

Vile 431

Chapter 431 A Deal with Benefits

"So tell me Eren, do we have a deal? Offer closes soon, you know."

Dianna said and started drinking her brand of elven ale. Eren pondered a bit before asking with a stern face.

"My funds are kind of dried up after buying that plot of land from you. Can't you offer me some more discount?"

Dianna shook her head before replying:

"Remus Auction House is one of the few kingdom-sanctioned sources you can buy such spells from, Eren. But as a result, we have to give a fixed commission per transaction to the kingdom's Treasury department.

A huge cut from those 20K Extols is going to find its way into the kingdom's sleeves. Any less than 20K, and the offer won't be worth it for us."

Eren sighed dramatically and drank from his pitcher after he heard that. He already knew that 20K Extols for a transcendent-grade time element spell was a steal-deal. Dianna chuckled and thought of teasing the butcher some more.

"Well... there's one way you can have another 50% discount sponsored by me."

Eren's eyes lit up after hearing Dianna. He raised his head and looked at the ranger who was also looking at him with her playful gaze.

'That is... if you sleep with me.'

As an added touch, Diana made the offer over a voice channel. She thought a serious and focused guy like Eren would lose his calm. But contrary to her expectations, she saw him maintaining his serious face before answering her in the same manner.

'Listen here, Dianna. If you think I'll sleep with you just to get a 50 percent discount on the deal...'

Eren chugged the contents inside his pitcher whole before moving on.

"Then... you are abso-fucking-lutely right. Just get the spell first and tell me when and where."

Eren smirked and said the last part out loud which caught Dianna off guard. She then burst into a burst of cheerful laughter before responding with only one simple word.

"Deal!"

Eren nodded and playfully took a closer look at Dianna's bust while knowing full well that she was aware of his gaze. Dianna didn't shy away from a bit of play and stretched her shoulders apart before bringing them closer to make her cleavage look more prominent. She was wearing semi-revealing clothes as always. So she didn't have to do much to flaunt her assets.

"Those are some premium goods, Dianna. I'll be waiting for our deal to get finalized. Cheers!"

Eren toasted to Dianna before getting up from his place. He started walking towards the watchtower Orcs had built and somehow survived the battle.

The ranger looked at him and shook her head while smiling. She thought she had the butcher all figured out. But what started as a prank was now turning out to be something she was also looking forward to.

'You want to get cosy with your team's ranger and captain at the same time? How ambitious!'

Eren heard a familiar voice in his head that he hadn't heard for quite some time now as he was walking towards the watchtower manned by Altashia. The voice belonged to Alephee, which surprised him a bit.

'Haha! It's not ambitious if you know what you are doing. It's been a while, Alephee. Did you sleep okay? Hehe!'

Alephee spoke in a plain voice that seemed devoid of any emotions.

'You can say that. My recovery speed increases as you progress further in your ranking journey. And I can see that you've made a lot of progress already. The marks of sins... hm... let's talk about them later on.

For now, tell me about Layla and that pendant. My memories of your progress are fuzzy because of my state at that time. So it would be better if you tell me what happened from the moment I drifted into slumber.'

Eren nodded and slowed down his stride while telling Alephee everything. The latter took some time to process everything before asking Eren another question.

'So where has this Layla gone off to?'

Eren shook his head in denial before answering.

'She wouldn't tell me. She is not obligated to. Her loyalties lie with Eliza after all.

That young witch often wanders off solo and teleports straight into the personal space of this pendant artefact after every few days. She should be back in three or four days considering she left just before I joined this clean-up mission.'

Eren said and reached out his right hand to check it. Every time Layla appears in the storage space of the pendant, he feels a distinct mana pulse that can only be felt by him. This is because the artefact had been bound to him.

'Hm. Okay. What are you thinking about then? Because I don't see you working for Eliza obediently. But you can't also do much considering she has too many things as leverage over you.'

Eren lit up his smoke when Alephee reminded him of how helpless he was when it came to Eliza. These small victories won't matter if he fails to translate them into something that he could use over the Sage if and when things start turning south for him.

'One step at a time, Alephee. Are you with me?'

Alephee asked the only other person besides Reen he could count on for the pinch he was in. The latter chuckled before responding.

'I won't be able to do much directly. But...'

Alephee took a brief pause before pressing on.

'I'll be helpful in other ways. I'm with you, Eren.

I have to be if we want to leave this place together. It's just a Sage we are dealing with. Hehe! Don't worry too much.'

Eren nodded internally before executing his movement spell to take a long jump. He had reached the watchtower by the time Alephee finished speaking to him.

"What's up, captain?"

Eren asked Altashia after he got up on the watchtower. It was a tiny wooden room with huge windows serving as walls. She was seen patting her demon beast while gazing at the void with blank expressions on her face.

"Hm? What are you doing here, Eren?"

Chapter 432 Opening Up

"Hm? What are you doing here, Eren?"

Altashia got pulled away from her line of thoughts when Roo let her know that there was someone else in the watchtower's room apart from her. She turned around only to find the person that was the reason behind most of her stray thoughts standing with his hands behind his back.

Her cheeks had a tinge of red as a result. But by now, she was a pro at maintaining stoic expressions. So that experience didn't fail her here as she asked the reason for Eren's sudden visit. He was given off time to rest because of his involvement in the battle. He shouldn't have been in the perimeter detail.

"Oh, I came to check up on you. And relieve you of your night watch duties of course. Don't worry. I'm fine. Let's just say that I have discovered a way to quickly recover my stamina and my stats. Hehe!"

Altashia was reminded of Eren's voracious eating habits even though that's not what he meant. She smiled and asked another question in the spur of the moment.

"Your "appetite" indeed knows no bounds. Got bored from flirting with Dianna so you came here?"

This time Eren was taken aback. Even Altashia was also lowkey shocked that she tried to intrude in someone else's space like that. This was her first time doing something like this.

Eren saw the twitch behind Altashia's stoic expressions and realized that the captain was on the verge of breaking character in front of him. He smiled and shook his head before responding.

"Dianna and I... well... Let's just say we have a business deal. Forget about that. You should get up and take a rest as well. Let me man this tower."

Eren just shrugged his shoulders and acted like he didn't care what Altashia was trying to imply. He just had his agenda to carry forward.

