

The Witch 441

Chapter 441: End of Seven Days

Holy Knight Empire's northern border region, Equinox City's outskirts

Outside the city walls, countless pitched tents covered the land and formed a long line, reaching the western sands and the eastern grasslands. In the past several days, the original moderate-sized camp had grown exponentially to accommodate the empire's one million and five hundred thousand-strong army.

For the inevitable war with the Kingdom of Black Rose, the Holy Knight Empire had mustered every soldier they could gather without affecting their economic stability and compromising their border security with other countries.

If not for those reasons, they may not have stopped at one million and five hundred thousand, even if the additional soldiers may be of poorer quality.

But despite the grand majesty of the camp and army, a gloomy and solemn aura surrounded the camp's command center, where Emperor Renardier held his strategic meetings.

"Today is the end of the seven days we gave to the Kingdom of Black Rose. If nothing is done, the kingdom is expected to hand over the imperial princess, Dorothy, in a few hours tops."

Emperor Renardier swept the nobles and lords gathered around the large battle map in the center with a solemn gaze, raising the issue at hand.

"This doesn't make any sense, Your Imperial Majesty," a white-armored lord uttered with a big frown.

"We did anticipate the kingdom would figure out our intentions and try to intercept the Deathsworn Group. However, the Deathsworn Group had been successful for the most part, even if there were only half of the original five hundred left."

"They have scoured every corner of the central region, even expanding the search to other parts of the kingdom, and still failed to locate the imperial princess. It's as if Imperial Princess Dorothy had disappeared into thin air," the white-armored lord added.

"You're not the only one baffled by this," Emperor Renardier replied before saying, "It's most likely that Dorothy was transported somewhere secure with spatial magic. Perhaps, she was sent to one of those grey zones, where even witches don't dare venture."

"However, all attempts at exploring these grey zones had been fruitless, and matters no longer; we are out of time. Once the kingdom hands over Dorothy, we'll lose the right to attack for non-compliance," Emperor Renardier stated.

"What should we do now, Your Imperial Majesty? If the kingdom hands over the imperial princess just like that, are we just going to give up, even after everything we've done to prepare for this war?" a braided-beard noble asked.

"We still have time," another blonde noble suddenly stated.

"No matter where they hid Imperial Princess Dorothy, she is bound to show up at Fort Whitebridge today. The Deathsworn group just has to retrieve her before the actual turnover."

"However, the biggest problem is doing so without getting caught," the blonde noble added with a frown.

"Don't bother, Lord Nicholas. Security will be incredibly high. A few Deathsworn Soldiers will not be able to reach Dorothy, let alone retrieve her unnoticed."

"Then, what do you propose, Marquis Salazar?"

"Ultimately, we are only left with two choices. It depends on how far His Imperial Majesty is willing to go to make this war happen."

"Let's hear the two choices first, Marquis Salazar," Emperor Renardier calmly said.

"Of course, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich nodded before saying, "The first choice is to have the disguised Deathsworn Soldiers assassinate Dorothy from the kingdom's side during the turnover. That is the only time security around Dorothy will be at its lowest point."

"The kingdom won't expect such a thing to happen from their side and in front of everyone, no less. But, of course, that's only if our Deathsworn Soldiers had infiltrated their ranks properly. There is no greater provocation and justification for war if the kingdom 'assassinates' the imperial princess right before our empire," Ulrich stated.

"You do realize Duke Chalfont is among us, do you not? Marquis Salazar?" Emperor Renardier uttered, briefing glancing at Duke Chalfont, who had a darkened expression.

"Of course, I am aware, Your Imperial Majesty. I am just listing our options as they are," Ulrich calmly replied before saying, "But of course, if that doesn't work, we still have one last choice."

"We can just forget about acquiring any justification entirely and wage war on the Kingdom of Black Rose. After all, they are isolated from the rest of Pangea. Thus, even if we say it was the Kingdom of Black Rose that initiated the war, the other countries have no way of refuting our claims."

"At most, they will just be displeased with us."

The meeting quickly fell silent after Ulrich finished speaking. Everyone appeared to be contemplating the two choices, but they all had an answer in their hearts.

However, no one dared to speak up, fearing they would offend both Duke Chalfont and Emperor Renardier.

"Prepare the troops. We attack as soon as we secure Dorothy's safety."

Emperor Renardier eventually made his decision with a sigh. He had a promise to keep with Duke Chalfont. Furthermore, to begin with, the empire wasn't viewed favorably by the other countries. Thus, it didn't matter if they were a little displeased as long as it didn't affect their trade deals.

Suddenly, a messenger arrived outside the big tent with news to report. Once the messenger received Emperor Renardier's permission, he immediately entered to give his report.

"Your Imperial Majesty, the Kingdom of Black Rose informed us to prepare a delegation to receive Imperial Princess Dorothy. They'll be handing her over shortly."

"So the time has come..."

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Kingdom of Black Rose's southern border region, Fort Whitebridge

"The final preparations are all completed, my Lord. Everyone is in position and ready for battle. Also, we've just received confirmation from the Holy Knight Empire. They will meet us in the middle of Stormwind Lake to receive Dorothy."

Shortly after Artemis finished reporting, Vaan also received a sound transmission from Zodreg, informing him that special recording magic tools were also deployed and ready for us.

"The stage has been set. Well then, let us meet the empire's delegates over Stormwind Lake as they wish."

"Yes, my Lord!"

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Compared to several days ago, Fort Whitebridge had become completely different.

Although it retained the same outer appearance, its defense had significantly been upgraded, especially after resources from the capital and central region started flowing into the border region.

Artemis followed in Vaan's footsteps as they left the council room to meet up with Astoria and Aeliana on the ground floor by the gate with their captive, Dorothy.

Along the way, they passed rows of battle witches lining up against the stone wall with their backs straight, appearing strict, disciplined, and confident. Not a single one of them was below the High Witch rank.

Vaan had assisted many Peak-stage Senior Witches to advance to Early-stage High Witches, turning it into something common.

Even so, the opportunity only came to a few when comparing the whole witch army. There were only twenty-thousand High Witches at most.

That said, the Peak-stage Senior Witches had all learned the Mana Utilization Method and could exert power comparable to Early-stage High Witches.

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On the ground floor, a few cross-dressing male bodies lying in pools of blood quickly came into sight as Vaan and Artemis reached the bottom of the stone steps.

"Just as we anticipated, the Assembly of Silent Night's members snuck in to make an attempt on Dorothy's life, my Lord," Aeliana mentioned.

"Not surprising," Vaan acknowledged with a nod before commenting, "However, they're not really committed if they only sent A-rank Witch Hunters... It seems Ulrich Salazar still has other ways to make this war happen..."

"However, there isn't any other way at this point... unless the empire gave up on acquiring justification. In that case, they'll just make a desperate attack and pin the blame on us..."

"Whatever, the truth will prevail in the end," Vaan stated, knowing everything would be recorded.
"Let's meet the empire's delegates."

"Mm."

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'Should I start the visual and sound recordings now, Supreme Leader?'

Shortly after Vaan's group came out from Fort Whitedrige's gate, Zodreg sent Vaan a sound transmission, seeking his permission.

'Start them,' Vaan permitted.

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Moments later, the kingdom and empire's representatives confronted each other over Stormwind Lake.

On Vaan's side, he had Artemis, Astoria, and Aeliana, who had a tight grip on Dorothy. They all flew over with their abilities and magic.

