

Vile 41

Chapter 41: Recorded Interview

"Why, you ask? Of course, it was to feed that damn demon beast. It was raised especially by that backer, you see. And it needed ranked entities to feed on."

Dom said this like it is the most obvious thing in the world.

"That's absurd. A demon beast will never be tamed by anyone if it's not the blood ritual performed at the time of their evolution."

Julie refuted him without waiting for a moment's delay. She thought the guy was too drunk to make sense now.

"I said they raised the beast. Not tamed. The beast was sent human sacrifices at the right time for its steady evolution. Don't you know the hunters' disappearance had increased long before the Osan woods' disturbance was known to the populace?"

Eren said this in Dom's voice from a distance. He was using his bullshittery again. There would always be cases of hunters' disappearances into the woods and more. Not just here, but all over the world.

Eren just linked those disappearances to a conspiracy. People needed a reason to believe the lost hunters' disappearances were a part of a bigger plot than some mundane things like being killed by the magic beasts, terrains, circumstances, or rivals.

Eren / fake Dom's claims worked. Julie and the audience around them suddenly realized that there was more to the sudden increment in death toll and disappearances.

"But who would be crazy enough to raise a demon beast this way? If they were found out, they would be hunted by the entire kingdom and brought to justice no matter how high their rank is."

Julie said this and immediately felt she shouldn't have asked the question. The matter didn't look as simple as she thought it to be.

Maybe it would be in her best interest if she doesn't know the identity of the one who raised a demon beast this way. She wanted to retract her question and replace it with something else when she heard a burst of hearty laughter coming from Dom:

"Hahaha! Julie, oh my sweet little Julie. Don't you think a person partaking in a project of such scale and magnitude would know about the risks involved in it beforehand?"

Let's just say there's no fight between the killers coming from the same creed. The kingdom is more than what it lets on."

Eren again voiced and weaved a popular conspiracy theory. A kingdom that keeps its citizens in the dark and obtains benefits through shady means.

Conspiracies that discredit popular beliefs would always get sold like hotcakes, whether they were true or not. This time was no different.

"You mean..."

“What I mean doesn’t matter. What matters is that I was put in a tough position to choose between two hard choices. Either stay as a mediocre hunter all my life. Or, take a flight in the skies with a little push from that backer, after a chance meeting in the woods.

I wanted to say no. But his power and the things that he was offering in exchange were too hard to resist.

That guy had always done things slowly and carefully till now. But it looked like he was in a hurry all of a sudden. He decided to expedite the process by sending a lot of sacrifices towards the beast in one go.

That’s when he laid his hands on my party. He offered me a deal. To lure my party to an isolated location and sacrifice my members there in exchange for a sure shot way to break into D Rank and progress much further.

We all know the kingdom controls information like this so most of us stay stuck in lower ranks. But I had the chance to break past these limitations. And I took it. Begrudgingly at first, and willingly later on.

That cursed demon beast evolved into a C Rank as a result. The backer was able to tame it successfully using the blood ritual.

He also gave me an artefact to safely exit from the woods without leaving any clues behind. For our discretion, we had chosen an off route to exit the forest. But... “

“But what?”

Julie asked anticipantly.

“But we met some greenhorns unexpectedly. My backer wanted to keep his identity hidden so he killed them all brutally. I suspect he would have killed me too had I not signed a binding contract with him and taken some preventive measures against him.

I’ll meet up with my backer in the next few days outside the city and then leave the city of Osan for good. But I need to enjoy my last days here.

Turns out, a few among the younglings my backer killed were loaded with money. He didn’t need the money or any of their stuff. So I kept some, sold some, and threw some.

I still have plenty of their money on me. Should we make good use of it during my time here?”

Eren / Dom smiled creepily like he hasn’t tried smiling before while saying that. Then he took out two Extols from his ID stone and handed them to Julie. Julie’s eyes opened wide after Dom gave her two Extols in advance without them doing anything together.

‘How loaded is this guy?’ Julie thought to herself after she looked at the Extols lying on the table in front of her.

Before she could say anything about it, Julie saw two ladies approaching their tables after they witnessed Dom’s charity work. Julie could see what must these ladies be thinking of when they were approaching Dom.

One Extol was enough for them to live a good life for quite some time. And if they could please Dom some more, maybe he would bless them with another couple of Extols.

Julie couldn't blame them. She too would have similar ideas had it been someone else and not Dom who had gotten himself involved in the mess. And Julie was here on a mission.

A mission that was almost completely over due to an unexpected encounter with the perpetrator behind the whole incident himself.

The ladies approached Dom and offered him to 'double' his fun. Dom of course accepted right away. He looked at Julie who waved him goodbye, indicating she wasn't interested in the offer. Dom didn't mind. He even let her keep the two Extols.

Julie had tried following Dom when they went outside the bar. But even in his drunken haze, Dom could sense he was being followed and looked back to stare at Julie who then had to bow her head and let him go away.

She knew if she pushed her luck now, forget about unwrapping the whole mystery behind Dom, she'll end up deadlier than the dead.

Dom had gotten away. Nobody could tell where he had gone. Julie closed her fist on the two Extols Dom had given her. She needed to inform her superiors about the breaking news she had received.

Julie Ekheart was on a mission when she was spending her time in such a lowly place. To collect information about the unknown person that had accompanied Dom during his second visit to the Osan woods.

Sometimes the denizens of the darkest corners of the city knew more about what happened around them than people of the light ever could.

Julie stuck out in the bar due to her ranking. Not many people could gauge her rank due to her using an artefact to interfere with their mana sense. But Reen could find out about it with her C Rank prowess.

Therefore, Eren immediately closed in on Julie, knowing full well she wouldn't be the bar's usual customer. She was there to collect information regarding anything and everything that had happened in the Osan woods.

Eren knew the city was now crawling with spies. He just needed to approach the right spy at the right time to 'spill the beans' about Dom's involvement.

When Dom was approaching Julie, Eren could tell that there was a hint of surprise flashed in Julie's eyes briefly before she masked it away. Eren guessed she did not personally know Dom but must have seen his picture in the reports.

Eren was also aware Julie had started video-recording the entire conversation with her mana-powered 360-degree audiovisual capturing device dubbed as her ID stone.

First, she handled her ID stone hurriedly and briefly without taking anything out from it. She had also kept that stone too far away from her on the table when the conversation started. That was another sign.

Eren was more than happy to give a documentary-type recorded interview to Julie. He said enough about his motives, stayed vague about a few things and blamed everything on his 'backer', which was no one by the way.

Unless someone was doing something suspicious in the Osan woods for real. But what were the chances of that happening, right? Eren had thought.

Eren was purposefully being vague about the kingdom's involvement during his spy interview. First, he didn't want to draw the kingdom's attention. And second, if he outrightly blamed anyone, nobody would believe him.

Plus, the chances of his lies getting caught would be high if he named someone or became specific about anything. It was better he let others conclude the story themselves to fit their narrative.

Of course, there would be some loopholes in what Eren had said to Julie. Like why did he come back to save Matt if everyone was going to get sacrificed? But he had skipped on many details and stayed elusive about the rest.

Therefore those loopholes will be treated as blank spaces that need to be filled with either information or conjectures.

Eren also did not go into details about Isaac's party wipeout for the same reason. He even skipped mentioning their names to show that Dom was still in his capacities to think about himself.

A miser like Eren gave two Extols to Julie with a bleeding heart so that she would have proof of Dom's involvement in Isaac's murder.

Every batch of Extol had a special mana refraction pattern that was different from the other. Julie could compare the batch pattern of Isen's current Extols with the Extols she had received from Dom to make a solid case against him.

With this, Eren had given Julie enough to make her see Dom and his backer as the real culprit.

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Author's Note: I'll soon update VEH's discord link in the novel's synopsis. Be sure to check it out ?

