

The Witch 401

Chapter 401: Spirits at Work

Shortly after Sybil disappeared from the underground space, Henrietta reopened her eyes with a soft sigh, lamenting the fate of humanity.

'Greed, betrayal, war... Rinse and repeat. Humanity never learns from its mistake... Never united, always distrustful, always hating.'

Henrietta had already taught the other Transcendent Witches the secret to becoming stronger multiple times in the past. She had told them the trick lay in utilization, not accumulation of one's power.

Without applying utilization, her divine power would just be as strong as any other Transcendent Witch.

However, it was a shame that no one believed her even though they were all granted equal opportunities. Ultimately, they simply had differences in talents.

If Sybil and the other Transcendent Witches weren't so entitled that they regarded her generosity as a privilege, she might have continued to help them.

Unfortunately, they shouldn't have gone after things that didn't belong to them.

Even though Henrietta was absent from her throne, she didn't have the slightest concern for her kingdom. She knew it would be fine even without her.

The Holy Knight Empire was in for a rude awakening if it invaded the Kingdom of Black Rose and stirred up the hornet's nest.

'You should stop caring about the human race, Young Henrietta. For the past three hundred years, you have tried to guide them on the right path. But where has that gotten you? Nowhere. They have only ever tried to take advantage of your kindness and use you for their own interest,' an ancient voice sounded in Henrietta's mind.

'Demons aren't the greatest threat to humanity. No, you should have known by now – Humanity itself is the greatest threat to its own existence! Thus, you do not need to care about them. If they are fated for extinction, nothing you do can stop it. Instead, you should focus on yourself!'

'In the great scheme of things, all beings, including humans, are merely pawns in the game of life, struggling for survival and dominance! If you don't fight to win, your bones will be the stepping stones for lifting others toward their goals!'

'Of all my successors, your talent has been the greatest. As a mere Rank 5, you can already perceive the universal laws. But, even though it is done through my divine power, that's still not something just anyone can do.'

'You can still become much stronger, Young Henrietta. You just need to throw away your burdens and wholeheartedly pursue power. Once you achieve eternity, you'll understand what it means by a small sacrifice for the greater good.'

'Compared to eternal life, protecting humanity is but an insignificant goal. Humanity does not need your protection. But, more importantly, they clearly do not want your protection! So why bother?' the ancient voice asked.

"We've been over this multiple times, Master. It's just something for my own self-satisfaction. When I am ready, I will definitely pursue power wholeheartedly. So you don't need to worry about that," Henrietta replied perfunctorily.

'Hmph! Suit yourself. Just don't die,' the ancient voice ordered.

"I know."

Shortly after, Henrietta closed her eyes and resumed her meditation, spreading out her consciousness to perceive her surroundings in silence.

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Kingdom of Black Rose, Red Goblin Mountain

After Vaan reached the highest point of the mountain, he studied the region with Omni-Sense. Soon, he confirmed the present land wasn't suitable for building such a large magic tower.

Due to the collapse of the previous pocket realm, the foundations wouldn't be firm enough to keep a ten-thousand-foot magic tower standing.

The slightest unevenness in the foundation would drastically increase the risk of the magic tower tilting and falling over. In that event, all their effort, time, and money would be laid to waste.

'It looks like some landscaping will be required,' Vaan thought.

Shortly after, he summoned all three of his contracted spirits.

Considering he had been keeping them inside his body for a while, it was just the right time to let them out to play.

"Fyuu—!"

Ruby was the first to fly out of Vaan's body as she materialized into her mountain bluebird form. The unfamiliar environment immediately made Ruby halt her movements before she surveyed the area out of curiosity.

However, she was quickly interrupted before she could get a good look.

Topaz, who was excited and full of energy, shot out of Vaan's body like a blazing cannonball, crashing straight into Ruby's back and knocking her off into the distance.

Ruby spun uncontrollably, becoming dizzy as she drew an arc in the air before she crashlanded, embedding her beak into the soft ground that shortly hardened due to her flames.

As a result, Ruby ended up stuck upside down with half her body inside the hardened ground. Her legs flailed in the air helplessly as she tried to free herself but to no avail.

"Fyuu, fyuu!" Ruby cried for help in her panicky and disorientated state, forgetting she was a Mid-rank Fire Spirit.

Topaz did not attempt to help Ruby free herself. Instead, she simply poked Ruby a few times for fun, causing the latter to become distressed.

Meanwhile, Emerald was the last to leave Vaan's body.

"Myuu?"

At first, Emerald peeked outside Vaan's body with just her head like a timid child before she deemed the outside was safe for her to come out.

She landed on the ground with a soft plop.

After she saw Ruby's plight and heard her cry for help, she went over to get Ruby out of the ground. However, she immediately backed away and gave up after she got slightly burned by her flames.

"Myuu..." Emerald rubbed the small burn on her hand with a sad look.

On the other hand, Topaz continued to poke Ruby in odd places and teased her, thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Kukukukyu," Topaz giggled.

"Fyu, f-yuu!" Ruby tried to evade the ticklish poke with her limited movements before she became a little mad at Topaz.

Boom!

Ruby charged up her fiery energy and erupted with an outburst of flames, blasting her way out of the ground and freeing herself.

At the same time, bits of hot soil and red flames scattered in every direction. Topaz and Emerald were both caught under the small explosion of fireworks.

However, debris and flames simply bounced off Topaz's body. On the other hand, Emerald got lit on fire when a piece of burning rock landed on her head.

"Myu, myuu!" Emerald cried pitifully, running in circles and rolling around on the ground as she attempted to put out the fire.

The scene became chaotic following the interaction between the three spirits.

Vaan didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the chaotic scene following the interaction between his three contracted spirits.

Ruby's bad luck seemed to have spread to Emerald and caused her secondhand suffering.

"Alright, alright. That's enough. Tia, you should apologize to Ru and make peace with each other," Vaan instructed, causing Topaz to pout but ultimately comply. Then, he turned to Emerald. "Mera, you won't blame Ru, right?"

"Myu!" Emerald shook her head while hiding behind Vaan's leg timidly, seemingly recovered from her burns but still afraid of Ruby.

Nevertheless, shortly after Vaan mediated between the three spirits, he put all three of them to work. He had them help him do some landscaping and improve the solidity of the ground.

First, Vaan and Emerald manipulated the growth of tree roots, causing them to spread deep and far throughout the underground.

Then, Vaan and Topaz pulled up all the rocks and debris underneath the earth before flattening and compressing the ground, removing any gaps left behind by the collapsed pocket realm.

Afterward, Vaan and Ruby set fire to everything in a blazing hellfire, transforming the region into a land of molten lava.

Most of the work in the second half was primarily carried out by just Vaan and Ruby.

As such, Emerald hid in Vaan's body as the horrid flames devastated the area after her work was done.

On the other hand, Topaz stood on Vaan's shoulder with one hand pointing out and the other on her hips, acting like she was a construction supervisor directing Ruby's work.

"Kyu, kyu, kyuu!"

"Fyu, fyuu."

Ruby lazily played along while following Vaan's lead.

Nevertheless, they repeatedly refined the mountain, transforming it into a land of igneous rocks, as igneous rocks were much harder than ordinary rocks.

Unfortunately, Vaan couldn't finish his work on the mountain in a single day due to its sheer size and his spirits exhausting their mana.

"Kyuu..."

"Myuu..."

"Fyuu..."

Topaz, Emerald, and Ruby all lay on the ground sluggishly, not wanting to do anything as they suffered from mana deficiency.

"Thank you for the hard work," Vaan acknowledged their effort with a smile.

In return, Topaz, Emerald, and Ruby responded with cute, innocent, and cheerful smiles. Although they were tired, the work was fun and worth it in the end.

After Vaan fed them mana stones to help them recover, he glanced at the darkened sky and noticed many hours had passed.

He decided it was time to head back for the day, check on the situation in Sunpeak Town, and spend the night training with the ladies.

But as Vaan was about to leave, he sensed Zodreg's presence from a distance. Zodreg had also felt Vaan's general location and made his way over.

Zodreg had most likely completed his first round of scouting and came back to report his findings to Vaan.

"I have finished scouting the neighboring regions as you required, Supreme Leader," Zodreg announced after descending from the sky and exiting his stealth mode.

Sure enough, it was as Vaan expected.

"Did you find anything unusual?"

"Yes, Supreme Leader!"

"Let's hear it then."

Chapter 402: Zodreg's Report

"Understood, Supreme Leader," Zodreg acknowledged before taking a moment to compile his findings.

"I am uncertain if this is the norm around here in the witch kingdom, but I noticed blockades were set up beyond the neighboring human settlements in each direction, preventing people from entering and leaving this central region, Supreme Leader."

