

The Witch 481

Chapter 481: Strange Dragon Aura

Thousand Fog Mountains, Red Dragon Clan

On Seventh Peak, the dragons worked together to maintain a steady production line of warring magic tools like the other eight peaks when the grand fog array obscuring the lower parts of their mountain suddenly parted.

Considering the Red Dragon Clan rarely had visitors, let alone repeated visitors, the nearby dragons were immediately alerted by the changes in the grand fog array, causing them to halt their work.

Meanwhile, Henrietta stood at the entrance of Seventh Peak with a dumbfounded Ember, who had adamantly followed her despite her suggesting otherwise.

It didn't take long for Ember to feel her skin crawling with goosebumps when she sensed the gazes of several dozen dragons, beings she didn't expect to meet in the innermost parts of the Thousand Fog Mountains.

"T-T-They're all dragons..!" Ember exclaimed with a ghastly, alarmed look.

The powerful presence that each dragon possessed filled her heart with dread and a threatening sense of danger – so much so that she wanted to flee on the spot.

Unexpectedly, the heart of the Thousand Fog Mountains was home to such mighty, mythical beings!

While Ember was aghast by the discovery, Henrietta remained calm and collected; Ember's reaction was no surprise to her. After all, she did not warn her about the dragons prior to their arrival.

"Relax, Ember. They won't harm you as long as you don't anger them," Henrietta assured.

Ember eventually dropped her defensive stance and calmed down after she studied Henrietta's relaxed look for some time.

At the same time, news of their arrival traveled fast. Before long, the seventh dragon lord, Kemun, emerged from his cave to receive them.

"Well, if it isn't Lady Henrietta. I apologize for not giving you a proper reception on behalf of our dragon clan. We've been quite busy here, as you can see. That said, what brings you here?" Kemun greeted Henrietta with a casual, lackadaisical look.

Knowing Kemun was the most easygoing and free-spirited among the dragon lords, Henrietta didn't mind his sloppy welcome. A smile appeared on her face as she prepared a reply.

However, Henrietta paused with a partial smile, having detected a sudden yet subtle surge of mana from a distant mountain peak.

The subtle mana surge possessed a trace of dragon aura, but it was unlike any dragon aura she had known.

At the very least, it didn't seem to belong to any member of the Red Dragon Clan. At the same time, a sense of familiarity also came from it, as if it belonged to someone she knew.

Such a peculiar discovery naturally attracted her attention and curiosity.

"What is this strange dragon aura...?" Henrietta softly muttered in thought.

Meanwhile, the unexpected words caused Kemun's expression to stiffen briefly before he glanced over his rear and wondered, 'Strange dragon aura? What strange dragon aura? Could it be the foul dragon aura I just released?'

Nevertheless, it was only a split-second thought before Kemun glanced in the direction of Ninth Peak and understood.

"Ahem, that strange dragon aura should belong to... Lady Astoria," Kemun awkwardly declared before he, too, paused with a pondering look, realizing the implication of his statement.

After all, Lady Astoria was a human and shouldn't possess any dragon aura.

Even if Lady Astoria did somehow gain a wisp of dragon aura from absorbing the Supreme Leader's potent blood to recover, the dragon aura should have belonged to their clan's Fire Dragon God Bloodline.

However, that was not the case.

"Let us head over, Lady Henrietta, and...?"

"Ember. I am Ember Killian, Your Excellency."

"Lady Ember, it is."

After a short exchange and suggestion between Kemun, Ember, and Henrietta, they all headed over to Ninth Peak.

Although Henrietta was slightly surprised when Kemun brought up Astoria's name with a trace of respect, she decided not to jump to any conclusion until she met the person and learned more about the overall situation.

Upon arriving outside the guest building, the group noticed they weren't the only ones attracted to Astoria's strange dragon aura. Several other dragon lords had also departed from their peaks to investigate.

"Lord Kemun."

"Lord Astarot."

The first and seventh dragon lord acknowledged each other's arrival before welcoming the other dragon lords, who had come later.

Surprisingly, the ninth dragon lord was the last to arrive for investigation despite being the closest to the source of interest.

"Lord Narvim, you came as well."

"That goes without saying, Lord Kemun."

Narvim gave the seventh dragon lord a cool reply, causing the latter to glance away wryly with some embarrassment for stating the obvious.

If dragon lords didn't investigate anomalies when they appeared within their areas of jurisdiction, they would be seen as irresponsible and criticized by others.

Nevertheless, everyone's attention on Kemun and Narvim didn't stick for long before returning to the guest building.

The strange dragon aura sensed from within attracted their curiosity, but none dared to pry further with their magic lest they disturb and interrupt something important to Astoria.

After all, they didn't know or understand what was happening inside.

The guest building seemed tranquil and ordinary, as if nothing was going on at all. However, the increasing clarity of the strange dragon aura detected inside was undeniable proof of something happening.

"Please wait here patiently, Lady Henrietta," Astarot made a sudden request, stopping Henrietta from entering the guest building.

Although Astarot's tone was polite, there was a hint of warning and threat, enough to make Henrietta understand the dragon lord placed great importance on Astoria's safety.

Henrietta's eyes flickered with surprise.

It wasn't her imagination that Astoria garnered greater respect from the Red Dragon Clan than her. Why that was the case, she had yet to learn.

Henrietta silently nodded and took a step back, rejoining the group of observers.

"What do you think is going on with Lady Astoria, Lord Astarot?" Narvim sought the first dragon lord's opinion shortly after as they continued to observe the guest building patiently.

However, the latter shook his head.

"I don't know. But I believe it shouldn't be something bad. Rather, it should be something good," Astarot guessed after some consideration.

"Right. This gradual intensifying dragon aura... seems to be a bloodline awakening. But how is that possible?"

Narvim was baffled, but he wasn't the only one.

After all, Astoria, a human, was awakening a dragon bloodline. Furthermore, judging by the dragon aura, the dragon bloodline belonged to a different line of dragons.

At the very least, the dragon lords present were certain the dragon bloodline was unrelated to their Fire Dragon God Bloodline.

"Could it be a mutated bloodline resulting from the Supreme Leader's mixed bloodline? No... That shouldn't be possible," Narvim frowned.

"Right," Astarot nodded and said, "Lady Astoria would have to absorb a substantial amount of the Supreme Leader's blood essence to inherit his bloodline. More importantly, there's no distinctive trait of the fire dragon or wolf in her dragon aura."

Suddenly, Astoria's dragon aura surged exponentially, pouring out of the guest building like rushing water.

In that instant, multiple sets of eyes widened at the unexpected golden dragon aura that also carried a trace of nobleness.

"This... This is...!"

Chapter 482: Two Possibilities

"Bloodline of the golden dragon race..."

The present dragon lords all jumped to the same conclusion the moment they witnessed the golden dragon aura outburst.

But even though they all arrived at the same answer, they were plagued with even more questions.

"Lady Astoria possesses a golden dragon bloodline... But how is that possible?" Kemun uttered with a startled, confused look.

Nevertheless, the increasingly distinct golden dragon aura undeniably belonged to the golden dragons.

Narvim and Astarot had a lot of thoughts but not an immediate answer to Kemun's question.

"It's almost impossible for the golden dragon bloodline to form from a mutation in the red dragon bloodline, let alone a nobler bloodline of golden dragons," Narvim stated with a puzzled frown.

"Right," Astarot nodded.

"Even if a cat could turn into a tiger god, it would require an unimaginable amount of precious resources and opportunities to pave the way for its evolution. Lady Astoria's recovery involved no such thing."

"In other words, Lady Astoria possessed the golden dragon bloodline from the beginning. It had nothing to our Red Dragon Clan. Supreme Leader's blood essence and our efforts only accidentally stimulated her hidden dragon bloodline," Astarot concluded.

