

The Witch 61

Chapter 61: Hidden Information

Vaan found it hard to believe that he had become the seventh Great Devil Contractor. It wouldn't add up with everything he had learned about the Great Devils and their Contractors.

Even when little information from outside the seven witch kingdoms was known, the seven Great Devils and the six existing Great Devil Contractors were special exceptions.

After all, the six Great Devil Contractors obtained powers that rivaled Transcendent Witches, not to mention the seven Great Devils that stand far beyond the Transcendent Rank.

That kind of shocking information is nearly impossible to keep secret.

'The six Great Devil Contractors all received Transcendent-level power at the time of the contract... On the other hand, my body has only been strengthened to Rank 1 after awakening the system...'
Vaan mused.

Unless the system had been playing a prank on him, Vaan had not heard any voices from any of the seven Great Devils.

'I'm not a Great Devil Contractor, but I seem to have a relationship with one of the seven Great Devils of the Gehenna Realm,' Vaan determined.

And if Vaan had to make a guess, it had something to do with being 90% human.

'Although I lack memories of the body before my transmigration, the parents of this body were more likely to be humans—or a witch and witch descendent, to be more precise... Then—'

'Kyu? Kyu...!'

Topaz suddenly appeared in Vaan's direct line of sight, asking him why he was ignoring her. She moved onto his head with a pout on her face and threw a tantrum by pulling his hair.

Alas, Topaz lacked physical strength. Thus, Vaan only felt like she was trying to find nits in his hair.

Although Vaan understood her thoughts, he only responded with a smile and continued to let her tug at his hair.

'When I was struck by an Aura-powered attack, I was left thrown into the wasteyard. That must mean that none of the witches could have saved me with healing magic. But against all odds, I survived anyway,' Vaan recalled.

However, the system was not one to give without first receiving; it doesn't draw rewards from nothing. Vaan had, more or less, figured this out.

'The system didn't just help me recover but also fortified my body. Considering the system doesn't draw power from nothing, it must have been something it already had,' Vaan speculated.

Furthermore, a lot of blood was required to awaken the system within the Etherstone.

'A sacrifice? No, that's probably not it.'

Vaan relied on his superior memory to recall the details of the event. He had indeed lost a lot of blood at that time. His bones were broken, and even his organs were crushed.

However, the system didn't absorb all of his blood. In fact, most of it was left behind.

'I believe the system has the answers to my doubts. Status!'

Ding!

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[STATUS]

Name: Vaan Raphna

Race: Human (90%)

Age: 20

Unique Physique: [Heaven-Swallowing Physique], [Earth Spirit Body (Low-rank)]

Cultivation: N/A

Spirit Contract/s: [Topaz (Named Spirit) (Mid-rank Earth Spirit)]

Skills: [Basic-level Weaponcrafting] [Intermediate-level Heavenly Massage] [Basic-level Hand-to-Hand Combat] [Intermediate-level Cloud Evading Steps] [Expert-level Mental Focus] [Expert-level Magical Foundation] [Expert-level Mana Application] [Expert-level Mineral Interaction] [Basic-level Dagger Mastery]

Ability: [Heaven-Swallowing Space] [Magic Vision (Low-rank)] [Regeneration (Low-rank)] [Earth Acceleration (Low-rank)] [Earth Manipulation (Contract-dependant)] [Telepathy (Contract-only)]

Stats: [150 Defense] [23 Strength] [31 Speed]

Topaz's Mana Capacity: [26/201]

Elemental Affinity: [50% Earth]

Elemental Resistance: [50% Earth]

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Vaan's attention paused on Topaz's mana capacity.

As expected of a spirit; even if Topaz did nothing, she had already recovered some mana within a short time.

However, her upper limit had also increased by one point despite being raised by a hundred points upon becoming a Mid-rank Earth Spirit a moment ago.

'It seems like 200 points in mana is just the minimum amount for a Mid-rank spirit and not its upper limit. Since Topaz just became a Mid-rank Earth Spirit, she will continue to grow until she hits the peak for Mid-rank Earth Spirits, huh?' Vaan mused.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't dwell on Topaz's information. He focused on his.

'My status is clearly incomplete. Some crucial information has been kept hidden... However, I am getting the hang of this system now... Reveal hidden information!' Vaan willed.

Ding!

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[Status]

Name: Vaan Raphna (Vahn Cadieux)

Race: Human (90%), Devil (10%)

Bloodline: Spatial Bloodline (Heaven-rank), Immortal Lycan Bloodline (Divine-rank)

Age: 20 (Physically), 31 (Mentally)

Unique Physique: [Heaven-Swallowing Physique (Heaven-rank) (Upgradeable)], [Earth Spirit Body (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)] [Immortal Lycan Physique (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)]

Cultivation: N/A

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Ability: [Heaven-Swallowing Space (High-rank) (Upgradeable)] [Magic Vision (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)] [Regeneration (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)] [Earth Acceleration (Low-rank)] [Earth Manipulation (Contract-dependant)] [Telepathy (Contract-only)] [Wisdom From the Void (Heaven-rank)] [Name Bestowal (Divine-rank) (Non-Upgradable)] [Blessing of the Moon (Low-rank) (Physique-Dependant)]

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'Holy... shit.'

Vaan was greatly startled by what he was seeing.

Although the information about his past life was surprising, he found all the other hidden information much more shocking.

He wouldn't have known how much information was hidden from him until he saw it for himself. It was so incredible that it felt exaggerated.

'I knew the system was mainly devised for the demons to hunt witches, but to think it made me one of them—even if it is only partially. Furthermore, it's most likely to increase in the future...' Vaan frowned at the 10% devil trait.

'Immortal Lycan Bloodline... This must be what saved me when I awakened—No, bound the system. Reveal information.'

Ding!

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[Immortal Lycan Bloodline (Divine-rank)]

Status: Unawakened

Overview: the unique bloodline of Balmodon the Undying, one of the seven rulers of the Gehenna Realm.

Legend said that Balmodon was once a mortal of the Warring Race. But, after Balmodon performed the impossible feat of slaying the Evil Wolf God Kezan and eating its heart, he stole its divinity and ascended to godhood.

Note: As you have yet to awaken the Immortal Lycan Bloodline, you can only use some of its abilities.

Unlocked Abilities: [Magic Vision (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)] [Regeneration (Low-rank) (Upgradeable)] [Name Bestowal (Divine-rank) (Non-Upgradeable)] [Blessing of the Moon (Low-rank) (Physique-Dependant)]

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'I can understand Name Bestowal and Blessing of the Moon, but Magic Vision and Regeneration are included as well?' Vaan furrowed his brows.

Chapter 62: Early Morning

'I thought I had flexible choices, but my choices are only given from a fixed set of choices. The abilities I unlocked are related to my bloodlines and physiques,' Vaan mused.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't dwell on it.

The system might not have been omnipotent as he expected in terms of aiding his growth and evolution, but his potential wasn't any less without it.

'Spatial Bloodline, huh?' Vaan paused with a calm look.

