaan and Zodreg witnessed such a sight, they no longer had room for doubts.

"Supreme Leader, the Holy Knight Empire's border cities are gathering large numbers of troops and supplies. Their intention to wage war on the Kingdom of Black Rose is conclusive," Zodreg stated.

"Yeah, it was already clear when they raised Dorothy's status to that of an imperial princess," Vaan nodded and said, "However, this certainly leaves no room for doubts. In fact, I can confidently say the Holy Knight Empire doesn't care if the Kingdom of Black Rose even took their demand seriously."

"They only made their demand public for the other countries to know about their justification for attacking should the Kingdom of Black Rose fail to comply; it's just a pretense," Vaan stated.

"Since we have confirmed the empire's intentions, should we head back and prepare?" Zodreg suggested.

However, Vaan shook his head.

"It's a bit early for that. We've only just got here; it'll be a pity to return so soon," Vaan replied before adding, "We still have to figure out the Holy Knight Empire's strength."

That said, it didn't take long for Vaan to see that the Holy Knight Empire's troops were well-equipped.

"They sure have nice armor and weapons; those are all at least Peak-level Rank 3 to Low-level Rank 4," Vaan commented with narrowed eyes as Zodreg descended for a closer look. "Oh? There are even a few Peak-level Rank 4 and Low-level Rank 5 equipment."

"The people in possession of these pieces of equipment must be nobles or lords. Their strength isn't bad either; they are at least Mid-to-High-level Rank 4 Aura Lords," Vaan added with a thoughtful look.

The Assembly of Silent Night's A-rank Witch Hunters was all around this level, and they numbered in the hundreds. Furthermore, they were trained in subterfuge, stealth, and assassination.

Thus, the empire's nobles and lords were a little inferior to them.

But while the empire lacked experts compared to the Assembly of Silent Night, they had an enormous army, making them a force to be reckoned with.

Chapter 414: Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum

After some time, Vaan completed his small analysis of the Holy Knight Empire's army.

From the weakest soldier to the strongest commander present within their camp, they all used a single weapon. Besides the sword, they did not wield any other weapon.

As such, it was safe to assume they were all sword masters that only fought with their swords.

Considering they also wore quality armor, the magic of Senior Witches wouldn't stand a chance of defeating the empire's soldiers. Even the magic of High Witches would have limited effect.

"The Kingdom of Black Rose doesn't stand a chance against the Holy Knight Empire in a direct confrontation..." Vaan concluded.

If powerhouses like him, the dragons, and Transcendent Henrietta were excluded from the war between the two countries, the Holy Knight Empire would win without a doubt.

"As expected of a super country with access to the rest of Pangea. In terms of magic engineering, the Kingdom of Black Rose is lagging far behind compared to the Holy Knight Empire..." Vaan muttered.

It wasn't hard to see why the Holy Knight Empire didn't fall under the rule of witches.

In front of such quality armor and weapon, it was too difficult for witches to possess any advantage with their magic.

Furthermore, witches were vulnerable once they exhausted their magic. On the other hand, aura users only needed to consider their stamina, which could recover with rest faster than witches did with their mana.

"There wouldn't be a large disparity between the two countries if the Kingdom of Black Rose also had access to the knowledge shared by the rest of Pangea," Vaan thought.

Considering the seven witch kingdoms were defenders of humanity, the Holy Knight Empire was contemptible for failing to offer even the minimum level of support.

From this, it became apparent that the Holy Knight Empire always had intentions to swallow the seven witch kingdoms.

Its desire for power was insatiable.

Unfortunately for the Holy Knight Empire, they had no idea there was a group with far more advanced knowledge than the collective whole of Pangea hidden within the Kingdom of Black Rose, the Red Dragon Clan.

"Supreme Leader, our clan has a lot of idle dragons. We can make use of them to produce quality equipment, weapons, and magic tools for the Kingdom of Black Rose to level the playing field," Zodreg suggested.

"What coincidence," Vaan smiled and said, "I was thinking the same thing. Otherwise, the Kingdom of Black Rose won't stand a chance in this war."

If he genuinely wanted to avoid the war, all he needed to do was locate Transcendent Henrietta and free her from captivity.

That would halt the Holy Knight Empire's plans for the Kingdom of Black Rose if they had even the slightest wariness of Transcendent Henrietta's strength.

However, if that happened, Transcendent Henrietta would wage war on the Kingdom of Verdant Woods and give the Holy Knight Empire a chance to swoop in and swallow both countries when they are exhausted from fighting each other.

At the same time, he might not have the chance to play around with the kingdom and swallow it for himself.

Either way, Vaan thought the war was necessary for humanity's growth. After all, humans thrive on conflicts. And there was no better place to train strong witches than the battlefield.

'Peaceful times create weak people, while strong people create peaceful times,' Vaan mused thoughtfully.

Si vis pacem, para bellum. If you want peace, prepare for war.

...

While studying the Holy Knight Empire's border regions, Vaan and Zodreg ended up on a secret tour through the northern quarter of their whole country.

Seeing the more developed parts of the Holy Knight Empire helped Vaan gain a better grasp of its strength.

Nevertheless, they eventually had to turn back to make other arrangements since they were strained for time. If they weren't short on time, they would have explored the whole country and then gone on to see the other neighboring countries as well.