Altashia pursed her lips and looked at Eren closely. She looked like she wanted to ask Eren a lot of things. Then she resigned to leaving them be and replied.

"Eren, I'm the least tired person in our team. I don't feel like I need to rest. You are the one who is supposed to be resting, you know."

Eren chuckled before taking out another bottle of elven ale from his space along with a wine glass. He filled the wine glass half-full and poured some ale into his pitcher.

"Here. have this. This elven ale can increase your understanding of the fire element upon drinking. This is a unique blend that is only available in the Lionheart duchy.

You won't find it here. Think you should give it a try. It'll also help you relax a bit."

Eren offered Altashia the wine glass while he drank from his pitcher. The latter looked at the glass and pondered for a bit before taking it in her hands.

The butcher did not come here to woo Altashia. At least that wasn't his primary reason to seek her company tonight.

He wanted her to rest and resign from her inspective duties so that he could sneak out and check up on a few things. He wanted to get to a certain place that he had heard about from his past timeline. And this orc camp was the closest to that place that he had ever come. So he needed to do some recon before setting his next course of action.

This area of the Badlands was restricted to military personnel. So he couldn't get to it by joining any guild. This was one of the major reasons Eren took on assignments in the Nightshade duchy.

He couldn't do what he had been intending to do if there was someone like Altashia keeping a watch over the camp. The sooner she retires, the better it would be for him.

Altashia started drinking some more with Eren. The pair talked about a lot of random things. Then the close combat expert and warrior both exchanged notes on how they could deal with a certain opponent they had seen in today's mission.

The butcher's witty replies would crack Altashia up from time to time. His glib tongue worked wonders when it had the backing of his Sativa-induced mind. This was the first time Altashia could open up to someone like Eren. A feat she had thought she would never be able to achieve.

After loads of laughter and pegs after pegs of booze, Altashia finally loosened up to Eren and commented.

"Sorry for asking something personal earlier, Eren. I just... hehe!

I just thought that you were a lot like me... you know... someone who keeps to themselves. That was until today when I saw a different shade of you. And felt it personally after talking with you."

Altashia looked at her half-finished drink after saying this. She swirled her wine and took another sip before continuing.

"You are indeed a lot like me. Yet I can see that you are more than any of the facets you have shown to any of us so far."

Eren smiled when he heard Altashia say all this about him. He also marvelled at the fact that a girl of her age could think so deeply about so many diverse and subtle things at once. He had to admit that he was not this mature when he was her age.

But Eren didn't say any of this out loud. He wanted to hear all that Altashia had to say without any interruptions.

The ale sure hits the spot, Eren. My fire-element mana is circulating on its own without me feeling any discomfort. Where did you get this?"

Altashia had another sip and couldn't help praising the butcher's booze collection. Eren knew she wasn't really asking for the ale's location. It was just the booze talking. So he let her return to her original line of thoughts without saying a word.

"So where were we? Yes... you! You surprised me. Um... How should I explain this? To me, it felt like you betrayed the camp of introverts I assumed we both belonged to. How stupid of me."

Altashia was starting to feel the effects of the Ace ranked wine Eren had given her. She came very close to Eren and placed her index finger over his chest in an accusing manner before continuing further.

Chapter 433 Hatched

Altashia came very close to Eren and placed her index finger over his chest in an accusing manner before continuing further.

"You are responsible for my rude yet much-needed reality check. Maybe it's my hubris to try and judge a book by its cover. It's an old habit of mine from my shut-in childhood. Hehe! It won't go away that easily.

My loneliness finds comfort in judging people from afar. As it turned out, I was right for most people when I did this.

But I'm glad that you were an exception. You became my eye-opener by being just that."

Eren felt puzzled by what the drunk Altashia was saying. It felt like she was trying to link one small incident with every other scene that had happened to her in the past. But that didn't deter him from making use of the opportunity.

The butcher placed his hands on her hips and pulled her towards him before bringing his face very close to hers. The tip of their noses almost touched each other.

The butcher could feel Altashia's warm and long breathing that was now laced with the aroma of the booze. The butcher's steady breath, which was a mixture of alcohol and Sativa stick, was also felt by the latter. For some reason, that combination didn't repel the warrior.

"Wha... what do you think you are doing, Eren?"

Altashia asked with a slight stutter in her voice. Her index fingers that she had placed over Eren's chest were still between them. And she was applying some pressure through that finger as if telling Eren to step back. But the butcher knew that was just for the show. The force didn't have enough weight behind it for him to think about respecting her space.

"What am I doing? Hm! That's a good question. Let's say I'm trying to get rid of the loneliness you feel. Would... you like to help me?"

Eren asked while maintaining his distance from Altashia. The warrior's body felt like it was burning as the ale's effects were beginning to kick in for real. Eren could feel her body warmth increasing as he stroked her waist with both his hands.

"I... I'm not sure, Er.... Eren. What... ah... do... do what you feel is right"

The butcher couldn't understand Altashia's speech impediment due to her being drunk or overstimulated. But he understood one thing. That the proverbial iron was hot enough for him to hammer it.

He flashed a gentle smile before whispering in Altashia's left ear.

"Close your eyes and respond just how your heart wants you to respond."

Eren kissed Altashia's forehead before continuing. He then lifted his hands and used them to secure her face from both sides before kissing her closed eyelids. By now, her fire-element mana that was excited by the ale was surfacing on various parts of her body in the form of tiny wild flames.

But the girl was too busy doing what Eren had instructed her to do. As a result, Eren started feeling some light burns on his hands that were holding her face. But he didn't tell Altashia to fix it, lest she snaps out of her current zone.

Eren then planted a soft kiss on Altashia's left cheek. Then he drew his face away from her to look at her state.

'She wants more. Better give it to her.'

Eren thought before deciding to dive right back in. He tilted her face using his hands and adjusted his own according to it before planting his lips over hers.

Altashia didn't respond to Eren's kiss at first. But he knew she was too stunned and too drunk to think straight. Plus, her inexperience in the matter didn't help her much.

Eren sucked on her lower lip before sending his tongue inside Altashia's mouth. He let his hands roam free on her back while he did that.

The ice broke eventually. Altashia's hand, which she had used to poke Eren's chest, changed its position and grabbed Eren's collar. Her other arm reached for the back of Eren's head and grabbed his hair.