On the other hand, the empire's representatives relied on a white magic airship to meet them at the center of the lake. Unexpectedly, the emperor had come in person. There was also Duke Chalfont, and two other marquises, all fully equipped for battle.

However, that wasn't all.

Vaan sensed another two dozen people hiding under the magic airship's deck, but they weren't powerful; they weren't even aura masters. Instead, they were Senior Witches.

Neither side spoke immediately. Instead, they stared at each other in silence, trying to feel each other out.

A visible frown could be found on Emperor Renardier's face, which wasn't surprising.

After all, nothing went according to his plans, and there was even an unknown man among the witches. Furthermore, the man's standing didn't seem inferior to the witches, even surpassing them, judging by how they were positioned behind the person.

Emperor Renardier was greatly disappointed at the Deathsworn Group for failing to provide information on such an important yet unknown person within the Kingdom of Black Rose.

Chapter 442: Provoking Opportunities

Although Emperor Renardier was unsettled by Vaan's presence, it wasn't the time for him to satisfy his curiosity and doubts.

"Now is the time for you to hand over our imperial princess!" one of the two white-armored marquis, a pot-bellied blonde man with chubby cheeks and a swirly mustache, strongly demanded with a threatening tone.

"Of course. That is why we are here," Aeliana amicably announced with a sweet, charming smile, enchanting the pot-bellied marquis in a brief daze. Her beauty easily moved the hearts of men.

But anyone with the slightest awareness of Aeliana's true nature would have known that she wasn't one to respond to open hostilities with friendly kindness normally. She had to restrain her wild nature for the rare instance.

Nevertheless, Aeliana's vines, which restrained Dorothy's ability to move, speak, and see, unfurled, freeing her. The vines then joined with other vines, forming interlocking patterns to create a bridge to the white magic airship.

Any disability Dorothy had previously incurred had been restored with dragon magic.

"Come, Dorothy. Over here," Duke Chalfont signaled with a hand gesture.

After Dorothy blindly crossed the vine bridge with a dull look and entered Duke Chalfont's arms, Duke Chalfont finally felt some relief in his heart.

However, her lack of response made him frown.

"Don't worry. She's only sedated. The effects will wear off in a few hours," Astoria calmly explained to the Holy Knight Empire's representatives. "Now that your demands have been met, please recall your army. Otherwise, the Kingdom of Black Rose will view it as an act of aggression."

Shortly after, Emperor Renardier finally managed to pull his attention away from Vaan and gazed at Astoria before his eyes brightened, immediately attracted by her beauty.

Her demeanor, aura, and elegance were on a different level from other women. As expected of royal blood, only someone like this could become his main wife – Emperor Renardier thought.

Astoria frowned under Emperor Renardier's uncomfortable and unsettling gaze.

"You must be Lady Astoria, my older cousin. The rumors do you no justice; your beauty is without equal, the best I have seen. Won't you return to the empire with me and become my empress—?" Emperor Renardier suggested expectantly.

However, his expression suddenly darkened when he noticed Vaan's arm wrapping around Astoria's waist, pulling her body towards his own.

"I didn't know the emperor of the Holy Knight Empire was so unrestrained and lacking in women that he would target other people's women," Vaan coolly commented while Astoria blushed in his arms.

He decided to give up the friendly and reasonable approach, figuring it was fine if the empire still looked bad in front of the recordings. It would be even better if his cheap provocations forced the empire's representatives to utter disadvantageous words that could be used against them later.

Nevertheless, Vaan's comment easily enraged Emperor Renardier as veins protruded on the latter's face. Even so, Emperor Renardier forcefully suppressed his emotions to remain calm.

That said, he still wore an ugly expression.

Emperor Renardier felt like he had just found his significant other—only to have her stolen in front of him. It left a bitter feeling in his heart. As the emperor of a country, there was nothing he couldn't get if he desired. But here, he was forced to eat the bitter melon.

"Who are you?"

"Her man."

Vaan's reply enraged Emperor Renardier even further, as it wasn't the answer the latter wanted to hear.

Even so, Vaan's answer was still an answer, nonetheless. And even if Vaan wasn't feigning ignorance to the real question, Emperor Renardier couldn't exactly call him stupid for it.

"Her man... Her man, huh? Very good!" Emperor Renardier uttered with a glaring and intense look in his eyes before he asked, "Do you have any idea who she is? Do you think you are worthy of her?"

"Do I have any idea who she is? Not your woman, that's for sure. As for whether I am worthy or not, I don't think that's any of your business, Your Imperial Majesty," Vaan replied satirically and rudely, enraging the emperor even further.

"We've already returned the imperial princess as per the empire's demand. Therefore, our business here is concluded; there's nothing left for us to discuss. So withdraw your army and be on your way," Vaan strongly demanded.

"How dare you speak to His Imperial Majesty like that! I should have you executed for your disrespect, peasant!" the pot-bellied marquis drew his Rank 4 silver sword, pointing it at Vaan threateningly in his anger.

However, Vaan remained calm and unfazed; the pot-bellied marquis did not possess the qualities to make him feel threatened.

"How laughable," Vaan mocked.

"The Kingdom of Black Rose and the Holy Knight Empire have a hostile relationship; we do not get along. We do not need to be nice to you, nor do your country's laws and rules apply to us. Or is the Holy Knight Empire so arrogant as to believe their laws extend to other countries?"

"You—!"

"Let it go, Marquis Salsburg. This young man is completely right. We are done here. Let us head back," Emperor Renardier acknowledged with a dark look, turning to leave before he suddenly glanced back and added, "However, an amicable and friendly attitude is a necessity to maintaining a long, healthy life. It would be in your best interest to remember that."

"No, I don't think I need to. We won't be seeing each other ever again, Your Imperial Majesty," Vaan nonchalantly replied, not heeding the advice.

Then, he glanced at Duke Chalfont and uttered a few soundless words only the latter could read.

"Oh, believe me, we'll be seeing each other again sooner than you think. Also, I hope Lady Astoria won't regret choosing him over me later," Emperor Renardier departed, leaving behind a vague threat.

Whatever he wanted, he'd take by force.

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Shortly after, the two parties returned to their respective camps. On the empire's white magic airship, the pot-bellied immediately vented his frustration to the emperor.

"Dammit, what an audacious young man! Does he think the witches can protect him? I almost couldn't help myself; I wanted to cut him down so badly!"

Chapter 443: The Inevitability of War

"I understand how you feel, Marquis Salsburg. But regardless of the other party's attitude, a diplomatic exchange only uses words, not violence. It would be difficult for our empire to interact with other countries if word spread that our empire kills representatives during diplomatic exchanges."

"I'm aware of that, Your Imperial Majesty. However, this is the Kingdom of Black Rose we are talking about. They are isolated. The other countries won't know whatever we do to them. Furthermore, we're going to accuse them of starting this war anyway."

"I know. However, we still have to take precautions and make it seem legitimate," Emperor Renardier stated gloomily. He briefly glanced around, then said, "This distance is good enough. Begin the plan!"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!" the two marquises answered with blood-boiling excitement.

The time has come!

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Boom!

As Vaan's party headed back to Fort Whitebridge, a distant explosion suddenly resounded, prompting them to glance back. They immediately saw the white magic airship's rear engine in flames and rising smoke as it plummeted out of the sky.