Vaan and Zodreg took a spatial gate to save time on their return trip.

Considering the amount of time they had spent scouting the southern borders, Vaan briefly stopped by Sunpeak Town to check on the situation.

After he confirmed nothing big happened during his absence, he headed into the Red Goblin Mountains and had Zodreg send him to the Red Dragon Clan via a spatial gate.

Since Vaan did not use the black cube, First Peak wasn't notified of his arrival. Even so, the dragon still felt his presence.

At the same time, Vaan noticed a quarrel was going on over at Seventh Peak's training field. Thus, he quickly made his way over to check it out.

"What's going on here?" Vaan enquired upon his arrival.

The fourth dragon lord, Pedyssin, paused her argument with the seventh dragon lord, Kemun, and turned to him with surprise.

"W-Welcome back, Supreme Leader," Pedyssin greeted before saying, "It's nothing serious—No, actually, it is. I was criticizing Lord Kemun here for slacking in training the young elites of his peak."

"He's been doing nothing besides sleeping all day!" Pedyssin stated with a grumpy look.

"Haiz, Lord Pedyssin is falsely accusing me, Supreme Leader," Kemun said unconvincingly as he lay on his platform and yawned lazily. "I don't chase perfection and glory like her. I have already taught the young ones everything I know."

"Thus, it's up to them how they practice what I taught them. They only need to bother me when they have doubts. And it's not like I've been doing nothing. I was busy chasing my dreams. Where are dreams found, you ask? In my sleep, obviously.

So yeah, I've been sleeping all day..."

"Ahem, jokes aside," Kemun coughed after seeing Pedyssin's intensifying glare and said tiredly, "I really wasn't idling here, Supreme Leader. I was simulating the Formless Dragon Exercise in my mind."

"After all, I physically practice it while I am also supervising the young ones. Can't you see how mentally exhausted I am?"

"Bullshit! I don't believe you!" Pedyssin accused him.

After some back and forward talk between the fourth and seventh dragon lords, Vaan grasped the situation.

It wasn't much different from a lover's quarrel.

After all, the other dragon lords didn't bother interfering as they did not want to get involved in their charade.

Nevertheless, it was also true that the two dragon lords were wasting time bickering over nothing.

"You can easily clear the misunderstanding if you just demonstrate a higher mastery of the Formless Dragon Exercise, Lord Kemun," Vaan casually suggested.

Chapter 415: Origin of Metallurgy Knowledge

After Kemun heard Vaan's suggestion, he could only give Vaan a wry look. If only it were that simple. He was certain that Pedyssin would just find another reason to nitpick with him.

"There's no need for that, Supreme Leader. I believe him," Pedyssin stated, contrary to what she had said earlier. Then, she glanced at Kemun. "Since the Supreme Leader has intervened, I'll let you off the hook this time, Lord Kemun."

Kemun heaved a sigh of relief after he heard that.

In fact, the problem started when Pedyssin caught sight of a young female dragon hitting on him. In other words, Pedyssin was jealous and, perhaps, self-conscious of her age.

It was tough being a male dragon sometimes – Kemun lamented.

Moving forward, Vaan summoned the nine dragon lords for a meeting at the Dragon Summit.

None of the dragon lords dared to take their time. Thus, they all arrived swiftly after putting aside their activities.

Afterward, Vaan explained the situation to the dragon lords.

"So the Holy Knight Empire's invasion is inevitable, huh?" Astarot muttered with a deep look before asking, "What do you require from us and the Red Dragon Clan as a whole, Supreme Leader?"

"We have an agreement with Queen Henrietta that requires us to lend our assistance in defending the Kingdom of Black Rose from foreign invasions. Although this agreement was made for Gehenna, the Holy Knight Empire is also considered a foreign force..."

"I didn't think there would be a day we have to intervene in a conflict that isn't related to Gehenna," Astarot mentioned with a concerned look.

After all, the Red Dragon Clan wasn't ready to reveal all of their cards to the world.

"Don't worry, Lord Astarot. I will not have the whole clan participate in this war personally. After all, sending everyone out will defeat the purpose of making Gehenna overestimate our true strength," Vaan calmly stated.

"Only the young dragon elites will join the war. The rest will play a supportive role in manufacturing equipment and magic tools to strengthen the kingdom's troops."

"How many young dragon elites are we expecting to reach Rank 5 after seven days?" Vaan enquired shortly after.

The nine dragon lords quickly shared their data before they reached a rough evaluation.

"Including Zodreg and the others, we can expect a total of twenty young elites to Rank 5 by the end of the seven days, Supreme Leader," Astarot answered.

"Twenty Rank 5 True Dragons, huh?" Vaan softly muttered with a nod of approval.

Considering the might of dragons, twenty Low-level Rank 5 True Dragons would possess the same combat prowess as twenty Mid-level Rank 5 beings.

If they joined forces, they could stand their ground against High-level Rank 5 beings and buy some time.

Nevertheless, soon, Vaan took out all the equipment he had acquired from the Assembly of Silent Night and tasked the Red Dragon Clan to modify their sizes and appearances to fit the witches of the kingdom.

"This... This is incredible," the sixth dragon lord, Tyvrin, commented with astonishment after inspecting most of the Rank 4 pieces of equipment. "To think humans have advanced this much with Pangea metals..."

