

## The Witch 421

### Chapter 421: Dumbfounded Linetta

"Ahem," Solana cleared her throat with a cough and changed the topic.

"Anyway, how much have you learned about the current situation with the Holy Knight Empire, Lady Arabelle? Have you received the news from the southern borders?"

"I made my way here as soon as I heard about Queen Sybil's scheme and the Assembly of Silent Night's activities in the central region, Lady Solana." Arabelle shifted her attention from Vaan to give a serious reply. Then, she asked with a frown, "What is this news from the southern borders you are talking about?"

"I see. You must have missed it on your way here..." Solana figured before pausing for a moment, then adding, "Or perhaps, the southern border lords only shared the news with central."

"If it were the latter, that would save us the trouble of dealing with the witches from the capital. But on the other hand, it will be difficult to rally troops for the war," Silvaria mentioned.

"War? What war are we talking about? Who are we going to war with? The Kingdom of Verdant Woods? No, don't tell me it's the Holy Knight Empire?!" Arabelle asked cluelessly with a solemn expression.

Shortly after Solana explained the situation regarding the Holy Knight Empire's demands and intentions, Arabelle and her personal guards' expressions turned ugly.

Their expressions were the most grave when Solana recounted Vaan's scout report on the empire's strength.

Arabelle and her personal guards didn't expect the Holy Knight Empire to be so powerful.

No, it was more accurate to say that they didn't want to believe it. Deep down, they had always known the Holy Knight Empire would surpass them one day.

However, they were too drunk on the glory of their past to accept it.

After all, in the past, many witches were refugees who had fled from the southern kingdom and empires and founded the Kingdom of Black Rose to escape the oppressive and tyrannical rule of men.

"This is big news!" Arabelle slammed the table with both hands as she stood up solemnly. "If war with the empire is inevitable, we need to alert the capital and notify Her Majesty so she can lead us!"

"That won't help. Transcendent Henrietta is missing, trapped somewhere by Transcendent Sybil. If everyone learns about it, there will be chaos in the capital; all the bigwigs will become warlords and fight for control of the kingdom's army," Astoria calmly stated.

"Vaan will assume the position of supreme commander and lead us in this war with the empire."

"What?" Arabelle glared at Astoria with frustration and replied snappily, "Even if what you say is true, do you understand what you're saying, Headmaster Astoria?! The fate of the whole kingdom is on the line, and you're just going to put a man in control of...!"

Arabelle did not dare to finish her sentence when she quickly noticed everyone staring at her with displeasure. There was also a threatening undertone hidden in Aeliana and Eniwse's gazes.

Gulp!

Arabelle swallowed her remaining words.

She was not stupid. It wasn't difficult for her to guess Vaan was the most important person within the group.

Furthermore, the abnormal strength everyone revealed had to be related to him as well.

"Never mind, I am willing to listen to your reasons." Arabelle backed down, regaining her cool before she enquired, "Do we have a solid plan against the empire if they invade us?"

"That's what we are currently working on." Astoria suddenly turned to Vaan and asked, "Right. How did your trip go, Vaan? Has Lord Helia finished arranging the meeting?"

"Yeah, we will convene at Fort Whitebridge in three hours," Vaan casually replied with a nod.

"Three hours?" Arabelle's lips twitched before she mentioned, "Even if we rush there at top speed with magic airships, we will not make it within the time frame. Just how do you plan on getting there on time?"

"That's not something you need to worry about." Vaan calmly glanced at Arabelle and asked, "Will you be joining us?"

"Do you even need to ask? Of course, I am! How can I miss out on such an important meeting?" Arabelle firmly responded.

Little did she know, it wasn't a meeting to discuss defensive strategies against the empire.

No, it was a meeting for Vaan to acquire the border lords' allegiance, whether through peaceful negotiations or with forceful means.

It was impossible to mobilize the full force of the kingdom to participate in the war.

After all, while many warlords would rise to assume control, even more people would flee once they learned the empire's strength.

As such, it was crucial to at least acquire the allegiance of the three border lords, considering they were the most experienced and familiar with the empire and the surrounding terrains.

One week was not a lot of time to prepare. Thus, they only needed to gather the most willing and experienced to join the war.

"Then, get ready," Vaan acknowledged Arabelle's participation before he said, "After I come back, we will all depart for Fort Whitebridge."

"Wait, my Lord," Aeliana suddenly stopped Vaan as he was putting Linetta down and preparing to leave.

"What is it—?"

Smooch!

Aeliana wiped Linetta's marks off Vaan's cheeks before giving him several soft pecks. Then, she gave Linetta a haughty look to show her dominance.

At the same time, the others witnessed the scene before Eniwse and a few others mimicked Aeliana's action. They gave Vaan soft pecks on the cheeks to reveal their relationship in front of Linetta.

Eniwse and Dahlia didn't have a problem proving the intimate relationship in front of Linetta, while Astoria hesitated a bit.

Meanwhile, Hester and Solana chose not to participate. Even so, their wry expressions revealed they had some intimate relationships with Vaan.

Only Cyrena and Silvaria were excluded. Still, their envious gazes also revealed their desires to enter an intimate relationship with Vaan.

Linetta could only stand still with a dumbfounded look as Vaan's relationships were exposed. She didn't realize she had so many tough competitions.

But at the same time, she suddenly felt a pang in her heart, thinking what kind of horrible situation she had put Vaan in after she left that it would force him to rely on so many powerful witches for support.

#### Chapter 422: Bullying Arabelle

Rather than being angry at Vaan for starting so many relationships, Linetta felt sorry for him. She felt like it was her fault.

Because she was powerless and left him to cure her sister in the capital, he had to resort to promiscuous methods for survival.

Nevertheless, Vaan shook his head before Linetta delved deeper into her misunderstanding.

"I know what you are thinking, but it's not like that. So don't feel bad. Also, this is just how it is. You can accept it, or you can not. It's your choice whether you want to be a part of this or not," Vaan stated.

He wasn't naïve enough to believe he could give everyone equal happiness. After all, not everyone was willing to share their lover.

However, he was at least confident in his ability to provide for those willing to stay with him.

"You are all fine with sharing the same man?" Linetta stared at Astoria and the others incredulously, considering they were all impressive women. They wouldn't lack any suitors.

Nevertheless, she quickly understood the answer in their eyes before they could verbally reply.

"Obviously," Aeliana stated, provoking Linetta with her haughty look.

"Then, why the hell wouldn't I be fine with it?" Linetta stubbornly gave her answer as she clung to Vaan's arm. Then, she said to Vaan, "It's not that easy to get rid of me!"

Vaan smiled wryly.

It was never his intention; he was simply giving her a choice.

"Linetta, get back here!" Arabelle ordered with a strict tone. "It's fine if you only want to play with him temporarily. However, I will not let such a promiscuous man marry into our family. I will not let my granddaughter and family become a joke to other witches."

"No! I only want Vaan! If he can't marry into our family, I will marry into his family!" Linetta replied defiantly, causing Arabelle almost to puke blood in anger.

"Nonsense!" Arabelle thundered, saying, "You are the hope of the Vossen Household! How can you share a man with other witches? God knows when you'll be able to produce an heir and continue the lineage?! Only other men can share you!"

Due to the low fertility rate, it was common for witches of noble households to have multiple lovers as it would increase their chances of impregnation.

Nevertheless, while Arabelle was admonishing her granddaughter, Aeliana suddenly approached her with a dark look.

"Do you need something, Lord Aeliana?" Arabelle asked with surprise.

"Do I, a Mid-stage High Witch and the Lord of Sunpeak Town, look like a joke to you, Lady Arabelle?" Aeliana asked in a low tone.

Arabelle shook her head in response with a startled look.

"Then, does Headmaster Astoria, another Mid-stage High Witch, headmaster of Blackmoon Academy, and the true heir to the imperial throne of the Holy Knight Empire, look like a joke to you?" Aeliana coldly continued.

"Do you think everyone here is a joke to you because they are willing to share Lord Vahn? If he permits it, I would be most willing to marry him and carry his family name! I'm sure that's the same for everyone! Does that make us a joke to you?!"

