

## Vile 1011

### [Chapter 1011 Respect Is One Of The Greatest Expressions Of Fear](#)

Rufus was stunned when he saw the condition of the flying vehicle as it was approaching the Arena.

It had caught fire and released a dense amount of smoke that covered its entire appearance. The mana pulse it was releasing made it abundantly clear that it was going to blow up.

"Who the f..."

Rufus and the panel of Grandmaster rankers were about to make their move when an overwhelming presence shrouded their psyche. They stopped in their tracks and looked at each other before dropping to their knees in unison.

"Let me handle it."

A simple command. A serene voice that was neither too dominant nor too servile.

Everyone in the immediate vicinity froze in their positions. They stopped what they were doing and looked up. A single man appeared in the sky and intercepted the flying vehicle's projected trajectory.

He raised his hand and it seemed like everything had come to a standstill.

'A Sage!'

The people in the surrounding area shared a collective thought and felt the need to venerate this man.

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Hansen Lehan.

This man looked to be in his early 20s— exuding nothing but a youthful vibe. He had jet-black hair and sharp but attractive facial features. His snow-like skin had a pinkish hue as if he was a newborn.

This man looked at ease in his surroundings. He had a frail-looking body and a lack of manly features on his face as if he was only a juvenile. But nobody in their right mind would mistake a Sage for a young brat.

Hansen Lehan wore a traditional Hanfu ensemble. An azure black long overcoat over his all-white clothes. He had his waist-length hair tied in a knot before letting it loose over his back. He carried a long spear behind his back that made him look like a warrior.

Hansen Lehan had a carefree air around him as if he knew there was nobody here to challenge his authority. Even Edinburgh royalty would speak to him with utter respect and try to fulfill his every demand.

When Hansen raised his hand in front of him, the vehicle's speed was cut off on its own. The moving object seemingly defied all the classical laws of physics and came to a halt abruptly.

For a while, nobody talked. A deafening silence engulfed the surrounding area, causing everyone to hear their heartbeats.

When Eren looked around, the participants as well as the rankers in the crowd started kneeling. They were all paying their respects to Hansen Lehan - someone with Sage rank that was considered the pinnacle of existence in the land of Anfang.

'Respect is one of the greatest expressions of fear.'

Eren thought to himself and smiled as he looked at everyone around him. He sighed before joining them by taking a knee. The butcher didn't want to stand out any further than he already had. At least not in front of a Sage.

As much as Eren had heard about the Demon Princess from Alephee, those entities were not part of his current reality. His current reality demanded that he respect a Sage.

"It's fine. It's safe for you to come out."

Hansen Lehan said casually before snapping his fingers. All of a sudden, the fire was put out and smoke stopped being produced. The haywire elemental runes over the flying vessel dissolved on their own. A platform made of the altered space fabric itself was created which Marla and Almera could use to step out of the vehicle.

It took a while for Marla and Almera to understand what had happened. Even with Hansen's gentle voice, the two felt like they had done something horribly wrong. They both came out of the flying vehicle at the same time and took a bow.

"I... I apologize for this accident, Sage Hansen. I didn't mean to... it was..."

Hansen ignored what Marla and Almera were trying to say to him. He snapped his fingers, and the flying vehicle vanished into thin air. In the next moment, Marla and Almera found themselves standing in the audience zone of the arena. Their positions were changed in the blink of an eye.

Eren saw someone standing next to him while he was kneeling. He looked up to see Hansen had appeared in front of him.

"Brat... it was you, wasn't it?"

Eren knew what Hansen was talking about. So he nodded quickly before presenting his apology.

"I apologize, Sage Hansen."

Hansen narrowed his eyes at Eren and inspected him from head to toe. Eren's response to his presence was not how Hansen expected it to be. He could tell that the butcher respected his rank but he wasn't afraid of him.

Hansen didn't fail to notice Eren's Blink right before the flying vehicle's arrival. The butcher might have caught Rufus and other rankers on the panel off guard. But a Sage couldn't be fooled by neat tricks alone.

'Strange! So very strange... this boy. With the way, he executed that blink... I would have thought he was a space element ranker. But he is not.'

Hansen didn't make use of his mana sense to inspect Eren. The Sage felt that he shouldn't affect a participant's psyche and their performance by proxy by subjecting them to his mana sense.

Hansen couldn't help but develop a bit of curiosity about Eren for a few moments. But then he discarded it because it was not his first time seeing a talented ranker rise from the masses. He had seen many exceptional talents with a varied range of expertise rise to fame before dying in the darkness of mediocrity later down the line.

Only a few of them achieved the Grandmaster rank. And even the Grandmaster rank became the final cut-off for these so-called geniuses.

Still, Hansen felt like the boy in front of him had some redeeming qualities about him. It reminded him of his youth. So he smiled lightly before speaking to Eren.

"Good.

Footprints in the sands of time can't be left while sitting down or using someone's back for a piggyback ride. I hope you remember this, young man."

Hansen said before he disappeared from view. He appeared on the platform in the next moment and replaced Rufus right away.

"I'll take it from here."

The Sage declared.

### [Chapter 1012 Vengeful Demon](#)

Marla and Almera settled on a spot in the audience zone.

There were no standard seating arrangements in the Edinnica Arena. The rankers in the audience zone either came up with their own setup or just sat on the ground.

The array mechanisms in the arena will allow viewers to view the event seamlessly from any part of the audience zone. To avoid drawing more attention to themselves than they already had, Marla and Almera settled a bit away from the participants' zone.

Hansen Lehan was seen busy talking with the rankers' panel that had come out with Rufus. Rufus and the rest had been made to stand up. But they still kept their heads down in Sage's presence. They would answer whatever questions Hansen asked them. And nothing they said could be heard by any of the participants and rankers in the audience.

Thanks to the light-element array, Marla could see Eren clearly if she tried to focus her gaze on him. Every individual in the audience could choose their own views and viewing angles to focus on in fact.

'This vengeful demon.... He got me back for that Frostfoam prank.'

Marla cursed Eren under her breath when she realized why Eren had set her up. The Expert ranker had spiked the elven ale she had given him before he left LA for his on-field assignment in the past. She could only conclude that Eren wanted to set his record straight with her for trying something like that on him.