Chapter 42: Breadcrumbs

Eren had given Julie enough to make her see Dom and his backer as the real culprit.

But just in case, the Osan Woods' Butcher decided to leave more breadcrumbs for his pursuers. Therefore he led those two ladies who were following the fake Dom into an inn.

The fake Dom made the two ladies drink a lot of booze to dull their senses once they all got into their reserved room. Eren had already given a lot of stuff to store in the ID stone Reen was using. The strong booze was included in that storage.

Eren had booked another room to enter the inn. Then entered Dom's room after he opened the door for him. Both the ladies had already gotten delirious by then.

Eren didn't want to kill these two ladies. They would serve as the breadcrumbs/proofs for Dom's supposed involvement in Isaac's murder.

Eren needed to perform sexual acts on these ladies that would serve as proof of them spending the night with Dom. But Eren didn't want to lose his newly gained virginity on these cheap thots. He wanted Nina to do that honour.

So penetration was out of the question. These ladies wouldn't remember what had happened to them tonight either. Only their sore bodies would make them remember they had been through a lot with some guy named Dom.

Eren immediately got to work. He told Reen to become a coffee mug first. Then he made her retract her mana sense and stopped his mental connection with her for the time being.

Eren didn't want Reen to experience the sexual appetite just yet. First, he thought of her as a child who is just learning to walk. Second, he didn't know what physiological changes it would bring to the demon beast.

Perhaps Reen will go berserk if her sexual needs aren't met properly. This happens with even rankless animals. And with ranked animals, the state of berserk can only get enhanced.

Therefore, Eren turned Reen into a complete coffee mug before starting his business with the ladies.

Eren started rough. He didn't give the same care to the ladies as he did to Nina. He needed the proof of his rough play to be shown on the ladies' bodies the next day.

When Eren was done, both the ladies were naked and writhing in pain-induced ecstasy. They also had come a lot. Even without the penetration, Eren was thorough with his hands.

Eren just kept his mouth away from getting involved in the play. In this life, he would only taste the finest of ladies with his mouth.

The musky after-sex scent had filled the room. Both ladies soon fell into a deep slumber together. Eren left four Extols, this time stored inside Dom's original ID stone. Plus, he left some equipment he had received from Isaac's party stored in the same ID stone.

The breadcrumbs had been planted. Eren knew, by tomorrow, the location of these ladies will be found. And all their possessions so far will be analysed.

What will they find after checking the stuff that's inside Dom's ID stone?

The next day.

Things happened as Eren had predicted. The two ladies were tracked even before they woke up. They were both sleeping soundly. And wouldn't open the door when it had been knocked multiple times.

The pursuers had to barge in by breaking the door. The environment quickly got awkward when the team of pursuers' male populace started intensely looking at two naked ladies in front of them.

The female members of the team had to take the lead and chase the males out of the room. They gave these horny men the job to secure the area. Then they woke the two sleeping beauties up and made them wear their clothes.

The female members talked to what seemed like their superior over their ID stones. A trio entered the room shortly after. It was Lin, Peter, and Ela from Lin's party. Julie followed them soon after.

Julie Ekheart was a regular member of Lin's party, serving as an E Rank huntress in the OB. Peter and Ela were her usual superiors but for this case, she reported to Lin who was in charge of their entire team and this investigation.

"What did you find?"

"We have confirmed their identities. They are the same person who had exited the bar with suspected Dom Walker." One of the ladies of the investigation team reported to Lin.

"Julie, confirm their identities a second time. You were there after all."

Julie came forward and gave a short bow to Lin before proceeding to look at the barely clothed ladies. She confirmed their identities and stepped back.

"Alright. Let's go with the standard practice. Take everything in the room as an object of interest in the investigation and seize it. Let the historians do their work. And make the arrangements to secure these ladies as potential eyewitnesses."

The ladies were taken to a secure warehouse. Lin wouldn't have treated the case with such sensitivity had it not been indicated by Dom's previous statements that there was kingdom politics involved in this case.

"Hello. My name is Lin Karr. I'm a regulatory officer of the OB. We are currently investigating a man named Dom Walker who you two ladies met yesterday. We want details regarding your interactions with the same man."

The ladies blushed after hearing Lin's request. Eren had done a number on them. Their bodies were sore and they didn't remember many things post the booze and the bong. But they knew they had the best time of their lives with Dom Walker.

"Sir, might we know what crimes the guy committed for you to bring us here against our will?"

One of the ladies asked while mustering her courage. They wouldn't want to rat out the guy who had kept his word and left them four Extols each like he had promised unless they could help it. Lin lit a dark green gasper, inhaled the smoke, and took a huge puff before replying:

“Where do I begin? We suspect that the man you know has killed his party members willingly by putting them in harm’s way. He has colluded with a third party to cause Osan woods disturbance. He is suspected of nurturing an untamed demon beast of C Rank.

There are some more crimes we suspect him for. But it would be too immature for me to comment on those at this point. So tell me, what do you know about the guy you met yesterday and what did you do together?”

The ladies realized the guy was even more of bad news than they gave him credit for. They decided to come clean and told him everything they knew about him and what took place after they got into the inn’s room.

Lin had creases on his forehead after hearing the ladies’ statements. Although they confirmed that they had spent the night with Dom doing the sexual activities, when he asked them about the details through Ela and Julie, they said that they were too drunk and high at the time to remember. Matt had given them a crucial detail that Dom had a small scar just below his right pectoral. But the ladies couldn’t confirm seeing that.

Lin was just about to grill them some more before the historian’s report came in. They said that the suspect named Dom Walker had a very faint aura of a demon beast on him, meaning that he was in close contact with the beast or he was a demon beast himself. Lin immediately discarded the second idea.

The historian also confirmed that the room had another visitor at midnight. The reports indicated that he was rankless. But that only confirmed Lin’s guess that it was the same man who had accompanied Dom during his second trip to the woods. His backer.

Lin was thinking about his next set of plans when he got another report. One of the objects collected from the room was confirmed to be Dom’s ID stone. And it had some stuff remaining in its storage space that belonged to Isaac’s party.

“So it WAS him. Killing his party members wasn’t enough. The bastard and his damn backer killed the kids as well and ruined everything for me. We need to skin these cold-blooded criminals alive after capturing them.”

Chapter 43: Redact and Whitewash

“So it WAS him. Killing his party members wasn’t enough. The bastard and his damn backer killed the kids as well and ruined everything for me. We need to skin these cold-blooded criminals alive after capturing them.”

Lin said out aloud after seeing both the reports. It was useless to dig any further after seeing so many substantial pieces of evidence.

“Lin, I respect you as my senior, but please don’t drag our party and association in this mess any more than you already have. Sure, we can do anything we want to do with Dom Walker if he gets captured by us.

But forget about his backer. He is bad news. Not just for you, me or the association. But for the entire city of Osan. I’ve known cities that were more prosperous and prominent than ours getting wrecked

after they made the mistake of involving themselves in the kingdom's power games. Isen Osan is not even worth a fart in the big league's eyes. Our worth is even lesser."

Ela held Lin's shoulder and said everything. She was saying no to her superior which was a form of disrespect. But Lin knew there was no malice in it. And he was worried about the same thing as well.

"What should we do then?"

Lin asked helplessly. No matter what came out of the investigation, Isen was on his case. Lin had to withdraw inside the academy and resume his lecturing again if he wanted to have some peace of mind.

"Simple. Redact everything about the backer from the report. Blame everything on Dom Walker. And punish him. I'm sure his backer wouldn't mind us taking care of a nuisance."

Ela replied calmly.

"But we can't do anything about the reports already submitted to the kingdom and LA academy. Who would we call Dom's accomplice?"

"Just keep that part of the case open to speculation. Kill Dom without taking him into custody. That way he won't renege on his backer and make troubles for him as well for us."