"Right," Astarot nodded as he traced his claws on a piece of equipment and glimpsed into vague and fragmented memories of the equipment's creation process. "In order to produce this quality of equipment purely with just Pangea metals, they have to use a special fire and a sophisticated refining process."

"If we look at the Kingdom of Black Rose's rate of development, it would have taken them several hundred more years to achieve this level of advancement, and that's if they focus on magic metallurgy studies."

"Unfortunately, their focus lies in magic. Thus, I can kind of see why the Kingdom of Black Rose is falling behind in this field, but at the same time, not really. This knowledge doesn't seem to originate from Gehenna," Astarot stated with a puzzled look.

Even if the Devil's Contractors could borrow the knowledge of the Great Devils to produce such quality equipment, that was only applicable to Gehenna metals.

However, the equipment before them was made purely with Pangea metals.

Knowledgeable as the Great Devils were, even they would take time to learn about Pangea's resources and produce quality items from them.

Furthermore, it didn't make much sense for the Great Devils to teach such refining knowledge to the humans; that was no different from strengthening their enemies.

"I agree with Lord Astarot's opinion," Narvim supported.

"The knowledge used to produce these pieces of equipment doesn't originate from Gehenna. For example, take a look at this Rank 5 sword. This doesn't look like something humans should be able to produce even if they were given a thousand years."

"It seemed like a master artificer used some highly-advanced techniques meant for higher-rank materials to produce this. There's hidden knowledge in these items that even we can benefit from learning," Narvim added.

"The problem is that these items aren't limited to the Assembly of Silent Night. The Holy Knight Empire possesses many pieces of equipment of such qualities, and possibly the rest of the Pangea, too," Vaan mentioned with a frown after listening to the dragon lords.

"If what you all say is true, then the metallurgy knowledge and refining techniques used to produce these quality items must have originated from a reincarnator of this universe."

"That does seem to be the most plausible explanation, Supreme Leader," Astarot and the other dragon lords agreed.

In that instant, it became more apparent to them that more advanced civilizations existed out there somewhere among the stars.

Nevertheless, moving forward, Vaan listed a number of items for the dragons to produce, which included communication type, barrier type, spatial-interference field type, image-capturing-type, sound-recording-type, and one-time explosive-type magic tools, among several other requirements.

Vaan also drew down rough blueprints for each requirement and explained their functions, leaving the finer details for the dragons to handle. When he checked with the dragon lords, they were able to confirm they could produce such particular magic tools according to his requirements.

After the meeting with the dragon lords concluded, Vaan brought a large number of empty memory crystals back to Sunpeak Town.

By then, a new day had just started as the sun slowly rose on the horizon.

Chapter 416: Astoria's Confession

In the early morning, Vaan found Astoria already awake—or rather, she had returned from her trip to Blackmoon Academy.

Nevertheless, she appeared to have some thoughts on her mind, causing her to lose focus and bump into him. As a result, she was greatly startled when she glanced up and saw his face.

"V-Vaan. Good morning."

"What's plaguing your mind, Astoria?"

"It's... No, it's nothing."

"Didn't we promise to communicate and not hide anything?"

"Ah, you're right," Astoria nodded with a sigh after hearing Vaan's reminder. Then, after taking some time to gather her thoughts, she suggested, "Let's go for a walk."

"Alright," Vaan agreed.

The two left the lord's estate and took a stroll around central town; their pace was neither fast nor slow. Instead, they were steady and calm.

Vaan did not rush Astoria but patiently waited for her to speak when she was ready.

"I guess by now, you have already learned about the Holy Knight Empire's imperial family and suspected my relationship with them, right? How come you haven't asked me about it?" Astoria quietly asked.

"You must have your reasons; it seemed personal, and I didn't want to pry," Vaan calmly replied. "As such, I was waiting for you to bring it up instead."

After Astoria heard that, she was touched by Vaan's considerations. But at the same time, she felt guilty for keeping quiet about it.

"It's... exactly as you think; I'm related to the Braveheart imperial family. The current reigning emperor should be my younger cousin," Astoria admitted.

"Should?" Vaan uttered before asking her, "You're not confident that the emperor is your cousin?"

"Yeah, I don't particularly pay attention to news from the Holy Knight Empire," Astoria replied with a nod. "The tension between the two countries doesn't make it any easier to receive information from there either."

"It has been many years since I broke ties with the Braveheart imperial family. At that time, the current reigning emperor wasn't even born yet. Even Gehenna wasn't a thing. Thus, he might even be my nephew," Astoria stated.

"Will you be okay fighting against the current Braveheart imperial family?" Vaan asked.

"Yeah, you don't have to worry about that, Vaan," Astoria assured with a nod before sighing. "I was bound to be forced into ending this ill-fated relationship one day."

"You see, my father was the king three hundred years ago. He was a kind, benevolent ruler who thought the best for his people. He taught me how I should live and serve the people. He was someone I respected deeply."

"However, he suddenly passed away one day, and my mother followed him in her grief, leaving me with no family besides an ambitious uncle and his wife. I have always suspected they were behind my parents' deaths. But instead of avenging them, I ran away to avoid civil war."

"You must be thinking I was pretty pathetic, right?" Astoria asked self-deprecatingly.