Eren definitely wanted to get back to Marla for her silly trick with him. But in his defense, he could have never imagined that she would let the flying vehicle get out of control to that extent. He had considered it a harmless prank, just like what Marla had thought at that time.

"Hmm? What is this?"

Marla mumbled to herself as a spectral display popped up in front of her. It was a notification she had received from the city administration regarding the recent vehicle incident.

"THIS FUCKI...!"

Almera was spooked when she heard Marla curse so loudly. She quickly pressed her palm against her mouth to make her shut up. She also looked at Marla annoyingly as if saying "what is wrong with you?" with her gaze alone.

Marla tapped Almera's hand but the latter wouldn't release her. So she made her spectral screen visible to her and pointed at it to make Almera see the reason for her curses.

Even Almera was shocked by what she read in the notification. It basically said that the city administration was charging 320k Extols as compensation for totaling a flying vehicle. This was the amount after Sage Hansen Lehan spoke in their favor.

Almera couldn't help laughing mirthlessly at the whole aftermath. She looked at Marla with a bit of pity in her eyes and reminded her to not lose her cool before releasing her mouth.

"Fucking... sweet baby balls! It's not even my fault, damn it. Did you see the amount they are charging me for? It's like they know exactly how much money I have in my storage. Because that number is basically all of it."

Marla looked at Eren and cursed him some more. The rented flying vehicle would only record the last driver's mana signature before any unfortunate incident. So Eren made Marla a scapegoat for the aftermath of his stunt. The one who could pay the penalty for his rash driving was the one who had secured himself from the penalty.

"Um... Hehe. Look on the bright side, big sis Marla. At least you didn't have to pay 350k Extols to that vixen. You got them for free. So 320k Extols could still be seen as a saving grace for us.'

Almera tried to pacify Marla using logic. But the latter felt even angrier.

"This is unacceptable! That bastard... I can't believe he would not be able to take a joke. And he did that to someone who he had apprenticed under, for fuck's sake.

That's it! I'll wring him dry for all his worth when I join his guild."

Marla snorted her nose in anger before taking out a bottle of Frostform from her storage. She spoke first before Almera could stop her from indulging in her vice.

"No! I need this. I need this to calm myself down, Almera."

Marla held onto her ale firmly before uncorking it. She and Almera were supposed to join the security detail of the arena because of being associated with LA. But they decided to do that later after the event officially began.

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Eren saw Hansen Lehan discussing things with Rufus and others on the platform. He could feel Marla's piercing gaze on him. But he decided to ignore her and started taking notice of the White Raven Crew members' progress instead.

'Hm? Eren, there's something different about Steve.'

Alephee also scanned Eren's teammates and informed him of her observations. The butcher didn't have to ask any further as the homunculus spoke further after a brief pause herself.

'Hmm. It seems he has stopped becoming a traditional ranker.'

Eren was particularly interested in Steve's development as well. Steve was indeed taken on by the butcher owing to his immense growth potential. Steve, however, exceeded his expectations by becoming an Expert ranker in such a short amount of time. His growth was certainly eye-catching even by Royal Renar standards.

Of course, ranking status wasn't a complete representation of one's potential as a ranker or the possibility to keep on moving forward on their journey. Certain talented rankers progressed slowly in their ranks and could still compete against those higher in ranking status than them. And they faced almost no bottlenecks even after becoming Master rankers.

Altashia was one such example. She was slower than her Royal Ren peers when it came to ranking progress. But nobody from Royal Ren would call her weak or incompetent. And this was when she was used to battling influential rankers like Rodrick Renar.

Altashia had beaten many royal scions like Rodrick into submission despite her lower-ranking status than them. Thus, many participants from Royal Ren were glad that the stone-cold beauty wouldn't be able to attend the event as a participant. Nobody wanted to see a dreadful history repeat itself.

Still, Steve's progress was more than Eren could bargain for. He had to assume that there was an external factor attached to it.

'Steve... I need to ask you something. Answer me honestly if you can...'

Eren decided to ask Steve directly about the path he was treading on.

### [Chapter 1013 Body-Strengthening Art](#)

'.... So that's how it is, man.

I'll be honest with you, Eren. I am very happy with my body-strengthening art despite the restrictions it has placed on me.

So what if I had to stop practicing conventional ranking techniques? So what if I have fewer options as a Berserker when it comes to versatility?

In the end, what I do with whatever I have is more significant for me than the range of options I might have. I lost my advantages as a regular ranker. But I gained my edge as a berserker.'

Steve answered Eren's question right away. He saw no reason to hide anything from the butcher.

Eren had carefully listened to Steve's journey till here and he had to say that the berserker was gutsy for walking on his path. He pondered a bit before asking him another personal question.

'Who taught you this body-strengthening art?'

Steve answered right away, confirming Eren and Alephee's doubts.

'Hehe. It was my demon beast, Wilber. He told me to take this path.'

Wilber was a boar-type demon beast that Steve had tamed by accident. The demon beast couldn't assume a humanoid form like Argo despite becoming a C-rank entity. But he was still able to communicate with his master.

Steve wasn't appreciative of Ana for nothing. Like her, he had also started walking on a divergent path from that of a traditional ranker. He knew the difficulties and the mental burden of walking alone on a path one had to pave for themselves. So he could relate to Ana's struggles.

'The whispers of a demon are difficult to ignore. No wonder Steve followed the path blindly.

Anyway... I cannot say for sure since Wilber is occupying Steve's Beast Space and the soul fragment is slumbering. But the story holds up for the most part. There is a connection between this body-strengthening art and the demonic realm.

Plus, I can say that it is not the work of a lesser or higher demon to regulate body-strengthening art of this caliber. I'm guessing Wilber's demon soul fragment belongs to an archdemon.'

Alephee quickly came up with a conjecture of her own after Steve shared his experiences with Eren regarding the body-strengthening art he was practicing.

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Steve's body-strengthening art had basically replaced the ranking technique normal rankers were supposed to follow. This art allowed him to break into the C-rank at an accelerated rate without compromising his potential as a berserker.