"Ummm!"

Altashia hummed as she continued to enjoy Eren's advances on her. They both felt that the senses of time had gotten skewed for them as they indulged in each other's company.

While things had gotten wilder than Eren had planned, his objectives remained the same. After tasting Altashia some more, he intended to break the kiss. But that moment came sooner when something poked his cheeks.

Roo was trying to poke Eren's cheek with his beak. The bird didn't quite get what was going on exactly. But he had come to realize that Eren was not doing something weird to his master. Plus, his mental connection with her told him that she was starting to feel good.

But her thoughts were a mess all the same. One of those thoughts told her to get away from Eren. So when Rood heard that, he got to work. He was anyway sitting over Altashia's other shoulder from the very beginning even though the pair had forgotten about him.

Eren couldn't take the bird's disturbance anymore and finally snapped.

"What is this shitty bird trying to do? Poke a hole through my cheeks?"

Eren's words finally brought some sense into Altashia's head as she was pulled back into reality. There was a hue of red on her cheeks that indicated that she could think and be shy for a bit about everything that had happened just now.

But before she could respond to Eren's annoyance with her demon beast, the demon beast himself decided to address his grievances personally. He felt like his status as a demon beast was challenged when he heard the butcher call him a shitty bird.

"Craw!"

Roo croaked while releasing his demon beast aura. He also added his mental waves into the mix as an added effect. But before Eren could respond to such provocation, someone else did it for him.

There was something in Eren's space storage that cracked. It was Eren's egg that he had received as a part of his rewards from Purgatory. Eren could feel that it was creating weird mana pulses inside his storage sense so he took the egg out.

Apparently it had been hatched and was now ready to let its occupant out.

"Keeeee!"

A sharp and high-pitched scream was heard in the surroundings as it fought the effects of Roo's croak. Something was angry at the baby crow for trying to flaunt his skills in front of the butcher.

Chapter 434 Monster and Beast Categories

"Keeeee!"

A sharp and high-pitched scream was heard in the surroundings as it fought the effects of Roo's croak. Something was angry at the baby crow for trying to flaunt his skills in front of the butcher.

Crack!

Thump!

An unexplainable suppression was detonated in the surroundings all of a sudden. The suppression was not entirely related to mana. It was a form of mental suppression that could cloud the minds of low-ranked entities who are exposed to it.

The soldiers that were made to be a part of the perimeter detail were the first group of people that got exposed to it apart from Altashia. Arjun was among those who could identify this phenomenon within seconds.

"This... a demon beast is evolving!"

Arjun thought of Roo at first. But then he felt that the feeling he got wasn't something he could relate to Roo. This beast was from a different hierarchy.

"This feels like... an epic-tier demon beast! Damn it. I hope it doesn't belong to any of our opponents. I have to see and check it out."

Arjun said and instructed a few of his fellow soldiers. Then he disappeared from his position and started approaching the source of this newfound potential trouble.

The rankers of Anfang had categorized beasts into multiple categories— common, uncommon, mutant, epic, legendary, and lastly mythical. The categories or tiers were based on how much of a threat the beasts belonging to their respective categories posed to normal rankers or urban settlements. Common beasts were the least threatening and could be handled by local forces if the beast region or area within the Badlands needed subjugation.

Uncommon beasts were those who needed special arrangements otherwise their special attributes carried the risk of causing casualties.

After mutant beasts, rankers' teams had to be careful when dealing with subjugation. Their strengths couldn't be predicted by normal standards. One of the boars Eren's team had fought and slain belonged to this category.

Epic and legendary tier beasts were normally limited to Badlands. Rankers' teams rarely ventured too far into the Badlands because they feared such beasts. If legendary tier beasts were the king of their regions then the epic tier beasts would be those who were vying for that position in their next evolution.

In general, ranker teams - including those from the army and guilds - encounter creatures of the mutant category at most. Epic tier beasts would normally be handled by special forces present within the armies and guilds.

No matter which kingdom or establishment, rankers of Anfang would not mess with legendary beasts willingly. Because battling with them was bound to turn into a catastrophic event for all the parties involved.

The slaying of legendary beasts could not be done by one team or army. Various forces within any establishment's army and guilds would work for hand in hand to deal with this level of threat. Typically, a ranker would at least need to be in a C-Rank to be part of such a legendary raid.

Mythical beasts were exactly that... mythical. Forget about messing with them. Establishments would surrender their regions to such beasts without even trying their luck at fighting for them. If any of such beasts decided to attack human settlements, then kingdoms would forget all their grievances and come together to deal with such an existence. That's because their survival depended on them.

Both mana beasts and demon beasts could be categorized this way. It's just that the dangers would increase multifold per category when it came to demon beasts due to their crowd control abilities.

Then there were special cases. Or to be specific, certain families of beasts were labelled with a particular category. This was done without taking into account the level of threat they might or might not pose to rankers and their settlements. That's because some bloodlines carry a higher threat potential than others.

Normally, low ranking beasts don't exceed the mutant tier standard no matter their ranking status. That's because establishments could arrange appropriate response teams with ranking status corresponding to the beasts to deal with them most efficiently.

There were few standards of measurement in place other than this vague generalization that would help the ranker distinguish between the beast categories. Calculating the rough BTP estimates using the artefacts was one way. The BTP limits for each rank were different for beasts. There was a larger difference between the initial and final stages of the ranking for the beasts than between human rankers'. The bottleneck difference per BTP was also significantly large.

Rankers would often use artefacts when they were doing their recon missions to find out which rank, type, and category of beasts they were dealing with. This was the primary method to formulate subjugation missions.

The intensity of psychic waves the demon beasts could produce would attest to their categories. The more intense their psychic wave was, the more crowd control abilities they would possess, posing a much higher level of danger.

It was said that each of the demon beasts carried the potential within them to become the progenitor of their race or type. Crowd control was limited for the other races. But for their race, such high-ranking demon beasts would be able to obtain total control over all their lower-ranked kin. This was what made them different from being referred to as mana beasts.

Even monsters on individual levels were categorized the same way. As a result, the monster subjugation mission tended to consider monster tribes as a whole instead of just individual monsters.

