

Vile 191

Chapter 191: [Bonus] Distinction Between Rankers & Cultists

“All your big problems and your pressing worries are related to me. Isn’t that a big enough reason for me to ask you that question?”

Said Reen with serious expressions on her face. But one could see a hint of worry and guilt hidden behind that seriousness.

“Yeah. I have to admit. You are the reason behind my problems, Reen.”

Eren said this while nodding nonchalantly. Due to which Reen had a blank face. She thought her master would try to talk some sense to her, saying how wrong she was in thinking the way she was thinking. The butcher was unpredictable to even his demon beast, it seemed.

But then Reen sensed Eren’s emotions and got angry:

“Hmph! Now I get it. You were just teasing me. Be glad I don’t like to bully my master. Otherwise, you’d be in a lot of trouble.”

Eren smiled mirthlessly after he heard his demon beast throwing tantrums at him. She was becoming more like a teenage girl than a feared demon beast.

“My point is even if I knew these troubles beforehand, I’d still choose to make you mine. That’s because you are that important and precious to me.”

Eren tried to cajole Reen into submission. And it would have worked on almost any teen girl. But alas, Reen could read his thoughts well.

“Important to you or your crafty plans?”

Reen said this and narrowed her eyes as if she was paying close attention to her master’s moves and his statements. Eren scratched his head before continuing:

“Why do they need to be mutually exclusive in the first place? You are important to me and my plans both. Besides, you were the reason behind a buffoon like Dom getting successful in the previous timeline. Surely, we can do something about my rotten luck in future as well. Hehe!”

This answer finally satisfied Reen. It highlighted the importance of her existence in her master’s life. Eren didn’t deny that he had become her master for his interests. But he also added that she was an integral part of his existence now.

Reen thought that Eren was investing his time and resources into too many things at once when he could have just focused on his ranking journey. All his planning and cunningness were not worth it in her eyes. That’s why she couldn’t help ask him:

“Eren, I feel you are better suited as a cultist than a normal ranker. Why do you need to put this much effort into everything you do when you can join the other side and enjoy more freedom?”

Eren raised his eyebrows again after listening to Reen’s question that came out of the blue. He scratched his chin along with his barely growing beard before replying:

“Hehe! While I admire your efforts in looking after me, Reen, you are still too much of a greenhorn. You see rankers and cultists as two groups. But they are two sides of the same coin.

There’s not really a difference between a ranker and a cultist when you think about it. One does all that they wish while the other does things in the dark.”

Said Eren and stored Edgar’s journal back in his storage space. Then he picked up the purple apple kept on the fruit stand and started eating it. He threw the other one to Reen who caught it with a trace of confusion still visible on her face.

“So why do humans see each other as cultists and rankers at all? Why can’t they all just be rankers pursuing their own paths to power?”

Asked Reen while following her master’s lead and eating the purple fruit she was handed to. Eren looked at the girl savouring the fruit and shook his head before continuing:

“There are some cosmetic differences between the two. And cosmetics matter.

The biggest advantage cultists have over rankers is the way they share their knowledge about their ranking journey. It seems the bigshots among them have invested their time and resources into finding old and new paths to power that can be deemed revolutionary when compared to what the rankers have today.”

Eren said while finishing his fruit. Now he had retrieved another book from his storage. This was a pioneering book about ingredients. He was reading on the irritant gas released by Malva Hibiscus and its uses.

“But then why are you hesitating to become a cultist? Your status as a potential demi-human is sensitive no matter which side you join or abandon. But with cultists, at least you’d have more ways to learn about the lost path of becoming a demi-human. Here, as a ranker, you won’t gain much regarding how to tap into your true potential.

If you can’t come out in the open regarding your potential demi-human status,

But the cultists’ advantages end there. The establishments spread across this continent are way too powerful. They won’t allow the cultists to prosper because they are anti-establishment.

The cultists exist because the establishments want them to exist. The kingdoms and empires use the cultists as their powers in the shadows to create unrest in their enemy’s territory.

In short, the cultists exist to serve as an excuse for the establishments to do their dirty work while shedding responsibility for their actions. No matter what they do inside and outside their territory, they always have one force to blame for their mischiefs: the cultists.

Sure, I’d like my freedom. Which sane ranker who wants to progress faster and further in their ranking journey would ever say no to such an offer? But I don’t want to sacrifice my safety because of it.

Being a ranker has its disadvantages, I can’t pretend that they don’t exist. And rankers’ societal rules are bothersome. What’s even more bothersome is the way they are less restricted the higher you climb in the ranking ladder.

But even with all restrictions, staying as a ranker would give you a stable way to progress without being worried about the repercussions from the powers that are above you. Slow and steady progress in the beginning ranks is essential for a ranker.

And it's not that I won't ever swim in those murky waters. But right now, I'm better off as just another ranker."

Said Eren and closed the book he was reading. Reen was satisfied with her master's explanations as she looked at him pondering over something.

Eren then retrieved the runic container in which Malva Hibiscus was stored. He checked the ingredient one more time to ensure everything is the way it should be.

Eren stored the container after the final recheck and raised his hands towards Reen. The latter just converted into her slime form and merged with the tip of his index finger before disappearing into his body.

It was time Eren met up with Adapt Levine.

Chapter 192: Master Ranker!

"Morning, Adapt Levine."

Eren greeted the potion master with a courtesy bow. He had come to the small library attached to the potioning lab, where Levine was busy reading through some books. The latter looked at him and raised her brows before replying:

"Hmm? I don't think we have a lecture set for today, Eren. Is something the matter?"

Eren flashed a broad grin at the Adept rankers before replying:

"I got it. The thing that you were looking for."

It took a while for Levine to realize what Eren was talking about. The look of urgency was seen on her face as she could only utter a few words to describe it:

"Show me."

Eren didn't play the tease and retrieved the runic container from his storage space. Levine practically snatched it from his hands as soon as she saw it appear in front of her.

Levine freed the C-Rank ingredient from its confines and observed it closely. An inspectional glance soon replaced urgency, paving the way for unmasked ecstasy.

"Brilliant, Eren. This Malva Hibiscus is top-notch. Just the way I wanted it.

You have even harvested it the right way. I'm utterly satisfied.