"Furthermore, according to what I learned, the people at the blockade appeared to be part of this kingdom's royal army. It almost seemed like the kingdom's ruler personally ordered the blockade to contain the region," Zodreg added.

"Transcendent Henrietta mobilized the army to seal off the central region?" Vaan raised an eyebrow before shortly shaking his head. "That doesn't sound right. Unless Transcendent Henrietta had forsaken the kingdom, doing such a thing wouldn't benefit her in any way."

"Of course, it could be to hide the news of Sunpeak Town's development from the greedy witches living in the capital. However, this is hardly considered a good move when multiple predators are eyeing this piece of land."

"I'm more inclined to believe the royal army was mobilized by one of the witches that chose to side with Transcendent Sybil," Vaan said with furrowed brows.

In other words, at least one witch with a high position in the royal army was working with Transcendent Sybil.

"Right, Supreme Leader; I also forgot to mention the blockades were also equipped with large magic tools that seemed to be mana disruptors," Zodreg recalled.

"Mana disruptors, huh?" Vaan's eyes flickered thoughtfully before he commented, "How meticulous."

As its name suggested, mana disruptors disrupt mana—or, more precisely, they disrupt mana signals, which was similar to a mana version of sound waves. Any large-scale spell cast within the range of mana disruptors would not be felt outside of it.

At the same time, the mana disruptors would also disable all communication-type magic tools; the mana signals transmitted by them would never reach their destination.

There was even the risk of the messages hidden in the mana signals getting intercepted.

"Since the enemy has also deployed mana disruptors, any long-range communication-type magic tool would become useless. They've truly locked down all forms of news from leaving and entering the central region."

"The capital won't learn what happens in the central region, and no one in the central region can contact outside," Vaan stated.

After learning about the mana disruptors, Vaan felt even more certain that Transcendent Henrietta didn't order the blockade.

He also understood why Transcendent Henrietta never appeared to investigate his battles in Sunpeak Town.

However, there was only so much time the capital could remain oblivious to the situation in the central region. Unless the royal army silenced everyone heading to the central region, news of the blockade would have spread throughout the capital sooner or later.

As such, even if Transcendent Henrietta weren't all-knowing, she would be too incompetent of a ruler not to know or even see the blockade.

In other words, there were only two possibilities; Transcendent Henrietta either foolishly turned a blind eye to the blockade, or she was in a situation where she could do nothing about it.

"What are you thinking about, Supreme Leader?" Zodreg wondered out loud. He couldn't help but feel curious seeing the person in such deep thought.

At the same time, the spirits sitting on Vaan's shoulders also tilted their heads toward him curiously while nibbling on the mana stones.

As a bird form, Ruby had no hands like Emerald and Topaz. Thus, she had the whole mana stone stuffed in her mouth, causing her cheeks to be puffed out like a squirrel with nuts.

However, Ruby accidentally swallowed the mana stone and got it stuck in her throat, causing her face to pale as she choked.

"Fyuk, fyuk!" Ruby tried to cry for help.

"I was just thinking; if Transcendent Henrietta's strength has reached Peak-level Rank 5, the Holy Knight Empire still has no chance of winning unless something was done about her," Vaan casually mentioned as he helped Ruby disperse the mana stone stuck in her throat.

"Transcendent Sybil shouldn't have overlooked this, even if she found a way to keep the other witch kingdoms from aiding the Kingdom of Black Rose. It would be too risky to confront a Peak-level Rank 5 being without an equal opposing power."

"Of course, the Holy Knight Empire has Ulrich Salazar. But if he openly challenged Transcendent Henrietta, his identity as a Devil's Contractor would be exposed, and the Holy Knight Empire would be viewed as the enemy of humanity for shielding him."

"If that happens, Ulrich Salazar will no longer have a place on this continent and be forced to flee to Gehenna—if he can get past us, of course. As such, it's unlikely for him to reveal his strength and even more unlikely for the Holy Knight Empire to invade without a foolproof plan since they don't know his secret identity."

"After pondering for some time, I'm ultimately led to believe Transcendent Sybil has found a way to contain Transcendent Henrietta while the Holy Knight Empire invades—No, Transcendent Sybil might have already trapped her somewhere," Vaan guessed with narrowed eyes.

Shortly after, he shifted his gaze to Zodreg.

"If I want you to investigate the capital and check if Transcendent Henrietta is present in her magic tower, do you think you can do it unnoticed?" Vaan asked.

"You mean that city of spires up in the north?" Zodreg asked for confirmation before shaking his head. "I might have reached Rank 5, but I'm afraid that's impossible even for me, Supreme Leader."

"I don't even need to go there personally to feel the cluster of mana gathered in that region. I would say there are at least several hundred thousands of magic towers in that land. The cumulative mana gathered from all these magic towers works like a network of detectors."

"As such, the security is too high for me to bypass unnoticed. I'm not sure even the Peak Lords can sneak through the city's airspace without getting discovered either," Zodreg replied.

"I see," Vaan casually uttered without a shred of disappointment, having suspected that might have been the case. "Anyhow, let's leave it at that."

"Let's talk about Redpine City, the first city north of these mountains. You should have passed it twice already. What's the situation there?" Vaan asked.

Shortly after Zodreg filled him in on the details of Redpine City, Vaan understood Redpine City also had its own difficulties.

However, Redpine City was on the lower list of priorities compared to Sunpeak Town.

In other words, there was a chance that Lord Helia still had her long-range communication-type magic tool.

Once they ruin the northern mana disruptors, they could use the magic tool to inform the capital.

Transcendent Sybil's people were trying to keep Sunpeak Town's situation from reaching the capital. Thus, it was all the more reason for him to ruin their plan.

Although doing such a thing would cause great chaos for both sides, the traffic to Sunpeak Town would likely increase by a few dozen times.

His strength now, he was no longer afraid of troublemakers. Instead, he welcomed them. It would give him more victims to extort and help him speed up Sunpeak Town's development.

At the same time, the confrontation between him and the supremacist faction would force Transcendent Henrietta to intervene—if she was still in the capital.

If Transcendent Henrietta didn't appear during the chaos, it would confirm his suspicion regarding her absence.

In that case, he would have free rein to do whatever he pleased with her kingdom as he protected it from outside threats, even if it involved some housecleaning.

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After Zodreg finished all his reports, his interest shifted to the mountain.

When he asked the Supreme Leader about it, Vaan explained his plan to build the ten-thousand-foot magic tower, which required a very firm foundation.

"Our clan has a very large collection of rare minerals. You can find the strongest of metals there. Why don't you use them to build the foundation, Supreme Leader?" Zodreg suggested. "And if we lack Rank 5 metals, we can produce new ones through alloy fusion."

"Bold of you to assume I wasn't planning to," Vaan replied.

Zodreg was immediately speechless.

He suddenly recalled the eighth and ninth dragon lords recently had their mana stone collections emptied by the Supreme Leader.

Would the same happen to their mineral collection next? – Zodreg wondered.

While Vaan and Zodreg were discussing, Ruby finished absorbing the mana stone and started rubbing her cheeks against the side of his neck.

"Fyuu, fyuu!" Ruby made an unexpected yet not-so-unexpected request.

"Hm?" Vaan shifted his attention to her and uttered, "You want to see my blue flames again? Alright then."

Shortly after, a tiny wisp of blue flames lit up on his fingertip like a lighter before he moved it closer to Ruby.

During their earlier work, Ruby had shown fascination toward his blue flames.

Although Ruby had the form of a mountain bluebird, she was not blue at all. Instead, she was mostly red like any other Fire Spirit.

At first, Vaan thought Ruby's attraction was just simple curiosity since his flames differed from normal flames. But later, he suspected she might have an affinity with it.

His suspicions were confirmed when Ruby suddenly devoured the wisp of blue flames like a powerful vacuum.

Shortly after, she grimaced in pain.

"Fyuu..." Ruby groaned.

Vaan started to worry, thinking his blue flames were too powerful for her, given she was only a Mid-rank Fire Spirit. On the other hand, his blue flames were comparable to the fires of a Quasi-Divine Fire Spirit like Flamewing.

That said, Ruby wouldn't have attempted to devour his blue flames if she didn't think she could handle it.

After all, spirits weren't prone to committing suicide to their own element – or at least, Vaan hoped not.

Unfortunately, he didn't know much about spirits for him to be certain.

Ruby's body inflated like a balloon, seemingly about to explode, which caused Vaan even greater worry.

But then, she burped out all the smoke in her body and deflated back to her original size.

"Fuu...!" Ruby expressed her joy and satisfaction as if she had just finished eating a great meal.