Following the sudden attack on the white magic airship, several more explosions took place within the Holy Knight Empire's front camp as a portion of the tents burst into flames.

Whether it was Astoria, Aeliana, or Artemis, they all revealed a look of surprise. They did not expect to witness such a scene after their departure.

'Zodreg?' Vaan checked.

'The empire blew up their own ship and also took advantage of the dummy explosives we purposely left half-exposed, Supreme Leader. I have everything recorded.'

'Good work. You can cut the recording now,' Vaan mentally instructed.

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Holy Knight Empire's side

After the white magic airship plummeted into the ground on the Holy Knight Empire's soil right before their camp, shaking the earth and sending large piles of dirt into the air, the holy soldiers froze with dumbfounded looks.

Moments later, their expression drastically changed.

"Secure the perimeters! Save His Imperial Majesty!" a thousand-men commander barked urgently, racing ahead of the others to the crash site.

However, Emperor Renardier's party escaped the burning magic airship unscathed, protected by a strong barrier, which took twenty Senior Witches to produce.

"The Kingdom of Black Rose had launched a sneak attack on our empire and attempted to assassinate our emperor! All troops prepare for war! The Kingdom of Black Rose must pay for this transgression!"

"The Kingdom of Black Rose did this?"

"How dare they! We must make them pay!"

"Death to the witches!"

Shortly after the pot-bellied marquis' serious declaration, which almost exposed his inner excitement, the soldiers within the camp were incited, exploding with outrage.

At the same time, a group of high-profile commanders in higher-quality white armor appeared in front of Emperor Renardier's party with urgency and relief.

"It's great that you are alright, Your Imperial Majesty. Fire has spread across multiple parts of the camp, and the troops are disorderly. Please give us your command, Your Imperial Majesty!" the commanders requested.

"Go and quell the fire and troops, then give me a damage report!"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!"

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Kingdom of Black Rose's side

"What just happened? Did someone accidentally set off our explosives?" Artemis uttered with shock.

"No, but that doesn't make sense. The camp's explosive is one thing, but what about their magic airship? Did they do it to themselves? They wouldn't, right...?"

"They would, and they did," Vaan confirmed solemnly before softly chuckling the next moment. "They are truly desperate to make themselves the victim in this war. I am tempted to give them their surprise gift right away, but we have to give them one last chance."

"It's your turn, Astoria. A majority of the empire's army is likely unaware of their higher-up's self-destructive plan to incite the war. You can add that in your speech."

"Mm."

Shortly after Astoria acknowledged with a nod, she flew up from Fort Whitebridge's wall.

In the air, she conjured a large magic circle, amplifying all sound waves passing through them tenfold at the very least.

"Citizens of the Holy Knight Empire, I, Astoria Braveheart, the firstborn and only heir of Siegfried Braveheart. If you still have a shred of loyalty for the old monarchy and true heir to the throne, hear me! The Kingdom of Black Rose did not initiate any attack on the Holy Knight Empire, nor does it wish for war."

"It was all a calculated scheme devised by none other than your current reigning emperor and leaders. They are the ones who want this war to happen. And for that purpose, they didn't hesitate to make you all victims in it!"

"Do not be misled by your leaders! A war between our two countries will not benefit you; it will only benefit them! Your blood and bones will be the price of their glory! We do not need this meaningless bloodshed!"

"Three hundred years ago, I fled the empire to avoid a divided country—"

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"Do not be misled by the words of a witch living in a men-enslaving country. She is just trying to cause confusion and doubts among us!" Emperor Renardier interrupted Astoria's speech, not intending to let her finish and sow discord in his army.

Due to his proximity to the camp, his mighty voice easily overwhelmed her.

"Only male heirs have the rights to the imperial throne! Regardless of who she says she is, the current empire has nothing to do with her! She had long turned her back on you while I have been with you every step of the way, raising the empire to its present state!"

"His Imperial Majesty is right. We have no need for a long-lost imperial princess that abandoned us!" Count Eldridge chimed, fueling the emperor's momentum.

With more lords and nobles joining in with their own input, the holy army was easily swayed in their favor.

As such, Astoria's words lost their effect and fell on deaf ears.

Although the result didn't surprise Astoria, she was still disheartened to see the holy soldiers quickly incited, burning with hate for the witches in their eyes.

In the end, she could not stop the war.

Shortly after dwelling in her regret, Astoria's eyes suddenly flickered with cold rage at the emperor. Because of one man's ambition, many lives will be lost.

Chapter 444: Magitech Cannon

Holy Knight Empire's camp, command center.

Inside the camp's biggest tent, Emperor Renardier and countless nobles, lords, and high-ranking commanders gathered around the battle map.

"What is the status of the Kingdom of Black Rose's forces?"

Emperor Renardier enquired with his gaze fixed on the witch kingdom's three border regions, marked with several black flags, indicating the positions of their battle witches.

"There are about 15,000 – 30,000 battle witches in Fort Whitebridge, 5,000 – 10,000 battle witches in Fort Ironhaven, and 10,000 – 15,000 battle witches in Fort Dragontail. According to the Deathsworn Group's information, they also have about 40,000 – 50,000 battle witches stationed in each border city," Ulrich reported.

"So we're only looking 150,000 – 205,000 strong in the border regions at most, huh? A tenth to an eighth of our army..." Emperor Renardier muttered with a frown.

"It was your idea to wait seven days and have the greedy and ambitious witches compete with each other for control and authority. In the end, it worked out perfectly—No, I dare say it worked out even better than we imagined, Your Imperial Majesty," Count Eldridge stated before asking with doubt, "So, why do you look unhappy?"

"That's because I don't trust our information," Emperor Renardier declared with a deep look.

"For starters, the Deathsworn Group failed to pinpoint Dorothy's precise location and retrieve her within the stipulated timeframe; this proves the enemy kingdom has master spatial manipulation technology or possesses spatial-attribute witches."

"However, spatial-attribute witches are extremely rare. Only the Great House of Caelestis comes to mind, but witches from the household are at odds with the Kingdom of Black Rose for the loss of their direct members in the Third Great Expedition. Thus, they are unlikely to lend their help."

"In other words, it's more likely that the Kingdom of Black Rose is in possession of advanced spatial-teleportation technology. Of course, there's still a small chance that they have a spatial-attribute witch within their rank, but I'm leaning towards the former."

"Regardless of the truth, the Deathsworn Group provided no such vital information; this implies the Deathsworn Group is either incompetent or the enemy had in the palm of their hands right from the start, manipulating them to hide information from us, or worse, feeding us false information."

"We all know just how capable the Deathsworn Group is, so there's no way they are incompetent. That leaves us with the latter possibility," Emperor Renardier concluded grimly.

"Impossible," Alistair Cane immediately denied, mentioning, "The Deathsworn Group is something the Wizard Tower had worked with Your Imperial Majesty to create. Not only is each member of

this group trained to be absolutely loyal to you, but they also have five layers of mental defense; their souls are set to collapse the moment interrogation magic is used on them."

"There's no way the Deathsworn Group would betray you while they are still alive, Your Imperial Majesty," Alistair Cane stated confidently.

However, Emperor Renardier didn't share the same sentiments.

"Nothing is absolute, Lord Alistair. I don't doubt the Wizard Tower's capability. However, we are facing a kingdom of witches. Magic is also their specialty. Thus, we might be underestimating their magic capabilities," Emperor Renadier stated.