He didn't find it surprising to have such a bloodline. His Heaven-Swallowing Physique was based on it.

All descendants of witches had a high chance of inheriting their parents' bloodline, whether they were male or female. Their physiques are born based on that bloodline.

Although it doesn't happen often, there were also cases when the descendants were born with a different elemental bloodline from their parents.

Even so, it doesn't change that Vaan's parents were likely to be people with the Spatial Bloodline, whether it was his father possessing a spatial physique or his mother possessing spatial specialization magic.

'The Spatial Bloodline isn't rare, but it isn't that common either. It might not be too difficult to find the original body's origins... But there's no need to look for liabilities and shackles,' Vaan thought.

If he had any relatives, he would just look into them; he wouldn't actively approach them.

Moving on, Vaan shifted his attention to the following new skills, completely skipping over his mental age.

There was nothing remarkable about his past life.

He was a 29-year-old office worker who happened to land himself in a black company, where hard work isn't rewarded, and his credits are frequently stolen by his immediate superior.

Furthermore, the black company was very stingy with the wages but very generous with overtime.

'In my last life, I died saving a kid from a speeding truck. But if it wasn't because I was exhausted from overwork, dodging the truck wouldn't have been a problem.'

'Hah... If I knew I would live such a short life, I would have at least gone to the company with a gun and dragged all those greedy and selfish bastards to hell with me,' Vaan smiled self-deprecatingly.

Although he didn't regret saving the kid, it would haven't been better to drag his trashy bosses to hell with him.

If there was one thing that he learned from his past life, only those with power got to do what they wanted.

He was tired of working like a dog for others and being used by them.

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[Wisdom From the Void (Heaven-rank) (Upgradeable)]

Overview: there is infinite wisdom and truth hidden within the boundless void, but only a selected few can tap into it and learn from it.

As your Heaven-Swallowing Space expands, the more room it has to accommodate the infinite wisdom and truth hidden in the void, granting you comprehensive abilities far beyond human limits.

Note: It might be possible to learn everything you need to know at a higher level simply by glimpsing into the void.

Restriction: This ability is limited by the rank of your Heaven-Swallowing Physique

Upgrade Method: Unknown (Information is lacking)

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[Name Bestowal (Divine-rank) (Non-Upgradeable)]

Overview: a divine ability that allows you to share some divine power with another being by granting them a name, which is engraved on their soul and becomes the basis of their existence.

Note: Named beings are marked by your divine power. They become your faithful followers and cannot betray you.

Restriction: Only applicable to beings without a [True Name], which is usually but not always given at birth.

Upgrade Method: N/A (This ability cannot be upgraded)

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[Blessing of the Moon (Low-rank) (Physique-Dependant)]

Overview: the distinctive ability of the Evil Wolf God Kezan and his descendants who inherited its bloodline.

The ability is inherited by Balmodon the Undying's Immortal Lycan Bloodline.

Note: On the night of a full moon, your Immortal Lycan Physique's abilities are amplified by the rich lunar energy.

Restriction: Your Immortal Lycan Bloodline's purity determines the level of blessing from a full moon. The higher the purity, the greater the amplification of abilities.

Upgrade Method: Awaken your Immortal Lycan Bloodline to receive more of the full moon's blessing.

Blessing Level: 1% Amplification (Unawakened Bloodline).

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After reading through his bloodlines, physiques, and abilities, Vaan softly sighed with some relief.

'It seems the requirement for [Name Bestowal] is quite strict. I don't have to worry too much about giving out names. At the very least, nicknames are safe to give,' Vaan mused.

More importantly, Vaan understood why he felt more comfortable at night. It was a result of the [Blessing of the Moon].

Even if it wasn't a full moon, his Immortal Lycan Bloodline reacted to the lunar energy at night.

After Vaan was done checking out his abilities, he gave Topaz the attention she wanted. He also studied her abilities while he was at it.

Thanks to Topaz becoming a Mid-rank Earth Spirit, the power of Earth Manipulation was also upgraded to the next rank.

'Are you still upset?'

'Kyu!' Topaz pouted with her arms crossed while looking away.

'Oh? So you are. What should I do for you to forgive me?' Vaan asked with amusement. He was very patient with Topaz.

After all, Topaz was his source of power for earth magic.

'Kyu... ' Topaz pondered with her chin resting on her hand, but she couldn't think of anything good. She wanted something that would satisfy her, but she didn't want to make things difficult for Vaan either.

After some time, Topaz placed her hands on her hips and nodded with a benevolent look.

'Kyu... '.

Topaz said she would forgive him this one time since Vaan had given her a name and allowed her to become a Mid-rank Earth Spirit.

'My, Topaz is so kind.'

'Kyu.'

Topaz posed with an 'as a matter of fact' look. She had to live up to her new name.

Vaan slightly smiled with amusement.

After Interacting with Topaz for some time, early morning gradually arrived. At this time, only very few early birds got up to perform their morning routine.

The rest of the townspeople would only wake an hour or two later.

However, Vaan spotted Captain Rhys as one of the early birds when he glanced outside his room's window.

At that moment, Captain Rhys was practicing sword swings outside to work up a sweat. It was clear that he was a very diligent and disciplined person.

Chapter 63: Not With That Attitude

'Time to go back inside, Topaz.'

'Kyu...'

Topaz was reluctant, but she still obediently returned to Vaan and disappeared inside his body after he gave her the order.

Shortly after, Vaan stepped outside his room after organizing Lady Solana's books and research papers into a neat stack and leaving them on the bedside table.

"Quite an early bird you are, Sir Vaan," a voice directed at him as Vaan exited the room.

"I believe the term 'early bird' is inappropriate when neither of us had gotten any sleep, Lady Solana," Vaan calmly smiled at battle-ready Lady Solana, who leaned against the second floor's balcony.

At that moment, Lady Solana's ashen hair was neatly tied up, and a long sword was strapped to her side. The innkeeper vibe was gone. The air around her was replaced by one who had mastered the sword.

"I've neatly placed your books and research papers on the bedside table."

"How was it? Did you find anything useful?"

"Yes, my Lady," Vaan calmly nodded and said, "I've gained a better understanding of abominations thanks to them. That being said, I still plan to visit the libraries in Redpine City to further my research."

Vaan lied as naturally as he breathed.

He had already gained enough information from Lady Solana's research papers and abomination-related books.

However, Vaan wasn't in a hurry to inform Lady Solana of his solutions, whether it was for her benefit or his own.

"I see... It wasn't enough, huh?" Lady Solana muttered with a sullen look before suddenly changing the topic. "Anyhow, I have some information you might be interested in. Do you want to hear it?"

"I am all ears, Lady Solana," Vaan replied respectfully with a slight smile.

"A few people were snooping around outside the inn last night—three people, to be exact. They were likely the assassins. Unfortunately, they were careful enough not to trespass on my estate. Otherwise, they would be forced to leave their lives behind," Lady Solana spoke with a sharp glint.