"Lady Astoria sure is fortunate. She had profited from a disaster this time," Narvim commented with a sigh before continuing, "However, it's starting to make some sense."

"Unlike us, red dragons, which have an advantage in our fiery destructive capabilities, the golden dragons' strength lies in their incomparably sturdy bodies. Although their physical might are also nothing to scoff at, it still pales in comparison to their defense and tenacity."

"Given there is also a hint of nobility in Lady Astoria's golden dragon aura, her golden dragon bloodline must also be superior to ordinary golden dragon bloodline."

"If Lady Astoria didn't have this hidden golden dragon bloodline all along, she wouldn't have survived the Demigod-level attack for as long as she did. It wouldn't be farfetched to say that any other human in her shoe should have died on the spot."

"No matter how great the regenerative properties of the Supreme Leader's blood essence, it wouldn't have been possible to bring back a dead person," Narvim believed.

While listening to the dragon lords converse, Henrietta grasped a small part of the situation and couldn't help but clench her fist.

She understood that in the war between the Black Rose Kingdom and the Holy Knight Empire, Astoria had suffered the attack of someone with Demigod-level strength and nearly lost her life.

Considering Astoria's history with the Holy Knight Empire, she didn't think Astoria would participate in the war.

Such an assumption had almost cost her to lose a dear friend.

Shortly after Henrietta finished self-reflecting, she shifted her attention to another matter worth mentioning.

"I thought the Red Dragon Clan was the only group of true dragons in this world, but apparently, that was not the case?" Henrietta directed a questioning look at the three dragon lords.

"Hmm..." Astarot hummed in thought before he replied, "That only shows how little we know about this world's history."

"Lady Astoria's golden dragon bloodline was so diluted that no one knew she possessed such a noble bloodline until it awakened and surprised everyone. This tells us that Lady Astoria's golden dragon ancestor must be very ancient."

"Us, red dragons, might be the only true dragons in this world now, but we can say for sure that a golden dragon, one with a nobler bloodline than our own Fire Dragon God, had once walked this earth and ruled its skies," Astarot stated.

'That can't be right,' Henrietta's master suddenly sounded within Henrietta's mind, prompting her to ask, 'Why not, Master?'

'You should understand well what the world was like before Gehenna's appearance introduced mana to the world. It's a barren world that doesn't accommodate higher lifeforms or grant such evolutionary possibility.'

'It's impossible for such a world to have nurtured or accommodated a golden dragon more powerful than the Red Dragon Clan's Fire Dragon God. Unless...'

'Unless?'

Henrietta's master's sudden silence fueled Henrietta with growing curiosity as she waited for her master to continue.

It seemed like her master had realized something important.

'Henrietta, do you remember the structure of the starry sky I explained to you?'

'Of course, Master. I remember everything you told me clearly.'

According to Henrietta's master, Pangea was just one of many celestial bodies in the infinitely vast sea of stars, which generally revolved in large spirals, forming unimaginably large groups of stars called galaxies.

Each galaxy was divided into four regions of core, inner, outer, and desolate, based on the level of a natural energy source called spirit energy found everywhere in the cosmos, where there were stars and life.

Desolate regions possessed such a scarce amount of spirit energy that it was almost impossible for life to prosper beyond the mortal rank.

In comparison, the core region of a galaxy contained the highest concentration and densest amount of spirit energy that the spirit energy itself had transformed into higher-level energy called divine energy.

Thus, the core region was also referred to as the divine realm.

'Previously, I had taken this world to be one situated somewhere within the desolate region. However, I've realized that this might not be the case,' Henrietta's master stated.

'If the planet of Pangea isn't located in the desolate region of stars, then where else would it be? And how can we explain the lack of this so-called spirit energy, Master?' Henrietta inquired, clearly baffled.

She had assumed her master to be the wisest person in the world, given her master's profound background. But even such a person could be wrong at times.

'Pangea could be anywhere within the four regions of stars. The possibility now exists. The key point lies in its lack of spirit energy,' Henrietta's master declared.

'Any celestial body in the desolate region with life should have some spirit energy, no matter how scarce it is. And yet Pangea has none. This shouldn't be possible normally, at least according to my knowledge.'

'Thus, I can only think of two possibilities for the lack of spirit energy in Pangea. Which do you want to hear first?' Henrietta's master asked.

'Does it matter, Master? I'll end up hearing them both anyway unless you decide to change your mind and not tell me,' Henrietta replied.

'I suppose you have a point,' Henrietta's master acknowledged before continuing, 'The first possibility is that somewhere on this planet exists a priceless treasure capable of absorbing all the spirit energy on a planetary scale.'

'Given the countless years of absorption, if we can find it, the accumulated spirit energy within the treasure should be enough for you to cultivate to the divine rank and beyond.'

'What about the other possibility?' Henrietta asked, noticing a change in her master's tone.

'The second possibility is more fearsome,' Henrietta's master stated.

'The second possibility is Pangea being a prison world locked down by some high-level divine being. In that case, we can forget about acquiring any spirit energy or dream of ever leaving this world for a higher-level one.'

'Of course, that was before Gehenna's appearance. Now, we have another choice; to enter Chaos and make full use of mana, which is even more miraculous than spirit energy and divine energy.'

'Chaos has its own dangers. But as an ant in pursuit of power, we can only pick which fire to dive into.'

Chapter 483: The Cattle and Farmer

After Astoria's golden dragon aura poured out of the guest building, it receded inside and stabilized within Astoria's body.

It was only a matter of time before Astoria's bloodline awakening concluded.

However, due to her incredibly thinned golden dragon bloodline, Astoria didn't undergo any visible changes to her body. Even so, only a fool would believe her physical toughness and strength were still the same as prior to her bloodline awakening.

That said, the dragon lords continued to guard the guest building until the process truly finished. As such, Henrietta and Ember still had to wait outside with them.

More importantly, the appearance of the golden dragon bloodline had everyone's attention fixated on the world's situation.

"A golden dragon with a nobler bloodline than the Fire Dragon God, huh? If such a divine being once existed in this world, there's no reason why this world would have such a poor life value. What do you think about this, Lord Narvim?" Astarot casually queried.

"Why are you only asking Lord Narvim, Lord Astarot? Why didn't you ask me as well?" Kemun chimed, prompting Astarot to cast his cool, indifferent glance over.

"Among the dragon lords of our clan, you would be the last dragon I would ask to engage in a deep topic discussion with, Lord Kemun."

"I see..."

Kemun appeared slightly awkward after being told upfront by Astarot, not that he didn't understand why. The others couldn't take him seriously due to his nature.

"Hm?"

Kemun's attention was soon drawn away by his contracted fire spirit emerging from his body. The little thing was definitely out to cause trouble again.

"Little brat, are you trying to pluck my dragon whiskers again?" Kemun questioned with a slightly threatening gaze.

However, Kemun's fire spirit had grown accustomed to Kemun's nature. As such, it didn't fear his intimidating gaze and even taunted him by shaking its rear at him on top of his nose with a smug look.

"This little s... thing..."

The corner of Kemun's eye twitched, but he contained his indignant, turbulent emotions and tried to calm himself down.

Interactions with the fire spirit were not good for his mental health.

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Meanwhile, Astarot paid no heed to Kemun's antics and shifted his attention to Narvim, whom he waited to speak.

"A golden dragon at the level of our Fire Dragon God or beyond would definitely be capable of traversing the vast starry sky. Since this world lacked the conditions to nurture divine beings, the golden dragon most likely came from the stars," Narvim guessed.

"I thought so too," Astarot acknowledged with a nod before mentioning, "However, that brings up a different question."

"If such a powerful golden dragon could come to this world, then it could also leave. And if it did leave, why would it leave behind its descendants in such a desolate world? Also, if it didn't leave, where would it be now?"