I know you want my discipleship to use my name and contact, Eren. But for this favour you've done for me, I don't see that as a problem.

Here, take this. Bound it with your blood and mana."

Levine handed a token to Eren, which had an image of a cauldron on one side and the name Montmorency on the other. There were also intricate runic inscriptions that seemed to glow with a faint light as soon as Eren touched them.

This was a ranked item. Eren just didn't know which one. But he didn't dally and did what Levine told him to do. Soon the item was bound by the butcher who then looked at the D-Ranker for an explanation:

"That's your discipleship badge, Eren. It will prove useful to you in the future. From today onwards, you are my disciple and I'm your teacher.

I'd give you more details regarding our arrangement. But not now. Give me a few days to sort out some affairs that need my immediate attention. I'll contact you when the time's right."

Levine was clearly in a rush and wanted to deal with her problem immediately. Instead, she wanted to talk to the person who had become the delivery man for what she desired the most. Eren had realized this but he couldn't help but add a comment of his own:

"Thank you, teacher Levine. I'm glad to be under the tutelage of such a talented potionier.

But I'd like to remind you at the risk of sounding ignorant about your expertise. Malva Hibiscus is a mild ingredient in nature. But its effects would change drastically if it's distilled with mana-core-healing potions that also tend to be mild. If you..."

Eren wanted to continue warning Levine about something but the latter just chuckled before interrupting him:

"Hehe! Eren, you mean to say I won't be able to handle the effects of my creation because I made some rookie mistake?"

Eren shook his head before replying:

"No, I am not saying that. But I'm saying that instead of adding another agent in your potion to act as the neutralizer, why not use the side-product of the same ingredient that it is compatible with?"

"You have stored the irritant gas of the ingredient as well while harvesting?"

Instead of confirming Levine's questions, Eren removed a portion of the irritant gas that was released by the C-Rank ingredient as a defence mechanism. He had another container of the irritant gas with him that he kept in his storage space.

"I think this much should be enough."

Eren handed the vial to Levine, whose face was etched with surprise. The kid in front of her didn't understand the value of this irritant gas, but she did.

With this, Levine now had both the ingredient and a stabilizing agent to concoct the potion she needed for so long now. She felt happy, yes. But her happiness was overshadowed by Eren's in-depth preparation to harvest the ingredients the right way even when he knew nothing about their effects.

'The boy came prepared, I must say.'

Thought Levine before smiling wholeheartedly. With the irritant gas added to the distilling process, the potion's quality she was preparing to brew would be exceptional even by her standards.

"Eren, do you know about my mana core damage?"

Levine couldn't help asking when she heard the guy talk about healing potions that treated damaged mana core. Malva Hibiscus could have been a dead giveaway if it wasn't used in various potion recipes.

So Eren coming with that spot-on conclusion was still somewhat surprising for Levine who was waiting for her new disciple to answer her question.

"Oh, I just guessed after talking with my aunt Nina about Malva Hibiscus. You have regressed in your ranking journey, right? Although a C-Rank ingredient is ideally not suited for your requirement, I'm sure potioners at your level will have countless ways to deal with such an issue."

Eren used Nina's name again to skip any explanation about how he knew about things, which he knew because of the past timeline. Levine had regained her ranking status as a C-Rank Expert ranker in the past timeline. All thanks to her past-future disciple finding her the Malva Hibiscus. So he thought Levine had regressed to D-Rank from C-Rank.

But he underestimated the effects of compatible stabilizing agents the potions at higher rank needed to up their quality. The same stabilizing agent he had provided to Levine.

"Oh! So it was your healer guardian that might have come up with that conjecture.

Hehehe! You are right about my regression alright. But let's just say that you underestimate me not only as a potioneer but also as a ranker."

Eren was confused about what Levine was talking about. So he was about to ask for an explanation but it seemed that he didn't have to. That's because Levine provided it for him with her next statement:

"Had it been only Malva Hibiscus, I would have only regained my status as a C-Ranker. But with the compatible stabilizing agent in my hands, I might just be able to create a Master rank potion. You know what that means right?"

Chapter 193: Acquaintances

"Had it been only Malva Hibiscus, I would have only regained my status as a C-Ranker. But with the compatible stabilizing agent in my hands, I might just be able to create a Master rank potion. You know what that means right?"

Levine looked at her disciple with an amusing expression after she asked the rhetoric question. The latter took some time to digest the words he had heard just now from his teacher. He only expressed his disbelief after some time:

"Master Rank potion!

B-Rank!

Teacher Levine, you were a B-ranker before regression!"

Now it was Eren's turn to feel utter surprise. Contrary to his limited knowledge from the past timeline, Levine was a B-Ranker!

She was a master potioneer who had regressed two ranks straightaway.

Eren didn't even want to know about how she was forced to regress so much. He feared asking her about it would give her the impression that he was interested in knowing about her woes.

Eren wanted to stay away from such controversial things as far away as he could, lest they come to bite him in the ass. He already had a terrible experience with being the Osan Woods' Butcher and potential demi-human. There was no need to add another entry to that list.

"Hehehe! You look shocked, alright. Yes, I was a B-Ranker before my regression. And it is only a possibility that I'd regain my rank back with the help of both the ingredient and stabilizing agent distilled into a Master potion.

As an Adept, however, it will not be easy to create a Master ranked potion. I will need some help.

Anyway. I'll be a bit busy for some days, Eren. My cure doesn't lie in me finding the right ingredients. I also need the right resources to get out of my regression for the better.

I'll post a notice on your Spectral screens soon and halt all my scheduled lectures for a few days. They'll only get resumed when I am done doing something about my regression.

I'll take my leave now."

Said Levine and got up to find her potioneering lab located at a distance from where she was. She knew it might even take weeks on end to get out of the ditch a Master potioneer like her had found herself in.

Eren also took his leave after he heard that. He regretted only one thing in this deal:

'Damn it. I should have asked for something more. This was a huge opportunity for me to get something from a B-Ranker. But Fu****ck.'

Eren regretted missing out on a potential fortune he didn't see coming and therefore missed. The scrooge thought that Levine could have been milked for more than just her discipleship had he known about the importance of the stabilizing agent he had provided.

