

## Vile 391

### Chapter 391 Master Key

Eren resumed reading further into Edgar's journal.

"Heh! This House of Samael was made up of a bunch of visionary rankers. Research into mutagens seems to drive it a great deal. It looks like they were preparing to create a dummy mutagen that in itself did not hold any bloodline-related innate spell.

The document I have with me conjectures that the Samaels were aiming to create a blank mutagen. Something that would act as the master key to unlock the pre-established spells obtained by other bloodlines.

Documents also state that the house of Samael did not announce whether their research was successful or not. The documents also speculate that it was a failure.

Still, that was a pretty ambitious project. The sheer efforts they must have taken along with the number of human experiments they must have performed might have made them evil in normal rankers' eyes.

If only... if only I could get my hands on some of their research documents! What a day it would be."

'If only I could get my hands on YOUR journals. Guess we don't always get what we want buddy.'

Eren shook his head in denial and sighed. Then he continued to smoke and read the journal. There was a lot of vague talk about mutagen and the supposed master key along with the most prominent half-blood clans of the bygone era.

Eren also found some brief theories Edgar had penned down regarding someone named Witch of the Enderflame. He had found a personal note from a bunch of normal rankers of that time that said she was akin to a god among rankers.

Edgar claimed that Witch of the Enderflame was an urban legend at the time. Because he had found a couple of documents that described her deeds and found them too ludicrous to be true. So he didn't mention them in his journal.

'My man, Edgar. You had one job!'

Eren sighed as he kept on speed reading Edgar's journal. Soon the journal started talking about a discovery that interested him.

"This is HUGE! I have to write it down to curb my excitement.

The half-bloods still exist on the continent of Anfang! So some of my predictions were true after all. They've gone into hiding though, for some reason.

I had to sign a strict binding contract and had to perform so many tasks to win their confidence. But just yesterday, I was contacted by one of them who told me he'd be willing to maintain contact with me if I did a few things for him. He is a member of a very secretive cultist organization called the Ancients. An organization that I believe to contain the majority of half-blood rankers if not all.

He wants me to be part of a small cultist organization that walks on the path of therianthropy. I'll be leading one of their core projects based on my ranking status and my knowledge in the field. I told him I'd think about it. But the benefits of being part of such an organization are huge. I'd get to dabble in live human experiments while maintaining a link with their contact.

I'll be running an organization named Beast Bloods. Hehehe! The name is enough to hint at the path that the organization has set out on. I don't mind that the Ancients have set up everything about the organization themselves. It seems they had already planned a few things about this stuff a long time ago before contacting me.

All of a sudden, I have so many things to do now. Plus, I have been provided with some research material as well as plenty of funds by my half-blood contact to do a few things for him as well.

Lehan Duchy is just the beginning. I've been encouraged to open branches in other duchies too starting from the duchy of Lionheart. And find trusted colleagues I can count on to run those branches before repeating the same process in another region.

It looks like Beast Bloods won't just be limited to Edinburgh. I guess that the Ancients are gathering more people like me who are interested in the old paths of power and using them to create branches of Beast Bloods.

Maybe they are planning something big. Maybe they just want to create more chaos. Why should I care? I'm just a man on the path to knowledge.

So basically, the coming years are bound to be interesting. I'll just have to make sure I keep the contact in the loop regarding my progress so far using..."

Eren processed all the information he had read so far and his eyes seemed to have shined with a cunning glint. It sounded as if the Beast Bloods were closely linked to the Ancients, which in turn could lead him to the existing half-bloods. If all of Edgar's conjectures and his experiences were true that is.

Eren kept on reading the journal and found out a few things he could use to start his search. He finally finished speed-reading the entire journal before lighting another smoke.

'Maybe I'd have better luck in the Duchy of Lehan. But that is secondary. Contacting the Ancients is not my priority right now. It's more like I shouldn't contact them too quickly due to my artificial half-blood status. The living and breathing master key they think doesn't exist.

I need more information. Everything about the Ancients and the Lost History. Maybe I can blackmail Arizihana again?

Then again, I created a mess last time I came into contact with those guys. I guess I should wait until the dust settles.'

Eren kept on thinking of many things before discarding most of his ideas. The trip to the city of Laurel is more urgent than thinking about these things for him at this point. He needed to start preparing for a lot of things. Therefore, meeting Agatha had to be the top priority.

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The city of Laurel.

Eren was looking at the report handed to him by Agatha while sitting down on a comfy sofa placed inside Agatha's living space. She had opened another shop in the city of Laurel under Eren's guidance and had reserved a well-lit room for herself upstairs in the shop.

The city of Laurel was the focal point for a lot of potioners, herbalists, and merchants. Eren's elementary products were immediately popular when they hit the market. Even his black market products were sold for higher prices.

Agatha had come to realize that opening a potion shop in this city was a very lucrative idea. She had wondered why a thrifty man like Eren was willing to spend so much money to plant his roots here. But now it all made sense to her.

"Tell me how things are coming along, Agatha?"

### **Chapter 392 Settling Affairs**

"Tell me how things are coming along, Agatha?"

"I have found a few capable potioners and some staff as you've asked along with a capable manager to handle the shop's daily affairs. And I've made them sign binding contracts with the manager. And I've only signed the binding contract with her.

As per your instructions, I've enlisted Jack's help to sell our black market products. It'll be treated as a separate account from the shop's affairs. But sadly, we can expect our profits in the black market to go down soon."

Eren raised his eyebrows and looked at Agatha standing in front of him inquisitively. But he figured out what the problem must have been before she responded.

"Oh, I get it. Counterfeits! They arrived already?"