"In my opinion, you don't know just how lucky your granddaughter is for the choice she made! Only endless opportunities await her!" Aeliana spat menacingly, causing a few pieces of phlegm to land on Arabelle's face.

Nevertheless, Arabelle was so shaken by Aeliana's threatening pressure and killing intent that she dared not wipe them.

While trying to lecture her granddaughter, she had inadvertently offended everyone else.

Many people would have agreed with her words if they were in the capital. But unfortunately, it was not the case for where she was currently.

"Astoria, do you have any spare mana utilization methods recorded? Give one to Linetta to learn," Vaan casually requested with a smile.

"Unfortunately, I have yet to record any new ones, Vaan," Astoria replied with a shake of her head before adding, "However, she can have mine. I won't be needing it since I have the mana utilization method memorized."

"Take it, and learn it well," Astoria handed a memory crystal to Linetta, much to the latter's curiosity and surprise.

"Alright, I'll be back. Take care of things while I am gone for now," Vaan informed, no longer delaying his plan to prepare for the trip to the southern borders.

"We understand," Solana and the others followed his wish.

After Vaan disappeared from the lord's estate, taking Zodreg with him, Arabelle raised her hand when Aeliana glared at her again.

"I dare you to wipe them. Do you dare?"

"No..."

Arabelle replied meekly, leaving the phlegm on her face.

She recognized her mistake, but she was still bullied for it. Even so, there wasn't much she could do. She was surrounded by witches more powerful than her.

How many years has it been since she suffered such injustice?

Nevertheless, Aeliana didn't say anything when Linetta wiped the phlegm for her grandmother. Arabelle was almost moved to tears.

"Are you alright, grandmother?" Linetta asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about me..." Arabelle warmly smiled with some hidden bitterness before advising her granddaughter, "Headmaster Astoria gave you something. You should go ahead and learn it."

"Yes, grandmother," Linetta nodded before returning her attention to the memory crystal with growing curiosity.

Ten minutes passed in the blink of an eye as Linetta was immersed in studying the mana utilization method.

Although she memorized the technique, she missed the chance to practice.

Vaan had returned.

"Let us head to Fort Whitebridge. Lord Helia is already waiting there," Vaan invited everyone downstairs to the basement, where the teleporter was located.

Arabelle and her personal guards were shocked by the advanced magic tool in their possession. Even so, they kept their silence for fear of antagonizing someone with their careless words.

They obediently followed the group and entered the black spatial gate, taking them into a new room.

It was the council room within Fort Whitebridge.

Although they had never been there, Lady Artemis, Lord of the Whitebridge Region, was present.

Thus, they had no choice but to believe they had crossed over several regions and arrived at the southern border in an instant.

"Welcome to Fort Whitebridge," Artemis greeted everyone.

Chapter 423: Who Scares You More?

"We really are in Fort Whitebridge?" Linetta uttered with amazement as she inspected her surroundings.



If they could popularize such advanced magic technology, they could travel anywhere in the kingdom and perhaps even beyond within the blink of an eye, saving them an incredible amount of time.

Although Arabelle and her personal guards didn't comment, their expressions gave away their thoughts and surprises.

Artemis was glad she wasn't the only one to be shocked by the reveal, given it happened not long ago.

"It's a bit earlier than scheduled, but since you're all here, let us start the meeting right away," Artemis said as she swept the group with her gaze. "Which one is the imperial princess Dorothy?"

Shortly after the question was raised, Astoria and the others immediately frowned.

"Dorothy is not here. She is in a secured location," Astoria coolly stated.

"What?" Artemis also frowned before solemnly asking, "Then why have you even come here? I thought the purpose of this meeting was to discuss how we should hand the person over to the empire, no? What's the point if the person is not here?"

"What's going on here, Lord Helia?" Artemis directed her attention at Helia for an answer.

However, Helia didn't reply. Instead, she glanced at Vaan and signaled him to speak on her behalf.

"We can, of course, discuss how to hand over Dorothy to the empire. However, the person doesn't have to be here now," Vaan calmly said before saying, "Did you really think it'll be over once we hand Dorothy over to the empire? How naïve."

"More importantly, Lord Artemis isn't expecting any more guests to arrive," Aeliana added.

"Coupled with Lady Arabelle's cluelessness, it's clear that the border lords have not informed the capital regarding the empire's demands and threats."

"I wonder what Lord Artemis is secretly plotting?" Aeliana asked with narrowed eyes.

"You're overthinking things," Artemis coolly shrugged in the face of Aeliana's accusation and said, "Why do I need to inform the capital over trivial issues? You're making a big problem out of nothing."

"Sure, the empire's threat is unpleasant, but that is just that. They won't start a war as long as we hand over the imperial princess as per their demand," Artemis stated.

"As I said, you are too naïve, Lord Artemis—"

"Who the hell do you think you are to speak to me like that? Just because I tolerated you once doesn't mean I will keep tolerating you, pretty boy!" Artemis snapped at Vaan before he could finish speaking.

"I don't know what it's like for central in recent years, but here, men don't get to talk like my equal! I call the shots here—!"

"Do you?"

Aeliana narrowed her eyes dangerously at Artemis as she sealed the person's mouth and movements with her vines.

Artemis was caught off guard by the surprise attack, but she didn't panic. However, when she tried to resist, she realized she couldn't break free from her binding.

Only then did she start to panic.

"When my lord is speaking, you listen; nothing else," Aeliana stated overbearingly before her following words became colder, "I would kill you right where you stand for disrespecting my lord, but he still has plans for you, so count yourself lucky to be alive."

"However, let me remind you that the highest authority here is not you, not me, or anyone else; only my lord. Get that into your head," Aeliana coldly stated. "Is that understood?"

Faced with Aeliana's heavy murderous intentions and mighty pressure, Artemis wanted to nod her head with obedience.

However, even she found that difficult to do due to the vines constricting around her neck. She couldn't breathe, let alone nod her head.

Her eyes started to roll back, revealing sheer whiteness; she was about to pass out from the lack of oxygen when Aeliana finally released her binding.

In that instant, Artemis immediately dropped to the ground weakly and greedily gasped for air while grasping her neck.

She violently coughed and choked when she inhaled improperly, causing her eyes to naturally turn watery.

If Aeliana had applied just a bit more force, her neck would have snapped.

Meanwhile, when Arabelle witnessed the dignified Artemis reduced to a sorry state, she felt surprisingly good, knowing someone else also suffered under the overbearing Aeliana's hands.

She was no longer alone in the matter.

Nevertheless, as long as witches failed to recognize Vaan's importance in Aeliana's heart, she didn't doubt such scenes will become common.

"Do you think it's acceptable to assault another lord in her own territory? Are you all going to turn a blind eye to this?" Artemis hoped the other witches would step up on her behalf.

However, no one did.

"It seems you still feel rebellious. My punishment must be too lenient," Aeliana commented before suggesting to Vaan, "Should I just kill her, my lord? I don't think she will be useful..."

"No...! I am useful! Please don't kill me!" Artemis pleaded desperately after recognizing no one was on her side.

At the same time, she truly believed Aeliana would kill her at Vaan's order.

"I want to ask you a question, Lord Artemis. You have to answer me honestly, alright?" Vaan crouched down and wiped Artemis's tears, almost appearing like a saint, before he asked, "How many troops do you command?"

"F-Five thousand, sir," Artemis answered truthfully.

"Five thousand, huh?" Vaan muttered before saying, "Now, do you believe five thousand is enough to hold off the empire's entire army when they possess overwhelming numbers, superior strength, and better equipment?"

"No matter how trivial of a problem you think it is, it is still a matter concerning the whole kingdom. Seven days would have given the kingdom time to prepare. But if you deprive the kingdom of that chance, you would have become the biggest sinner when the empire invades."

"Or perhaps you have already sold yourself to the empire? Is that why you are keeping crucial information from the capital? Why don't you tell us what you have been up to while guarding the borders?" Vaan asked.

However, Artemis fell silent and didn't answer. As such, Aeliana forced her to answer by grunting, expressing her impatience

"Please," Artemis pleaded as she said, "If I confess everything, I don't know what kind of terrible fate will await me, and that scares me!"

"More than I scare you?" Aeliana frowned.