"Not at all," Vaan shook his head before gripping her hand tightly and saying, "It must not have been an easy decision to make at the time. You wanted to live up to your father's expectations even after his passing, right?"

"You didn't run away because you were scared; you ran away to protect the people from dying in a meaningless war against each other. I'm sure your father would have been proud of your choice," Vaan stated.

After listening to Astoria's story, he learned how she became the person she was. At the same, he also understood what kind of person her late father was.

Without a doubt, her father would have been a great king in peaceful times. But in chaotic times, not so much.

Meanwhile, Astoria felt a lot of weight lifted from her heart after she heard Vaan's reply. Perhaps, she was just waiting to hear those exact words.

"Thank you," Astoria said in a low voice with her head down.

"C'mon, let us head back to the lord's estate," Vaan suggested as he rubbed Astoria's head. "We have much to discuss and prepare. We must remove the imperial family from power if we want to stop the Holy Knight Empire from waging any more wars on human countries."

"Mm." Astoria nodded, understanding the full complications of Vaan's words.

She was no longer the same girl that ran away three hundred years ago. She was ready to make sacrifices and fight for her rightful place on the throne.

...

Inside the lord's estate, everyone was gathered over breakfast before Vaan shared everything he discovered during his scouting trip.

However, the mood quickly turned heavy and grim when everyone learned about the Holy Knight Empire's strength.

"There's such an overwhelming disparity in both the power of our troops and the quality of our equipment..." Silvaria said before wondering with a big frown, "When did our kingdom fall so far behind?"

"If I have to be painfully honest, it's actually not surprising that other countries have surpassed us," Eniwse said solemnly. "After all, the world seems to have this misconception that our kingdom is rich with resources just because we have access to Gehenna."

"But in truth, how many times have we managed to succeed in plundering resources from Gehenna? Only three times. And each time was led by none other than Queen Henrietta, yet we still have to share the spoils with other witch kingdoms."

"Even during the great expeditions, the resources we plundered weren't much more valuable than the scraps we collect from demons that crossed into our world. Only the Fuhengir's carcass was something worth mentioning, but even that was divided and lost."

"How many times must things be taken from us before enough is enough? The only thing I can confidently say we have in abundance is mana," Eniwse stated heatedly before she soon felt embarrassed by the stares she received. "Ahem, sorry. I was too caught up in my speech."

"Don't be. What you said wasn't wrong, Lady Eniwse," Astoria stated seriously before saying, "Adding to Lady Eniwse's point, the Holy Knight Empire controls a vast amount of land. This gives them both access to richer and rarer natural resources as well as people."

"Exploiting the knowledge of reincarnators is something the Holy Knight Empire had been doing even before the existence of Gehenna," Astoria stated, shocking everyone besides Vaan and Eniwse.

Nevertheless, Silvaria quickly fixed her expression and seriously asked, "So how do we win despite such overwhelming odds against us?"

Chapter 417: Accidental Discovery

"Now, hold on a minute!" Solana suddenly interrupted with an exasperated look and asked, "Why do I feel we are skipping over something significant here? What do you mean by exploiting the knowledge of reincarnators?"

"I thought they were just rumors. Please clarify this, Headmaster Astoria," Solana requested, feeling very intrigued and curious.

"Well, it's just as I said, reincarnators exist; people with memories of their past lives are hidden among us, Lady Solana," Astoria replied.

"I might have made a bold assumption about the Holy Knight Empire exploiting the knowledge of reincarnators, but if you think about it, it all makes sense. Think about it; before Gehenna appeared, the Holy Knight Empire was just one of many other smaller kingdoms on Pangea."

"However, the Holy Knight Empire suddenly made leaps and bounds in their advancement of martial arts, allowing them to dominate other kingdoms in battle. Now that mana exists, their martial arts must have evolved and become even more powerful. There's no other plausible explanation besides exploiting the knowledge of reincarnators."

"There were a few self-proclaimed reincarnators during the time I lived in the Holy Knight Empire. Although it was said that they were killed for offending bigshots, that might not have been the case after all," Astoria stated.

Even if the reincarnators back then were killed, it didn't change the fact that there were still more hidden reincarnators in the world.

"Great. So, we are not facing an enormous army that isn't just stronger and better equipped but also more skilled in combat," Silvaria said pessimistically before asking again, "How are we supposed to win?"

Although she had witnessed Vaan's strength, she doubted it was inexhaustible. As such, she didn't believe he could singlehandedly carry them to victory.

"I believe Vaan has a plan for us," Dahlia stated, directing everyone's attention toward him.

"We will have better equipment, magic tools, and weapons of war; my associates are producing them as we speak. The bigger issue is the difference in raw power," Vaan calmly stated before mentioning, "I have devised a mana utilization method for witches to test."

"If it works as I have theorized, it should grant witches physical capabilities similar to aura users and their aura," Vaan added.

"That sounds incredible, Sir Vahn," Silvaria acknowledged before asking, "But how would learning such a mana utilization method make up for the difference in power and numbers?"

"It won't," Vaan coolly admitted. "However, it will greatly cut down your mana expenditure and increase your survivability chance in battle at the very least."

"For example, you won't have to expend mana conjuring a sturdy earthen wall to block an attack when a single sword or shield backed with enhanced physical strength could do the same time."

"Furthermore, you don't have to waste time casting the defensive spells," Vaan added.