Plus, monsters were less likely to travel into urban areas or enter urban territories by leaving their tribes alone unless a coup had taken place. So monster subjugation missions were often limited to the area near the boundaries of the Badlands where the exiled members were forced to go.

Altashia's demon beast was called WindFire Jackdaw. Just like his master, he too had an affinity with fire and wind. It was an ideal match for the warrior. It would grow and eventually step into the epic category when it becomes a high-ranking entity. Further category progression would depend upon the beast's potential as a demon beast and his luck.

But Eren's hatched egg released such intense psychic waves that Arjun could confirm that it belonged to the epic category at its birth. He wasn't sure who had captured such a beast.

Arjun told the rest of the rankers to stay alert. He then approached the tower, which had suddenly become a focal point for all of the rankers present at the orc camp.

Chapter 435 Regality

"Keeeeh!"

The egg cracked and out came a chick that had its eyes closed, which he didn't open for some reason. It was coated with amniotic fluid when it first broke free of its shell. It didn't have any feathers over its body.

The chick had its beak open because it was crying at Roo who was now sitting over his master's shoulder. He had stopped trying to scare Eren. It was his time to be subdued by a beast of a higher tier than him.

Eren had been taking care of the egg in his free time just as instructed by Layla ever since he came out of Purgatory. He would often imbue it with a semblance of his mana in a controlled manner. Then he would wrap his mana sense around the egg to make the embryo get attuned with his mana sense.

Apart from safeguarding the egg, the runes over the egg were also meant to act as the medium between the beast and its tamer. They allowed the beast to get familiar with Eren's Ace Rank mana straight away while it was still in its pre-birth state.

Eren also poured his blood over the runes from time to time so that the beast becomes bound by him even before it is born. This served as a form of blood ritual that was required to tame the demon beast.

Eren had started feeling another channel of mental connection had been opened between him and some entity that didn't seem to have any thoughts for a few days now. He had tried talking to the chick on that channel but so far he only felt the emotions of endearment from it.

This was how the hatched beast could detect Eren getting affected by Roo's psychic waves, even if only a bit. It had already started treating the butcher as its kin. So it decided to break free from its eggshell instead of waiting for things to proceed naturally. To set the records straight with the baby bird who had dared to act this impudently in front of his kin.

The chick stopped screaming and stopped releasing psychic waves when it felt that the tiny bird which had dared to against its master had been quieted down. The sheer intensity of those waves made Roo realize that the newborn would be treated as the leader between them if they decided to subdue the nearby mana beasts at the same time.

The chick was in the Ace Rank from its very birth, thanks to Eren familiarizing it with his Ace mana through the runes' help. This enabled the beast to become compatible with Ace rank mana at its starting point.

That's right!

The chick was a creature of Ace rank from birth. And yet, it wasn't done with its progress. It opened its mouth once again. It wasn't to intimidate anyone.

A mini whirlpool of lightning and fire element mana was created as the chick opened its mouth. It started growing longer and wider ever since its inception.

'He is... devouring fire and lightning element mana in the air. That looks like a derivation of my half-blood powers.'

Eren thought to himself as he watched his newborn demon beast strengthen his position in the Ace Rank by devouring the surrounding mana with his unique inherent spell. He could only come up with one explanation to answer the question he had asked himself.

'It seems that those runes and the blood ritual were the reason behind how this beast turned out to be the way it has.'

Eren concluded and watched as his demon beast progressed further and underwent drastic physical changes. Eren and Altashia stepped aside as the mana storm was created around the newborn demon beast.

The limbs that looked malnourished were the first to be strengthened in the process. The skin without any hair suddenly started growing beastly golden brown fur. The fur could be seen to have a subtle shine over it, which was an indication that it had been strengthened by mana.

The beast's forelegs looked just like the hind legs except they grew bird-like claws and black talons that gave off a menacing vibe. The hind legs of the beast were more beastly.

The beast also grew a tail that was the same length as its torso, which looked flexible and prehensile. Eren concluded that the beast could use the long tail like a whip.

Except for its shoulders and up, the demon beast now had a lion's body. He also seemed to have a very flexible spine considering it had its back bent inwards way more than normal to deal with the pain of the mana-induced sudden growth spurt.

The hind paws also grew thick black talons that looked retractable. The beast appeared to have a very low body fat percentage. Its body seemed to have been packed with muscles that still looked underdeveloped for the time being.

The limbs grew rapidly and stabilized, enabling the demon beast to stand on its four legs firmly. Next, dense feathers could be seen to erupt just below the beast's shoulders, starting at the high back. They looked glistening and smooth as if they were waterproof. Contrary to golden brown fur, the feathers were snow-white in colour, making them have a distinct visual appeal.

The beast's body measured 5ft in height and 7ft in length. But his growth didn't end there. Two eagle-like wings erupted from the tops of the beast's shoulders with a wingspan twice its torso's length for each of the wings.

Eventually, the beast's head became more of what it was born with. It looked even more eagle-like with a sharp, razor-edged sickle beak.

With his Ace Rank progression stopping after breaking into the solid stage of the Ace Rank, the beast's body also stopped progressing any further and stabilized. The mana storm around it simply vanished into thin air, allowing the spectators to take a closer look at his regal form.

"This... this is a gryphon. Epic tier!"

Altashia mumbled to herself. But because everything around her was quiet, Eren could hear it as well. The latter shared her surprise as well. That's because beasts like gryphons were very rarely seen by normal rankers. Rankers' teams usually had to go deep into the Badlands for this to happen.

The butcher looked at his newly acquired demon beast and had to admit that he looked intimidating, courtesy of his inborn regality. And this was when he was just born.

Chapter 436 Argo

The mana signature the demon beast gave off also had a resemblance with Eren's mana signature. The mental connection he shared with his newborn demon beast also stabilized, enabling both the beast and him to feel what the other was feeling or thinking about.

The butcher had to admit that despite all that had happened, purgatory was a huge opportunity for Eren. Maybe an epic-tier beast wasn't enough for her, but for Eren who couldn't count on his most trusted partner, this beast was a huge power-up.

Eren also understood at this point that Eliza had only offered him the beast so that he could make effective use of it when she assigned him the task she wanted to be done by hook or crook. He didn't believe for a second that the beast was offered to him out of Sage's goodwill.