"Is there a special reason why you only doubt our information now, Your Imperial Majesty?" Ulrich asked with narrowed eyes.

"Naturally," Emperor Renardier replied with a nod.

Shortly after, the emperor recounted his encounter with Vaan during the diplomatic exchanged and raised his doubts.

"What are your opinions on this man, Lord Salsburg and Lord Valtran? What do you think of his strength?" Emperor Renardier asked the two marquis that accompanied him.

"There's nothing to think about; that man is just a puppet, Your Imperial Majesty," the pot-bellied marquis, Lord Salsburg, replied without hesitation.

"At first, it seemed like the witches were quite amicable, but they left most of the talking to that man. They are just two-faced, snake-like bitches. Those women definitely brought him along to insult us."

"They were clearly telling us that they are so high and mighty, they didn't need to insult us personally; they have men to use in their stead. And if we couldn't see through that, then we would be viewed as fools in their eyes," Lord Salsburg added grimly.

"I share the same opinion as Lord Salsburg, Your Imperial Majesty," the braided-beard marquis with a scar down the middle of his left eye, Lord Valtran, continued.

"I didn't find anything worth mentioning about his strength either. His build suggests he is physically fit, but there wasn't a shred of aura emanating from his body; he's not even an aura user. He's just the witches' boy toy."

"If the witches weren't carrying him along, he wouldn't even have the opportunity to meet us at such a height, let alone disrespect you, Your Imperial Majesty," Lord Valtran added.

"I have a different opinion," Emperor Renardier argued, shaking his head, then said, "If the man were truly powerless, he wouldn't be so fearless in front of three Late-stage Aura Lords and one Late-stage Aura King."

"He was completely calm in front of my pressure – a Late-stage Aura King's pressure. Can you all believe that? Unless this man has overwhelmingly powerful mental fortitude, he must have some special means of concealing his power."

"My only fear is that he has both – that would make him the most dangerous unknown variable in this war, second only to Queen Henrietta," Emperor Renardier stated, startling everyone. "I'm considering the use of the magitech cannons to test the kingdom's strength. What does our strategist think?"

"I was thinking the same thing, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich agreed.

"But, Your Imperial Majesty—! The magitech cannons consume too many mana stones to use! If we use it now, how are supposed to breach Blackthorn City's powerful defense later?" Baron Arderlard asked before adding, "Furthermore, Lord Artemis is in Fort Whitebridge. She might get caught in the blast."

"Fool, stop thinking with your dick and take a look at yourself," Emperor Renardier criticized sternly.

"Do you really think Artemis has any interest in becoming your wife? She was only buying time for the kingdom while misleading us. I shouldn't have put my faith in your words. I should be considering how I should punish you instead!"

"I... I'm terribly sorry, Your Imperial Majesty! Please have mercy!" Baron Arderlard paled, immediately dropping to the floor and begging for his life along with Baron Gregory and Baron Ranulf.

Nevertheless, Emperor Renardier temporarily overlooked their matter.

After finalizing their war plan, one giant magitech cannon was brought forward, entering the firing range of its target, Fort Whitebridge, which lay on the other side of Stormwind Lake.

The giant magitech cannon was twenty yards long and ten feet high.

In addition to its two large wheels and thick black metal pipe, which had a hollow center no bigger than two inches in radius, it also had four large vertical stakes, two on each side, to impale the ground and withstand the powerful recoil of its shots.

That said, the stakes' effectiveness in keeping the magitech cannon in place was yet to be tested and seen.

"Charge the magitech cannon!" a thousand-man commander instructed after receiving the signal from above.

Twenty thousand high-rank mana stones' worth of liquified mana was poured into the magitech cannon's pipe before the opening was sealed with a thick tungsten rod.

Shortly after the magitech cannon was activated, glowing blue runes lit up on the long cylindrical pipe in a swirling pattern. With each loop completed by the glowing blue runes, the magitech cannon shook more violently until it could no longer contain the chaotic power within it.

Boom!

Following a deafening roar, the thick tungsten rod-turned molten red disappeared from the magitech cannon's pipe, shooting off into the distance with a blazing trail of rainbow sparks behind it.

The first shot had been fired...

Chapter 445: Chain Explosions

Rumble...!

The molten tungsten rod slammed into Fort Whitebridge's wall like lightning; fast, deafening, and full of destructive power. Although the molten tungsten rod significantly deformed on impact, it continued to drill into the stone wall under the driving force of the chaotic rainbow energy behind it.

Unfortunately, the stone wall didn't stand a chance against the might of the empire's magitech cannon. It collapsed almost instantly as broken stones scattered in different directions.

Countless battle witches staggered from the violent tremors produced.

"That is..."

Emperor Renardier narrowed his eyes after the dust settled, revealing Fort Whitebridge's wall still standing strong after taking the full force of their magitech cannon, which was said to be comparable to an Early-stage Transcendent's attack.

However, the white stone wall had completely disappeared, replaced by a metallic black one. The white stone wall was only an outer shell that concealed Fort Whitebridge's true defense.

That said, the magitech cannon's attack wasn't completely effective against Fort Whitebridge's defense. Clear cracks could be seen on the magic barrier protecting the black metal wall. A second shot would definitely breach its magic defense system.

"What a good defense they have... to be able to withstand the might of our magitech cannon," Emperor Renardier spat with a gloomy look.

Although it seemed like he was praising Fort Whitebridge's defense, he was actually criticizing the border lords, Ulrich Salazar included, for failing to obtain such information.

"Fort Whitebridge did not have such a powerful defense in the past. The Kingdom of Black Rose must have invested a lot into upgrading its defense in the past week we gave them," Ulrich frowned before adding, "However, if they have the chance to do that, then we can expect the Kingdom of Black Rose to be well-prepared for this war."

"How long will it take to charge up the next attack, Lord Alistair?" Emperor Renardier asked.

"The magitech cannon has overheated, and the interior is a scrambled mess. At the very least, it will take my people an hour to return it to its peak state," Alistair Cane answered.

"Can it be done faster?"

"We could try, but I wouldn't bet on it, Your Imperial Majesty. We won't be able to guarantee the magitech cannon's structural integrity if we rush its repairs."

"Fair enough. Please get its repairs started at once, Lord Alistair."

"Understood."

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Meanwhile, over at Fort Whitebridge, Vaan had his gaze fixed on the magitech cannon in the distance with a flicker of curiosity and desire. He wanted to dissect it for study.

Regardless of the world he lived in, it seemed humans were always more adept at creating weapons of mass destruction than self-improvement.

"My Lord, our fort's magic defense has been reduced to 20% durability. If they fire that thing again, our walls won't hold," Artemis quickly reported after receiving the data from her subordinates.

"Don't worry. Even if they have the technology to produce such a devastating level of attack, it shouldn't be something they can fire as they please. We should have some time if they intend to attack again," Vaan assured before instructing her, "Focus on restoring the fort's magic defense."

"Yes, my Lord!" Artemis solemnly answered.

"Is it finally time, my Lord?" Aeliana asked shortly after, albeit a little too excited about what would come.

"Un," Vaan calmly nodded and said, "Since the empire has officially launched the first attack on our kingdom, we can't blame us for retaliating. It's time to give them their surprise gift."

Vaan took out a strange black remote with a red button before pressing it without hesitation.

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"Your Imperial Majesty, one hour is too long," Count Eldridge mentioned.