"What about Matt, the only guy alive from Dom's Raiders? He'll make noise if something about our report and investigation seems half-hearted to him."

"That might indeed be a problem. But he is just an F Rank hunter in the initial stage. I'm sure the OB wouldn't mind if we discredit him a little before getting him out of the association. That way his rants would seem like him getting back at us for kicking him out."

"And when did you come up with this entire game? Don't tell me you thought all this on the spot."

Lin had to ask after hearing Ela's every full-proof explanation on how to make this problem go away.

"Yesterday. After I saw the footage of Dom Walker's talk with Julie. Unlike you, I've met him in the OB a couple of times. It was indeed him. No doubt about it.

I was only wondering how he was so hammered not to speak normally during that footage. But after seeing the ladies and estimating the guy's recently changed lifestyle, I'm more shocked that he could still function the way he functioned at all.

So if it was indeed Dom. And if we assume all that he said during the footage to be true. Then today's outcome was a foreseeable event. I couldn't sleep at all last night thinking about the repercussions of our investigations and came up with this plan."

"Alright. Let's do it your way then."

Lin agreed with Ela's plan. They weren't justice seekers. They were hunters. They knew about how to skin their prey. But they also knew about how to save their hide.

Lin's only regret was that he wouldn't be able to think about ranking up anytime soon after he resumed being a lecturer. But his life and safety were more important at this point.

A week later!

Nina had come back from her trip to the city of Lauren. She had carried a lot of ingredients in her ID stone. But that wasn't enough. She had to use a couple of E Rank storage space artefacts to pack all the stuff.

Eren greeted Nina with open arms. He inhaled her musky scent mixed with her new go-to EDP he had gifted to her. Nina too felt at home after taking Eren in her embrace.

Eren used his hands again to grab Nina's butt and gave them a firm squeeze. Nina was kinda expecting this so she didn't flinch.

"Little rat, behave! We are at doorsteps. Let me come in first."

Nina pulled Eren's cheeks with equal enthusiasm. She was in a good mood today seeing Eren after a week.

But then Nina remembered Eren would be gone for five academic years. And he might not come back to her after he is grown up and gets a place of his own. That realisation suddenly hit her and made her sad.

Eren observed the sudden drop in Nina's mood and understood she was thinking about his eventual departure from this place. He tried to pacify her:

"Aunt Nina don't worry. For me a week and five years are all the same when I don't get to see you. I'll come back as soon as those wretched academic years get over."

Nina smiled hearing that. She had underestimated Eren's EQ.

"Hmph! Who's worried about your absence, little rat? I'll probably enjoy not being ogled at by a horny teenager all the time."

By now they both had entered the inner sanctum of the ground floor. Eren had already made breakfast. He would have it with her after she freshens up.

"Erni, tell me what did you do all week? Hehehehe! Did you perhaps avail of 'self-help' thinking about me?"

Nina asked while she had the first bite of her breakfast. She has gotten fresh. Eren had made poached eggs with toast.

"Please! I'd rather save my energy for our post date adventures in the coming days. What about you?"

Eren was oozing confidence while he was having his bite. The past week had been fruitful for him. He had started sensing mana around him now after the repetitive meditations based on his past experiences. He was much faster than in his previous life because of it.

Plus, his framing of Dom Walker had gone smoothly. Nina asked about the same after she sensed the unusual calm in the city even after it was known that Isaac Osan had been killed.

The city's law and order should have been strained attempting mass arrests of suspects. But she didn't see or hear about such a thing from her carriage service.

"Enough joking around, Erni. Tell me what happened to Isaac's case? Did the suspect get caught or something? I was in a hurry doing a lot of things in the city of Lauren. So I couldn't keep a tab on these things."

"Hahaha! You'll be surprised if you know the identity of Isaac's killer!"

Eren laughed genuinely thinking about poor Dom's situation. The guy couldn't complain now that he was dead.

"Hmm? Why? Is it someone we know?"

Nina asked as she had another bite of toast.

"Yes. Dom Walker is Isaac's killer. He first wiped out his party. Then when he was running away from the crime scene via a different route he was caught by Isaac's party. So he killed them off too.

They say that Don had help when he did these crimes, which had accompanied him during his second visit to the woods. That unknown person was the reason behind the Osan woods' disturbance. They also managed to tame the demon beast.

That person's identity is not known. So he is being referred to as the Osan Woods' Butcher. The bounty contract has gone on his head. Dom is missing and considered a fugitive.

Some say Dom is killed by the OWB (Osan Woods' Butcher) while others claim he is on his way to leave the kingdom. A few others even testified that he is still living in the city of Osan.

There's a lot of news and gossip about Dom. But surprisingly, not even a peep for the OWB. Even Isen didn't come forward to release any further statements after the killer's link with Dom was established.

I think there's some whitewashing going on in the backdrop. Because now some news is even claiming Dom didn't return from the woods after killing his party members. We both know it's not true.

But nobody is satisfied with only a few versions of events it seems. Instead of finding the identity of the OWB, everything has been made to look like it starts and ends with Dom and nobody else."

Eren gave Nina a brief retrospect of the news that was being circulated during the past week. Eren had started selling the stockpiled potions in the apothecary. His customers would inform him about recent events.

What the customers didn't know was that they were talking to the elusive Osan Woods' Butcher himself when they told him about such news.

During this past week, Eren had gotten himself busy creating a lot of fake and confusing trails of Dom that led to nowhere and everywhere. Eren worked hard for this and was given her due reward in the form of 'sumptuous food'.

The cocktail of real and fake news was created by him. But it was served to perfection by the city's administration. Eren guessed that the city didn't want to offend any bigshot from the kingdom in their search for justice.

That served Eren's purpose. He had given that statement during his interview with Julie for this very reason. He wasn't sure if his trick would work. But apparently, he had underestimated the city lord's wariness for the kingdom's royal experts.

Isen Osan was a minor baron in the kingdom. He didn't have stakes high enough to question the kingdom's role in the woods' disturbance or the murder of his grandson, irrespective of whether it was true or not.

And therefore, nobody could know the real identity of the OWB. Who, by the way, was busy flirting with his aunt at the time!

Chapter 44: Jake Sullivan

Ten days before heading out for the Academy!

Eren was seen seated in his room. He was holding the smallest, F Rank Mana Blessing from his collection in his hand while meditating.

Eren wanted to use a bigger, and better one. But the area of influence the bigger Mana Blessing would have was enough for aunt Nina to figure out its presence.

Eren concentrated and tried to take the mana inside his body through the region below his navel. The eventual outcome was realized finally.

Eren felt like a black hole had been created inside his body. All the surrounding F Rank mana that was condensed in the surrounding by the Mana Blessing was getting absorbed by that blackhole genesis.

A point of mass was created after the attraction force ended. It felt surreal and real at the same time.

Eren had an inactive F Rank mana core now in his body. It only needed primary mana pathways for him to officially enter his F Rank journey.

But Eren felt something was different about this time's F Rank's core creation. The force of attraction was stronger than he remembered.

Eren could see an intricate pattern that was getting faint when he checked his navel. The pattern had disappeared after a couple more breaths.

Eren could swear that he had seen that pattern somewhere. It took him a while to recollect that the necklace's gem that he had gulped down had the same pattern carved atop it.

Eren had not forgotten about the biggest miracle of his life. He had a couple of sleepless nights thinking about it, along with his past mistakes and regrets.

It was just that he couldn't do anything to solve the mystery around it. And he couldn't ask anyone either. So he had to let it go. Maybe the mystery would reveal itself when he was strong enough.

Eren tried to make that pattern resurface again using his thoughts. But he wasn't successful. He had to give up on his efforts after a couple more tries.