#### Chapter 424: Artemis's Submission

Artemis didn't know how to respond to Aeliana's question. After all, Aeliana made her point clear.

If Artemis confessed everything, she might suffer terribly for all the crimes she committed while guarding the southern borders.

However, if she doesn't confess, then she will definitely suffer.

Shortly after Artemis thought it through, she eventually surrendered herself to the present situation and confessed everything.

Over the years, she had been making secret deals with the border lords of the Holy Knight Empire, which included selling intel to each other. As a result, she avoided skirmishes with the empire and didn't have to worry about assassinations in her sleep.

It was the only way to survive in the border regions when one lacked both strength and backing to repulse any threat.

Even so, no matter how insignificant the intel she sold to the empire was, it was still an act of betrayal to her kingdom.

"So what now? Are you going to send me to the capital to be judged by Her Majesty?" Artemis asked shortly after her confession.

However, Vaan shook his head.

"No, you are in luck. Transcendent Henrietta isn't around to judge you for your crimes," Vaan replied before adding, "More importantly, you still have a chance to redeem yourself. Swear your allegiance and fight for me."

"Wouldn't that make me betray Her Majesty?" Artemis raised an eyebrow in surprise and alarm.

"Even if it was a means of survival, you already betrayed her trust by selling intel to an enemy country. So why does it matter?" Vaan casually said.

"Furthermore, you'll still be serving your kingdom, so it's not really betraying your queen. You'll just be following the orders of the supreme commander to win this war."

"Orders of the supreme commander...? You want to assume the supreme commander position, sir?" Artemis asked with a startled look.

"Even if I agree, there's no way everyone else would do the same. It'll be difficult to convince them all. After all, you're a..."

"It doesn't matter," Aeliana interrupted before firmly stating, "My lord will become the supreme commander, and that's not something we came here to negotiate. We aren't asking people to agree; we are telling them."

"So if they don't agree.... Hehehe, let's just say that I am fond of bending people's will with the use of violence," Aeliana stated with a menacing grin.

The corners of Artemis and Arabelle's lips couldn't help but twitch speechlessly when they heard that.

They were both prime examples of Aeliana's violence.

Nevertheless, Artemis eventually submitted to Vaan, swearing her allegiance. To prove her loyalty, she swore the Oath of Magic, which would scatter her magic and sever her heart veins if she broke it.

Like that, Fort Whitebridge fell under Vaan's rule.

At the same time, after Artemis swore her allegiance and became one of Vaan's people, she felt more comfortable with the group and no longer pressured.

"I have something I must say, Lord Vahn. I have some friendships with the empire's border lords due to our mutual deals. So if the empire was truly planning to go to war with our kingdom, I believe they would at least warn me," Artemis mentioned before asking, "How can you be so sure that the empire will start a war with our kingdom?"

"You overestimate your importance, Lord Artemis. Why would they tell you anything important when the basis of your friendship with the empire's border lords was founded on mutual self-interest?" Vaan calmly replied.

"Nevertheless, answering your questions, the empire is amassing a large number of troops and supplies in their border cities. Do you really think they are doing all that just to scare us?"

"No, the empire always wanted to invade; they just needed justification," Vaan stated.

"And that justification is the imperial princess Dorothy?" Artemis asked.

"Precisely," Vaan nodded and said, "Aeliana will tell you the details if you want to listen to the full reason."

"However, right now, we have more important things to do. You should have accumulated many scout reports over the years. I want to read them all; bring them to me," Vaan ordered.

"A-All of them?" Artemis was shocked, thinking it was impossible for anyone to read it all within a short time. "Are you sure?"

"Hm, you're right. It will be inconvenient to bring them all here," Vaan replied after some thought and said, "You can take me to the report archive later."

Artemis was struck speechless, thinking that was beside the main point.

"How many troops can the Vossen Household summon to the southern border within seven days, Lady Arabelle?" Vaan enquired after turning to her.

"Not that many," Arabelle shook her head with a sigh and said, "I've brought five hundred elites with me to Sunpeak Town. But if I return to the capital, I can gather a thousand of my private army at most."

"Then, please go ahead and do just that," Vaan requested before saying, "I will see you in the capital when I'm ready to set up safe travels between the capital and Fort Whitebridge."

"Alright," Arabelle agreed with a nod, preparing to return through the teleporter with her two personal guards. "I'll leave my granddaughter in your care."

Vaan acknowledged.

Shortly after, he returned his attention to Artemis and instructed her to spread the news to the capital via her long-range communication magic tool and request reinforcements.

Even if doing so would sow greater chaos in the capital, it had to be done; they needed to amass troops for the war.

A few several thousand wouldn't cut it, not when the empire's army reached the several hundred of thousands and beyond.

"It will be done," Artemis accepted the task and left.

"Shall we go on a tour and see how reliable Fort Whitebridge's troops are?" Vaan suggested to the rest of the group, treating it like a little school excursion.

But of course, Vaan wasn't just planning to sightsee with them; he intended to inspect Fort Whitebridge's security and defense in detail.

He wouldn't want to miss a flaw the empire could have known and intended to exploit to take down Fort Whitebridge swiftly.

Chapter 425: Movements from the Empire

Holy Knight Empire, northern borders, Holsworthy City

Inside Lord Arderlard's castle, Emperor Renardier and his entourage of border lords stood in front of a blue cylindrical crystal-like magic tool, which displayed an image of Queen Sybil.

At that moment, they were already in the middle of negotiating the division of land after Emperor Renardier confirmed Queen Sybil's intention.

Queen Sybil truly wanted the Kingdom of Black Rose's downfall and guaranteed to keep the other witch kingdoms from interfering in their war.

At the same time, Queen Sybil had also shown Emperor Renardier the location of Queen Henrietta's captivity through the display.

When Emperor Renardier laid eyes on Queen Henrietta's flawless figure, his heart was moved by her beauty. For a moment, his eyes glowed with desire and lust before they disappeared.



Although Emperor Renardier could put Queen Henrietta's beauty among the top of the world, he knew she wasn't a person he could have.

She was a pretty rose filled with thorns.

Nevertheless, after Emperor Renardier confirmed Queen Henrietta's captivity, their desire to conquer the Kingdom of Black Rose was strengthened.

"Name your price, Queen Sybil. What do you want in return for this opportunity you have prepared for us?" Emperor Renardier enquired seriously.

"Ironhaven, Steel Mountain, and Goldriver. Besides these three regions, I also want ten thousand sets of Rank 4 armor from the Holy Knight Empire," Queen Sybil did not beat around the bush and listed her demand.

In the face of her exorbitant demand, Emperor Renardier was not fazed in the least.

However, it was hard to say whether he had expected such a big demand or the demand was not as much as Queen Sybil imagined.

That said, the people around Emperor Renardier were not as calm. In fact, they were enraged by Queen Sybil's demand.

Even so, Emperor Renardier calmly raised his hand and signaled their silence before they could voice their opposition.

It wasn't their place to speak.

"I accept your conditions, Queen Sybil," Emperor Renardier agreed.

"Great," Queen Sybil uttered before wishing the Holy Knight Empire good luck, "I will be awaiting your glorious victory and good news, Emperor Renardier."

"Just one more thing, Queen Sybil," Emperor Renardier mentioned before Queen Sybil could cut the communication. "How long can you keep Queen Henrietta in captivity?"

"Considering she is not even trying to break out, I would say indefinitely," Queen Sybil casually replied.

"However, if you want a more precise answer, then unless she suddenly advanced to Beyond Transcendent in her magic or a being with High-level Rank 5 physical strength helps break her out, she won't be going anywhere."

"Of course, there are a couple more ways in which she could get out, but I assure you the chances of them happening is almost zero," Queen Sybil stated.

Naturally, she was referring to the probability of Queen Henrietta wresting control of the holy tree from her or if someone disrupted the anti-magic field.

Both were nearly impossible to happen.

After all, Queen Sybil was bound to the holy tree. Therefore, no one should be able to exercise greater control over the holy tree than her.

At the same time, she wouldn't let anyone close to Queen Henrietta's area of captivity. Thus, it was even more impossible for someone to break her out.