"Are you familiar with the term 'prison world,' Lord Astarot?" Henrietta inserted herself into the two dragon lords' discussion.

"Prison world, you say?" Astarot repeated with a startled look before his expression turned solemn. "Prison worlds are quite common in Chaos. I didn't expect Lady Henrietta to also know about it."

"I don't actually know much besides the term. I wonder if Lord Astarot can enlighten me about it, if it isn't too much to ask," Henrietta humbly requested.

"Not at all, Lady Henrietta. We are, after all, allies. Perhaps, it'll be a good thing to have you familiarize yourself with it," Astarot agreed, seeing no reason to reject such a simple request.

"Exactly as they imply, prison worlds are worlds that imprison things. They are generally created by Rank 7 divine beings and above, and the prison worlds' usage varies according to their whims. Some are merely used to contain fugitives, while others are used to cultivate living resources."

"If we are truly living in a prison world, we'd best wish it was the former, not the latter," Astarot solemnly stated.

"Why?" Henrietta sought further details.

"Because the latter implies you are all just cattle being reared on a farm. Once it's time to be butchered by the farmer, who can resist their fate?" Astarot replied with a heavy look.

The Fire Dragon God had migrated the clan to Pangea in search of opportunities to raise the clan's strength to new heights.

However, if Pangea was indeed a cattle-rearing prison world, then they did not enter a land of opportunities but a land of death!

After the possibility was brought up, Astarot couldn't help but shake off the thought that it was true.

After all, Pangea's historical records were lacking; they only date back to a few thousand years at best.

Anything older than that was either lost or not recorded, almost as if they had all been wiped clean. In other words, a historical reset.

'You must find out the cause of the missing spirit energy as soon as possible, Henrietta. It will definitely benefit you if it's due to a peerless treasure. But if it's not a peerless treasure, you must flee this world quickly,' Henrietta's master advised.

It would be too late to leave if the 'farmer' came to harvest.

After all, the 'farmer' would definitely discover the dimensional crack leading to Gehenna and eye its vast resources and opportunities.

'Is it that serious, Master? If such a powerful being arrives, couldn't it also be an opportunity? Given my talents, I believe there's a good chance I will be accepted into the being's tutelage and leave to experience the vaster world beyond,' Henrietta thought.

However, Henrietta's master could only shake her head in her mind.

'You are too naïve, Henrietta,' Henrietta's master stated.

'Don't forget what you have can even tempt a benevolent being to turn malevolent once discovered, let alone a wicked being. Furthermore, a being that rears cattle in their prison world has a higher chance of being wicked.'

'For example, a blood practitioner could refine the blood of all life in this world to enhance their cultivation, while a dark alchemist could concoct divine elixirs and pills from the flesh and bones collected.'

'There are many ways powerful divine beings could use living resources in a prison world to serve their purposes,' Henrietta's master stated.

After hearing up until that point, Henrietta quickly dismissed her idea.

'Powerful divine beings can be so brutal?' Henrietta frowned.

'I thought intelligent beings would become more open-minded and reasonable with their elevation in power and status. How come it seems more ruthless and cold instead? Do such beings feel nothing even if they wipe out an entire world of life?'

'Do humans feel bad when they slaughter their livestock for their meat?' Henrietta's master replied.

'Right and wrong is only a matter of perspective. What seems wrong to you could be considered absolutely normal to someone else. In this case, we are the livestock, and the farmer is the 'human.' In the great game of life, we can only wrong those weaker than us if we want to survive against those stronger than us.'

'That's why the only absolute law in the world is the law of the jungle. Without power, your words are worthless,' Henrietta's master stated.

Although Henrietta had always known the cruel truth regarding the ways of the world, she subconsciously didn't want to think about it.

Perhaps, she didn't want to believe that the world, despite its beauty, would also hide such a cruel, unchanging truth.

However, if she had power, she could also enforce her own truth on the world. But, of course, the prerequisite was to have the strength just like her master had always stressed to her.

After the meaningful discussion with her master, Henrietta thought about many things and became more inclined to follow her master's instruction; to enter Chaos in pursuit of power.

That said, her responsibility to her people and friends was something she had to resolve. She couldn't abandon them nor take them on such a dangerous endeavor.

As Henrietta pondered over her dilemma, Astoria stepped out of the guest building and caught everyone's attention.

Astoria's simple blue and white dress, coupled with her beauty, used to produce a feeling of purity and holiness.

However, the golden dragon bloodline had reformed her aura, adding a trace of nobility and majesty to her appearance.

Even if she wore peasant clothing, her aura would make people naturally assume she was someone of royal birth, and they wouldn't be wrong.

"Astoria!"

Henrietta and Ember's eyes both lit up as they made their way over to see her. The two also inspected Astoria's body condition with some concern.

After all, the person supposedly suffered a Demigod-level attack.

Nevertheless, Henrietta and Ember soon confirmed Astoria had made a full recovery. No, she was even better than before due to her bloodline awakening.

Such a thing was naturally worth celebrating.

"I heard you were struck by a Demigod-level attack. I thank your lucky stars for making a full recovery and even benefiting from it," Henrietta held Astoria's hands happily as she chirped before making a doubtful look. "However, you don't seem all that happy about it."

Astoria responded with a half, seemingly forced smile.

Chapter 484: Risk & Opportunity

Astoria briefly studied Henrietta and the others' expressions before slowly shaking her head.

"I'm sure you have a lot you want to ask me, Your Majesty. We can talk inside," Astoria replied before turning to the dragon lords. "Thank you for watching over me, Your Excellencies. If I may, I would like to speak to my friends first."

"Of course, Lady Astoria. You do not need to mind us," Astarot spoke without a complaint.

Nevertheless, the hint of stiffness in his words made him appear even more respectful towards Astoria than before.

Besides the basic respect the Red Dragon Clan granted to humans, Astoria also commanded higher respect from the Red Dragon Clan due to her connection with Vaan.

However, now, her nobler golden dragon bloodline also commanded higher respect.

Even true dragons had their own hierarchy based on the purity of their bloodline, and the Red Dragon Clan was only one of many branch clans spread across the entirety of Chaos.

More specifically, their Fire Dragon God was the descendant of one such branch clan, while the rest of the Red Dragon Clan was only the branch clan of that branch clan.

Within the great fire dragon race, their Red Dragon Clan's Fire Dragon God's status was as ordinary as a commoner's, let alone within the collective whole of the dragon race, where the black dragons held the highest status.

The golden dragons were only second to the black dragons, while their fire dragon race was roughly somewhere in the middle.

Astarot only knew the fire dragon race was at least higher than the earth and green dragon races.

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After Astoria thanked Astarot and the other two dragon lords for their understanding, she brought Henrietta and Ember into her room, where they could talk privately.

The room was plain and simple, containing a single soft bed at one end and a tea table for four at the other.

Henrietta showed no surprise as she had stayed at the guest building before.

On the other hand, Ember expressed her amazement; she didn't think such giant dragons could produce everything according to human standards.

Nevertheless, it was only a brief thought before Henrietta unloaded the piled-up questions in her mind.

"What's going on, Astoria? What happened during my absence? Did you overcome the bottleneck of High Witches? How did you advance so fast? How strong are you, exactly, now? What's the situation with the Holy Knight Empire?

Also, why are the dragon lords giving you such preferential treatment and respect?"

Ember opened her mouth to add to the questions but realized they had all been asked by Henrietta. Thus, she could only close her mouth and wait for Astoria to answer wryly.

"How strong I am now, huh?" Astoria muttered, staring at her clenching and relaxing palm blankly as she grasped the changes in her body. "To be honest, even I don't know yet."