Agatha sighed and nodded her head before speaking further:

"That's right. The potion bombs that we were selling now have stiff competition. There are at least three variants that can compete with our products in terms of both output and price. What do we do now? Change our focus from potion bombs to something else?"

Eren chuckled at Agatha's response before speaking up:

"It's not like potion bombs were completely unique to the black market. They were still available to rankers with deep pockets. We just made them available to the masses.

We created a buzz because of the price at which we sold it along with its enhanced output. That was all made possible by the unique recipe I had found.

Um... let's just say that the recipe wasn't mine, to begin with. I borrowed it from somewhere. So no need to sulk for missing out on something that didn't belong to us in the first place.

The counterfeits would always keep on appearing no matter which product we choose to focus on. So don't worry about anything and maintain our current operations as they are. Our profits would take a hit for a time before getting stable.

Plus, the potion bombs are not the only thing we'll be dependent on. There would be a wide range of new products that would make the White Raven potions famous in this kingdom. Hehehe!"

Eren giggled as he smoked. He didn't forget to get an ashtray this time. Agatha wanted to ask which products they'd be launching but Eren spoke up before she could do so.

"It's helpful that you've hired the manager to take care of things here. I'll let you handle her. Also, you need to focus on your ranking practice as well. I can see you've barely made any progress."

Agatha looked at Eren like she had been wronged when he said that. He had made her handle everything regarding his shop affairs. And now he was expecting her to be a competent ranker too while handling these things.

"Hehe! Don't look at me like that. The new manager should give you plenty of time. Stay in the city of Laurel for some time. Settle all our affairs here. Take Jack's help if and when you need to. Then you'd have to come to the Nightshade duchy.

Meanwhile, take these recipes and have the potioneer start making them in batches. They are not completely groundbreaking. But they should give us the variation we need to minimize the negative impact of counterfeits getting introduced."

Eren handed Agatha a bunch of pages containing new recipes. She took the pages from his hand and immediately began reading a few. She had found that although the products weren't unique, the products always contained an additional effect or two. For example, she found a potion recipe that could restore a person's stamina and recoup his strength while enabling them to experience extreme focus.

In short, the potions created based on these brand-new recipes were multi-purpose products. They had a good potential to become popular in a short time. Like Eren had said, they'd be able to prevent the extreme dip in profits with this updated line of products.

"This... this should help us a lot. I'll arrange a rotation for the potioners to start making these products in rotation. Our regular production is bound to get affected. But we have made plenty of stockpiles by now. So that shouldn't be a problem.

Um... When am I supposed to leave for the duchy of Nightshade? It would be better if you could share a time frame with me, you know."

Agatha asked with a bit of nervousness. Eren looked at his anthropomorphic slave keenly before asking her.

"What plans do you have?"

Agatha looked down and said in a small voice that Eren could barely hear...

"I... I need some personal time. I'll only need two weeks to settle my affairs. I didn't get time to do that until now. But with the new manager and you leaving, I thought I'd better take care of that before heading for the Nightshade duchy."

Eren thought about Agatha's request. Then he remembered the things she had said when he had intimidated her using Reen. He then sighed and looked at his assistant before speaking up:

"Agatha, I know I should be the last person to speak about letting things go and not seeking revenge. But I'd say this. Make sure that you are strong enough to seek justice for yourself before you take any step in that direction.

And from the look of things, you are not strong enough. At least not right now."

Agatha clenched her fist when she heard Eren's response. Technically, he hadn't said anything wrong. But that realization still irked her a bit. She responded while controlling various emotions that were raging in her mind.

"You... you don't even want to listen to my side of the story. And now you want me to lecture on it? In case you forgot, it's almost impossible for me to break into Ace rank because of my status as a therianthrope.

I will use potions to reach the solid stage of the Novice rank and then carry out my plans. I'm not heading out a plan either. I'll use a bunch of potions to my advantage now that I know how to use them. That's the most prepared I could get anyway. I'll neither ask for your help nor get you involved in any way.

Do... Do you still plan to stop me?"

### **Chapter 393 Small Talk Big Moves**

"Do you still plan to stop me?"

Eren chuckled after he heard Agatha's response that sounded like a challenge. He shook his head before speaking up:

"I still want to avoid listening to your sob story if I can. There are a lot of people in the world who would have an even more heart-wrenching past than yours. What makes you special?"

Agatha wanted to respond with a lot of words. But no words came out of her mouth when it came to talking. Eren continued speaking before she could get over her silence.

"That being said, I can help you step into Ace rank."

Agatha shook her head in denial as if she was expecting this solution to be preached by Eren.

"Even with the anthrope-specific ranking techniques, the chances for anthropes to progress further in their ranking journey are extremely low. So obtaining such a technique at such a high cost might result in a huge loss if I end up staying stagnant in the Novice rank.

I know how you value your money. You would sell me immediately on the black market to recover your losses."

Eren raised his right hand that was holding the smoke and pointed at Agatha to say something. But he stayed speechless for a while. Then he coughed before speaking up.

"\*Cough. That's not what I was suggesting, Agatha. I'm saying we could try a different approach. Something that would make you capable of practising normal ranking techniques of your element."

Eren finished his statement and took a drag. Agatha narrowed her eyes before asking the first question that came to her mind.

"You are not bullshitting me the way you bullshit with other merchants and your clientele, are you?"

Eren was again made speechless by Agatha. She seemed to be on-point with her verbal punches.

"No bullshitery. But it's just that I'd need some time, which I'm always running short of these days. It might take a few months. But you'd see the results if you choose to be patient.

In the meantime, I suggest that you use potions to reach the solid stage. Then use your current ranking technique to stabilize it. Keep your revenge plans on hold till then.

