

## The Witch 451

Chapter 451: You Shall Not Rest!

"Chalfont...!!"

Following the rude awakening of the explosion, Emperor Renardier's furious, sad cry resounded through the camp shortly after.

Although the blast radius of the second magic bomb had been about the same, it was much more destructive. This time, the soldiers caught in its explosion weren't so lucky; they were all reduced to ashes.

There wouldn't be any lucky survivors a second time. Only a large crater remained where the sick bay used to be.

"Dammit!"

Emperor Renardier pounded the ground at the crater's edge with helpless rage and bloodshot eyes.

The Holy Knight Empire had been too arrogant to think the Kingdom of Black Rose wouldn't strike back just because they stayed outside their spell range.

"Your Imperial Majesty, it is no longer safe here. We need to relocate our camp!" a lord quickly suggested.

"Relocate?" Emperor Renardier gritted his teeth and barked, "Relocate where?! If the Kingdom of Black Rose drops another magic bomb on our heads, do we have to relocate again?!"

"I want to know who was in charge of the night watch! Bring them to me this instant! How can they let the enemy fly over our camp and drop a magic bomb on our heads?!"

Emperor Renardier's thunderous words shook the earth and the hearts of men as they all trembled under his fury – the fury of an enraged Late-stage Aura King.

The sheer pressure suffocated the nearby lords and soldiers with fear and intimidation. Even brave men would feel their heart palpitate nervously within such proximity of the angry and powerful emperor.

As a result, no one dared to refuse Emperor Renardier's order, not that they would, even in normal circumstances.

"Right at once, Your Imperial Majesty!"

Shortly after, the night watchers were brought forward. Under the emperor's intense interrogation, they quickly confessed their negligence, which enraged the emperor further.

However, in their defense, the sky was too dark and vast. Therefore, they could easily overlook many details, even if they took their night watch duties seriously.

Nevertheless, the crime of negligence was inexcusable; it didn't quell the emperor's rage at all.

Still, the emperor didn't punish them with a quick and straightforward death sentence. Instead, he placed them in the vanguard for tomorrow's operations. Even if they had to die, they would be given a warrior's death on the battlefield.

After settling some matters and reinforcing the night watch duty with increased personnel and lighting, Emperor Renardier returned to the loving embrace of his twelve concubines in his big tent as they tried to soothe his pain and anger.

At the same time, the other lords, nobles, and commander-rank soldiers also returned to their tents to share a passionate night with their concubine, lovers, and slaves to relax.

All men of notable status had brought at least one woman along to keep them company.

However, these women weren't just tools to relieve their stress and frustration during wartime; they were witches that played a supportive role. Whether by choice or force, they were bound to the men by a contract.

"Ahh... My lord, you are being so rough tonight~!"

Lovely moans escaped from one tent, causing nearby soldiers to feel both excited and envious. They were quickly motivated to rise up the ranks so they could also enjoy such privileges.

Meanwhile, many soldiers forced themselves back to sleep despite the fear of explosions on their minds. They eventually succeeded in falling asleep after one to hours.

But that was also when it came again...

Ka-boom—!!!

The thunderous roar of heaven's wrath resounded as another magic bomb exploded in each camp, shaking the earth and threatening to tear the sky asunder with its devastating and furious white flames.

As a result, the whole army was rudely woken up without a choice. They were kept up and busy for another two hours as they allocated more troops to the night watch.

Multiple beams of light shone from the wizards' staff as they directed it at the sky, searching for their bombers, but to no avail.

At the same time, the lack of further activity from the Kingdom of Black Rose allowed the empire's soldiers to fall back to sleep much easier—not because they got used to it but because they were tired.

The two rude awakenings put a strain on their minds.

Unfortunately, if god—ahem, if Vaan didn't want them to rest, they shall not and will not rest.

Ka-boom—!!!

Another round of magic bombing dropped on the central, western, and eastern camps, forcing everyone awake once more.

The repeated harassment made the soldiers' eyes bloodshot with anger, despair, and helplessness. The sense of powerlessness to do anything against the magic bombing was a strong blow to the empire's morale.

"I see them! I see the damned witches that dropped magic bombs on us! Don't let them get away!" a soldier roared furiously with red eyes.

"Oh, no, we've been spotted. Time to flee, girls," an Early-stage High Witch chuckled heartily as she ordered the retreat, angering the empire in the process.

After the third bombing, each taking thousands of lives, the Kingdom of Black Rose's aerial bombing squads was finally spotted—but only because they lost their cover of the night.

Seeing the first ray of sunlight appearing from the horizon, many soldiers felt depressed rather than happy.

After all, they didn't get a wink of sleep!

Meanwhile, the wizards gave chase under Alistair's lead, but they failed to catch up to the fleeing witches in the sky.

The aerial bombing squad was wholly comprised of wind and fire dual specialists. Thus, their flight speed was quicker than others.

When Alistair and his wizards chased the witches to the fort, a volley of spells fired their way from the walls, forcing them to give up their pursuit and retreat.

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"First Bomber Squad has returned from its third successful bombing!"

"Second Bomber Squad has returned from its third successful bombing!"

"Third Bomber Squad has returned from its third successful bombing!"

After the three groups of four battle witches returned from their mission in high spirits, Vaan acknowledged their accomplishment with a nod.

"Un. Good work."

#### Chapter 452: Northern Visit

"My lord, if I may ask, how many more of these magic bombs do you have?" a wind-attribute battle witch asked curiously.

"Hm." Vaan paused for a moment before nonchalantly stating, "Let's just say there's enough to blow the empire's entire army to kingdom come."

The eyes of every battle witch immediately sparkled, and their hearts palpitated with excitement.

"Then, why don't we bomb them all, my Lord?" another battle witch couldn't help but ask, but Vaan's cold, indifferent gaze quickly made her sweat nervously.

"Do you take pleasure in committing a mass genocide? We aren't fighting this war to kill the empire's soldiers; killing the empire's soldiers is just one part of the requirement to achieve our goals," Vaan coolly stated.

"And if I want to erase the empire's army, do you think I need to rely on these toys? I, alone, have the power to erase a country from existence; I believe those from the capital would know that very well."

Indeed, facing Vaan's claim, the battle witch couldn't refute. As an ex-supremacist witch from the capital, the blue sun was still vivid in her mind.

Many ex-supremacist witches like her expected a life of oppression and humiliation after they swore their Oath of Magic to Vaan. However, Vaan, their lord, didn't chase vanity; he didn't need to make them suffer to flex his superiority—or, at the very least, it had yet to happen.

As such, they gradually tried to be more open-minded and observe the kind of person their lord was. Needless to say, what they had witnessed in the past several days had truly opened their mind.

What used to be their ultimate pursuit in life was easily achieved with their lord's help. To him, raising a High Witch was just something insignificant.

"What are our goals in this war, my Lord?" one of the ex-supremacist battle witches asked the question they all wanted to know.

"All of you have become High Witches with my help. But if you think that makes you qualified High Witches, you couldn't be more wrong. You won't hold a candle against real High Witches. That's why I will create opportunities to train you during this war," Vaan stated.