At the same time, Vaan received a notification from the system.

Ding!

<Ruby (Mid-rank Fire Spirit) has grown stronger>

<[Mana Capacity]: 20/255 → 25/360>

Chapter 403: Emperor Renardier

Unexpectedly, Ruby could absorb Vaan's blue flames to improve herself despite the level of his flames.

Although Vaan didn't know much about spirits, logically speaking, spirits shouldn't be capable of absorbing elements more than one rank above their level. As such, Ruby's ability should be considered abnormal.

Vaan suspected it had something to do with her unknown unique talent.

"Want some more?"

Vaan summoned another wisp of blue flames on his fingertip, wondering whether he could draw out Ruby's unique talent if he continued to feed her.

However, Ruby vehemently shook her head and rolled over on her back, expressing she was too full to consume any more of his blue flames.

"Next time, then?"

"Fyuu!"

Ruby nodded enthusiastically.

"Do you have any more tasks for me, Supreme Leader?" Zodreg enquired shortly after the spirits went back inside Vaan's body.

"As a matter of fact, I do, Zodreg," Vaan confirmed with a nod before demanding, "Open a spatial gate to Redpine City for me."

"I'll be visiting the Lord of Redpine City. And while I am doing that, I want you to head back to the blockades and remove the mana disruptors. It doesn't matter if you destroy or confiscate them; I just want the mana disruption field gone."

"It's fine to run a little wild as long as the task is completed. Also, it doesn't matter if you expose your existence; just don't let people see your true appearance," Vaan added.

If rumors about a dragon were to spread across the kingdom, it would attract even more people to the central region.

"Understood, Supreme Leader," Zodreg obliged with a serious nod, but he couldn't hide his excitement.

The taste of freedom was as sweet and addicting as nectar.

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Shortly after Zodreg opened the spatial gate, Vaan entered it and arrived in the skies above Redpine City's central district.

He immediately plummeted after passing through the circular black gate—or, more precisely, it was just a hole in space.

After Vaan got a sense of his location and direction, he kicked against the empty air and thrust himself toward Helia's castle with a quick burst of flames at the soles of his feet.

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Swish!

"Intruder!" an Early-stage Senior Witch in the courtyard immediately alerted the entire castle after catching sight of Vaan's rapid approach. "Halt!"

The Early-stage Senior Witch quickly prepared to fire warning shots, but another Early-stage Senior Witch suddenly tapped her on the shoulder and shook her head.

"Hold on. I recognize him. That's the Lord's valued guest, Sir Vahn," the Senior Witch stated.

Even so, the earlier outburst still attracted all the castle's guards over.

At the same time, they were intimidated by Vaan's powerful aura even though he didn't actively reveal his strength. As such, they surrounded him with nervous looks without making any hasty moves after he landed in the courtyard and awaited further instructions.

It didn't take long before Lord Helia personally came out and escorted him inside the hall to chat with a pleasant smile.

However, it couldn't hide the fatigue under her eyes.

It was clear that Lord Helia didn't have much proper rest in the past week or month due to various issues concerning Sunpeak Town and the central region as a whole.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you again, Sir Vahn. It seems your trip to the Thousand Fog Mountains has been most successful," Helia commented, vaguely sensing Vaan's powerful aura.

Although she was shocked by how much Vaan had grown, she felt even more glad by the presence of a strong ally.

"I'd take it that you know what's been happening in Sunpeak Town and its neighboring regions, yours included?" Vaan casually asked.

"Yes, but only the surface issues," Helia nodded before saying, "Besides some unruly merchants, I haven't been able to figure out who else has been involved. The other parties aren't easy to deal with."

"I see," Vaan uttered.

Shortly after, he explained the whole situation to Helia, revealing the enemies presently plotting against the kingdom.

The revelation made Helia's expression turn terribly grim.

She was only a Peak-stage Senior Witch, while the enemies were at least the equivalent of Peak-stage Senior Witches or stronger. They weren't opponents she could deal with.

Fortunately, she hadn't been on their list of priorities. Otherwise, it was hard to say if she would still be alive should they have chosen to eliminate her.

"What should we do, Sir Vahn?"

"Do you still have your long-range communication-type magic tool?"

"Yes."

"Inform your close contacts in the capital about it, but avoid contacting Transcendent Henrietta directly," Vaan instructed.

"If Transcendent Sybil managed to trap Transcendent Henrietta somewhere, it's likely that her people have control of Transcendent Henrietta's magic tower and communications."

"Thus, contacting Transcendent Henrietta's magic tower directly will put you in danger," Vaan added.

"I understand," Helia nodded but then sighed, "However, It's no use. I have been trying for the past two weeks but have yet to receive a single reply from the capital."

"That's because of mana disruptors. However, they won't be around for much longer. So keep trying," Vaan encouraged.

"Alright," Helia agreed.

Sometime later, Vaan sensed Zodreg's presence in the area. Thus, he bid his leave from Helia's castle and met up with Zodreg in the sky, then returned to Sunpeak Town via the latter's spatial gate.

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Over the next three days, Vaan spent his time raising the strength of his people in Sunpeak Town, working on the Red Goblin Mountains, and paying regular visits to the Red Dragon Clan.

In the Red Dragon Clan, Vaan had checked on the young elite dragons' progress and also requested various magic tools from the dragon lords.

As a result of his requests, he acquired human-size spatial teleporters, which he deployed in Redpine City and Sunpeak Town, allowing fast travel between the two settlements.

Of course, the teleporters were only deployed in secretive locations within Helia's castle and the lord's estate in Sunpeak Town. Their usage and existence were only privy to a few people due to their importance and large mana consumption.

Zodreg gained two new Rank 5 dragon elites to join him on missions around the central region.

For a short period of time, they also accompanied Vaan on a secret trip to Baron Chalfont's domain in the Holy Knight Empire and placed a letter on the baron's desk.

The content of the letter included Transcendent Sybil's scheme and Dorothy's status.

At the same time, Dorothy's treatment would depend on the Holy Knight Empire's attitude toward the Kingdom of Black Rose.

After Baron Chalfont finished the letter, he almost burned it in his anger.

However, he ultimately kept the letter as evidence and made a trip to the holy city to seek an audience with the emperor.

Due to Baron Chalfont's status, his request to see the emperor was easily approved.

Not long after the emperor learned the contents of the letter from Baron Chalfont, he summoned every noble to the holy city for an urgent meeting.

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Holy Knight Empire's central region, Holy City

The jewel of the empire, home to over ten million residents, was one of the largest cities on the Pangea continent, second only to the city of trade in the Freedom Federation.

A colossal statue of the Sun God could be found in the very heart of the holy city, towering over all buildings at a staggering height of twenty-seven hundred feet. Even the imperial palace paled in comparison to the Sun God's statue by far.

However, the Sun God's statue wasn't just a statue; it was also a type of magic tower, collecting large volumes of mana to power the entire holy city.

All the magic transports and lights were all powered by the Sun God's statue.

Although other countries doubted the Sun God's existence, the people of the Holy Knight Empire wholeheartedly believed in the Sun God.

In fact, they were so devoted to their belief they built the holy city to be just like the sun and stars, illuminating the darkness with its bright lights at night.

The holy city was a city that never slept.

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Holy Imperial Palace, Great Hall

Present time

Shortly after Renardiere Braveheart, the reigning emperor of the Holy Knight Empire, arrived, he sat on his golden imperial throne and glanced over the hundreds of nobles gathered, including Baron Chalfont, Marquis Salazar, and the rest of the northern border lords.

Despite being over two hundred years old, Emperor Renardiere still retained the appearance of a man in his prime.

Undoubtedly, it was an effect of being a High-level Rank 5 Aura King.

Emperor Renardier had blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin, which were distinctive features of the Bravehearts and most of the Holy Knight Empire's people.

Additionally, he wore mostly golden armor and carried a greatsword strapped to his side. Other holy knights and nobles wore golden-white armor.

When the gossiping voices in the great hall died into silence, Emperor Renardier understood it was his cue to speak.

"Firstly, I would like to thank everyone for coming from afar and showing up today despite the sudden notice," Emperor Renardier sincerely spoke with a deep voice full of charisma and authority.

"You're too kind, Your Imperial Majesty. It was no trouble at all," the nobles and lords replied humbly with honor one after another.

No one dared to speak otherwise.

Nevertheless, shortly after everyone gave their reply, silence returned to the great hall. Emperor Renardier acknowledged them with a nod before continuing with the meeting's agenda.

"Everyone should have been briefed on the purpose of today's meeting, so I won't be wasting time on meaningless words. What are your thoughts on the seven witch kingdoms?" Emperor Renardier asked.