Some days after Eren's visit to Levine.

Inter-class ranking war. 1C White Raven Crew vs. 1A Stormborns

White Raven Crew this time had a five-member squad that consisted of Eren, Renita, Steve, Becky, and Jake. The butcher was supposed to lead the charge in this match as well with Steve supporting him in his frontal assault. Renita was supposed to provide cover fire to their charge while Becky and Jake were meant to be the cushions they could fall back on.

But Eren's expressions changed from carelessness to seriousness as soon as he heard the name of their opponent squad. That's because he had met up with the three members of that team while he was travelling towards the academy.

Jason Storm, Ivor Osan, and Veronica Garcia. They were the same people Eren had met in the city of Laurel outside the grocery shop.

Eren wasn't worried about Ivor, Veronica or the other two members of the team. But Jason was different. And this wasn't about winning or losing the match.

Unfortunately for Eren this time, one couldn't forfeit the compulsory ranking wars without participating first. He had to play this match and be done with it.

'Just one match. I'll leave Jason to others and deal with the rest.'

Eren changed his battle tactics slightly. He let his teammates know about it. The other members of White Raven Crew had no reason to argue with Eren so they all agreed.

"Eren Idril. Glad we met again. How have you been? I'm guessing pretty well after looking at your war ranking."

Jason flashed a mild smile when the teams met up just before the match. He was trying to get Eren into his friend circle. But the guy was more slippery than an eel. Every time he tried meeting him, the guy would just disappear from his last known place as if he knew who was coming to see him.

But this inter-class ranking war gave Jason a chance to finally have a word with this interesting fellow. And he was looking forward to having a long discussion with him after the match gets over as well.

Jason and Ivor had gotten even more famous than Eren as first-year rankers. They were always within the top ranks. Like Eren, they also had progressed much further than their ordinary peers in terms of their ranking journey.

Veronica was also quite impressive in her league. It was just that compared to the rising stars in her team, she appeared to have a dimmer halo.

"Jason Storm. Right back at you. Your and Ivor's names are all the rage these days among us first years. In the name of our acquaintance from before, I would appreciate it if you could just make it easy on me and my team. Hehe!"

Ivor was standing right behind Jason. He liked Eren's flattering attitude and didn't find anything wrong with it. Osan Jr. was used to being treated as someone in charge all the time anyway. So when someone followed that practice in the academy when they didn't need to, Ivor would feel his ego getting soothed subconsciously.

But there was that girl with an irksome attitude who seemed to always have something against the butcher. She couldn't help pitching in before any other members of her team had a chance to reply:

"Just get your sorry asses beaten up nicely and quickly. Then you won't have to suffer much."

Veronica replied with an uncaring attitude that said she was getting impatient to prove her words right. And she also added another expression, in the end, to show her distaste in everything that was happening around her:

"Hmph!"

Chapter 194: White Raven Crew vs Stormborns

“Hmph!”

It was impossible to miss Veronica’s voiced attitude. With a mirthless smile on his face, Jason told Eren and his team to ignore his arrogant teammate. But Eren couldn’t help narrowing down his eyes on Veronica:

‘What is up with this bitch?’

Eren thought to himself as he shook hands with Jason before both teams separated. The match was about to start.

“The battle between White Raven Crew and Stormborns commences in 3... 2... 1... Now!”

Announced the referee to the teams and the audience watching the match. A lot of students were fanboys of Ivor and Jason. They wanted to see their stars beat down their opponents while keeping their cool.

Because that’s what has happened in their matches so far. When compared to Eren, who had experimented in his ranking matches and struggled to win every time, Jason and Ivor dominated their opponents.

Ivor was even more brutal with his opponents than anyone in the first years. He was a close combat expert like Eren. So he would get up and close to his opponents and beat them up black and blue with his uncaring attacks.

Ivor’s opponents would often spill blood one way or the other because of Ivor’s quick dagger work. And that was considered fan service for Ivor’s fans.

Just like Eren, Jason’s team had also focused on their attack potential. Jason was a battle mage, a specialized branch of the mage path that focused on mid-range attacks instead of the usual AoEs and long-range attacks the path was known for.

Jason had an affinity for wind. It made his battle style quick and fast-paced. A second benefit of having the great element as your affinity is that your ranking journey is unhindered. Therefore, his BTP value was greater than Eren’s.

Ivor was a close combat expert. But his similarity with Eren didn’t end only there. He also had a lightning element as his elemental affinity. Additionally, his dagger arts made his attacking style quite similar to that of the butcher.

His grandfather Isen Osan provided Ivor with plenty of ranking resources and extols. Plus, the guy was talented as well as diligently working. And he had a relentless drive to be the best in his generation.

Jason was already a heavy-hitter in the Stormborns. Ivor, with his BTP value of 21, was akin to a loose cannon that was as deadly as it was precise.

Veronica's affinity for lava made her a unique first-year mage. It served her battle style that the two of the most OP members in her team were always moving. That gave her the space to cast her AOE spells without catching her opponents in them as well.

Veronica had a BTP value of 17. She was about to enter the middle stage of F-Rank. Her mana-core was almost going to enter the liquid stage. She just needed a small push.

The two extra members Jason had kept in his team were just there to fill the numbers. They were talented as well. But compared to the rising stars and one talented bitch with attitude, they were akin to cannon fodder.

Eren zeroed his eyes on the cannon fodder. As soon as he heard the referee making the announcement that the battle had started, he seemingly disappeared from his position.

Eren appeared right in the middle of the battlefield. He had travelled a sizable distance between the two teams in a fraction of moments, making it difficult for Steve and Renita to follow him in his assault.

But they weren't worried about Eren. They had started to believe in him. He wouldn't take unnecessary risks for short gains. And he would be the first to retreat in case he saw an unstoppable danger heading his way.

Renita fired off her rounds of mana bullets in the direction of Jason. That's what she had been instructed to do by Eren. His instructions were to hinder Jason as much as she could while maintaining a safe distance from him.

She had wind elemental affinity too. Plus her class made her more nimble than the battlemage she was targeting currently. Jason grunted audibly before he started dodging the wind bullets seemingly homing on him.