Previously, she had yet to reach the transcendent rank. But after the bloodline awakening, she didn't feel like she could lose to ordinary Transcendent Witches and Aura Kings even if she wanted to.

The power coursing through her body made her feel invincible.

Astoria wasn't sure if it was an illusion brought by significant changes to her physical capabilities, but she felt confident that a Low-level Rank 5 attack wouldn't be able to harm her current body, even if she didn't wear any armor.

'The golden dragon bloodline...' Astoria recalled what she overheard during her bloodline awakening.

The golden dragon bloodline must be why the Bravehearts had always been more physically capable than others. She never would have thought that one of our ancestors was a mighty golden dragon.

Nevertheless, Astoria soon shoved her doubts aside and refocused on Henrietta's questions.

"I believe my strength and advancement method isn't what you wish to know most but the war, right?" Astoria asked.

After receiving Henrietta's affirmation, Astoria briefed her and Ember on the events from the start leading up to the final battle, which ultimately ended in their victory.

Whether it was her own achievements or the kingdom's, Astoria gave all the credit to Vaan. Without him, none of it would have been possible.

Henrietta and Ember were dumbfounded and shocked when they found out one man could grow and achieve so much in such little time.

More shockingly, the same person was now the Supreme Leader of the Red Dragon Clan. It wasn't farfetched to say that Vaan currently wielded the world's strongest power and military might.

'In this world, it's almost impossible for a man to achieve such rapid growth in such a short time unless he has one of two things: a never-before-seen heaven-defying talent that trumps all other known talent or a secret method that can improve his talents to such a level. Even your unique Seven-Petal Void Soul would seem inferior in comparison.'

Henrietta's master sounded solemn as she spoke inside Henrietta's mind.

'I have lived a painstakingly long time and experienced many things in life, but this is also the first time for me to discover so many great surprises in one place. As I suspect, there is something special about this world.'

'But something isn't right, Master,' Henrietta suddenly thought.

'No matter how heaven-defying Vaan Raphna's talents are, it doesn't seem to be possible for such a young man to be so knowledgeable and wise as well. Could he be like us? Someone who has the support of a divine-level soul?'

'Or maybe he, himself, is the reincarnation of some mighty divine being?' Henrietta guessed.

'Whatever it is, we'll know once we meet the person,' Henrietta's master responded.

'In any case, you two are destined to meet. However, even I cannot tell whether this will be a good or bad thing. After all, while this person had saved your kingdom, he had also practically taken it for himself. The relationship between the two of you is very delicate.'

'Depending on how you see this situation, you could either become terrible enemies or great allies to one another,' Henrietta's master added.

'Isn't it too risky to meet such a person, Master?' Henrietta asked with doubt.

'Given how the witch kingdoms treat men, I don't think this person has a favorable attitude toward witches. At first, it seems like this person is on the witches' side; he is ultimately the one benefiting the most from helping the witches. From this, we can see that he is likely a highly calculating and manipulative person.'

'Most importantly, he has inherited the Fire Dragon God's inheritance and become the Red Dragon Clan's new sky. His power far exceeds mine,' Henrietta mentioned.

'What do you have to fear? He might be stronger than you, but you have me. If push comes to shove, I will take over and eliminate him even if we have to pay a great price for it,' Henrietta's master coolly retorted.

'Still, you can't shy away just because some risks are involved, my dear disciple. When had opportunities ever been free of dangers? If our information is accurate, there's a good chance this person could help you reach Rank 6 sooner.'

'You have a point, Master,' Henrietta acknowledged.

In fact, she wasn't opposed to meeting and learning more about the person. After all, while it was true that the person had practically robbed her kingdom, it could also be seen as the person taking away her burden.

Thus, the person had actually done her a favor.

However, just because she saw it that way doesn't mean others do too. As such, she needed to grasp a better understanding of the other person's nature.

"Can you tell me more about Vaan Raphna and what kind of person he is, Astoria?" Henrietta asked.

"There's something I can't wrap my head around. Despite all your accomplishments together, why do you have such a dejected and regretful look when you talk about this person? Are you feeling guilty for me because the man you fancy practically robbed my kingdom?"

"I highly doubt that's the reason behind it," Henrietta asserted.

It had only been a short interaction, but she could already tell that her close friend, Astoria, had fallen head over heels for the man named Vaan Raphna.

Three hundred years of friendship couldn't compare to the short period her friend spent with the man.

Nevertheless, she wasn't salty over such a matter.

She was merely curious regarding her friend's pensive sadness. After all, given everything she had heard, there was no reason for such a feeling. Her friend should be feeling happy and celebrating their victory instead.

"It's because I understand a small fraction of Vaan's burden and struggles, Your Majesty," Astoria replied with a sad smile, feeling pained in her heart.

As a bystander, she will never completely understand the spiritual conflict constantly happening within Vaan's mind.

However, the small glimpse she comprehended after making her mistake was enough to make her feel terrible.

"Care to explain further?" Henrietta requested with a confused frown.

She needed to hear further details.

Chapter 485: Vaan's Burden

"Your Majesty, if I asked you to conjure hundreds of fire lances and manipulate every one of them at the same level as controlling just one, would you be able to do it?"

After Henrietta received such a question from Astoria, she immediately thought it nonsensical as it wouldn't be humanly possible.

Even her master, at the height of her power, couldn't do such a thing.

Conjuring hundreds or even thousands of fire lances was not a problem. But having perfect control over all of them simultaneously was an entirely different story. After all, the difficulty in control would grow exponentially with each additional fire lance.

Humans simply could not retain perfect control over numerous objects as they continued to divide their focus. The division of focus would weaken their control.

Nevertheless, Henrietta knew Astoria was serious about her question. As such, she had to give a serious answer.

"Forget about hundreds; I won't even be able to control a dozen fire lances simultaneously and perfectly. Perhaps, with some practice, I could increase the number of control. But presently, seven should be my limit," Henrietta stated.

"Humans aren't born capable of consciously multitasking many things. A skilled person could do two to three different things at once, but four would be the limit, and even then, it wouldn't be perfect control. Although we can increase the limit through training and advancement, the effects are insubstantial in this field, and we don't know any great methods to improve it either."

"As such, a person who could control hundreds of spells perfectly and simultaneously should no longer be considered a human; the person would be a god," Henrietta stated.

'No, even gods might not necessarily be this capable,' Henrietta's master suddenly interrupted.

'The soul is the most mysterious and difficult to understand in this world. Even Empyrean Cosmic Sword, a divine being who stood at the apex of my Divine Realm, could only perfectly control 108 divine swords at once.'

'Oh?' Henrietta was startled by her master's information.

If a peak-level divine being from her master's world was inferior to Vaan, it could only mean two things: either her master's world was seriously lacking in soul-related developments, or Vaan had been someone even more powerful than Empyrean Cosmic Sword in his past life.

Of course, there was also another possibility: Vaan had a unique soul-type talent that allowed his mental abilities to develop to such a level.

However, Henrietta and her master had never heard of such a heaven-defying ability.

Still, the existence and emergence of Chaos opened up limitless possibilities. Thus, they couldn't claim they knew everything with their limited knowledge.

"Is it safe for me to assume that Vaan Raphna is someone who could conjure and control hundreds of fire lances? Still, how is this related to what I wanted to know?" Henrietta asked.

"That's right, Your Majesty," Astoria nodded before adding, "However, hundreds might even be an understatement; perhaps, Vaan can control thousands at once. No one knows his exact limit besides himself."

"Still, this at least allows us to understand that his calculating and thought-processing ability is far beyond human comprehension in this world. You asked me how this topic is related? Well then, let me ask you, Your Majesty."

"Would a person with such mental capacity still think and act like a normal human?" Astoria glanced at Henrietta and asked seriously.

"Well, of course not," Henrietta replied honestly.