"If you want to become truly strong High Witches, you must be tempered through blood and fire. But don't think you can go back to living luxurious lives after becoming strong High Witches; those days are behind you."

"You will train to become strong. Then, after you become strong, you will train to become stronger. And after you become stronger, you will still train to become even, even stronger. There will be no leisure life for you."

"You are soldiers – soldiers of a kingdom that defends humanity. It is your duty to train and become strong so you can face the real threat of our world, Gehenna. So grit your teeth and prepare yourself. As the one in control of your lives, I'll be pushing you to surpass your limits over and over."

"Thus, if you still have lingering superiority over men, you can forget it now. The strong do not need to prove their strength to others. Furthermore, men aren't your enemies. Your only enemy is yourself and the limits defined by your body; that is what you must overcome."

Although Vaan spoke about forcing the battle witches to train eternally so long as they were under his control, strangely enough, they didn't feel upset or sad while imagining the future under his rule.

Perhaps, it was because their lord guaranteed results.

Thus, by his words, even after they become Peak-stage High Witches, he would push them to become Transcendent Witches. And after they become Transcendent Witches, he would still push them to go even further beyond.

As long as they followed their lord, such a day would surely come – Vaan's capability swayed the battle witches into firmly believing that.

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"Alright, return to your posts. There will be a big battle today. The Holy Knight Empire will surely want to take revenge for last night's bombing."

"Yes, my Lord!"

Shortly after Vaan dismissed the battle witches, he notified Aeliana and Astoria that he would be leaving Fort Whitebridge temporarily. He also instructed Zodreg to inform him via their long-range communication tools if anything significant happened during his absence.

Nevertheless, after finishing his arrangements, Vaan took the teleporter and arrived in Blackthorn City.

'Any changes in the north, Urseon?' Vaan contacted the leading Rank 5 dragon in charge of surveillance over the capital.

'None, Supreme Leader,' Urseon replied before adding, 'If anything, there have been increasingly fewer demons entering our world over the past few days.'

'I see. Keep up the good work, Urseon.'

'It's my honor to serve you, Supreme Leader.'

Just as Astarot estimated, twenty young elite dragons had reached Rank 5 at the end of the empire's seven-day deadline.

And all that while, Vaan had allocated half of them to guard the north in case of a surprise demon invasion from Gehenna. After all, it wouldn't be strange if the demons took the opportunity to strike the kingdom in the back while they were focused on their war with the Holy Knight Empire.

For that reason, Vaan had also kept most of the witches in the capital and didn't send any aura users or men to the southern borders. He couldn't guarantee their obedience like their witches' Oath of Magic, and there was always the risk of the empire inciting them to rebel for their rights.

Nevertheless, the witches in the capital had another task besides idling away their time on standby for a surprise attack that may or may not come; they had been ordered to produce mana stones within the magic towers all this while.

Considering there were still over one million witches in the capital, without a doubt, the mana stones produced by such a large workforce had to be astronomical.

As such, there was no shortage of mana stones to power the teleporters.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't come to the capital to collect the mana stones as he took off, heading further north for the Great Ashfallen Forest.

Someone else was already tasked with regularly delivering the mana stones to the southern borders. Thus, he didn't need to do it personally.

More importantly, he had always been curious about the dimensional crack that connected the two worlds.

Needless to say, he wasn't disappointed when he arrived near the dimension crack.

'I can sense strong Spatial Laws in this region...'

#### Chapter 453: The Day of Impending Battle

Several miles deep inside the Great Ashfallen Forest, the enormous dimensional crack was revealed, towering over even the tallest ash-grey trees like a colossal titan.

Unlike normal spatial gateways, where passing through them would take one from Point A to Point B, the dimensional crack didn't look much different from a shattered glass mirror leading to a mirror dimension.

Except, it wasn't the mirror dimension; it was the Gehenna Realm, a small part of Chaos.

A person does not travel from Point A to Point B by passing through the dimensional crack in the normal sense.



Spatial teleportation at least involved covering much more distances than the steps actually taken to pass between two points. On the other hand, such a thing didn't exist when entering Gehenna; the distance taken to enter Gehenna was the same distance actually traveled.

In other words, the dimensional crack wasn't really a spatial gateway; it was just the collapse of a boundary that separated two different planes existing in the same space at the same time.

It just seemed like two different places due to the differences in governing laws.

Vaan could see that a portion of the Great Ashfallen Forest had already merged with Gehenna.

According to what he learned from Narvim, the dimensional crack would continue to expand until Chaos completely swallowed their world and Chaosverse, assimilating it as part of its own.

It was an inevitable process to conserve their Chaosverse from fading into nothingness during its destruction cycle.

Nevertheless, Vaan could also see that not everything that existed in Pangea could withstand the changes brought by Gehenna.

The overflowing mana spilling into their world was both a miraculous power of change and a poison to life. Plants that could absorb its power were able to evolve, but those that couldn't were withered and dead.

As a result, only a barren land could be found surrounding the dimensional crack. There were only dead trees and cracked ground. Whatever plant evolved and survived had long been plucked by other people.

Further away from the dimensional crack, many traps and barricaded walls had been set up to confine whatever came out from Gehenna.

There were also small encampments with several hundred witches, tasked with hunting down the demons that entered their land.

They were undoubtedly full of battle experiences, making them quite desirable to recruit.

However, Vaan postponed that idea for another time. Even so, he designated one of the ten Rank 5 dragons in the north to watch over them secretly.

He was more interested in the dimensional crack, which contained a strong presence of the Spatial Law. Of course, the Fire Law, Wood Law, and other laws were also present, but they had a much weaker presence.

Nevertheless, Vaan quickly understood why the governing laws were more prevalent around the dimensional crack than in other parts of the world. It was because they were clashing with Gehenna's governing laws.

It was a great place to perceive the laws.

Since he had already hit the limit of the Fire Law permitted by his Peak-stage Demigod-rank soul, it wasn't a bad idea to start comprehending other laws. The Spatial Law, in particular, would be quite useful and convenient if he comprehended it.

Unfortunately, he ran out of time.

'Supreme Leader, there are large movements from the Holy Knight Empire's camp. By the looks of things, they appear to be preparing for a full-scale attack on all three forts.'

'I understand. I will be back as soon as I can.'

Shortly after acknowledging Zodreg's message, Vaan gave one last glance at the enormous dimensional crack before preparing to leave.

However, he suddenly paused with a thought.

After scanning his surroundings with Omni-Sense, Vaan raised one hand at the dimensional crack and... started absorbing the large quantity of mana and air into his Heaven-Swallowing Space.

Since the mana within the area was so abundant and concentrated, it would be a shame if he didn't take some back after visiting.

After all, he had many uses for it, such as speeding up the battle witches' advancement to High Witches.

Nevertheless, once Vaan was done filling up a good amount, he finally summoned the nearby Rank 5 dragon to send him back to Fort Whitebridge with its spatial magic.