Remember, revenge would only make sense in your head. So you should plan everything before setting things on fire."

After speaking, Eren threw the butt of the smoke into the ashtray. Then used his mana sense to operate the small array placed at the bottom of it. The ashtray caught fire on its own and cindered everything in it into nothingness— making it clean and as good as new.

Agatha was finally convinced and she decided to put her plans on hold for a while. She wasn't suicidal. She only tried to make haste because she thought she had next to no chance of upping her rank.

"Al... alright. I'll postpone my task. I'll focus on expediting the manufacture of these upcoming products. And also prepare for moving to the Nightshade duchy. I'm sure you must have planned a few things from your end. So I'll need your input from time to time."

Eren nodded at his assistant before deciding to read up on a rune-sealed scroll he had gotten from his underground contact. It was information related to various cultist organizations and the regions in which they were presumed to be active. He had started collecting information about the Nightshade duchy through legal and illegal means.

Eren raised his head from reading the scroll and looked up at Agatha, who was standing awkwardly beside him. He narrowed his eyes and asked.

"Is there anything you want to ask?"

Agatha played with her hair as if she was a bit nervous before asking something random.

"Um... I don't know. Well... Oh, yes! I... I always wanted to ask you something. Why do you act so thrifty even though you are getting richer even as we speak?"

'Small talk?'

Eren pressed his lips when Agatha asked him a question. He had realized that she wanted to ask him about something else. The question she threw at him was just a ruse. But he decided to answer the question honestly anyway.

"Well... I wasn't always like this. But you tend to value your financial stability extremely when you almost get kicked out of the city for not having enough money to pay the monthly city tax. Then forced to take

some extreme measures only to end up almost getting eaten by some beast in the most horrific way possible.

Things like that are... let's say bound to leave a scar on your conscience. You'd do anything in your power to prevent it from happening again.

But that's not the question you wanted to ask, was it? Tell me what you think. I'm listening."

Eren asked while continuing to read from the scroll. Agatha played with her now-long hair some more before asking in an even lower voice than before.

"Um... that kiss... what... what was that?"

Eren replied without thinking while reading the scroll.

"Hm? What kiss?"

Agatha didn't speak and let Eren think it through. The latter remembered after a while that he had kissed Agatha on a whim when they were in the city of Lionhearts. He smirked and stored the scroll in his storage before saying.

"Gee... I don't know. Let me confirm by doing it again."

Eren disappeared from his seat and appeared right in front of Agatha—startling her. She was about to take a few steps back. But she found out that her waist was locked in the same position because Eren had grabbed it with both his hands on either side.

Agatha nervously looked upwards only to find out that Eren was staring down at her with mischief in his eyes. She had a range of emotions at that time. But before she could process them for what they were, her lips were sealed by Eren's.

Eren caressed her waist while inserting his tongue into Agatha's mouth. She wrapped her hands around his neck and resigned herself to his sudden attack.

Eren broke the lip-lock himself after a while. He caressed Agatha's hair and patted her before speaking up:

"Sadly, we don't have time to go any further than this, Agatha. I got to meet up with Jack now that he is here along with a few of his contacts.

But at least we'll have something to look forward to when we reach Nightshade Duchy. See you soon."

Eren said and separated from Agatha. The latter seemed too stunned to speak. But she followed his gradual disappearance with a glint of expectation in her eyes.

## **Chapter 394 Stake Out**

Time of dusk.

A region covered in an untamed wilderness not far away from the city of Osan.

The full moon peeked through the passing clouds. It was asserting its dominance amid countless glowing balls of lights. Despite the warm season, the night was much colder than expected.

"Kelmar, are you sure the kid will take this route? Maybe this was a dumb idea. We can call this off, you know."

Clinton Claho asked his buddy and confidante while staking out a certain route on top of a big tree's upper branch. Meanwhile, he kept in touch with others scattered around the area who were doing the same as him- keeping their eyes on the road.

Clinton Claho was the same person who had obstructed Eren on his way to the city of Osan and demanded an absurd amount of "entry fee" from him. A huge part of him wanted to get back at Eren just for the sake of curbing his anger toward all the students coming from institutions like LA. Kelmar and a few other members of his squad had the same mindset. Others had accompanied this off-the-books operation as a form of brotherhood.

But there was a part of him that was telling him there was something off about the guy. That's why at the very last minute, he suggested to his buddy that they should call off their operation on Eren.

Kelmar snorted his nose at Claho's plans to back out of their plan. He replied to his squad leader in a berating voice.

"Damn it, Claho. You are our leader so you better act like one. You didn't say this the whole time we were tailing the guy. Now that our plan is about to come to fruition, do you want to waste away all our efforts? And for what? Just because the guy has a C-Rank backer?"

Claho shook his head before replying.

"Don't underestimate a C-Rank in their absence. Even if that woman is just a healer, she might get us in trouble with any potential connections she might have.

Plus, now that I think about it, that entire scene wasn't such a big deal. No need to off the guy just because he gave us fewer Extols."

Claho suddenly started making sense, which wasn't something bloodthirsty Kelmar wanted to hear. The vice-captain responded to his captain patiently.

"You are talking about the repercussions that might happen if and when we are found out. We have done a lot of under-the-table deals and killed a bunch of rankers just because they looked at us funny. How many times were we questioned?"

Remember that everything has been done to ensure that nothing can be traced back to us. So no matter what we do here, that C-Rank entity won't have a clue. Hehe! There's no need to get nervous dealing with Ace rankers when we have all our trump cards.

Plus, we received all these toys to play with. But there are no cultists that have the balls to mess with us. All these toys would just disappear if we didn't use them. We might as well seek out the target ourselves to do field practice, don't you agree?