Since Steve started practicing his body-strengthening art, he did not have to worry about elemental attainments like the rest of the rankers. He also did not have to reserve a set amount of time every day for his ranking practice anymore. His body-centric technique could be practiced even while he was doing chores or simply taking a walk.

The more active he was, the better results he would get from his body-strengthening art. And the most remarkable thing about body-strengthening art was the fact that Steve never felt exhausted. He could go months on end without sleep and still function well without compromising any of his faculties.

Steve's body stats were through the roof for his rank. He hardly got tired even after engaging in gruesome combat with his opponents. Plus, his body's recovery rate was unparalleled. He had beaten Ramy Richards countless times while never having to use his full strength.

This was the reason Steve had dominated the ranking wars of LA and received his title as a Boar Berserker. Just like a boar, he would never get tired even after fighting multiple opponents back-to-back.

The legend of the Boar Berserker only grew as Steve kept on advancing in his ranking journey at an unbelievable rate. By the time he was in the last stage of the Adept rank, he could fight Becky, Ramy Richards, Ana, and Bel at the same time. And he had never tasted defeat fighting alone against them. Steve's progress made it impossible for ambitious Becky to have her way within the team and grab the leader's spot.

Steve had his own fanbase back at the academy before he even left for his on-field assignment. He would always generate hype within the borders of LA. Furthermore, he continued to refine his berserker physique using demonic art after taking the on-field assignment.

Body-strengthening art also had its drawbacks.

For example, Steve couldn't cast his earth-element spells with the same level of proficiency that was expected of his rank. He discovered that his mana circuits were becoming incompatible with the kind of heavy mid-range spells he was used to casting in the past.

Another drawback was the fact that he needed to consume expensive resources to practice his body-strengthening art. As a result, he had to always look for a constant source of nourishment for his body.

Steve's body had become a resource-burning machine ever since he had shifted to his new path. This was the reason he had taken the most amount of loans from Eren throughout his ranking journey till this point among all the White Raven members.

It was only now that the butcher realized what his team's berserker was doing with all those Extols he lent him with promissory notes. Steve had been allowed to borrow money from Eren at zero interest after all. And the berserker made full use of it throughout these years.

The body-strengthening art streamlined Steve's path as a berserker by cutting down on all that was unnecessary. It limited his options as a ranker and made him a purely physical force that couldn't be stopped by any normal means.

Eren could never imagine getting rid of his multi-elemental and multi-class compatibility just to strengthen his body beyond the normal standards set in the land of Anfang. But he had to admit that it made sense for a ranker like Steve. The guy was practically made for walking on this path.

Unbeknownst to both Eren and Steve, the latter's body-strengthening art would ascend him to new heights within the kingdom. One day, his academic moniker of Boar Berserker would become his kingdom-bonafide title.

#### [Chapter 1014 Demonic Takeover](#)

Eren didn't fail to notice a particular thing Alephee explained in passing.

'Demon Baron, huh? How much on the Sage-power scale are we talking about?'

Eren asked Alephee as he stared at Steve's back. Alephee chuckled a bit before trying to come up with an answer.

'Let's see... an archdemon is typically more powerful than an ordinary Sage. But not by much. The battle between them can turn either way depending upon the number of Trump cards and other external factors they have in their favor.'

Eren's eyes glowed when he heard about Archdemons being as strong as a Sage. He felt that Archdemon was the kind of existence he needed to see face-to-face before he even thought of existence on the level of Demon Princess.

The butcher wasn't sure if he could pull it off. But he couldn't help licking his lips in anticipation as he thought of devouring an archdemon's soul fragment. The thought of digesting a Demon Baron's gains and all the demonic knowledge it possessed almost made his mouth watery.

Steve felt a shiver down his spine and turned around to see Eren smiling at him. The berserker cursed himself for getting jittery for no reason before resuming to look at the stage occupied by a Sage.

'Are you thinking of devouring Steve? I would advise against it.'

Alephee commented casually. The butcher nodded before replying.

'Yeah. I can instinctively sense it using my bloodline powers. Because of his body-strengthening art, the guy has basically stopped being useful for gaining elemental attainment. I'll be able to boost my body stats to some degree, but that's it. There are no tangible benefits to losing a pawn I have invested so much in just for that.'

What I'm interested in is devouring the guy's demon beast. By demon beast, I mean the fragment of a demon soul that resides within Wilber. How would that go?'

Eren could feel Alephee metaphorically shaking her head in denial.

'Refining a demon soul fragment? You cannot use your bloodline powers directly for something like that. But there are certainly other ways.'

However, there are various factors involved in refining a soul fragment. You'd need an awakened soul sense, which you already have. The most critical thing is that you'd need a soul sense strong enough to overpower the demon soul fragment.'

Eren was excited after hearing Alephee's explanation. But Alephee reined him in right away.

'Don't get too excited, Eren. Soul-sense only allows you to stand at the starting line.'

Demons are the masters of intent-based magic because their expertise lies in soul-related stuff. They scour various worlds using their soul fragments based on that expertise. You are not their match yet when it comes to matters related to souls.

Forget about an archdemon or the demons that are beyond that rank. Even a Greater Demon's fragment is not something you can overpower with your current level even though you have your awakened soul sense.

Let's just say that they are born with an awakened soul sense. How will you overpower their souls using your infantile soul sense?'

Eren scrunched his nose in annoyance when he heard Alephee's response. The latter sighed and softened her voice before continuing.

'Hmm. There's good news. It seems the kingdom has tweaked the continent-encompassing array in this region for the time being to make that giant golden sphere work. It means we have some freedom to discuss this thing.'

Eren looked up above him and saw the giant sphere floating motionlessly in the air when Alephee mentioned it. He didn't know what Alephee was talking about. But he was too focused on his previous question to care about anything else. So he let Alephee expound further on the same topic.

'You have a soul sense that might take over a lesser demon's soul fragment. That is if we are only talking about the soul fragment. But the efforts aren't worth the risk.'

As for your earlier question, you need to understand that I'm oversimplifying things here. And that the things I'll mention can't be considered standards. But let's compare the ranking statuses of Anfang and the demon realm just for argument's sake.