After all, a gryphon could be a suitable mount for him to fly. And that enabled a more effective set of tactics he could apply to all of his plans. Tactics that were difficult to counter.

Due to his underdeveloped physique, it looked like he wouldn't be able to support the butcher's weight in a constant flight. The most it could do now was give him a short flight experience or help slow down his sudden vertical fall. But the beast will eventually grow in a normal manner after a few more months.

The beast was still yet to open its eyes. He turned his neck 180 degrees towards his master before turning his body in that direction as well. He walked up to Eren and rubbed the back of his forehead against Eren's face while growling a bit.

"Hm? Who am I? Well... you can call me Eren. Your master."

Guttural!

"What does Eren mean by that, you say? It's just my name that was given to me after I was born."

Guttural!

"You want a name too? Well.. that... makes sense. Let me think."

Eren patted the beast's head while understanding the beast's intentions through his mental connection with him. It looked like the conversation was going in multiple directions all at once as Eren kept on giving many seemingly coherent and incoherent replies.

The beast already measured up to his shoulders when he greeted his master for the first time after his birth. His half-opened, curved blackshine beak of a mouth would release a guttural sound whenever the butcher answered one set of questions.

"Argo!"

Eren said his newborn beast's name out loud and finalized it while patting him and caressing his soft-feather-like neckline. The beast didn't mind the name and released some more guttural sounds in affirmation.

Croak!

Altashia's demon beast produced a low pitched noise towards his master when he witnessed an epic-tier demon beast's birth. He had subconsciously understood that Argo was at a level above him in the beastly hierarchy. So he tried to make his concerns known to Altashia.

Argo heard Roo's croak and narrowed his light blue eyes on him as he turned his head 180 degrees. Eren had to admit that his beast was blessed with a lot of seemingly simple yet convenient features at birth. Since he could now share his senses with Argo, he could see what was in front of him from two perspectives. That is if he used his mental connection with the demon beast.

Argo rubbed his head against Eren's chest before straightening his neck up. Then he started walking towards Altashia and her demon beast. His walk was a little shaky since he had just been born and his feet felt wobbly to him. But that didn't prevent Argo from exuding a regal aura a beast like Roo could never match up to in their current ranks.

Roo wanted to assume his true form as well. But Altashia prevented him from doing so. She didn't want a fight to take place between the two demon beasts.

Argo stopped a few inches away from Altashia and looked at Roo who was sitting over her left shoulder vigilantly. He brought his neck closer to the baby crow before making another set of guttural noises.

Altashia looked at Eren who was standing in front of her at the other corner of the watchtower's observation room with keen eyes. It was clear she was looking for a translator.

Eren massaged his forehead before stating what his demon beast wanted to convey to Roo. He looked like he was anticipating trouble dealing with Argo.

"Um... he is saying that if Roo makes one more pass at me or him, he'll have him for his next meal. He is also saying that he is very hungry and could use some nutrition."

Altashia raised her eyebrows and looked at Argo again when she heard Eren's statement. The beast didn't even flinch when he felt her presence. Even without Roo's help, she could beat the crap out of the current Argo. His beastly senses should have been enough to make him understand just that.

The Mana and Demon Beasts respected power above all. They wouldn't be imprudent to act against someone placed higher than them in the food chain unless there were special circumstances.

And yet, Argo was bold enough to make that claim in front of Altashia. Something told her the beast was extremely prideful and battle thirsty in nature. So much so that he could suppress his beastly nature—indicating a will to fight someone stronger than him without any hesitation.

'This guy seems even more of an edgelord than Ivor.'

Eren sighed after talking to himself. He already started comparing Argo with Reen in his head and found out that he was lucky to have Reen as his first partner in crime instead of Argo. Especially when he was handling things related to the case of Osan Woods' Butcher. At that time, If he had a demon beast like Argo instead of Reen who wasn't aggressive by nature, he would have had a tough time covering his tracks the way he had covered them.

Roo didn't reply to Argo's challenge in any way. It stared at him for a while before bringing his neck down in submission. Altashia's assumptions about beasts did come true. The only beast that followed the pattern was hers. Meanwhile, she looked at Eren with keen eyes.

Now with this beast added into the equation, Eren had one more trump card in his sleeves. It didn't seem that far-fetched anymore that he would challenge Altashia to a fight in the future not far from today.

Chapter 437 Freedom-Loving Individuality

"Kiyeeeeee!"

Argo let out an exciting cry after he saw the world outside from the spacious windows of the watchtower's room. He looked at Eren and flapped his newly formed wings before letting out some more guttural noises.

"You want to go outside? I mean you can..."

Argo didn't wait anymore after he processed Eren's permission. He broke through the windowsill and the wooden construction of the room and jumped out the window. It seemed that he was already tired of the confines of the cramped room.

Argo took a huge lead with his jump and travelled a bit in the air, thanks to the momentum he generated with the push of his hind legs. He then flapped his wings rapidly in anticipation of the unfettered flight he desired. But things don't always work out according to plan.

"Kiyaaaaaak!"

The cry this time reflected shock and desperation.

Lil Argo had to learn his life lessons on the very first day of his birth. He crashed to the ground right after the momentum of the jump was killed by gravity.

Altashia ran to the window Argo had jumped from. She wanted to see if the demon beast she had just witnessed being born would die from his stupidity on the very same day. Eren didn't move from his position. He just kept on massaging his head as if he was already aware of what was happening down there.

Argo got up from his awkward position on the ground and shook his head vigorously. He then cleaned himself up with his beak before releasing another cry at the sky. Next, the demon beast started running on the ground while flapping his wings as hard as he could.

It wasn't long before Argo's jumps started looking like broken flight attempts. This continued for a while.

The demon beast finally succeeded in having a stable flight experience after some more tries and desperate struggles.

"Kiyaaaaah!"

A sharp and loud eagle cry was soon heard and spread across the orc camp. Argo soon started zipping across the camp's territory with incredible speed. His flight wasn't completely stable yet as he would sometimes slam into the ground all of a sudden. But that didn't prevent the beast from experiencing what he was born to experience— freedom!

"Arjun, no need to be afraid. It's Eren's demon beast. You can come here."

Altashia said to Arjun as she felt his presence with her mana sense. The guy was trying to maintain a safe distance from the watchtower in fear that it was taken over by monsters or a wild demon beast.