Eren wasn't disappointed. He wasn't in a hurry to know about the timeless treasure he was carrying within him. If it wanted to interact with him, it would, at the right time. Or when he was strong enough to make it reveal itself. No use banging his head against the obstacle now.

Eren decided to freshen up. His body was sticky due to the F Rank core formation. When a ranked entity breaks through its existing rank and enters a new one, its body goes through a purification process. The body expels impurities hiding deep within it and invigorates itself.

The body's natural clock resets. Halting or reversing the ageing process. That's why high ranked entities leave for longer and look youthful even when they turn hundreds of years old.

The core formation was the most important part about one starting their ranking journey. The mana pathways would form eventually even when one doesn't take additional efforts to do so.

Eren will again experience another body cleansing when his mana pathways form and the F Rank mana circulates through his body for the first time. F Rank was special that way. It had two body cleansing events.

Eren bathed thoroughly and took his time getting freshen up. He knew it wouldn't be long before the mana pathways formed. He just needed to expedite it before he leaves for the academy.

Eren needed to visit the Osan woods. Reen was basically the boss of that forest. He wouldn't have to face any risk. And Reen knew about the location of a few precious herbs which would help him open his mana pathways faster while going easy on his body.

But how could he convince Nina? She wouldn't let him go on his own in the woods. Plus she would get suspicious about his motives.

Eren was already walking on the tight edge keeping Reen in his room. Reen had gotten better at controlling her demon beast aura. She was almost impossible to detect for the entities who had the same rank as her or below.

But that didn't mean Eren raised the difficulty by himself. Reen was more useful when her existence and her abilities were only known to him.

Your opponent would play their hand safely when they knew about the cards you've been dealt with.

Therefore, Eren was always careful about dealing with stuff that was related to Reen. He didn't want to raise aunt Nina's awareness unnecessarily for the same reason.

Eren had a plan that he could use to cover and make use of Reen's abilities almost openly without her getting detected. Provided it gets executed flawlessly when he enters the academy.

But that was for the future. Till then, only Eren and Reen were witnesses of her existence.

Coming back to the present.

Eren needed to get his hands on those herbs by visiting the woods. And he needed a valid reason for his absence.

Enter Jake Sullivan.

Jake was the son of a businessman in the city of Osan. His father Jack Sullivan dealt in the import and export of goods.

The business would provide raw ingredients to Nina at a discounted rate than usual. In return, she would sell him potions in bulk only for him to resell them at higher rates at the right market outside the city.

Therefore the businessman father had very cordial acquaintances with every healer in the city, including Nina.

Jake Sullivan was a carbon copy of his father in many ways. He was cunning and cordial at the same time. He always talked sweetly. And he was ready to make friends with everybody.

Eren had seen an opportunity in Jake when he had come to the apothecary with his father. His excuse to get out of aunt Nina's supervision and visit the woods unsupervised.

Things became even easier for Eren to make an acquaintance with Jake after he knew that he was also going to enter the LA academy with him.

Jack Sullivan had paid a hefty donation to the city of Osan's administration to reserve a spot from the limited seats in the academy for his son.

The city of Osan could send up to five kids every year under the reserved quota. Everyone other than the reserved seat kids would have to pass an entrance exam. Which was as difficult as it was unpredictable.

Therefore the reserved seats would always be preferred by the well-to-do people who wanted to send their kids to receive the best education the kingdom had to offer.

Even aunt Nina was no different. She had enrolled Eren into the reserved seat quota. It was just that she didn't have to pay. Her influence on the city's administration was strong enough to avail a reserved seat.

Therefore, Eren and Jake didn't need to give any exams before entering the academy. They will be fellow students in the next few days.

Eren was a shut-in in his previous life. He didn't interact with people apart from a select few of them in the academy. So he didn't know about Jack or the fact that he came from the same city as him. But that didn't matter to his current plans.

Jake immediately extended his hand of friendship to Eren and the latter accepted as quickly for reasons known to him.

Today Eren was going to use his new and only connection so far to get out of his current predicament.

Eren stepped downstairs. Had his breakfast. And told aunt Nina that he would be meeting with Jack and discuss academic studies with him. He also told her that he might stay over as his place.

Nina wanted to ask some more but Eren had already run out of the house by then. She never knew a recluse like Eren would find a friend in Jack this easily.

Nina was glad that Eren was finally making connections and didn't want to stop the progress. So she let the matter go.

Eren headed to a now-familiar alleyway that he had been using to disappear into the dark. When he appeared from the other end, everything about him had changed.

Eren had bought Hunters' clothes for himself when the city markets started functioning. It was to blend in with the Hunters' populace.

Eren had also got two masks now. He was wearing one of them that only left his eyes and forehead unmasked.

An unknown lady in her late 30s could be seen with him. She looked menacing with her odd, deformed smile. She had also worn the Hunters' clothes.

"Reen, stop smiling. It doesn't look good on you yet. You might scare the rental agency guy."

Eren scoffed at Reen who then followed his orders and stopped her facial exercise. She asked her master as they were headed to the southern city gates:

"Eren. What should I say to that rental agency 'food'?"

Reen spoke in the lady's voice she had eaten before. It was just some random woman who the duo had preyed on. To satiate Reen's hunger that is.

Reen's oratory skills and her bipedal walk had taken huge leaps forward. She almost sounded normal. There was a slight oddity in the way she controlled her voice but that wasn't a deal-breaker.

Reen's walk and her run were the ones she had improved most on. She walked and ran like humans. She could go faster than Eren now if she wanted to.

"Just rent two nice colts for both of us. Use the money I've given you and the ID stone of the lady you have shapeshifted into.

Of course, the ID stone and your mana signature won't match. Just tell him your ID stone has some problem and you intend to change it after this trip. Give him five EDs (Edenberg Dollars) as a bribe while saying it."

"Alright. I... I can't eat it afterwards, right?"

"Call him 'him' and not 'it' when you talk, will you? No, you can't eat him. You'll have plenty of mana beasts to feed on in the woods."

Eren and Reen talked like usual and reached the rental agency's office.

Chapter 45: Jaime's Party

"This is your fifth mana beast now. It should be enough to last a while. Now let's go get our herbs before the night sets in."

Eren commented as he saw a mana beast getting devoured inside a slimy ball of mass. Soon that beast's body was nowhere to be found.

Even the beast's bones had vanished into the thin air. The slimy ball of mass turned into a naked woman in her late 30s with the average face but well-defined curves. Reen wore the clothes nearby while complaining:

"Why do humans wear clothes? They don't serve any purpose to me."

Reen was wearing her panties now. Or to be precise, the panties of the prey she had eaten and found out later on in her ID (ID Stone).

If it was Eren from before, he would have nugged then and there, after witnessing that scene. But geezer-brain Eren of today had only one thing running in his mind right now. The forest's undiscovered treasures!

"Alright. Eren, there's an F Grade wood elemental crystal nearby."

Eren nodded and followed Reen who was now dubbed by him as a treasure-seeking device. It's been a few hours since they reached the forest.

They had already collected plenty of herbs. It was enough for Eren to finally break into F Rank and start his ranking journey. Now Eren was focusing on collecting elemental crystals.

Reen also had her fill in between their forest traversing. Eren was getting impatient whenever they stopped for Reen's snack time.

Eren only had till twilight to collect as many treasures as he could. He needed to be back by the next day's morning, lest aunt Nina tries to contact Jack to confirm his whereabouts.

The duo reached the place and collected the elemental crystal hiding inside the tree's trunk. It didn't wait for long before heading to its next treasure destination.

The forest was soon covered by a layer of darkness. The moonlight was the only solace creatures of night could find.

Eren was about to head to get the next elemental crystal when Reen informed him about some activity ahead in their path.

The duo paused in its tracks. Eren told Reen to morph into her original form and get inside his shirt to her usual position.

Eren was rankless. So his vital signs were not as apparent as the ranked entities. At most, he'd be considered as another rankless animal in the forest.