It was as if her gaze alone could pierce through a person; they were as sharp as swords.

"Three people, huh?" Vaan muttered with furrowed brows. As prudent as he was, he did not notice such people lurking outside the estate.

His Magic Vision was far from being omniscient.

Vaan was made aware of the assassins' abilities to hide the mana in their bodies. Of course, there was another yet less likely possibility; they had no mana in their bodies.

Nevertheless, Lady Solana gave him a valuable piece of information. Vaan knew not to trust his Magic Vision unconditionally.

"The information was beneficial to me, Lady Solana. How should I repay you?" Vaan asked.

"How, huh?" Lady Solana smiled ambiguously before shaking her head. "Never mind that. We can decide the next time we meet."

Vaan's eyes flickered before he nodded, "As you wish, Lady Solana."

"Are you heading outside now, Vaan?"

"That's right, my Lady."

"I see," Lady Solana uttered without adding further, ending the conversation there. Vaan took it as his cue to leave.

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After leaving the Golden Peacock Inn, Vaan headed right over to Captain Rhys's training location. The swishing sound of strong sword swings was quickly heard.

Heup!

Captain Rhys practiced his double-handed vertical sword swing over and over again, kicking up a strong gust of wind each time.

His upper body was bare, and sweat glistened under the morning sunlight, highlighting his well-defined muscles.

Nevertheless, Captain Rhys quickly ended his sword practice upon spotting Vaan approaching. He sheathed his sword and picked up his towel by the bucket of water before taking the initiative to greet Vaan.

"G'morning, Brother Vaan. Which pleasant wind brought you to see me?" Captain Rhys wiped his sweat with a warm smile before glancing up at the sky. "I believe there is still a lot of time before our scheduled departure."

"We'll be leaving ahead of schedule. It's best to wake up all your men and prepare food to eat on the road. There won't be any time to dine at an inn, Captain."

"Oh? Brother Vaan did hint that we would be leaving earlier than the schedule... But it's this early, huh? Very well, I will go wake up my men. They must be sleeping like logs, but they only have themselves to blame for drinking so much last night."

"Well, we aren't that much of a hurry. I am just giving you a heads up, Captain. That aside, you're quite diligent."

"Haha, you think so?" Captain Rhys chuckled before saying with a soft sigh, "Well, there's no shortcut to training aura. Only intense exercise can increase the synchronization between mana and blood in the body. I still want to reach Rank 3 in this lifetime."

"Only Rank 3? If you're going to dream, you should at least aim higher. Don't you think so, Captain?"

"Aim higher, you say? Haaa, even if I want to aim higher, I have to consider whether such a goal is achievable, Brother Vaan. Rank 3 is already impressive; Rank 4 is simply a legend. Something like that is impossible for me," Captain Rhys smiled wryly and self-deprecatingly.

"Not with that attitude," Vaan cracked a smile.

"Hahaha!" Captain Rhys suddenly burst into laughter and said, "Are you trying to say that a man should be more ambitious? You're a very interesting fella, Brother Vaan. I believe you have what it takes to advance very far in life."

"Weren't we talking about you? Why the sudden focus on me?" Vaan casually replied with a calm look.

"Hahaha..." Captain Rhys chuckled without replying before changing the topic with a shake of his head. "Alright, I will head inside to wake up the boys now."

"Alright," Vaan acknowledged.

Shortly after Captain Rhys headed inside the nearby inn, Vaan didn't linger either. He went ahead to explore a bit of the town.

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Inside the neighboring inn, Captain Rhys entered the rooms booked by their Steelguard Escort Group one by one and kicked the beds of the young men.

"Get up! We need to get ready for departure!" Captain Rhys hollered.

However, the young men remained unresponsive. They simply groaned and adjusted themselves into a more comfortable sleeping position.

Seeing that, Captain Rhys became more forceful. He directly flipped them out of bed.

"I said get up, ya little bastards! It's time to work!" Captain Rhys roared.

Chapter 64: The Frightened Old Ronnie

"Ahhh! What the hell, Captain!"

Several young men cried after their heads smacked against the cold wooden floor. The pain immediately roused their minds awake.

Even so, they still felt like shit from their hangovers.

"Urgh... I feel sick."

One of the young men felt like throwing up all of last night's food and drinks, but the urge to piss quickly became predominant.

However, the moment he stood up and saw the morning mist outside the open window, his brows furrowed with doubt.

"Is it nearing midday already? Sure as hell doesn't look like it..." the young man commented.

As soon as the others heard it, they also glanced outside the open window before the same doubt festered in their minds.

Rather than nearing midday, it seemed very early in the morning!

"Pack up your stuff and gather outside by the wagon for me. Once we prepped the food for the journey, we'll be meeting up with Lady Linette and Lady Lillias," Captain Rhys instructed.

"I've already warned you all last night. You can only blame yourselves for not heeding my warning," he added.

The young men of the escort group all grumbled with complaints.

They recalled that there was something like that. But how were they supposed to take it seriously? The captain should have been more straightforward!

Nevertheless, the young men all followed Captain Rhys's instructions. They packed their belongings and headed to the designated location, albeit like lifeless zombies.

Caelan was the last to leave the room. He waited for everyone to leave first before he grabbed his fat bag of coins and hid it inside a bigger bag filled with clothes and travel necessities.

Once the bag of coins was safely hidden inside, he followed the others to the wagon and loaded everything onto it.

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Meanwhile, Vaan finished his tour around the town. He quickly returned to Golden Peacock Inn with some packed food and called the two ladies.

"It's time to leave, my Lady," Vaan informed after knocking on the door to their room.

"I got it," Linetta answered from the other side.

A few moments later, the door slowly opened before Linetta calmly walked out, followed by a droopy-eyed Lillias with messy bed hair.

It was clear that Lillias was only half awake.

Nevertheless, after they bid farewell to Lady Solana, they met up with Captain Rhys and the rest of the escort group by the parked wagon.

"Lady Linette. Lady Lillias," Captain Rhys and the young warriors in the escort group greeted.

Linetta furrowed her brows slightly when she saw the lack of energy within the group of young warriors. Some of them had their eyes closed to catch up on their sleep.

Nevertheless, Linetta eventually acknowledged their greeting with a nod before ordering, "Let us head to the east gate."

"Understood, my—"

Captain Rhys was about to comply when he suddenly paused, thinking he may have misheard Linetta's words.

Some of the more awake young warriors were also surprised by Linetta's words. Caelan, in particular, revealed a slightly alarmed look, which was captured by Vaan.

Nevertheless, Vaan feigned ignorance and did nothing.

"Pardon me, my Lady. But did I hear you say the east gate? Weren't we taking the Hobgoblin's Road over at the western gate?" Captain Rhys sought confirmation.

"There's a change of plans. We are taking Goblin's Road. Looking at the state of your men, I believe this is the right call," Linetta said with a hint of disdain.

Although she knew the escort group was full of new recruits, she didn't expect them to be so lacking in self-discipline.