Plus, we might spare him after playing with him a bit. We are planning to keep our identities hidden anyway. Let him think that the bandits did him dirty. Hehehe!"



Claho had come to realize that his egocentric and pointless revenge had turned into a way for some of his soldiers to vent out their stress. Kelmar was their on-field leader and was actively involved in the operation.

Claho wanted to prevent them more than ever. But then he thought that maybe they should proceed with the plan as they had planned. Otherwise, his reputation would take a hit in the eyes of his squad members. He finally discarded the idea of retreating.

'Maybe Kelmar is right. This isn't our first time doing 'target practise' for fun and it won't be the last. The kid might be talented. But so what? He can not win against a squad of rankers, especially since we have our tools to take care of him.

Hehe! Maybe I was getting cold feet for nothing. Now I kind of want to see the despair in the kid's eyes when he sees he has no way out. I want to crush his smugness. I'll spare him only when he begs for his life. But not before breaking his limbs.'

Claho self-motivated himself and resumed looking at the off-road path. This was the path they had made sure Eren would take with the rest of their team members who would join them after their target had been surrounded. They were currently following him from a distance using artefacts— ensuring Eren doesn't get suspicious about their setup.

They finally heard from their sentries placed in the distance that someone was traversing through the path they had their eyes locked on. Everyone started looking at each other and contacting one another via voice communication. This was the show-time.

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"Something feels off."

Eren said to himself as he continued riding on his colt towards the city of Osan. He just had to travel for about five more hours and he'd be home. But for some reason, he had an inkling that he was being followed and watched upon.

The butcher spread his mana sense around in all directions and found nothing except a few mana beasts that couldn't hurt him. But this information made him more alert to his surroundings than ever before.

'Give me a minute.'

Layla said suddenly. And a minute she took before responding further.

'Hmm. I just used a potion to confirm. Somebody is indeed following you. But they are using artefacts and potions at the same time to suppress their presence to its bare minimum.

Layla talked to Eren via their voice communication through ID storage. She was in her pendent abode. She had been busy with a lot of activities while inside the pendant these days. Plus, Eren's activities with Nina had made sure that she would stay away from him while he was in the city of Osan. but she had followed him to the city of Laurel.

The news of a few odd events had reached Eren's ears when he was heading to the city of Osan from the city of Laurel. This was after settling his affairs with Agatha. This was the reason he was traveling at night.

But now he wondered whether that was a wise decision.

### **Chapter 395 Hubris**

The news of a few odd events had reached Eren's ears when he was heading to the city of Osan from the city of Laurel. This was after settling his affairs with Agatha.

According to the city's message board at the entrance, travellers should avoid the regular route toward the city of Osan. There were signs of a mana beast horde attacking passersby under the leadership of an Ace rank one.

There was also news that the city of Osan might be put into lockdown for a couple of days for some security reasons. As a result, the travellers were advised to make plans accordingly- either don't go to the city of Osan or make haste and get there before the lockdown begins.

Eren pondered a bit and chose the latter option. His time in the Lionheart duchy was short after all. He had to make another batch of potions for his personal use before his departure to the Nightshade duchy. He could use the lockdown days to make potions and make out with Nina some more if she is home.

Plus, he had to check out the geo-coordinates saved on the array disk given to him by Lin Karr. A hunch led him to think it was related to the Osan Woods' Butcher. But he couldn't determine exactly what he would find at the coordinates.

Did you use potions to find out if any followers were pursuing us? How does that work?'

Eren was fascinated by how Layla would sometimes use potions for herself. So for a moment, he put the news about him being followed on the backburner and asked the first question that popped into his head.

'That's simple actually. I took your scent into account and eliminated it from the equation. Then I used an array to amplify the sensory feedback that surrounding rankers' scents might have on a Scent Detection potion. Currently, there are four distinct lumps in the potion that are growing as a result of four separate feedbacks. That means four rankers are still following you.'

Eren was impressed by Layla's creative potion usage. He hadn't even heard that potions could be used this way. But he quickly snapped back to reality and asked Layla via voice communication.

'What can you tell me about my pursuers from those lumps?'

This time Layla was impressed by Eren's deduction that the lumps could be used to determine which rankers the scents belonged to. She didn't take the time to tell him just that.

'Two Ace Rankers. Both are in the gaseous stage. Then there are two Novice rankers— both in the solid stage. One has just broken through into the solid stage while the other is about to step into the Ace rank. The latter is the female ranker the group has.'

Eren scratched his chin to think about who might be targeting him. But he drew a blank. Then he focused on another particular detail.

'Wait a minute. You said they are using artefacts and potions at the same time to hide their presence. All are using the same artefacts and the same potions?'

Layla took her time to perform another round of experiments with her potions. She was using the feedback the surroundings would have on the potions to figure a few things out.

'It seems that is correct. They are all using the same type of artefact and the same type of potions. But what would I do with this information?'

Layla asked as Eren kept on moving forward on his colt. The butcher smiled coldly before responding.

'See? The book smarts are useless if you don't know how to make use of the advantages you gain through them. I asked you that question because I wanted to see if it was a motley crew of bandits we are dealing with. Instead, I wanted to see a team of professionals who are used to working in sync.

The bandits are out of the equation right off the bat. They can't afford or be trained to use something like that in sync. With such perfection.'

Eren had retrieved his smoke from his storage by now. He lit it up. Took a few drags before speaking up as he rode on his colt with a relaxed speed.

'Plus, having the same kind of artefact for everyone's use might only be possible for big guilds and rankers' teams that place custom orders to the artefact forgers. Otherwise, there would almost always be some form of a discrepancy between two artefacts of the same kind.