"Normally, when we face a problem with limited time, we can only think of a limited number of solutions to choose from. And even then, we can never be certain which choice we make is the best choice."

"Thus, if we had the ability to simulate all the possible solutions from lowest to the highest chance of success in a short time, we would almost always, on a subconscious level, lean towards picking the solution with the highest chance of success," Henrietta stated.

"That's right," Astoria acknowledged before suddenly adding with a sigh, "However, the option with the highest chance of success might not always be the most desired choice and could even be the worse choice."

"For example, you got caught in an enemy ambush, and death seemed almost certain at a glance. Still, you're not afraid because you have a solution with an absolute chance of success in surviving the precarious situation."

"However, the prerequisite is that you sacrifice your most beloved person in the world in order to succeed. In that case, would you still consider it to be your best choice? No? It paints an entirely different picture, doesn't it?" Astoria asked.

"Yeah..." Henrietta nodded before saying, "Rationally, it's right. But morally and personally, it's unacceptable."

"If a person could only make rational choices and would only choose rational choices for self-preservation, that person would be no different from an emotionless puppet," Henrietta seriously thought.

Suddenly, her eyes flickered as she started to understand where her friend was getting at with the direction of their conversation.

"Indeed, if a person only chose rational choices due to the guaranteed success of survival, even if it meant abandoning their morals, principles, and values, they will lose their individuality and humanity. Eventually, they will succumb to their ability and become a slave to their own rational mind," Astoria thought.

A machine wouldn't have feelings, just cold calculations.

"Did Vaan tell you about this? Maybe he just wants you to feel sorry for him," Henrietta wondered, having a strange feeling that could be the case.

However, Astoria smiled woefully and shook her head.

"Your Majesty, given Vaan's current power and intelligence, he could tackle any worldly problem by himself if he wanted to. He is also someone with a grand goal of exploring all the mysteries in the vast world. And yet, he took the time and effort to train our kingdom's witches and resolve a lifelong issue of mine."

"I didn't understand why he needed to use a roundabout method to stop the Holy Knight Empire and avoid a continental war, but now I do. He was being considerate of me and those around him. He is willing to give himself emotional shackles, and you should be able to guess why by now."

"So no, Your Majesty. He did not tell me. I only made the realization after the mistake I made. He is not a bad person like you think," Astoria defended her man, tears streaking down her cheeks.

Vaan needed emotional shackles to protect his sense of self from his own ever-growing mental capacity. As such, the last thing Vaan needed was for his people to not become his burden.

Vaan didn't need protection from others, not anymore. What Astoria needed to protect was herself instead.

Only by keeping herself safe would she not become his burden.

"If only he did talk to me about his problems and struggles, then perhaps, I wouldn't be feeling as bad as I am now. However, some men would just rather suffer in silence than provide unnecessary worries to those around them," Astoria sighed with a sense of powerlessness.

Henrietta listened to Astoria's emotional outburst before she also sighed but with a wry look.

"It wasn't that long ago that I still thought you would be single for life. And yet, before I was aware of it, you had already become completely in love with this person, Astoria. Thanks to you, I know a little more about this person's character now," Henrietta stated sincerely.

She became more interested in her meeting with the person.

Meanwhile, Astoria suddenly felt a sense of wariness and became on guard when she noticed the look of interest in Henrietta's eyes.

Because Henrietta and Vaan were both important to her, she wanted Henrietta to understand Vaan better in order to avoid any possible conflict between the two. That was why she was so willing to open up about her feelings.

However, she couldn't help but get the feeling that she had just let a stray cat into her house, and it might run off with the house owner later.

"Pft, you take a look at your face, Headmaster Astoria. You look like you just got robbed or something," Ember chuckled, finally speaking for the first time.

However, her cheerful expression soon stiffened when she received Astoria's defensive glare.

"Uh... It was a joke... just a joke, girl. Calm down," Ember scratched her head nervously and awkwardly.

Perhaps it was better if she didn't say anything. She tried to relieve the tension, but it didn't seem to be working. The silence felt suffocating.

Soon, she turned to Henrietta for help.

"Don't worry, Astoria. It's not what you are thinking. I would never try to steal my dear friend's sweetheart for myself," Henrietta promised with a smile.

Chapter 486: Wyvern Riders

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In the east of the Holy Knight Empire, a seemingly barren land filled with giant pillar rock formations, steep cliffs, and towering mountain peaks stretched all the way to the Eastern Sea.

In terms of land coverage, this stretch of barren land was not inferior to the Holy Knight Empire. However, it was a dangerous place where powerful winged beasts dominated the land and sea monsters ruled the waters.

Given such terrible existing conditions, it should have been a No Man's Land.

But, contrary to expectations, humans were able to thrive in such a place, becoming a mighty nation that wasn't inferior to the Holy Knight Empire.

This mighty nation was called the Great Ratholos Empire. It was also considered a holy land for Aura Masters.

Despite its dangers, it was also the best place for warriors to train and test the extreme limits of their human bodies.

Nevertheless, the Great Ratholos Empire's greatest attraction did not lie in their extreme terrains but in their unique food.

The meat acquired from hunting the winged beasts and sea monsters were all precious resources capable of supplementing Aura Masters in their training, allowing them to improve twice as quickly and with half the effort.

As such, the Great Ratholos Empire's warriors were not just strong but also great climbers of mountains and swimmers of seas.

If the Great Ratholos Empire didn't have such a strong, stubborn belief in a warrior's body being their strongest weapon, perhaps their nation's military might would have greatly surpassed the Holy Knight Empire.

But even if the Great Ratholos Empire lived a less-developed lifestyle than other countries and lacked the advantage of quality weapons, its extreme terrains made their country a natural, impregnable fortress.

It was a strong country that couldn't be invaded.

...

Shortly after Vaan stabilized the Holy Knight Empire, he buried himself inside the holy capital city's imperial library to read relevant books about the various powers in Pangea.

Since he had become the Holy Knight Empire's 'Sun God,' there were no doors he couldn't open or books he could not read.

Whether it was general knowledge or the highest level of classified information in the empire, they were all made readily available for his perusable.

When Vaan finished reading up on the Great Ratholos Empire, he immediately knew it was a place he must visit at least once.

His soul might have hit a bottleneck, but his body could still improve, and the Great Ratholos Empire was a great place to do so if the recorded information was correct.

Furthermore, by relying on just its fist, the Great Ratholos Empire was comparable to the Holy Knight Empire in power.

Clearly, the Great Ratholos Empire possessed more advanced and developed martial arts.

Still, the Holy Knight Empire didn't necessarily lose to the Great Ratholos Empire. At least in terms of aura cultivation methods, the two empires should be roughly equal.

But once again, this was all based on the accuracy of the Holy Knight Empire's information.

Nevertheless, only by learning all the aura cultivation methods of both empires would Vaan be able to forge a clearer and smoother path ahead for himself.

After Vaan grasped a good understanding of the Great Ratholos Empire, he began looking up information on the Freedom Federation and other various neighboring countries.

Although the truth behind the war had been spread to the neighboring countries, Vaan couldn't be completely certain that none of them wouldn't do anything foolish.

Ambition and stupidity had always been destructive.

As such, Vaan had long dispatched the dragons to the borders to watch the neighboring countries for suspicious movements while he stayed in the capital to consolidate his authority and stabilize the country.

That said, the Holy Knight Empire still had numerous internal affairs and other issues that also needed to be addressed.

However, they could wait for Astoria to recover and handle.

Suddenly, Vaan sensed a spatial distortion in the airspace above the holy capital before a Rank 5 dragon returned from the eastern border post to give him an update on its situation.

'Supreme Leader, the Great Ratholos Empire has been increasing their western outpost's garrisons in the last few hours. However, their numbers are far too few to pose any real threat to this empire's eastern border,' Chaezi gave her report via telepathic magic.