"Mana stones are precious to us, but it's most likely as common as sand to the witch kingdoms. By the time the magitech cannon is ready for the next attack, their magic defense will most likely be restored to peak conditions as well."

"We need to think about a different strategy," Count Eldridge suggested.

"You're right, Count Eldridge," Emperor Renardier completely agreed and said, "There's no need to take down Fort Whitebridge with the magitech cannon. It consumes too many resources. If I didn't have to conserve my strength for unexpected variables, I would have personally carved out a path for our—"

"Ahh—!"

Dorothy's suddenly clutched her head and wailed painfully deep inside the camp, where it was supposedly secured. Her voice easily resounded throughout the busy camp, startling Duke Chalfont and attracting the nearby soldiers over.

"What's wrong, Dorothy? What's going on with you?"

"My head hurts...! It hurts so much... I want to die!!!"

The ringing pain in Dorothy's head drove her crazy as she repeatedly smashed her head into a wooden pillar, splitting her forehead and drawing blood until her father restrained her.

Although Duke Chalfont wanted to help his daughter, he didn't know where to start; he could only stop her from inflicting further self-harm.

Beep... Beep...

A strange noise was produced within Dorothy's head. It wasn't loud, but it could be heard clearly by those around her.

However, each time Duke Chalfont heard it, his heart pounded like drums as he recalled Vaan's parting silent message for him:

"The price of misplacing your faith will be your undoing."

Beep... Beep... Ka-boom...!

Duke Chalfont's vision was suddenly blinded by an explosion of brilliant white light from Dorothy's head that devoured everything it touched.

Whether it was Duke Chalfont, Dorothy, their tent, or even the several dozen surrounding tents and hundreds of soldiers within the area, everything disappeared in the brilliant white fury that roared thunderously like heaven's wrath.

Everything else outside the blast radius was blown away by the powerful shockwave.

After the brilliant white light of intense heat subsided, an enormous crater was left behind in the middle of the empire's camp; its soils still burned with scorching temperatures.

No one knew what happened, but they at least understood they were attacked, and seven hundred soldiers went missing. It was a nightmarish scene.

However, that wasn't the end of their nightmare.

Following the initial explosion, another three dozen explosions resounded in their rear camp like a chain reaction, swallowing the empire's food supply crates one by one with their furious eruption of flames.

"What the fuck is going on?! Someone please tell me what the fuck happened!"

Chapter 446: Damage Report

Angry shouts erupted left, right, front, and rear as nobles, lords, and commanders rushed toward the fiery scene.

"We are under attack, milord! The enemy targeted our food supplies! Even our mana stone reserve got caught in the fire!"

"Then what the fuck are you still waiting for? Hurry up and fetch some water to put them out before the fire spreads even further!"

After being scolded by the higher-ups, the holy soldiers clad in white armor immediately scurried to their water sources with buckets.

However, the wizards within the camp proved to be the most useful in putting out the fire with their magic. With a few simple spellcasting, the spreading fires were quickly snuffed out.

Afterward, holy soldiers rushed into the scorched land to salvage what was left and tally up the damages for their report.

While that was happening at the sites of the explosions, other holy soldiers found badly burned bodies further away. The holy soldiers blown away by the shock wave sustained the least damage, but the one directly caught within the blast suffered critical injuries.

Not only were they thrown much further away, but they also suffered burns on various parts of their body unprotected by their armor. Some lost their faces, limbs, and even their lives.

"Medics! Where is the medical team? We need their healing potions! No – Low-rank healing potions won't be enough to treat them. Do we have healing specialists among the wizards? Please send them over!"

A burly blonde lord filled with facial scars strongly requested while supporting a critically injured soldier in his arms.

Nevertheless, medics and wizards rushed forward to help where they could. Some were saved, and some were too late to be saved. The ones that survived critical conditions were transferred to the sick bay while the medics and wizards focused on those in life-threatening states.

"Where is Duke Chalfont?"

Emperor Renardier barged into the sick bay with a heavy heart as he scanned the hundreds of occupied beds for his sworn brother and friend.

The first white explosion, which was also the most devastating explosion, occurred at Duke Chalfont's location. Thus, Emperor Renardier didn't doubt the person got caught in it.

He only hoped the person survived.

Nevertheless, after scanning every occupied bed, his gaze fell on a single body whose face had been reduced to an unrecognizable state.

Being the closest to the epicenter of the white explosion, Duke Chalfont undoubtedly suffered the worse injuries among those that survived.

He lost all his limbs, his sturdy armor was indented, and his face was wholly comprised of melted flesh; he didn't have a single hair left. He couldn't see or hear. Talking was exhausting, and simply breathing was a chore.

However, Emperor Renardier recognized Duke Chalfont's armor. Thus, his heart trembled at his sworn brother's state.

"Chalfont, my brother. Please tell me, how did this happen to you?"

"Wuwuwu..."

Duke Chalfont uttered incoherent noises due to his fused flesh and missing parts of his mouth and tongue. Tears dripped from the corners of his eyes. Emperor Renardier immediately understood it had something to do with Dorothy, and his heart quickly turned cold.

The enemy had planted a magic bomb inside Duke Chalfont's daughter. Thus, there was no need to look for her. There was probably nothing left of her untrained body.

He felt cold sweats when he thought of the possible consequences. If the enemy had set off the explosion during the war meeting, even if he could escape unscathed, the rest of the war council would have been crippled or killed.

However, there was no way the enemy would have overlooked such an opportunity.

"What a devious trap... Is this a strategist's mercy? I don't know who planned this, but rest assured, my brother. I will definitely make them pay for what happened. I will let them know how terrible a mistake it was to show kindness to their enemy in war. Such an opportunity doesn't come twice!"

Emperor Renardier vowed to avenge Duke Chalfont and every victim as his eyes burned with silent rage. After instructing some Peak-stage Second-Circle Wizards to take special care of Duke Chalfont, he left the sick bay, giving the person some time alone to grieve.

If Duke Chalfont knew such a situation would happen, he would have picked a different choice. But, unfortunately, there was no medicine for regret.

He could only live with the fact that he had lost his only miracle child. He had toiled for most of his life before he could produce a single child, yet she was gone just like that.

"I regret it so much... I swear I will kill you all...!"

After drowning in his regret, Duke Chalfont transformed all his regret into hatred for the Kingdom of Black Rose.

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Meanwhile, after leaving the sick bay, Emperor Renardier returned to the explosion site with a grim and serious look.

"Give me a damage report," Emperor Renardier demanded, causing the nearby soldiers to sweat nervously as they sensed his silent rage and growing hatred.

Even though they knew his anger and hatred weren't directed at them, the intimidating pressure of a Late-stage Aura King wasn't something they could ignore just because they wanted to.

"Right at once, Your Imperial Majesty!"

A young-looking count with dashing, long blonde hair acknowledged the order before grabbing a clipboard from a nearby holy soldier to peruse the information recorded on it.

"The explosions cost us four-fifths of our food supplies, mana stones reserves, and one-tenth of our magic grenades, bombs, and other explosives. For casualties, we have 1,457 critically injured or crippled, 389 lightly injured, 5,433 deaths, and roughly over 4,000 soldiers still unaccounted for since we couldn't locate their bodies."

"Fortunately, our men were swift in taking out the fire. Otherwise, the explosive chain reaction might have continued. We can also restock food and mana stones, but it will take time to transport them from other regions."

"However, that also means we won't be able to use much of our magitech siege weapons for the time being. We won't be able to use our fleet of magic airships for extended periods either."

