

The Witch 461

Chapter 461: Henrietta's Belief

Puchi!

Suddenly, a sharp wooden spike impaled Ember's thigh, causing her to groan in pain. But as if that wasn't enough to satisfy Queen Sybil, she split the wooden spike into thin little worms that wiggled inside Ember's wound, aggravating and exacerbating her pain.

"Ahhh!"

Ember's cry eventually resounded once she couldn't endure the worm-like wooden splinters wreaking havoc inside her body.

The worm-like splinters entered through her thigh wound but exited from different parts of her body. Then, they drilled back into her body and ate away at it like parasites.

Henrietta was forced to watch Ember tortured in front of herself, and her low mood plummeted further. Her pressure surged under her silent rage.

"Just what the hell do you want, Sybil," Henrietta spat gloomily.

"Your secret. Isn't that obvious?" Sybil coolly smiled before commenting, "It seems Marquis Ember is pretty close to you. Otherwise, you wouldn't be reacting like this. So I guess it was a good idea to bring her here. Teach me the secret of your power, and I will spare her life. That is my condition.

I will not ask again."

"Don't do it, Your Majesty. A conniving bitch like her will only become a calamity if she gains more power—Arghhh!!!"

"I did not permit you to speak."

Queen Sybil did not let Ember finish speaking before she tortured her with great pain. At the same time, Ember's pretty face quickly became bloodied and disfigured under the merciless stomps of her heels.

Henrietta's expression became so dark and ominous that it almost seemed like the sky outside would also darken from grey thunderclouds blotting out the sun.

"Truly an irredeemable fool. Even teaching a horse how to breathe underwater would be easier than trying to get my words through your head. Since you are so stupid, I will remind you again: you lack willpower and perception; your soul is weak! If you don't strengthen it, you will never improve!" Henrietta stated condescendingly.

"Hmph, I see you are also stubborn until the end," Queen Sybil snorted and said, "So be it. Since you don't want to cooperate, don't blame me for what I will do to Marquis Ember."

"Where are you taking her?!" Henrietta barked, seeing Queen Sybil dragging Ember away by the hair.

"Oh, don't worry. I won't kill her right away. Someone like her surely didn't come to my kingdom alone. As such, I still need to interrogate her and catch the remaining rats. After I kill them in front of her, I will torture her until she begs me for death," Queen Sybil stated.

"But why do you still care? Clearly, your secret is more important than their lives; you've already made your choice. So shut up, sit back, and wait for my good news. I'll make sure you feel regret."

"When I get out of this shitty cage, your death won't be pretty, Sybil. Mark my words!" Henrietta vowed furiously. She would not rest until Sybil suffered hell before death.

However, Queen Sybil didn't take her threat to heart. After all, the person was trapped and couldn't do anything about it.

"Heh. I like to see you try," she snickered.

Shortly after, Queen Sybil left with the Marquis Ember, leaving Henrietta alone inside her cage. But, of course, Henrietta wasn't really alone.

'Master, please help me out,' Henrietta mentally requested with a determined look.

'What a pity...'

Following Henrietta's determined request, the ancient female voice sounded in her head with some disappointment.

'Given another two weeks or so, you would have gotten out on your own. And with Sybil's fusion rate with the holy tree at that point, we could have refined them into an incomparably powerful Spirit Weapon. No, I dare say a Semi-Divine Weapon or even a Divine Weapon is possible with a bit of luck.'

'That said, you understand the risk you're about to take if you let me take over, right? You have always been guarded against me. And yet, you are ready to risk everything and put our trust to the test for one subordinate.'

'She's not my subordinate; she's one of my dearest friends, someone who has been with me thick and thin, even before Gehenna existed. She's family, Master. I can abandon anyone but not family,' Henrietta declared resolutely.

'In the grand scheme of things...'

'In the grand scheme of things, all life besides your own is insignificant. Treasured friends, families, and lovers of today will merely become fond memories of yesterday. You've said this before, Master.'

'However, what is the point of eternity if you can only spend it alone? I don't know what happens if yours, but to me, such a life isn't worth living. People aren't meant to be alone. How can I be whole if everyone dear to me is gone? A piece of my soul would be missing.'

When Henrietta said that, the ancient female soul sharing her body fell into a trance as if she was reminiscing a fond memory from the distant past.

Suddenly, a drop of tears ran down one of Henrietta's cheeks, but it wasn't hers; it was her master's tears.

'So this is what you really think, huh? You've hidden it well. I just wanted to save you from a lifetime of heartache and regret... But as expected of my disciple, you remind me of my younger self. Alright, I should live up to your trust. You don't need to worry about me stealing your body.'

'There will be plenty of opportunities for you to create a better one for me in Chaos,' the ancient soul mentioned.

Nevertheless, shortly after Henrietta surrendered her control over her body, the ancient soul took over, causing an overall change in her aura. Even the world itself was affected as the cage rattled and the antimagic array cracked.

It was like the world's laws were trying to stop an incomparable powerful existence from emerging, and in the process, they destroyed the very shackles that kept Henrietta bound within her cage.

The rumbling phenomenon only occurred for a few seconds before it stopped.

However, the holy tree's roots all withered and died like cracked grounds that suffered prolonged droughts, and the antimagic array shattered like glass.

At the same time, blood dripped down from Henrietta's nose.

'Your body is too weak to contain my power for long. I can only reside inside your soul. Anyway, with this much damage, you should be able to get out now.'

'Thank you, Master.'

Chapter 462: Full Assimilation

"Fuck, fuck, fucking dammit!" Queen Sybil cursed, dragging Ember by the hair up a winding spiral of steps with haste.

Thanks to her connection with the holy tree, she immediately knew the moment Queen Henrietta broke free from her captivity. She could sense all movements within the vicinity of the holy tree; it was also how she detected Marquis Ember.

Nevertheless, as Queen Sybil rushed up the spiral stairs, leaving behind a trail of blood belonging to Ember, the wall to her right side suddenly blew open. The shockwave immediately slammed her against the center pillar to her left.

"Where do you think you're going, Sybil?! I said I would kill you, and I am not one to go back on my word!" Henrietta roared with her cold gaze locked on Sybil's figure.

At the same time, Sybil glanced back and saw Henrietta floating outside the holy tree, draped in her insidious and terrifyingly destructive black flames. Her expression instantly turned terribly grim.

After a side glance at the bloodied and disfigured Ember lying powerlessly some distance away on the lower steps, she immediately dashed to grab her with an outstretched hand—only for a wall of black flames to cut off her hand and obstruct her path.

However, the wall of black flames didn't just obstruct Sybil from her objective; it also sliced into the holy tree's trunk with its terrifyingly sharp and destructive power.

"Did you think I would let you use Ember to threaten me again?" Henrietta coldly uttered, waving her hand at Ember.

In that instant, a golden magic barrier covered Ember's body to protect her. Then, a wave of black flames wrapped around it, burning away anything and everything that contacted it.

Much of Ember's surroundings were quickly reduced to black ashes before Henrietta retrieved Ember from the holy tree.

Although Sybil lost one of her hands, she regenerated a new one within mere seconds, making her seem almost immortal and undying.

After she recovered her hand, she wanted to stop Henrietta immediately. However, the wall of black flames obstructed her at every turn as if it had a will of its own. The wall of black flames even formed a hand and waved its index finger at her as if it was telling her, "Don't even think about it," to mock her.

But, of course, the black flames were completely under Henrietta's control. Thus, it was Henrietta who was mocking her.

As such, Sybil's expression turned gloomier.

"How did you destroy the antimagic array and break free from your cage? You used your secret power, didn't you? To think... even the antimagic array can't stop it..."

Henrietta had no intention of answering Sybil's question. No, with Ember on her side and in need of treatment, she didn't give Sybil her attention at all. Thus, the person was only talking to herself.