Chapter 404: The Emperor's Decision

As the emperor said, every lord and noble present had been briefed on the situation before they arrived at the great hall. Thus, there was no confusion regarding the topic of their discussion.

Nevertheless, with hundreds of nobles and lords gathered in the great hall, each with their own opinions and thoughts on the matter, their discussions were bound to be chaotic without order.

"What do you think, Baron Chalfont?" Emperor Renardier sought the war hero's opinion first as the person was the chief informant of the situation.

"Permission to speak freely, Your Imperial Majesty."

"Permission granted, Baron Chalfont. Please speak your honest thoughts."

"Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty," Baron Chalfont expressed his appreciation before saying, "To be honest, I feel like the letter was a trap. There isn't much information on the seven witch kingdoms, especially their inner conflicts."

"Thus, for all we know, the seven witch kingdoms could be pretending to be at odds with each other and baiting us into invading. If that happens, erasing our empire's image as a warmongering country will be difficult."

"At the same time, we would be giving the witch kingdoms the moral high ground to launch a counter-invasion on our empire," Baron Chalfont stated.

"I also have similar doubts." Emperor Renardier nodded before asking, "But what about your daughter? Don't you want to save her?"

"Of course I do, Your Imperial Majesty. However, I shouldn't let my personal interests threaten the stability of our empire," Baron Chalfont replied, winning the approval of many nobles and lords.

That said, he was only able to act reasonably because his daughter was said to be still alive.

If she had died, he would have likely rallied up an army and started a war with the witch kingdoms impulsively without notifying the emperor.

At the same time, there were a few nobles and lords that doubted Baron Chalfont. Still, they didn't say anything and patiently waited their turn to speak.

"As I would expect of a war hero, always putting the empire first. You're a role model for all who wish to serve the empire, Baron Chalfont."

"Your words are wasted on me, Your Imperial Majesty. I am underserving of such praises. I am not as selfless as I seem."

"I can see that much," Emperor Renardier replied coolly before moving on. "Does anyone else have anything to add regarding the seven witch kingdoms?"

"Count Normand, feel free to speak," Emperor Renardier selected after seeing the person's disapproving look.

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!" Count Normand obliged, stepping forward before condemning Baron Chalfont, "First off, I want to question Baron Chalfont's faith in the empire. How did his daughter end up in the Kingdom of Black Rose's custody in the first place?"

"To begin with, I have never heard of Baron Chalfont having a daughter. For him to suddenly have a daughter implies she had been living outside our empire, beyond our notice. I really wonder if he had something against our empire to send his daughter away."

"Baron Chalfont's loyalty to the empire is unquestionable. Get to the point, Count Normand," Emperor Renardier coolly stated.

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!" Count Normand obeyed, no longer questioning Baron Chalfont's intention. "Although we can't confirm the truth behind Transcendent Sybil's scheme, we know the Kingdom of Black Rose has illegally crossed our borders to deliver their letter to Baron Chalfont."

"Additionally, they have one of our empire's noble's daughter hostage. These two points give us enough justification to wage war against the Kingdom of Black Rose. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Kingdom of Verdant Woods."

"Even if Transcendent Sybil plotted against our empire, we have solid proof to justify a war against them. It's a pity that Baron Chalfont's daughter isn't royalty. Otherwise, we would have a very solid justification for waging war against the Kingdom of Black Rose," Count Normand stated.

"That can be easily solved. I just need to announce Baron Chalfont's daughter as my twenty-fifth concubine or adopt her and give her the status of an imperial princess. That will strengthen our justification," Emperor Renardier casually said.

"However, the real problem is Transcendent Henrietta. Even if we go to war with the Kingdom of Black Rose, we don't necessarily have a chance of winning. And even if we do, our losses won't be small."

"If Transcendent Sybil wanted to force our empire into a war with the Kingdom of Black Rose, she should have accounted for Transcendent Henrietta and the other witch kingdoms. But, alas, we don't know what she has prepared. We lack reliable information."

"I wonder if the northern border lords have something to add?" Emperor Renardier glanced in the direction of Marquis Salazar's group.

Baron Aderlard and the other northern border lords subconsciously sought Marquis Salazar's opinion with their gazes before the latter gave them an approving nod.

"We actually have something important to add, Your Imperial Majesty..." Baron Aderlard took the lead in speaking before he spilled everything he knew.

Everyone in the great hall listened with rapt attention when the hidden conflicts between the seven witch kingdoms were revealed.

And when they heard Transcendent Sybil could keep the other witch kingdoms from intervening in the war between the Holy Knight Empire and the Kingdom of Black Rose, their eyes sparkled with greed.

The most surprising news was Transcendent Henrietta, a Peak-stage Transcendent Witch, getting trapped under the holy tree.

"There's no need to hesitate. With Transcendent Henrietta out of the picture, the Kingdom of Black Rose stands no chance against us. So we should strike while they are still weak and unprepared!" an enthusiastic noble suggested.

Emperor Renardier glanced at the noble before the person's excitement was quickly replaced by fear.

"I have forgotten my place, Your Imperial Majesty. Please punish me," said the noble, but he was actually hoping for leniency.

Nevertheless, Emperor Renardier chose to postpone the noble's punishment as they had more important matters to discuss.

"Forget it. That can wait," Emperor Renardier stated before resuming the topic, "Now that the situation in the seven witch kingdoms is much clearer thanks to Baron Aderlard's input, what does everyone think?"

"Why don't you speak your thoughts, Marquis Salazar? I want to hear the opinions of someone who learns toward peace," Emperor Renardier mentioned.

"Understood, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich Salazar acknowledged his turn to speak and said, "I believe we should go ahead and attack the Kingdom of Black Rose."

"Oh? That's a surprise. To think we would get such an answer from you," Emperor Renardier expressed his astonishment before asking, "Care to elaborate why?"

"It has become clear to us that the seven witch kingdoms are no longer qualified to be the defenders of humanity. Their development has stagnated and fallen behind the rest of the continent despite their access to vast resources," Ulrich calmly mentioned.

"And despite all that resources, they are still competing with each other for more. Thus, if we continue to leave those resources in their hands, we are only holding back humanity's development and heading towards an eventual doom."

"So instead of letting that happen, we should replace them as the new defenders of humanity. It will give our empire more sway over the continent and perhaps let us become its leader. The Kingdom of Black Rose can only blame itself for giving us this opportunity," Ulrich stated.

"Interesting," Emperor Renardier rubbed his chin thoughtfully before shifting his attention elsewhere. "What about you, Lord Gibbon?"

"My thoughts are the same as Marquis Salazar, Your Imperial Majesty," Lord Gibbon humbly replied.

"I would say the Kingdom of Black Rose won't be the last of our conquest, but only the start. After all, it's unlikely that Transcendent Sybil would release Transcendent Henrietta after we claim the Kingdom of Black Rose."

"Thus, if we can launch a surprise attack on the Kingdom of Verdant Woods and secure the entrapment that holds Transcendent Henrietta, we can continue to conquer the rest of the witch kingdoms."

"I believe we are capable of such feats with our current military might if we exclude Transcendent Henrietta out of the picture," Lord Gibbon stated.

"You've made a valid point, Lord Gibbon," Emperor Renardier acknowledged before suddenly shaking his head. "However, those are some dangerous assumptions you included there."

"Even with Transcendent Henrietta out of the picture, the other Transcendent Witches are not easy to deal with. Each one of them could be even craftier than Transcendent Sybil. Don't forget Transcendent Henrietta is a Peak-stage Transcendent Witch. And yet, Transcendent Sybil, a supposed Early-stage Transcendent Witch, could trap her. Her strength must be higher than it seems."

"We don't know much about the other Transcendent Witches. They could all be hiding their true power. If it wasn't because of Fuhengir's incident and the Great Expeditions, even Transcendent Henrietta's strength would have remained unknown," Emperor Renardier mentioned.

"I apologize for my inadequacies, Your Imperial Majesty. I was too blinded by the glory that I underestimated by the Transcendent Witches," Lord Gibbon reflected on my mistake.

Nevertheless, Emperor Renardier continued to seek the opinions of the nobles and lords present.

Before long, the collective opinions became clear. A majority of the present members were in favor of the war with the Kingdom of Black Rose.

In particular, the members of the anti-witch faction were the most passionate about the war. They wanted to free enslaved men.

"So it's been decided then," Emperor Renardier concluded the discussion and made his decision, "We will conquer the Kingdom of Black Rose first. Everything else comes after we stabilize our rule and gather more information on the other six witch kingdoms."