To make two artefacts of the same rank and grade the same, the craftsmen would have to use high-grade techniques. Such techniques are highly regulated. You won't find some shabby weapon forger making them in a rundown workshop.'

Layla was confused even more than before. She wanted to ask what his deductions would have to do with identifying his pursuers. But Eren resumed speaking even before she had the time to ask about it.

'I don't think I've pissed off any guild or rankers' parties, well-known or otherwise. So they are ruled out of the equation. Therefore, I am left with only one option.

The army!'

Eren narrowed down his eyes when he said this to Layla. He was acting normally. But he was mentally preparing for action.

'Military-issue artefacts. Only army artefacts can be standardized like these. And only army personnel can be trained to use such artefacts with this perfection. Plus, I recently had a verbal spat with that brain dead Ace ranker, remember?'

I just don't get how I offended him so badly that he resorted to this? It doesn't make sense. These army soldiers are acting more like cultists than the cultists themselves.'

Layla laughed at Eren's answer when she heard him say that. She replied in the voice of a young girl.

'To be honest, you have it too easy these days, Eren. In my master's era, everyone was out to cut each other's throats for profits.'

The rankers' code of conduct would only be followed in the case of high-ranking entities. Rest of the rankers who were in the same rank as you were fair game.

The establishments of today may be able to enforce certain rules over rankers, but that won't change their nature. As soon as a ranker embarks on their ranking journey, they are cursed with it.

Rankers have hubris!

So don't search for reasons behind every nutcase ranker's actions. Chances are you won't always find something that would make sense to you.'

### **Chapter 396 Lamb to the Slaughter**

Layla continued speaking to Eren while she was playing with her vials. Eren's crisis didn't affect her mood.

'Rankers have hubris!

Don't search for reasons behind every nutcase ranker's actions. Chances are you won't always find something that makes sense to you.

You and not even my master are exceptions to this rule. It's the way you channel your hubris and turn it into something positive or negative that sets your path as a ranker.

Peace has softened the rankers of this generation. What I see is a welcome change. Slaughter them, Eren.'

Eren stayed vigilant as he listened to Layla without saying anything. He was trying to appear as normal and carefree as possible. He had thought of changing his route but Layla told him that he was now surrounded by a lot of array traps. They could go off as soon as Eren comes into the vicinity.

In short, Eren didn't have any choice but to move forward. Running away would bring more trouble. This way, he could at least catch his opponents off guard when they decide to act and launch a counterattack.

'What kind of array traps have they laid, Layla? Is there any trap where I'm headed?

Eren asked Layla. He was now near the position where Claho, Kelmar and other soldiers were. The latter took new vials and observed the newly formed lumps in them before answering.

'I'm no array master, Eren. I only know a few basic arrays that are related to potioneing. But I guess that they are arrays to counter your lightning and fire element spells. There may be other arrays along with additional features that I am not aware of.

These guys are testing the effectiveness of these arrays it seems. They have planted all kinds of them all around you. I can't give any more details with my lack of expertise and my current position.'

Eren nodded internally before responding in a cold tone.

'Damn it. Running away doesn't seem like a viable option. Going forward seems even riskier. And staying at the same place might make them get a read on me. They might decide to denote the arrays right away if that happens without giving me the time to create countermeasures against them.

Fuck it.

Layla, what can I do about these traps?'

Eren now had a frown on his face as he communicated with Layla. He was getting pissed because of the pettiness Claho had shown him in targeting him. He would have understood if the guy initiated the mano-e-mano challenge whatever reasons he might have for targeting him. But this was just a waste of resources for the sake of petty revenge.

'There are many ways to break an array if you know what you are dealing with. But sadly, I don't know anything about that. The most I can do now is create a counter array potion. But I'd need a closer look. Keep your guard up and proceed further.'

Layla suggested it to Eren who then decided to follow up on it. By now, even his colt was beginning to act restless because it had sensed something disturbing through its animal instincts. That's why Eren had to use the leash inscribed with runic patterns to control the domesticated mana beast.

Eren didn't know how many of the rankers were waiting for him there. That's why he had decided to go for the kill right off the bat.

With thoughts of mass slaughter in mind, the butcher was marching ahead with a seemingly relaxed demeanour.

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"Are you ready, Claho?"

Kelmar asked while licking his lips and flashing an evil smile. He drew his weapons from his storage. Two mana guns— one was meant to be used in case of sniping. The other was meant for medium-range attacks.

"I... I am."

Clinton Claho drew a long sword from his storage and gripped it tightly. The soldiers around them started drawing their weapons too. They had a lot of blood on their hands. Acts they did for the kingdom's so-called safety in the past were not something they could erase from their memories. Therefore, these soldiers had become jaded in taking lives. It didn't matter to them that the victim of their attacks would be a criminal or someone innocent.

Kelmar's first plan was simple. Surround Eren with army-issue array disk traps to box him in. Mess with him a bit. And then leave after looting all that he had on him— making him think that they were robbers.

Kelmar failed to anticipate Eren's way of dealing with his enemies. But that was because he was treating him like any other normal student at the top institutes. That's why messing up with a kid, using army-issue artefacts, and leaving him half dead or completely dead were things that made complete sense to him in his head. What he didn't know was the fact that Eren had decided to kill on sight whereas they had decided to play with him.

The squid members of Claho had thought that they would try all their experiments on Eren. If he survives, so be it. They would keep their cover as bandits. But if he turns out to be problematic or if their cover gets blown, they would kill him. This was plan number two.