After Henrietta took out a Rank 3 healing potion from her Magic Domain and treated Ember's wounds, nursing her back to health—only then did she finally give Sybil some attention with an icy cold look.

"How do you want to die, Sybil?" Henrietta coolly asked.

"Heh, die? Me?" Sybil snickered with a shake of her head before saying with a severe glare, "Do you really think you can kill me in my territory, Henrietta?! If I weren't so wary of your secret power, I wouldn't even be afraid to fight you!"

"Whether you fight or not, you will still die by my hands. You can't run from this fate, Sybil!"

Following Henrietta's statement, she hurled black flames at Sybil with the intent to kill, knowing full well that the person would not die so easily.

Just like she expected, the holy tree itself moved to protect Sybil from the black flames, shielding her layers of wood from its trunk.

It was like the holy tree had become soft like water; it could change its form and move as it pleased.

Nevertheless, Henrietta's black flames reduced everything in their path to ashes all the same. But after clearing the area, Sybil's figure was nowhere to be seen.

"Do you really think you can fight me while protecting Marquis Ember at the same time?! In my territory, no less! You are looking down on me too much, Henrietta! Let me show you true power!"

Sybil's croaky voice resounded from the holy tree without clearly distinguishing her location; it was like the holy tree itself was speaking. Even her aura had spread thin all over the enormous and towering holy tree.

Rumble...!

The earth shook as countless large tree roots emerged from the ground, causing chaos all over Emerald City. Buildings collapsed, and people cried, consumed by the deep rifts and fissures that formed on the surface.

Although some witches were able to save themselves with flight magic, the same couldn't be said for the rest, let alone men. Many plummeted to their deaths within the abyss of the newly formed deep rifts and fissures.

At the same time, many further away from the holy tree also fled Emerald City as far as they could before they got caught up in the destruction like the rest.

Nevertheless, Sybil didn't care about the destruction she caused in Emerald City. Her attention was solely focused on Henrietta.

"This is... sheer madness. Don't you care about your people?" Henrietta frowned at the devastating scene.

"My people? Them?" Sybil snickered with ridicule and said, "They are just insects, expendable tools used for achieving my purpose. If they can't aid me in achieving my goals, then they are useless and better off dead."

"What a heartless ruler."

"Hahaha... I wasn't made a ruler because I wanted to be made one."

Henrietta's remark made Sybil laugh out loud, enough for her voice to resound throughout the great forest for everyone from the capital city to hear.

"These insects gathered around me, put me on a throne, and dumped all these bullshit expectations on me simply because I am stronger than them! Those are chains used by the weak to tie down the strong! I'm sure you can relate, Henrietta! Since they used me, I used them. Simple as that! So, no, I am not their ruler!

It was just an exchange of interests!"

While listening to Sybil, Henrietta narrowed her eyes with a sharp glint, sensing the former was speaking words from her heart.

However, they weren't words that would be normally spoken out loud, let alone in front of such a big audience. After all, it would cost her all of their loyalty.

Thus, Henrietta could tell Sybil was losing touch with herself and becoming irrational – such was the price for fully assimilating with the holy tree. It would only get worse from here. In time, Sybil would be reduced to a mindless beast that could only act according to her most primal instincts.

Sybil acquired a power she wasn't ready to gain and got consumed by her greed.

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"Thank you, Your Majesty. I came to save you but ended up saved by you instead."

"That's what friends are for, Ember."

"Mm. I have recovered enough. Allow me to leave on my own. I don't want to become your burden in your fight with Queen Sybil—or whatever it is she has become."

"You're not a burden, but I will honor your request."

Although Henrietta thought differently, she didn't wish to argue with her friend. Thus, she readily released Ember and allowed her to fly away on her own.

Even if Ember were a burden, she would be considered a necessary burden. People only grew much stronger when they had things to protect.

Nevertheless, even as they spoke, a large barrier of black flames protected from the holy tree-fused Sybil's whip-like large roots.

However, Henrietta's black flames failed to burn away the tree roots. The tree roots continued to hammer against her black flame barrier while the holy tree-fused Sybil's overwhelming life force regenerated any damage done to her roots almost instantly.

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"Your Majesty, please end this madness! Please tell us what you said wasn't true! That wasn't really what you truly thought of us, right?! Please listen to me, your most devout sub—"

"Puny insect! You were at the top of the list in terms of your pestering and expectations! Disappear for me!"

"Y-Your Majesty, Please don't! Nooo—!"

A supremacist witch at the Early-stage High Witch rank failed to flee before a giant tree root swiftly slammed her into oblivion, tearing apart large landmasses of the earth in the process.

Each giant tree root contained so much weight and power that it easily shattered the earth into fractures.

At that moment, Sybil was no longer considered an Early-stage Transcendent Witch. Given her destructive capability after fully fusing with the holy tree, she was comparable to a Peak-stage Transcendent Witch.

Henrietta had forced her into early full assimilation with the holy tree, and the consequences resulted in the degradation of her intelligence, albeit at a much quicker rate than anyone could have anticipated.

Sybil was no different from a kid that would throw a tantrum at the slightest irritation. Except, her tantrums resulted in large-scale devastation to the surrounding land.

From another perspective, the holy tree-fused Sybil was like a colossal Kraken with the mind of an angry child. But instead of rampaging in a sea of water, it was in a sea of trees.

Suddenly, a large wave of black flames slammed into the holy tree-fused Sybil and burned a quarter of her crown, causing her to squeal in pain.

"Ahhh—! Damn you, Henrietta!"

"It's over, Sybil. I will end you! I originally wanted you to suffer the most excruciating pain before death. However, I cannot allow your rampage to continue devastating this land!"

"Argh, it's all your fault! If only you didn't exist! Such a marvelous power should have belonged to me!"

Chapter 463: Henrietta's Secret

Henrietta had heard enough to know what Sybil truly wanted, and upon thinking about it, she realized it would be weird if Sybil and the other Transcendent Witches didn't suspect she was hiding something.

After all, they won the holy war three hundred years ago because she was forced to rely on her master's power.

During that era, when witches had only just started to emerge, their magic was hardly developed enough to fend off the demon invasion from Gehenna. Although they did make a great effort in the holy war with the Transcendent Witches, her master was ultimately the one who decisively won the battle for them.

However...

'What a simpleton and utter fool,' Henrietta's master spat.

'Not just any mortal can host my divine soul without having their body and soul collapsing from within. They would at least need a unique soul constitution like your Seven-Petal Void Soul.'

According to Henrietta's master, Henrietta's Seven-Petal Void Soul was shaped like a swirling galaxy with seven points and a central super black hole with seemingly infinite space within.

And because of that seemingly infinite space, she could accommodate her master's divine soul, which was much bigger than a regular mortal soul – just like how stars came in different sizes.

In other words, a big bubble would not fit inside a smaller one; forcing it would only cause the smaller bubble to pop. And when one's soul disperses, they supposedly experience true death and fail to enter the cycle of reincarnation.

That said, possessing the Seven-Petal Void Soul had clear advantages and disadvantages.

The Seven-Petal Void Soul allowed Henrietta to fuse up to seven different elemental magic to produce more potent spells, but not without their own difficulties.

At present, Henrietta was only able to perfectly fuse two elemental magic, mainly fire and space, to produce the black flames. But even with just that, she was considered a Peak-stage Transcendent Witch despite still being an Early-stage Transcendent Witch like the other six.

Unfortunately, Henrietta's heavenly blessing also came with its envy.

Although the Seven-Petal Void Soul granted her access to more powerful magic and made her stronger than her peers of the same rank, it also made her the perfect vessel for mighty divine beings who had lost their bodies.

As such, for her own safety, she couldn't let her secret spread.

Therefore, everyone that tried to uncover the secret of her master's divine soul and her Seven-Petal Void Soul had to die.