Jason was as fast as Eren when the latter only used his movement technique. When the battlemage gave it his all, he was faster than the butcher. So when Renita started firing, not a single bullet was able to touch him.

But that didn't prevent Renita from targeting the battlemage. She stopped advancing after spanning a few meters with Steve. The ranger then nodded at the latter, suggesting the berserker to aid in Eren's opening salvo.

Jason was pinned by Renita and was taken out of the picture for a while. Eren could sense Steve following from behind. He looked at his berserker and pointed at Veronica. He wanted Steve to take care of them or at least hold off the mage.

Ivor had the same idea as Eren. He had moved ahead to deal with Eren's remaining team members Jake and Becky while they were in their metaphorical stronghold.

Team Stormborn's cannon fodder saw an enemy close combat expert heading their way and couldn't help looking at each other with helpless smiles.

This event was not new for them anymore. They have witnessed and gone through situations like these many times now. That's because team Stormborn's opponents would always target these poor fellows and their OP team members wouldn't care much about them.

Therefore, the cannon fodder didn't lose their confidence. They prepared themselves for what they had always been preparing for: the worst. Unfortunately for them, that still wasn't enough.

As soon as he was within the range of his targets, Eren activated his Sedated Perception and vanished into thin air. The cannon fodder had their backs against each other. But they had kept some distance from each other for the freedom of movement.

This was the space Eren chose to seemingly morph into existence— right in the middle of his two targets.

Chapter 195: Berserker with Brains

The space Eren chose to morph into existence was right in the middle of his two targets. He executed the Blitz Bolt through both hands without wasting any time. Before the crowd could even see the cannon fodder's epic struggle to stop being cannon fodder, they faced a vicious blow behind their necks.

Eren's simple attack literally and metaphorically made the hair on their backs turn straight. With his simple attack, the butcher made quick work of his two opponents.

The side characters were taken care of. Eren narrowed his gaze on Veronica next. It was about time he returned the "compliments" thrown his way by the mage with compound interest.

Veronica was battling with Steve who seemed annoying to her. That's because the guy also had an earth element affinity, which gave him a fighting chance against her.

Veronica had turned the sizable area around her into a pond of lava with the help of her AoE spell. She was standing in the middle, creating whips of lava that shot forth from the pond from time to time. Steve was targeted by these whips whenever he approached close to her to take care of her.

If this was a normal berserker, she would have taken care of them by now. That's because her lava pond made it difficult for the berserkers to close in on her even with their signature berserker charge.

Plus, the lava whips provided her with a very effective offence and defence mechanism packed into one move. So whenever an opponent would approach her, she would just wait for them to get near her before trapping them into her lava pond.

Veronica's lava would eat away the invisible yet protective mana layer the rankers had coated over their bodies, making them prone to serious burns. And she had enough control on her AoE spell to increase the temperature of the lava even more if and when she needed to.

Veronica's lava, like her, was always boiling and seething. So usually her opponents would give up and forfeit their involvement in the match when their mana layers would get burnt away by her lava attacks.

And yet, Steve proved to her that she wasn't the only one that was in total control of her spells. All these weeks fighting with Eren and learning from him the true path of a berserker had opened the guy's eyes to a new reality.

Steve now understood the attitude required to be a berserker in a true sense. Berserking isn't all about amplified power that is powered by berserking potions.

Emotions also served as another type of fuel in a berserker's path. Aggression that caused rankers to shut off their brains wasn't always ideal. Total control over their movement and battle style didn't tap into the berserker's true potential either.

But a controlled aggressiveness that made use of those emotions while keeping the ranker's rationality in check granted the berserkers to truly make full use of their path.

Steve had emptied a berserking potion in his mouth by now. As per Eren's instructions he wasn't allowed to underestimate his opponent. And he could clearly understand that Veronica wasn't someone who he could tackle easily in the first place.

So he had to be fast and efficient with his battle style. He executed his earth element spells and made his hands and legs get wrapped in earthen armour. As the armour was mana-infused, it was lightweight while allowing easy movement.

The armour was what kept Steve safe from Veronica's attacks. Of course, he was struggling to keep his armour on for some time without it getting hardened. This was because he came into contact with the lava.

But Steve had no problem with his armour getting crumpled down in the first place. He would cast the spell again and make a supplementary layer of armour appear on his limbs.

Then Steve would charge at Veronica once again, making her almost unable to concentrate on any other detail happening around her battlefield. Plus, the berserker would always choose creative ways to get close to the lava mage.

He would sometimes go for a direct charge. And sometimes his direct charge would turn out to be a decoy to cast another earth-element spell in the lava mage's direction.

Eren had guided Steve in choosing the right kind of earth element spell that would bode well with each other. And he had also polished his berserker's battle style closer to perfection than ever before.

Earth Spikes!

This was another spell Steve now had in his arsenal. Of course, he needed to get close to his opponents for it to work. But with his mana sense spreading forth in the surrounding, he would be able to cast the spell in any direction he saw fit.

Plus, Steve could now stack his Earth Spikes spells. He was able to cast up to three Earth Spikes spells simultaneously by now. He was able to accomplish all this because earth elements were readily available no matter what his environment was.

And the fact that the earth element was one of the great elements that focused on simplicity allowed Steve to stack three spells with only a few weeks' dedicated work under Eren's guidance.

The Earth Spike spell had turned out to be a nuisance for Veronica. She was still relatively safe standing in the middle of her self-created lava pond. But the spikes would breach the defences set by her mana and would always make contact with her. That's why she was forced to change her direction and line of attack from time to time.

Steve kept her busy. But it didn't look like he would be able to tackle her successfully by getting close to her. Neither did Veronica look like she would be able to break the stalemate anytime soon.

The berserker and the lava mage both had their hands full with each other. So they couldn't pay attention to Eren who was getting close to their battlefield at a rapid pace.

Eren saw it was almost impossible for him to sneak on Veronica because of her AoE. So he decided to use his berserker as a decoy.

"Steve! Now!"

Shouted Eren and executed his movement spell.

Chapter 196: [Bonus] Going Into a Shell

"Steve! Now!"

Shouted Eren and executed his movement spell.