"I feel like this mana utilization method will greatly benefit me," Astoria commented with a thoughtful look, considering her physical strength was already high.

If she could convert mana into additional physical strength, according to Vaan's description, her physical prowess would surpass her magic power once more.

"Let us hope so," Vaan nodded.

After everything that was said and done, it was still a newly-devised mana utilization method that had yet to be tested. As a result, the reality of its effects could differ from the theory.

"I will teach this mana utilization method to Astoria first. The theory isn't complex, but its application won't be easy. Furthermore, it requires a good understanding of the body's internal structure," Vaan stated.

Considering Astoria's body was well-trained compared to everyone else, there was no better candidate than her to test the mana utilization method.

"Alright," Astoria readily agreed with a nod, feeling a sense of anticipation. "What do I need to do?"

Shortly after, Vaan pointed out the twelve main channels in her body and the sequence in which to circulate mana.

Astoria spent ten minutes memorizing the main channels and circulation sequence by heart before she was ready to put it into practice.

Vaan had warned her that a mistake in the circulation method could result in serious internal injuries. As such, Astoria made sure she fully understood the mana utilization method before she actually practiced it.

At the same time, she understood why she had to be the first candidate to test it; there wasn't anyone more appropriate for the task than her.

If there were, it would have been Solana, who had trained her body and swordsmanship for a couple of years after losing her magic.

"Well, here goes nothing," Astoria uttered after moving to an open space and taking a deep breath.

Shortly after, she controlled a portion of mana and circulated them through her blood channels according to the specific sequence. It was like she had practiced the mana utilization method dozens of times in her mind.

At first, she didn't feel any changes in her body despite the mana circulation. But after she completed a couple of cycles and increased her circulation speed, she immediately felt the effect.

At the same time, the astonishment that appeared on Astoria's face quickly told everyone that the mana utilization method was working.

"Don't lose focus," Vaan solemnly warned.

"Mm," Astoria noted.

As she continued to increase her mana circulation speed, her physical power rose like she was pumping blood through her body and experiencing an adrenaline rush.

However, the effect was much more prominent and sophisticated than the simple physical enhancement magic she had been using.

Astoria suddenly threw a strong punch at the empty air in front of her without a second thought.

Boom!

The raw physical force behind her punch caused a powerful surge of air to slam against the wall and blast it open, leaving behind a gaping hole.

"Oi..." Solana hollered, looking at the destruction of her home.

"My bad, Lady Solana. I'll fix it later," Astoria apologized after recognizing her mistake. Even so, she immediately noticed a problem. "The mana is circulating too fast. How should I put an end to it?"

"Try picking an exit point in your fist and expelling it as a magical attack with your Specialized Magic," Vaan suggested before quickly adding, "But do it outside and aim for the empty sky."

"Alright." Astoria acknowledged.

Due to the mana veins in her arms, it was easy to follow Vaan's instructions and guide the high-speed to her fist as she threw out another punch.

Rumble...!

A massive fist of light surged into the sky with lightning speed, causing the ground to quake under the might of its thrusting force as it took off like a giant rocket launching into outer space.

Solana and the others were all stunned by the power behind the giant fist of light for a long time before their minds eventually snapped back to reality.

"W-What the fuck was that?! The power behind that magical attack was definitely not something a Mid-stage High Witch could have produced normally!" Silvaria exclaimed with sheer disbelief.

The physical strength enhancement was already incredible enough, but the power of the magic attack was on a whole other level of insanity.

"Right? That was like a supercharged magic spell. It must be comparable to the attack of a Late-stage High Witch!" Hester chimed incredulously.

Chapter 418: The Vossen Household's Arrival

Shortly after, everyone shifted their attention to Vaan with respect and amazement, only to see his jaw drop with a similar look of astonishment.

Evidently, Vaan didn't expect Astoria to produce such a powerful magical attack from the mana utilization method either.

Or rather, he didn't think that far when he devised the mana utilization method. Thus, he was surprised by the result like everyone else.

"I supposed this accidental discovery was quite the pleasant surprise," Vaan smiled wryly and said, "With this mana utilization method, witches will be able to cast spells above their rank."

Some of the greatest discoveries were made by accidents.

"Please teach us the mana utilization method, too, Sir Vahn," Solana and the others stared at Vaan with bright eyes, full of eagerness and excitement, especially Silvaria and Cyrena.

They both looked like hungry wolves as they eyed his nether region, ready to do anything to learn the mana utilization method.

Although they seemed a little too eager, it also seemed like an excuse.

After all, Vaan was a desirable man, not to mention the night activities with his regular dual-practice partners had been stimulating them.

"We'll get to that soon," Vaan replied.

Afterward, he requested Astoria's assistance after taking out an empty memory crystal and teaching her its general function.

Half an hour later, Astoria learned how to use the memory crystals. She recorded the mana utilization method in detail before passing a memory crystal to every person in the group.

As such, Solana and the others equally received the opportunity to learn the mana utilization method.

Nevertheless, Vaan handed over another two hundred empty memory crystals for Astoria to continue recording the mana utilization method.

They needed many witches to learn and master the method as soon as possible so they could boost their military force.

"I'll get this done as soon as I can," Astoria promised earnestly.