Lesser demons in the demon realm can be compared with Master rankers while the greater demons can be pitted against Grandmaster rankers. And just as I said before, the archdemons and Sages can be put on the same pedestal. And forget about the Demon Princess for now. They are existences far above the archdemons.

Hence, I advise against refining the soul fragment of an archdemon. That being said, you definitely need to pay attention to Wilber and Steve if you consider Steve to be an extremely valuable pawn.'

Eren raised his eyebrows when he heard Alephee's warning. He activated Sedated Perception for himself before engaging.

'What do you mean?'

In the pendent abode, the homunculus was busy engraving a special array inside her grimoire. She replied while continuing her work.

'It doesn't matter what kind of demon they are, they don't act out of pure goodness. Wilber is making a contingency plan to take over Steve's body by giving him body-strengthening art.'

A visible shock spread across Eren's face.

'What? How? Didn't the demon soul fragments get tamed by the rankers using the blood ritual? How could they plan against their masters if that is the case?'

Alephee explained patiently.

'The demon soul fragments can't backstab their masters after the blood ritual. But they don't have to.'

The body-strengthening art Wilber had given to Steve is genuine. The demon hasn't rigged it at all. But he is the one regulating it.

In Steve's case, the art is making his body compatible with the demon realm. In short, the body is becoming more and more compatible with successful demonic possession.

Wilber will not harm Steve in any way. But everything changes when Steve dies due to external factors and Wilber is left alive. Wilber will be able to take over Steve's body using the link established by the blood ritual.'

Eren had a stoic expression as he listened to what Alephee was saying. He started worrying about his own safety as well. After all, he had tamed two demon beasts. He wasn't sure about Reen but Argo's soul fragment belonged to a Demon Prince. What Alephee said next made him even more concerned.

### [Chapter 1015 Faustian Contract](#)

After a short pause, Alephee continued where she had left off.

'Of course, a ranker doesn't necessarily have to die for bad luck to strike. And almost anything can happen when demons and their intent-based magic are involved.

There are other extreme ways a demon can take control of a person's body under the right conditions. This is when a strong enough demon soul fully awakens the demonic individuality they had in the demon realm.

This can be considered as the next stage of demonic possession in which the demon soul fragment starts refining the ranker's soul instead of the other way around. We can call it a demonic takeover.'

Eren gulped audibly as he listened to the risks of demonic possession and demonic takeover. He always knew there had to be a catch for every power one gained using shortcuts. He just didn't know how serious the repercussions were.

'That means the majority of demon beast tamers don't have to worry about demonic possession. But what about the demonic takeover? Can't a ranker take countermeasures against something like that? Because it seems like something that can't be avoided.'

Alephee chuckled amusingly before replying quickly.

'The person doesn't even know the demons are taking over them until their consciousness just fades away into nothingness— slumbering forever. How will they respond to something like that?

Even if we take rare cases in which the ranker becomes aware that their soul is being encroached on by demons, it wouldn't necessarily help them. How can their slumbering soul fight those demons?

The demonic takeover is the most dangerous for rankers because it is an irreversible process. It allows the demon soul fragment to obtain nature, memories, and all the other aspects of being the entity whose soul it has refined.'

Eren processed the information slowly in his head. He came up with his own conjecture on the matter.

'That means...'

Alephee confirmed his conjecture quickly.

'That's right. This situation makes the entity neither a complete demon nor a complete ranker. In a way, a demon soul fragment becomes a completely different entity with a demonic takeover. One who knows the demonic ways yet retains the characteristics of the ranker whose soul it has refined.

When the demonic soul fragment assimilates with the person, the demonic takeover is complete. There's no way to separate the two anymore when that happens.

If I'm not mistaken, Demonmir's case is like that. Because there's no way he could overpower a demon soul fragment of a Demon Prince and refine it for himself. Of course, there had to be some favorable conditions for the Demon Prince's soul fragment to pull this off. But it's a strong possibility.

At this point, Eren wanted to meet with Demonmir as soon as he could to find out the truth. He had concluded that he was safe from any potential demonic possession or demonic takeover. Once his safety was no longer in doubt, he began to think about how he could use the demons' ways to his advantage in the long run.

'So can we say that the blood ritual contract is not foolproof?'

Alephee had predicted correctly, and the continent-spanning array did not generate negative feedback. So she and Eren both wanted to make use of this opportunity to discuss a few things.

'There is no such thing as foolproof anything.

Demonic loyalty comes with a condition. And demons are masters at finding loopholes in Faustian Contracts. The blood ritual the rankers perform at the time of a demon beast's breakthrough is also a form of the Faustian Contract.

The Faustian contract has something good and something bad for both parties. In case of demonic possession or takeover, the blood ritual that had kept the demon beast tamed and loyal becomes the downfall of a ranker.

This is a hidden risk of using body-strengthening or flesh-altering arts from the demon realm. Demons use this art to create better shells for their possessions in every world.

A majority of demonic rankers in other worlds use these demonic arts without ever understanding the consequences. By using demonic methods, they achieve quick success. And in the end, one wrong move and they get possessed by demons.

Being a demonic ranker isn't all rainbows and sunshine as they think it to be.'

Alephee finished drawing the runic details of her newly designed array and felt satisfied with her work. With a smile on her face, she closed her grimoire and spoke further.

'Ideally, a demon soul fragment and the demon beasts themselves would die with their masters. The body-strengthening art, however, allows the demons to still be present inside the world they have infiltrated even after their master's death.

That's why I said Wilber prepared a contingency plan. He wouldn't harm Steve himself. He doesn't have to. However, let's just say that he wouldn't be too upset if Steve died due to other factors.

Of course, this case is only applicable if you give in to the demonic whispers and follow everything they say to you. The body-strengthening art, the flesh-altering art, or any of the demonic power-ups that the demons offer anyone— one can be damn sure that the demons get something in return. That's the law of equivalent exchange observed by any Faustian Contract.'

Alephee deemed that this much information was enough for Eren to understand a few things. She came back to her original point after allowing him a chance to process everything she said.