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Whitebridge Region, Fort Whitebridge

"My Lord, thank goodness you are back!" Artemis immediately rejoiced with relief upon Vaan's return. "We were beginning to worry whether you would make it back before the enemy made their move or not."

"Have the battle witches take their positions and summon everyone for a quick meeting. Today's battle will be quite different from yesterday's."

"Yes, my Lord!" Artemis answered.

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Meanwhile, the Holy Knight Empire continued to rally troops from their camp and prepare their siege weapons, consisting of a dozen large strange-looking ballistae, each equipped with two big, heavy tungsten arrows.

The end of these tungsten arrows was attached to long ropes and sturdy wooden planks that seemed to stretch as long as the river itself, if not longer.

A single glance at the strange siege weapon was all it took for everyone from the Kingdom of Black Rose's side to figure out how the Holy Knight Empire intended to cross the river quickly.

However, that wasn't all. There were other sieged weapons hidden in the back of the empire's army, obscured from view.

The entire atmosphere within the camp was heavy and gloomy as the holy soldiers lined up for war with serious expressions; they were not happy at all. No, they were angry.

"Last night, the Kingdom of Black Rose had disturbed the peace of our camp and claimed the lives of twenty thousand brothers in arms, including our respectable and beloved war hero, Duke Chalfont! This was indeed a great loss for our empire."

"The Kingdom of Black Rose thought they could get away with it. However, I say – I think not! They must pay for what they have done! What say you?! Should we make them pay for their actions?!"

"Yeah!!!"

Following the emperor's fiery and heated speech, the soldiers thundered in unison, causing the earth and sky to tremble under their collective cry, full of pent-up emotions.

Shortly after, Emperor Renardier glared at Fort Whitebridge in the distance with hatred.

Chasing a perfect victory in a war against the Kingdom of Black Rose was impossible. Therefore, if Holy Knight Empire wanted to be victorious, they must be prepared to make sacrifices!

#### Chapter 454: It Begins

Emperor Renardier stood fearlessly at the forefront of his army in his full set of Low-level Rank 5 golden-white armor. He also had a Low-level Rank 5 greatsword sheathed and strapped to his side and held his sallet helmet in his left hand.

By simply standing in front of his army, Emperor Renardier easily boosted the soldiers' morale. They felt like he was going to lead their attack, which he did intend to do.

The Kingdom of Black Rose may have shattered his confidence in strategies, but he still had absolute confidence in his strength.

After Emperor Renardier put on his white sallet helmet, he pulled down the visor for full facial protection. Then, he drew out his greatsword with a firm grip and an increasingly intensified gaze.

Although it was important to conserve his strength for unexpected variables, he was also the only person who could take down Fort Whitebridge's defense without consuming a gargantuan amount of resources.

"Begin the attack!" Emperor Renardier commanded, pointing his greatsword ahead.

In that instant, the soldiers immediately fired the large ballistae with deafening, resonating twangs, launching sets of two giant tungsten arrows across Stormwind Lake with great momentum as they dragged the long chains and wooden planks attached them.

Due to the sheer weight the tungsten arrows carried with them, their momentum rapidly declined as they traveled across the body of water.

By the time they reached the other shore, they had lost all power to reach Fort Whitebridge's wall, let alone penetrate its defense.

Even so, the tungsten arrows abruptly reached the end of their flights as the chains attached to them suddenly pulled them, causing their sharp tips to directly slammed into the ground, becoming firmly rooted in place.

The back end of the chains had been nailed into the earth. And with the front end firmly rooted in the ground as well, solid wooden plank bridges were formed across Stormwind Lake; they barely shifted under the windy weather.

"The path has been laid. All units, charge!" the lords and commanders immediately commanded their troops.

Although the bridges were only wide enough for the empire's soldiers to run across them in single profiles, thousands still found themselves on the bridges at once.

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Meanwhile, Fort Whitebridge didn't stay idle once they saw the wooden plank bridges.

"Destroy those bridges! Do not let the empire cross!"

"Protect the bridge, even if you have to shield it with your bodies! We mustn't let their spells hit the bridge!"

Following Artemis's orders and the empire's, thousands of spells were quickly fired at the wooden plank bridges as the empire's soldiers desperately protected them.

Fire arrows, icicles, wind blades, earth spikes, and all kinds of sharp offensive and destructive spells were thrown.

Some landed, but they only destroyed the wooden planks. The chains holding the bridge remained firm. Some also landed in the water, rocking the lake with large waves and geysers.

However, many were either cut down by the holy soldiers' aura-enhanced swords or blocked with their sturdy armor.

Of course, not everyone was successful.

Only The Aura Lord-rank soldiers could repel the attack spells with some effort. On the other hand, the Aura Grandmaster-rank soldiers were blown away by the powerful spells; their bodies smashed into the lake and sent geyser-like columns of water rising into the air.

As for their fates, it remained to be seen.

Nevertheless, several bridges went loose after the battle witches' spells targeted the tungsten arrows and destroyed its surrounding earth.

Without anchoring support, the bridges lost their strength and plunged thousands of soldiers into the water.

Nevertheless, a red flare soon fired into the high sky from the empire's central camp, signaling the western and eastern camps to also commence their attacks on Fort Dragontail and Fort Ironhaven.

Within a short instance, a full-scale war between the two countries was underway.

Under battle witches' strong barrage of spells, the Holy Knight Empire quickly lost thousands of soldiers within a matter of seconds.

"W-What kind of firepower is this?! Just how many High Witches does the Kingdom of Black Rose have? Don't tell me they've all been gathered in Fort Whitebridge?!"

Without a surprise, the Holy Knight Empire was shocked by the Kingdom of Black Rose's show of strength.

Several dozens of High Witches was understandable. But when there were thousands, it became mind-boggling and unreal to the empire.

The empire's people couldn't believe what they were seeing and facing.

Emperor Renardier frowned at the situation.

"Even if the bridges hold, our soldiers won't be able to cross the lake under such a strong magic barrage without a hefty price! Deploy the bomber fleet!"

Following Emperor Renardier's order, a large fleet of white magic airships quickly took to the skies. They were originally scouts, but once equipped with the magic bombs from camp, they became carriers of mass destruction.

With the impending threat from the sky, the Kingdom of Black Rose was forced to divert some of its offensive spells at the empire's airships.

"Shoot them down! Don't let them fly over our heads, or there will be hell to pay!" Artemis roared.

Boom! Boom!

Hundreds of spells shot toward the fleet of magic airships, but magic barriers obstructed their path and protected the fleet of magic airships.

Evidently, the magic airships had their own magic defense systems and couldn't be taken down quickly.

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"Buff me, my concubines!"

Following Emperor Renardier's sudden shout, his twelve witch lovers in the back clasped their hands together like they were praying.

In that instant, Emperor Renardier felt twelve different sources of mana channeled into his body through their invisible contract link, giving him overall empowerment in all physical abilities.

Even his aura was augmented as it surged out of his body explosively, blowing wind in all directions and causing waves in the river.