Steve heard Eren's call from behind him and flashed a wicked smile towards his opponent without looking back. He retrieved another vial of berserking potions and used his berserking charge that aimed straight for Veronica.

Veronica heard Eren's shout too. She was taken aback by Eren's speed to take care of the cannon fodder she had in her team. It wasn't that she was expecting them to neutralize Eren completely. But she had thought that they would be able to at least hold the close combat expert off for a reasonable amount of time.

She had thought wrong. Or maybe she underestimated her opponent thoroughly. Either way, she was under immediate pressure from two fronts.

Veronica saw the enemy berserker drink probably his last vial of berserking potion and knew that things were about to get serious. She had also realized that the first threat would come from Steve. Even if he fails, the incoming enemy can use the time to close in on her and force her to join a close combat battle. That would be a game over for her.

Therefore, she needed to take care of the charging berserker first. She raised both of her hands in front of Steve and waved them as if guiding the lava whips born from the lava pond.

Steve saw a barrage of incoming lava whips closing in on him. He couldn't help smiling after looking at the reddish-orange whips heading his way at breakneck speeds.

'Eren was right. Even a tough game becomes fun to play against stronger opponents if you know how you can play your strengths.'

Steve thought and cast his other spell.

Earth Spike!

Veronica was ready as soon as she sensed the mana fluctuations in her surroundings. She started looking around her with the corner of her eyes, anticipating an incoming attack from Steve.

Veronica's alert reactions made the berserker more fearsome as he charged toward her. While under the effect of the berserking potion, he remembered Eren's words about voicing his attacks with zeal to get the most out of them. So he followed his leader's advice.

"Earth Spike!"

Said Steve out loud. Veronica heard the guy's shout and balled her fists in anticipation, seemingly preparing for a dodge-and-counter strategy. But alas, White Raven Crew's berserker had picked up a thing or two from their shadow leader.

Steve had been told by Eren that berserker's in-battle shouts would sometimes fool the enemy into thinking the attack was coming, regardless of whether it was true or not. Even if the opponents knew that there's a chance the berserker was just bluffing, their subconscious mind would always think about the countermeasure to the enemy attack they had just shouted the name of.

Steve employed Eren's trick and decided to use it against over alert Veronica, making for a convincing bluff. The Earth Spike he had executed was not for her. It was for him.

That's right. Steve fired his Earth Spike right in the middle of his path toward Veronica. His feet were thrust into the air when he stepped on the ground outside the latter's lava pond due to the spike forming immediately beneath them.

The size, speed of formation, and the direction of the spike had all been adjusted to suit Steve's berserking charge. Like this, an earth element berserker seemed to have found an invisible pair of wings to complete his charge in the air. Without worrying about what was happening on the ground below him.

The lava whips missed their mark. In response, they attacked the spike that sent Steve in the air, and it soon crumpled. But Steve had no use for it anyway. He appreciated Veronica's panic after she saw him seemingly flying towards her.

Veronica retracted the lava whips she had sent towards the spike and was getting ready to tackle the flying berserker who had his limbs coated in the earthen armour again.

Veronica stopped caring about the opponent's life and launched an all-out offensive against Steve with numerous lava whips targeting him from all directions. The mage was confident her attack this time would produce results as Steve had no manoeuvrability while in the air.

She thought wrong. Because Steve expected Earth Spikes again and created a new, bigger spike in his path just before the whips hit him. This time he didn't step on the tip but caught the spike with his hands. He manoeuvred his body such that it would change position and launched himself in the opposite direction he was heading in just now.

Steve retreated using a last-minute manoeuvre. Veronica couldn't help cursing after she saw the berserker keeping his emotions in check and displaying exceptional control and skill to get the most out of his simple spells.

"Fu*ck.... You... Steve or something. Fight me as you mean it, I dare you."

Veronica gave Steve a naked threat. But he was all smiles after looking at his opponent seething in rage like boiling lava. She was so preoccupied with obsessing over Steve's retreat that she had forgotten his charge was only a decoy to buy time.

The real attack on Stormborn's lava mage came from White Raven Crew's close combat expert. When Steve retreated safely from the whips, Eren had launched his spell combo and accelerated towards the lava mage.

Eren used the spell combo of Sedated Perception, Stunning Speed, and Blitz Steps. He felt like his entire body was as light as a feather as he approached the lava mage in the seemingly stagnated world. The spell combo made him too fast to be recognised by an F-ranker's mana sense, much less the visual perception done by the eyes.

So when Steve retreated to a safe zone from Veronica's attack she almost didn't anticipate Eren coming her way. Almost.

Veronica didn't anticipate Eren getting close to her in such a short time right after Steve's retreat. Even so, she had anticipated that sooner or later one of her opponents would make her fight close range.

Therefore as soon as she saw Steve flash a smile towards her, Veronica knew something was up. She didn't waste any time and raised her hands in urgency.

"Lava Shell!"

Chapter 197: Staunch Believer of Gender Equality P1

"Lava Shell!"

The lava pond around Veronica immediately started concentrating with her at the centre. Then it took the shape of a sphere with the lava mage standing inside it. The red hot lava unexpectedly cooled down rapidly due to the ranker's mana interfering in the natural process.

Soon the almost-complete sphere turned charcoal black in shade with bright crimson lines running on its surface like some intricate pattern. This was Veronica's defensive spell: Lava Shell.

Lava Shell required that the caster first cast Lava Pond so that the lava can be moulded into a sphere-shaped shell around the caster. That requirement made it impossible for the caster to use the Lava Shell without casting Lava Pond first.

But Veronica didn't mind that the defensive spell had this requirement. She was used to using Lava Pond all the time. So she was glad that the defensive spell played to her advantage.

The shortcoming of not being to be regarded as a standalone spell was balanced by the spell's casting time. Since the lava was already up for the spell's taking, it largely cut down on the execution delay while keeping it easy on the caster's mana consumption.

That's why Veronica was able to cast Lava Shell with such ease. She was almost secured from external harm if and when the spell completed the construction of the sphere around her.

The inclusion of Lava Shell made Veronica even more confident in using her signature spell Lava Pond. Whenever she felt threatened she'd enter the Lava Shell and spread her mana sense to observe the situation outside.