In either case, they would clean out the battlefield and keep their involvement hidden. As a last resort, if they were found guilty, they would declare Eren as a cult member. They would announce that they had performed a surgical strike on him to prevent or reduce innocent lives from being killed. Ambush was a standard response to handling a dangerous lone cultist after all.

But some soldiers in the operation were already thinking of crossing the line and blaming it on the heat of the battle. They had become too used to hiding behind the army's protection.

The soldiers surrounding the area were alerted. They too would join the battlefield as spectators to watch their sole victim struggle in vain.

Clinton Claho stepped in front of Kelmar and decided to show off his leadership skills. He cleared all his doubts and spoke to his team members via voice communication.

'Alright, guys. Listen up. Start approaching the guy from all directions as soon as I give you a go. I'll let you play with him a bit with your new toys. It's not like we'd get to use them on Osan Woods Butcher. So use them to your heart's content.

If things become tough because of any of the kids' trump cards, just remember to give Kelmar a bit of space and he'll snipe him from here. Cláho Four, stay with our ranger Kelmar. Claho Seven, Claho Eleven, Claho Three, you would only surround the guy without involving yourself in a battle. Your turn would come if the kid survives the assault made by the rest of the guys.

Everything is clear?'

Claho asked in his usual tone. It was as if he had asked the question numerous times. There was only one word spoken by everyone at the same time.

'Clear!'

Claho nodded before speaking further.

'Good. Treat this as your regular army drill, hehe! Don't let me...'

Claho's speech was interrupted when he saw Eren approaching the location they had chosen for the battle. Smirking, he spoke again through voice communication.

'Oh look, our target is in sight. Like a lamb to the slaughter. Haha.

You know what to do. Go!'

### **Chapter 397 The Mute Spectator P1**

'Oh look, our target is in sight. Like a lamb to the slaughter. Haha.

You know what to do. Go!'

Claho ordered his men to take action. And they all seemingly disappeared from their spots.

\*\*\*\*\*

Eren felt some presence suddenly making itself known in front of him. He looked ahead to find out that a medium-sized man was approaching him using his water element movement spell. His feet had been coated in water that was helping him jump and spur his stride forward with exceptional agility.

"Where do you think you are heading, kid?"

The one who approached Eren from the front was a close combat expert. He declared his intentions with his words and his actions and he swung and flaunted his Warhammer without any head attached at the tip.

Without the head, the Warhammer looked like a rod of metal that wasn't useful at all. But then the man imbued his water-element mana into it and the runic inscriptions on it lit up. The weapon was now completed.

There was now a sizable hammerhead on the Warhammer, made of dense water gathered at its tip. The shape looked solid even though the moonlight was getting passed through it. The more the close combat expert poured his mana into the weapon, the denser and more powerful the hammerhead got.

Eren stood up on his colt's back and drew out his katars. He didn't say anything as he saw the hammer-wielding ranker approach him without any fear.

'The weapons they are using! They are a cut above the standard Ace rank weapons. I wonder how much money I'd get after I sell them.'

Eren had a random thought as he channelled his mana into his legs and cast his lightning element movement spell. He had stopped worrying about the colt since the enemy decided to blow their cover. So when he cast a lightning-element spell over the colt's back, the Novice rank mana beast fainted on the spot. It crashed onto the ground without a moment's delay.

But Eren was not at his usual spot anymore. He launched himself backwards and created a room for himself to deal with the close combat expert approaching him.

'Any moment now.'

Eren thought and clenched his katars tightly. Without thinking he did a cartwheel flip and executed his lightning element attack-type spell on his weapons— Blitz Bolt. He swung it without any hesitation. Purely on his instincts. And the butcher's instincts were right on target.

A person's head was chopped off at that moment.

The killer was barely aware of his actions. But the victim died without even knowing how he died.

The Warhammer soldier approaching Eren from his front was too stunned to advance. He was only a few meters away from his target. Yet he felt like the target that he was approaching so fearlessly wasn't something he could deal with on his own.

A soldier from the Edinburgh kingdom who was assigned to the city of Osan to protect it from the cultists died a silent death at this moment— without his killer uttering a word from his mouth.

The Warhammer ranker's feet felt like they had been trapped in quicksand after he watched Eren stare briefly at the about-to-fall body of his victim. He disappeared from his position before the body hit the ground— leaving only a few sparks of lightning in his place.

The Warhammer guy saw that Eren had appeared in front of another of his fellow squad mates. This was a woman Ace ranker that was only supposed to support the mission.

Eren again used his katars to his advantage. Before she could draw her sword, he used the punching daggers as if it was some form of agile artistic handiwork and drove one of them right through her heart.

The water-element soldier didn't know what he was seeing at the moment. All the surrounding noise had been cut off from him as he watched the butcher do what he did best- butchering people with an emotionless face.

'No. Not emotionless. What... what is that?'

He see a faint smile on Eren's face. As if the guy is happy that he got jumped by their squad.

As if he found relief in being ambushed the way he was ambushed. The soldier of Edinburg had first thought they were doing something unjust. But now it felt to him that killing this demon was exactly what their job entailed then to do.

'The question is... can we... can we do it? Can we kill this monstrosity that doesn't feel human at all?'

The Warhammer guy stopped channelling his mana into his weapon as he had this random thought in his head. The hammerhead first started dripping water before completely losing its shape all of a sudden. The water fell on the guy's torso and dripped on the ground. And yet, the feeling of being drenched— because of his spell wasn't enough for the guy to snap back to reality as he watched his target targeting his peers.

There was mayhem taking place in front of the Warhammer-wielding ranker. He was supposed to close in on his target. The command was to act as if he was about to attack Eren while grabbing all the attention for himself. The guy that the butcher had cut the head off of was supposed to engage with Eren in their simulation.