"Marquis Salazar, as a northern border lord, you are one of the strongest in the empire and also one of the most familiar with the Kingdom of Black Rose's borders. Therefore, I will appoint you as my advisor."

"Do you accept?" Emperor Renardier asked shortly after.

"With honor, Your Imperial Majesty!" Ulrich answered, kneeling on one knee and placing a hand over his chest with his head lowered, seemingly subservient and overjoyed.

He received some looks of envy, but not that many.

Being the emperor's advisor would mean Marquis Salazar wouldn't get to fight on the front lines and accumulate battle merits.

At the same time, it implied the emperor's intent to participate actively in the war as the supreme commander of their army.

As such, the positions of army commanders were more appealing to most nobles and lords seeking to participate in the war.

Chapter 405: The Emperor's Decision (2)

Shortly after appointing his advisor, Emperor Renardier looked for six commanders.

Nearly all the nobles and lords voiced their eagerness to participate in that instant. However, only more than half of the assembly was selected for the war.

The remaining lesser half was forced to remain in the empire to defend their borders.

"Return to your domains, make your peace, ready your armor, and rally your troops. In one week, we convene in Equinox City for a strategic meeting," Emperor Renardier stated before dismissing the assembly.

However, Baron Chalfont, Count Eldridge, and the northern border lords were asked to stay back for a bit longer.

"Fret not, Baron Chalfont. We will definitely save your daughter," Emperor Renardier promised despite waging war against the Kingdom of Black Rose would put Dorothy in danger.

Baron Chalfont understood that there was no guarantee Dorothy was still alive and under the Kingdom of Black Rose's custody when the Transcendent Sybil especially sent her there to die.

And even if Dorothy was still alive, her life wasn't so important that she could be used to threaten the Holy Knight Empire.

"What have you decided, Your Imperial Majesty?" Baron Chalfont asked.

"We'll become sworn brothers. I will grant you the peerage of a duke and adopt your daughter as my own, making her an imperial princess," Emperor Renardier stated. "I will make this news known throughout the empire and our neighbors."

"That will give us a solid justification to go to war with the Kingdom of Black Rose. However, before that, we will give the Kingdom of Black Rose seven days to return your daughter to us in one piece."

"If she loses as much as a single hair, we will make them pay," Emperor Renardier added, knowing Baron Chalfont's daughter would have suffered under the Kingdom of Black Rose's interrogation.

As such, even if the Kingdom of Black Rose handed Dorothy over, the Holy Knight Empire would still go to war with them.

"What if my daughter, Dorothy, has no visible proof of suffering?" Baron Chalfont enquired further.

"It matters not, Baron Chalfont," Emperor Renardier casually assured before explaining, "The Kingdom of Black Rose has no access to the rest of Pangea. So it's alright if we twist the truth a little. No one else will know."

"I will follow your arrangement, Your Imperial Majesty," Baron Chalfont lowered his head with a sigh, knowing his own choice did not matter.

He understood Count Eldridge was kept back to convince him, even if he did not want to become a duke and surpass his lord's peerage rank.

"It looks like I am not needed here in the end, Your Imperial Majesty," Count Eldridge commented with a wry smile. "Baron Chalfont is very understanding of the situation. For the glory of the empire."

"For the glory of the empire," Emperor Renardier nodded before suddenly stopping Count Eldridge from leaving. "However, you're wrong, Count Eldridge. That's not the only reason I kept you here."

"Oh?" Count Eldridge turned back and showed his fealty with a hand-over-his-chest salute. "What Do you need from me, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"As you know, even if our empire has grown powerful beyond belief compared to three hundred years ago, the witch kingdoms cannot be underestimated, with or without the Transcendent Witches," Emperor Renardier patiently mentioned.

"You and Baron Chalfont have the widest connections among the nobles. So I want both of you to reach out and find someone who can contact the dark organizations. Let them know we are willing to buy all the information they have on the seven witch kingdoms, the Kingdom of Black Rose in particular, of course. The price can be negotiated."

"However, the information must be prepared within the week," Emperor Renardier instructed.

"Understood, Your Imperial Majesty. I hear and obey," Count Eldridge and Baron Chalfont acknowledged, lowering their heads to the emperor before taking their leave.

"Where are you going, Baron Chalfont?" Emperor Renardier casually asked, stopping Baron Chalfont but didn't stop Count Eldridge. "Did you think my words were just mere lip service? Come here; we will swear the oath of brotherhood."

Baron Chalfont was surprised, but he eventually agreed after some hesitation.

Emperor Renardier summoned some servants to bring forward two chalices of wine. Then, the two cut their thumbs and dripped some blood into each other's chalices.

After they swore the oath of brotherhood to the Sun God and drank the blood wine, they officially became sworn brothers.

"Friends for years, brothers for life. Hahaha!" Emperor Renardier chuckled boisterously as he patted Baron Chalfont on the shoulders. "You stubborn ox finally caved in."

Baron Chalfont could only smile wryly in response. The emperor had made use of the situation to make them sworn brothers.

Nevertheless, after a bit of chatter, Baron Chalfont also took his leave to carry out his task.

"Sorry about that. I hope I have not kept the rest of you waiting too long," Emperor Renardier apologized to Ulrich Salazar and the other northern border lords.

"Not at all, Your Imperial Majesty," Ulrich and the others denied with shaking heads before they asked, "What do you require of us?"

Once the question was asked, Emperor Renardier's expression turned solemn.

"I want you all to know I do not doubt your loyalty to the empire. That's why I am not opposed to this war, especially when every noble and lord are in support of it," Emperor Renardier seriously mentioned before saying, "But as the emperor, I need more assurance than just your words."

"Since your group has been in contact with Transcendent Sybil, I want your group to arrange a meeting for the two of us. If I can't meet face-to-face with Transcendent Sybil, at least holographic communication will do."

"I need to see proof of Transcendent Henrietta's captivity and negotiate the division of the land with Transcendent Sybil," Emperor Renardier firmly stated before asking, "Do you think you can make it happen?"

"We'll do everything we can to ensure it does, Your Imperial Majesty!" Baron Aderlard and the others assured.

Given that the Holy Knight Empire would wage war with the Kingdom of Black Rose if the emperor saw Transcendent Henrietta's captivity, Transcendent Sybil shouldn't be against it.

"However, we have to wait until Transcendent Sybil contacts us, which won't happen until tomorrow evening. Is that fine?" Baron Aderlard asked.

"Of course," Emperor Renardier nodded and said, "I still have things to do and people to meet in the holy city."

"Then, we will wait for your arrival in Holsworthy City, Your Imperial Majesty," Baron Aderlard stated.

"Un," Emperor Renardier nodded.

Shortly after making some arrangements with Ulrich Salazar, Emperor Renardier left the great hall and went to pay his mother, the Queen Dowager, a visit.

Chapter 406: Queen Dowager

Shortly after Emperor Renardier arrived outside the Queen Dowager's bedchamber, he waited for permission before he was granted entry.

Immediately, the scent of dandelions assaulted Emperor Renardier's nostrils as he laid eyes on the Queen Dowager's half-naked, lazy but voluptuous figure on the bed.

The Queen Dowager, Elsbeth Braveheart, was a Mid-stage High Witch who lived over three hundred and fifty years but retained the beauty of a young maiden. Like all Bravehearts, she had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion.

In her current defenseless posture, she could easily make any young man excited.

However, not a single hint of lust could be seen in Emperor Renardier's eyes as he walked into the bedchamber and glanced at her body.

"I have come to see you, mother," Emperor Renardier greeted, kneeling on one knee in front of Elsbeth's bed with his head lowered.

"..." Elsbeth sighed with a helpless but loving look before she said, "Renardier, you are the sovereign ruler of an entire empire; you kneel to no one. I've told you many times, but you still won't listen to me on this, will you?"

"This is the one thing I won't agree on, mother. I might be an emperor to the people, but before that, I am a son to you. That fact won't change, not now, not ever," Emperor Renardier stated.

"Fine, fine. Enough of that," Elsbeth shook her head before staring at her son more seriously. "Tell me why you are here today."

"I've come to receive your blessing before I lead the empire to war with the Kingdom of Black Rose, mother. An opportunity has come for our empire to gain access to Gehenna's resources," Emperor Renardier stated.

As soon as Elsbeth heard that, she immediately sat up with a grave look and asked her son to repeat what he said. Then, after she confirmed she had heard correctly, she frowned in deep thought.

"Of the seven witch kingdoms, it just has to be the Kingdom of Black Rose, huh? You can't pick another kingdom to fight?" Elsbeth asked.