'What are the exact numbers and strength of their current outpost?' Vaan asked after a moment of thought.

'Yes, Supreme Leader,' Chaezi complied.

'Originally, there were 500 soldiers stationed to guard the outpost, and their strength varied between Rank 2 and Rank 3. Now, another 40 had been added to their numbers. However, their status doesn't appear to be ordinary.'

'They all arrived on wyvern backs, and their strength varies between Peak-level Rank 3 to Low-level Rank 4. Only one person was at Mid-level Rank 4,' Chaezi reported.

'Wyvern backs, huh?' Vaan mused with interest.

Wyvern riders were another unique asset of the Great Ratholos Empire. Only they had the ability to tame the wild and hostile wyverns that dominated their skies.

Nevertheless, it was true that the addition to the western outpost was far too few for the Great Ratholos Empire to attack or defend.

Thus, there were only three possibilities for the wyvern riders' appearance at the border: They were either scouts sent to confirm the news, envoys preparing to make contact with the Holy Knight Empire, or a combination of the first two.

Vaan didn't doubt the Great Ratholos Empire would express a strong interest after hearing about the emergence of true dragons.

Most likely, Emperor Varan sent his representatives to come and negotiate a deal regarding this matter. Depending on their attitude and demand, the Holy Knight Empire's relationship with the Great Ratholos Empire could turn hostile.

'You may return to post and continue to monitor the Great Ratholos Empire's movements, Chaezi.'

'Yes, Supreme Leader!'

Shortly after Vaan dismissed the Rank 5 dragon, he glanced at the big map of Pangea hung on the library's wall and set his sight on the southern countries.

More specifically, he was looking at the Freedom Federation, the only other superpower that could rival the three empires on Pangea.

'The Freedom Federation is the leader in the field of magic engineering. Let's see what the empire has recorded about it,' Vaan mused.

Chapter 487: Mysterious Empire

The Freedom Federation...

Comprising nine middle kingdoms and thirty-six city-states, it was the largest and most technologically advanced alliance in Pangea.

If Vaan remembered correctly, the Black Witch Society's headquarters was hidden within the Principality of Dainsleif, which was a part of the Freedom Federation.

As the Supreme Leader of the Red Dragon Clan, it was only natural that Narvim wouldn't keep such important information from him.

As such, unless the Black Witch Society moved their headquarters, Vaan knew their exact location on the map of Pangea. Furthermore, he could reach it anytime with a dragon lord's help.

Since they were in an alliance to combat the threat of Gehenna, they had not cut off contact since their last face-to-face meeting with Ophelia. On the contrary, they had maintained communication with each other.

Vaan had made a secret arrangement with the Black Witch Society as part of his Plan B.

In the event that the neighboring countries couldn't contain their greed and risk the start of a continental war over the Holy Knight Empire and Black Rose Kingdom's matters, the Black Witch Society agreed to assist them by secretly striking the enemies' rear and targeting their supplies.

It might seem simple for a backup plan, but its effect shouldn't be doubted.

After all, greedy countries wouldn't be able to send out troops to join the continental war if their homes were on fire.

The continental war would also be avoided since the neighboring countries failed to muster enough military force to invade.

Nevertheless, Vaan was confident they wouldn't have to worry about the southern countries.

After all, a copy of the footage revealing the truth behind the Holy Knight Empire's scheme had already arrived in the Freedom Federation before news from the neighboring countries' spies even left the Holy Knight Empire's borders.

Since the Freedom Federation occupied the supercontinent's central region, information from it would spread quickly to the rest of Pangea.

And considering many countries depended on the Freedom Federation's advanced technology and magic knowledge to prosper, information would spread even quicker.

There was a reason why the Freedom Federation was the leader in magic engineering, leading Pangea with its advanced knowledge and technology.

Unlike most countries, the Freedom Federation did not engage in slavery. Anyone caught engaging in or associated with slavery activities was strictly punished by the law.

Furthermore, the people of the Freedom Federation all had access to education regardless of gender and class.

That said, even the Freedom Federation wasn't free of discrimination.

The Freedom Federation was divided into three main factions: the witch faction that looked down on men, the male-dominant faction that believed in male supremacy, and the neutral faction that fought for gender equality and prosperous co-existence.

However, thanks to the Freedom Federation's strict policy and regulated system, these three factions didn't engage in bloody battles despite butting heads. Rather, they competed in technological achievements and contributions for more authority in the alliance.

'Educated people fight with their heads, not their fists. Given these favorable conditions in the Freedom Federation, it would indeed be strange if it didn't become the most developed power in Pangea,' Vaan mused with interest.

Although Vaan wanted to reform the Black Rose Kingdom and Holy Knight Empire and implement changes like the Freedom Federation, it would still take years before producing the same results.

'For now, the southern countries shouldn't be a threat. The Great Ratholos Empire isn't interested in territorial expansion, so I can also rule them out; I only need to watch out for the last empire in the west,' Vaan thought.

Actually, it wasn't that the Great Ratholos Empire wasn't interested in territorial expansion; it's just that their focus lay in the eastern sea and not the western land.

The hidden treasures and resources buried in the eastern sea made it far more alluring than any land.

After Vaan finished perusing information on the southern countries, he set his sight on the last of the three empires in Pangea, the Divine Serpent Empire.

The Divine Serpent Empire was the most mysterious country in Pangea. Even the Holy Knight Empire's imperial library didn't have much information on it.

This superpower, which occupied a large part of Pangea's western coastline, was surprisingly unknown to the rest of the world.

Whether it was the Divine Serpent Empire's military power, technological development, or culture, barely anything was known about it.

If not for the Divine Serpent Empire's emperor revealing his strength and prohibiting all foreign travelers from crossing their borders, people wouldn't have even known this third empire existed.

People would have just thought the Divine Serpent Empire was just a large wilderness, foggy land that hadn't been conquered and developed.

Getting into the Divine Serpent Empire was difficult, but getting out was even more so.

The Holy Knight Empire had sent many envoys to the Divine Serpent Empire over the years, hoping to establish an amicable relationship with their unknown neighbor.

However, none of the envoys had ever returned upon crossing the border.

A powerfully-recognized country wasn't feared as long as its intentions were clear. On the other hand, even a small, unknown country with unclear intentions could be frightening.

Although the Divine Serpent Empire had never invaded another country, Vaan was more wary of it than any other neighboring country.

After all, no one knew anything about the Divine Serpent Empire or what it wanted; it was unpredictable.

'Divine Serpent Empire... A land of fog... Situated next to the Treacherous Sea...' Vaan deliberated with a frown.

Recalling the fog in the Thousand Fog Mountains, Vaan couldn't help but suspect the Divine Serpent Empire was hiding a huge secret.

After all, who could have known there was a mighty dragon clan living in the depths of the Thousand Fog Mountains?

Nevertheless, Vaan could only look further into the Divine Serpent Empire at a later time.

Besides putting it on his to-visit list and strengthening the Holy Knight Empire's defense at the western borders, there was not much he could do regarding the Divine Serpent Empire for the time being.

He had many other things to do.

Suddenly, Vaan received information from Zodreg via telepathy.

'Supreme Leader, a minor issue arose in the Black Rose Kingdom. Lady Linetta urgently requested your assistance at the Delarosa Marquisdom.'

Chapter 488: Delarosa Marquisate

Vaan recalled Linetta and Lillias's home situation before his eyes flickered with understanding. It wasn't difficult to guess what was going on there.

'This is something I should have resolved sooner rather than later,' Vaan thought.

...

After asking Zodreg to give him a ride to the Delarosa Marquisate via spatial magic, Vaan arrived in the Delarosa's territory in no time.