'So the moral of the story is... Steve's body is still developing as a demonic vessel and it isn't time yet for that possibility to take place. But I thought of letting you know just in case you decide to use him for your long-term goals.

No matter the demon's rank, their nature is always inclined to stay demonic.'

Eren nodded to himself as he understood both Steve's and Demonmir's possible conditions. Demonmir had become twice as dangerous in his eyes than previously after finding out that there was a chance a Demon Prince's awakened consciousness was residing within his body.

He and Alephee also concluded that the Demon Prince had managed to keep Anfang's forces in the dark after his demonic takeover was completed.

#### [Chapter 1016 If You Can't Defeat Them... Join Them!](#)

'My Sin Series Abilities... are they also something I received using the Faustian Contract?'

Eren started connecting the dots as soon as he received relevant information from Alephee. The latter confirmed his assumption right away.

'Yes. The Sin Series Abilities are given to you using the runic chains that bound your heart. And since these Abilities are related to the demon realm, they are otherworldly in nature when you use them here on the land of Anfang.

But... the contract you have established for your Sin Series Abilities is not a normal Faustian Contract. There's no demon involved at the other end of the deal.

Your Sin Series Abilities are granted to you by the Seven Planes of Sin. So you don't need to worry about a demon enticing you into doing something beneficial for them.'

Eren breathed a sigh of relief and Alephee chuckled. She wanted to tell him something about the Seven Planes of Sin but then decided against it. This time, it was less about the restrictions placed by the continent-spanning array but more about maintaining the health of Eren's psyche.

'Do you think they know that Steve is practicing demonic art?'

Eren asked Alephee while looking at Hansen, Rufus, and other rankers on the panel. Maybe the rankers of Anfang couldn't see through Demonmir because of the Demon Prince whose soul fragment was now residing within Ottoman.

But the butcher refused to believe that they would not see through Steve. His incredible progress was already eye-catching. And one could tell there was something different about him from the get-go.

'They probably do. These are the most outstanding rankers from their respective academies who have participated in this graduation event. It also means that they want to see the top-tier class of rankers who would have the biggest impact on the kingdom's battle might. At least that's what I'd do if I were in their position.'

Eren nodded at himself before canceling Sedated Perception. He then contacted Steve.

'Steve, pay attention to what I'm saying. This graduation event is a showcase of your talent. The kingdom's big leagues are eager to watch you perform.'

Steve raised his eyebrows and was shocked by Eren's sudden cryptic talk.

He felt that he was nothing special among all these talented rankers around him. So there was no need to pay attention to him specifically. But he knew that Eren would not kid with him for no reason. So he let the butcher finish what he was saying.

'The graduation event is also like an enlistment program for the kingdom. The demonic art you practice might be seen as a threat if you don't join them at the end of the event.'

Trust me... you don't want to meet Anfang's secret forces after this event. They will not be something you can handle on your own. And they'll just keep on coming until you either bend to their will or disappear mysteriously.

What I meant to say is... If you can't defeat them... join them.'

Steve froze in his tracks when he heard Eren's grim predictions. The Berserkers were usually stereotyped as having fewer brain cells. But the guy strayed away from that stereotype. He had his own instincts as a berserker that he had developed along the way.

Steve might not be able to see the undercurrents of the land of Anfang like Eren. But he was able to sense their existence all the same. The higher he rose, the more apparent the existence of these undercurrents became to him.

'What about joining the White Raven guild? This was our plan all along... all of us... joining you.'

Steve just trusted Eren wholeheartedly instead of asking the Whats and the Whys. Even he could tell that the body-strengthening art he was practicing had otherworldly origins. Eren's words helped him to understand the ramifications of using such a technique. So there was no point in asking juvenile questions.

'Work for them, but stay in touch with me. Do you understand?'

Steve chuckled when he heard Eren's plans. The butcher's plan was simple. Joining the kingdom would allow Steve to take the target off his back. In exchange for his services, the kingdom will become his sponsor so he can practice his body-strengthening art more efficiently. A symbiotic relationship to some extent.

Despite all of the restrictions placed on him, Steve would still be able to flourish under the kingdom's guidance. Until he was strong enough to pursue some other options, this was the right choice for him at the time.

Meanwhile, Eren and Steve both could use and support each other in the background. This way, Steve would not be completely reliant on the resources provided by the kingdom.

'Alright. So they want to see my worth before offering me a deal I can't refuse, huh? I got to perform at my peak then. Hahaha!

Steve commented and laughed it off while clenching his fists. Nobody liked feeling restricted in their choices. He did not want to take part in the upcoming war as a ranker strongly affiliated with the kingdom because they were bound to attract more heat. He knew that it was a thankless job that didn't pay very well.

He realized his enlistment was inevitable as a result of Eren's prediction. He might as well accept the road that was made available to him and walk steadfastly on it. Steve's limbs weren't the only ones getting stronger through demonic art. His heart was also getting tempered by the fires from the demon realm— making him headstrong in his decisions.

Eren would rather have Steve work for him in a limited capacity than hire him only to get him killed mysteriously one day. All his investments in Steve would come to naught if and when that happened. So he changed his plans then and there to make them future-safe.

As for Wilber taking over Steve's body, Eren decided it wasn't relevant for the current Steve to know about these things. The guy was making huge progress in his demonic art. Telling him these things might affect his psyche and impact the growth spurt he is experiencing.

Eren then moved on to inspecting the growth of his other team members. He talked with Ramy and others while all of them waited for Hansen to kick-start the event.

Eren had to say that his team members had responded well to his guidance and investment. Even Becky had performed well past his expectations despite her non-cooperative behavior.

Getting selected for the graduation event itself was a big deal. As a result of the efforts Eren made since the first academic year, they were all qualified to attend.

Eren could say with confidence that this was the best he could do as his team's mentor. He just hoped that it was enough to get the things he wanted out of this graduation event.

Four Sage legacies were on the line after all.

#### [Chapter 1017 Sage Legacies](#)

Berserker - Sage Ivar Ironside with the title Lionheart.

Assassin - Sage Yuffie Loxley, who bears the title Lufthansa.