"Let me send you on your way, Sybil. You have no one but yourself to blame for seeking your own destruction," Henrietta coolly stated as her eyes flashed with a decisive glint. "It's generally too difficult to use this on a large scale... But for you, I'll make an exception."

Shortly after Henrietta spoke, she placed her palms together, with one resting on top of the other. Soon, mana gathered in between them; the darkness of the fractured void and the fiery heat of scorching flames clashed, refusing to intermingle.

But under the will of her Seven-Petal Void Soul, the two elements were forced together, producing a new element that didn't and shouldn't normally exist in the natural world of Pangea, but did at that moment.

With her current mastery, Henrietta could conjure the black flames almost instantaneously under normal circumstances. But due to the sheer amount of mana she had gathered and compressed in the space of her palms, the process took much longer.

Petals of heavily concentrated and compressed black flames were produced one by one before coming together to form the preliminary shape of a budding rose.

Although it looked pretty, it was definitely a rose filled with dangerous thorns.

Nevertheless, the holy tree-fused Sybil could sense the danger emanating from the unbloomed flower and began striking Henrietta more fiercely with extensive roots, leaves, and branches.

"Damn you, Henrietta! Why won't you just die and disappear!!!" Sybil roared furiously.

No matter how much she wanted to destroy Henrietta, none of her attacks could breach the black flame barrier Henrietta had set up.

Everything that bashed into the black flame barrier got burned to ashes, regenerated, then burned to ashes again in an endlessly repeating cycle.

Ping... Ping...

Eventually, Henrietta completed her preparation as the budding black rose in between her palm started pulsating like a heartbeat.

"Today, the black rose shall blossom again," Henrietta uttered expressionlessly.

Following her statement, she created an opening in Sybil's endless barrage of attacks with her black flame barrier, exposing her own body to danger.

However, she immediately followed up by sending the budding black rose swirling toward the holy tree-fused Sybil with a shoving motion of her two hands like a tiger palm thrust.

The instant the budding black rose left Henrietta's control, its petals began peeling apart one by one. With each petal peeled, the threat it emanated surged with significant momentum.

"Nooo—! What are you doing?!"

By then, the holy tree-fused Sybil had completely given up on attacking Henrietta. Whether she wanted to or not, the holy tree's instinct to preserve its own life overruled her will to defend itself.

All the roots, leaves, and branches, everything the holy tree could control, were immediately retracted, coming together to form the strongest defense it could imagine.

The blooming black rose continued on its trajectory, seemingly neither fast nor slow, as if time had been slowed down, but in fact, it was traveling and blooming quickly.

Boom...!

At the moment of contact, a sea of black flames erupted from the black rose explosively, threatening to devour everything. It briefly formed the faint image of a much large blossoming black rose before the furious roar and shockwave from it rushed in all directions.

"Ahhh—!"

The holy tree-fused Sybil's howling cry of pain resounded far and wide as the black flames engulfed her crown, burning everything atop her to ashes.

However, her incredible regenerative capability allowed her to keep up with the destruction caused by the black flames, albeit barely.

Nevertheless, it did not last long.

As the black flames spread to the rest of her body and completely engulfed the entire body of the holy tree-fused Sybil, her regenerative ability failed to keep up any longer.

"Nooo—! I don't want to die! Not like this...!"

Sybil's last cry of desperation slowly died as the survivors from the devastated Emerald City watched the giant holy tree crumble apart, disintegrating into ashes.

Burning soot and charcoal descended upon the devastated land below and charred it, turning it into a desolate wasteland. Life was seemingly completely erased from the region.

Sometime later, after the black flames died, Henrietta narrowed her eyes in on a tiny tree sprout growing from the charred stump of the former holy tree.

"You sure are tenacious like a cockroach, Sybil."

'Wait, Henrietta. She's already gone.'

Henrietta was prepared to deliver the finishing blow when her master suddenly stopped her, letting her know that Sybil's soul had already been wiped away from existence along with the main body of the holy tree.

The tree sprouting before them was a new holy tree, an offspring of the last one.

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Nevertheless, with Queen Sybil gone, the Kingdom of Verdant Woods was left without a ruler at the Transcendent rank. As such, the survivors of Emerald City nervously and fearfully came forward and swore their allegiance to Henrietta, wanting to make her their new ruler.

However, whether Henrietta would agree had yet to be decided.

"What will you do with them, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"I'm not sure yet. However, we need to stabilize this country, then rush back to check on our own kingdom's situation. Supposedly, a man is leading my witches to battle with the empire. Do you have any idea who that person might be, Ember?"

Faced with Henrietta's question, Ember could only shake her head. She had not been in the Kingdom of Black Rose for almost a month; she wasn't aware of the changes there since she left.

As such, her guess was as good as Henrietta's.

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Holy Knight Empire's border region

Inside the central camp's command center, Emperor Renardier and Marquis Salazar looked at the battle map with heavy expressions, especially the former. The constant report of heavy losses on all fronts weighed down on him.

However, he knew that sacrifices were necessary to achieve victory over the Kingdom of Black Rose. As such, he pinned his hopes on the success of the lords leading the holy knights through the secret passages.

The Kingdom of Black Rose's defenses were too strong. But as long as their elite army of holy knights launched their surprise attack from the rear, they would surely take down the forts.

Alas, nothing ever went according to plan.

"Your Imperial Majesty, Count Eldridge is back with urgent news to report!" Count Eldridge announced outside the big tent.

Count Eldridge was so heavily injured that he required two other soldiers to carry him. But despite his heavy injuries, he prioritized his report over his treatment. He couldn't live with his failure. Thus, he was prepared to die after finishing his report.

Although Emperor Renardier wished Count Eldridge would receive immediate treatment, he acceded after the latter's desperate pleading.

Sometime later, Emperor Renardier and Marquis Salazar learned the entire situation and the fate that awaited everyone at the end of the secret passage.

In that instant, they had an ominous feeling regarding the situation in the other secret passages taken by the other lords and holy knights.

"Allow me to call off the assault, Your Imperial Majesty. The enemy is well-prepared—too prepared, in fact, that I find it abnormal. I hate to admit it, but we cannot break past their defensive lines."

"Do it."

At Marquis Salazar's suggestion, Emperor Renardier permitted with a sigh, feeling drained of energy.

It was shameful and humiliating for the Holy Knight Empire to retreat without even breaking past the Kingdom of Black Rose's first defensive line.

However, the lives of the remaining soldiers were more important than their honor.

"There's nothing dishonorable in a strategic retreat, Your Imperial Majesty. We haven't lost yet. We can still win this war!" Ulrich reassured with a firm look.

"Or so you say, Marquis Salazar..."

Chapter 464: Greatest Threat

Following Ulrich's issued retreat order, the commanders began pulling back their troops from the front lines. Some found it regretful, while others felt relieved.

Although the central army managed to reach the foot of Fort Whitebridge, the firepower was too strong for them to scale the walls. Under the heavy barrage of spells, they incurred more losses than when they were trying to cross the lake.

The situation was even worse for the western army.

The Violent Tributary was too treacherous for them to cross with the same tactics; they had to deploy large, sturdy metal ships. Otherwise, the soldiers would be cooked alive.

Furthermore, the concentrated sulfur zone turned the river into a highly explosive and toxic region with only a few fire spells. As a result, the empire's troops did not even get to reach the walls of Fort Dragontail.

Only the eastern army achieved the greatest progress in the full-scale assault.

They froze the Sleeping River and crossed it before laying siege to Fort Ironhaven. Thanks to their swift advancement, the enemy's battle witches were forced to target the troops scaling the wall instead of destroying the frozen river.

Claiming the walls of Fort Ironhaven seemed close at hand, but in truth, they reached a stalemate in their advancement. With the enemy's battle witches alternating turns in defending the wall, their mana reserve seemed endless.

In the end, the eastern army incurred even more losses from the intense battle than the other two armies.