She would have picked a veteran escort group if she had a choice.

Unfortunately, there weren't any veteran groups available in the Steelguard Escort Group at the time of her commission.

Nevertheless, Captain Rhys felt ashamed after catching a glimpse of Linetta's disdain.

He would have been more strict with his men if he had known they were leaving so early in the morning. The blame lies with him; he had been too lenient on the new recruits.

"I'm sorry, my Lady. I should have instructed them better," Captain Rhys lowered his head in apology on behalf of his men.

"Never mind that," Linetta shook her head and said, "Let us head out now. If we are quick, we might even reach Redpine City by nightfall."

"Understood, Lady Linette," Captain Rhys complied, but his lips slightly twitched.

According to their usual pace, it would take more than a day to reach Redpine City from Sunpeak Town.

However, Lady Linetta expected them to reach their destination within half the day. In other words, they would be rushing through Goblin's Road.

Sometime later, the group passed countless other buildings before arriving at the east gate.

Along the way, the Vaan casually glanced around with his Magic Vision before he slightly paused on the second floor of Rainy Bell Inn. After a moment, he continued to look around casually as if he had seen nothing.

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Meanwhile, Old Ronnie spotted Vaan's group as they passed through the area to leave town through the east gate.

However, Old Ronnie quickly hid inside his room and pretended not to have seen Vaan's group. He knew there would be problems on the road.

In fact, Old Ronnie had dark bags under his eyes. He couldn't catch a wink of sleep after being threatened by the unknown assailants at knifepoint last night.

Suddenly, one of Old Ronnie's people rushed into the room, causing Old Ronnie to be startled.

"Sir, the escort group is leaving the town earlier than the scheduled time, as you suspected. Should we quickly prepare and catch up to them?"

"N-no, we are not going with them anymore," Old Ronnie stuttered with fear.

Whoever was targeting the witches and their escort group clearly had the ability or some level of confidence in wiping them out.

Following such a group was like asking for death.

However, the person from Old Ronnie's merchant group did not know what Old Ronnie had experienced last night in his room. As such, the person was baffled by his change of heart.

"No?" the person furrowed his brows before mentioning, "Weren't you very eager to follow them, Sir?"

Chapter 65: Misdirection Tactic

"Haaa, I did some reflection last night," Old Ronnie sighed to hide his fear before saying, "That group clearly doesn't want us to tag along. As such, we shouldn't insist. We'll just wait for the next escort group that passes by."

"T-the next escort group that passes by? We don't know when that would be. It could take days or even a whole week! If we stay in Sunpeak Town for that long, we might as well stay here for life!" the person said with shock.

After all, three days was enough to catch the Curse of the Purple Umbala. They wouldn't be allowed to leave Sunpeak Town once that happens.

"W-we'll wait one day. If we can't find an escort group to tag along, we'll go through Goblin's Road by ourselves," Old Ronnie compromised.

He valued his life, but he didn't want to stay in Sunpeak Town for life either.

Nevertheless, the person couldn't understand what Old Ronnie was afraid of—so much that Old Ronnie would rather put the merchant group in danger by traveling alone than travel with the escort group they encountered.

"Is there something you're not telling me, Sir?" the person inquired.

"It's... better if you don't know," Old Ronnie said carefully after looking around nervously. He was uncertain if the person that threatened his life last night was still around somewhere or not.

"I see..."

The person eventually grasped the situation based on Old Ronnie's odd behavior and didn't pry any further.

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Meanwhile, Vaan left Sunpeak Town with the escort group and the two witch sisters.

While Captain Rhys's men pulled the wagon, Vaan enjoyed the leisure ride on the back of Linetta's Earth Salamander with her and Lillias.

Nevertheless, Captain Rhys suddenly paused his steps, having second thoughts about their route to Redpine City.

"Considering there might be assassins waiting for us ahead, wouldn't it safer to tread more carefully? We'll be at a disadvantage if we exhaust our stamina and encounter enemies on the road," Captain Rhys mentioned.

"You don't have to worry about that," Linetta calmly said after glancing at Vaan.

Captain Rhys was immediately baffled by Linetta's confidence.

If the escort group's stamina was exhausted from their hasty trip, they would be too tired to fight goblins, let alone trained assassins.

'Does Lady Linette believe she can handle the assassins on her own? Or does she believe we are ahead of the assassins because we left early?' Captain Rhys wondered with a frown.

Nevertheless, Captain Rhys chose not to overthink. It was clear to him that Lady Linette was acting according to Brother Vaan's plan.

Unfortunately, the young warriors didn't share the same thoughts as their captain. They weren't in the best conditions for traveling, let alone traveling at a quick pace while pushing and pulling a wagon.

An hour into their trip, everyone in the Steelguard Escort Group beside Captain Rhys was already puffing with exhaustion even though they hadn't even broken a sweat.

Some had even vomited along the way.

"Captain, we can't keep up with this kind of pacing. We need a break," one of the young warriors complained.

Captain Rhys immediately frowned while Linetta revealed her displeasure.

"If you didn't drink so much last night, do you think you would all be in this state after an hour into our trip? I told you that it wasn't too late to celebrate after we complete our mission!" Captain Rhys berated his men.

However, a few moments later, Captain Rhys's ears twitched at a sudden noise coming from the woods on their left, which was in the direction of Red Goblin Mountain.

"Quiet! We have company," Captain Rhys alerted as he unsheathed his sword. He was prepared to take on the entire wave of goblins by himself.

After all, the new recruits were useless in their current states.

Swish!

The grass in the woods rustled.

Half a breath later, several green goblins quickly jumped out with their wooden clubs and stone axes., wearing nothing but a simple yet terribly dirty loincloth to cover their nether region.

But before Captain Rhys could act, Linetta shot them all down with metal spikes that were the size of threading needles.

They didn't have a lot of attack power, but their lethality was more than enough for the likes of green goblins from Red Goblin Mountain.

Linetta didn't need to bother pulling out the big metal spikes she prepared to deal with Rank 2 and Rank 3 monsters.

"Don't bother with the small fries. Let us continue the journey after a small break," Linetta said.

"Understood, Lady Linette," Captain Rhys nodded.

The green goblins had nothing of value. As such, Captain Rhys and the young warriors didn't bother salvaging them.

After the young warriors recovered some of their stamina, the group resumed their trip to Redpine City at a quick pace.

They continued to encounter more green goblins in small groups, but they were all swiftly dealt with by Linetta.

Due to the size of Linetta's metal needles, her mana consumption had been minimal. Furthermore, she received Vaan's massage to stimulate her pores and recover mana along the way.

As such, Linetta's mana reserve remained high.

Sometime later, the sky darkened at the arrival of nighttime, but they were only three-quarters towards reaching their destination.

They didn't make it to Redpine City by nightfall due to the repeated breaks they were forced to take in between.

"This is strange... The assassins were definitely ahead of us," Captain Rhys mentioned.

When they went to sell their beast carcasses to the butcher stores, they learned another group had sold their stolen beast carcasses and wagon ahead of time.

