

Vile 571

Chapter 571 Idolized

Gladius still had one last thing to clear with Tuan after taking care of all the investigative matters and getting into an arrangement of convenience. He coughed awkwardly before speaking up once again.

"By the way, Tuan, that Ogre Lord's Labrys. I suppose you have it. Frankly, that Ogre Lord was placed just for intimidation. We weren't expecting the contestants to actually slay it.

The artifact that you have... is kind of precious and rare. Would you mind giving it to us?"

Gladius asked and sighed. The double-bitted ax was supposed to increase the Orc Lord's destructive power, making it near impossible for the contestants to even think about launching a raid on him. The artifact was something that had been found in the ruined city. It wasn't supposed to be taken by any ranker.

"I... I really like that ax sir. Can... Can you consider that as my payment for cooperating with your investigation? Besides, the contestants as well as the viewers have already seen me using the ax.

So don't you think it would be bad publicity for the House Titus if the organizers make me give them the weapon I earned through the monster drop. Especially someone like me, the winner of the tournament?"

Tuan asked with an awkward smile on his face while scratching his forehead. This was the first transcendent-grade weapon he had laid his hands on. He wouldn't let it get taken away from him just like that.

Gladius Red heard Tuan's speech and pondered for a bit. Everything the butcher said made sense to him. So he contacted his higher-ups once again and had a brief chat.

Gladius then looked at Tuan with a bright smile before commenting.

"Tuan, good news. You can have the weapon. But you won't be able to have anything else apart from the 100 thousand Extols. You'd have to let go of other gifts we had arranged for you. Is that okay?"

"Deal." Said Tuan immediately.

The butcher didn't even ask Gladius about what other prizes were going to get awarded to him apart from 100 thousand Extols. That's because he knew that those gifts won't contain another transcendent-grade weapon. Therefore, he had no interest in them.

After settling a few more details with Tuan, Gladius was very satisfied with Tuan's way of handling things. He felt like he wasn't talking to someone hot-blooded guy but a guy as mature as him.

Finally, Gladius wrapped up the whole thing by adding further.

"Alright. Your fanbooth... no.. the entire Aranger stadium is waiting for you. It would be too boring to see them using the normal means. Hehe! Come with me."

Gladius chuckled and told Tuan to follow him. The two were soon out of his study room and went towards another hall that had an array etched onto its ground.

"We made some special arrangements for our winner. Go ahead. Stand inside the array eye."

"Drin... Drin.... You did great, my man. That Tuan guy was too cunning. Had it been a mano-e-mano showdown, there's no way he would have won by defeating you."

"Katalina.... Marry me!"

"Hahahaha! Wayne Wilder is the true champion of this tournament, no matter what anyone says."

"Bianka would have made it into Top 3 with the way she was going had it not been for the safe area getting revoked in the middle of the night right? Did you see the kind of trap she had set for Katalina and the rest?"

"Don't beat yourself too much, Ketsu. You did really well for a ranger. But teaming up with Lily was a bad choice."

"Silvera Rehrook, we from the elf community are proud of your achievements. We would be happy to invite you on our Badlands exploration."

"Lily... marry me!"

"Wait, aren't you the same guy who asked Katalina to marry you?"

"Yeah... so what? I'd like to marry them all. Hahahaha!"

The Top 10 of the tournament were received with various praises and a bunch of criticisms as soon as they all appeared collectively in the middle of Arangar colosseum. Each of them then proceeded to approach their respective fan booth to greet their loyal fans.

A raised platform was created in front of each booth to allow the contestants to stand up on it and listen to their fans. It also acted as a security set up in case any of the fans tried to breach the security protocol and get handsy with the contestant.

Each contestant knew what to do. They maintained their cheerful expressions while waving at their booth and the rest of the arena from time to time.

But there was one fan booth that did not receive any contestant greeting it. Tuan was yet to arrive at the scene. Not just his fans, almost all of the viewers present in the colosseum were waiting for his entrance.