After the armies retreated with more losses in their rear, battle reports soon reached the command center, including news from the holy knight armies.

Just as Emperor Renardier feared, the Kingdom of Black Rose had also hidden troops to ambush them at the other secret passages.

Fortunately, the lords leading the holy knights were quick-witted in realizing the unfavorable situation. As such, they managed to retreat before sustaining heavy losses like Count Eldridge's army.

Even so, after the losses on all fronts were tallied up, the Holy Knight Empire found out they had lost over 200-thousand soldiers on that day alone. It was a catastrophic loss for a single day. Including the losses from previous days, the losses reached up to 250-thousand soldiers.

It was no longer the age of swords from three hundred years ago, where such losses would have spanned several weeks, possibly even months, to reach.

Life was too fleeting with magic involved.

Nevertheless, the Holy Knight Empire experienced first-hand how terribly misinformed they were about the Kingdom of Black Rose.

They were far more advanced than they could have imagined.

Not only did the Kingdom of Black Rose possess a whole army of High Witches, but they even had magic bombs and other advanced magic technology!

However, Ulrich ultimately ruled that it was impossible for the Kingdom of Black Rose to possess such advanced magic technology. The Assembly of Silent Night would have at least learned about it during their years of operation in the kingdom.

In other words, it wasn't that the Assembly of Silent Night was too incompetent to acquire such vital information over the years; their information was simply outdated.

"There's only one reason why the Kingdom of Black Rose would suddenly possess such advanced magic technology and strength of High Witches within a short time: they received help from a mighty power."

"Impossible. There's no human country with such advanced magic technology, let alone capable of raising an army of High Witches in a short time."

"Not a human country, but there's one: the fabled dragons. It seems their existence wasn't just a rumor."

When Ulrich mentioned the dragons, Emperor Renardier and the others all had drastic changes in expressions.

"However, I believe we don't have to worry about the dragons personally joining this war. They have been reclusive all these years; they wouldn't suddenly emerge now. I think we can all see that much," Ulrich reassured everyone.

After all, it was much more troublesome for the dragons to raise the Kingdom of Black Rose's battle witches to High Witches and give advanced magic technology than simply ending the war with their own strength.

"So the dragons have been hidden in the Kingdom of Black Rose..." a lord muttered.

"Not necessarily," Ulrich shook his head.

"Considering they could give the Kingdom of Black Rose teleportation technology, they must be masters of space magic; they can travel virtually anywhere in this world. Although I also suspect their home is located within the Kingdom of Black Rose, it's not a certainty."

"However, one thing is clear. The dragons don't like us invading the Kingdom of Black Rose, so they are telling us to fuck off. We have no choice but to give up on the Kingdom of Black Rose," Ulrich stated.

"But even if we give up, the Kingdom of Black Rose certainly wouldn't. We can't initiate and end a war as we please. The Kingdom of Black Rose will most likely launch a counterattack on our empire," Emperor Renardier speculated.

"And that's exactly what we want, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich declared.

"We only suffered badly because we gave the enemy time to prepare, then fought on their home ground. That was a grave mistake. However, the result will surely be different if we are the ones to have the home-ground advantage."

"The battle witches can only be helplessly slaughtered in our antimagic field, just like how they killed our holy knights in their anti-aura field," Ulrich stated.

"Right," Emperor Renardier nodded and said, "But even if we don't have to worry about the dragons, the Kingdom of Black Rose still has that man to lead them. His powerful fire magic will be the greatest threat to our army."

"For that reason, I will use myself as bait to lure him out. If we take out their leader first, the witches' chain of command will be crippled," Emperor Renardier stated.

"We can improve on that plan," Ulrich agreed.

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Kingdom of Black Rose, Fort Whitebridge

Meanwhile, after the Holy Knight Empire's army retreated, Artemis reported to Vaan, including their total loss of 20-thousand battle witches, with a proud look.

Although the losses were higher than Vaan had hoped, to the witches, such an outcome was already the best they could have hoped for.

After all, they originally didn't have high hopes for this war.

However, Vaan turned their defeat into an overwhelming victory. That said, Aeliana contributed most to the war by crippling the Holy Knight Empire's elite army's strength with her antimagic spores.

"For tonight, get some rest. You've all earned it. Tomorrow, we charge into the Holy Knight Empire and claim it as our prize."

"Yes, my Lord!"

Chapter 465: Day of Decisive Battle

After the witches got their much-needed rest and mourned their losses for the night, the following day quickly arrived.

'I'm excited for the upcoming battle, Supreme Leader.'

'So am I.'

Zodreg's excitement could be clearly sensed in his sound transmission to Vaan, which didn't come as a surprise at all.

After all, Zodreg and the other nine Rank 5 young elite dragons had been bored of playing their supporting roles. Their chance to reveal themselves to the world and actively participate in the forthcoming battle was finally arriving.

"My Lord, all 250-thousand battle witches have arrived and are ready to sortie!" Artemis excitedly reported after the battle witch army lined up outside Fort Whitebridge.

After losing 20-thousand battle witches in battle and leaving behind 10-thousand battle witches in each fort to defend them, Vaan was left with 250-thousand battle witches of the original 300-thousand he had used to fend off the Holy Knight Empire's invasion.

Besides Aeliana and Astoria, Hester and Eniwse would also be participating in today's battle.

"Today, you will march into the empire to fight them on their home ground without the protection of your walls and traps. It's most likely that the empire's army will be even greater than when they invaded us. And yet, I am only bringing this many of you to fight with me. Tell me, are you afraid?"

"With you to lead us, we are not afraid of anything, my Lord!"

The air and earth trembled under the battle witches' united cry, full of confidence, excitement, and anticipation.

"Good! Set out!"

"Yes, my Lord!"

The 250-thousand-strong battle witch army followed Vaan's lead and departed from Fort Whitebridge. They used the ruined remains of the Holy Knight Empire's sieged weapons and ships to form a temporary bridge to cross with their magic.

Nevertheless, after marching to the gates of Equinox City, they found it burnt down and devoid of people, or any activity for that matter; it had become a ghost town.

The Holy Knight Empire had decisively abandoned Equinox City after deeming it wasn't the ideal location to defend. And in order not to let the Kingdom of Black Rose use it as a foothold in their land, the empire took everything with them and destroyed the city.

Vaan guessed Ulrich Salazar had also destroyed all evidence of his ties to the Assembly of Silent Night. Thus, there was no point in searching the city, especially when Zodreg and the other dragons had already scouted it ahead of time.

"Our battle is not here. Let us continue," Vaan stated.

The Holy Knight Empire was luring them deeper into their land, where it was easier for the empire to summon troops from the whole country and attack them from every direction.

Despite knowing the empire's plan, Vaan boldly continued leading the battle witches deeper into the empire's net.

Half a day later, they passed another two abandoned cities that had been emptied and burnt to the ground, leaving nothing for them to take or use.

"Such a waste... Imagine the time and effort it took to build these cities... And yet, the empire decisively wasted them," Eniwse commented with a frown.

"They don't want to leave us anything to use against them while luring us into a bigger trap," Vaan smiled.

"At the same time, they are forging evidence of the Kingdom of Black Rose's aggression against the Holy Knight Empire in this war. It's killing two birds with one stone for them, so why wouldn't they resort to it?"

"Unfortunately, it's all useless," Vaan laughed.

At the same time, he patted Astoria on the shoulder with a reassuring look. They could rebuild and regain whatever was destroyed and lost to be even better than before.

After the sky darkened and turned to night, Vaan's army pitched camp and rest to restore their energy.

The following day when the sun rose back into the sky, Vaan's army continued their advance toward the heart of the Holy Knight Empire.

Eventually, they arrived at a vast rocky mountain region where Emperor Renardier and his army had chosen to make their stand against Vaan's army.

'The empire has set up a large-scale antimagic field ahead, Supreme Leader. It may affect the recording.'