The water-element close combat soldier wasn't briefed by Claho on what he was supposed to do after the one who did the sneak attack failed in his execution. He wasn't briefed on what he was supposed to do as another of his female peers was getting killed by their target. Though he doubted he could take action against a cold-blooded killer like Eren even if he was informed of the possible countermeasures.

The guy lost his grip on the unique artefact he was endowed with through the mission as his hands started shaking. He felt dread as he watched the butcher place his foot on the female ranker's tummy while she was standing stunned in front of him. He used his foot to push the body of the female ranker forward as he drew the lodged katar that was stuck in her ribcage out.

The butcher swung his katar as soon as it was drawn out of the ranker's chest and spun it around with his agile hand movements— like he was performing a circus act of juggling with his weapons. This juggling act was done to get rid of the blood and flesh the edge of the lodged weapon was coated with. Since the butcher pulled it so abruptly, the wound ejected blood and flesh when the weapon was pulled out.



Eren, who stood in front, was about to be sprayed with blood and flesh. But he swung and juggled his weapons at surreal speeds before disappearing from his spot.

The Warhammer guy saw the spray of blood and flesh hit empty air. There was something else flying in the air too. A lump of flesh that took a while for him to identify as the female ranker's left breast.

Eren had either yanked or chopped the female ranker's left tit and left her to die on the spot.

Was it the breast getting chopped or yanked? The water-element soldier acting as the witness to the whole scene couldn't be sure. His mana sense was barely keeping up with Eren after all.

He couldn't hear the noise of duels, victims' screams, the cries of his fellow soldiers or commands getting dished out by Claho and Kelmar on the voice communication. He had been reduced to nothing but a mute spectator at this moment.

### **Chapter 398 The Mute Spectator P2**

Eren had either yanked or chopped the female ranker's left tit and left her to die on the spot.

The part of lady ranker's body that she was most proud of when she was alive would soon become one with the earth, losing its former splendour. The flesh that many once lusted after was now on gory display for all to see.

The close combat expert that was given the job of acting as a decoy felt that everything that was happening in front of him was stuff from his nightmares. He didn't care that the two of the guys that were supposed to be his comrades in arms were nothing but two dead bodies now. He was more worried about how or when he could wake up from this nightmare.

The mute spectator felt like he had been watching a spectral scene recorded on the array disk unfolding in front of him in slow motion. He felt like quite a lot had happened since he played this scene. But somehow he was also aware that barely a few moments had passed since the series of events had started taking place.

The water-element close combat expert was using his mana sense on autopilot. He processed the feedback coming from it subconsciously as though he wasn't in control of his senses.

He also felt that the mana signature Eren had released just before the start of the battle was part of the reason he felt this dread. He had been standing closest to the butcher when that had happened after all.

He felt on a deeper level that none of them was in the same league as their target. That none of them could be as inhuman as the ghost in front of him was.

'This guy... he isn't human. He... is a devil in a human's skin.'

The mute spectator had this thought as his mana sense felt Eren's presence. This time it was quite far away from him— where the squad's healer was supposed to be.

The spectator watched as the butcher tried attacking the healer of their group. But this time he was stopped by another team member from his team. This soldier was assigned to protect the healer at all costs. He was the tank of the team.

Other team members of the close combat expert's team were also heading towards the butcher's position. While four of the others chose to head in four different directions away from the battlefield they were assigned to. It wasn't long before they reached the array disks. The array disks were planted in the ground like one-time use runic landmines at a set distance from each other.

The four rankers that stood on the array disks started chanting incantations while imbuing their non-elementalized mana into the array disks. The runes on the array disks lit up in the four directions at the same time—releasing a distinct mana pulse.

Each of the array disks had started creating a semi-transparent mana layer outside their perimeter. The mana layers extended in all directions. Soon they would meet with each other and create a rectangular box that would isolate the battlefield from the surrounding area outside it.

But the mute spectator couldn't keep tabs on his team's current progress. It was the time that slowed down only for him. And the ones moving around in front of him were nothing but mirages and ghosts that would soon disappear from the face of the earth if and when he blinks. But blink he could not.

Coming back to the situation unfolding in front of the spectator at the moment. He watched as their healer was successfully rescued by their tank.

The tank had already executed his earth-element spell and two earth golems were formed using the mixture of existing earth and mana. They were twice the height of the average person and looked like badly shaped humanoid dolls that were wearing armour made of mud. They also had a club each.

One of the golems swung the earthen club at Eren who was approaching the team from the front. Soon, however, it became apparent that it had struck Eren's afterimage. The golems were slow to react, but their spellcaster was not so sluggish.

The tank slapped both his hands on the ground and sent his mana into the ground through his hands. Four shabby-looking walls will soon be raised from the ground. He aimed to surround himself and the healer with four walls, while the golems fought against the abomination.

The tank only needed to buy time as the rest of his teammates were on their way to reach the scene. Once that happened, the bloodthirsty demon could be dealt with.

The plan was well-executed. The actions of the healer and tank made sense. The execution of their defensive plan was impeccable. The speed at which the walls were getting raised was also exceptional.

And yet, the combination of all those things falling into place couldn't stop the butcher from executing what he had set out to do.

Another heart-wrenching image was imprinted deep into the mute spectator's psyche as he watched his team's healer getting killed. She was also a lady ranker.

Eren had suddenly appeared in front of the healer, covered in lightning and fire. The tank was just behind him looking at the butcher's afterimage that was going to get smashed by the golem's attacks while the walls rose.

The butcher pierced her throat with his lightning-clad katar, then yanked out her larynx without mercy. He always liked to kill the healers this way if he could help it, lest they shout and make their assigned protectors aware.