"Thank you, Headmaster Astoria. We'll be relying on you for this," Solana thanked her on behalf of everyone before she suddenly reminded with a serious look, "But don't forget to fix that hole in the wall."

"I won't, Lady Solana," Astoria replied with a wry look.

...

Shortly after, Solana and the others dispersed to study the content of their memory crystal.

At the same time, Vaan took the teleporter to Redpine City to check on Helia's progress regarding the meeting arrangement with the border lords.

...

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...

A few miles away from Sunpeak Town, a group of magic airships crossed into the region's airspace, carrying hundreds of Peak-stage Senior Witches and dozens of Peak-level Aura Grandmasters.

Sunpeak Town could be seen just in the distance.

"Wow! Is that really Sunpeak Town?! It looks nothing like the last time I was there!" Linetta exclaimed with amazement as she leaned over the edge of the airship's railing.

In her memory, Sunpeak Town was just a run-down small town with nothing worth mentioning. But now, it was much larger after several expansions and possessed multiple tall structures.

Sunpeak Town had transformed into a bustling city.

Nevertheless, Linetta didn't care too much about Sunpeak Town's changes; she only cared about meeting the person in it.

"Be careful, or you'll fall off the airship. Also, it'll be very dangerous from here on. So you need to follow my instructions—" Arabelle Vossen didn't finish warning her granddaughter before Linetta suddenly took off.

"I'm going ahead, grandmother!" Linetta informed after she suddenly jumped off the magic airship, giving Arabelle a small heart attack.

"You—!" Arabelle's face paled as she watched Linetta plunge toward the ground.

But just as she was about to jump over the railing to save her granddaughter, she witnessed Linetta summoning a black spear from her Magic Domain before flying on top of it.

Linetta rode on her black spear like she was surfing on a surfboard; she made loops in the air before leaning forward, increasing her speed.

Swoosh!

Linetta left Arabelle and their group behind after applying Earth Acceleration to her black spear, racing to Sunpeak Town.

"Quickly give chase! We must catch up to her!" Arabelle barked, ordering her subordinates to increase the speed of the magic airship.

She was anxious due to the unknown situation in Sunpeak Town.

Nevertheless, Arabelle quickly closed the distance on Linetta in no time due to the magic airship's superior speed.

She immediately jumped off and caught Linetta in mid-air.

"I got you now, you little brat!" Arabelle roared exasperatedly before reprimanding her, "Didn't I warn you about Sunpeak Town's dangers?! Are my words just farts to you, young lady?! No matter how excited you are to see that little bastard, you need to consider your safety first!"

"But grandmother, take a look around you. Does this look like a chaotic and dangerous town to you?" Linetta argued after noticing the bustling and lively atmosphere in Sunpeak Town. "It's way too orderly, don't you think?"

Arabelle was surprised when she realized her granddaughter was right.

Considering many rogue wanderers from the capital had reached the town ahead of them, it was very strange not to see a single conflict breaking out in Sunpeak Town.

For a moment, Arabelle wondered if everyone was bewitched by some powerful large-scale illusion spell that made them behave.

However, she didn't sense any active large-scale spell when she entered the town.

No matter how Arabelle wracked her brain, she couldn't figure out why some of the capital's most notorious witches wore seemingly genuine and humble smiles as they engaged in trades with the locals.

As such, she figured it would be best to ask them for the answers herself.

After the Vossen Household's personal troops caught up, they followed closely behind Arabelle and Linetta.

"Hm? Can I help you with something, Lady Arabelle?" a Peak-stage Senior Witch enquired with a friendly smile, seemingly unconcerned despite being surrounded by the Vossen Household's troops.

"Olga, the Blackhearted Trader, what mischief are you up to now?" Arabelle asked with narrowed eyes.

"M-Mischief?" Olga's face paled before she barked angrily, "There's no mischief here, and don't you dare slander me, Lady Arabelle!"

"No mischief? Well, that's a surprise. Usually, if you're not openly causing trouble or in dispute with someone, then you must be secretly up to no good," Arabelle indifferently mentioned before asking, "What changed, hm?"

"Hah, if you want to court death, then be my guest and go cause some trouble in this town. However, I, Olga, won't be joining you. I'm not tired of living yet," Olga firmly stated before impatiently adding, "Now, if you will excuse me, I have businesses to attend to."

Arabelle signaled her troops to make way for Olga to leave. Even so, she was even more confused by Olga's behavior and responses; it really did seem like the work of a bewitchment spell.

After all, how can a person change so much in such little time after visiting Sunpeak Town?

"Maybe we should talk to someone more willing to answer our questions, like the kind-looking locals over there or the local lord, grandmother," Linetta suggested.

"Also, I think it's in our best interest to heed Olga's words and not cause any trouble for now."

"Alright, we'll ask the locals first, then visit the local lord to learn more about this town's situation," Arabelle agreed with a nod.

Chapter 419: Arabelle's Shock

Considering the strangeness of Sunpeak Town's situation and the people's behavior, Arabelle and her people couldn't help but feel apprehensive. As such, they were extra careful not to cause trouble.

At the same time, they ensured their big group didn't affect the businesses in town.

"Hey, you there. Do you mind if we ask you some questions?" Arabelle picked out an Early-stage Senior Witch who appeared to be a local.

"Sure," the Early-stage Senior Witch inspected Arabelle's group warily before she eventually agreed, "What do you want to ask?"