'I can also sense its disturbance. However, it's fine as long as you don't try to record the scene within the antimagic field, Zodreg.'

'You're right, Supreme Leader. It's still working fine.'

...

On top of a mountain cliff, Emperor Renardier and Ulrich stood side by side as they glanced down and watched the Kingdom of Black Rose's battle witch army arrive.

"Just as the reports stated, the enemy didn't target the other regions and marched straight toward us. They have entered our inescapable net, Your Imperial Majesty. It's time to make your speech."

"Right."

Following Ulrich's urge, Emperor Renardier nodded. Then, he took a step forward and cleared his throat. In the next moment, he pointed his finger at Vaan's army with a fierce glare.

"How dare you, people of the Kingdom of Black Rose! The Holy Knight Empire will not tolerate this transgression! Instead of defending against Gehenna, you have chosen to invade another country. All of Pangea will not standby and let you do as you please—!"

"Shut up—!!!"

Emperor Renardier openly condemned and accused the Kingdom of Black Rose of initiating the war with his mighty voice, which could be heard miles away.

But before Emperor Renardier could finish his pretentious speech, his voice was drowned out by Vaan's more deafening and mighty roar that was akin to a dragon's roar after being amplified by Aeliana's magic.

"I did not come here to listen to the emperor talk shit out of his ass!" Vaan thundered, shaking heaven and earth with his voice.

"The Holy Knight Empire has colluded with a Devil's Contractor to disrupt stability in the Kingdom of Black Rose, one of the defending kingdoms of humanity! As such, the Holy Knight Empire only has two choices: Execute Ulrich Salazar, the leader of the Assembly of Silent Night and one of the six Devil's Contractors, then surrender peacefully, or we shall use force to enforce them!"

"If you choose to surrender peacefully, you must also offer up Emperor Renardier's head! These conditions are non-negotiable. Now, make your choice!"

Vaan finally dropped the news bomb on the empire, which was followed by a deathly silence after his words stunned everyone from the empire.

The sheer ludicrously of the accusations aside, the outrageous conditions were simply unacceptable!

Even if others agreed, Emperor Renardier definitely wouldn't!

Chapter 466: The Biggest Cinematic Experience

"What an utter load of horse shit! I expected them to come up with their own bullshit justification for invading our empire, but it still infuriates me to hear it! They must think we are stupid!" a lord cursed furiously.

However, he wasn't the only one outraged by Vaan's words. In fact, everyone was fuming with rage.

If the Holy Knight Empire executed its own strategist and gave its emperor's head to the enemy, the Holy Knight Empire would truly be at the Kingdom of Black Rose's mercy and the mercy of every other rivaling country like the Great Ratholos Empire.

"Don't listen to that brazen man, Your Imperial Majesty! There's no way Marquis Salazar is one of the Devil's Contractors! There's also no way he would think we are stupid enough to agree with

such outrageous conditions! He is just trying to confuse and make us doubt ourselves before the battle!"

"Who the hell do you think I am? Don't you think I am aware of that?! Even if Marquis Salazar was a Devil's Contractor, do you think this emperor will offer up his own head?!"

Following Emperor Renardier's furious roar, the lords and nobles' heated, anxious words died into silence. They were startled into calming down as if they had been splashed by cold water.

"There will be no surrendering today, nor is there a need to! Today, you will all die!" Emperor Renardier declared coldly.

They had to slaughter everyone from the Kingdom of Black Rose to ensure their lies became the truth. After all, no one would be able to refute their claims if they were all dead.

And the other countries wouldn't be able to say anything either because the Kingdom of Black Rose's witch army was found on the Holy Knight Empire's soil, along with multiple burned cities.

Unfortunately, Emperor Renardier did not know Vaan had been collecting evidence of the Holy Knight Empire's wrongdoings since the start of the war.

"Does Emperor Renardier speak for everyone else from the Holy Knight Empire?"

"His Imperial Majesty is the emperor of our great empire; his will is the empire's will!"

Shortly after Vaan received the answers from the Holy Knight Empire's lords, nobles, soldiers, and holy knights, basically everyone on the rocky mountains in the distance, he no longer delayed his judgment.

"Your answers have been heard," Vaan acknowledged.

"The Holy Knight Empire has chosen to protect and side with a traitor of humanity! Therefore, I, Vaan Raphna, as a representative of the Kingdom of Black Rose, defender of the north, will declare the Holy Knight Empire has forsaken humanity and sided with the demons of Gehenna!"

"For that, the Kingdom of Black Rose shall purge all traitors from the Holy Knight Empire! Any resistance will be met with deadly force. Anyone defending them will be considered in leagues with the demons of Gehenna!" Vaan loudly declared.

In a few words, he made the Holy Knight Empire the enemy of Pangea. At the same time, he warned other countries spying in the dark to think twice before deciding to assist the Holy Knight Empire.

He had chosen that exact day to reveal Ulrich Salazar's identity in order to ensure they could invade the Holy Knight Empire without other countries interfering.

At the same time, Ulrich Salazar wouldn't be given the time to flee into hiding.

"You've gone too far with your accusations! Do you honestly believe anyone would fall for your bullshit?! You have no proof!"

"You want proof? Look up at the sky!"

Following the outbursts of the imperial people, Vaan directed their attention upward. At the same time, he signaled Zodreg to bring out the big holographic screen.

Soon, a giant floating blue crystal appeared; it lit up with colorful lights and projected its recordings with clear audio to be heard, playing from the first scene.

In that moment, the first and biggest cinematic experience was known to the world.

"Destroy it! We mustn't let them continue!" Emperor Renardier roared with bloodshot eyes, fearing the scenes to follow.

Although the wizards fired their spells, a powerful magic barrier protected the massive holographic recording.

Seeing that, Emperor Renardier's expression turned grim.

At the same time, a seed of doubt regarding Ulrich Salazar sprouted in his heart. He also had many questions on his mind. But, unfortunately, it wasn't an opportune time to investigate or have his questions answered. It was no longer a matter of who was right and wrong but a matter of survival.

They had to destroy all witnesses and enemies. Otherwise, the empire would be done for!

"All units, attack!" Emperor Renardier ordered gloomily.

They had prepared a solid defensive strategy on the rocky mountains. But thanks to the enemy's means, they were forced to be on the offensive instead, rendering their preparations useless.

"Impatient, are we? Then..." Vaan chuckled as he raised his hand and swung down, signaling his side to attack. "The dragon unit can take the lead."

Roar—!!!

After Zodreg and the others received their Supreme Leader's permission, several earth-shaking, sky-rending dragon roars resounded.

In that instant, whether it was the newly-emerged imperial armies that appeared on the west, east, and rear of Vaan's army or the imperial army charging down from the rocky mountains at the front, everyone froze in their tracks and glanced up without exception.

"D-Dragons...! True Dragons!! They have True Dragons!!! Arghhh—!"

Following countless imperial soldiers' cries of shock and disbelief, blazing fire breaths descended upon them like hellfire from above.

Hundreds of imperial soldiers were wiped out on the spot, but the dragons' fire breaths didn't just stop on the first impact. The fire breaths formed long blazing trails as Zodreg and the others flew over the imperial armies, causing their kill count to soar quickly into the tens of thousands.

Imperial soldiers, holy knights, lords, and nobles...

It didn't matter who they were; their strength and equipment quality meant nothing in front of the might of Rank 5 fire dragon breaths.

"H-How... How can this be...?! Why are the dragons here?! They were supposed to be reclusive!"

"Why... Why did things turn out like this? Where did it all go wrong? ...From the start?"

Whether it was Ulrich Salazar or Emperor Renardier, both stood rooted on the spot at the top of the rocky mountain cliff, stupefied with eyes of sheer disbelief.

Chapter 467: The Trapper and Trapped

After some time, Ulrich Salazar recovered his wits faster than Emperor Renardier; his eyes flickered with a sharp glint.