Reen had become even more inconspicuous than her morphed form after getting back to her usual state. Plus, the duo had darkness as its cover.

Eren proceeded further with caution. No hunting party would prefer hunting at night unless there were specific conditions. And Eren was sure the hunters of the city of Osan didn't excel in nocturnal hunting. So he took extra precautions when approaching the entities in front of him.

Eren wanted to avoid any conflict if he could. He had just settled his earlier crimes. He didn't want to waste time covering his tracks once more.

But at the same time, Eren's instincts told him he should at least have a look before jumping the gun. Reen had already told him they were all D and E Rank entities.

That meant Reen could still somehow handle them. Or at least escape safely if push comes to shove.

Eren could see a kinda open area ahead with a campfire lit right in the middle of it. Eren didn't exit the woods. He quickly got into the nearby bush and observed from there.

Eren could barely see what lay in front of him. But he guessed at least four people were sitting around the campfire, talking among themselves.

Eren couldn't hear their conversation. So he asked Reen to help. Reen spread her mana sense in their direction while keeping it inconspicuous.

The mana sense was an extra sense a ranked entity would develop after starting its ranking journey. With each rank up, the mana sense would cover more area and be more thorough in its investigation. It also had an array of uses.

Mana sense could double up as a 360-degree vision inside the ranker's mind. It could also serve as an added ear, or an intangible taste bud.

Reen used her mana sense on the people ahead and shared the feedback with Eren. Eren could now envision and listen to the people ahead as if he was sitting right in the middle of them.

"Is there any rankless animal nearby? Should I go check it out?"

One of the four members spoke. He was a tall and dark man. He had an eagle-beak-like nose and a medium stubble. With Reen's senses, Eren found out that he was a Rank E entity in the upper stage.

"Stop being always on edge, Ronald. There's nothing to fear from a rankless rabbit. Here, drink this. This will calm your nerves."

A woman in her mid-30s offered Ronald a bottle of booze that she was drinking a moment ago. She was lean and looked to have a medium height. Her features were generic except her blood-red hair.

"Haah! Keep that filth to yourself, Linda. I wouldn't want to turn like you after drinking such a potent amount of Golden Grain."

"This is the fourth bottle in a day that you've gulped down. Do you want me to serve as an excuse for you to take out one more?"

Ronald refused Linda's offer. Linda wasn't sad though. 'More for me it seems!' She celebrated that thought with another huge gulp of Golden Grain.

"Ronald, don't worry. I have taken precautions to secure the perimeter. Your vigilance is appreciated but your anxiety is not. And Linda, you might want to slow down on the booze a little considering we are still in the Osan woods."

A calm voice shut both Ronald and Linda. Eren could sense through Reen that he was the only D Rank entity in the group. He was only a tad shorter than Ronald. But had a more defined physique. His looks were also above average with his golden locks, blue eyes, and chiselled face. He would be their leader, Eren thought to himself.

“Jaime, forget about these idiots and tell us our next set of plans. We can’t be roaming in the forest every day and have nothing to show for it.”

The last person to speak was another woman. But unlike Linda who was dressed messily and talked crassly, this woman was exuding elegance and sternness. She had dark green hair and short stature. She looked stronger than Ronald and Linda.

Chapter 46: Good PR

“Jaime, forget about these idiots and tell us our next set of plans. We can’t be roaming in the forest every day and have nothing to show for it.”

The last person to speak was another woman. But unlike Linda who was dressed messily and talked crassly, this woman was exuding elegance and sternness. She had dark green hair and short stature. She looked stronger than Ronald and Linda.

“You are right as always, Verna. But don’t worry our assignment is going to end soon. As soon as we find out exactly what happened in the Osan woods and who was the culprit behind it, we can convey our findings to that man and our job will end here.”

Jaime replied to Verna while chugging down a potion of unknown effect. But Linda intruded in their conversation before Verna could reply to him:

“Verna, stop thinking like you are better than me just because your ranking stage is higher. And who are you calling stupid? I’ll tell you who is the stupid one here. All of you, including me. Aaaargh! That indeed makes me stupid, doesn’t it?

Whatever! My point is we should have never agreed to complete this assignment. God knows what will become of us if we interfere in the big league’s games.”

Linda vented her pent up anger on everyone. But there was a sense of fear in her anger! Ronald found some truth in her words:

“As drunk as she might be, Linda is right! We shouldn’t have accepted this assignment. If I find that rat who messed up so “royally” in a royal affair, I would kill that person myself.

First, that rat messed up with the demon beast’s evolution. That wasn’t enough. It leaked the whole disappearance of hunters to the masses. And even hinted at the kingdom’s hand in this affair. What kind of idiot paints a bull’s eye on their back by doing this?”

Ronald concluded and finally snatched the Golden Grain from Linda before hurriedly sending it down his throat. Linda could only look at him angrily. She was the one who had teased him about having her booze. Now she had to face the consequences.

“But the bigger question is, how did they find out about everything? Leaking this news seems like sending that man a message. I’m not sure how that man will retaliate after knowing his plans were put to rest just because of this cockroach!”

“That’s what we need to find out in this forest. Our search can only be initiated during nights when other hunters from the city of Osan remain idle. We don’t want any more information breaches. During the daytime, we will search and find clues about the students’ deaths. And during night time we will conduct our separate investigation.”

Jaime stated and the rest nodded. Verna asked another query:

“So will we be able to stick to the same excuse? Jaime the lecturer at the LA academy and his three assistant lecturers are here to investigate the deaths of the academy’s final year students?”

Verna asked rhetorically. To which Jaime could only smile mirthlessly before sounding his agreement:

“Yes! Most high ranked entities will see through this BS. The academy will seldom send the lecturers to do these investigations. And they all know we belong to which faction in the royal court. Even that scheming but shallow man Isen Osan will see an oddity here.

But this ruse is enough to keep the lower-ranked entities in check or second-guessing. Plus, it also doubles up as the academy caring about students’ welfare. That’s good PR.

Though, the biggest damage that rat has done is to our reputation and credibility. Now that man thinks the leak took place from our end. We need to clear our name by finding the real culprit of this incident.”

“Do you think it’s Dom Walker as the reports submitted by the city of Osan say?

I’m not sure why, but my instincts say there’s a veil woven with the strings of dead ends, confusion, and mysteries to hide a vile evil under it.”

Linda talked as if she was sobered up all of a sudden. The three members around her didn’t act surprised by Linda’s sudden clarity. As if they were used to it. Verna was the one to answer her:

“I don’t think so. At most, this Dom guy can be a puppet for someone really powerful. They knew about that man’s plan in the Osan woods and decided to sabotage it using Dom as a spoiler. Everything will be answered if we find this puppet named Dom.”

Jaime shook his head at Verna’s opinion, indicating his disagreement:

“You are naive if you think that Dom is still alive after all this. If there’s someone powerful behind for real, they’ll get rid of Dom now that he has served their purpose. Or to be precise, after he damaged their interests after telling more than he should have.

Why would they leave a loose end behind in the form of a blabbermouth who was okay with puking out everything he knew on that recorded footage just to get laid. If you ask me, he is down under some lake, talking with the fishes.”

“Then what should we do? Keep running around in the forest day and night without knowing about what we are looking for?”

Verna asked with frustration. She was bothered the most about spending her days in the forest, where there was no bath or proper toilet facilities. She looked elegant and cool, but only she knew how hard it was for her to maintain that facade in this environment.

“Well, Linda will use her powers to detect the smallest of clues if we find some other trail of the person who was with Dom. So far, we have only confirmed what the city of Osan claimed to have found. That there was a second person with Dom whose identity is unknown.

Following Dom’s trails is a waste at this time. When you have so many clues regarding Dom out as public knowledge, it can only mean they’ve been left behind purposely to mislead the pursuers. We can’t track the demon beast either because of its speciality.