Archer - Sage Nira with the title Nightshade.

And lastly, Sage of the arrays - Lin Lehan with the title Sansara Sage.

These four Sages were the grand dukes of Edinburgh. Their names and titles became synonyms with the names of the regions they used to rule which eventually became the four grand duchies of the kingdom.

In Eren's past timeline, the students of LA were allowed to compete in an event in which they could claim the berserker Sage Ivar Ironside's legacy for themselves. This was an event meant only for LA's top-tier students. So of course, he wasn't allowed to see it unfold from the audience zone much less attend it as a participant.

Eren wasn't sure if other academies in the kingdom had similar events on their academy grounds or not. Because the five academies had never come together like this to conduct a joint event.

Eren was told the details of the event after it was over. He had come to know that it was a team-based event in which an entire team could benefit from Sage's legacy.

Of course, the event was in Eren's last timeline. And he had no way of knowing if his knowledge of the past would be relevant at this point.

Things had changed too dramatically after Eren's intervention in various ways in this timeline. The difficulty of the event had been raised to unprecedented levels because of the involvement of other academies and their talented rankers.

However, increased risks come with greater rewards. The potential war had spooked Edinburgh into organizing this event. And it would feature the four Sage legacies as potential rewards for participants.

Had Eren known this was going to happen, he would have made the White Ravens grind some more. After all, even a single Sage legacy was precious beyond imagination— let alone four of them at the same time.

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Hansen had been busy with his potion-induced epiphanies for the last few weeks. So he couldn't coordinate with the organizers of the event on time regarding its fine details. Yet, the Sage quickly coordinated with the rest of the rankers on the panel before addressing the entire group.

"So that settles it. Rufus, you will be the one entering the Sansara Array as its moderator. Make sure you do everything you can to make this event a success.

After all, our "friends" from the kingdom of Layos are watching. We don't want to make them feel disappointed with our show."

Hansen commanded Rufus and the latter bowed to show his affirmation. With everything settled on the moderators' end, Hansen turned around and looked at the participants.

"First of all... sorry to keep you waiting, younglings."

The participants were shocked by Sage's humble attitude. The latter chuckled and explained as if he could read their faces.

"When you get to my age, you start understanding the value of time. There are only a few things that are worth spending one's time on. And you certainly don't want to spend it waiting for an old-timer like me. Hehe."

Hansen chuckled before adding further.

"This graduation event is special. Rufus has explained the background of the event. So I'll just go ahead and confirm the suspicions you all have.

Four Sage legacies can be claimed by participating in this graduation event. They belong to Sage Lionheart, Sage Lufthansa, Sage Nightshade, and lastly, Sansara Sage Lin Lehan— who is also my ancestor."

The participants' gazes turned fervent when they heard Sage Hansen Lehan confirm the open secret they'd come to know. All of them had worked really hard in their on-field assignments and ranking wars to get qualified for this event. All so that they could have a chance to claim Sage's legacy for themselves.

An event in which four Sage legacies could be claimed was unheard of. They all understood that the kingdom of Edinburgh wanted to leave no stone unturned in raising heroes. Such heroes were a potent fighting force. But their true value lay in how they could act as mascots for the rankers fighting alongside them.

It was as if the kingdom of Edinburgh wanted to rebirth its founding heroes by allowing their legacies to be claimed by the younger generation. The winners of the four legacies would serve as excellent morale boosters for the general populace.

Members of various guilds, as well as mercenaries, might be inspired to participate in the war if and when these heroes are employed by the kingdom. The kingdom could use all the help it could get from the majority of the rankers within its borders. After all, the kingdom of Layos had elves as their enemies.

Hansen Lehan smiled as he saw the excited faces of the participants. He pointed upwards and looked up before speaking in a serious, mana-imbued voice.

"The massive golden sphere you see floating over your heads is a Sansara array— a creation of Sasara Sage. It is a special kind of separate dimension.

This special dimension will place limitations on you and make it difficult for you to fight using your full potential. But since restrictions will be placed on everyone, it can still be considered fair game.

The Sansara Array contains the legacies of Edinburgh's grand Dukes. It will serve as your battleground and road to success. It might also leave a mental scar on your consciousness if you are not mentally prepared for it."

The participants started looking at each other's faces when they heard a grim premonition from the Sage. Everybody had heard rumors about the four legacies but nobody knew the hurdles involved in claiming them.

For the first time, Hansen's innocent smile stopped looking innocent. It turned into a wicked grin before the Sage spoke further.

"Your mental fortitude will be tasted more than any of your other qualities inside the Sansara array. After all, inside this separate dimension, you will be able to experience.... death!"

### [Chapter 1018 Bare Minimum Gang](#)

A metaphorical bomb exploded in everyone's heads as they listened to Hansen's speech. Hansen didn't let them take a breather as he continued.

"Experience death. And you might get reborn to experience the feeling of death again.

How many times will you have to die agonizing deaths before you decide to call it quits to keep your sanity in check? You will be able to find the answer to that question for yourself if you decide to stay as a participant in this graduation event.

Exciting, isn't it?"

Hansen looked around and observed an eerie silence. He sighed before continuing.

"I have been the Dean of the Royal Ren for a very long time. And I have also been its student. I have seen many generations of rankers prosper and wilt away in the winds of time.

There were a few instances in the academy's history where we made use of the Sansara array to test talented rankers. Unfortunately, I have seen how the Sansara array broke some of the most talented rankers of their generation just because they came face to face with their mortality.

Death... or the premonition of it changes you. It's up to you to decide if it's good or bad.'

Hansen's listeners started looking around at each other to gain some form of psychological assurance that they were not the only ones getting nervous about the event. Hansen could understand what they were thinking, so he decided to give them some guidance.

"I can tell you that the experience of death will shake you from within. You will either start to get scared of everything around you or become motivated to do something with whatever time you got here in this world.

I cannot predict how you will react. Because the experience and its impact will differ greatly from person to person. In a way, it is even more profound than the state of epiphany itself.

I remember long ago there was one student named Jarlath Edgar who was one of the top students of Royal Ren. He became unstable after coming out of the Sansara array. Eventually, he became a cultist before suddenly disappearing from our radar."