"If the assassins wanted to make their move, they had plenty of chances to do so already," Captain Rhys added with doubt.

Linetta and Lillias also revealed their confusion.

Although they followed Vaan's plan, they didn't know the full details. They only knew they were trying to mislead their enemies by feeding Old Ronnie false information.

However, there was no point if they would take the same route they told outsiders.

"You don't have to worry about the assassins. They are probably still waiting to ambush us on Hobgoblin's Road like idiots," Vaan casually said with a slight smile.

"Oh? They knew we were going to use Hobgoblin's Road initially?" Captain Rhys uttered with surprise.

"Yeah, you can thank one of your guys for that. He did a good job selling our information to the enemy."

"What!"

Chapter 66: Terrifying Foresight

After hearing Vaan's claim, Captain Rhys immediately exploded with outrage and glared at his men.

He didn't doubt Vaan's words for even a second—not because he believed Vaan, but because he was well aware of his men.

They were still new recruits, untrained, undisciplined, self-entitled, and weak-minded.

The Steelguard Escort Group's training would teach them to become respectable warriors like real men. But before they complete the training, they are still brats sucking on their mamas' tits.

"Who was it?! Who did it?!" Captain Rhys bellowed with rage as he glared at the young warriors one by one.

At the same time, the young warriors were so shocked and intimidated by Captain Rhys's pressure that they froze on the spot, unable to utter a single word of response.

"It's not a matter of who did it, but why he did it. Isn't that right?" Vaan casually stared at Caelan with an all-knowing yet sly look.

Caelan immediately felt a cold chill as Captain Rhys shifted his gaze to him. In that instance, the split-second guilt in his eyes quickly sold him out.

Captain Rhys didn't need to interrogate to understand that Caelan was indeed the culprit.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Caelan. In fact, I've been disappointed with all of your performances during this escort mission. However, you, Caelan, have succeeded in surpassing everyone in terms of disappointing me!" Captain Rhys spat gloomily.

He hated traitors with a great passion, but he forced himself to suppress the urge to kill in order to listen to Caelan's excuse.

"C-captain, I can explain...." Caelan stuttered.

"You can explain, can you?! What kind of explanation can you possibly give that makes it okay to betray everyone, huh?!" Captain Rhys barked furiously as his killing intent intensified by the moment.

Caelan immediately became desperate.

"I was going to die if I didn't tell them what they wanted to know! What else was I supposed to do?! Tell me, Captain! What was I supposed to do?! Am I supposed to just accept my death?!" Caelan cried.

After Captain Rhys listened to Caelan's tearful outburst, his anger slightly subsided.

"Haiz, I supposed you are right," Captain Rhys sighed and looked at Caelan with disappointment, "It was too much to expect you selfish and self-entitled lot to be so self-sacrificing for the rest of the escort group."

"However, even if you sold us out to the enemy just to save your own skin, you should have informed us of what happened first thing in the morning!"

"I... I thought about doing that... However, I thought there was no longer any need to do so since we decided to take a different route from what I told the assassin..." Caelan said hesitantly.

"Even so, you should have told us what happened!" Captain Rhys scolded him.

"I understand, Captain. I was being inconsiderate—"

"Inconsiderate? You're just a heartless coward," Vaan coldly chuckled and said, "There's no need to keep listening to his lies, Captain Rhys. I'm sure he hasn't told you everything."

"You mean there's more to the story, Brother Vaan?" Captain Rhys glanced at him with a frown. At the same time, his anger started rising again.

"Of course, there's more to the story," Vaan calmly nodded before saying, "Just think about it. Even if he told the assassins about our plans and route, there's no way the assassins would let him live with just that."

"The assassins would have silenced him after extracting the information they wanted to eliminate the variable—even if it meant doing so would alarm us. Of course, their most ideal situation would have been to gain his cooperation."

"However, if we consider the assassins to be versed in psychology, they wouldn't have been the ones to propose cooperation first. They would have pushed Caelan into despair to see through his heart and thoughts. They would only propose cooperation once they were convinced that Caelan was a person they could use."

"In essence, it's a simple tactic of the stick and carrot," Vaan casually stated.

"Is that true?"

"I..."

Caelan was unable to refute Vaan's accusation when Captain Rhys shot him a sharp look for confirmation.

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't give Caelan any more chances to explain himself.

"What's interesting is what Caelan did in order to gain the assassins' trust and make cooperation possible between them," Vaan mentioned.

"I doubt he simply told the assassins he would do anything to live. That wouldn't have been enough. He most likely mentioned how he also wanted Lady Linetta and Lady Lillias dead to match the assassins' interests."

"But what's even more interesting is the reason why he wanted Lady Linette and Lady Lillias dead. He must have used an excuse—something like wanting Lady Linette dead for killing one of his brothers or something similar."

"That being said, I doubt Caelan would have actually cared about such a matter if he was prepared to send everyone to hell for his own survival anyway. I suppose his true purpose was to obtain the Stalactite Milk from Lady Linette."

"I'm sure that he believed that he would have gained a blessing from a disaster if his plan actually succeeded—not that it would, of course," Vaan chuckled coldly.

As Vaan spoke, everyone's mood plummeted to rock bottom.

Not only did Captain Rhys, Linetta, and Lillias want Caelan dead. Even the other young warrior shared the same thoughts.

On the other hand, Caelan's heart turned cold. Vaan's valid points were like sharp swords stabbing right into his heart. It was as if Vaan had been present and witnessed everything from the start.

'Who the hell is this person? What kind of terrifying foresight is this?!' Caelan inwardly cried. His mind was quickly clouded by despair and the threat of death.

"Nevertheless, cooperation requires both give and take," Vaan added.

"I'm sure the assassins must have given Caelan something of value in addition to sparing his life in order to guarantee his loyalty to their cause," Vaan rubbed his chin thoughtfully with a sly smile and said, "I wonder where he kept the goods."

"Search his bag!"

Captain Rhys immediately barked at the other young warriors by the wagon with a sharp glint in his eyes.

In that instance, Caelan's face completely paled like a ghost as the last trace of his hope disappeared.

He couldn't hide anything at all; Vaan had completely and thoroughly seen through him.

Chapter 67: Caelan's Death

'What a monster!' Caelan's eyes gleamed with malice when he looked at Vaan.

The person had stripped him of all paths to life and condemned him to die by revealing everything.

Death was almost inevitable, but Caelan was unwilling to resign to his fate. He didn't betray everyone only to die a dog's death anyway.

At the very least, he had to drag someone to hell with him.

"Arghhh, I'll kill you!" Caelan roared at Vaan. All of his despair was quickly transformed into anger and hatred, clouding his judgment.

Caelan immediately drew his sword and lunged at Vaan. But before he could even get close, he was pinned down by Captain Rhys and had his sword disarmed.

Ka-cha!

The sound of bone being broken was heard as Captain Rhys disabled Caelan's arms behind his back and pressed his head into the ground.