As Vaan silently hovered in the sky, unnoticed by anyone, the city's overall structure was entirely within his view when the passing clouds did not obstruct it. His powerful Omni-Sense quickly swept the land below briefly before he grasped every detail and ongoing situation within the city.

Whether it was the number of people, buildings, or even stone bricks used in the city, Vaan learned everything.

His inhumane information-processing and powerful Omni-Sense combined were almost on par with a divine observation skill. The only difference was the divine observation skill could grant all information related to the target of interest, whereas he was limited by his knowledge.

Logically, a divine observation skill capable of providing the user with information and knowledge that even the user had yet to learn shouldn't be possible.

However, Vaan had reached the peak of the Demigod rank in his soul and touched upon the world's laws. He knew boundless information was hidden in the world, unseen by the naked eye.

As such, it might not be impossible for him to create such a divine observation skill if he could comprehend the related laws and gain access to the world's hidden information.

Nevertheless, Vaan quickly understood the situation in the city below.

Several forces had been gathered outside of the Delarosa Household's main estate. Matriarch Arabelle and her Vossen Household members were present among these forces. Linetta and Lillias were also with them.

The other forces gathered outside the main estate appeared to have come to assist them in their cause.

However, everyone reached an impasse, unable to advance inside the Delarosa's main estate due to High Witch Adeline's threat.

High Witch Adeline had taken control of the main estate and held the ill, bedridden Matriarch Belline hostage. As such, the gathered forces could only stay outside the estate, unable to advance or retreat.

Furthermore, all of the members loyal to Matriarch Belline had been detained in the large underground cellar by the other Delarosa Household members according to High Witch Adeline's orders.

That said, Vaan could see the loyalty of High Witch Adeline's people wavering. Their tensed bodies and nervous expressions couldn't be hidden.

It was clear that they were also aware of their precarious situation.

After all, although High Witch Adeline's people were temporarily safe from outside attacks, they all knew it was just a matter of time before someone broke the status quo.

Without Matriarch Belline as their hostage, they would have been helplessly overwhelmed by the outside force; they didn't have the power or numbers to resist. And even if they wanted to flee, there was nowhere to run.

To begin with, most of them didn't serve High Witch Adeline because they were loyal to her.

They only followed her orders because she had been managing the Delarosa Marquisate in Matriarch Belline's absence.

"What should we do? Many High Witches and Peak-stage Senior Witches have surrounded the estate. We can't win if we fight, and we can't even run if we want to," said an anxious battle witch on sentry duty.

"Sigh! I knew something like this was going to happen sooner or later. I should have accepted a mission outside the Marquisate and waited until the storm passed before returning," another concerned battle witch on the wall mentioned.

In fact, many members of the Delarosa Household had long guessed a big storm was going to hit the Marquisate when they heard Young Lady Linetta was close to the kingdom's supreme commander in the war.

It was hard not to learn about all sorts of rumors when the returning witch army happily praised the supreme commander for their overwhelming victory over the empire.

...

Nevertheless, since Vaan had arrived, the stalemate at Delarosa's main estate was bound to end.

After checking on Matriarch Belline's condition, Vaan confirmed that, while the person was very ill, her life wasn't in immediate danger.

He could save her right away and free all the captives at once. However, he decided not to out of consideration for Linetta and Lillias.

Since the two had already gathered a large force to save their mother, it wouldn't be meaningful if he resolved everything for them by himself.

At most, he would just play a supportive role by removing their biggest dilemma.

Vroosh!

With a snap of his fingers, a pillar of fire descended on the Delarosa's estate like a flash of lightning, vaporizing everything in its path as it headed for Matriarch Belline's location.

However, Vaan's blue flames did not strike the bedridden marchioness but circled her white bed, forming a protective barrier. The two nearby battle witches waiting to take the person's life at a moment's notice got caught in the flames and died, reduced to ashes in an instant.

At the same time, another wave of flames headed for the underground cellar to protect the other captives.

"T-This..."

Arabelle and the others outside were immediately stunned by the sudden pillar of flames. On the other hand, High Witch Adeline's people within the estate were thrown into disarray.

Nevertheless, Linetta and Lillias were only momentarily surprised before their eyes beamed with joy the next moment.

"Vahn!" the two ladies cried out his name as he descended.

"Your mother, Marchioness Belline, and the captives have been secured by my fiery flames. Unless a Peak-stage Transcendent intervenes, they'll be completely safe until your forces reach them," Vaan calmly informed.

"Mm, mm!" Linetta and Lillias nodded as their eyes welled up with emotion.

It was only during this moment the two ladies showed how much their mother's issue had weighed down on their hearts.

They could finally see their mother again and take her away from their aunt's clutches to seek proper treatment.

Meanwhile, Arabelle gave Vaan a grateful nod of acknowledgment as their gazes met before she set her sight back on the estate with a fierce glint.

"Everyone, charge with me! Spare everyone who surrenders but kill all who resist! Today, we must have that vicious bitch, Adeline, give me an answer!" Arabelle roared vengefully.

She suspected Adeline was involved in her son's mysterious and untimely death.

Chapter 489: Delarosa Marquisate (2)

"Follow Lady Arabelle's lead! We must not fall too far behind!"

Shortly after Arabelle led her troops into the Delarosa's estate, the matriarchs of small households also advanced with their forces.

Evidently, these small households had come to assist Linetta in hopes of earning her favor and seeking opportunities to get closer to Vaan.

However, Vaan already had the allegiance of the capital's people via the magic oaths and effectively controlled the kingdom. Thus, their plans would produce their intended effect.

Vaan no longer needed to rely on others. On the contrary, they needed to depend on him.

As some of the minor households' forces rushed past Vaan, he caught a few grudging and envious gazes among the young men before they quickly looked away in fright and panic.

He didn't doubt they were Lillias's suitors.

After all, Linetta was already publicly recognized to be in a relationship with him. As such, that only left Lillias to pursue and forge a marriage connection between their households.

It was all to establish a solid backing, whether through the Delarosa Household's own influence or him, who was related to it through his relationship with Linetta.

Unfortunately, these minor households could only be disappointed since both sisters' hearts belonged to him.

Vaan casually shook his head with nonchalance before continuing to monitor the Delarosa's estate with his Omni-Sense.

...

Meanwhile, High Witch Adeline's raging voice shortly resounded from the central building's middle floors.

"You!" Adeline pulled over a panic-stricken servant and thundered, "What the hell happened?! Why did the outside forces suddenly launch their assault? Don't they care about Belline's life!?"

"I-It's Lord Vahn, my Lady! He is here! The people watching over the marchioness had been reduced to ashes in a fiery attack! Now, a fire barrier protects her from harm's way. No one can breach its defense!"

The male servant did not dare to leave out a single detail and spilled everything he knew to the best of his knowledge, fearing the enraged lady's wrath.

"Dammit!" Adeline cursed.

Her expression turned extremely nasty and vile in her fury as she tossed aside the male servant, causing the latter to slam into the corridor's reinforced stone wall.

The impact shattered several bones and inflicted heavy injuries on the male servant, but the person did not dare to leave or complain after getting back on his feet.

Instead, he shivered in a groveling position until Adeline left first.

Swoosh!

The stone castle seemingly grumbled to life as the ceiling parted way, and the marbled floor beneath Adeline's feet elevated her to the very top.

There, Adeline had a clear view of the situation happening on the Delarosa's properties around her.

"Surrender, and you may live; resist, and you will die!"

"Surrender, and you may live; resist, and you will die!"

Under the pressure of the overwhelming forces charging into the Delarosa's estate with high momentum, Adeline's people quickly surrendered their weapons, prostrating on the ground after the other.

The chain of command within Adeline's force collapsed before any order was even given.

"Ingrates!" Adeline cursed.