Emperor Renardier was already a Late-stage Aura King. But after the empowerment of his twelve concubines, who were also his supporters, he emanated the pressure of a Peak-stage Aura King.

Boom!

With a powerful step, the ground cracked widely as Emperor Renardier threw himself toward Fort Whitebridge with a giant leap – His jump was so big, he was practically flying.

At the same time, Artemis and several battle witches quickly spotted Emperor Renardier's rapidly closing figure.

A threatening sense of death instantly gripped their hearts when they saw him raise his aura-empowered greatsword above his head with both hands, ready to swing down at their wall.

It was then that Vaan stepped forward...

Chapter 455: It Begins (2)

Unlike normal aura weapon empowerment, Emperor Renardier's aura-empowered greatsword wasn't just enhanced in attack power and durability; the red aura formed the shape of a large greatsword that extended over five yards long.



Furthermore, Emperor Renardier's aura didn't just mimic the sword's form; it also possessed the sword's sharpness. No, its sharpness was even more frightening than his Rank 5 greatsword! It was so sharp that it seemed possible to cut through anything.

Sword aura was the higher application of aura augmentation on the sword; it didn't just raise the sword's capability but copied its traits and improved on them.

With fury in his eyes, Emperor Renardier's sword aura wasn't just moments away from cleaving Fort Whitebridge's wall apart, tearing through its defense like paper.

No, Artemis and the battle witches had the feeling that he was capable of splitting the entire fort in half with a single swing!

Luckily, the worse did not happen.

"Hm?"

Emperor Renardier suddenly felt a threatening sense of danger, forcing him to be on the defensive as he blocked a wave of scorching-hot blue flames.

Swoosh!

Vaan's blue flames blasted Emperor Renardier away, but the latter did not plunge into the big lake. Instead, he was caught by a wizard using a levitation spell.

"Are you alright, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"I'm alright."

Emperor Renardier responded to the nearby holy soldiers' concerned questions calmly, but he couldn't relieve the frown on his forehead as he could still feel the sting of Vaan's blue flames.

The blue flames didn't just destroy his sword aura; his greatsword and armor also took damage.

The blue flames possessed such frighteningly high temperatures that it would melt his rank-five equipment if they were exposed to them for prolonged periods.

"Who the hell are you?!" Emperor Renardier barked with a grave yet doubtful look, viewing Vaan as a great threat.

He was unable to determine Vaan's source of power.

The person's blue flames appeared much more powerful than any wizard and witch spells he had encountered. Furthermore, the person didn't possess the same feminine vibe wizards tried to hide.

Although Emperor Renardier knew there were Spirit Contractors, he doubted the person could contract such a powerful fire spirit.

Yet, at the same time, that seemed to be the only plausible explanation for the person's control over such powerful flames.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't answer his question.

"It's too early for us to be fighting; it would be a pity if the war ended too soon. That said, if you insist on participating, I'll be your opponent," Vaan coolly stated, seemingly indifferent, but his eyes sparkled with great interest.

Just by seeing how Emperor Renardier's aura operated, he felt like he had found a clue to making a breakthrough in his aura cultivation. If he could fight Emperor Renardier, he would definitely gain more enlightenment.

For that reason, it would be a pity to kill the person outright, not to mention it would also end the war.

Many battle witches had yet to gain any battle experiences in the war, and those that did barely got a taste of it.

As such, he could only delay his fight.

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"Your Imperial Majesty, please return and treat your wounds! Leave the fighting here to us! It's not too late for you to lead us once we figure out this person's mysterious strength!" a lord urgently stated.

Although Emperor Renardier was unwilling, he also knew of his importance. He was the core of the empire.

If he fell, the army would collapse.

Thus, even if it was a cowardly tactic that went against his warrior's code to rely on his subjects to find out the person's strength and exhaust him before he could fight again, he had to follow through with such a choice for the lives of the whole army that depended on him.

"Alright," Emperor Renardier sighed as a Peak-stage Second-Circle wizard carried him back to the camp.

After his armor was removed to check for wounds, he discovered his injuries were worse than he had imagined. He suffered terrible burns in places that weren't covered by his armor.

"Such a terrifying flame... This power must be at least Peak-level Rank 5 or above..." Emperor Renardier muttered with a frown as his twelve concubines tended to his wounds.

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As the war raged on, Count Eldridge brought a bunch of troops forward and knelt down in front of Emperor Renardier outside the command center.

"Your Imperial Majesty, please permit me to use the first secret passage! I will lead my troops and risk my life to confirm whether the enemy has set traps for us!"

"I understand if you mentioned the other secret passages, but the first? I do not understand. You know the first secret passage has a high risk since it has been used before, so why do you insist on that one, Count Eldridge?"

"You and Marquis Salazar had already assigned others to lead the attack in those other secret passages. Therefore, only the first secret passage is left. Duke Chalfont was also a precious retainer and a dear friend of mine. I also want to lead the vanguard and avenge him. Please permit me, Your Imperial Majesty!"

"Since you have completely made up your mind, there's no reason for me to stop you. You have my blessings. Be careful, Count Eldridge."

"Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty!"

Emperor Renardier knew he would only hurt Count Eldridge's pride if he stopped him. The person was determined and prepared to die, fighting for a higher chance at victory for the empire.

Thus, he agreed to the person's request.

Nevertheless, a scout report soon came in from the fleet of magic airships hovering high over the skies of Fort Whitebridge.

"Your Imperial Majesty, the enemy has begun reinforcing their forts with troops from their border cities!" a soldier reported.

"Good! Everything is going according to plan," Emperor Renardier exclaimed.

"Since we have the enemy's full attention, they won't suspect an attack from their rear. It's finally time to make full use of those secret passages. That's your cue, Count Eldridge. I will also inform the lords to begin."

"I will bring back good news, Your Imperial Majesty!"

Count Eldridge promised solemnly, saluting with his right fist over his chest, pointing upward, and his other fist behind his back.

## Chapter 456: It Begins (3)

Shortly after Count Eldridge departed, Emperor Renardier entered the command center. Inside, Ulrich was alone, overlooking the battle map and receiving reports from different channels via their communication crystals.

However, Ulrich immediately paused his work upon noticing Emperor Renardier's arrival.

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich immediately said apologetically, kneeling on one leg with his head lowered. "I shouldn't have asked you to create an opening in Fort Whitebridge for our army's advancement. I didn't expect the Kingdom of Black Rose to have hidden such a powerful figure."

"At ease, Marquis Salazar. Neither did I," Emperor Renardier coolly replied before shaking his head. "But, no, this is good. If I didn't make a move, we wouldn't have known we were dealing with such a powerful person, a man, no less."

"I had some suspicions, but to think a man was actually leading the witches in this war. I can't even begin to fathom how he achieved such a feat. Those supremacist witches definitely wouldn't have allowed such a thing to happen."

"It's almost as if... Queen Henrietta disguised herself as a man to throw us off guard..." Emperor Renardier suddenly felt alarmed by his speculation.

Nothing made sense if the man leading the witches was truly a man. His authority, background, and power all came into question.