In that instance, Caelan also felt the cold chill of death from Captain Rhys's killing intent.

"Don't kill him yet, Captain Rhys. There's no need for you to dirty your hands. He is bound to die even if we don't do anything to him," Vaan stated.

"What do you mean, Brother Vaan?" Captain Rhys paused as he looked up and waited for Vaan to elaborate.

However, at that moment, the other young warriors finished finding Caelan's bag and locating the fat bag of coins hidden inside it.

"We found it, Captain! Caelan's bag contained another bag with coins inside it. The amount isn't small as well!" one of the young warriors informed.

As the bronze, silver, and gold coins spilled out of the bag, Captain Rhys glanced at it with his dark and gloomy eyes.

All of the evidence had coincided with Vaan's statement. There was no further room to doubt that Caelan had betrayed them.

"The assassins must have gained this wealth from selling the stolen beast carcasses," Captain Rhys determined before muttering, "And Caelan planned to keep all of this and the Stalactite Milk to himself? How greedy."

"Death would be too easy for you, Caelan! How dare you do this to us! You're a fucking animal! To think we treated someone like you as one of our brothers!" the young warriors curse.

"Hahahaha! So what! You would have all done the same if you had been in the same boat as me! What right do you have to criticize me?! None of you are better than me! Cursing me is the same as cursing yourself, hahaha!"

"This fucker... He must have lost his mind! How dare you put us in the same boat as you! We are nothing like you, you heartless bastard! Go die!"

The young warriors wanted to silence Caelan before he could speak any more nonsense. They all felt ashamed in their hearts because there was truth in Caelan's words.

"Back off! Death is too easy for this bastard!"

Captain Rhys barked at the young warriors, forcing them all to retreat before they could take Caelan's life without his permission.

Shortly after Captain Rhys suppressed the young warriors with his authority, he turned to Vaan and continued from earlier.

"What did you mean by what you said before, Brother Vaan?" Captain Rhys asked.

"Well, you see... even if we leave Caelan alone, the assassins are still going to kill him. If they had succeeded in their plan, they would have killed him and taken their money back anyway," Vaan stated.

"But they failed."

"Yes, so the assassins must be fuming right now, thinking Caelan tricked them. They will definitely kill him once they find him," Vaan stated.

When Caelan heard that, he felt so aggrieved that his eyes started bleeding from glaring too hard.

Why was his fate so ridiculous? No matter what he did, he would still die in the end? How can he accept that? Life was so unfair.

"How do you want to deal with this person, Lady Linette?" Captain Rhys asked.

"We don't have time to waste on this person. Just give him a quick death and be on our way," Linetta said after some thought before adding, "We shouldn't be wasting time and giving the assassins a chance to catch up."

"Understood, my Lady," Captain Rhys nodded.

Ka-cha!

Captain Rhys broke Caelan's neck, immediately snuffing out Caelan's life. He left his body to rot on the road without a proper burial and prepared to leave with the group.

"Put away the coins. Since it originally belonged to us, we will split the share later," Captain Rhys stated.

"Yes, Captain," the young warriors complied.

They loaded the coin bag onto the wagon and prepared for their departure. But before the group left the area, the young warriors all kicked Caelan's corpse and vented their anger.

...

Nevertheless, the atmosphere was strange within the escort group during the remainder of their travel to Redpine City.

Although Vaan allowed the group to avoid an ambush from the assassins where their strength remained unknown and even pointed out Caelan's betrayal without much effort, none of the young warriors felt grateful to him.

They felt like Vaan exploited them.

"What's with that look? Why are you looking at our benefactor like that?" Captain Rhys glared at one of the young warriors after noticing his unfriendly gaze toward Vaan.

"I don't feel safe traveling with someone who cannot be trusted, Captain. If we encounter a life-or-death crisis, this person might backstab us," the young warrior voiced his honest thoughts.

Captain Rhys immediately fell silent for a moment before Linetta snickered with disdain at the young warrior's narrow-mindedness.

The Steelguard Escort Group's new recruits had been nothing but trouble.

"Sometimes, you have to fool your allies in order to fool your enemies. Vaan's method might have been unconventional, but you cannot deny its effectiveness," Linetta stated coldly.

"Haiz," Captain Rhys softly sighed before agreeing, "Lady Linette is right. If it wasn't for Brother Vaan's plan, who knows how many of you would have died fighting the assassins? You all need to learn how to be grateful."

"Che, we wouldn't have this problem if it wasn't for Lady Linette and Lady Lillias in the first place," a young warrior quietly spat his complaint.

But no matter how quiet he was, multiple faces immediately darkened upon hearing it.

Chapter 68: Symbol of Wealth and Authority

"Once again, I am deeply sorry for my men's behavior, Lady Linette. Please give me a moment to fix them into shape," Captain Rhys said apologetically while containing his rage and shame.

"Make it quick," Linetta permitted while casting a brief but chilling glance at the young warriors.

"Thank you, Lady Linette."

"Dammit, why does our captain have to keep apologizing to—"

"Enough!!!" Captain Rhys snapped and scanned the young warriors with his fierce. They don't seem like they learn from their mistakes, even if they were beaten to death.

"Time and time again, you have all continued to test my patience! You are not fucking kids under the protection of your mothers anymore, so stop acting like spoiled brats! You should have understood our line of work before you joined!"

"Regardless of our client's circumstances, it's our responsibility to ensure the safety of their journey once we accept their money! Only incompetent people complain and pin blames on others! Tell me, are you incompetent?!"

"No, we are not, Captain!" the young warriors strongly answered.

"Wrong! You are incompetent! You are all fucking incompetent! So incompetent I would have kicked you all out of the group if it wasn't for your mothers possessing some relationship with the Steelguard Escort Group!" Captain Rhys cursed.

In fact, Captain Rhys wanted to curse their mothers for being incompetent as well. After all, their mothers wouldn't have sent them to work for the Steelguard Escort Group if they were capable people.

However, cursing witches wasn't a man could do—no matter how incompetent the witches were.

Captain Rhys could curse their incompetent sons all he wanted, but the same cannot be done for their witch mothers. It was the same as asking for death!

"None of you could even compare to the last batch of new recruits! Not a single one of them had a good upbringing, unlike all of you! And yet they are countless times better than all of you! They are orphans from the slums! The youngest among the last batch was even fifteen years old!"

"The fact that none of you who have just reached adulthood can't even compare to a fifteen-year-old orphan from the slums... You should all be ashamed of yourselves!" Captain Rhys berated.

Maturity, self-discipline, and integrity – the young warriors lacked all three aspects.

Captain Rhys silently decided to write an in-depth report on the new recruits' performances and recommend the discontinuation of their service after he returned to the Steelguard Escort Group's headquarters.

Nevertheless, Captain Rhys harshly scolded and cursed the young warriors to the point that they did not get the chance to refute his words.

Even when they were finally given a chance, they had nothing to say in their defense.

Captain Rhys did not give them a shred of respect. They were humiliated and shamed, but they could do nothing about it.