Shortly after the two rulers concluded their talk, the display within the blue crystal disappeared.

"I know it's too late to change your mind, but are you sure giving up so many Rank 4 equipment to the Kingdom of Verdant Woods was fine? They could use it against us," Lord Arderlard mentioned.

"Considering we are also doing most of the work in conquering the Kingdom of Black Rose, giving them three mineral-rich regions is too much. They only deserve one or two at most."

"Right," Baron Ranulf agreed.

"They could use those mineral-rich regions to mass produce high-quality equipment and magic tools to use against us once they reverse-engineer the process of producing the Rank 4 equipment we give them."

"There's no need to worry about that," Emperor Renardier assured them, confidently saying, "Even if they manage to figure out the refining method to produce the Rank 4 equipment, they won't be able to mass produce it."

"According to the information we've collected from the dark organizations, Ironhaven, Steel Mountain, and Goldriver only possess common mineral deposits."

"More importantly, tungsten, the primary mineral for producing the most common Rank 4 equipment, is very rare within the seven witch kingdoms," Emperor Renardier stated.

Baron Ranulf and the others wore looks of understanding after listening to the emperor. It wasn't difficult for them to comprehend why that was the case.

The seven witch kingdoms only occupied a small fraction of the whole Pangea continent. It would be strange if their land contained every mineral in the world, let alone in large quantities.

Even the Holy Knight Empire would not boast a large possession of tungsten. But unlike the seven witch kingdoms, they were open to trade with other countries.

As long as they paid the willing price, any mineral or herb could be obtained.

"However, this is so strange. The Kingdom of Black Rose and the Kingdom of Verdant Woods are much weaker than I imagined," Baron Gregory mentioned with a frown.

"The amount of high-quality equipment and magic tools determines the strength of a country. Considering these two witch kingdoms are lacking them, this war would be a breeze for our empire."

"Why haven't we found out about this sooner? If we did, we could have also conquered the witch kingdoms sooner," Baron Gregory stated.

"Heh," Baron Arderlard snickered at Baron Gregory's simple thinking.

"If high-quality equipment and magic tools were everything, don't you think the Great Ratholos Empire would have made a move on them long ago? You just don't know how destructive Transcendent Witches can be."

"Sure, we can win the war and conquer the witch kingdoms if we found out sooner. But that's only if we don't fear the consequences of offending the Transcendent Witches, among other moral complications."

"Lord Arderlard is right," Emperor Renardier acknowledged with a serious tone.

"Transcendent Witches are capable of large-scale destruction. If Queen Henrietta was not detained, she could wipe out half our army with just a few spells at the start of the war, and that's not the worse she can do."

If she fled into hiding, she could conjure large-scale curses and plague our empire with terrible famine and diseases. Our empire would surely decline from that," Emperor Renardier stated.

That's why if they were to offend a Transcendent Witch, they have to guarantee she could be killed quickly or sealed indefinitely.

"Alright, enough of that," Emperor Renardier suddenly changed the topic, focusing on the three border lords. "I heard the three of you have been somewhat close to the border lord of Dragontail, Whitebridge, and Ironhaven."

"Your Imperial Majesty, we..." the three border lords immediately paled.

"I don't care what past dealings you have made with each other in order to survive on the borders," Emperor Renardier interrupted with a solemn expression and said, "I just want to know if you are confident in convincing them to surrender."

"If we can acquire the cooperation of the border lords of Dragontail, Whitebridge, and Ironhaven, we'll be saving precious time to occupy their main cities," Emperor Renardier added.

The faster they conquered territories after initiating the war, the less time their enemy had to prepare, which in turn, would minimize their casualties in battle.

"We..." Baron Arderlard frowned in thought before he replied, "If we reach out to them and reveal our strength, there's a high chance they will submit to our empire."

"However, doing so would also reveal our intention to wage war on their kingdom. In that case, we shouldn't have given them seven days, Your Imperial Majesty. We should have just struck without warning to produce the best effect," Baron Arderlard stated.

"That's where you are wrong, Baron Arderlard. Any bright mind would be able to figure out our empire's intention the moment we demanded them to hand over imperial princess Dorothy," Emperor Renardier calmly stated.

"As such, seven days would indeed give them ample time to prepare for war. However, that's only true if they still had their queen to lead them."

"Without someone powerful like Queen Henrietta around to lead them, the Kingdom of Black Rose would undoubtedly plunge into chaos once they realize war is imminent. We haven't bothered hiding our strength for the purpose of fueling that chaos."

"Eventually, the Kingdom of Black Rose would become divided. The strong will have differing opinions and contend for the right to lead their kingdom's army, while the weak will try to flee."

"I estimated the end of the seven days would be when the Kingdom of Black Rose would be at their weakest and most vulnerable state," Emperor Renardier explained.

"It seems you already have it all planned out, Your Imperial Majesty. I am in awe of your wisdom," Baron Arderlard praised his emperor as he bowed his head with one hand over his chest to express his respect and reverence.

The other border lords also did the same.

However, Emperor Renardier did not feel happy with such praises and respect. Rather, he frowned with worry.

"If only everything proceeds according to plan," Emperor Renardier sighed and said, "However, the lack of information from central bothers me. There may be some unexpected variables in this war."

Nevertheless, he was prepared to alter his plans accordingly to the changes in the war.

After Emperor Renardier finished his business in Holsworthy City, he decided to visit Equinox City next.

"I hope the dark organizations updated Count Eldridge and Duke Chalfont with some useful information on central," Emperor Renardier muttered to himself.

Chapter 426: Arderlard's Call

Equinox City, Salazar's castle

Inside the secret chamber underneath the castle, Ulrich Salazar contacted his subordinates for an update on the central region's situation.

However, they failed to provide anything useful in the past several days.

"What do you mean you still don't know what's happening in Sunpeak Town?! I've given you several days to find out already! How hard is it to do a single task?! Are you not a Rank 5 powerhouse?!"

Ulrich cursed through the communicator after he lost his patience.

He had been seeking an update every day, and each time he checked, he would become more disappointed than the last.

"I'm sorry for my incompetence, Your Excellency," Death Blade apologized on the other side of the communicator.

"Naturally, it's impossible for over a hundred of our members to disappear overnight without a single trace while carrying out their mission in Sunpeak Town. In fact, this subordinate believes many people inside Sunpeak Town know what happened to them."

"However, the problem is that none of our scouts have returned after entering the town to investigate, no matter what disguise they used. I feel like our opponent has a way of tracking our identities," Death Blade suspected.

"Have we not resolved Fuhengir's bloodline problem with the bloodline concealers?" Ulrich asked with a dark look before continuing, "Or are you telling me the Kingdom of Black Rose possesses more advanced tracking magic tools that render my bloodline concealers useless?"

"I'm not sure if it's the work of a magic tool, Your Excellency," Death Blade said honestly.

"Although I have not entered the town myself, I have always felt like an almighty and omniscient being is overseeing the town, protecting it from all who enter it with ill intentions. At least, that's the kind of danger sense the town is giving me."

"Whoever killed Lord Smiling Knife and Lord Dream Streak is surely not an opponent I can contend with, Your Excellency," Death Blade added.

"That's no excuse for your incompetence! I am not asking you to fight whoever killed our people; I'm telling you to find out who did it!" Ulrich roared at the communicator.

"Surely, people aren't just entering the town. There should be people leaving the town as well! Just grab a few and interrogate them! I'll give you three more days to produce some useful information."

"If you continue to disappoint me, be prepared for punishments!" Ulrich warned before shutting off the communicator.

He didn't have a lot of time to handle the affairs of the Assembly of Silent Night, especially when he had many important guests in his city.

After fixing his expression, Ulrich exited his secret chamber and went to attend to the nobles and lords.

...

Meanwhile, Death Blade sighed after Ulrich's obscured display vanished from the communicator screen.

"Impatient and unreasonable as ever, huh?" Steel Jackal chuckled nearby before suggesting, "If you ever feel like betraying the leader, let me know. I'll join you."

"We are obviously dealing with someone more powerful than we can handle; the leader is practically urging us to die. It's not too late to abandon the mission and run away."