"You need to make your move, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich urged before mentioning, "While it is considerably shocking that dragons have appeared, they are only Low-level Rank 5 beings. Your power is still greater!"

"Right," Emperor Renardier agreed with a firm look as he gripped his sword. "My holy knights, charge with me! The rest of you, wait for me to attack the enemy!"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!"

Shortly after Emperor Renardier's twelve concubine witch supporters buffed him, he immediately led his personal guards into battle with him.

Swish!

"Die, you vile dragon!"

Following Emperor Renardier's roar, he soared in the skies with a powerful step and slashed at a Rank 5 dragon named Zafnir with his lightning-fast greatsword.

Ka-cha!

Zafnir immediately conjured a magic barrier—only to have it shattered almost instantly. But the brief delay in Emperor Renardier's attack provided just enough buffering time for him to evade the fatal strike.

Swoosh!

Emperor Renardier's sword missed, but his sword aura slightly grazed Zafnir's neck, splitting apart some of the latter's dragon scales like a hot knife through butter.

Zafnir flapped his wings and quickly soared into the skies, far away from Emperor Renardier.

"Holy smokes! I almost lost me head! Oh, darn it! Me scales have been cracked!" Zafnir exclaimed with great shock and fright, quickly checking if his head was still intact before warning the others, "Watch out, bruvv! This dude with the big stick is very strong!"

"No shit! That's the fucking emperor!" another dragon cursed right after getting targeted by Emperor Renardier right after.

"Oh, snap! When did he get over 'ere? Dude's fast!"

Zafnir trembled after checking Emperor Renardier's original location at the top of the rocky mountain cliff was absent.

Meanwhile, Emperor Renardier's sword came at another dragon after a great leap. But this time, it was blocked by a wave of blue flames rapidly shooting over from his left side.

After Vaan reminded Astoria, Aeliana, Eniwse, and Hester to be careful, he immediately joined the fray, aiming for Emperor Renardier.

Although Zodreg and the other dragons could flee from Emperor Renardier's attack range, they weren't his opponents. More importantly, the dragons were needed to balance the power and numerical differences between the imperial and witch armies.

He couldn't have them tied down by Emperor Renardier.

"Your opponent is me!"

"You want to challenge this emperor? How old are you? 18? 20?! Back when this emperor was still roaming the land, challenging all the greatest warriors of Pangea, you weren't even a sperm in your father's balls for me to scratch! So fuck off back to your mom and drink some more milk, kid!"

You can come back after you grow some hair!"

Although it sounded like Emperor Renardier was too contemptuous to fight Vaan because he was too weak, his actions didn't match. He could only flee while hurling provocative insults as Vaan chased him.

"You're funny," Vaan chuckled and casually asked, "Does the emperor of the Holy Knight Empire only know how to fight with words?"

If he wanted, he could close the distance instantly.

However, he was aware the enemy emperor was purposely luring him away from the main battlefield and into a trap. Even so, he willingly followed at a leisurely pace. He couldn't fight to his heart's content with his people in the way.

Thus, he had to fight elsewhere.

Since his opponent was working so hard to prepare the stage for him, why would he refuse?

"Why did my words hurt your little heart? Are you angry? Do you dare chase this emperor to the mountains?!"

"Why wouldn't I dare?! Do you think you can get away from me after spouting such insults?!"

Considering Emperor Renardier could only resort to low-level, obvious goading, it was clear that he was not used to such cowardly tactics. Even so, Vaan played along perfectly like an enraged person would while laughing in his heart.

...

At the top of the rocky mountain cliff, Ulrich watched Emperor Renardier luring Vaan toward them. He quickly raised his hand and signaled his troops to prepare.

"The emperor is coming with the enemy. Get ready to deploy the trap!"

"Yes, Marquis Salazar!"

...

Although the rocky mountain cliffs had steep inclines, Emperor Renardier easily scaled them with his great strength and speed.

On the other hand, Vaan relied on the propulsion of his blue flames to fly over.

He immediately noticed the top of the rocky mountains were all flat as if the peak had been sliced off.

There were also countless large, round boulders, which the empire had intended to roll down the mountain to crush their enemies. Unfortunately, they didn't get the chance to use it in the end.

"Activate the antimagic field!" Ulrich barked the moment he saw Vaan fly over their heads.

At the same time, the imperial soldiers activated their large pillar-looking magic tools at each far corner of the mountaintop, disrupting the mana flow and rendering all magic useless within the area.

Vaan dropped out of the sky and landed on the ground with a heavy thud.

"Hahahaha!" Emperor Renardier laughed raucously, rejoicing with glee, "What an utter fool! Even if you wield powerful magic, you're still too green to fight me, brat! Your overconfidence will be your undoing!"

"Without your powerful fire magic, you're just a useless young man. This is the end of the road for you—" Ulrich added – when Vaan's sudden laugh made him frown.

"What's so funny? Do you think you can get away? The strongest aura users in the imperial army have been gathered, just for you. You're completely surrounded and trapped here."

Despite being surrounded by Aura Lords, Ulrich, and Emperor Renardier, Vaan couldn't help but chuckle while listening to them celebrate their early victory, unaware of the true situation.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself while watching you all make a fool of yourselves. You are all gravely mistaken about one thing: I'm not trapped here with all of you. You are all trapped here with me!"

Following Vaan's declaration, his blue flames reappeared, forming a sky-high barrier that covered the edges of the mountaintop and cut off all paths of escape.

During that moment, Emperor Renardier, Ulrich, and the other Aura Lords could only glance back and forth between the sky-high wall of blue flames and their active antimagic pillars with incomprehensible, dumb looks of confusion, doubt, and budding panic.

"From the start, you had no chance of winning this war with me in the picture. Given the effort you all went through to prepare the stage, I hope you will do well to entertain me," Vaan stated.

Chapter 468: Not Fighting, But Still Dying

Even after everything Vaan said, Emperor Renardier, Ulrich Salazar, and the other Aura Lords did not appear to be listening to him; they were completely and utterly preoccupied and distracted by the blue flames' presence.

What the actual fuck was going on?! Why wasn't the antimagic field working?! How could the young man still use fire magic?

Even if Emperor Renardier and Ulrich Salazar were both existences that achieved peak Transcendent rank in strength one way or another, they were still, in the end, peak Transcendents, nothing more.

The Demigod rank, which they would refer to as Beyond Transcendent rank, was uncharted territory. They had no idea the extent of power such beings wield nor their abilities.

As such, they did not know that Demigod-rank beings and above could tap into the limitless power of the universal laws, which did not require mana. Thus, they weren't affected by the antimagic field.

But while Emperor Renardier remained confused, Ulrich Salazar received divine revelation from the Great Devil he served.

In that instant, the fog over his eyes immediately cleared up.

"Demigod... He's a Demigod! We were fools to think we could cripple a Demigod's Divine Authority with the antimagic field! He wasn't using fire magic but the Divine Authority of Fire!" Ulrich exclaimed.

However, sharing his newfound knowledge did not make others happy in the least. In fact, the seed of doubt in Emperor Renardier's heart germinated.

"How do you even know that, Marquis Salazar—No, who are you, really? Don't tell me you really are a Devil's Contractor?!"

Even at that moment, Emperor Renardier didn't want to believe before his eyes as Ulrich stopped hiding his demonic power.

"No.... It can't be... How is that even possible?! How could you cultivate a holy aura with such a powerful demonic power at the same time?!"

"If I didn't cultivate holy aura, how could I possibly fool everyone? No one would have suspected the holiest person would turn out to be the most unholy being," Ulrich chuckled dryly before solemnly saying, "However, that isn't important. If you want to live, we must join hands!"

Indeed, at that moment, no one was Vaan's match if he relied on his Fire Authority.