"No, it has to be the Kingdom of Black Rose. If our empire targets any other witch kingdom, we'll be met with the retaliation of all seven witch kingdoms," Emperor Renardier replied with a frown. "Do you know something about the Kingdom of Black Rose? Does our empire stand no chance even with Transcendent Henrietta out of the picture?"

"It was wise of you to see before you initiated a war with the Kingdom of Black Rose, Renardier," Elsbeth stated.

"I do not know whether the Kingdom of Black Rose has any hidden experts or allies that could be a match for our empire's army. However, I do know that if you do not want the empire to suffer heavy losses, leave the Great Imperial Legion behind. Do not bring them to war with you," Elsbeth advised.

"I don't understand, mother," Emperor Renardier frowned with confusion and doubt.

"The Great Imperial Legion contains some of the most powerful warriors in the entire empire. So it wouldn't be farfetched to say that not bringing the Great Imperial Legion is equivalent to cutting our military force in half. Not having them would no doubt increase my casualties in war."

"It is almost like you are implying the Great Imperial Legion will betray our empire if they go to the Kingdom of Black Rose," Emperor Renardier guessed.

"I am not saying that they definitely will, but there is a high chance under the right circumstances," Elsbeth replied with a sigh before mentioning, "You should already know this, but your late father, the previous emperor, wasn't the legitimate heir."

"He only assumed the imperial throne after the rightful heir, your father's elder brother, who is also your uncle, suddenly died along with his whole family. However, the truth is your uncle's bloodline is still alive in the Kingdom of Black Rose; you have an older female cousin."

"Considering our side of the family had always been under the suspicion that we poisoned the true emperor's family to death to usurp the throne and the Great Imperial Legion being loyal to the true heir, your older cousin's existence will likely sway them into turning against you," Elsbeth stated.

After the revelation, Emperor Renardier fell silent for some time.

As someone who had been the reigning sovereign of the Holy Knight Empire for two hundred years, he wouldn't just hand over the position to anyone besides his offspring.

Furthermore, even if he wasn't from the legitimate royal bloodline, he had ruled the empire for many years. The Great Imperial Legion shouldn't cling to the past.

"Even if my older cousin reveals her status, she's a woman and has no right to the throne," Emperor Renardier said with a firm look. "However, there is a way to turn my illegitimate rule legitimate. I just have to marry my older cousin."

"That is indeed a solution to the legitimacy problem," Elsbeth acknowledged. "But unless you use force, she will never agree to it."

"And I am fine with that," Emperor Renardier said determinedly.

"So you have made up your mind."

"Yes, mother."

"Then may the glory of the Sun God be with you in battle."

"Thank you, mother."

...

Shortly after receiving Queen Dowager's blessings, Emperor Renardier left.

He immediately headed to his private armory, which had four imperial guards with Peak-level Rank 4 strength guarding at every given moment.

Inside the private armory were multiple sets of armor and a range of swords. The lowest quality among the items stored was Low-level Rank 5.

"Rank 5 Anti-magic Armor... It's been a long time since I was required to don this armor for battle," Emperor Renardier muttered as he gazed at a full set of golden-white armor with some nostalgia.

Few people became his opponent after he reached High-level Rank 5 Aura King.

That said, he did not dare to underestimate the Kingdom of Black Rose. Thus, he had decided to bring his full strength to the war.

"With the augmentation of my supporters, my battle power should be raised to an unrivaled level within the Transcendent rank..." Emperor Renardier estimated.

He suddenly thought it was unfortunate that he wouldn't get the chance to test his peak strength against Transcendent Henrietta in battle.

Chapter 407: Fake Henrietta

Redpine Region's northern border, inside the Shadow Swamp, a group of witches and aura users guarded a hundred-foot black tower.

At a glance, the black tower looked like an ordinary magic tower.

However, the black tower didn't just absorb mana from the atmosphere. Instead, after the tower was fully charged with mana, the tower would blast the concentration of mana into the skies, scattering it.

The construct was indubitably a mana disruptor whose sole purpose was to collect and disrupt mana signals.

Among the group of witches, the strongest were Peak-stage Senior Witches and Peak-level Rank 2 Aura Masters, while the weakest were Early-stage Senior Witches and Low-level Rank 2 Aura Masters.

At that moment, the Senior Witches were clamoring about their poor situation. They didn't have a problem with the task; they only had a problem with the location.

The Shadow Swamp was an unclean region, home to creatures of the darkness attribute.

Compared to the streets of Blackthorn City, which were clean and high maintenance, the Shadow Swamp was a stark contrast.

"Dammit, if I knew I was going to be sent to the Shadow Swamp, I would have joined the other groups!" a Peak-stage Senior Witch said with frustration, having lost her patience.

"My Lady, we've been camping in this location for many days," a High-level Aura Master mentioned before asking, "Isn't it a bit late to say this now?"

Pak!

The Peak-stage Senior Witch slapped the High-level Aura Master without warning after giving him a glare.

"Shut up, Mongrel! I did not ask for your opinion! You will only speak when I require you to speak! Do you understand?!"

"Yes, I understand, My Lady."

Shortly after, the High-level Aura Master no longer spoke another word, having learned his lesson. He stood guard with his bruised cheek untreated.

The other aura users also kept their silence.

Boom—!!

However, the silence did not last long before the mana disruptor exploded without warning, shattering into countless pieces of burning debris by a sudden attack from the sky.

The attack came so quickly that no one had time to react; they all got blown away by the shock wave.

"W-What just happened?"

"T-The mana disruptor got destroyed—!"

Roar—!!!!

A sky-sundering, earth-shaking dragon roar was shortly heard from the skies, but the source of the mighty dragon roar was nowhere to be seen.

Even so, the immense pressure of a Rank 5 being was clearly felt, suppressing the entire group of witches and aura users.

Everyone froze in terror; they didn't dare to breathe, let alone utter the slightest squeak.

Sometime later, when the dragon's presence was long gone, the Senior Witches and Aura Masters finally moved. They glanced at their hands that still trembled from lingering fear.

"D-Dragon... That was a dragon, wasn't it?! Not a fake one, but a real one. It has to be! Only a real dragon can be that powerful!" a Late-stage Senior Witch uttered.

"That was definitely a dragon's roar. However, I don't know if it actually belonged to a real dragon or not." A Peak-stage Senior Witch shook her head before solemnly saying, "Still, I do know that we need to report this!"

"Right, the mana disruptor was destroyed! We'll be in big trouble if we don't properly explain this to Lord Xena!" another Peak-stage Senior Witch said gravely.

...

Meanwhile, multiple mana disruptors around the central region were eventually destroyed one after another.

Soon, multiple reports from the royal army blockade reached the ears of the higher-ups, repeating the same content; dragon roars, possible Rank 5 True Dragon, and destruction of the mana disruptors.

As a result, the higher-ups in the royal army started to wonder whether the mana disruption field had attracted the dragons and angered them.

At the same time, news from the central region quickly reached the capital.

In the first hour, less than a dozen witches learned about the current situation in the central region. But by the second hour, the number of knowing witches snowballed into the thousands.

Finally, by the third hour, the news was spread to every member of the kingdom's upper echelon like an unstoppable fire that could not die no matter the amount of water poured on it.

No matter how much Transcendent Sybil's people tried to downplay the news, they couldn't stop it from reaching every corner of the capital.

Eventually, the whole capital was shocked by the news.

Numerous Senior Witches gathered outside the royal magic tower, hoping to seek an audience with the queen to confirm the authenticity of the news.

However, the doors to the royal magic tower were firmly shut tight. They showed no sign of opening for the gathering crowd outside, no matter their status and request.

On the top of the royal magic tower, a person could be seen pacing back and forth with a panicky expression.

She was the perfect copy of Henrietta Rosegarden, albeit only in appearance. She lacked the same transcendent breath and nonchalant grace.

As such, her disguise could only be used to trick people from afar.

"What do I do now? It's only a matter of time before people start suspecting something is wrong with Queen Henrietta," the fake Henrietta muttered to herself anxiously.

"Dammit, I really wonder which bastard spilled the beans! The whole plan has gone to shit! I hope Queen Sybil won't blame me for this."

The fake Henrietta peeked outside the royal magic tower and saw the growing crowd and chaos. The sight immediately made her even more anxious.

If the crowd suddenly stormed inside the royal magic tower to meet her, they would immediately see through her disguise. And once that happened, she would die without a grave.

"I can't just sit here and wait. I need to do something," the fake Henrietta immediately used her communication-type magic tool to contact her allies.

Unfortunately, she didn't receive any response from them, no matter how many times she attempted to call them. They were too busy worrying about their own lives to care about hers.

After all, while many people paid a visit to the royal magic tower, others went to the military district to question the upper echelons of the royal army regarding their purpose behind restricting information from the central region.