After the young-looking count finished the report, Emperor Renardier's expression turned grave with narrowed eyes.

Although the enemy didn't blow up their war council, the damage to their supplies wasn't any worse either. The loss of resources was hard to recover.

"They got us good. This first exchange of moves... was our loss."

Although he was unwilling, Emperor Renardier had to admit the Kingdom of Black Rose had bested them during the first exchange of moves.

Chapter 447: Another Meeting

Holy Knight Empire's camp, command center

Shortly after Emperor Renardier summoned the leaders for an urgent war meeting, the attending nobles, lords, and high commanders voiced their rage, condemning the kingdom for their dirty trick.

"We can't let the Kingdom of Black Rose get away with this, Your Imperial Majesty! We must strike back and make them feel the same pain!"

"Oh? And how do you propose we do that without incurring greater losses than the Kingdom of Black Rose, exactly? Do you have a solid plan, Lord Dehmur? Anyone?"

"This..."

Faced with Emperor Renardier's question, Lord Dehmur, and the other nobles, lords, and commanders failed to answer. Their faces soon flushed with embarrassment, realizing they had been too hot-headed.

Emperor Renardier didn't gather them to discuss what they should do but how they go about doing it.

"As it stands, we can no longer use the magitech cannon for the time being. We only have enough mana stones for one or two shots. It's fine if we manage to breach Fort Whitebridge's dense within these shots. But if we don't, it will be a waste of resources," Emperor Renardier stated.

"I'm considering investing our remaining mana stones into our scout fleet until more supplies arrive. If we have aerial support, at the very least, we'll be able to monitor their movements. The only problem is we don't have a concrete plan to conquer the border regions."

"You got something to say, Marquis Salsburg?" Emperor Renardier asked.

"In my humble opinion, we should just launch a full-frontal assault on all three forts simultaneously, Your Imperial Majesty. It'll be difficult for them to defend three points at once without messing up their chain of command," Marquis Salsburg stated.

"More importantly, if we don't make use of our numerical advantage to overwhelm them, we are only playing in the enemy's favor. It's clear they have a skilled strategist. Thus, if we try to rely on tactics to minimize our losses, we might end up accumulating more losses in the long run."

"Does Marquis Salazar have anything to add to that?" Emperor Renadier shifted his attention to their strategist.

"Marquis Salsburg made a valid point, but that is only under the assumption that the enemy strategist is more skilled than me," Ulrich calmly argued.

"The enemy might have caught us off guard with their one-time trick, but that is no reason for us to overestimate their abilities and put them on a high pedestal. There's no need to jump to conclusions."

"Once we initiate a full-frontal assault, there's no going back from it. The blood of our soldiers will be on our hands," Ulrich said seriously.

"However, there is some merit to a full-frontal assault; it will draw all of the enemy's attention. After all, one million and five hundred thousand soldiers isn't a force they can ignore. We can use that to our advantage and distract the enemy from our true goal."

"A diversion, huh?" Emperor Renardier muttered before saying, "Let me guess, by forcing the enemies to keep their eyes on our main army, we can send in elites through the secret passage to pass their defense and flank them from behind."

"Indeed, it's a good plan... if only the enemy isn't aware of the secret passage, that is. Unfortunately, the Deathsworn Group had already used it once to infiltrate the kingdom, and their performance was disappointing. It's likely that the enemy already knows about that secret passage."

"Thus, there's a risk that we'll be walking right into a trap if we use that secret passage again," Emperor Renardier stated.

"Indeed, that secret passage cannot be used again. It's too close to Fort Whitebridge," Ulrich acknowledged with a nod before smiling. "However, we are in luck, Your Imperial Majesty."

"The dark organization provided us information on another six secret passages; three in Whitebridge, two in Dragontail, and one in Ironhaven," Ulrich mentioned, giving everyone a pleasant surprise.

"Another six secret passages! But why would the dark organization provide this information to us?" Emperor Renardier frowned with doubt.

"The dark organization, Assembly of Silent Night, had lost all their contacts within the Kingdom of Black Rose. Thus, they hoped that by providing this information to us, we could avenge them, Your Imperial Majesty."

"Is that so? Hahaha!" Emperor Renardier suddenly burst into laughter, rejoicing heartily, "This is the best thing I've heard all day. Finally, some useful fucking information. However, this information has been verified, yes?"

"Absolutely. The six secret passages exist, Your Imperial Majesty. I've already had my men ascertain their specific locations," Ulrich assured.

"Good!" Emperor Renardier exclaimed.

"Since at least one secret passage exists in each border region, let us decide where we should focus our attack. As long as we can take over one of these three forts, we'll be able to quickly rally troops there and sweep the rest of the land with unstoppable momentum."

Emperor Renardier stated, directing everyone's attention to Fort Whitebridge, Fort Dragontail, and Fort Ironhaven on the battle map.

No one doubted the strength of the empire's army; they all had absolute confidence that their soldiers would be able to dominate the witches in battle.

However, a long body of water existed between the two countries, and the soldiers could not fight in the water. They couldn't cross the river without suffering casualties under the witches' barrage of spells either.

As such, they needed to occupy one of the forts to secure a safe river-crossing path for their big army.

Nevertheless, the attending members of the war meeting had a hard time deciding between Fort Ironhaven and Fort Dragontail. As for Fort Whitebridge, it was immediately eliminated from the list of options.

After all, Fort Whitebridge has the highest number of battle witches guarding it. And they also found out its defense was impregnable if they didn't consider the use of their magitech cannon.

"It seems we won't be able to come to an easy decision between Fort Ironhaven and Fort Dragontail. Let us send out the scout fleet and get an update on their numbers."

Ulrich's suggestion quickly received a unanimous agreement.

Since the war had already begun, the Kingdom of Black Rose was bound to reinforce its forts with more troops.

As such, they needed updated information on their enemy's strength.

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Chapter 448: A Fatal Weakness

Fort Whitebridge

Shortly after the Holy Knight Empire's camp lit up like fireworks, the eyes of every battle witch stationed on the wall brightened with excitement. They wanted to shout it all out but refrained from doing so due to military discipline.

"My Lord, the magic bomb appears to have been much more effective than we anticipated," Aeliana reported her observation.

"Un," Vaan nodded before explaining the exact situation to her regarding the explosions. Then, he said, "Since we blew up their war supplies, it should buy us some time to prepare for their next attack."

Now that blood had been drawn and hatred had been formed, the empire's following attack would undoubtedly be much bigger and fiercer.

"If they want to enter our land, they'll look for a weak point to target."

"Where do you think the empire will attack, my Lord?"

"Let us head to the council room."

Following Artemis's question, Vaan suggested a change of location as they continued their discussion over the battle map.

Agatha, Mesulina, Arabelle, Aeliana, Astoria, and a number of other matriarchs were all called to the council room.

Thanks to the spatial teleportation they had installed in each region, the members in charge of defending Dragontail and Ironhaven were able to arrive within mere seconds.

Artemis gave them a quick update before Vaan spoke.

"If the enemy wants to minimize their loss but maximize their gains, they will not do a full-frontal assault. However, they will likely try to make us believe that they are to distract us from their true objective."

"And of the three forts, Fort Whitebridge is the least likely to be their target. Fort Whitebridge's defense is too strong. If they forcefully try to cross Stormwind Lake, they will suffer too many casualties," Vaan stated.