They did not deserve Captain Rhys's respect. Respect was earned and not given, and they had lost all of it.

"..."

The journey to Redpine City became deathly silent without the escort group besides the occasional encounter with green goblin ambushes on the road.

Only Vaan and the two sisters remained casual and lively after putting the young warriors' matters behind them.

"Once again, I would like to apologize for my men's unruly behaviors. I hope Lady Linette, Lady Lillas, and Brother Vaan do not think badly of the Steelguard Escort Group. These new recruits do not represent all of us," Captain Rhys said.

"You don't have to worry. The Delarosa Household won't hold the whole Steelguard Escort Group responsible for the misconduct and disrespect of their new recruits," Linetta coolly said.

Nevertheless, Captain Rhys focused on the "whole" of Linetta's words before he strengthened his resolve.

"Thank you, Lady Linette. I can assure you that the Steelguard Escort Group will punish our new recruits appropriately," Captain Rhys promised.

"Then, that's that," Linette ended their talk there.

"You don't blame me, do you, Captain Rhys?" Vaan asked shortly after.

"How can I?" Captain Rhys shook his head with a wry smile.

"Brother Vaan had given me enough hints ahead of time. More importantly, we avoided a bloodbath thanks to you. Your plan to fool the enemies by fooling your allies first was a well-thought-out plan. Unfortunately, my men are too narrow-minded to appreciate it."

"I'm afraid these idiots wouldn't even last a week if they didn't have me to supervise them," Captain Rhys said with a sigh.

"A week?" Vaan's lip curled into a smile before saying, "You're too generous, Captain Rhys. It would be amazing if those wastrels could last a whole day without courting death. That being said, even wastrels have their uses."

An experienced person doesn't fear strong opponents, only pig-like teammates.

On the other hand, a competent person would know how to use their pig-like teammates to their advantage.

Captain Rhys smiled without commenting further. He had criticized his men enough. They might just rebel and stab him in his sleep if he pushed them any further.

...

Sometime later, the trees became sparse as the group left the thick woods and entered an open area.

Soon, the sturdy, tall brick walls of Redpine City came into view, lightly illuminated by brightly-lit torches in the night.

At a single glance, one could immediately tell the difference when comparing the state of Redpine City and Sunpeak Town.

They were worlds apart; one was declining, and the other was prosperous.

Rumble...!

As Vaan's group arrived at the city gate, a distant shadowy figure roared with a droning noise in the night sky.

The noise grew louder very quickly but became just as distant several moments later.

"Was that...?"

"An airship."

Linetta finished off her younger sister's words, which she uttered in surprise. Neither of them expected an airship to be passing through the region.

At the same time, Vaan's eyes dimmed as he deactivated his Magic Vision. He had seen the convergence of mana.

Even though Vaan had only heard about them from others and read them in books, he did not doubt that it was an airship—a mana-powered airship, to be precise.

It was a symbol of wealth and authority in the Kingdom of Black Rose.

"Why is there an airship here? Which important person is passing through this part of the kingdom?" Lillias wondered with surprise.

Chapter 69: Lord Helia's Invitation

"Considering what happened in the Blackmoon Region a while back, someone must have relayed the news to Blackthorn City. Perhaps the queen dispatched an inquisitor to investigate," Linetta speculated with surprise.

The lowest-ranking inquisitors in the kingdom were at least Earl-rank nobles.

"Surely not, right?" Lillias doubted before adding, "The situation in Blackmoon Region was indeed very dangerous for us back then, but even if many people died, it shouldn't be serious enough to summon an inquisitor... probably."

Lillias became unconfident the more she thought about her reasoning.

"It's hard to say, Lady Lillias. I'm not in a position to comment on the queen, but it doesn't need to be a big issue for our sovereign to dispatch an inquisitor for investigation," Captain Rhys inserted his opinion.

"Right... If it's about our sovereign, anything could happen," Linette agreed with a nod.

No one could guess the thoughts of a Transcendent Witch, especially the Transcendent Witch of Black Rose, who was considered a little eccentric.

When it comes to managing the kingdom, whether they were big or small, everything was up to the ruler's whims.

"What do you think, Vaan?" Linette turned to him and expressed her interest in his opinion.

"What do I think?" Vaan paused for a moment before he replied with a mysterious smile, "Well, let's just say the City Lord of Blackmoon City is in big trouble, my Lady."

"Why's that?" Linette pressed with one of her brows raised, hoping Vaan would provide a more detailed answer.

"Because of you and Lady Lillias, my Lady. You neither announced your arrival in Blackmoon City nor did you bring any subordinates from your household for protection. Who do you think will have the biggest reaction to the disaster in Blackmoon Region?"

"It wouldn't be the City of Blackmoon City herself, right?" Lillias wondered.

Vaan glanced at Lillas for a moment before asking her with amusement, "If you did something wrong as a lord, would you take the initiative to report the problem, my Lady?"

"Don't you think it would be the same as shooting yourself in the foot with a risk of potentially burning down your house in the process?" Vaan added.

"Err, maybe... I think..." Lillias scratched her head wryly before asking, "What's up with the weird analogy?"

"An inquisition won't just look into the problem they are tasked to investigate. They will also dig up every problem they can find within the lord's territory and determine whether the lord is managing their territory adequately," Vaan stated.

"If there are too many problems within the territory, the inquisitor may deem the lord unfit for the role and pass the word to the queen. In that instance, the queen will usually strip the lord of their territory and give it to a more capable lord to manage."

The Transcendent Witch of Black Rose was generous in handing out territories to her loyal subjects to manage.

But at the same time, the Transcendent Witch of Black Rose wouldn't hesitate to pass their territories onto another if she found them incompetent.

A single word could determine the rise and fall of a household.

"City Lord Istana would be the last person to make a report to Capital and alert the inquisitors," Vaan stated.

"I get it," Linetta's eyes flickered with enlightenment before saying, "Our Delarosa Household would have the biggest reaction."

"Why's that, sister?" Lillias turned to her with confusion. "Mother is bedridden, and all authority and management is currently in Aunty's hands. Would Aunty kick up a fuss when she is trying to get rid of us?"

"That's the point, Lily. Even if Aunty wants us dead, she has to put up a front to make others believe she cares about us," Linetta stated.

"After all, it would be too strange if the entire Delarosa Household remained silent when they knew the two flowers of the Delarosa Household passed through the Blackmoon Region during its most dangerous period."

"And if the Delarosa Household is voicing a complaint, the queen would definitely dispatch an inquisitor to investigate. That is why Vaan mentioned that the City Lord of Blackmoon City would be in trouble."

"Even if City Lord Istana didn't provoke the Dark Hellhounds in the Blackmoon Region, it still happened under her rule. She wouldn't be free from blame," Linetta explained.

"Ooh~!" Lillias finally understood the reasoning. It was very plausible.

"Anyhow, let us enter the city. The night watchers are giving us odd stares since we are just standing outside the gate," Linetta mentioned.