Although she was fueled with even greater fury after seeing her people surrender so easily, she also knew they wouldn't be able to change anything even if they stubbornly resisted.

It was better for them to surrender and grab hold of the chance at life; they still had that chance.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Adeline, who commissioned a hit on her nieces and was suspected of several other crimes.

It didn't take long for Arabelle and the other friendly matriarchs to surround the old castle with half of their forces. The other half went to apprehend all the surrendered members of the Delarosa Household and secure the estate.

While the battle witches remained on the ground, Arabelle and the other matriarchs took to the skies to confront Adeline on an even level. Their pride wouldn't allow their enemy to stand on higher ground.

Their eyes had to be leveled or above Adeline's.

"Adeline! I've held back for many years! However, today, I must get my answers from you! You had something to do with Belline's illness and my son's death, right?!" Arabelle barked as she hovered in the air.

Adeline glanced at the dozen or so High Witches surrounding her before bursting into maniacal laughter as if she had lost her mind.

"Hahahaha! So what if I did?! So what if I didn't!? If you really want to know, you'll have to beat it out of me!" Adeline asserted her dominance, allowing her mana to surge wildly and pressure the surrounding.

She knew she didn't stand a chance of winning, but she wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Very well. I will do just that!" Arabelle's gaze turned cold.

Within moments, the other matriarchs coordinated with Arabelle and simultaneously unleashed their spells on Adeline.

Vaan had tagged along to watch the show, but alas, there wasn't much to see; the difference was too great.

Still, he couldn't help but frown due to the terrible stench coming from Adeline, though no one else seemed to be bothered by it.

Most likely, only he could smell the rotten stench due to his superior senses.

Although Adeline managed to resist the matriarchs' united attacks for a short while by borrowing the power of the reinforced old castle, her defenses were eventually shattered one by one under the bombardment of High Witch-level spells.

"Arghhh!" Adeline cried in pain and anguish.

A violent wind blade sliced off her left leg, and a frost ball froze her right arm before shattering into a thousand pieces.

Although Adeline retained the rest of her body, she still suffered various cuts and burns all over her body during the short barrage of spells before Arabelle and the other matriarchs quickly halted their attacks.

By then, the weakened Adeline was too defenseless to resist the confession spell and eventually spilled all her crimes.

Just as Arabelle had suspected, Adeline was involved in Belline falling ill and Arabelle's son, Chalmers, who was also Belline's husband and the father of Linetta and Lillias.

However, the truth and reason behind Adeline's actions were more twisted than everyone anticipated.

Chapter 490: Delarosa Marquisate (3)

Originally, Adeline wasn't after the Delarosa's territory and authority; she desired Chalmers' affection.

Unfortunately, she couldn't obtain it. Thus, her mentality became increasingly twisted with jealousy and envy as she watched Chalmers and Belline together.

Chalmers and Belline being able to have two daughters spanning a few years apart also made Chalmers all the more desirable in Adeline's eyes. After all, it proved Chalmers had great seeds.

Arabelle was shocked when she found out Adeline had been trying to seduce her son for years, even after his marriage.

And when Adeline couldn't get what she wanted, she secretly captured Chalmers and locked him in her hidden chamber, where she forcefully tortured and made love to him day after day, year after year. This did not stop even after Chalmers turned into a corpse.

Arabelle became livid with rage as she listened to Adeline's mind-controlled confession.

Everyone knew Chalmers had mysteriously disappeared from the Delarosa Marquisate for years before they confirmed his death through a divination spell.

However, Arabelle could have never imagined how much her son suffered prior to his death.

Unless she retrieved his body and gave him a proper burial, his soul may never rest in peace, given his body was still getting sexually desecrated until now.

Everyone thought they had already heard the worst up to that point, but it only got worse from there.

Adeline preserved Chalmers' corpse and continued receiving his seeds, even in death. Her years of effort resulted in countless successful pregnancies.

However, she suffered an early miscarriage every time without an exception. The fetus would always die for unknown reasons.

Unfortunately, Adeline never gave up on her unborn children.

She had preserved them all in jars of water and stored them in her hidden chamber, where she conducted experiments and researched ways to revive them. Although she made some progress, she only produced moving abominations and mutated corpse poison.

It was also this exact mutated corpse poison that made Belline seriously ill and bedridden without a viable treatment.

Arabelle didn't even dare to imagine the state of Adeline's hidden chamber. The sheer thought of it made her feel sick in the stomach.

"You... crazy fiend! You are more diabolical and wicked than demons and fallen witches! How could you be so inhumane and do such things to my son?! Those aren't things people would do to the people they love!"

As Arabelle condemned Adeline with shaking rage, she glared so hard that blood spilled from her reddened eyes.

"What do you know?!" Adeline retorted with a twisted expression after regaining her mental clarity.

"I was the one who met him first! I was the one who spent the most time with him! I practically raised him when you were busy managing your Vossen Household! And yet you married him to my sister!"

"How is that acceptable?! Chalmers belonged to me! Even in death, he will still belong to me and me alone!" Adeline declared wickedly before directing her gaze of hatred at Vaan as she writhed powerlessly on the ground.

"If it weren't for you, no one would have the power to rally against me and discover my secret! I would have eventually become the marchioness of this territory and continue loving my Chalmers forever! It's all because of you that my plans have been ruined!"

"If only you didn't exist—No! If only my sister didn't exist, it would have never led to this!"

Adeline blamed Vaan before redirecting it back to Marchioness Belline.

She dug into the flesh of her face with the nails of her remaining arm as if she wanted to tear off her face. She hated everyone, even herself.

Her grotesque face and self-mutilating actions made Linetta and Lillias frown with discomfort.

However, Vaan continued to look back at Adeline with cold indifference. Even if the person retained her flawless beauty, he would still be unmoved and look at her with the same gaze.

No matter how beautiful she was, it would never be enough to compensate for her rotten heart and terrible stench.

"You can blame everyone and everything, but it won't change a thing. You are responsible for your actions. You should remember this well in your next life: The more you fuck around, the more you will find out. The dildo of consequences seldom arrives lubed," Vaan coolly stated.

Adeline's hatred and anger suddenly intensified as she threw her body at Vaan with all the strength she could muster, hoping to bite off a piece of his flesh before she went down at the very least.

"Die—!" Adeline roared.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for her to achieve anything with so many High Witches around.

Arabelle's eyes simultaneously flashed with killing intent.

Puchi!

In the next moment, Arabelle directly decapitated Adeline with a swift yet simple mana blade attached to her hand. She had been unable to stand the sight and words of Adeline. Thus, she was the quickest to react.

Nevertheless, the Delarosa Household's issue was subsequently brought to an end following Adeline's death.

Even so, the truth uncovered during Adeline's interrogation continued to plague Linetta and Lillias with shock and disbelief. The two clutched their necks and hugged their chests beside Vaan as they felt sick, wanting to throw up.

"I can't believe our aunt could do such things to Father even though she sounded so in love with him..." Lillias uttered with frailty.

Thinking about it, she couldn't help but clutched onto Vaan's arm tightly. She wished the same thing would happen with her sister over Vaan.

Linetta also felt uneasy as she tightly clutched onto Vaan's other spare arm.

"Love is like a fart; if you force it, it's probably shit. No wonder she stinks so bad," Vaan softly sighed with a shake of his head.

Shortly after, he wrapped his arms around the two ladies and pulled them into his tight embrace, giving them a firm sense of security and reassurance.

"Don't worry. The same won't happen to us," Vaan promised.

Unlike their father, he wasn't faithful; he was willing to share his love and treat his women equally well as long as they met his criteria and didn't break his bottom line.

He understood the pain of not having one's feelings reciprocated.

Although it might seem unfair to his women since he couldn't give any one of them all his time and attention, it was their choice to be with him.