Although joining hands wouldn't guarantee them victory over him, at the very least, they would definitely fail if they didn't even try.

"Don't worry. I won't be using my Fire Authority; I'll fight you with this."

Following Vaan's statement, Emperor Renardier, Ulrich, and the other Aura Lords all glanced at the Peak-level Rank 5 black-red greatsword Vaan had pulled out from Heaven-Swallowing Space.

Although they couldn't tell its exact quality, it did make Emperor Renardier's treasured Low-level Rank 5 greatsword look like garbage.

Emperor Renardier's lips twitched.

However, the most pressing issue was that even at that moment, they could not sense Vaan's aura cultivation at all—that was, until he finally decided to unleash his pressure.

!!!

'Peak-stage... Aura Lord? Uh, that's it?' Emperor Renardier and Ulrich Salazar frowned.

Even though they could only sense Peak-stage Aura Lord-level pressure from Vaan, it was thick and tyrannical, definitely stronger than ordinary Peak-stage Aura Lords.

Emperor Renardier had his Sword Aura, Ulrich Salazar had his Holy Aura, and Vaan had his Dragon Aura.

Nevertheless, after Vaan revealed his aura, his skin revealed an exceptional luster that also exposed his physical qualities, which shocked Emperor Renardier and Ulrich Salazar.

Although Emperor Renardier and Ulrich Salazar didn't know how Vaan cultivated his body to such extreme levels without acquiring excessive muscle mass, his strength would still only be around Low-level Rank 5 to Mid-level Rank 5 at most.

On the other hand, they were both Peak-level Rank 5 after their buffs and borrowed power.

Well, Emperor Renardier and Ulrich Salazar had nothing to complain about if Vaan intended to underestimate them. They weren't going to go easy on him either way. No, they had to take him down while he was still careless!

Emperor Renardier and Ulrich Salazar gave each other a silent glance and understood each other's intention.

In the next instant, they immediately lunged at Vaan from two opposing directions without warning. Emperor Renardier made a wide horizontal swing at Vaan's left waist while Ulrich Salazar targeted the right side of his neck with his white longsword.

Boom!

Contact was made, and the subsequent shockwave from the two instantaneous and powerful clashes immediately blew the other Aura Lords away.

Ahh—Poof!

Some Aura Lords uttered short-lived cries as they flew into Vaan's wall of blue flames and died on the spot, reduced to ashes and molten equipment.

People of their level simply lacked the qualifications to participate in the battle. Heck, they couldn't even serve as proper cannon fodder.

In a battle between titans, the imperial Aura Lords could only be killed like helpless chickens after getting caught in the aftermath.

They weren't fighting, but they were still dying.

How sad.

Meanwhile, contrary to Emperor Renardier and Ulrich's expectations, they did not succeed in cutting Vaan down in an instant.

Instead, Emperor Renardier's greatsword was blocked by Vaan's own greatsword, and, more surprisingly, Ulrich's white longsword was caught with Vaan's other spare hand.

"Impossible...!" the two uttered with shock and disbelief.

In such a short time, Vaan's strength had skyrocketed from the Mid-level Rank 5 to a level beyond their comprehension.

Ding!

<You have entered Celestial Dragonwolf Transformation>

=====

«Celestial Dragonwolf Transformation»

Effect: 50% base physical attributes increase.

[800 → 1200 Defense (↑400)] [Mid-level Rank 4 → Low-level Rank 5] [1050 Aura Power] [Total Defense: 1850 → 2250 (↑400) (Mid-level Rank 5 → High-level Rank 5)]

[1100 → 1650 Strength (↑550)] [Peak-level Rank 4 → Low-level Rank 5] [1050 Aura Power] [Total Strength: 2250 → 2700 (↑550) (High-level Rank 5 → Early Demigod)]

[500 → 750 Speed (↑250)] [Peak-level Rank 3 → Mid-level Rank 4] [1050 Aura Power] [Total Speed: 1550 → 1800 (↑250) (Mid-level Rank 5)]

=====

"Hoho, how scary. If I didn't partially transform by arms first, I might have died then and there," Vaan casually stated.

Indeed, if he wanted to stand a chance in a physical fight with two Peak-level Rank 5 beings at once, he had to enter his strongest physical form.

Meanwhile, Emperor Renardier and Ulrich quickly retracted their weapons and drew some distance. Then they observed Vaan's dragon claws, scales, and still-growing long white hair and horns with solemn looks.

"You... What the hell are you?"

Chapter 469: Renardier's Decision

"Do you really have the luxury to talk right now? Can't you hear it? The screams of your soldiers getting slaughtered that is."

Vaan didn't answer the question directed at him, nor was there a need to.

Emperor Renardier and Ulrich possessed enough intelligence to guess that he had a mixture of dragon and wolf bloodline – based on the appearance of his transformation.

Nevertheless, just as he said, Emperor Renardier and Ulrich could hear their troops' cries from miles away.

Although Ulrich didn't care much since his identity was exposed, Emperor Renardier's expression was grave.

...

On the main battlefield, the imperial soldiers were slaughtered without getting close to the battle witch army, no matter which direction they charged from.

Zodreg and the other nine Rank 5 dragons circled the battle witch army in laps while shooting their dragon breaths, forming an impassable zone the imperial soldiers could not cross.

Everyone that made an attempt lost their lives, whether it was to the dragons' flames or the battle witches' barrage of spells.

"Don't falter! Once His Imperial Majesty defeats the enemy leader, he will lead us to victory! The dragons are nothing before the might of His Imperial—"

A 5,000-man commander tried to keep up the imperial army's morale. However, he attracted a dragon's ire and got himself killed in a blazing hellfire.

"What a joke. My mighty Red Dragon Clan possesses the power to wipe your backwater country off the face of the earth ten times over! Did you think you could win just because we didn't bring our full force? How foolish," the dragon called Magneel spoke.

At the same time, Astoria tried persuading the imperial soldiers to surrender again after estimating their losses.

However, their faith in the emperor was too strong; they wouldn't give up unless their symbol of hope and belief were crushed.

...

"My people are waiting for me. I can't let them down! I'm taking you down, young—"

Emperor Renardier worked himself up, but Vaan didn't wait for him to finish speaking before slashing at the former with his greatsword.

Boom!

Emperor Renardier blocked the attack with all his might, and shockwave sent more Aura Lords flying towards the wall of blue flames.

"Nooo—!" the Aura Lords cried before their inevitable demise.

"Hoh!! Stop for me—!"

At the same time, Emperor Renardier roared with veins protruding on his forehead and neck after taking Vaan's blow. The powerful force had pushed him back more than fifty yards, leaving two trails in the rocky ground like giant chisels had carved them out.

However, Emperor Renardier's disbelieving eyes were immediately fixed on his Low-level Rank 5 greatsword—or, more precisely, the small chip on it.

If he continued taking Vaan's greatsword head-on, his treasured greatsword would be ruined.

"C'mon, is that all you got? You need to work harder, you know? Entertain me more," Vaan casually urged while studying the emperor's aura circulation method with his Omni-Sense.

"Hmph!" Emperor Renardier snorted gloomily before barking, "What are you waiting for, Marquis Salazar?! I can't take him on alone!"

"I'm gathering power for my strongest attack! Buy me some time, Your Imperial Majesty!" Ulrich requested as he forcefully fused his holy aura and demonic divine power.

"Dammit. It better be worth my effort!"

Shortly after Emperor Renardier spoke, he immediately lunged back at Vaan with a powerful step despite still feeling sore and fearful of the last attack; it felt like he had been struck by a magic airship.

Even so, he still had to fight and keep his opponent busy.

Boom!

Emperor Renardier and Vaan clashed with their greatswords again – much to the Aura Lords' horror as the shockwave tore apart the earth and blew them away.

With every clash, the mountaintop would be devastated with cracks and trail scars. It was uncertain how many more blows the rocky mountain could take before it shattered apart entirely.