Shortly after, Vaan and the two ladies hopped off the Earth Salamander before Linetta unsummoned it. Afterward, everyone passed through the gate without being stopped by the guards.

Nevertheless, Vaan felt something scan his entire body like everyone else.

'This must be one of those magic tools used for identifying and recording information of people entering and leaving the city,' Vaan determined.

Along with the advancement in magic engineering, magic tools were essential to daily life in the present era.

However, not all cities and towns were developed enough to incorporate them like Redpine City. Some were more backward like Sunpeak Town.

Small villages with primitive lifestyles also existed in some secluded regions.

The development and application of technology was not uniform throughout the kingdom.

'Security is quite high,' Vaan thought with a casual look.

As a first-timer entering Redpine City, Vaan's information was newly generated and saved in the city's database.

The more advanced identification-type magic tools could record a person's name and status, while the less advanced ones would only record their appearance and criminal record.

As no one came forward to record his name and status into the city's database, Vaan quickly determined Redpine City's identification-type magic tool to be one of the less advanced ones.

"We'll resupply for necessities in the city. Then, we will continue on our way and head to the next city through the night," Linetta said with a sigh.

Redpine City was where they would be parting with Vaan.

Linetta glanced at Vaan and wanted to say something when a group of servants led by a fairly important-looking witch suddenly approached them with hasty steps.

"Welcome to Redpine City, Lady Linette, and Lady Lillias. Lord Helia would like to invite both of you to her castle. And if you may, please allow me to escort you two there," the leading witch informed humbly.

Linetta and Lillias glanced at each other with furrowed brows.

Chapter 70: Hobgoblin's Road

Generally, the city lord wouldn't bother extending an invitation, even if they knew important people were visiting or passing through their city.

There were many nobles in the kingdom, not to mention the families and extended families of nobles. Simply said, there were a lot of people in the upper class.

Those that like to travel wouldn't be small in number either.

If the lord had to meet every person of status every time they visited the city, the lord would be greatly inconvenienced.

As such, Linetta and Lillias were baffled to learn of Lord Helia's invitation.

They would have understood if it was someone like their mother, a Marquis-rank noble, unlike them who have yet to contribute to the kingdom and receive peerage from the ruler.

"May I ask who you are? And why does Lord Helia want to see us?" Linetta asked politely before adding, "I believe someone like Lord Helia would be quite busy to extend an invitation to others visiting her city normally..."

"Oh my, I am deeply sorry, Lady Linette. Where were my manners? I am Yasmin, the head of the combat witches serving under Lord Helia," the leading witch introduced herself.

Despite being a witch, she wore armor over her red dress like a knight and had a sword equipped at her waist.

Just by looking at Yasmin's appearance, anyone can guess that she was a combat witch—one who fights with both magic and martial prowess.

"As for a reason behind Lord Helia's invitation, I am not exactly sure what my Lady's intentions are, but I do have a pretty good guess. We've recently received a request from the Delarosa Household to provide Lady Linette and Lillias with protection if you made it to our city."

"Lord Helia must have something to talk to Lady Linette and Lady Lillias related to that," Yasmin assumed.

"I see..." Linetta muttered before glancing at Vaan for a moment. Afterward, she asked Yasmin, "There won't be any problem if I bring another person along, right?"

"By person, are you referring to this man, Lady Linette?" Yasmin sought Linetta's confirmation after she briefly stared at Vaan.

"That's right," Linetta nodded.

"I am unable to confirm. Please allow me to check with Lord Helia," Yasmin requested.

Shortly after, Yasmin summoned a flaming bird familiar and sent it to deliver a message to Lord Helia in her castle.

The flaming bird flew very quickly, disappearing into the distant castle in a short moment. A few breaths later, the flaming bird returned with Lord Helia's message.

After Yasmin received Lord Helia's permission through her flaming bird familiar, she nodded to Linetta.

"Lord Helia had permitted the man to tag along. Please follow me, Lady Linette and Lady Lillias. Lord Helia awaits you at her castle."

"Alright."

Before heading to Lord Helia's castle, Linetta made arrangements for Captain Rhys and his escort group, giving them a time and location.

Afterward, she followed Yasmin with Vaan and Lillias.

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Meanwhile, a group of five dark-cloaked figures hid in the ground on Hobgoblin's Road at the midway point between Sunpeak Town and Redpine City.

The pathway was full of hills with steep downward and upward slopes.

To the east of Hobgoblin's Road was the steep rocky wall of Red Goblin Mountain and to the west of Hobgoblin's Road was a steep cliff leading to a dense forest below.

Unless one could fly or scale the mountain wall, there was only one way forward and one way backward.

Nevertheless, the dark-cloaked figures in hiding were all trained assassins from the Assembly of Silent Night.

Despite waiting until nighttime to ambush Linetta and the escort group, the assassins in hiding did not discover a single soul beside themselves.

Hobgoblin's Road was a deserted road that not many people used.

"Black Crow, are you sure the information is correct?" one of the assassins inquired quietly.

"Absolutely! I interrogated the people myself. Do you think I would make a stupid mistake like misremembering the information?" Black Crow replied with a frown.

That being said, none of his facial features could be seen.

The assassins had their bodies completely wrapped up in black cloths from top to bottom under their dark cloaks. Only their unnatural yellow eyes weren't covered, which would have obstructed their sight.

"Well, how do you explain the current situation? The target should have arrived some time ago, yet they are still not here. If your information isn't false, then I don't know what is," the assassin criticized.

"The target's party must have experienced delays on the road. The young idiots in the escort group have no sense of danger and responsibility. They drank a lot last night despite still being on the job," Black Crow speculated.

"You are too impatient, Silver Horn. Just wait a little longer. The targets will definitely show up soon. I can't be wrong."

"Hmm, you spoke some sense. I suppose we can afford to wait a little longer," Silver Horn thought before suddenly adding, "However, you will be held responsible for the mission's failure if the target still doesn't show up in the next two hours."

Nevertheless, two hours quickly passed before Silver Horn snapped.

"Fuck! I knew your information was wrong, Black Crow. Not only did you get tricked by a brat, you even gave him all the money we made!"

"Impossible! There's no way I wouldn't know if he was lying or not. According to their heartbeats, the two people I interrogated had both spoken the truth!"

"If none of them lied, then where the fuck are our targets? They are definitely aware of us going after them. There's no way that they are taking their sweet time sightseeing on Hobgoblin's Road despite being aware of that!"

"We've failed the mission. Our targets have most likely taken Goblin's Road to Redpine City. We've been hoodwinked by a clever tactician," a third assassin spoke.

"We haven't failed the mission yet!" said a fourth assassin.

Unwillingness could be sensed in his tone as the fourth assassin continued, "If we hurry, we can still catch up to the targets at Redpine City or the next."

"Fool! Redpine City's security measures will immediately detect the abnormalities within our bodies the moment we step through their gates!" Black Crow barked angrily.

As much as Black Crow hated the current situation, entering Redpine City was too risky.