However, if they assumed the man was actually Queen Henrietta in disguise, everything made sense, whether it was her authority, background, or power.

Only someone as powerful as Queen Henrietta could have faced him without being oppressed by his aura.

"Did Queen Sybil betray us and release Queen Henrietta? Or have they been in cahoots from the start?" Emperor Renardier seriously wondered with a grim look.

The seven witch kingdoms couldn't expand their territory by waging war on other countries.

However, if other countries initiated war on them, it would be a completely different story. They just needed to weave the truth and lies to come up with a convincing justification to swallow the Holy Knight Empire.

"If that was true, we might have fallen into a big scheme, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich frowned before suggesting, "Although I don't hold much hope, we should contact Queen Sybil to confirm the truth."

"Un. We should," Emperor Renardier agreed with a nod.

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Boom! Boom!

Meanwhile, the war continued to rage on as countless spells exploded between the two countries' borders.

The wizards did their best to intercept as many spells with their own, but they were severely lacking in both numbers and power.

The Kingdom of Black Rose's battle witches seemed way too powerful to be ordinary Early-stage High Witches; they felt like they were facing Mid-stage High Witches.

If the three tower masters didn't have their powerful staffs, even they might not have been these battle witches' opponents!

"Goddamit! No one told me the Kingdom of Black Rose would be this powerful! However, that makes them all the more desirable! If I could use their mana veins to create a new magic core, I'm sure my magic staff would reach a new level of power!"

Alistair licked his lips with greed as he gazed at the battle witches on the distant wall of Fort Whitebridge.

A few battle witches felt his uncomfortable gaze. They couldn't help but feel creeped out and disgusted, causing their expressions to become colder.

However, they couldn't target someone so far away. As such, they just focused on defending the fort.

All of the empire's wooden plank bridges lost their stability after the battle witches destroyed the land surrounding their impaled tungsten arrows.

Unfortunately, the Holy Knight Empire had more of where those came from.

Twang! Twang! Twang!

New tungsten arrows attached with chained wooden plank bridges were loaded on the large ballistae and fired across the river once more, allowing another wave of soldiers to rush across.

Some also used the floating bodies of their fallen comrades as stepping stones to help them cross the river.

As a result, the empire's holy soldiers got dangerously close to reaching land.

"Light them up!" Artemis barked.

In that instant, two groups of battle witches, a water-attribute group and a fire-attribute group, quickly acted.

The water-attribute battle witches transmuted water into oil and poured them over the abandoned rafts, while the fire-attribute battle witches lit them on fire before they even reached the rafts.

As a result, a blanket of fire descended on the rafts, then soon spread into the lake, wherever the burning oil flowed.

A large blazing wall of fire and a sea of flames blocked off the holy soldiers' path ahead, but it did not the holy soldiers' advancement. The holy soldiers charged through the fire, disregarding their fears of getting burned; they relied on their aura to minimize the damage.

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Meanwhile, the empire's fleet of magic airships continued to be bombarded by Fort Whitebridge's battle witches.

Eventually, their magic defense systems were destroyed or depleted of power, causing their magic airships to lose the protection of their magic barriers.

Boom! Boom!

Important components of the magic airships were struck, damaged, and destroyed, causing several magic airships to lose their flight capability.

As a result, they quickly plunged toward Fort Whitebridge with increasing speed.

Artemis felt a cold chill when she looked up.

"Raise the defense!"

Following Artemis's order, the falling magic airships smashed into a bubble-like magic barrier that covered the entire fort.

However, the magic barrier failed to hold under the magic airships' falling velocity and weight as the magic airships squeezed their way through – only for the magic barrier to set off the magic bombs on board.

Ka-boom!

Countless explosives went off mid-air in a series of chain reactions, easily tearing apart the magic airships and magic barriers alike.

However, only four out of seven magic airships were blown to bits by their own magic bombs.



Seeing the other three magic airships continue to plunge toward the fort without the magic barrier to protect, Artemis and many battle witches froze on the spot.

If they tried to blow up the magic airship with their spells, it could set off the magic bombs they carried, and the blast wave would rip them apart.

"Useless!" Aeliana spat, stomping the ground.

In that instant, countless vines grew out of the ground and proliferated with accelerated growth, transforming into colossal vines – the biggest Vaan had seen.

Aeliana, in her Dryad Transformation state, controlled the colossal vines to catch the three falling magic airships and stop their crash, but not without suffering the backlash of their immense weight bearing down on her as if she was part of the vines.

She bled from her nose and lips while all her nails split apart as if it wasn't vines but her hands that held up the three magic airships.

Nevertheless, Aeliana gritted her teeth and persevered.

"Fuck... off!!!"

Following her cursing, the vines hurled the three magic airships away from the fort, sending them into the lake beyond the fort's wall.

'Oh, fuck...'

Hundreds of holy soldiers had the same thought as they saw the three huge magic airships falling toward them.

But before the magic airships even landed in the lake's water, they were struck by the barrage of spells as they fell into its striking zone.

Ka-boom!

The magic bombs onboard all exploded at once, creating a seismic shockwave that blasted everyone and everything away from its range with an earth-shaking, sky-rending roar.

Even the battle witches were blown away from the edge of the wall.

#### Chapter 457: Chaotic Tornado Array

Following the resulting explosion that swallowed countless volumes of lakewater, land, and people, Stormwind Lake was transformed into a misty region full of heavy rain and strong winds that obstructed everyone's vision of within and beyond.

The slushing sound of running water was heard as water from the Violent Tributary and Sleeping River flowed back into Stormwind Lake to replenish the lost water and restore it to normal levels, albeit slowly.

"A-Are you alright, Lord Aeliana?"

"I'm fine!"

Aeliana grumpily replied to Artemis's question with a dark yet pale look as she wiped the blood from her nose and lips with the back of her hand.

Even if she was a Mid-stage High Witch comparable to High-stage High Witches, holding back the three huge magic airships was almost too much for her, even in her Dryad Transformation state.

Fortunately, she was barely able to repel the three magic airships, even though she had to overexert herself to do so.

Thanks to her dual attributes in wood and light, her wounds quickly healed on their own, returning some strength to her weakened body.

"Get your head into gear, Lord Artemis. You have thousands of High Witches under your command!"

"I-I'm so sorry..."

Artemis recognized her mistake, but one could not fault her for losing her cool. The war was more horrid than anyone could have imagined.

Both countries wield great power and magic technology that could easily tear apart each other. And in front of such destructive power, their lives were fleeting and insignificant.

Whether it was the battle witches or the holy soldiers, both sides wanted to destroy each other. But once the war began in full swing, they started to question how morally wrong it was. They shouldn't be slaughtering each other like this; it only brought pain and sadness to both sides.

Nevertheless, they could only steel their hearts and keep fighting; it was either kill or be killed.

"Quickly restore the fort's magic defense system unless you want to get bombed! There are still more enemy magic airships in the sky!"

"Yes, Lord Artemis!"

Following Artemis's orders, a group of battle witches rushed to the fort's magic core room and resupplied the exhausted magic core with mana.