"No—! I don't want to die! Your Excellency, I beg of you, have mercy! I surrender!" the Aura Lords lost their will to fight Vaan.

Just by looking at the situation, they could tell that Vaan had not used his full strength against Emperor Renardier.

Vaan was simply toying with Emperor Renardier, pushing the latter to exert his strength to the limit and reveal all his cards.

It was clear who held the advantage despite being outnumbered.

Ding!

<You have gained insight into a Peak-rank aura circulation method>

<You have gained insight into a Peak-rank aura circulation method>

<Your understanding of aura cultivation has increased>

...

"It's a bit late to surrender, no?" Vaan casually asked as he smacked Emperor Renardier away with his greatsword. "Nevertheless, I am a benevolent man. I can give you all the chance to redeem yourself by killing Ulrich Salazar and proving your faith in humanity. Do that, and I will spare you."

"Is that chance also given to me?" Emperor Renardier asked.

"Of course."

Following Vaan's answer, Ulrich immediately shot Emperor Renardier a fierce glare, full of threat and warning.

"Are you planning to betray me, Your Imperial Majesty?!" Ulrich roared angrily.

"To begin with, there's no proof that he will honor his word! So it's better for you to serve my master! My master might be a Great Devil, but he cherishes talents. He has a place for you among his ranks!"

"Well? Will you honor your word and spare me if I kill Ulrich?" Emperor Renardier turned to Vaan and asked.

"Of course not." Vaan chuckled and said, "Anyone can live, but not you. You have to die."

"Are you messing with me? Why are you only targeting me?" Emperor Renardier frowned with a cold gaze.

"Let's just say I'm also a petty and vengeful person. You shouldn't have set your eyes on someone else's woman," Vaan coolly stated.

'Son of a... fucking bitch!'

Emperor Renardier cursed inside his mind. He couldn't believe Vaan wanted him dead for such a simple reason.

"Which Great Devil is your master, Marquis Ulrich? I swear to serve him!" Emperor Renardier decisively declared, seeking the only plausible choice of survival.

If he could also receive a Great Devil's blessings, they might just be able to turn the battle around.

Chapter 470: Temptation of Power

"My master is the Great Devil Helcan the Mighty!" Ulrich declared proudly.

Surprisingly, Ulrich Salazar did not establish a contract with Balmodan the Undying but the Helcan the Mighty. After all, Ulrich led a dark organization full of members that gained strength by assimilating the bloodlines of wolves – like how Balmodan did.

Nevertheless, Ulrich's brute strength could be explained if it was Helcan the Mighty.

Just like how Balmodan the Undying boasted the greatest regenerative ability, Helcan the Mighty boasted the greatest physical power among the seven Great Devils.

Strength was also a type of law.

Anything could become the law; everything starts with a thought, a will, and a belief. Such was the world they lived in – a world of magic.

Although Vaan wasn't sure if it also applied to the creation of new laws, the process in which he comprehended one could be categorized into three main stages: realization, actualization, and manifestation.

First came the realization of a thought, a possibility, then the will to actualize it – actualization, and finally, the manifestation of one's belief.

That was how he comprehended the Fire Law.

Of the three stages, actualization was the biggest hurdle to overcome. If the will conflicted with existing laws, the harder it was to become a belief and manifested. Likewise, if existing laws backed the will, the easier it was to manifest the belief.

For example, blue flames could be produced by burning copper chloride or butane, and a fire was something that burned. By understanding those two main points, he could easily manifest blue flames.

Blue flames were just by-products of his input; he wasn't limited to manifesting blue flames. If he wanted, he could manifest other colors too.

However, the color blue was generally associated with cold things. Thus, blue flames were great for catching his enemies off guard – if he intended to use them so.

Furthermore, ordinary blue flames could never reach the same terrifying temperatures manifested by his Fire Authority.

That said, Vaan was curious about the actualization process of Great Devil Helcan's pure strength-based law.

Was it psychic self-enhancement?

Although it seemed like Vaan deliberated for a period of time, his entire thought process happened in a single instant.

...

"Swear your allegiance to my master, Your Imperial Majesty! Do it sincerely, and your thoughts will reach him!" Ulrich stated.

"I swear to serve the Great Devil—!"

Boom!

Before Emperor Renardier could finish speaking, he was sent flying after being forced to block another one of Vaan's sword attacks, which further chipped away at his treasured greatsword.

"Did you really think I will let you do as you please?" Vaan uttered.

Shortly after, he did another horizontal slash with his Peak-level Rank 5 Greatsword in a complete revolution. The subsequent shockwave sent all the remaining Aura Lords flying to their deaths in the blue flames, clearing out the area instantly.

"Your Excellency, nooo—!"

"I don't want to die—!"

Countless short-lived cries resounded before the Aura Lords were heard no longer, all reduced to ashes and scattered in the wind.

Vaan kicked against the ground with a powerful step and lunged at Ulrich next, causing the latter to eye him seriously.

However, Emperor Renardier barely made it in time to block Vaan's attack—only to send flying again. He lost his footing and ate the dirt, rolling on the ground until he came to a crashing stop near the edge of the mountaintop.

The threatening, scorching-hot blue flames made Emperor Renardier break into cold sweats. Just a little more force and he would have been suffering severe burns.

"How much more time do you need, Marquis Salazar?!" Emperor Renardier roared, picking his sore and battered body off the ground and throwing himself back at Vaan.

"It's done! Keep clear!" Ulrich alerted.

After he finished the forced fusion of his holy aura and demonic power, Ulrich's felt like his body was filled with strength. Even if it was only for a moment, he felt like he had surpassed the Transcendent rank.

"I'll take it from here!" Ulrich's shouted with confidence, immediately lunging at Vaan with his longsword. "Die!"

Ka-cha!

Vaan burst with instantaneous speed, shifting his position to the side of Ulrich. Then, with one big downward swing of his greatsword, Ulrich's longsword snapped in half.

"Tch!"

Ulrich clicked his tongue at the sight, but he didn't freeze on the spot. Instead, he immediately threw his broken weapon at Vaan and whipped a kick at his waist.

However, Vaan slapped the broken longsword away with his spare hand before intending to block the incoming kick with his knee.

Although Vaan raised his knee quickly, he was still a split second too slow. As a result, he failed to block Ulrich's kick but deflected it instead, kneeing the person's leg upward.

Rip...

Ulrich's leg overextended into a super split, causing something to tear that made his face pale instantly; he dropped to the ground, seemingly having lost strength in his legs.

"Fuck...!" Ulrich cried.

At the same time, his holy aura and demonic power separated once more, causing his strength to plummet back down to the peak Transcendent Rank.

...

During that time, Emperor Renardier took the opportunity to swear his allegiance to the Great Devil, Helcan the Mighty.

"Hahaha!"

Emperor Renardier laughed maniacally, having heard Helcan's voice accepting his swear of allegiance in his mind. He almost seemed to have lost his mind.

"Your servant swears to carry out your bidding! Please bestow upon me the divine power to defeat thy foes, my new master, Helcan!"

'I can only bestow my divine strength onto one person. If you want my blessing, prove to me that you are more worthy of it!'

After Emperor Renardier heard Helcan's message, his gaze immediately flickered with a cold, sharp glint.

In the next moment, Emperor Renardier immediately threw himself at Vaan again with bloodshot eyes, full of murderous intentions. His aura surged to the limit.

However, his treasured greatsword was also at its limit; it would undoubtedly break with one more clash.

Nevertheless, just before their swords clashed, Emperor Renardier's chipped greatsword suddenly shifted, narrowly evading Vaan's greatsword as he threw himself to the ground and rolled heavily, crashing into Ulrich.

Then, he did something neither Ulrich nor Vaan anticipated.

While Ulrich wasn't on guard against him, Emperor Renardier directly lopped off the person's head with his greatsword...