"And run where exactly?" Death Blade glanced at Steel Jackal and said, "Even if we hide in the corners of the earth, Leader will find us one way or another. He is just too strong. You should know better than to betray Leader."

"Of course. I was just joking with you, Lord Death Blade," Steel Jackal laughed it off.

However, it was uncertain whether it was truly a joke or if he was serious.

Nevertheless, Death Blade had made valid points. Even if they knew the leader's true identity, it wasn't something they could use against the person.

After all, the person was still a Peak-level Rank 5 being.

Even if they exposed Ulrich Salazar's true identity as the Devil's Contractor, the person would only lose their backing and connections. They didn't know anyone powerful enough to kill the person.

Thus, they would eventually suffer as a result of their betrayal.

"We better get to work then. We only have three days," Steel Jackal added with a sigh, getting off his lazy ass.

...

...

...

Kingdom of Black Rose, Fort Whitebridge



Sometime after Vaan and the others toured the white stone fort, the Lord of Dragontail, Agatha, and the Lord of Ironhaven, Melusina, arrived for the scheduled meeting.

However, they ran into Vaan and also made the mistake of underestimating him while he was disciplining the fort's troops and teaching them some key command words to remember.

As a result, two border lords were also beaten into submission by Aeliana, who followed closely behind him like a shadow.

"You two, stand there and watch. You'll be teaching your troops the same drills once you return to your territories. Is that clear?" Vaan instructed shortly after receiving their allegiance with the Oath of Magic.

"Y-Yes, Lord Vahn!" Agatha and Melusina answered as they kneeled on the ground with bruised cheeks and black eyes.

Unlike Artemis, who only had a bruised mark around her neck, Agatha and Melusina had evidently received a much more physical lesson from Aeliana.

However, they weren't the only ones to have received a beating in the last hour. At least several dozens of battle witches had also suffered similar surface injuries.

That said, they weren't beaten for disrespecting Aeliana's lord. Instead, they were simply unlucky enough to be Aeliana's training partners.

"May I ask what is the purpose of the current training regime, Lord Vahn?" Agatha carefully asked before mentioning, "If you reduce the fort's troops to such states, it will become more difficult to defend the fort in the face of a sudden attack."

"You don't need to worry about that. The empire won't invade before they acquire the justification and moral high ground to start a war," Vaan coolly stated before adding, "Even if they do, the fort's troops won't be able to achieve anything in their present state."

"Fort Whitebridge had known peace for too long. As a result, the battle witches are all out of shape, both physically and mentally. As such, the current training regime aims to whip them back into shape."

"It just so happens that pain stimulation and physical exercises are effective methods in achieving just that," Vaan casually stated.

Shortly after, he explained the relationship between magic and vessels.

A witch's body was a vessel for containing their magic. If the vessel were weak, so too would their magic. On the other hand, a strong vessel would be able to contain more powerful magic.

As such, it was important to strengthen the vessel.

More importantly, poor vessels prevented the battle witches from practicing the mana utilization method. With their poor concentration and control, they were prone to making mistakes.

And mistakes with the mana utilization method would result in serious—if not deadly internal injuries.

Although the battle witches did not appear to be fat, it could be seen how unfit they were. They all looked like they were about to die from a little exercise and beating.

But no matter how much they disliked their situation, they could only grit their teeth and persevere through their training regime.

After all, they were also forced to swear their allegiance to Vaan with the Oath of Magic.

Vaan wouldn't want to leave their loyalty to chances, considering military discipline was lacking, and they also had their egos.

Most importantly, it was hard to imagine the consequences if his orders weren't followed during the war.

Nevertheless, while the fort's battle witches were being ingrained with the training regime, Artemis suddenly rushed over to inform Vaan.

"Lord Vahn, we're receiving a call from one of the Holy Knight Empire's border lords, Lord Arderlard of Holsworthy City," Artemis reported.

"And you haven't answered the call?" Vaan asked.

"No, my Lord!" Artemis denied, shaking her head vehemently before saying, "I figured it was best to inform you first."

"You made the right call," Vaan acknowledged with a nod before signaling Artemis to lead the way. He also instructed Agatha and Mesulina to follow them.

"What do you think the empire wants with Lord Artemis, my Lord?" Aeliana curiously asked along the way.

"Hmm..." Vaan briefly pondered before saying, "Well, if the empire is contacting Lord Artemis around this time after they just announced their demand recently, they might be hoping to seek some information through her or gauge her stance."

"We'll know for sure once we get there," Vaan added.

Shortly after they reached the council room where the communication magic tool was last left, Vaan did not ask Artemis to accept the call immediately.

"How good is your acting?"

"I..."

Vaan didn't wait for the border lords to finish their answer.

The moment they hesitated, he immediately got his answer. As such, he instructed Aeliana to cast a temporary memory loss spell on them, forcing them to forget everything before their meeting with him and the others.

As a result, Artemis, Agatha, and Mesulina immediately frowned with confusion once the temporary memory loss spell took effect.

However, they were bound to Vaan by their Oaths of Magic.

Thus, they couldn't refuse his orders without sensing their mana circles and veins cracking even though they couldn't recognize who he was or why he could command them.

Vaan gave them time to accept their situation before instructing them to receive Lord Arderlard's call.

"Good day to you, Lord Artemis. I can see Lord Agatha and Lord Mesulina are with you as well," Lord Arderlard greeted on the other side of the communication crystal before saying, "I hope I wasn't interrupting anything?"

"It sure took you some time to accept my call," Lord Arderlard added.

#### Chapter 427: Arderlard's Offer

"And I apologize for that, Lord Arderlard. You see, we were in the middle of a meeting, discussing how and when we should return the imperial princess to your empire," Artemis replied before asking curiously, "Have you contacted us to share more details about that?"

"Not exactly, Lord Artemis," Baron Arderlard shook his head before mentioning, "We've known each other for years and worked together to survive despite the tension between our two countries. So, as a friend, I want to give you three a chance at life."

"A chance at life?" Artemis and the other two border lords beside her frowned before she asked, "What do you mean by that, Lord Arderlard?"

"I'm asking the three of you to join our empire, Lord Artemis," Baron Arderlard firmly stated.

"If you swear to serve our empire, I can guarantee you will live. Otherwise, once the empire wages war on your kingdom with its full might, your territories will be the first to burn. Please don't take my words as an empty threat; this will definitely happen unless you join our empire's cause."

"Even as we speak, the empire has already gathered over four hundred thousand soldiers at the borders, with more still on the way. Each soldier is armed with at least Peak-Rank 3 to Low-Rank 4 equipment."

"As such, you can expect at least forty-thousand elite soldiers with the combat strength of Rank 4 beings. And as I said, more are still on the way. Your fortified walls and magic won't be able to stop our army's advance."

"Please consider my words seriously, Lord Artemis, Lord Agatha, and Lord Mesulina," Baron Arderlard pleaded solemnly.

What—!?

Artemis, Agatha, and Mesulina were visibly shaken and shocked by Baron Arderlard's information.

"Now, hold on just a moment, Lord Arderlard! What do you mean by starting a war? Does the empire really intend to wage war on our kingdom?" Agatha asked urgently.

"That's right, Lord Arderlard. What about the empire's demand? This matter won't end with handing over the imperial princess?" Mesulina quickly added.

"I'm afraid not," Baron Arderlard shook his head again, seemingly regretfully, before saying, "The empire has always been interested in expanding their domain and influence, and it just so happens that Queen Sybil provided the perfect opportunity for the empire."

"The Kingdom of Black Rose will not receive any help from the other witch kingdoms. Even your ruler, Queen Henrietta, will not be around to lead your kingdom. Therefore, you are alone in this war once it starts. Dragontail, Whitebridge, and Ironhaven will turn into a battlefield of death."

"However, that can be avoided if you join our empire," Baron Aderlard stated.

"Even if what you say is true, how can you guarantee we won't be persecuted once we join your empire?" Artemis asked doubtfully.

"If we openly betray our kingdom, no one will respect or trust us. It'll be difficult for us to conduct any kind of business—no, it'll be difficult live from then onward in general."

"Be that as it may, it's still better than dying, right?" Baroon Arderlard replied before suddenly adding, "Moreover, what you said isn't exactly true. I'm sure your people wouldn't want to die in the war. Thus, they would be grateful to you for saving their lives."