"There should have been influxes of people visiting this town every day, right? So how is the town maintaining order so well? Don't you get troublemakers?" Arabelle asked.

"Heh, troublemakers?" the Early-stage Senior Witch snickered with a smug look and said, "We used to get them every day, too many, in fact. But after Lord Aeliana put them in their place, no one dares to act up anymore."

"If you head toward the town's square, you'll see a large stone stele engraved with many names. Those names belong to every troublemaker who committed crimes in this town and got executed for it," the Early-stage Senior Witch directed them.

Arabelle and her people were shocked at once.

To bring order to the town, the local lord would have to execute a considerable amount of troublemakers before the rest started behaving. But in order to do that, the local lord would also need to have both power and boldness.

When did Lord Aeliana possess such audacity to execute people as she pleased?

"Lord Aeliana... Wasn't she the lord that turned into an abomination? When did she come back—or rather, how did she even recover?" a Peak-stage Senior Witch behind Arabelle muttered with great astonishment.

"You don't know? That's old news now," the local witch grinned and said with glowing reverence in her eyes, "That's all thanks to Lord Vaan. As long as we have Lord Vaan around, the abomination status is no longer an incurable problem."

"Lord Vaan? When did the kingdom have such an impressive witch?" Arabelle muttered before she frowned. "Why does this name sound so familiar?"

"That's because Lord Vaan is the only man ever to receive the title Venerable Sage in the Kingdom of Black Rose," the local witch replied before adding, "So, no, Lord Vaan is not a witch."

"Oh..." Arabelle uttered.

For some reason, she felt both disappointed and relieved at the same time. For a moment, she thought Lord Vaan was the same person her granddaughter had been harping about.

Fortunately, that did not seem to be the case.

However, Linetta couldn't help grinning from ear to ear. She had her doubts, but it was too coincidental that Vaan Raphna, who came from Blackmoon City, would also be staying in Sunpeak Town.

How could two men with similar-sounding names and impressive talents first appear in the same city and also stay in the same area?

Linetta had already confirmed with Lord Helia that Vahn Cadieux was currently residing in Sunpeak Town.

As such, the two had to be the same person.

Nevertheless, Linetta also couldn't help worrying about her relationship with Vahn, considering he no longer needed to rely on her powerful background to get by.

She wasn't sure if he would still recognize their relationship.

At the same time, she was also worried if Lord Aeliana's mad execution spree would implicate him. After all, they would have offended many forces.

Even Queen Henrietta might consider punishing them for executing her subjects without going through official trials—just to appease the offended parties.

She could only hope the special wartime situation would pardon their actions.

"Thank you for your help. You were very informative," Arabelle gifted the local witch a small pouch of mana stones to show her appreciation before saying, "We will go and see the stone stele."

When the local witch saw the generous amount of mana stones inside the small pouch, she couldn't help but reveal her surprise.

She didn't expect answering some simple questions with obvious answers would net her such handsome rewards.

How lucky!

...

Nevertheless, Arabelle's group eventually departed from the outer town area and made their way to the town square.

On the way, they were stopped by the town's guards, which didn't come as a surprise. No lord would just let a significant foreign force waltz up to their front doors.

That said, Arabelle, Linette, and a few personal guards were granted passage to the central town area after they revealed their identities and intentions to meet the local lord.

The remaining Vossen Household troops were forced to return and look after their magic airships outside the town.

Before long, Arabelle and Linetta appeared by the big stone stele in the town square.

"T-This... I was expecting to be shocked, but this still exceeds my expectations!" Arabelle exclaimed as she fixed her wide eyes on the stone stele with disbelief.

She was so shaken by the names on the stone stele that she appeared a little disheveled.

"Some of these people were part of big factions in the capital! Oh, my god! Even High Witches have been executed. Lord Aeliana has offended so many big factions. Doesn't she fear heaven's wrath?!"

"If... If these big factions came in full force, Sunpeak Town would be reduced to ruins!" one of Arabelle's personal guards gulped nervously.

A local aura user overheard Arabelle's personal guard's comment before immediately expressing his disagreement.

"You're wrong. Even if they come in full force, they won't be able to do anything."

"You're just a Mid-level Aura Master." The personal guard glanced at the local aura user condescendingly and retorted, "What the hell do you know?"

"You're right. I don't know much," the local aura user admitted before saying, "However, I have seen a lot within this past month. So I can confidently say even if Queen Henrietta herself wanted to raze Sunpeak Town to the ground, she won't be able to do it—not with that person around."

"Those are some bold words there, Aura Master. Do you believe me if I say I can cut you down right where you stand for disrespecting Her Majesty?" the personal guard replied with a dangerous look.

However, the local aura user stood his ground fearlessly.

Chapter 420: Arabelle's Shock (2)

"You can try if you want to implicate your lady and household. I did not disrespect Queen Henrietta; I was merely speaking the truth. Times have changed, witch."

"You..."

"Stand down, Rosina," Arabelle ordered her personal guard before taking the reins of the conversation. "That person you speak of... you're not referring to Lord Aeliana, right?"

"Of course not, my Lady," the local aura user replied more respectfully. "I can see that you are a person of status, and you are on the way to see Lord Aeliana. I am a nobody, so my words mean nothing. Everything will become clear once you speak to Lord Aeliana."