The spell would buy enough time for her team to deal with the enemy waiting outside while Veronica stayed inside the shell safely. Although rare, Veronica had been saved by the spell several times in her team's previous battles.

So when she sensed something was wrong, Veronica didn't have to think twice about which spell she was going to use next. Additionally, the spell was almost complete.

But alas, Eren had been too fast for anyone like the lava mage. It held true even with her preemptive actions and her ideal spell combo. The sphere construction reached her shoulders in height, with only her head peeking outside. Another few moments and she'd be completely safe from external harm.

This was when Eren showed up right above the lava sphere in the air. He didn't waste any time. Because he knew that if he did, dealing with the bitch would become extremely difficult.

"Blitz Bolt!"

Veronica was almost done with her Lava Shell. There was only a small entrance over her head that was rapidly getting closed on her.

But just as it was about to completely seal her in, a bolt of lightning made its way through the opening and landed on her.

Eren had sent his mana circuits on hyperdrive to get the most out of the Blitz Bolt and extend its range a bit. As a result of its sheer power and stunning effect, Veronica was forced to dispel her defensive shield against her will.

Veronica felt the full burn of the lightning spell. Thanks to her mana layer that she had deployed unconsciously, she was still able to stay awake. Otherwise, she would have been long since passed out. Things could have been much direr had Eren concentrated his attack on her vital organs.

But the butcher wanted to punish the bitch without getting punished for it. So he had chosen the back of Veronica's neck for the Blitz Bolt's point of impact.

"Eyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

To cope with the spell's adverse effects, Veronica screamed. There was no way her Lava Shell spell would be executed properly anymore. So she dispelled it before it was forcefully dispelled.

Veronica's determination to act under the situation was what helped her regain some control and she cast her signature spell again.

Her almost-formed Lava Shell was cracked before crumbling down. The remains of the shell along with the nearby ground quickly started turning into lava. Veronica now had a brand-new Lava Pond to herself.

The newly created lava whips were created from the Lava Pond. They started their hunt for the vile creature who had hurt their master till she almost soiled her pants. But Eren was expecting this and was already on top of things.

Sedated Perception + Stunning Speed!

Eren also launched an altered version of the fireball spell and coated his feet with balls of fire. The Blitz Steps could not be performed after three spells were active so his trademark lightning feet were covered with only yellow blobs of fire.

Eren had done this to counter Veronica's lava for a short time. The blobs of fire will have their mana fire, which would prevent the mana fire generated by lava from affecting Eren's feet, only if temporarily.

Eren only needed to step over the Lava pond for a short while anyway. So he didn't hesitate to abandon his Blitz Steps and settle for this variation to match the situation.

Now with the distance almost negligible, it didn't take a long time for the butcher to get close to Veronica. He grabbed her face with his one hand while she was focusing on his afterimage getting pierced by her lava whips.

Eren placed his other hand right over the girl's stomach and executed Blitz Bolt again while looking at Veronica in her eyes. Her sensitive bladder had a bolt of lightning running through it along with other organs near her stomach.

Veronica had just found the joy of capturing the vile creature with her lava whips. The whips had quickly caught up with her approaching enemy and pierced him.

'No. This isn't right.'

Veronica thought and narrowed her eyes on Eren getting pierced by her lava whips. When she observed that it was only the guy's afterimage that had gotten pierced, she was reminded of a grim possibility. There was a possibility that Eren was faster than she thought and could handle her easily.

Veronica wanted to look around her to pinpoint her opponent's location. But it turned out that she didn't have to. That's because Eren's cold blue eyes were staring right at her the next moment when she thought of taking countermeasures.

Veronica felt a bolt of lightning pass through her stomach. She was stunned before feeling numb from her waist down.

Plus, Eren's emotionless eyes made her scared for her life. It invoked the primal fear in her heart that she hadn't felt before. All this was enough for her to lose control of her bladder.

Veronica peed her pants in the battle ring.

Chapter 198: Staunch Believer of Gender Equality P2

Veronica peed her pants in the battle ring.

But she didn't realize it until it was too late to do anything about it. In addition, she had worn white pants. So the wet stains were now easily visible to the audience.

Eren smirked when his nose twitched in response to the uric smell. Although he wasn't sure, he was aiming for this same effect. He was aware of his spell's effects his targets would have on their bodies after all.

'Try keeping your nose high with this incident forever etched onto the onlookers' memories now.'

Thought Eren before balling his fists and mercilessly punching hard on Veronica's stomach. The young lady who had just soiled her clothes was sent off in the air as the heavy fist hit her sensitive stomach region.

The onlookers started registering what had happened with Veronica as she flew further away than her initial position. And the audience bursts into uncontrolled laughter. The guys started jeering while the girls fanned their faces, looking as if they were feeling empathic embarrassment in Veronica's stead.

Veronica was enraged after the vile creature forced her to have the most embarrassing moment of her life. She was incensed after hearing the jeers and taunts she heard from the crowd surrounding the battle ring.

Not long after she landed, Eren had followed her to the place she had just landed and punched at the same region the same way again. The result of that attack was the same as the previous one. With another brutal attack accumulating on her body, Veronica was sent into the air.

Her stomach was punched again by Eren's unforgiving attack before she was able to react to the embarrassment and rage she felt. And another terrible situation unfolded for her as a result of that pain.

Veronica vomited all the food that she had eaten before her fight. And that vomit was distinctly visible as it flew in the opposite direction of the one she was flying towards.

'Ughhhhhh! This son of a bitch, I'll kill him.'

Veronica could only call names to Eren and threaten him in her mind as her mouth was foul and full of her vomit. It was not like Eren would find the part about his mother to be something to get angry about anyway. But the young lady didn't know that. So she cursed Eren some more while she was getting beaten up badly by him.

Eren's barrage of attacks on Veronica continued only for a short while. He was quick and efficient about his assault, targeting his opponent's soft spots.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

Veronica cried in agony and frustration. A pure, non-elemental wave of F-Rank mana was sent all around her with her standing at the centre. As a result, Eren was pushed back and was prevented from approaching his enemy.

Veronica had a small breakthrough within the F-Rank!