As the ranger climbed the watchtower, he appeared at the edge of the broken windowsill. He was followed by some other soldiers who had also come to check things out.

"Eren, care to explain?"

Altashia asked Eren after everyone was gathered in the watchtower room. The latter sighed and served them a fresh course of bullshittery he had cooked up some time ago. That he had ventured a bit deeper into the Badlands one day on border patrol duty. That he came across the egg while exploring an unknown cave located at the very top of some mountain peak.

One had to admit that telling lies came naturally to Eren. He couldn't have explained the origin of the egg properly without raising suspicions had he still been in the Lionheart duchy. But now that he was in Nightshade Duchy, especially in an area that borders the Badlands, the egg's made-up origin made sense.

Arjun and other soldiers were more surprised about the fact that Eren had an epic-tier demon beast than anything else. They started asking about the so-called mountain peak he had gotten the egg from. Maybe other soldiers would get lucky too if they decided to follow his head.

The butcher burst their bubble by telling them that there was nothing else in the cave apart from the egg he had received. Plus, he told them that he didn't remember where he had been and mapped out a large and dangerous area for them to comb through. The difficulty of locating the same cave caused other soldiers gathered around Eren to give up on trying.

The team's captain listened to everything silently from the sidelines before finally speaking up.

"*Sigh My family had to go to extra lengths to find someone like Roo for me. And you just randomly picked up a demon beast that was an apt match for you. Talk about luck!"

Altashia sighed before and after she expressed her bafflement over Eren getting his demon beast. She then straightened her posture, adorned a gentle smile on her face and continued.

"That being said, I'm glad that I'm not the only tamer in our team now. Plus, we both have flying mounts. Maybe we can race sometimes when your Argo grows up a bit to see who is faster among them."

Eren returned Altashia's smile with a smile of his own. He was about to reply that Roo might not stand a chance competing with him once Argo gets adjusted to flying. That's when he heard Argo do that for both of them.

"Kiyeeeee!"

Eren smiled mirthlessly before translating his demon beast's thoughts to Altashia.

"He says, 'Bring it on!'"

Eren's statement was followed by another eagle cry. The butcher translated that for his teammates as well.

"But not before he practices some more."

Then Altashia explained the process of registering the demon beast to his name in Edinburgh's official records. He was serving in the army anyway as part of his assignment. The process would be completed shortly after he raised it. He could do that after the team gets back to the army camp.

Eren might be asked to extend the duration of his army duties. Or he might need to participate in a kingdom-level mission to legally own the demon beast inside the kingdom of Edinburgh. but that would come after he gets back to the camp.

Argo eventually came down from his first flight and landed on the watchtower's ceiling, which made the wooden ceiling creak. He had somehow caught a Novice rank Earth Suidae in his talons. It was apparent by the prey's body that Argo had dropped it many times before picking it back up.

"Kiyeeeh!"

Argo cried while looking at Eren.

"Oh, I'm good. You can have that for yourself."

Eren conveyed his refusal to eat an Earth Suidae to his freedom-loving demon beast. The latter must have thought 'more for me'. Because he shook his head and flapped his wings a bit before closing them. Then he started to dig in without the slightest care for his surroundings.

One had to admit that Argo was someone who liked to be self-reliant even while being Eren's demon beast. He had hunted the first meal of his life all by himself without depending on anyone.

Nobody knew at the time that Argo's name and his individuality would one day be recorded in the annals of Anfang's history forever.

Chapter 438 Bottled-Up

"What are you planning to do with him?"

Altashia asked Eren while looking at Argo who was having his feast. The butcher sighed while looking at his demon beast. He ignited his smoke using his fire mana, and then took a long drag. He responded while staring blankly at the white fog he had just exhaled.

"The key question is, what will he do with me? When you lose something that matters to you, do you have the guts to seek something at the cost of being reminded that you can lose that too?"

Eren said and looked at Argo. But Altashia felt that Eren's line of thoughts had focused on someone other than his newly blood-bound demon beast. She could also feel that Eren was missing someone even when he should be happy about finding someone he could always count on. So she had to ask.

"Are we still talking about Argo, Eren?"

Altashia's question reminded Eren that he had lost track and started missing Reen because Argo reminded him of her. After he had come out of the separate dimension, his mental connection with her was not stable. He couldn't feel what she was feeling through her senses.

That worried him the most. He didn't know what Eliza was doing with her. He could only find solace in the fact that the existence of his mental connection with Reen hadn't completely vanished. But this was not something Eren would be satisfied with.

'I'll burn that mummy along with this whole kingdom down if she decides to use Reen as a sacrifice. Sages or gods, I'll find a way to chop down anyone who comes in my way.'

Whether he knew it or not, Argo's personality was resonating within Eren as he thought of something radical. He then chuckled to himself before having another thought in his head.

'Heh! They call me the butcher right? I'll be sure to live up to that name when the time comes.'

Eren then looked at Altashia who was looking at him with keen eyes. They were again left alone in the watchtower while the rest of the gathered rankers scurried about doing their duties.

Eren's distraught state had created a ripple in his mana signature and it gave off a cold feeling. His aura had become bloodthirsty for a while. Since she was so close to him, Altashia couldn't miss that. She wanted to ask him what he was thinking. But the butcher beat her to it by telling her what he was thinking at the time. He wanted her to get back to Argo's topic so that she would not ask him what he was feeling when he was giving off that aura.

"I want Argo to become like me yet I want to become like him when the dust settles around me. We are two different breeds, Altashia. Two different animals altogether.

It's not even a day since I got him and I can already feel his intense desire to stay as free as he is now. These feelings... will only grow from here. Since I'm connected to him, these feelings echo within me. I'm afraid it's me who is going to get swayed by his emotions rather than the other way around."

Eren told Altashia the truth so that she would not ask for another truth from him. He pressed on to change the topic to something that would benefit him. Since Altashai was well connected with Edinburgh and in some capacity privy to the controlled information kept hidden from most rankers, he wanted to try his luck at asking her exactly that.

"You know what it's like. What do you think?

How can the bond between us and demon beasts become so personal?

What is the blood ritual?

How can it affect us so much?

What is it about the connection with the demon beasts that have such power to capture the hearts of rankers?