That leaves us only with this person who is as elusive as they are cunning.

Even someone like Linda could only come up with that person being rankless, which is not true. So we can’t use the usual methods to know about their identity. They’ve taken necessary precautions against it.

That leaves us with the grid-wise, manual search for that person’s previous presence in the woods. They must have travelled in the forest a lot of time before the demon beast evolution was triggered. They had to, after knowing so much insider detail about the case.

Or they can return to the scenes of their crime, trying to see if they’ve missed anything. We have already placed artefacts at both the crime scenes, which will let us know as well as record the person’s identity there.

Meanwhile, we can only try to complete our grid search as fast as we can. This area has been cleared. We will now move to the next grid, heading towards the western side of the forest. And we need to hurry. As Verna said, we don’t want to spend a second more in this pathetic forest any more than we have to.

Alright! The break time is over. We will take some rest after the next grid gets finished. Let’s go.”

Chapter 47: Passive-Aggressive

“Alright! The break time is over. We will take some rest after the next grid gets finished. Let’s go.”

Jaime and his party soon left their campsite after extinguishing the fire. Eren stayed still for some time even after they left to confirm their departure for good. Only then did he come out.

“Damn!”

Eren came out and said this out loud after he understood what he had done.

Eren had made fake Dom say all those things about his mysterious backer, the disappearance of hunters, and the kingdom’s involvement to throw his pursuers off the track. He would have never imagined that what he thought to be bullshittery was true.

Eren had angered a lot of people in the big leagues by making the fake Dom say all those things out in the open. Sure, it had thrown his current pursuers off his trails.

But by doing so, Eren had allowed himself to be the target of even more sinister enemies. His only advantage so far was that they were thinking of him to be someone else. A hidden powerhouse that had the power of ruining the plan of another of their kind and status.

Therefore nobody would think about someone like Eren who was just a teenager and still rankless to be the mastermind they were looking for.

The OWB had gone scot-free in his crimes so far. And he wanted to keep it that way for as long as he could.

In Eren's defence, he couldn't even think in his wildest dreams that a backwater place like Osan woods was a stage set for bigger powers. He had only done what was right and most optimal at that point.

Eren simply did not have enough information about Dom to know about this hidden plot.

"So that's why in my previous life, Dom shifted to the kingdom's capital after his taming of the demon beast. He got involved in this mess. He didn't go there himself.

Dom was forced to relocate to the capital city of Edinburgh by these people.

Dom was accommodated into those guys' plans because he didn't cause any incident like me. He didn't become the whistleblower.

Of course, he wasn't aware of everything from the get-go. But slowly and surely that all changed. And Dom kept his mouth shut even after knowing about this mess.

Haah! There's just so much about the previous Dom that I don't know. I thought I had everything figured out when I took this step. But turns out I was just a naive fool. I need to be more careful than I already am.

These guys are from the LA academy. I need to keep my eyes on them when I enter the academy's grounds. They will lead me to the truth.

In any way, I don't regret making Reen my demon beast. I thought she was worth every risk. But her worth is maybe even more than what I had already anticipated.

Thank the devil, I heard about there being artefacts planted at my crime scenes. I was planning to visit those places out of curiosity.

Staying in this forest anymore or planning to come back here will be a mistake. These guys won't find anything with the grid search because I didn't enter the woods from any other side.

But they CAN find me eventually if I keep on lingering about in the forest."

Eren was talking to himself. He had already left the campsite and was now heading outside the forest the same way he came from.

"So there's more than what meets the eye about you, Reen. What secrets are you hiding in your belly?"

Eren asked Reen who was busy contracting and expanding on his torso under his shirt.

"Eh? Are you talking about food?"

Reen was puzzled at Eren's question. Eren knew she was a blank slate regarding the whole matter. So he skipped asking about it:

"Haha! Nothing. Just forget about it. Whatever you are hiding, I'll come to know about it eventually.

I was planning to visit the forest one more time, but I should scrap that idea as well. No need to take risks creating more trails for the treasures that are just F Rank.

Ronald's party has already completed scanning this northern side area for the OWB's traces. But they might think about doing it again on the spur of the moment.

Plus, that drunk woman Linda doesn't look normal to me. Is she a historian or someone else? My methods of masking my trails might not be enough to mislead her if she gets a fresh print.

If I have to forget about collecting the forest's treasures, I might as well put all my efforts into taking the last step with aunt Nina in these last days."

Eren had this thought and smirked. He had what he needed the most. The F Rank herbs expedite the creation of mana pathways.

These herbs would spell trouble for rankless entities who didn't have a mana core. But they would be extremely helpful for those who did.

With his herbs secured in the ID stone used by Reen, Eren returned home early in the morning. Nina was just done fixing breakfast and was about to call Jack Sullivan to ask him about Eren when the latter showed up.

"Erni, why do you look like you've run a mile in the forest?"

Nina's enhanced senses told her Eren was out in the wild. There was no point lying about his whereabouts. Eren needed to lie differently.

"That's because me, Jake, and his servant had gone for a campfire at Green Dunes just outside the southern city gates. We spent the night there and came back just a few minutes ago."

Eren immediately came up with a different lie. Lying came as easy as breathing for him because of his past life.

Eren didn't care if his lie got caught in the future or not. He was sure he'd be able to come up with another bullshittery at that time just as quickly.

"Little rat, you didn't even tell me about the plan. I might have accompanied you guys at the campfire.

Anyway, go get fresh. Have some breakfast. You are up for another elementary potion order."

"Eh? We didn't have this order when I left. Are you punishing me for ditching you?"

Eren looked at Nina with a mix of suspicion and smirk.

"Hmph! A scoundrel like you needs to be taught a lesson. Go do as I say!"

Nina had a pout on her face. She didn't think Eren would be gone for the entire day. Her anxiety peaked when she realised his absence would become semi-permanent for at least five years.

It looked like Nina was punishing Eren. But she only wanted to look at Eren for more time.

By making him work at the lab, Nina would be able to see him in front of her eyes. That was her passive-aggressive way of showing affection towards him.

"I'll walk on the path of fire for you m'lady. This much is nothing. Just let me get fresh. I wouldn't want to stand near a stunning lady like you with this attire and state."

Eren took Nina's hand in his and kissed the dorsal side while bowing a little. Nina's heart immediately softened at that gesture. She smiled at him and pulled his cheeks.

Chapter 48: State of Epiphany

The extra order done by Eren didn't have the delivery lined up for today just as he thought.

But Eren didn't complain. He knew Nina wanted to spend time with him as much as she could by making him stay in the lab with her.

Nina's affection towards Eren had grown a lot more than before, thanks to his progress with her. And he needed it to grow it even further.

"Aunt Nina, we two can go for a campfire at the Green Dunes. It'll be our camping date. What do you say?"

Green Dunes was a place not very far from the southern city gates. It was an area with green pastures, dunes covered in green vegetation, sparse trees, and an open sky.

Green Dunes was famous for family campings. People would go there with families to have barbecue nights out in the open.

"That would be great, Erni! But we need to buy a tent and other camping gear."

Nina was easy to please. Eren didn't even need to use his glib tongue this time. But he'll be sure to use it somewhere else.

"Don't worry aunt Nina. I'll make the preparations myself. But I'll need some time for myself. Therefore, we'll do it three or four days after today."

I feel like my mana pathways will be created during these days.

You already know my F Rank mana core has been condensed. I think I entered the State of Epiphany when I experienced the condensation. Therefore my mana pathway creation has been accelerated.

So our date after four days will be a celebration for me starting my ranking journey. You need to give me something important as a gift at that time!"

Eren looked at Nina and gave a meaningful smile. Nina knew what he was talking about. She too felt excited about their outdoor date.