"Lord Artemis, the mist and steam is blocking our vision of the lake! The empire is taking advantage of the cover to cross the lake while our spells are missing their target! At this rate, they will breach our defense!"

"Deploy the Chaotic Tornado Array! Wind team, fire team, and ice team; take your positions! It's time to send these imperial bastards flying!"

"Yes, Lord Artemis!"

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Meanwhile, on the Holy Knight Empire's side, the holy soldiers dragged away the huge ballistae and pushed forward small sail-less wooden boats into the water under Emperor Renardier's command.

Although they could only carry six men per boat, there were thousands of them.

However, they were a step too slow in their preparations. Before they could use their boats to cross the large lake, the wind suddenly picked up, forming several winding tornados.

Shattered wooden planks, metal chains, fallen bodies, burning oil...

The tornados lifted everything they caught and sent them swirling into the skies as they moved around unpredictably, sometimes even clashing with each other.

Seeing the wooden planks shredded to pieces by the wind blades, the might of the tornados couldn't be underestimated.

Although the region remained obscured by the mist and heavy winds, the lake became treacherous to cross.

The tornados would tear their fragile wooden boats to pieces. Even if the soldiers survived the wind blades, they wouldn't survive the big fall from the sky that followed.

"Your Imperial Majesty, Stormwind Lake has become impossible to cross! We can only pin our hopes on the western and eastern camps to succeed in their attacks!"

"Not necessarily! We still have the others leading the holy knights through the secret passages. However, we can't let the kingdom relax its guard against us and risk them failing. All units, flip your boats and enter the lake!"

Although the soldiers were initially surprised by Emperor Renardier's command, they quickly understood the idea.

Shortly after the boats were flipped over, the imperial soldiers carried them over their heads and submerged themselves inside the lake's water. They used the air pockets produced by the capsized boats to breathe underwater.

Even if the region over the lake suddenly cleared up at that moment, the Kingdom of Black Rose would not be able to see the tens of thousands of imperial soldiers crossing under the lake.

"What an interesting idea. Even I did not think of that, Your Imperial Majesty."

"Surely you jest, Marquis Salazar. It's a simple concept that anyone can understand. However, we wouldn't have gotten the opportunity to use it if we didn't have the cover of the mist."

While conversing with Marquis Salazar, Emperor Renardier continued to observe ahead with a solemn look.

He feared the possibility of the Kingdom of Black Rose even anticipating such a move.

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In another location, deeper under the earth, Count Eldridge led a small army of ten thousand holy knights through the first secret passage previously used by the Deathsworn Group.

The passage was dark and suffocating due to the lack of light and air, but it was still bearable. They only feared the ceiling suddenly collapsing on them due to the tremors caused by explosions above.

Nevertheless, they safely reached the other end of the secret passage, where there was light...

"There's light? There shouldn't be any light down here..."

"As expected, this secret passage has already been compromised. However, we shall not shy away after making it this far. Whatever traps the kingdom has in store for us, we will crush them with our strength!"

"Yeah—!"

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The end of the secret passage was connected to a vast, deep pit found in the forest west of Fort Whitebridge. It appeared that the pit had been dug out to receive them.

There weren't any traps awaiting Count Eldridge's army, only an ambush.

Astoria stood at the edge of the pit at the top, tall and proud, donned in a black, red set of dragon scale armor, and had her hands rested on the pommel end of her greatsword embedded in the ground of her.

At the same time, she stared down at Count Eldridge's army with a strict gaze.

"Count Eldridge, I will give you and your people another chance to surrender and live. Otherwise, this pit will be your grave."

"You know me?" Count Eldridge frowned.

Chapter 458: Aggrieved Knights

"It's basic common sense to learn about your opponents, no? But never mind that. Make your choice, Count Eldridge. If you're wise and care for your knights, it'll be in your best interest to surrender."

"Hoh? For a supposed legitimate heir to the empire's throne, you are awfully cold towards your people."

Count Eldridge bought time with his casual remark while studying the surrounding for traps. However, he found none besides the pit they were in.

"My people are righteous and outstanding heroes who help the weak and those in need, not the power-hungry, self-driven people like you, Count Eldridge."

"Is that so? Well, how do you plan to deal with all of us by yourself? Surely, you didn't think you could take us all on alone, Lady Astoria."

Although Count Eldridge sounded calm, his expression soon turned grave.

He found it alarming that such a huge pit was not seen and reported by the scouts despite the cleared trees leaving a large gaping space in the middle of the forest.

'An illusion array,' Count Eldridge's gaze sharpened immediately.

Since the Kingdom of Black Rose had used an illusion array to hide the large pit in the forest from aerial scouting, they likely had also used illusion arrays to hide other special terrains and possibly even their numbers.

Just as Count Eldridge had that thought, a sudden voice confirmed his fears.

"But she's not alone?"

Several matriarchs stepped toward the pit's edges and revealed themselves along with the army of witches behind them as their concealment spell dispersed.

In that instant, Count Eldridge and his holy knights suddenly felt the presence of many witches – possibly more than their army.

"I hope you brought enough troops to entertain our thirty thousand witch army. There are a few spells and tricks we wanted to test."

When Count Eldridge heard a matriarch say that, the corner of his lips twitched.

Just as he had feared, the Kingdom of Black Rose had hidden more troops than they had revealed on the surface.

According to the latest scout report, the reserve army in the border cities had all gone to reinforce the three forts. Yet, there were another thirty thousand battle witches here, where they were – or so the matriarch stated.

"So what if you have more numbers than us? I have ten thousand holy knights with me; each one of them is comparable to Early-stage High Witches. Your numbers mean nothing to us. Bring it on!"

"Sigh... So you have chosen to die. So be it."

Shortly after Astoria sighed, she steeled her heart with a cold look before signaling the matriarchs to order their battle witches to attack.

"Battle witches, prepare for battle!" the matriarchs barked.

The battle witches immediately circulated their mana and generated power as they charged their spells.

At the same time, Count Eldridge commanded the ten Peak-stage Second-Circle Wizards with him to create an earthen slope for them to rush out of the pit.

Although the Peak-stage Second-Circle Wizards successfully created the earthen slope, they felt something very wrong with their mana flow.

"The wizards have forged the path ahead. All holy knights, charge with me! For the glory of the empire!"

"Wait, Count Eldridge—"

"For the glory of the empire!!"

The holy knights roared, following Count Eldridge's lead as they rushed up the newly-formed earthen slope, missing the wizards' late warning.

Only after their aura surged in full swing—did they notice the same problem as the wizards.

"Huh?"

"Attack at will!"

Following the empire's confusion and the matriarchs' attack order, a barrage of spells soon rained down on Count Eldridge and his holy knights, overwhelming them instantly.



Puchi!

"Arghh—!"

"Nooo—!"

Painful cries immediately resounded as the battle witches' ballistic spells struck the holy knights like cannonballs, sending them flying and crashing into others behind them. It resulted in a domino effect as countless holy knights rolled down the earthen slope

Although they had their sturdy armor to protect them, they still suffered internal injuries from the shock waves. Some also had their arms and legs bent in unnatural directions.