What is the reason behind demon beasts being so different from mana beasts? Why do the establishments want more of them in their fold through us and yet fear them?"

Eren collected all the questions he ever had about the demon beasts in his mind and released them all at once. Because just like some of his primal emotions, the questions he had about things he barely understood were also bottled up way past his mental limit. He needed to understand the demon beast and their significance in the lives of those who were bound to them.

Altashia had realized that Eren was trying to change the subject to hide the inner agitation he had just felt. She felt that he had hoarded a lot of things in his head. But she also knew by now that the guy was tight-lipped about a lot of things. So there was no getting rid of his nature anytime soon. He won't tell her anything just because she asked him nicely or shared an intimate moment with him. In a way, she could relate to him. Because she was a lot like him.

So she patted Roo sitting over her shoulder before using a voice communication channel to speak to Eren.

'Eren, I don't need to tell you how strict Edinburgh is in controlling the flow of information regarding the demon beast. I'm one of the lucky ones who didn't have to sign a strict binding contract because of my family's connection. So I can at least talk about it to some extent.

Normally I wouldn't have told you anything. But since you have asked this after getting bound with a demon beast and struggling to make sense of it, I'll let you in on a few details. After all, I am a demon beast owner myself.'

Altashia paused and watched as Roo flew in the sky. The demon beast had changed his shape midway after he left his previous position and assumed his normal form.

Then she continued as she watched Roo flying off in a distance.

'The establishments of the Anfang don't fear the demon beasts. Not really.

I mean if it is their crowd-control ability we are talking about, then yeah, it does possess some danger. But it's nothing the establishments can't deal with using some form of preparedness.

What the establishments fear is the power of shapeshifting. Demon beasts and half-bloods fall in those categories. That's because they can tap into the power of shapeshifting and cause some severe havoc.

This fear stems from the period of Lost History of Anfang. I don't know much about Lost History myself. So your guess is as good as mine when it comes to assuming what might have happened during that time.'

Altashia paused and took a long breath before proceeding.

'But... even that is not the main reason behind why the kingdoms of Anfang fear the shapeshifters.'

Chapter 439 Transcendent

'But... even that is not the main reason behind why the kingdoms of Anfang fear the shapeshifters.'

Eren narrowed his eyes as he listened to Altashia. A range of thoughts kept forming in his head before disappearing just as quickly. But he didn't say a word— hinting Altashia to continue. The latter did just that.

'But even that is not the main reason behind why the kingdoms fear the shapeshifters. You have to understand that the power of shapeshifting doesn't belong to this world. Humans can't shapeshift by the natural order of this world.

They say that whenever someone taps into the power of shapeshifting, they corrode this world's consciousness and allow a foreign world's mana and consciousness to seep into it.

I don't know what that entails. But considering the measures taken by all the establishments in unison despite all their grievances and conflicts, we can assume that it's not something good.'

Altashia said and looked at Eren who was seen smoking while immersed in thoughts of his own. Her gaze focused on his lips for a moment, remembering the kiss they had just shared. She then looked at his facial expressions and realized that he wasn't thinking anything even remotely related to that moment.

'How stupid of you, Altashia. Of course, it's not a big deal for him. It's only a big deal for you because it was your first kiss. That guy must have...'

Altashia wandered off on a different tangent for a while in her head before coming back to the point of getting discussed between them.

'The blood ritual is you validating a demon beast's existence in this world under your name as the native resident of this world. It's sort of like you are making the beast an extension of yourself so that it doesn't get treated like an outsider. You are taking responsibility for that beast.

In return, the demon beast's personality changes when you bind it with yourself through the blood ritual. The beast absorbs a part of your existence and personality. That's why the tamed demon beasts are often a lot like their masters.

That freedom-loving individuality you see in Argo? A part of it is the beast itself. However, your personality also played a role. Or a facet of it at least.

The demon beast becomes loyal to you and only you, who is a native of this world. And by that extension, it becomes loyal to this world because you are part of this world.

As for why such a deep bond gets created between the demon beast and their tamers? Well, if something is an extension of your existence, why would you not feel attached to it? Will you ever feel detached from one of your limbs?'

Eren nodded his head in affirmation after hearing Altashia's response. He didn't get why demon beasts were treated as outsiders of the world. They were supposed to be just mana beasts with higher intelligence. So he started hypothesizing in his head.

'Were the mana beasts getting possessed by something foreign to the world resulting in the creation of demon beasts? If so, why are demon beasts vulnerable to being bound by rankers at the time of their ranking breakthrough? Does something happen when they are breaking through? Do they lose some form of protection at the time of their breakthrough?'

These were the assumptions Eren had come up with after reading through a lot of information he had collected from various sources in his past and present timelines. Nina's explanations about foreign mana along with Altashia's statements created a blurred picture for him that could only get clearer as he kept on learning new things.

"One last question, Altashia. Is it possible for a ranker to get bound with more than one demon beast?"

Eren narrowed his eyes looking at the void. This was the last doubt he had. He knew his guess in this matter was spot on. Still, he wanted to confirm.

"Um... no. Not by normal methods at least. The lost paths of mana may contain cultist methods that I am not aware of. But they would also have negative side effects for rankers with more than one mana beast. And they should be apparent from the very moment someone tries doing something like that."

After confirming something in her head, Altashia spoke. As if she was trying to read something she had come across a long time ago. She took a short pause before continuing.

"Normally, if someone tries to blood bound a second demon beast, their mind breaks and the blood ritual fails. Even demon beasts don't come out unscathed from this. Their mana cores get destroyed and most just die. There are plenty of records regarding this very thing, tried by cultists and rogue rankers. The records are available in my family's ancestral library. So this is something I can say with confidence.

Why are you asking though? It's not like you would always get lucky and find another demon beast by chance. Hehe."

Altashia chuckled and looked at Eren who was also smiling. The latter was smiling for a different reason though.

While Altashia was explaining things to Eren, he suddenly remembered that he was technically bound with two demon beasts. Which, to his knowledge, was something that was considered nearly impossible.

He didn't feel any negative side effects of having been bound with the second demon beast. His mind was as clear as it was before Argo was hatched. Argo seemed to be in good shape as well.