"Furthermore, there is one way I guarantee your livelihood in the empire; our bond through marriage will grant you both the status and wealth to live in the empire without a problem."

"Is that what you are after from the start?" Artemis asked suspiciously before saying, "Your information is too much for us to digest at once. I hope you don't mind giving us some time to think it over before we give you a definite answer."

After all, they couldn't just believe everything Baron Arderlard said to them, even when they had established a long-standing trust between them.

The matter was too huge. They had to confirm Queen Henrietta's absence, at the very least.

"That's fine," Baron Arderlard nodded, understanding Artemis's misgivings, as he mentioned, "I was prepared to give you until the deadline of seven days."

He anticipated Artemis and the other two wouldn't agree immediately. In fact, it would be strange if they readily agreed without fact-checking for themselves.

"However, back on the topic of your meeting, is it safe to assume our imperial princess Dorothy is currently with you?" Baron Arderlard enquired shortly after.

"No," Artemis shook her head and said, "However, we have already notified central about this matter. We should be expecting news about the imperial princess soon."

"In that case, I would like to strike another deal with you, Lord Artemis. We want to send some troops into your country secretly. As such, we would like you to ease the border security and grant them passage," Baron Arderlard stated.

"You want me to sneak your troops through my territory? That's more demanding than any information you've requested in the past years, Lord Arderlard," Artemis said solemnly. "If I get caught, it won't be as simple as a swift execution for me. You know that, right?"

"Of course, that's why it must be carried out in secret," Baron Arderlard acknowledged.

"More importantly, we are prepared to pay a reasonable price for the risk; a Rank 4 Mental Strength Potion from the Wizard Tower. Supposedly, it can boost your mental strength and increase the success of forming the third mana circle by fifty percent."

"What do you think, Lord Artemis? Do you agree?" Baron Arderlard asked shortly after.

However, before Artemis could reply, Agatha mentioned, "You're not really thinking you can strike this deal with Lord Artemis and not include us, are you? Lord Arderlard?"

"Of course not, Lord Agatha," Baron Arderlard acknowledged before adding, "We've prepared a total of three Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions. But, of course, we'll have to increase the number of troops we can send over."

"That's fine with us as long as the number isn't too great," Artemis and the others agreed.

Eventually, the deal was settled.

After going over a few more details, Baron Arderlard cut off his side of the communication, ending the call.

From start to end, Artemis, Agatha, and Mesulina had been reading from a script Vaan made on the go, mixed with their genuine emotions, as the conversation with Baron Arderlard progressed.

At the same time, Vaan and Aeliana had been standing on the blindside of the communicator. Thus, Baron Arderlard had no idea of their presence.

A few moments after Artemis, Agatha, and Mesulina recovered from their temporary memory loss, they couldn't help but feel the gravity of the situation.

Just like they were previously told, the empire truly wanted to start a war.

"It seems the empire wants to send troops to infiltrate the kingdom and retrieve Dorothy secretly. I was expecting them to do it at some point, but I didn't expect them to be this bold about it. They were really confident in convincing you three to join them, huh?" Vaan commented.

For three Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions, Artemis and the other two were required to secretly admit three hundred empire soldiers into their kingdom.

Undoubtedly, the empire soldiers would also be the elites of the elites, considering the importance of their mission.

After all, the empire's justification for initiating the war rode on their success.

Even so, three hundred empire soldiers weren't a small number. Most likely, they also had a secondary objective, such as gathering information.

"My Lord, we have already sworn the Oath of Magic. We wouldn't dare think about betraying you and the kingdom!" Artemis and the other two said fearfully.

"I know. So don't worry about it," Vaan calmly acknowledged.

He wasn't concerned about that in the least.

At the same time, Artemis, Agatha, and Mesulina felt immediate relief when they realized Vaan was reasonable.

"Baron Arderlard's offer was truly irresistible and tempting, though. But, unfortunately, I doubt I will get a chance to use one," Artemis commented with regret, knowing she wouldn't get a chance to use it even if it was given to her.

"Correct," Vaan nodded.

"If the effects of the empire's Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions are as they claimed, they are far too valuable to be consumed without studying them first."

"However, you don't have to worry. Even without the Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions, I will give the three of you the opportunity to advance to the High Witch rank after we receive the potions from the empire," Vaan assured.



To prove his claim, he picked out a few talented battle witches who had already sworn the Oath of Magic and helped them advance to Early-stage High Witches.

After Artemis, Agatha, Mesulina, and as well as the rest of the battle witches in Fort Whitebridge witnessed it, they were all shocked and impressed.

They began to develop genuine respect and reverence for Vaan.

At the same time, the battle witches became highly motivated to complete the training regime, even if they had to grit through all the pain and suffering.

They wanted to be like the lucky few that advanced to the High Witch rank.

Artemis and the other border lords felt a little regretful since they couldn't receive the opportunity right away. Instead, they were required to remain at the Peak-stage Senior Witch rank until they completed their exchange with the empire to avoid raising suspicions regarding their power.

Nevertheless, the exchange would occur at night when the empire sent its troops through the territory.

The empire's group leader would rendezvous with them at the designated location and hand them the three Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions.

As such, they could afford to wait.

Chapter 428: Alistair Cane

"Rank 4 Mental Strength Potion..." Aeliana muttered thoughtfully.

"If we recreate the recipe and mass-produce it, we could raise an army of High Witches—Of course, my Lord can also do the same. But at least with Rank 4 Mental Strength Potion as an option, it will save my Lord's time and energy."

"Unfortunately, that's only true if the ingredients required to produce the Rank 4 Mental Strength Potion aren't rare," Vaan said with a shake of his head.

"And considering it is a Rank 4 potion, chances are, the ingredients are definitely rare. We shouldn't assume it is common outside the seven witch kingdoms just because Baron Arderlard is willing to offer three such potions."

"It's unlikely for these potions to come out of his coffers or obtained with his own wealth; Baron Arderlard was only acting on behalf of the empire," Vaan stated.

"Still, three hundred is not a small number for a secret operation, my Lord. If they don't want to leave a trail, they are better off with a small group," Aeliana mentioned before adding, "I guess the empire isn't very bright."

"From a normal perspective, that would be the obvious choice to make," Vaan calmly acknowledged before saying, "However, that's only under the assumption that their secret operation isn't leaked."

"The empire sending three hundred elites over highlights the importance of their mission as well as their distrust in the border lords. For example, if their operation were leaked, it would still be difficult to catch all the infiltrators."

"Thus, even if some of them are caught, there would still be more people leftover to carry on with their mission. In that sense, the more they send, the higher chance of completing their mission," Vaan explained.

"But if we catch even one of them, we can just interrogate them and expose their secret. We could even expose the empire's actions to the world and put them at a disadvantage," Aeliana stated.

"That's right," Vaan nodded before saying, "The empire must have also considered this problem. Thus, if they are still willing to send this many people to infiltrate the kingdom, they must be confident in their countermeasures."

"Unfortunately, they just don't know who they are up against, even if they want to find out," Vaan smiled amusingly.

Even if the empire sent deathsworn soldiers, he was confident in incapacitating them before they could commit suicide.

After all, the chances of the empire's infiltrators being Rank 5 beings were low, let alone above Rank 5.

...

...

...

Meanwhile, shortly after Baron Arderlard finished his call with Artemis's group, he used the communication crystal to relay the news to the emperor.

"Have you completed negotiations with the kingdom's border lords, Lord Arderlard?" Emperor Renardier immediately inquired.

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!" Baron Arderlard strongly answered as he stood upright and saluted the emperor on display along with Baron Gregory and Baron Ranulf.

"Just as we anticipated, Lord Artemis, Lord Agatha, and Lord Mesulina all revealed genuine doubt and shock when we revealed our intentions toward war; they truly thought the matter would blow over if they handed over the imperial princess."

"I don't care about that. Move onto the important points," Emperor Renardier urged, seemingly impatient as he seemed busy on the other side.

"I understand, Your Imperial Majesty," Baron Arderlard acknowledged before listing the important points in their conversation as well as their negotiation's success.