Fake Henrietta's call would expose their secrets.

"Goddammit!" Fake Henrietta cursed.

Chapter 408: Vossen Household

"Lord Tarja, come out! We have some questions for you!"

"Where are you, Lord Lydia?! Is it true that you ordered the royal army to restrict information coming from the central region?!"

"Come out! We demand answers! What are your intentions for containing such vital information?! Have you betrayed the kingdom?!"

Outside the closed gates leading to the military district, dissatisfied voices of the people resounded far and wide.

Even the royal army's high commands could hear them from miles away.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck! Which vermin spilled the news?!" an Early-stage High Witch cursed inside a command center in the middle of the military district.

"If I find out who did it, I will dismember them into a thousand pieces and feed them to the bears, then gut them and put them together so I can do it again and again! I want them to suffer!"

"Before that, we need to figure out how to get out of here alive! And even if we do, it's unlikely that Queen Sybil will spare us for failing the mission," another Early-stage High Witch stated gravely.

"I'm sure the other commander-rank witches are already suspecting our involvement in the central region's restriction of information and looking through the chains of command. Once they tie our actions to the betrayal of the kingdom, there'll be no place for us here."

"But given the current situation, there's no way we can escape. I'm afraid our only chance of living is to convince them to join our side," the Early-stage High Witch stated.

That said, their chances of success with that endeavor were minuscule at most.

It was true that among the supremacist faction, many had grown disappointed with Queen Henrietta's neutral stance regarding matters related to the male labor force.

However, that didn't mean they could convince enough members of the supremacist faction that it would tip the disadvantageous balance in their favor.

Even so, they didn't have any other option to make.

They could only blame their bad luck for not getting enough time to convert more people over to Queen Sybil's side.

...

Meanwhile, inside the Vossen household, the Vossens were rallying their members and troops to make a trip to the central region like multiple other families.

They were all curious about the changes in the central region, but more importantly, they also wanted to remove the hidden threats lurking in their kingdom.

The Vossens were one of the great families living in the capital, and they also shared a relationship with the Delarosa household through matrimony.

That said, their relationship became estranged in the later years due to Marquis Delarosa's absence and her husband's passing.

Nevertheless, as the members of the Vossen household gathered in the big courtyard, their actions attracted Linetta's attention as she was training nearby.

Once she caught sight of a familiar figure among the gathering members of the household, she immediately made her way over for an inquiry.

"Grandmother, where are you all going? Why do you need to gather so many troops?" Linetta asked as she glanced at the crowd with surprise.

Arabelle Vossen, Linetta's paternal grandmother and the matriarch of the Vossen household, was a woman of stature and beauty.

Although she had lived over three hundred and thirty years, she still retained the youthful appearance of her younger years and could be mistaken as one of Linetta's sisters to the less-knowing.

Nevertheless, she had mothered over five children and was a grandmother to many more grandchildren.

The weight of time, familial responsibility, and duty as an Early-stage High Witch had turned her into a strict and rigid person.

However, the moment she heard and laid eyes on Linetta's figure, her face immediately blossomed with a rare smile.

"Linetta, you're here," Arabelle smiled warmly before saying, "We're preparing to head over to Sunpeak Town to check on the situation."

"Supposedly, the Kingdom of Verdant Woods is scheming to take over our kingdom with the Holy Knight Empire. Thus, we need to eliminate their spies and check our borders," Arabelle briefly explained the situation and their objectives.

Nevertheless, Linetta was baffled as the outside news had yet to reach her.

"Why does that require your personal involvement, grandmother? Isn't that what the royal army is for?" Linetta wondered.

"Hahaha..." Arabelle softly chuckled with some contempt when the royal army was brought up. "The royal army was involved in the central region's blockade, restricting important information from reaching us."

"Right now, we don't know how many people in the royal army had sided with Queen Sybil, so we can't rely on them. We can only entrust the task of protecting our kingdom with our own hands!" Arabelle claimed gallantly with a gripped fist.

"Oh? In that case, can I come too, grandmother? My fiancé is there," Linetta stated before she suddenly received a soft nudge on the head from Arabelle, causing her to hold her head.

"You little imp, are you still using that excuse? Do you really think I wouldn't be able to find out if you have a fiancé or not?" Arabelle retorted with a half-admonishing, half-joking look before saying, "If I didn't have to use it as an excuse to turn down the marriage proposals of lesser households, I would have long called out your bluff."

"How dare they even think of marrying their useless sons to my genius granddaughter?" Arabelle added as she recalled the marriage proposals with a contemptuous look.

"But it's not really a bluff. I have someone I like there. We've even cooked the rice together, grandmother!" Linetta argued.

"You..." Arabelle's eye twitched before she replied, "Do you think your innocence is something sacred? Why don't you go ahead and say you also had a child with him? Then I'll be impressed and annoyed."

"That said, I'm really curious who this lucky bastard is, to dare deflower my genius granddaughter," Arabelle added grumpily before consenting, "Fine, you can tag along. However, you have to stick by my side."

"It can be very dangerous!" Arabelle stressed.

"Yes!"

Linetta rejoiced with excitement.

Although it had only been less than two months since she last saw Vahn, time felt much longer. As such, she longed to see him again.

The capital had all kinds of handsome men with noteworthy backgrounds. However, none of them could move her heart. Flowery words meant nothing to her.

It would be considered impressive if they even had half of Vahn's capability.

Nevertheless, she was also a little worried about what her grandmother would do to Vahn if he didn't meet her expectations.

Even so, she was prepared to intervene if she intended to harm him.

"Can I come too, grandmother?" Lillias peeked her head out from a corner with an impish smile.

When Arabelle saw her, she smiled for a split second before her expression turned stern. Then, she firmly rejected her, "Definitely not."

"Boo! It's not fair!" Lillias cried with outrage.

"This isn't a picnic trip!" Arabelle said as she glared at Lillias admonishingly. "Your sister is at least a Senior Witch. But, you? You're still a True Witch! You might also be a genius, but it hasn't been long since your mana veins are repaired."

"It's far too dangerous for you to come, Lillias," Arabelle added.

Although Lillias sulked after hearing that, she no longer voiced her dissent. Her grandmother's words were absolute in the Vossen household.

"I understand..."

Chapter 409: Unrivaled Builder

Within Blackthorn City, Besides the Vossen household preparing for departure, multiple other big-name households also had the same intention. Due to the level of threat posed to their kingdom, they did not hesitate to mobilize magic airships for their journey.

Nevertheless, the first to depart from Blackthorn City were none of the big households but no-name individuals that weren't tied to any major forces in the capital.

They were generally called rogue wanderers, which was a particular classification for people who preferred living unfettered lives and working alone, unbound by household rules and expectations.

However, that also implied that among them were people that lived without principles and resorted to underhanded tactics to gain advantages over others.

Although not all, they were generally seen as selfish people whose actions were solely based on self-interest.

Within a short time, hundreds of rogue wanderers had already crossed several regions and passed Hundred Night City, reaching the Shadow Swamp, where the northern blockade was set up.

"Halt! Where have you all come from?! Return at once! The path to Redpine City is off-limits!" a Peak-stage Senior Witch from the royal army stepped out and warned the incoming group, "Stop! Proceed any further, and you'll be met with..."

Before the Peak-stage Senior Witch could finish speaking, her whole blockade party had an abrupt change in expressions when they realized the incoming group showed no signs of stopping.

In that instant, the sense of danger made them pale with bone-chilling goosebumps.

At the forefront of the large incoming group of rogue wanderers, the wealthier ones rode on tamed beasts and magic-powered land vessels.

The group intended to bulldoze over them like stepping on insects on the road.

"Dodge it!" the Peak-stage Senior Witch cried, warning her party.

Rumble!

Everyone evaded the ongoing traffic of tamed beasts and magic-powered land vessels in the nick of time. If they had been any slower, they would have been crushed to death under the stampede of rogue wanderers.

"Bitches!"

One of the Peak-stage Senior Witches in the blockade team cursed shortly after she resurfaced from the swamp water, soaked in black gooey substances.

But no matter how furious the blockade team felt, it was impossible for them to catch up to the rogue wanderer group, let alone catch them all.

Nevertheless, sometime after the group of rogue wanderers was long gone, several more people passed by at a more leisurely pace.

The blockade team glared at the newcomers vengefully. They couldn't stop a whole crowd of riders, but they could at least stop a small group of witches traveling by foot—or so they thought.

"Stop! This road is off-limits to—!"

Pak!

The Peak-stage Senior Witch was suddenly slapped across the face, sending her flying back into a puddle of black swamp water.