But her curiosity regarding his previous statements made her prioritise a different matter:

"Erni, you entered the State of Epiphany? Is that true? Describe the event to me."

A ranker would employ mana to strengthen their body, extend their lifespan, keep them youthful, perform superhuman feats and do many things that didn't seem possible for a rankless being.

A ranker would communicate with mana when he employs it for different uses and practices. But that communication was always initiated by the ranker. And therefore it would remain passive from the other side.

It was believed that mana had a collective consciousness of all living beings. That consciousness would contain all the answers to the questions a ranker would have in his mind. It would also give answers to questions that even the said ranker hasn't thought of yet.

And in the case of a naturally induced state of epiphany, mana tries to communicate with the ranker by its own initiative.

The communication with mana was a lot like how Eren and Reen communicated with each other using their thought link. There was no verbal, written or sign language involved. It was a pure exchange of thoughts.

Coming back to the case of the state of epiphany. The ranker with whom mana establishes the communication enters the state of epiphany.

In the state of epiphany, all their questions and bottlenecks regarding the rank up would get answered, helping them cross the ranking divide easily.

In the state of epiphany, a ranker's bottleneck regarding his next rank would get resolved, aiding them to step into a new rank without any risk. Therefore every ranker wanted to experience the state of epiphany, especially when they experienced a slump in their ranking journey.

A ranker who experienced the state of epiphany was considered lucky because it would not happen with everyone at low ranks. And the ones who had experienced it might not be able to experience it again.

The state of epiphany was a natural phenomenon. It couldn't be produced in a controlled environment or settings under normal circumstances by low ranked entities.

High ranked entities would sometimes be able to communicate with the mana and connect with its universal consciousness by using special means, spells, and artefacts. But this was called forced epiphany and its effects were far from the naturally occurring ones.

The state of epiphany was not for everyone. Mana would only talk of its initiative with a few individuals who were innately attuned to the mana. These individuals would be called geniuses of their generations. And they would traverse through the ranking journey so fast, it would create a legend around them.

The ranker would be called a genius if he could experience the state of epiphany before his teen years. As per this standard, Eren would be one of those rare geniuses who appeared once in a few centuries. If he did experience the state of epiphany that is. Which he did not.

But there was no way to prove that Eren did not experience the state of epiphany. That's what Eren counted on when he gave this reason to justify him using the herbs to open mana pathways.

Eren was no genius. The mana never talked with him. And he never experienced the feeling of being connected to higher consciousness.

But the state of epiphany was a perfect excuse for him to justify his sudden growth. It would also serve as a reason behind any potential leap in the ranking journey.

Eren had already known about the state of epiphany and read its effects on the ranker's psyche and body. That's because he had read the anecdotes of rankers who had experienced it.

When Nina asked him to state his experiences, Eren knew what and how to talk about the state of epiphany. He gave pretty detailed info to Nina. That had her convinced that he was the genius she thought him to be.

"Wow. Experiencing the state of epiphany at this age can be considered a blessing and curse at the same time, Erni.

That's because it's such a waste to use this rare opportunity to progress further in low ranks. It's towards the high ranks that you need a big help like this. And only in high ranks, can this gift be truly and efficiently used.

But since you've experienced the state of epiphany at such a young age, you must be better attuned to mana than even me.

That means the state of epiphany can happen to you again. I just hope that you have progressed further in ranks when that happens."

Nina told Eren while looking at him with care and pride hidden in her eyes. Her Eren was one of those geniuses of his generation. Of course, she would feel prideful.

But a genius ranker would often attract trouble their way. Nina hoped that Eren would be smart enough to not get involved in that mess.

Five days before heading out for the Academy!

Eren could be seen sitting naked in his room in a meditative position. He was trying to endure the tremendous pain as the mana pathways were being created inside his body at an unbelievable speed after the consumption of the herbs.

Eren knew the expulsion of impurities this time would be much higher than what he had to go through last time. Therefore he sat naked.

It took a while before the process was complete. As soon as it did, the mana core below Eren's navel spun and sent the accumulated mana through the pathways to circulate it inside his body.

The mana core had been activated!

Eren's body felt so much lighter and full of vitality after the mana started circulating inside his body through the newly created primary pathways. Eren knew he had entered the initial stage of F Rank with his mana core now.

Eren could see his entire body was oozing a colourless, sticky tar-like substance that was like Reen's slimy mass. Eren looked and smelled like he hadn't bathed in months and dipped in a beast's mucus.

But contrary to his current visage, Eren's body was rejoicing. He felt his body stats had been improved by a leap. Eren realized that this level up into Rank F was much better and thorough than what he had gone through in his previous life.

The gem's mysterious inscription showed itself again under his naval before disappearing again. But there were many things lined up for him to do instead of thinking about a mystery he couldn't solve at the time.

Eren needed to clean up. He needed a good bath to look as fresh as his current body felt. But his thoughts were focused on a different matter:

"Now that I'm done entering the F Rank, it's about time I enter someone else as well!"

Eren smirked and told himself. It was time for his camping date with Nina.

Chapter 49: Camping Date P1

It was time for Eren's camping date with Nina.

Eren took his time bathing. When he got out, the Osan Woods' Butcher managed to look even more youthful than he already was.

Nobody would believe that this kid who looked like he still hasn't stopped nibbling on his mother's breasts for milk would be the mystery so many ranked entities were looking to unravel.

Eren wore his usual clothes and stepped downstairs. Nina noticed the difference in looks and aura around him and realized the kid had pulled off entering Rank F.

Entering Rank F at in teen years wasn't a big deal. A lot of kids his age would be having the same ranking status as him. But these kids would usually prepare for their rank from a very young age, even before they could be termed as teens.

Whereas Eren had started his ranking journey only a month ago. Nina could only make sense out of this because of Eren's explanation that it was related to the state of epiphany.

Nina took Eren in her embrace and the latter returned her hug.

"Erni, you pulled it off. We should celebrate. I can..."

Nina was going to make him his favourite pancakes coated in layers of maple syrup. But she was cut off midway:

"Aunt Nina, you don't have to do anything extra. We already have a date planned at the campsite. We'll celebrate it there tonight.

I'll go get the camping gear now. But first I'll need an ID stone. So I'll visit a shop that sells it. Then register my mana signature on it at the city Admin office.

I'll also have to buy resources suitable for my current rank. Then I'll have to buy hunting set for my rank. I'm sure Jake's shop would cover these things. So I'll visit him.

My time till the evening is packed. But we can head for the camping site as soon as I come back."

Eren explained to Nina about his plans today while he had his non-pancake breakfast. Nina could only agree to the young adult's schedule.

Eren had his fill and was about to leave home when he looked back and asked Nina:

"By the way, aunt Nina, what colour is it today?"

Nina smiled. She thought Eren's head was filled with today's plans. But apparently, he still had some space left for 'these' thoughts. She didn't take any detours this time:

"I'll do you one better. Today's colour is white with green floral print."

Nina looked at him mischievously. Eren was impressed at the improvement:

"That's a nice print. A flower print for a flowery place. How I wish to just inhale the fragrance oozing from the pink blossom!"

"There'll be time for that. You do what you have to do first. Give me another memorable date. And then we'll see."

Nina was looking him right in the eyes when she said it. She thought it would be like their previous adventure. Everything in the menu apart from the penetration.

But what she didn't know was that Eren had prioritized the final act this time, treating it as the main dish.

"I live to serve M'lady. But would you be kind enough to... you know... 'mow the lawn' a little? That way I can enjoy exploring the folded petals of pink blossoms some more without any interruption."

"Little rat, you said you didn't mind the growth last time."

Nina first blushed after Eren made such a demand. She had really 'let it grow' and was aware she needed to trim it down if not outright wax or shave it.