"Lord Artemis, Lord Agatha, and Lord Mesulina seemed skeptical at first, but they didn't show any strong aversion to joining the empire. I have a good feeling they will reach out to me within the stipulated date to surrender to our empire."

"They also couldn't resist the temptation of the Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions sponsored by the Wizard Tower. I am in awe of your charisma, Your Imperial Majesty. How did you convince the Wizard Tower to join our war?" Baron Arderlard asked shortly after.

"You're giving me too much credit, Lord Arderlard," Emperor Renardier replied coolly as another person appeared on the crystal display beside him.

It was an elderly man with an overgrown long grey beard, eyebrows, and hair that had been braided to look neat and clean.

The elderly man also wore a distinguishable blue robe with a golden pentagon symbol, proving he was a member of the Wizard Tower member. He wasn't just any ordinary member of the Wizard Tower either.

He was a Peak-stage Third-Circle Wizard, which put him on the same level as a Peak-Early-stage High Witch.

Although this only made the elderly man a Low-level Rank 4 being, which wasn't much different from an elite soldier in the Holy Knight Empire, his status was even higher than most nobles and lords.

The elderly man was Alastair Cane, the seventh tower master, one of the nine tower masters of the Wizard Tower.

Each tower master was said to possess power comparable to High-level Rank 4 beings despite only being Third-Circle Wizards. This was due to their Rank 5 magic staff, which could greatly augment the power of their spells up to the Fifth-Circle level.

"The Wizard Tower has always been interested in the territory of the seven witch kingdoms due to their abundance of mana. But, of course, without benefits, Wizard Tower has no reason to aid the Holy Knight Empire in this upcoming war," Alastair Cane calmly stated.

"For that, we have Emperor Renardier here to thank for graciously promising the Wizard Tower the rights to build a branch in the Kingdom of Black Rose after we conquer it. Moreover, Emperor Renardier promised to fund its construction personally."

"There's no way the Wizard Tower could refuse such a tempting offer," Alastair Cane added.

In order to ensure the Holy Knight Empire's victory in its war against the Kingdom of Black Rose, Alastair Cane had bought over a hundred Peak-stage Second-Circle Wizards. That was the maximum number he could gather from his branch.

"The sixth and fifth tower masters are also on their way. However, it will take them some time to reach the northern borders. That said, they should arrive before the start of the war," Alastair said to Emperor Renardier.

"It's reassuring to have the Wizard Tower on board in this war, Lord Alastair," Emperor Renardier replied.

"We, of the Wizard Tower, are also grateful to be given the opportunity to participate, Your Imperial Majesty."

#### Chapter 429: Thousand-Mile Scent Flower

Back in Fort Whitebridge, Vaan began preparing to receive the empire's infiltrators.

There were more ways to make use of them than simple capture and extraction of information. They could also feed them false intel to mislead the empire into making disastrous decisions.

That said, a single mistake would also give the empire an advantage over them.

As such, it was crucial to reduce some of their numbers and ensure the infiltrators could only act within his area of control, where he could keep track of their movements.

"What are we doing out here, my Lord?" Artemis asked after Vaan led her and Aeliana to a secluded and bushy location eight hundred yards away from Fort Whitebridge.

"If you are asking that question, then I suppose it is safe to assume you have no idea about this secret underground passage?" Vaan casually asked after exposing a trapdoor underneath a tile of grass.

Thanks to his Omni-Sense, he was able to detect the hollow passage during his tour around Fort Whitebridge.

The secret passage didn't exactly run right underneath Fort Whitebridge. More accurately, it ran in parallel two hundred yards left of Fort Whitebridge.

Nevertheless, looking at Artemis's surprised and clueless reaction, Vaan understood she had no prior knowledge of its existence.

"Not at all, my Lord!" Artemis denied, shaking her vehemently before saying, "Up until Lord Arderlard's offer today, I have never smuggled the empire's people into the kingdom before, I swear!"

"And yet, Baron Arderlard didn't mention any part of this in the empire's plan to sneak people into the kingdom?" Vaan raised an eyebrow.

"Did they only intend to rely on the night's cover and night watchers' reduction to get past Fort Whitebridge secretly? Unlikely. But if the empire had never sent people to infiltrate the kingdom before either, then this secret passage must have been made by the Assembly of Silent Night."

"I doubt it's the only secret passage either," Vaan guessed with a thoughtful look.

Evidently, he needed to expand his search in order to discover the rest of the secret passages outside his range. The same applied to Dragontail Region and Ironhaven Region.

Nevertheless, considering dark organizations like the Assembly of Silent Night thrived by accepting assassination commissions and selling information, there was a chance that the empire would eventually learn about the secret passages.

If they knew, they wouldn't have made a deal with Artemis, Agatha, and Mesulina. At the same time, they could send more than a mere three hundred to infiltrate the kingdom.

"There's a chance the empire will make use of a secret passage like this during the war once they learn about it. For now, it's best that we don't reveal that we know about this to the empire," Vaan stated.

"Then what have we come here for, my Lord?" Aeliana asked.

"Of course, we can't let the empire and the Assembly of Silent Night know that we know about their secret passages. But that doesn't mean we'll just let their rats slip through without any traps," Vaan stated.

Shortly after he spoke, he searched through Emerald's Plant Compendium and recreated the seed of a Thousand-Mile Scent Flower.

Afterward, he used Wood Manipulation to accelerate its germination and growth.

Once the Thousand-Mile Scent Flower was fully grown, Vaan crushed, dried, and ground it into fine powders, creating the Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder.

Although the Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder wasn't common, it wasn't rare either. Thus, there was a chance the empire or Assembly of Silent Night would discover it being used on them.

As such, Vaan instructed Aeliana to scatter her antimagic spores and had them devour the Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder, masking their unique scent and presence.

"Release it into the secret passage."

"Yes, my Lord."

Shortly after receiving Vaan's instruction, Aeliana released her antimagic spores filled with the Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder into the secret tunnel.

Then, they left for their next target after covering the trapdoor and traces of ever being in the area.

In total, Vaan discovered seven secret passages through the three border regions; two in Dragontail, one in Ironhaven, and surprisingly four in Whitebridge.

Nevertheless, each secret underground passage was filled with Aeliana's antimagic spores and Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder all the same.

When Vaan's group returned to Fort Whitebridge, the skies had already started darkening.

They were gone for hours, but the grunts and roars of the battle witches continued to resound within the fort's stone walls as they persevered through their training regime.

Despite the battle witches' bodies soaking in sweat and crying with exhaustion and pain, they still managed to endure the grueling training regime with determined looks.

They had been mentally and physically unfit, but after a quarter of a day's training, they were already showing signs of shedding off their weakness. Their improvement rate was commendable.

It wouldn't have been possible if they didn't have the motivation to endure the training and the magic to speed up their physical recovery.

Evidently, the prospect of becoming High Witches was a deadly temptation to witches stuck at the Peak-stage Senior Witches for many years.

"The battle witches' training regime seems to be going well," Vaan commented as he returned.

"Mm, several battle witches are ready to learn the mana utilization method after some rest. Also, I finished recording the method in all the memory crystals you gave me," Astoria replied.

During the absence of Vaan's group, Astoria had been the one to watch over the fort.

"Thank you, Astoria."

"It was nothing, Vaan."

After their short exchange, there was a brief silence before Vaan asked Astoria to meet him after he rewarded some of the battle witches.

When the battle witches witnessed another five Peak-stage Senior Witches advance to High Witches under Vaan's assistance, they received another boost to their motivation.

"Ooh—! I'll definitely complete this training exercise and become a High Witch!" a blonde battle witch roared with excitement and determination.

"Yeah—!" the rest of the battle witches shouted even louder.



...

Nevertheless, Vaan didn't stick around after motivating the battle witches.

Instead, he met up with Astoria by the stone wall, where she stood and peered into the distant land of the Holy Knight Empire that lay across Stormwind Lake.

#### Chapter 430: Soul Link Spell

"Without a doubt, many people will die in this war. I know you're not okay with that, but you haven't asked me to stop it either, Vaan slowly mentioned as he stood beside Astoria.

"It's true that I'm not okay with it," Astoria admitted before saying, "But I also know you have plans to make use of this war, and I don't want to get in your way."