The lady ranker watched in complete horror as her organ was handed to her. However, she couldn't yell nor could she make the tank in front of her aware of her current condition using her scream. That was because her voice box had been made inoperable.

'This... this demon... he'll be the end of all of us if we don't do something soon.'

The Warhammer-wielding ranker thought for a moment and then looked up because he had sensed something. He observed a semi-transparent box made of mana was getting constructed. It wasn't long before the box was complete, isolating the entire battlefield.

'We can only hope this is enough to stop this monster.'

### **Chapter 399 In a Pinch**

Boom!

A blast had taken place on the battlefield only a few meters away from where Eren was standing. He knew that killing any soldier in his current condition was impossible for the time being.

He was surrounded.

There were too many rankers for him to even try to engage with any of them now. Still, he had made most of his time by executing four Ace soldiers and critically injuring the fifth one. This feat had been made possible because of his early prediction of the ambush.

Eren alone had killed four Ace ranker soldiers without sustaining any injuries. Only hands were bloody. His clothes had remained spotless amid the short but intense mini battles he had executed while enhancing his reactions with Sedated Perception and Stunning Speed almost the whole time.

He had to admit that the army had geared up these soldiers too well. They were a challenge for him because of their artefacts. For example, he couldn't sense the assassin that had come to attack him from behind at all.

It was only because he anticipated the move that he could kill him so quickly. Plus, he was also getting threatening vibes from Stephan's Warhammer. That's why he had maintained his distance from him. He had used the tank as bait to injure him with the potion bomb. Because he knew the guy would be able to dodge the bomb easily with his speed.

Eren had to stop his kill streak now. That's because he couldn't execute his lightning or fire element spells anymore. The rectangular mana layer seemed to have produced its intended effect.

There was a stalemate happening right now that quickly turned into a stare-down. There were around 30 pairs of eyes focused on Eren. He only looked ahead in front of him towards the person he had seen before— Clinton Claho. The guy was looking hatefully at the butcher. As if he was the one who had ambushed Claho's team while they were doing heroic deeds for the kingdom of Edinburgh.

Claho and Eren did not say anything to each other as they observed the night's silence while maintaining a sufficient distance. The rest of the soldiers were waiting for Claho's orders.

The squad leader decided to take things slow to minimize any further casualties on his end. He had seen with his stretched mana sense the sheer explosive nature of the butcher. He would tear through many of his soldiers before they could subdue or kill him.

Claho regretted targeting this monster. He and Kelmar had just thought of having fun while taking a bit of vengeance on Eren for their personal satisfaction. Had he known things would turn out like these, he would have never offended Eren when the meeting took place for the first time near the city of Osan.

'What is it, Layla? What is stopping me from executing any of my spells?'

Eren asked Layla while he remained silent on the outside. He had thought the times of mortal danger were behind him for the time being when he got out of Purgatory. But the situation hinted in the other direction. He was targeted by two cultist organizations as soon as he had come out of the separate dimension.

But even that wasn't enough. Now he was getting targeted by Claho for a reason that didn't make sense to him. The things happening to him were starting to piss him off. He was not completely stable after Reen was taken away from him anyway.

Eliza's presence and the mark of the seven sins had burdened his mind even more. And now these things had finally made his cold-hearted attitude crumble into pieces. A bubble of rage was building within him. Stephan had misinterpreted his smile during the earlier battle. It wasn't the smile of joy. The butcher's smile was a sign of suppressed rage and all the negative emotions getting riled up in his mind.

'It's an element restrictive array. Since they restrict two types of elemental spells, it could be called array integration. You can't use your mana for any of your lightning or fire element spells while trapped inside the array.

The good thing about this array is that it is not restrictive to a specific person. That means you won't find any lightning or fire element ranker on your opponent's side. The problematic thing is that...'

'Let me guess. They must have considered that. The rankers that had been sent at the perimeter to keep the array active are either lightning or fire element rankers. Since they have to keep the array active, they don't need to cast any of their spells anyway.

In short, I'm basically a dud while this array is active. Can... Can you do something about it? Is there a potion that can lift the restrictions?

Eren asked while keeping his Sedated Perception active. He had activated it so he could have more time to think while he conversed with Layla. Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, she could keep up with his enhanced perception.

'I'm afraid potion alone won't be able to cut it this time, Eren. I can make a potion to make your body compatible with a filtered mana source and make you absorb the same through the pendant. That way, you could use the filtered mana source to cast your spells.

But the source of mana needs to be outside the mana layer created by the array integration. And I'd need a supportive spatial array to tap into the external mana source.'

Eren wasn't interested in Layla's description. He asked, narrowing his eyes on Claho.

'Answer clearly!'

Eren kept his response short which indicated his urgency and irritation at the same time. Layla sighed and took a moment to ponder before responding.

'I can do it. But I'll need the E-Rank space-element artefact that you won inside the dungeon. I might damage it a bit if not completely ruin it by using it as the eye of a spatial array. But I don't think you'd complain about it at this point.

Plus, I'd have to stay inside the pendant to keep the spatial array running.'

Eren smirked before asking another question.

'Do whatever you want. I want to ask something else before we do this though. Can't we use that broomstick of yours to make our escape from this whole thing?'

Of course, Eren didn't like his odds against so many enemies who intended to take his life. The most sensible solution for him was to run away from the whole thing if he could help it.

Layla responded with a voice that spelt helplessness from her end.

'Sadly, we can't. You'll have to get out of this mess by wading through it.'

#### [Chapter 400 Full](#)

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pAn,Da-n0v e1,c In short, I'm basically a dud while this array is active. Can... Can you do something about it? Is there a potion that can lift the restrictions?

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