In a single instant, the empire's charge easily halted as the battle witches one-sidedly crushed the army of holy knights. Even Count Eldridge did not get out unscathed, as he had led the charge.

After they were blasted back down to the bottom of the pit, the battle witches continued to bombard them with ballistic spells that exceeded the power granted by their Peak-stage Senior Witch ranks.

As a result, Count Eldridge and the holy knights continued accumulating internal injuries until they coughed up blood. Hundreds started dying at once, and the number continued to soar by the moment.

Unfortunately, the ten Peak-stage Second-Circle wizards had it worse; they died from the very first shot.

Originally, Count Eldridge's holy knight army shouldn't have suffered such a crushing defeat.

However...

"My Lord, there's something wrong with my body! I can't circulate my aura properly!" a holy knight shouted desperately, vomiting blood in the process as ballistic spells battered his body.

Aura was vital to increasing their strength, defense, and speed. Without reinforcing their bodies with aura, they were only slightly stronger than ordinary people.

"I came fully prepared to face the enemy's traps, but even I did not expect them to have this kind of trap prepared for us... All holy knights, retreat...! We must report back to His Imperial Majesty...! We must let everyone know the enemy can suppress our aura...! It was a mistake coming here..."

Count Eldridge continued to cough up blood while speaking and dragging his battered body toward the dark passage.

At the same time, holy knights threw themselves behind Count Eldridge and shielded him from the incoming ballistic spells with their bodies.

"Ughk, please leave, my Lord! We'll cover your retreat...!"

"I'm sorry, everyone. I've dragged you all to hell with me."

Count Eldridge felt deeply regretful as he watched his holy knights throw away their lives one by one to protect him.

However, the holy knights didn't blame him; they were prepared to die when they chose to follow him. Even so, they still felt aggrieved and unresigned.

They came for revenge and glory, but all they got was depression and defeat.

After all, they were crushed before they were even given a chance to show off their strength!

Chapter 459: Doubts, Accusation, and Argument

"After them! Don't let those imperial bastards escape!"

"Wait! It's dangerous to pursue the enemy through such a narrow passage!"

Astoria quickly warned the witches after the matriarch gave the order to hunt down every last surviving holy knight from the empire.

However, the battle witches did not heed her warning. In their excitement to slaughter the imperials, their ears turned deaf to Astoria's words.

Although the supremacist witches had received some reformation due to Vaan's existence, it didn't change the fact that they found pleasure in defeating strong men. There was a sense of satisfaction in hunting down the enemy after crushing their spirits.

Nevertheless, they wouldn't have enjoyed such an overwhelming if Aeliana's antimagic spores didn't heavily suppress the enemy's fighting ability.

"Die! All of you, die for me!"

"Die, die, die! Hahaha, you're dead!"

The battle witches pursued the retreating holy knights with manic excitement that seemed borderline crazy.

"Quickly retreat, everyone! They can't pursue us forever...! Once we get to the other side, we'll have the support of the rest of the army!" Count Eldridge assured his holy knights as he violently coughed in the process.

However, the pain in his heart hurt more than his physical injuries.

Being forced to retreat in such a pathetic manner while abandoning his fallen knights after promising he would return with victory...

It was a stain on his honor.

"Arghhh—!"

Count Eldridge continued to hear his holy knights' painful grunts and wails in the rear as they were struck by the pursuing battle witches' ballistic spells. The situation was like something out of a nightmare. He wanted to stop listening, but he couldn't.

Meanwhile, the holy knights that lost their mobility stayed behind to fight to the death.

The battle witches did not properly check the corpses as they rushed past the piles of fallen knights on the ground. As such, some surviving holy knights managed to take them by surprise, grabbing at their ankles with one hand and dealing lethal blows with the sword in their other hand.

"Dammit! Just drop dead already, you fucking bastard!" a battle witch cursed after getting stabbed in the heart.

The fatal injury made it impossible for her to use the mana utilization method. Thus, she burned the holy knight's face with a normal fire spell. The holy knight eventually died after the flames flooded inside the openings of his sallet helmet and scorched his whole head.

Not long after, the battle witch also dropped dead due to her fatal wound.

Several other battle witches also fell in similar manners due to their reckless pursuit and giving the enemy to catch them off-guard.

Boom! Boom!

At the same time, the other battle witches continued firing their ballistics spells through the secret passage. Many struck the back of the holy knights, while some also missed, hitting the walls and ceilings.

The secret passage rumbled with tremors as cracks spread until it eventually gave way, causing the entire underground passage to collapse.

It was unknown how many holy knights were trapped or crushed under the weight of the earth, but a few hundred battle witches were also caught in the process.

Shortly after, Astoria glanced at the matriarchs' blank looks.

Despite her repeated warnings, the matriarchs made no effort to stop the battle witches. As a result, what could have been a flawless victory was stained with some losses.

"Was it worth it?"

Facing Astoria's question, the matriarchs couldn't answer. They immediately felt ashamed. They had lost control of themselves and became drunk on their power and overwhelming advantage.

Nevertheless, the other witch armies awaiting the enemy at the other secret passages also successfully routed their opponents with overwhelming victories. Some also lost control, and some didn't.

Although Vaan had anticipated such possibilities, he made no effort to stop them from happening.

He had already provided them with overwhelming advantages to dominate their opponents. Thus, if they still incurred losses under such situations, they only have themselves to blame.

Furthermore, some people had to fall for others to learn and grow from them.

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Kingdom of Verdant Woods, Emerald City

Underneath the holy tree, Queen Sybil paid Henrietta's captivity location another visit to antagonize Henrietta and provoke some positive response from her.

"This is your last chance, Henrietta. The war between your kingdom and the Holy Knight Empire has already begun. If you don't teach me the secret of your power, I will let you rot here and die!"

"We've been over this many times, Sybil. I already said everything I needed to say. I will not repeat them again."

Henrietta's stance remained firm as ever, causing Sybil's threats to become meaningless. There was nothing Sybil could say to make Henrietta cooperative.

However, Sybil was unwilling to back down and give up.

"Hmph! I'll refuse to believe you don't care about your kingdom at all! Just you wait! I will keep updating you on your kingdom's terrible situation!" Sybil snorted gloomily, firmly believing the Kingdom of Black Rose was doomed without Henrietta.

However, they both knew Henrietta wasn't going anywhere, no matter what she said. After all, if Henrietta were ever freed, Sybil would be the first to die by her hands.

Suddenly, Sybil's portable communication crystal pinged with a call from Emperor Renardier. In that instant, her eyes brightened.

"Well, look who's contacting me. This is just perfect timing. You hear the news from the emperor himself," Sybil smirked.

Shortly after she accepted the call, a holographic image of Emperor Renardier immediately shone above her communication crystal.

However, she immediately frowned at Emperor Renardier's following accusation.

"How dare you trick me, Queen Sybil. You better give me a good explanation for this!"