Nina was going to groom it today anyway after Eren's departure. But Eren's request made her keep it as it is just to spite him. How dare he dislike any part of her body? The contradiction incarnate had struck again.

"M'lady, you misunderstand. I still don't mind the growth. But I would PREFER if it was all super smooth down there. It would make it easy for me to taste-test."

Eren said that while kissing Nina's dorsal hand. But he didn't bow this time and kept his eye contact with hers. This naked honesty and reason behind it finally made her release her pout!

"Alright, alright. I'll see what I can do. Come back soon. Otherwise, I might head out without you."

Nina stuck out her tongue after she said that and closed the door on him. The door was supposed to be kept half-open as the apothecary was still open for business.

But closing the door on Eren just made sense to her at the time. Eren could see that aunt Nina also had a flair for drama.

“Haah! The hotter they are, the crazier they get! It’s like nature’s law or something.”

Eren lamented to nobody in particular while making his way to the city market.

Eren returned home at around 4.30 PM.

He now had his F Rank ID stone with his registered mana signature on it. The storage space inside the stone was filled with camping gear and some other stuff Eren had bought from Jake’s shop.

Mana signature was a small inscription array that only responds and lights up when the original user circulates their mana through it.

This mana signature was used in multiple ways to establish a person’s identity. It was also placed on ID stones. That’s how the term ‘ID’ was included in the nomenclature.

Eren found Nina who was just wrapping up today’s work. They both smiled when they saw each other. It was time to head out.

The duo quickly got ready. Eren had already called for carriage service. They boarded the same and waited for the Green Dunes to show up.

The place wasn’t far. Eren and Nina quickly found a remote place. They could see a lot of tents at a distance from them. But the temporary abodes were too far from each other.

The duo quickly got to work after finalizing the place. They erected a tent quickly and chatted for a while before lighting the campfire, post the night’s arrival.

Eren had got skewers and was making kebabs on the campfire. The barbecue table was getting its coal from the same fire. Nina was setting the supper she had made beforehand.

Finally, the duo settled on sitting beside each other on a wooden log nearby. The campfire was giving them warmth amid the occasional cold breeze.

The half-moon didn’t exude as much moonshine as it could. But there were plenty of stars whose collective starlight made a difference.

The smell of barbecue and kebabs was in the air. The sumptuous food awaited for the taking. It was a pleasant way to spend the night. Eren broke the ice:

“Au.... err... Nina, did you like the steaks? I made them medium-well, just the way you like.”

“Ah! Yes. They were good. But the kebabs were something special. When did you learn to make them?”

“Oh, that? I learned that from a recipe book. I wasn’t sure how they’d turn out. But I’m glad you liked ’em. I’ll give you the recipe if you want. You can make it for yourself after I’m gone.”

The topic of Eren leaving for the academy was inevitable. It was looming over their every possible conversation. Eren might as well get it out now on a lighter note to make Nina transition into it relatively easy.

“Erni, will you miss me in the academy?”

Chapter 50: Camping Date P2*

“Erni, will you miss me in the academy?”

Nina looked at Eren and asked with concern. Her heart and mind were restless thinking about the loneliness that would soon accompany her for five years.

If Eren had not made this progress with her, Nina would have been fine. She would have still cared for him and missed him, but it wouldn't have been detrimental to her psyche like the way it is during this timeline.

Nina had realized in this one month's duration.

Eren had gotten so close to her as a man that she had become emotionally dependent on him. She chided herself for turning into an emotional fool. But Eren's next words calmed her erratic nerves:

“Nina, of course, I'll miss you. And I'm sure you'll miss me too. But I have a home in you. I'll always come back.

Five years are nothing even for a rankless person. They are worth even less to ranked entities.

This long departure from you would be my first but we both know that it won't be the last. And no separation will be forever between us.

You have an important role to play in my future by being my guiding star. You need to concentrate on progressing further instead of immersing yourself in these desolate feelings.

I know you are strong. Not just as a ranker but also as a human being with a determined stance. I want you to put that strength into good use.

Look for opportunities to rank up. I'm sure it'll be hard for your level. But use your time, resources, and mind to come up with a solution. You don't have to worry about my safety anymore.

But not having to worry about my safety doesn't mean freedom to take unnecessary risks.

Use your brawns and brains in the right way to always ensure your survival, no matter what you need to do. Lie to me or anyone if your survival is at stake. Be selfish enough to prioritize your interests.

Only by doing this will you be able to progress further in ranks. Otherwise, you will regret not spending your efforts in the right direction in the future, especially when I overtake you.”

Eren said all that like it was the most obvious thing for him to overtake Nina who was so much ahead of him in rank and experience. Nina realized that Eren had a hand to play in the future. He was basing his predictions on a solid background instead of indulging in euphemism.

She also understood that Eren was telling her to seriously think about finding opportunities to rank up now that she had been given five years to do so without any care.

The Nina of previous timeline had stayed in the city of Osan when Eren was away. But this timeline's Nina had decided that she would explore the world and resume being an adventurer for these five years.

What the duo didn't know was that Nina's decision to explore would alter her fate and make her survive the tragedy that had befallen her in the past timeline, resulting in her death.

But that would be a story for another time. Coming back to the present. Nina wasn't surprised anymore by Eren's wise words like he had lived a lifetime. She had already accepted that Eren was special. He was way too clever to be simply called a clever kid.

"Erni I was going to tell you the same thing for your stay in the academy. But it looks like I don't have to. You even lectured your aunt on this! How cheeky do you want to get in front of me?"

Nina went for her usual move and pulled Eren's cheeks. To which the latter just let her while saying:

"Huh? Aunt who? I don't see any aunt here, do you? I can only see a lovely lady sitting beside me. We are having our outdoor date under the starry sky, surrounded by the green pastures and cold breeze, with only the campfire and each other's body warmth to keep us all cosy."

Eren got closer to Nina and nudged her gently by the shoulder with his. Nina felt Eren body warmth and understood what he meant.

The cold in the air did not affect Nina. But the cold loneliness that was about to hit her soon did. This warmth was all she needed to make that loneliness a little bearable for her.

Then she saw Eren take a sealed bottle out of his ID stone and uncork it before pouring her a glass of wine:

"Erni isn't that the same Madeira wine we had at Soirée Gracieuse? Did you buy another one out of your pocket? Are you trying to take advantage of me again?"

Nina understood Eren's classy act. Get her drunk to get in her pants.

She called him out brazenly for his 'gentlemanly' act. She was anticipating his embarrassment or some sort of an apology. She would have still gotten drunk after that after pulling his legs a little.

But the guy had sold all his shame in the city market before coming here. Eren didn't even flinch when he heard Nina's tease:

"Haah! I'm only giving you the excuse to act liberated in front of me. Otherwise, you'd be as afraid to make a move as an experienced teenage girl.

Now tell me, do you wish to take this excuse off my hands or do you prefer spending this night without it?"

Eren held the wine glass in front of her and stirred it while saying this. He came out in the open to tease her and reverse-tease her in this way. Nina's cheeks were instantly puffed red.

What Eren had said about the wine and her was true. Last time, she blamed everything on the wine. And this time too, the glass stood out as a good excuse for her to let Eren have his way with her.

But after hearing what Eren had to say, she wanted to reject the glass.

Eren had not used any aphrodisiac this time on Nina. he didn't need it. He didn't even need a wine.

Eren had the confidence to go all the way with her tonight. He just wanted to lighten the burden it would place on Nina a little. Hence the wine. Therefore, he cleared up her hesitancy to take the glass:

"It's okay, Nina. I was only kidding. Let's equally blame it on the wine. It's not like the wine will call out our BS. Here, gulp it down this way!"

Saying that Eren took a small sip of the wine. Nina was horrified by his stunt and wanted to stop him. First, he was underage. Second, the wine was made from C Rank ingredients. It was a C Rank debuff potion. Eren would die if he consumed it.