"I know," Vaan calmly acknowledged.

"That's why I will give you a chance to announce your identity to the empire and persuade them to give up. Those who still have loyalty to the true heir will be spared, but those who stubbornly defy it will pay the price."

"Thank you, Vaan," Astoria said gratefully, resting her head on Vaan's shoulder.

It had been over three hundred years since she left the Holy Knight Empire. Although she still possessed a sense of responsibility to the people, it wasn't as strong as in the past.

At the same time, she had become more flexible with her principles since her meeting with Vaan.

It was impossible to save everyone; some sacrifices were necessary for the greater good. It would just be like cutting off the rotten branches and keeping the healthy ones.

She had to be decisive to move on from her past.

...

After Vaan's talk with Astoria, he resumed his work on the southern borders. He moved between the three border regions, strengthening the battle witches as he checked on their progress.

Eventually, midnight arrived.

Back in Fort Whitebridge, more than four-fifths of the battle witches had retired to their sleeping quarters, leaving only one-fifth to carry out night duties.

As such, the security was lower than usual.

"My Lord. It's time," Aeliana alerted after she sensed changes in the antimagic spores she had spread out in the three border regions.

"Their numbers?" Vaan asked.

"About five hundred, more than the agreed number," Aeliana answered before adding, "They have taken the right passage, the closest one to Fort Whitebridge. No signs of any other secret passages being used."

"So the Assembly of Silent Night only revealed one of their secret passages to the empire, huh? Make sense. It would be strange and stupid of them to show all their cards," Vaan casually commented before saying, "Alright, let us head to the rendezvous location."

"Yes, my Lord," Aeliana and Artemis answered.

Before they left, Vaan instructed Zodreg to watch over Fort Whitebridge from the skies in their absence.

...

...

...

Two hundred yards away from Fort Whitebridge, at sixty feet underground, five hundred and five men clad in black moved through the secret passage.

Besides the five hundred men from the empire, they were also accompanied by five elderly men from the Wizard Tower.

More importantly, the five hundred men from the empire were all Rank 4 Aura Lords with strength rivaling the current known lords and nobles throughout the Holy Knight Empire.

However, none of their names were known to anyone other than the emperor. They were one of the emperor's secret shadow groups, the Deathsworn Group.

From a young age, they were secretly trained to the extreme to achieve strength that could repel any threat directed at their emperor. As such, they only answered to the emperor, only living and dying by the emperor's orders.

When they departed for their mission, they were prepared not to come back alive.

On the other hand, the five elderly men were all Peak-stage Second-Circle Wizards with power comparable to Early-stage High Witches. They were tasked to assist the Deathsworn Group with their magic.

However, they didn't have the same resolution to lay down their lives if push came to shove.

"This passage is completely pitch black. Let me illuminate our path with some light magic—" a Peak-stage Second-Circle Wizard was quickly interrupted before he could finish.

"Stop it, you fool."

"We are treading right under the kingdom's noses. Do you want to expose our location? Furthermore, I can sense disruption in my mana flow. We are most likely passing through an antimagic zone, so your spell won't work properly here."

"But the dark organization didn't mention anything about their secret passage having an antimagic zone," another wizard doubted.

"Even if they didn't, can't you use your head? Are you even a pursuer of truth and knowledge? The antimagic zone is clearly used to mask our presence. Otherwise, even if we are this deep underground, the kingdom could detect us."

"Well, you have a point," the wizards acknowledged, not wanting to argue further.

...

Sometime later, the group reached the end of the secret passage and climbed the ladder leading outside, where there were finally some traces of light.

"Remember our objectives: group one will find and secure the imperial princess, then return to the empire, group two will study the southern borders, group three will investigate the central region, and group four will observe movements from the capital."

"As for group five, you're on standby with me, ready to assist each group when needed. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Move out."

Shortly after, the four-fifths of the group split off into four different directions, leaving the fifth group behind with the speaker, who appeared to be the leader of the fifth group from the start.

"I will now rendezvous with the border lords and hand them the Rank 4 Mental Strength Potions. If I don't return, you know what to do," the fifth group leader stated.

"Yes, sir."

Nevertheless, the exchange took place smoothly without a problem. After the fifth group leader met up with Artemis and handed her the potions, they each went on their way.

The fifth group leader returned to his group, and Artemis headed back to Fort Whitebridge without Vaan and Aeliana.

At that moment, Vaan and Aeliana had been hidden nearby, using an invisibility spell that Aeliana had cast on them.

After the fifth group leader eventually departed for a different region half an hour later, Vaan finally broke the silence between him and Aeliana.

"Their positions?" Vaan asked.

"Most of them are heading north, but they left behind a fifth of the group to stay in the southern borders, my Lord," Aeliana answered before inserting her opinion, "Judging by how they are spreading out, they must be trying to form a wide network."

"Is that so?" Vaan rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"It seems the empire is quite careful. Despite possessing an overwhelming advantage with their military force, they still want to establish an intelligence network in our kingdom to feed their empire information."

"They're really going all out to ensure they are victorious in war and fully justified in doing so, huh? But, unfortunately, they've already fallen for our first trap. We have the initiative in our home ground."

"It's time to use that move, Aeli. Let us start with the ones in the southern borders," Vaan instructed.

"Yes, my Lord!" Aeliana answered as her eyes flickered with excitement.

In the next instant, she closed her eyes, focusing her senses on the antimagic spores within the southern borders. At the same time, she pressed her forehead against Vaan's, sharing their consciousness.

Soul Link

It was a dangerous spell, rarely used by any witches due to its high risk and limited usage. It involved linking two consciousnesses and sharing thoughts and control of each other's body in real-time.

The slightest disharmony could result in breaking the link and causing severe damage to both their souls if not outright crippling their minds.

But for Vaan, who shared a master-servant relationship with Aeliana, it was not a problem.

The both of them quickly locked onto the empire's infiltrators in the region. Then, they remotely cast hundreds to thousands of ignition spells at once, which was only made possible with Vaan's high-speed thought processing and multitasking ability.

In essence, Vaan could cast any magic by using his servants as a medium with the soul link spell.

Nevertheless, the antimagic spore had limited mana. Thus, the scale of the ignition spells was minuscule. Even so, the scale of their power was just enough to burn Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder within the antimagic spores.

As a result of burning the Thousand-Mile Scent-Tracking Powder that made it to the infiltrators' brains, they produced a relatively mild poison with a strong sleeping effect that knocked out the infiltrators instantly.

A normal person would stay unconscious for eight hours at most. But for the sturdy Aura Lords, the duration of the sleeping effect would be drastically reduced to a mere hour or two.

Even so, it was more than enough time for Vaan to round up the unconscious bodies.

Because the infiltrators still had antimagic spores inside various parts of their bodies and Vaan also had his wide-range Omni-Sense, Vaan and Aeliana didn't suddenly lose track of the infiltrators.

After they went to round up the unconscious bodies in the southern borders, Vaan sent them to the Red Dragon Clan.

"You don't need me to remind you what needs to be done with these guys, right?" Vaan asked for confirmation despite informing the dragon lords of his arrangement prior.

"Of course not, Supreme Leader," Astarot shook his head.

"You wanted us to extract information from them and learn their objectives and methods of contact, then brainwash them with hypnotism so they become oblivious to feeding their empire with false information, right?"

"That sums it," Vaan confirmed with a nod before suddenly saying, "But leave this one aside for now. I will study this one for a bit."

"Understood, Supreme Leader," Astarot acknowledged.

Afterward, he signaled his subordinate dragons to take away the hundred unconscious bodies to carry out their task.

"My Lord, this old man... possesses two saturated mana rings around his heart like Peak-stage Senior Witches!" Aeliana exclaimed with shock and amazement after she curiously checked out the remaining unconscious body.

"I know," Vaan nodded before commenting with amusement, "I knew it was possible in theory, but I didn't think Pangea actually had men who were willing to go to such lengths to gain power. I guess I underestimated people's desperation for power, even if it means castrating themselves."

"You mean he doesn't have a PP, my Lord?" Aeliana gasped as her eyes widened dumbfoundedly.

"Precisely."