She was very close to having a breakthrough in the liquid stage of the F-Rank in the first place. But she had felt like she was missing something when she practised her ranking technique for the past few days, whenever she tried to manually enter the breakthrough with the help of her technique.

But this time, Veronica had a breakthrough even without having to assume a resting position or practise her ranking technique. This was known as the forced breakthrough.

Forced breakthroughs didn't require a ranker to practice their ranking techniques. They would happen spontaneously when the rankers were in do-or-die situations. The word 'forced' may have a negative connotation to it. But the effects of forced breakthroughs were anything but negative.

Forced breakthroughs were something high-ranked entities would look for when they stopped progressing in their ranking journey through normal means. They would actively look for adrenaline-inducing moments by participating in mortal combat battles or exploring dangerous places.

One could say that forced breakthroughs required rankers to be extremely emotional. Veronica's breakthrough was not an exception to this assumption either. But instead of an unwavering survival instinct, she felt uncontrollable fury.

Veronica's anger towards Eren allowed her to take the last step required to enter the middle stage of the F-Rank. However, the ranker who had achieved the breakthrough couldn't register her success because her mind was consumed by flames of anger.

The wave of mana subsided before getting dispersed. Eren understood what had happened. But he didn't care that his opponent had a breakthrough in the middle of the battle and approached Veronica again.

"Aaaaaaah!"

"Eyaaaaaaaaaahh!"

"Aaaaaaargh"

"Aah!"

While Eren beat Veronica with only his fists, Veronica's repetitive shrieks could be heard in the surrounding area. He had coated his fists with his lightning and didn't need to execute any other spell besides that at this point.

Since Veronica's thoughts were in disarray, she had stopped fighting back. Eren could have made her unconscious and neutralized her. But the butcher had just enough of the bitch's shit.

Eren had decided to answer Veronica's verbal spats with his fist and occasional kicks. He had let her leave even with all her transgressions against him without doing anything when they were in the city of Laurel. But not this time.

It could be said that Eren was just being a staunch supporter of gender equality in a true sense.

He knew that forced breakthroughs wouldn't necessarily grant the rankers instant power-ups if they weren't aware of their situations or didn't know how to make use of that breakthrough. That's why Eren didn't give his opponent any time to register what had happened to her and continued beating her.

"You... you vile creature. This... this is not over..."

Veronica was at the end of her rope from losing consciousness. Yet she still somehow mumbled those words when Eren got close to her. She was fighting so hard against losing consciousness to say those words because her rage was so intense.

'Yeah? You started this, bitch. Don't you fuc*king dare turn this into my mistake now that your squishy ass is handed to you.'

Thought Eren and shrugged his shoulders in non-vocal response.

Chapter 199: Quadruple Spell Stacking

The butcher felt nothing as he looked at the result of using Veronica as his punching bag. She now had black and blue spots all over her body. Her mouth had a cocktail of saliva, vomit and blood dripping from it. Her wet-stained white pants and her now messy hair added to her battered look.

Eren was finally satisfied with this result. He smiled magnanimously towards Veronica as if granting the bitch her most desired wish.

"Byebye!"

Eren said as he grabbed Veronica's head and executed Blitz Bolt. Veronica Garcia could finally rest as she was sent to feel the bliss of unconsciousness.

Needless to say, all this took place within a span of only a few minutes. Eren took his time dealing with Veronica. But his perception of time would always get skewed while in Sedated Perception. So in reality, not much time had passed since Eren dealt with the cannon fodder.

Eren finally looked up after watching Veronica Garcia fall to her knees before finally sleeping like a baby on the bare ground. He observed that his opponent's team was not the only one who had its members neutralized.

Ivor had taken down Jake and Becky just the way Eren had taken down Veronica. He could have finished them sooner but he had underestimated Becky's attacks and suffered a bit because of it.

From that moment on, Ivor acted with prudence and slowly chipped away at their defence until finally neutralizing the team's tank. After Jake fell, it was only a matter of time before Becky followed her teammate in his footsteps.

Renita on the other hand had still somehow kept Jason pinned with her attacks. But she was soon going to be out of breath and mana as she had expended a lot of them compared to her opponents. The reason for this is that they were waiting for the inevitable to happen. She would soon get taken down by the boy prodigy if things progressed the way they were progressing and there was no external intervention.

He was on the verge of fighting Jason and helping Renita against his pragmatic judgment when his senses told him there would be danger soon befalling him. He looked in the direction of Ivor vs Becky and Jake's battle spot to see that Osan Jr was rapidly approaching him.

Ironically, Osan Jr had almost the same kind of lightning spells Eren had. That was because they had both got them from the academy's repertoire. Isen Osan had also pulled some strings to allow his grandson easy access to better spells and techniques.

Ivor was seen executing Blitz Steps. Their eyes met even from a distance. Osan Jr. couldn't help feeling excited after seeing how Eren fought with his opponents.

"Hahaha! You are doing well, Eren Idril. Very good. This is what I have been missing. Duel with a lightning ranker of almost equal calibre. Don't disappoint me. Prepare yourself."

Ivor provoked Eren loudly and made his confidence in him and his battle prowess known to all his fans. The crowd broke into chanting Ivor's name as they saw him about to engage with the guy who didn't know how to show leniency to the fairer gender.

'Another ass who thinks the world revolves around him.'

Thought Eren as he drew his katars out. He didn't know much about Ivor's battle style. However, he knew the guy was about to be a pain in the ass to deal with if he didn't open most of his cards.

'Blitz Steps.'

Eren activated his movement technique as well and ran in the direction of Ivor's to meet him head-on. The two lightning element rankers with almost the same type of spells were going to battle it out.

Sedated Speed + Stunning Speed

The world stagnated around Eren as he activated his time-element-specific spell combo. Unlike the rare but natural time element users, he didn't feel the backlashes of using the spells of the same element no matter how many times he executed them.

So it was not strange that Eren would decide to combo-use his battle centric time element spells without worrying about the aftereffects. But that only made it so that Eren would have only one more active spell before his senses, mana consumption, and mana circuit felt overwhelmed.

Eren had chosen Blitz Steps. He held his katar tight as he aimed at his opponent. But unlike the stagnated world around him, Ivor didn't feel stagnated at all.