Stormwind Lake was where the hotness of the west Violent Tributary and the coolness of the east Sleeping River met; it was always a windy region. A violent tornado could be summoned to wreak havoc in the area with the right combination of elemental spells added into the mix.

If the Holy Knight Empire weren't stupid, they would know Stormwind Lake was the worse location to cross.

However, Dragontail and Ironhaven also had their pros and cons.

For instance, the Violent Tributary was hard to cross due to its boiling temperatures and high sulfur content. But once crossed, the empire's aura users could freely fight in the open space around Fort Dragontail.

On the other hand, the calm waters of the Sleeping River were easy to cross. But once crossed, the empire's aura users would have to fight in the restrictive and treacherous steep rock pillar region of Ironhaven.

The collapse of a single rock pillar would crush many people to death under its immense weight.

"If the empire has to choose between Fort Ironhaven and Fort Dragontail, they will most likely pick Fort Ironhaven. But, of course, that's if they don't know about the other secret passages."

Compared to the potential hazard of the Violent Tributary, the risk of Ironhaven was lower. Furthermore, the Sleeping River was the easiest water region to cross.

If they had to launch a full-frontal assault, Fort Ironhaven was the best choice.

"But what if the empire is aware of all the secret passages, my Lord?"

Faced with Artemis's question, Vaan smiled and didn't answer immediately. But just when he was ready to reply, a battle witch rushed into the meeting room with urgent news.

"My Lord, the empire has made another move! They are sending a large fleet of magic airships toward us."

"A large fleet of magic airships? Indeed, crossing the water isn't their only option... But if they are trying to send troops into our land through the air, there's no way they wouldn't fear the possibility of being shot down. Do they have absolute confidence in the magic airships' defense? Or..."

After pondering for a moment, Vaan quickly led everyone outside to check out the large fleet of magic airships personally.

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In the distant sky, the large fleet of white magic airships could be seen rising higher and higher in altitude as if they wanted to pierce the clouds and hide amongst them, not knowing other beings were hidden up there.

'Supreme Leader, there's a bunch of enemy ships up here. Should I take them out?'

'No need. It's not time for the dragons to reveal themselves.'

Vaan shook his head at Zodreg's question.

Thanks to Zodreg sharing his visual senses, he was able to get a good look at the large fleet of magic airships. The enemy wasn't just trying to transport soldiers; they were trying to scout.

"The empire is just trying to scout us. Since they want to look, let them look. However, if they come within three hundred yards of our airspace, shoot them down."

"Yes, my Lord!"

The High Witch-rank battle witches answered.

Nevertheless, everyone was disappointed when the Holy Knight Empire's fleet of magic airships kept their distance and only observed from afar. They knew how to stay out of the battle witches' firing range.

After lingering in the sky for a few hours, they simply left.

Vaan wasn't so bored that he would watch the empire's movements the entire time, especially when he had competent subordinates tasked with it.

He used his time to raise more High Witches out of sight.

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Holy Knight Empire's camp

Meanwhile, Emperor Renardier and the war leaders were surprised when they received their awaited scout report.

Fort Whitebridge: 20,000 – 25,000 witches

Fort Ironhaven: 5,000 – 8,000 witches

Fort Dragontail: 10,000 – 13,000 witches

Note: no visible incoming reinforcement.

Numerous nobles, lords, and commanders frowned when they realized the Kingdom of Black Rose didn't reinforce any of the three forts since the start of the war.

"Do they think they can defend their forts with so few troops? They are looking down on our empire too much! We must show them the might of our army, Your Imperial Majesty!"

"Don't forget they have many more witches stationed in their border cities, and they are suspected to be in possession of teleportation technology. They can easily reinforce any fort in an instant."

At the emperor's reminder, the hot-headed baron that spoke up earlier immediately fell silent with an embarrassed look.

"Of course, the Kingdom of Black Rose has one fatal weakness; spatial manipulation consumes a lot of mana. If we can force them to deploy large-scale reinforcements via teleportation repeatedly, we can exhaust their mana reserves very quickly."

Emperor Renardier rubbed his chin with a thoughtful look.

If the Kingdom of Black Rose exhausted its mana reserve, the witches wouldn't be able to cast many spells; they would be at a great disadvantage in a battle of attrition.

Suddenly, Emperor Renardier's eyes sparkled, having thought of a great plan.

Chapter 449: Emperor Renardier's Plan

The sun's position shifted, from one horizon to the other; it disappeared with its light, bringing the end of day and the coming of night. The fluttering winds howled like the dying cries of prey caught by their predators, coupled with the temperature drop; together, they welcomed the night's arrival with a foreboding feeling.

The day went by without any retaliation from the Holy Knight Empire, but it was hard to say the same now that they had the cover of the night.

On the southern banks of Violent Tributary, Stormwind Lake, and the Sleeping River, the empire's soldiers lined up in groups of 1,000-man battalions and 4,000-man brigades.

Each group had a large wooden raft fully occupied with straw dummies, making the empire's army seem twice as big in the night.

Without speaking a single word, Emperor Renardier signaled the army to advance with his hand gesture.

The holy soldiers immediately pushed the wooden rafts into the body of water, with only four to eight men hopping on to steer them forward, against the turbulent waves of the Violent Tributary and Stormwind Lake. In comparison, the wooden rafts in the Sleeping River only required two men at most.

Although the Holy Knight Empire had the cover of the night, they couldn't completely avoid detection. The unnatural slushing of water in the peaceful Sleeping River alerted the perceptive night sentries of Fort Ironhaven.

"What's that weird sound coming from the river?"

"Let me take a look."

Amidst the doubts and curiosity, an Early-stage High Witch fired a flame arrow over the Sleeping River, briefly illuminating the body of water in its path and revealing the numerous shadows on the surface.

The night sentries' expressions changed instantly.

"Enemy attack!"

Shortly after the sentries sounded the alarm, the entirety of Fort Ironhaven woke up with great shock as battle witches jumped out of bed and rushed to their stations.

At the same time, Mesulina sent the news to Fort Whitebridge and Fort Dragontail, waking everyone there as well. Only one-quarter of their forces had been awake at the time as they took turns rotating their shifts overnight.

However, news of the empire's movements shocked them all awake. Even if they went back to rest then and there, they wouldn't be able to sleep.

Vaan calmly stood on the wall of Fort Whitebridge and shook his head with a bit of disappointment. He had seen everything beforehand but chose to watch how the witches would deal with the problem on their own.

And as he has witnessed, they weren't off to a very good start.

"The empire has launched a full-scale attack! What are your orders, my Lord? How should we defend?"

"Calm down, Artemis. You are a lord. If you can't ascertain the truth of the empire's intentions and panic just like that, you will spread the same feelings and misinformation to your troops. The empire is not launching a full-scale attack. Have everyone on standby."

Vaan's calm and confident voice quickly calmed Artemis down before she glanced over the wall and observed the empire's movements.

After fire spells were used to illuminate the darkness, Artemis realized the empire was only using dummies.

Even if they sent out a barrage of spells to burn down the wooden rafts right away, they wouldn't guarantee any kills. At such a distance, the empire's raft rowers would just jump into the water and swim back to shore.

But even if they waited until the enemy reached their shore, they would still kill only a few hundred soldiers.

Nevertheless, after Vaan's orders were passed down, the battle witches didn't attack. Instead, they waited and waited; then, they kept waiting.