"Then I will do just that," Arabelle acknowledged with a nod before pulling Linetta and her personal guards away from the town square.

"My Lady, that man was so rude. We should have taught him a lesson," Rosina stated resentfully.

"Don't forget we are in another lord's territory, Rosina," Arabelle coolly reminded and said, "It's best not to cause any trouble until we see Lord Aeliana."

"I... I understand," Rosina acknowledged.

...

Sometime later, Arabelle's party reached the lord's estate, where Aeliana and a few others were already waiting to welcome them.

"I didn't expect the matriarch of the renowned Vossen Household in the capital would pay my humble town a visit. I am honored, Lady Arabelle," Aeliana greeted politely.

"No, no, no, the honor is mine, Lord Aeliana. I don't dare receive such respect from someone bold enough to execute so many big-name witches from the capital," Arabelle replied with a bit of sarcasm. "Do you think violence will solve all your problems?"

"I definitely think it can." Aeliana's friendly smile disappeared before she coolly replied, "If it doesn't do the same for you, you're obviously not using enough of it, Lady Arabelle."

"Money and violence solve all problems as long as you use enough of them. And there are only two types of people in this world: your enemies and those who aren't."

"I wonder which one you are to me?" Aeliana hummed half-amusingly, causing Arabelle's party to feel tremendous pressure.

They didn't expect Aeliana to be so domineering, but more importantly, they were shocked by her reveal of power.

A Mid-stage High Witch!

"We are definitely not your enemy, Lord Aeliana. So please withdraw your magic pressure," Arabelle requested humbly. "I've brought troops to vanquish the enemy spies and restore order to your territory. However, I can see that is not necessary."

"You're right. We've already done that without your help. That said, there might still be some rats hiding on the outskirts of town if you're interested in cleaning them up," Aeliana mentioned.

"We'll do just that... huh?"

Arabelle was prepared to retreat when she suddenly realized Linetta had disappeared from her side while her attention was on the local lord.

At that moment, Linetta had snuck over to Solana's side.

"It's good to see you again, Lady Solana," Linetta politely greeted before mentioning, "You appear to be much healthier and brighter than our last meeting. Is it because of Lady Aeliana's return?"

"You can say that, Young Lady Linetta. It's good to see you again, too," Solana softly chuckled as she noticed Linetta's darting eyes.

"If you are looking for Sir Vahn, then I must say you just missed him. He went to see Lord Helia in Redpine City. However, he should be back shortly."

"Why don't you come in and join us for some snacks in the meantime?" Solana suggested before hollering at her daughter, "Aeli, be nice to our guests. We should be on the same side, so we should also fill them in on the situation."

"I understand, mother," Aeliana heard Solana's words before she fixed her attitude to become more accommodating.

Shortly after, Arabelle's party was invited inside the lord's estate for a chat.

However, after Arabelle entered the lord's estate with Linetta and her personal guards, she sat stiffly in her assigned seat, unable to relax.

In front of her sat Aeliana, a Mid-stage High Witch. On her left were Hester and Headmaster Astoria, another two Mid-stage High Witches, Eniwse and Lord Silvaria, two Early-stage Witches. Solana, another Early-stage High Witch, sat on the right side with Linetta, Dahlia, and Cyrena.

Arabelle and the personal guards standing behind her were completely shocked by the power of the collective group.

Since when did High Witches become as common as the cabbages on the roadside stalls? The scene had truly opened her eyes.

Nevertheless, when the attention of every High Witch in the estate was on Arabelle, the collective pressure made her feel like a lamb that had just entered the slaughterhouse; it was suffocating.

"You can relax, Lady Arabelle. We don't bite," Astoria assured with a friendly smile.

Arabelle nodded and tried to calm her nerves by taking a sip from her teacup. However, her hand shook nervously, causing her to spill her drink in the end.

"Pfft...!"

Muffled laughter escaped from Linetta's mouth when she saw her strict grandmother's silly and clumsy manner. But then, she quickly stopped when she received the person's glare.

At that moment, Vaan finished his short trip and returned.

"Oh? We had guests?" the familiar voice suddenly sounded behind Linetta, causing her heart to tremble.

She immediately turned around the next instant and saw Vaan's familiar face before she filled with joy.

"Vahn!" Linetta cried.

She immediately pounced on Vaan from her seat like a wild cat and glued herself to him with her legs wrapped around his waist.

Then, she proceeded to shower him with affection by pecking him on the cheeks.

"What are you doing here? Couldn't wait for me in the capital any longer?" Vaan asked with a calm smile, seemingly unsurprised by her presence and sudden attack.

"You bet! I missed you so much! It felt like forever!" Linetta replied excitedly as she rubbed her cheeks against his with joy, oblivious to her surroundings.

But after she slightly calmed down, she suddenly sensed everyone's attention on her. It made her feel a little embarrassed. Furthermore, she wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but she seemed to be sensing their jealousy.

"So you're the little..."

Arabelle didn't finish speaking when she suddenly covered her mouth to prevent herself from calling Vaan a little bastard. Her heart skipped a beat when she heard Aeliana's ceramic cup shattering in the same instance.

However, it was uncertain whether it was due to Arabelle's brief hostility toward Vaan or Aeliana's envy toward Linetta.