Eren felt something click in his head when he heard the name "Jarlath Edgar". He felt like he should be able to remember this name. Then Hansen mentioned Jarlath turning into a cultist and he realized who the Sage was talking about.

'JJ Edgar! The guy who wrote that diary!'

Jarlath Edgar, aka JJ Edgar, was the same person who wrote about his experiences in his journal. This diary was later found by Eren out of sheer luck in the cultist hideout. It was through the diary that Eren learned about the existence of half-bloods. The butcher found it incredibly unbelievable that he was once a talented student of Royal Ren.

Eren didn't understand what Sage was talking about. Because whatever JJ Edgar wrote in his diary didn't make him sound like the work of a madman. In fact, he was right about most of his assumptions about half-bloods.

Hansen was too busy reminiscing about his past to care about what Eren or any of the students were thinking. He took his time to snap out of his chain of thoughts before

"Anyway... you will either drown in the pit of misery or rise from the ashes of your past self after understanding the concept of life and death up close. These are the two extremes some of you will walk towards.

This event is not for everybody. We need rankers strong of the body and strong of the mind to enter the Sansara array. That's because we don't want Jarlath Edgar happening all over again if we can avoid it.

That's why we are offering you a choice. Those who think that whatever I have said was not what you signed up for, you can opt out of the graduation event this instant."

It seemed that the students of Royal Ren were already aware of the Sansara array. None of them were surprised by Hansen's speech. None of them wanted to quit. Or more like... only those rankers who were okay with the Sansara array had been selected for this event.

The rankers belonging to the remaining four academies weren't like their Royal Ren counterparts. Some of them started discussing various things about the event with their teams.

Some even thought of quitting. But they were afraid of letting their efforts to graduate turn to waste. So Hansen gave the quitters the assurance they needed to hear.

"Rest assured that your quitting will not be held against you. You will also graduate from your respective academy. Just that you won't be offered the same benefits as those who go through with the event and complete their graduation.

There won't be any difference between you and the Novice or Ace-ranked students who graduate by meeting the bare minimum requirements. The kind that stays at the bottom even after clearing the academy.

The only advantage you will have over these members of the Bare Minimum Gang will be your ranks. And that's still something if you think about it."

Some of the quitters had ashen faces. They decided to change their decisions right away. They hadn't toiled so much just to get grouped with the lowly Novice or Ace-ranked entities.

Everyone knew what happened to such novices or Aces when they got out of the academy. They would end up becoming the average lot of rankers who had lost all their hopes of becoming high-ranking entities in their lives.

The turning average was the best-case scenario for such pass-outs. Most of them wouldn't be able to come to terms with their reality after staying in the competitive academic environment.

There were a lot of cases of Novice or Ace ranked pass-outs from the four academies turning bandits, cultists, or simply rogue rankers. Some of them got addicted to vices and lived miserable lives all their lives. It was their way of showing rebellion against the system that rejected them.

#### [Chapter 1019 It Takes Courage To Admit One's Limitations](#)

'Is that like a personal attack or something?'

Eren snorted his nose as he watched Hansen talk about the members of the Bare Minimum Gang.

As much as he felt uncomfortable about hearing it, he had to say that Hansen's point of view about rankers was quite on the mark. However, the butcher could relate to this group of rankers more closely than someone like Hansen. After all, he was one of these rankers himself in his past timeline.

Hansen focused mainly on the outcome of passing the academy by meeting the bare minimum requirements instead of addressing the underlying causes. And in doing that, Hansen sounded like an elite to Eren who considered himself to be nothing special among the group of special individuals all around him.

There was some part of Eren that felt like he should defend the bare minimum gang members. It wanted to list out the problems and injustices they faced both inside and outside the academy. It ended up that they became monkeys in the middle who neither received welfare nor a chance to rise above their circumstances. A middle class of monkeys that could only watch as the game got passed from one end to another.

What's more? Such rankers were even more miserable than the dropouts from the four academies. Because at least the drop-outs could make peace with their lowly existences in the rankers' society.

However, Eren's revised timeline made him see the error of his ways. He felt that the things his past self would have cited to defend the bare minimum gang in this situation were simply excuses for him. No matter how valid the excuse may seem, in the end, it was bound to sound and work like an excuse.

Hansen knew what potential quitters were thinking. And he couldn't blame them.

He was surprised to see that more students from the four academies were not thinking about quitting. But he did not want to degrade the level of competition by encouraging the weak-minded to participate. So he decided to scare them even further.

'When I say that you might experience death, I do not mean that you will have to kill each other for real to obtain the Sage legacies. There's a difference between the experience of death and real death after all.

The kingdom of Edinburgh doesn't want its young rankers dying at each other's hands even if there are four Sage legacies at the stake. At least not at this time.

We will try to make sure you come back alive, irrespective of the physical and mental condition you will be in at the end of the event. However, nobody's safety is guaranteed in the Sansara array.

There are cases of rankers dying with perfectly healthy bodies and unharmed souls after they experienced the Sansara array. They start believing in their death so much that they refuse to come back to life.

One could say that the Sansara Sage's drive to seek perfection in his work is both a boon and a curse for the young rankers."

Hansen said and sighed. He put his hands behind his back and started pacing along the lateral length of the platform before speaking up.

"It takes courage to admit one's limitations. And quitting before the start line is a much better choice than trying things half-assedly.

Decide to stay in the event... and you won't be able to quit until it's over. Now it's your turn to choose. Which way will it be?"

Hansen posed a question to the crowd and allowed the participants some time to think. After about a minute or two, he spoke again in a more commanding tone.

"Those who wish to quit take a step back from their positions. And those who want to participate in the event step forward."

The majority of the rankers stepped up without a moment's delay. Some hesitated but decided to step forward nonetheless. It was only a handful of rankers who felt that the "experience of death" was more than they had expected.

Everyone in the White Raven crew stepped forward right away as well. Everyone except Ana. She was hesitant to participate in the event. She felt like she wasn't ready to face a life-altering event like this.