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Meanwhile, the lack of response from the Kingdom of Black Rose confused the Holy Knight Empire's side. According to their plan, the witches would have already fired their spells on their rafts.

"Your Imperial Majesty, our rafts safely made it to the other side. Besides sending a few fire and light spells out for vision, the enemy has not attacked. I think the enemy saw through our ploy," a lord mentioned.

"Not exactly," Emperor Renardier thought otherwise as he saw the walls of Fort Whitebridge lit up with light.

"We may have failed to exhaust their mana, but we have succeeded in rousing them awake. If we keep harassing them day and night from here onward, forcing them to stay awake, they won't have the energy to fight once we decide to launch our full-scale attack."

"That's a great plan, Your Imperial Majesty. We can keep the enemy on their toes while buying time until our new war supplies arrive," the lord commented.

"However, there's no point if we aren't letting our army rest either. From tomorrow onward, we only need a few soldiers to continue the operation. Also, the straw dummies won't work again. We need to switch it up if we want to keep them alert each time."

"Right."

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Shortly after the empire sent a signal into the sky, the raft rowers understood the order to return as they dived into the water and swam back.

Artemis watched the empire's people leave with a disgruntled look.

"We're going to let them leave just like that, my Lord? And what should we do about their rafts?" Artemis asked.

"Wasting our energy and time on hunting small fishes won't put a dent in the empire's large army. It's only meaningful if we catch a whole school," Vaan casually replied before chuckling. "Since the empire graciously gifted us firewood, why should we burn them now when we can use them later?"

"More importantly, I hope you and the others learned much from tonight's activity. There are advantages and disadvantages to defending. Staying in top condition is especially crucial. Don't fall for the empire's empty threats again," Vaan advised.

"Yes, my Lord," Artemis lowered her head.

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The night soon passed uneventfully.

In the morning, Vaan held a meeting with the three border lords and participating matriarchs, explaining the empire's plan.

On the other hand, the empire sent their soldiers to chop more logs and build more rafts for their night operations. Another group worked on siege weapons with the wizards.

At the same time, the empire also deployed its scout fleet to check on the kingdom's troop count, as the empire couldn't check during the night.

They were disappointed to find the witch count unchanged.

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Chapter 450: Double Tap

Inside the empire's command center, Emperor Renardier and Ulrich refined the details of their second night's operation with the participating war leaders.

"The kingdom realized our plan too quickly. As a result, tonight's operation could only be considered half successful. We need a new strategy for tomorrow's operation. The straw dummies were too simple; the kingdom won't take them seriously," Emperor Renardier stated before asking, "Do you have any good idea, Marquis Salazar?"

"Since the kingdom didn't burn our rafts, we should continue sending more rafts for tomorrow's day and night operations," Ulrich said after some thought.

"The logs are expendable, and the rafts are easy to make. So we can afford to waste them as much as we please. And if we use steel wood and coat them with green slime, they'll be almost impossible to burn."

"Once we fill the three water regions with enough of these slime-coated wooden rafts, our troops will be able to use them as springboards to reach the forts quickly; it'll practically be the same as running on water."

"That is indeed a good idea, but the chance of that succeeding is quite low. It'll take at least two weeks to fill the river with enough rafts before they become viable as springboards. The kingdom will surely catch wind of our plan before we see its fruition," Emperor Renardier frowned.

"I'm aware, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich admitted.

"However, it doesn't hurt to keep the option open in case the kingdom overlooks it. That said, our siege weapons will still play the most important role in crossing the river and breaching the forts' defenses."

"Still, if today's experience has taught us anything, it's that our army is ill-equipped to fight over water terrain. We are severely lacking in range weapons. If we want to apply constant pressure on the kingdom and wear them out, we definitely need more range weapons," Ulrich stated.

Emperor Renardier and the war leaders fully agreed with Ulrich on that point.

Their war with the Kingdom of Black Rose differed from previous wars. If they wanted to fight an army of witches with minimal disadvantages, they needed to adapt. The wizards weren't enough.

Fortunately, they had access to knowledge of powerful siege and ranged weapons and the resources to build them quickly.

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That night, Emperor Renardier and the attending leaders felt satisfied by the end of their meeting. They retired to their tents to rest with great anticipation for tomorrow's plan.

That night's operation was only a test; tomorrow's plan would be the real deal, where they would produce actual results.

As such, everyone went to bed feeling good about tomorrow.

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Meanwhile, in the sick bay, Duke Chalfont stayed up with his fellow injured soldiers.

Although they were out of critical condition, they weren't fully healed. It was a problem all aura users faced. The more powerful their bodies were, the more potent healing potions and spells were required to heal them.

As such, their bodies were still in pain from the explosions. And because of the pain, they couldn't fall asleep.

"I must say, Your Grace. You are the most fortunate one out of everyone hit by the explosions. You were the closest to the first explosion, yet you only got away with your limbs getting blown. They even found your limbs and reattached them for you," an armless soldier mentioned.

"On the other hand, some of our other brothers were reduced to nothing despite being further away. That doesn't seem very fair, does it? Perhaps, the heavens wanted you to live so you could take revenge for us all."

At first, Duke Chalfont thought the soldier was complaining. But later, he realized the soldier was just trying to cheer him up.

"Hahaha..." Duke Chalfont lightly laughed.

"It's nothing like it. I just have a much sturdier body than everyone else, thanks to my unique aura cultivation method. It's also thanks to my unique aura cultivation method that I managed to survive many battles and contribute a lot to the empire."

"No matter how unique your aura cultivation method, aren't you still a Late-stage Aura Lord, Your Grace? How can there be such a huge difference?" another injured soldier asked with doubt.

"That's because my aura possesses the earth attribute," Duke Chalfont explained.

"As you know, aura is created when you fuse blood and mana. However, there is more than just pure mana; they also possess attributes. And depending on which attribute mana you specifically fuse with your blood, your aura can also have special traits."

"If you're interested, I can teach you all my unique aura cultivation method," Duke Chalfont said generously.

Since he lost his only child, he considered looking for successors to learn his unique aura cultivation method so it doesn't die with him.

"If you are willing to teach, we are willing to learn, Your Grace!"

Without a surprise, all the injured soldiers voiced their eagerness to learn after hearing the offer. They would be foolish to turn down the opportunity to learn a superior aura cultivation method.

"Alright, why don't I start teaching right away since we can't sleep anyway. Who knows? Maybe if you achieve great progress, you could also become war heroes during this war, let alone increase your chances of survival..."

While speaking, Duke Chalfont suddenly paused with a frown, picking up a strange whistling sound that became increasingly clear.

"Do you all hear that..."

Ka-boom!!!

Before anyone in the sick bay could begin to guess the source of the whistling sound, a brilliant white flash swallowed everything with its terrifying heat and claimed everyone's lives.

Even a couple thousands of soldiers staying in the surrounding tents were also caught in the massive explosion and lost their lives.

At the same time, the thunderous roar akin to heaven's wrath resounded far and wide, waking up everyone within the central camp.

"E-Enemy attack...!"

Countless soldiers cried with shock and alarm as the fire from the explosion soon spread to other parts of the camp.

The magic bomb dropped down on the empire's camp when they least expected it. And once it happened once, everyone became restless, not knowing when the next magic bomb would drop on their heads.

Just like that, many people from the empire kissed their good night's sleep goodbye.

The empire wasn't the one capable of launching a night attack.