Ivor saw Eren start producing afterimages in his wake and knew his opponent was coming at him with all that he had got. But he wasn't frustrated or afraid by the latter's scary speed.

Ivor had his ways to make full use of his speed-centric elemental affinity. He activated the time-element artefact he had worn as a ring quadruple-stacked Blitz Steps.

The F-Rank time-element artefact was a very rare item Isen Osan had bought for his grandson using his reach. The ring had limited usage each day. And each time it was discharged, it would need to be charged with an array that made use of Extols like a fireplace makes use of the wood.

In short, charging the ring was a very tedious and expensive process that the average Joe couldn't afford to do. But Ivor wasn't average. He had secured the day's usage of artefacts on Eren alone. Because he knew his battle with Eren would last only a short while before the latter beat him up.

The time-element artefacts were rarer than the time-element users. That said a lot about their scarcity. So it was nothing short of a miracle when Isen found an apt artefact for his scion.

The artefact's effects were similar to Eren experiencing Sedated Perception. But unlike Eren who supported the spell with his mana, Ivor's enhanced perception granted to him by the artefact was autonomous and didn't require him to regulate with mana.

In short, Ivor was outsourcing Sedated Perception while importing its effects with his artefact ring. But that was not the only artefact he had.

Ivor's boots were also a pair of lightning element artefacts. Their usage was even simpler. They would help Ivor stack Blitz Steps, enabling him to stack the movement spell four times at once.

Chapter 200: Drawing Parallels

This was Eren's first time witnessing someone move in the stagnated world as freely as him. But he wasn't surprised. He knew the guy was loaded. And the money would always find a way to drag the impossible into the realm of possibility.

Eren shot forth with katars drawn. Ivor marched forward with his daggers clenched in his hand. And their first-ever strike against each other took place.

As a result of the weapons clashing with each other, a series of clanking sounds could be heard in the surroundings. The audience could see a series of afterimages of both the lightning-element rankers battling toe to toe against each other.

Ivor parried Eren's jabs almost every time. Likewise, the former dealt with every slash of the latter effectively. It looked like a stalemate to the audience but both the fighters themselves knew Eren had a slight upper hand.

Eren had a heightened, more refined perception of everything that was happening around him. This was because, unlike Ivor, who had given the responsibility of his enhanced perception of the artefact he was wearing, all of Eren's senses were well invested in augmenting his real-time reasoning as a whole.

This allowed Eren to make his attacks slip through Ivor's defences sometimes. They were rare moments. And the cuts and puncture wounds he had inflicted on Osan Jr. were not that serious.

But those wounds painted a grim picture for Ivor. But the sufferer didn't care. This was the first time he was pushed this hard against a ranker of his age. He felt unmatched exhilaration from battling with Eren.

The high-speed battle continued for a while before Eren and Ivor both retired a side opposite from each other to catch their breaths. They felt that they were at it for quite a long time now. And their bodies felt tired, which was highlighting that belief. However, they both knew it was the distorted perception of time.

Ivor laughed heartily before commenting on the duel that took place just now:

"I got to be honest with you, Eren. I didn't think you would have it in you to battle with me like this the first time I met you. You've finally turned into a fine specimen for me to have a duel against.

Why don't you disband your party and come to join us? Jason is looking for some trusted students he could count on. Maybe I can help you secure the place..."

Ivor spoke as if they were officially taking a break from their match. Renita and Jason were still fighting with each other in the backdrop. But that didn't invoke a sense of urgency in Osan Jr's mind. He knew Jason was going to win.

If he didn't, Ivor was confident he could deal with both Eren and Renita. Unlike Eren, he hadn't expended his mana that much. That allowed him to take things leisurely. Or at least that's what he believed in.

Eren and Ivor were slightly gasping for breaths. They both were perspiring and bleeding due to injuries inflicted on them by their opponents. Ivor looked more haggard than Eren. His clothes were torn at various places.

Because of Eren's precise attacks at similar locations, Ivor had appeared to have suffered fewer injuries than Eren. But they both knew Ivor's condition was much more severe.

The referee raised his eyebrows when he saw that two students had stopped their duels. But he didn't interfere. A sufficient amount of time had passed by now. The students' active participation was confirmed. Now they could choose to retire individually or call it quits as a team and the referee would allow them.

But it didn't look like the duel between Eren and Ivor was able to get wrapped up after the referee listened to Eren's reply that cut short Ivor's speech:

"Listen here, man. We don't necessarily have to talk while catching our breaths. Why don't we both just shut our mouths and settle for another round when we are both ready?"

The conventional battle scenario dictated that Eren would either reply positively or diss him. But Eren had chosen neither and just told him to shut up in a roundabout way.

After Eren spoke, Ivor raised his hand and pointed at him. But he found no words to counter Eren's demands. In the end, he kept his mouth shut and chose to follow his opponent's decision.

Eren knew what Ivor meant when he said Jason was looking for supporters to form a team. In reality, he knew it was much more than just forming teams to participate in the ranking wars.

That's why Eren was staying away from Jason, lest the guy makes him an offer he can't refuse. Eren was no stranger to ignoring his problems while wishing that they would go away on their own. He had practically lived one life on that principle. Using this to deal with Jason was something that came naturally to him.

That's why Eren didn't want to have any word with Ivor. No matter what they spoke, the subject would always come back to Jason recruiting members for his team. The butcher nipped this problem in the bud by making Ivor shut up with his rude yet effective statement.

The battle resumed. Eren chipped away at Ivor's defences and the latter did the same to him. Since both of their weapons were being used against each other, it was only natural for both of their clothes to become bloodied.

Yet, Ivor wasn't backing down. He laughed like he was feeling the greatest joy of his life while he was getting cut by Eren. That had already spooked a few of his fans in the audience while the others were turning into his zealots.

The audience was in awe at the level on which Eren and Ivor were fighting against each other. Eren still acted normal and uncaring. That made Ivor's maniacal laughter even more eye-catching to the audience. They also started feeling pity for Eren, thinking that the guy was fighting with a maniac.

"Good, Eren. I now know you don't like to talk much.

So allow me to show you with my actions that I can still outclass you with one card I haven't shown in the ranking wars yet. Hahaha!

Bow down to me!

Beast contract spell!"