He then remembered Eliza calling Reen a clean slate. One of her traits as a demon beast was supposed to create zero-conflict with any form of elements, mana or existence. She was created to keep this world's consciousness from seeping into her very being.

It meant that her bloodline powers gave him the ability to transcend the limits set for ordinary rankers. He realized why he was so compatible with foreign magic after he got over the initial rejection.

'Clan of Samael and its last scion Eliza. I don't know what you were thinking by creating someone like Reen. But your legacy... I'll show you how it should be used.'

Chapter 440 Courage

"Thank you for sharing things and your experiences with me, Altashia. I don't know how to repay you. You seem to have everything."

Eren flashed a light smile to Altashia when the pair was done talking. He returned the gesture before adding more.

"My pleasure, Eren. You don't have to repay me with anything. Hehe! I only cleared some minor doubts you had because I wanted to help a fellow demon beast owner."

Eren smirked before activating his time-element spell along with his movement spell. Altashia saw him disappear from her sight only to appear two inches away from her.

Altashia's mana sense could keep up with Eren's movements, no sweat. So she didn't understand what he was doing as she stopped ghostly hands that had appeared beside either side of her face with hands of her own.

"I know one way I can repay you. I'll show you if you could allow me."

Altashia's cheeks turned red as Eren's voice was heard near her right ear after he seemingly morphed into existence. She was about to argue but Eren cut her short.

"I saw the way you looked at me when you thought I wasn't paying attention. Why look at the goods from afar and torture yourself when you can just have them? I certainly won't allow myself to go through that form of torture if I could help it."

Altashia thought that ale's intoxicating effects were cut short by the incident that had unfolded. But now that Eren had gotten so near to her, she felt that intoxication once again. She soon realized that this intoxication wasn't caused by the ale but by something much more primal that she hadn't experienced yet.

"Eren... What happened between us was just an accident. I..."

Eren chuckled before cutting her speech short.

"If that was an accident, I'm fine with those accidents happening over and over again. I'll not shy away from getting you drunk to try that same move again, you know."

Altashia had a blank face after Eren said what he said. She then burst into laughter.

"Hehehe! You are very shameless. How can one man have so many different shades to him?"

Eren closed the distance between him and Altashia some more by walking a step closer to her. Their bodies were almost touching each other.

"Why should I feel any shame in kissing a girl as talented and gorgeous as you? If I need to be shameless to have a chance with you, I'll strive to become the biggest shameless Edinburgh has ever seen."

Altashia couldn't stop laughing when she heard Eren's witty response. Her recluse heart was also softened by the compliment she received from him. It wasn't that she hadn't received compliments. But she could tell that Eren meant every word he said.

"Eren, do you want to be with me?"

Eren nodded his head without a second's delay when Alashia asked him the question on a serious note. She narrowed her eyes and looked into Eren's before proceeding.

"You will only be with me while we are together. And nobody else. Will you agree now?"

The butcher suppressed a sudden urge to cough as he maintained eye contact with Altashia. He had almost forgotten that not every female ranker would be like Nina, Renita or Jules who would just allow him to plough around.

"How about we get together first and then work on details?"

Eren flashed a forced smile. Altashia smirked at his reply before responding.

"Being with me isn't as simple as you thought it'd be, is it? Frankly, I don't see a problem in you accepting this. I have a better background. I'm a superior ranker than you as of now."

This time Eren's facial expressions turned somewhat serious. He put his hands down and responded after a short pause.

"Talent, background, and dedication to work hard aren't everything. Sometimes you need the courage to stand up with your broken pieces and show it to the world that there's still a fight left in you."

The interaction that was supposed to be romantic suddenly took a strange turn. Altashia knew that she was the reason behind it. She didn't like to sugarcoat her words. So she meant it when she said she was a superior ranker than Eren.

"You think you have that courage and I don't?"

Eren shook his head in denial before replying.

"You didn't get it. Courage comes only when you are scared. You were never scared of anyone. So of course you wouldn't have it."

Altashia chuckled when she heard Eren's response. She didn't want to hurt the guy. So she placed her right hand over his chest and replied.

"Eren, what you said makes sense on a philosophical level. But it doesn't change the ground reality. And please don't get offended. It wasn't my intention."

Eren placed his right hand over her and pressed on it before responding.

"Give me a month and three chances. Without any of our demon beasts getting involved. I'll challenge you to three duels. If I don't win even after the third try, I'll accept anything and everything you say.

But...

After I win, you will retract your statement that you are a superior ranker and come on a date with me without any of those conditions. Deal?"

Altashia puffed her cheeks as she heard Eren's proposals as if she had been offended.

"You can't beat me anytime soon. At least not within a month. I'm close to breaking through to my current rank while you are still.."

Eren just shrugged his shoulders in response before adding up.

"All the more reasons for you to accept the deal. Why worry when you can win the challenge easily?"

Altashia smiled mirthlessly as if she had given up on convincing Eren.

"Alright. One month. Three tries. Let's see how much you progress within this one month."

Eren understood what Altashia said and smiled. She had told him she would win all three tries after checking out his progress. If nothing else, Eren liked Altashia's subtle way of giving a burn to someone.

Eren dropped his shoulder and turned away as if he was being disappointed. Altashia saw that and felt a bit guilty about it. In feeling that she let her guard down. The next thing she knew, her lips were pressed upon something and her normal vision was blocked by someone very close to her.

Eren had planted a lip lock when Altashia least expected it. She didn't feel like responding to the guy's rude way of dealing with these delicate things. So she pinched his stomach with her hand while imbuing it with her mana. But even that didn't help. So she pushed him away with great force.

Eren was thrown outside the open window while making a whistling noise. He landed just beside Argo, who had just finished his first meal. The blood of his meal was all over the ground. Thankfully, Eren landed just outside the bloody and messy area.

"Kiyeeeh!"

"Yeah. I'm alright."

Eren consoled his demon beast and stood up from his position. He dusted his clothes and looked at Altashia, who was smiling. That fall of his had taken out all the grievances she had with him.

The butcher returned her gaze with equal playfulness before mumbling something very softly. He didn't use mana-imbued voice or voice communication when he did so.

But Altashia was able to lip-read and understand what Eren had said just fine. She smiled when she decoded his message as she saw him walking towards Argo while dusting his butt off.

'Altashia darling, this is called courage.'

He had said.