Ana's on-field assignment was further away from conflicts and battles than the rest of the rankers. As a healer, she had progressed a lot. However, her mind wasn't quite ready to accept the brutality that would unfold as the event progressed.

Becky wanted everyone to accept Ana's wish to stay out of the event. The mage was about to say something in support of Ana but Steve didn't let her speak.

'Ana... you know what giving up feels like. Do you want to find out what happens if you don't?'

Eren on the other hand felt irritated by his team's healer. With no inhibitions, he spoke in a grim voice.

'Lass... I don't care about giving up or not giving up. I don't care about your sanity post event either. Some of us are already broken inside and we'd like to see more of you guys join us.'

For your own sake as well as mine, you better step forward. Do you have any idea how much effort and resources I have put into your growth? How are you going to repay me for that? I'll turn you into a hooker if you don't step forward before I count to three.'

Ana froze in her steps when she listened to the butcher's warnings. The butcher didn't even look at her before continuing. 'One!'

Ana hurriedly took a step forward when she heard Eren's blatant countdown. The other members of her group laughed it off. But for some reason, she believed the butcher's threats. She looked at him angrily before speaking up.

Eren... Even though I have talismans to heal even the C-rank entities... I'll not heal you at all during this whole event.'

Ana thought of scaring Eren a bit. The latter was only amused by her way of rebelling against him.

The butcher chuckled before retorting.

'I don't need a healer for myself anyway. Suit yourself.'

The butcher's claim made Ana speechless and other White Raven crew members looked at him in surprise. The healer narrowed her eyes on the butcher and decided to test his bold claims.

## [Chapter 1020 Soul Sense Battle P1](#)

Hansen raised his hand and waved it as if swatting a fly.

In the next moment, the participants who had decided to quit the event disappeared from their positions. The Sage flashed a subtle grin before commenting.

"Excellent. Those who remain are the true players in the event. It's time for me to announce the rules of this competition..."

Hansen was about to continue his speech. But then he stopped and turned to his right towards the audience zone. It seemed that someone influential had appeared there.

"Oh? How rare is it for you to make public appearances, young Altair?"

Hansen was willing to halt his speech for the newcomer in the audience booth. This was enough of a reason to convey to onlookers that the man in question was a big shot in his own right.

He effortlessly breached the barrier of safety that all of the participants were under. And all of them suddenly felt like they had been subjected to an unknown heat wave. It was as if they had been turned mortal and left to fend for themselves in the middle of the desert under the heat of the scorching sun.

How far would one have to progress in their elemental attainments for the world to start accommodating their presence by altering the existing laws? How much of a difference the Grandmaster rankers could have within their ranks just because they decided to pursue their own path?

Embers of crimson fire could be seen appearing near the Sage before a man stepped out of them. He was seen bowing to Hansen before straightening his posture.

This man was wearing a hooded cloak that hid some of his facial features. But the audience could see that he was a very handsome man nonetheless. He had a sharp jawline and a gaze that could penetrate a thick block of steel.

The man was wearing fusion armor that was made from part metal and part leather. He was taller than Hansen and managed to look even more intimidating than a Sage for some reason despite being a Grandmaster ranker.

Crimson Ghost— Altair Argas.

Altair Argas made a wave within the crowd by appearing in the audience zone. And he made the audience quiet by expressing his elemental attainments.

Still, people soon recovered from their shock and started calling Altair by his title. The man was nothing short of a celebrity.

"Hehe. I'm just following your steps, Sage Hansen. Your public appearances are even rarer than mine, after all."

Altair spoke in a dignified yet respectable voice. Even the sound waves he produced through his vocal cords felt like they had heat signatures of their own.

Rufus and other rankers on the panel also showed their respect for Altair when he appeared onstage. After all, the man was closer to the fabled Sage rank than them.

"Please forgive me for interrupting your speech like this. I wanted to meet up with a certain brat before you sent him inside the Sansara array."

Hansen raised his eyebrows when he heard Altair speak. It seemed that the bona fide title holder of the kingdom wanted to meet with a certain participant present in the Edinnica Arena.

The news would have blown up quickly and attracted a lot of attention in the city of Edin had it spread beforehand. Not that it wouldn't spread after the meeting.

Hansen shrugged his shoulders and let the man do what he wanted. For Hansen to be so accommodating, it appeared Altair had acquired the respect of a Sage ranker.

Altair turned around and took off his hood for the first time in a long while. He looked to be a man in his early 40s. His golden hair cascaded down his face.

The Crimson Ghost started looking around. And the participants felt like they were being scanned under heat radiation that could give them sunburns.

"Found you."

Altair mumbled to himself before disappearing from the stage. In the next moment, he was seen appearing in front of a young ranker.

'This... this is bad.'

Eren thought to himself as he found himself in front of the Crimson Ghost. He thought that the meeting with Demonmir was going to be an intense one in the city of Edin. He totally forgot about Altair Argas who was supposed to be Altashia's great-grandfather.

"Eren Idril?"

Altair asked and the butcher nodded.

By this point, he was used to acting like a pufferfish in front of the big rankers. A skill he was consistently improving. And yet. He found out that it was still trying to catch up with his needs due to incremental overload.

"Since when are you two together?"

"Hm? Who are you talking about?"

"You and Altashia."

"It's been a while. Where is she?"

"She is catching up. You... you are not... let's say... exclusive with her, are you?"

"No."

"Can I know the reason behind it?"

"Sure. It's simple really. It's because all my ladies deserve me and I deserve them all."

"Do you know how ridiculous you sound by saying things like these?"

"Ridiculous they may be. But did I stutter when I claimed them to be mine? I accept the good and the bad that they bring to me. I could have never reached here if I cared about petty things like that."

"Do you think you can just continue to act so profanely and I'll allow it?"

"Not this again. Give me a break here. Another old man with his big old ego."

Eren and Altair argued back and forth until they both reached a stalemate. They looked into each other's eyes and found them to be menacing. Throughout this verbal argument, their auras clashed against each other and made everyone around them take a few steps back.

If Altair was a crimson heat wave that just kept spreading everywhere and scorching everything, Eren was a cluster of lightning that stayed concentrated in its place and created a domain of red and purple lightning storms.