"Did you get your head kicked by a donkey? Why the hell do I need to explain anything to you? What the hell are you talking about? You better fix that tone of yours when you speak to me, Emperor Renardier."

Queen Sybil's good mood disappeared instantly as she snapped back at Emperor Renardier's blatant accusation coldly, causing the latter to also frown.

Shortly after Emperor Renardier recounted the situation and mentioned his doubts regarding the man he faced at Fort Whitebridge, Queen Sybil was even more enraged sheer ridiculousness of it.

"How dare you doubt my sincerity, even after I told you the truth under the Oath of Magic. You can clearly see Henrietta held right here."

"Then how do you explain that man's power and fire ability?"

"How the fuck would I know? If you're so great, go figure it out yourself! Or did that person's flames fry your brains, Emperor Renardier? You're barking up the wrong tree!"

"You might want to consider your words carefully before throwing out your next insult, Queen Sybil."

Being forced to listen to Queen Sybil and Emperor Renardier arguing back and forth like they were about to have a fallout, Henrietta interrupted them with a yawn.

"Look here... If you fools hate each other so much, go and fight it out somewhere else. My ears are growing calluses listening to your boring drivels," Henrietta said, but she actually found the situation quite fascinating.

Nevertheless, her remark quickly captured Queen Sybil and Emperor Renardier's full attention.

"It seems you know what's going on. Who is he, Queen Henrietta?"

"You think I know? I also wished I knew! But even if I did, why should I tell any of you losers? If you're not going to let me out, then get the hell out of my sight!"

Chapter 460: Captured Rat

"Hoh? It sounds like someone is unhappy. I mean, I would be, too," Queen Sybil softly chuckled.

"A man comes out of nowhere and leads your witches into war. At first, it seems like this man is defending your kingdom. But from another perspective, didn't he basically take over your kingdom? Hahaha..."

"Maybe you can work out a deal with him. Have you tried negotiating, Emperor Renardier?" Queen Sybil asked shortly.

However, Emperor Renardier shook his head with a frown. He didn't have high hopes of any success in that endeavor.

After all, why would anyone be willing to sell their country after getting their hands on it?

"I'll see what he wants," Emperor Renardier said regardless.

Shortly after he cut the communication connection, Queen Sybil's merry look vanished, replaced with grim and concern.

Evidently, the emergence of this 'man' wasn't Queen Henrietta's secret trump card against the Holy Knight Empire. In other words, there was something else she was still relying on to quell the Holy Knight Empire's invasion.

Initially, she had great hopes and confidence in her plan. But now that unexpected variables started emerging, she began considering the possibility of failure.

"Just what are you hiding, Henrietta?"

"You didn't hear what I said earlier? Let me repeat them for you: *Piss. Off.*"

Knowing Henrietta wouldn't say anything useful to her, Queen Sybil quickly gave up with a cold snort. But just when she was prepared to leave, she detected unwanted guests sneaking around within the domain of the holy tree – her territory.

"It seems a few rats have snuck into my city... And if I have to guess, they came looking for you. Kukuku, let me go and see who came. You best pray it's not anyone important to you, Henrietta."

Shortly after antagonizing Henrietta one more time, Queen Sybil left the underground root room under the former's cold gaze.

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Meanwhile, on the surface, inside Emerald City, a woman clad in heavy desert clothing continued her subtle search for Queen Henrietta as she drew closer to the enormous holy tree in the center. Her



investigation in the past month had eventually led her to Emerald City, the last place Queen Henrietta visited before her disappearance.

Considering Queen Sybil had conspired with the Holy Knight Empire to take over the Kingdom of Black Rose, she couldn't think of anywhere else Queen Henrietta would be besides the Kingdom of Verdant Woods' capital city.

Finally, after fishing around for information within Emerald City for the past two weeks, she concluded Queen Henrietta was held somewhere inside the holy tree.

But while the woman in heavy desert clothes was looking for an opening to infiltrate the holy tree area, someone suddenly blew cool wind behind her ears, sending chills up her spine for multiple reasons.

Swish!

The desert-dressed woman with her face hidden behind a sand-shielding veil created distance with a giant leap forward. When she quickly glanced back to identify the person who had unknowingly snuck up on her, her expression immediately turned grim under the veil.

"Queen Sybil."

"Well, if it isn't the Grand Inquisitor, Ember Killian. What's wrong? It looks like you just saw a ghost," Queen Sybil chuckled before asking, "Have you come to swear your allegiance to me?"

Ember quickly frowned with a heavy heart, wondering how she got discovered within the crowd of people. At the same time, Queen Sybil's smile widened with a hint of teasing.

"What? Surely, you didn't think such a simple cover would keep your identity hidden from me after you entered my territory? Aren't you looking down on me and overestimating yourself too much? You're an inquisitor, not a spy. You don't have any talent in this field."

"Where have you hidden my queen, Queen Sybil?" Ember boldly questioned with a strong tone after realizing there was no point in beating around the bush.

However, Queen Sybil was a two-faced person who could change her attitude at the snap of a finger.

Since the person didn't play along with her, she didn't bother continuing the friendly act; her smile quickly disappeared, replaced by a cold gaze.

With a sudden stomp, Queen Sybil swiftly summoned small vine-like roots out of the ground to restrict Ember's movements.

Although Ember tried to burn them all to ashes and escape, her power didn't hold a candle to Queen Sybil's. An Early-stage High Witch like her was nothing before a Transcendent Witch.

Despite being rigid in nature, Queen Sybil's vine-like roots from the holy tree moved like slithering snakes and fast like lightning under her control. With her superior mana supply coursing through them, they out-regenerated Ember's burning flames, making the roots seem like they had fire resistance.

In the end, Ember failed to escape her fate of being bound. The vines coiled around her limbs and neck, keeping her firmly in place.

"It would be a pity to kill you. After all, it wasn't easy to become a High Witch. Swear your allegiance to me, and I will let you live, Marquis Ember."

"If that is my fate, so be it."

"Think again, Marquis Ember. The Kingdom of Black Rose is done for. There's no need for you to die with it."

"My loyalty lies with Queen Henrietta. Someone like you, who conspires with outside forces to plot against your allies, does not deserve my respect, let alone my allegiance. I've already said what needed to be said. Make your move, Snake."

"Hmph! I was being nice because I cherish talents like you. But since you don't appreciate my kindness, so be it! However, don't think your death will be a pretty one! You wanted to know where Henrietta is? I'll show you!"

Queen Sybil lost her patience after repeatedly trying to persuade Ember—only to be refused time and again.

Shortly after Ember's body was wrapped in roots from the neck down, Queen Sybil dragged her by the hair down to the underground floor beneath the holy tree.

Then, Queen Sybil threw Ember before the root cage containing Henrietta.

"Ember?" Henrietta immediately frowned with a serious look.

"I apologize for my incompetence, Your Majesty. I came to rescue you but ended up getting caught by the enemy instead," Ember said self-disparagingly.

Meanwhile, Queen Sybil studied Henrietta's reaction and wore a thoughtful look.

"Interesting."