The slap came so fast that she, a Peak-stage Senior Witch, had no time to react. That could only mean the assailant was physically stronger.

"Who the hell do you think you are to block my path?" the Early-stage High Witch snorted contemptuously and said, "Your superiors are all under suspicion of treason. If you don't want to be viewed the same way, you better abandon your order and stop blocking the road!"

"Hmph!"

The Early-stage High Witch snorted again before going on her way, no longer paying attention to the witches and aura users from the royal army.

At the same time, the witches and aura users from the royal army stayed in the swamp with dumbfounded and confused looks.

They didn't have a single clue regarding the situation. They haven't heard from their superiors since their last report.

"Shit, what the hell is going on?" a Peak-level Aura Master wondered.

Although they didn't believe the Early-stage High Witch's words, they didn't dare to doubt it either.

As such, they didn't do anything and let everyone pass. They feared making rash judgments that would screw them over.

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In the past four days, Sunpeak Town underwent startling development that could even rival the changes in its entire past month.

Naturally, as more people moved to Sunpeak Town, more resources and human labor were acquired for the town's development.

However, the most significant changes didn't come from the outer town area, where its population was the densest; they came from the central town area.

In particular, the central area had a new sixty-floor building that reached six hundred feet tall.

The bottom five hundred feet of the building were used for public accommodations. On the other hand, the upper hundred feet were off-limits and acted as a magic tower, drawing in mana from the atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the most crucial point was it only took one day to complete four-fifths of its construction. Moreover, it was done by a single person.

It was a ground-breaking record in the history of construction, considering the sophisticated design.

At that moment, the local townspeople had gathered in the central town area once more to observe another skyscraper in the making, and even more people blindly joined the crowd out of curiosity.

All the materials for the new six-hundred-foot building were prepared at the scene.

Originally, preparing the raw materials needed for the construction project wouldn't have taken them so quickly.

However, everything changed once the spatial teleporters were deployed, connecting Redpine City, Sunpeak Town, Blackmoon City, and Wolfwater City. It wasn't long before they added Eastcliff City to the network.

Coupled with the Red Dragon Clan's vast wealth of resources, it would be strange if they couldn't gather enough building materials for a mere six-hundred-foot building.

Shortly after Vaan confirmed the raw materials, his Omni-Sense spread out and covered the area.

Then, the blocks of wood, nails, screws, bolts, metal frames, ingots, bars, and other building materials began rising off the ground before coming together perfectly at high speed to form the building.

It was like a reverse-dismantling process of an already completed six-hundred-foot building as the pieces of the puzzle were put back together.

But although it looked amazing and simple, like a work of art to the spectators, only Vaan knew the sheer amount of multi-tasking, calculations, and visualization required to maintain the high-speed construction.

Coupled with his control over fire, wood, earth, and kinetic energy, the consumption of mental strength was no joke.

Even so, it was still an acceptable expenditure due to his Peak Demigod-rank dragon soul.

Meanwhile, the crowd could only watch in awe.

Chapter 410: Daily Courters of Death

After witnessing the high-speed construction for the first time, the crowd came to watch it again with high expectations. And as it turned out, they were not disappointed.

Vaan's capability greatly impressed them to no end—to the point that they could no longer consider him human. The abilities he demonstrated had transcended well beyond human limits.

"It's like watching a creation god at work... I am in awe," a Peak-stage Senior Witch commented with wide eyes, not daring to blink even once. She didn't want to miss a single moment.

The sheer overwhelming computation prowess, precise calculation, elemental control, and multitasking Vaan had demonstrated shocked as much as it impressed everyone that day.

The scene left an everlasting impression on the spectators.

"I just followed the townspeople because they seemed excited about something... I didn't expect to witness such a spectacular sight. This is no ordinary man..." another Peak-stage Senior Witch softly commented before instructing her followers, "Find out who he is. I want to know this man's identity!"

"Yes, my Lady!" a group of six Rank 2 Aura Masters and four Mid-stage Senior Witches obeyed.

At the same time, similar situations happened among several dozens of other groups within the large crowd.

Everyone wanted to learn about Vaan's identity.

While the local townspeople and regular visitors had roughly already learned about Vaan's status, the newcomers were still oblivious to the truth in Sunpeak Town.

"No matter what, we must bring this person over to our side. His talents are too good to be wasted in this backwater town. Only the capital can make full use of his ability," an ambitious Peak-stage Senior Witch stated with a desire-filled gaze.

Nevertheless, her words were overheard by some nearby locals.

"You want to recruit Lord Vahn? I suggest you give up on that thought," one of the locals kindly advised before explaining, "He is one of Lord Aeliana's people, and you do not fuck with Lord Aeliana's people."

"Lord Vahn? The audacity you have to call him a lord, little witch. Have you forgotten where you are?" the Peak-stage Senior Witch narrowed her eyes dangerously and said, "I must admit his abilities are envious as much as they are impressive."

"However, he is still a man; he will never lord over us. So what if he is one of Lord Aeliana's people? Is Lord Aeliana someone impressive just because she was lucky enough to recover from her berserk transformation?"

"If Vahn only answers to the local lord, then I just have to remove Lord Aeliana and become the new local lord," the Peak-stage Senior Witch boldly declared, unable to contain her greed and excitement.

At first, she had not been too interested in a backwater place like Sunpeak Town.

However, now that it had piqued her interest, she recalled rumors about Queen Henrietta and Sunpeak Town that had been circulating among the Peak-stage Senior Witches in the capital.

It was said that due to the decline of Sunpeak Town, Queen Henrietta had secretly consented to Peak-stage Senior Witches competing over the rights to become its new lord.

Although there was a chance that the rumor could be false, opportunities were only given to those who grabbed it first.

Alas, the Peak-stage Senior Witch's ambition was greater than her ability. In fact, it was too great that she lost her sense of reality and couldn't think clearly.

Even so, she still noticed something was wrong when all the locals suddenly backed away from her out of fear.

In the next instant, a golden metal bar shot toward her with incomprehensible speed before coiling around her neck like a choker.

The Peak-stage Senior Witch wanted to break free from it immediately, but she soon realized the golden choker was incomparably sturdy.

It was a piece of Rank 5 metal!

Swoosh!

Before the Peak-stage Senior Witch could resist any further, her body was dragged by the golden choker's strong pull.

Her body helplessly flew along with the golden choker until she entered Vaan's clutch.

"Aeliana, someone wants to kill you. You go ahead and deal with her as you see fit," Vaan lazily informed before hurling the Peak-stage Senior Witch toward Aeliana's direction after he was done checking her.

"Yes, my Lord!" Aeliana answered with a sweet smile.

Shortly after, she glanced down at the Peak-stage Senior Witch bound to the ground by the golden choker wrapped around her neck.

It was like the golden choker was unbelievably heavy; no matter how much strength the Peak-stage Senior Witch used, she couldn't raise her head.

"Goddammit! What the hell is this?! How dare you treat me like this! Do you know who I am?! Do you know who is backing me?!"

"Honestly, I don't care," Aeliana nonchalantly replied with a cold, indifferent look. "Since you want to kill me, even if it was just a joke, you will still have to pay with your life."

"Do you dare to kill—!"

Splash!

Aeliana splattered the Peak-stage Senior Witch's head with a stomp, killing her. She did not hesitate to execute the person on the spot.

At the same time, her decisiveness sent a cold chill down the spines of every newcomer witch that had intentions on Vaan.

Each day, there would always be some people who did not know their place and came courting death.

Thus, it was up to Aeliana to make an example out of them so that the others would behave.

After the other witches saw the Peak-stage Senior Witch killed in cold blood, they did not jump out to condemn Aeliana or Vaan. Instead, they kept their head low and observed the reaction of the crowd.

The ones to stick their heads out would get beheaded.

Nevertheless, given that Peak-stage Senior Witch was executed just like that, some fool within such a large gathering of people was bound to do it in their stead.

The more witty newcomers were all hoping someone would do it. But after waiting for some time, no one did.

The townspeople were too quiet. In fact, they didn't look shocked or surprised, as if the situation was normal.

Only then did the newcomers realize it wasn't the first public execution conducted by the local lord.

However, the realization gave them more doubts than answers.

Even if Aeliana was the Lord of Sunpeak Town, she shouldn't have the right to act so unbridled in her territory that she could execute the elites of the kingdom as she pleased—not unless she didn't fear the consequences, such as Queen Henrietta's punishment.

The newcomers decided to keep a low profile and get a better grasp of Sunpeak Town's situation. It seemed like the wisest thing to do.

'Stay humble, and you may live longer; be arrogant, and you will die a dog's death,' a Peak-stage Senior Witch silently told herself after observing everything.