As the sun was just about to set, the orange-red sky of the colosseum was lit up anew in a fiery light. This light came from the opening of two giant fire wings that bloomed in the sky out of nowhere.

The Fire Wings had a wingspan of 50 meters each. When they made a flapping motion, a haze wave was generated that traveled to the arena at a rapid pace. The colosseum's defensive measures kicked in and they created a thin mana membrane to stop the haze from harming the viewers, especially mortals.

"That... there's someone in the sky... flapping those wings."

"Holy.... That's Tuan Aag! What a badass entry! Woohoo!"

"Tuan....!"

"Tuan... you fucking cheater cock!"

"Tuan... my idol!"

"Long live the Flame Feathers! Our one and only god of flames!"

"Hahahaha! I knew Tuan from the moment he entered the city of Arangar. Look where he has reached now because of my guidance."

"Tuan... I... I'll give you what your cheating wife couldn't. My absolute and untarnished loyalty. Please... please marry me."

Tuan slowly approached the ground as the giant wings that were behind his back allowed him to descend slowly. He wasn't controlling those wings because they weren't cast by him. The organizers had hired an array master to pull this visual trick off.

Booom!

Again, various fireworks painted the sky in various colors just when Tuan touched the ground. Behind him, a huge golden gate made of eye-blinding brilliance appeared and out came Gladius.

"Rankers and respectable viewers..."

I give you the champion of this year's Titus tournament.

Tuan Aag!"

Chapter 572 Accepting Rewards

"Rankers and respectable viewers! I give you the champion of this year's Titus tournament. Tuan Aag!"

Gladius greeted his audience as soon as he stepped out of the array-generated golden gates. He had his platform that started levitating off the ground as soon as he stepped on it. The contestants' platforms also started levitating at the same time before surrounding Gladius in a circle.

Tuan's platform was levitating at the same height as Gladius'. Others' platforms were located at a bit lower altitude.

Gladius first talked about the Top 10 contestants, starting from the Top 10th position. He depicted each of their battles and gave them appropriate praise for their accomplishments.

The battle scenes of each ranker were shown on the spectral screens as Gladius addressed them and their accomplishments. The audience also listened attentively, applauding their respective idols from time to time.

It was a while before Gladius moved on to finally address Tuan and his deeds.

"Dear viewers, this year's tournament was about strength, courage, and cunning. The strength to surpass the odds. The courage to face your fears. You need cunning to outsmart your opponents.

Tuan Aag has done all of that and then some more, outshining his competition by a large margin in each of those segments. And that's why he is standing as the winner of the tournament in front of all of us."

One had to say that Gladius was an excellent host. His way of putting the narrative forwards was impeccable and flawless. He depicted Tuan's achievements in such a heroic way that even the butcher doubted whether he really was the hero they thought he was.

Gladius also came up with valid reasons for each of Tuan's actions. He declared that Tim and Langdon were caught rigging the array setup the subspace had and hence were kicked out of the tournament.

'How do you feel when the dead bear the blame for something you do? It's almost like a pattern now. First Dom. Then these guys. Hehe!'

Aleph commented in the butcher's head as she also listened to Gladius' tweaked narration of the events. The butcher smirked at her comment but chose to remain silent. In his defense, both those circumstances weren't planned by him.

Gladius's patchwork of events continued.

"The Field Boss' job was to intimidate the rankers. But do you guys know the other reason for the monster's existence in subspace?

It was to test the contestants' courage. Had any of them chosen to form a raid team and initiated the attack on the monster, it would have meant that those involved in the team were bold and brave-hearted enough to take on something that was beyond their limits."

Gladius looked at the audience. Then he looked meaningfully at each of the contestants with a smile on his face before continuing.

Not just Tuan. If any one of the rankers, either collectively or individually, had tried to raid the monster, they would have come to know that the monster was only a test of their courage. He could have been dealt with easily if any of them had just tried to attack him.

Only Tuan was bold enough to attack the Ogre Lord solo. If that isn't enough of a testament to his unparalleled level of courage compared to other Top 10 contestants, then I don't know what is."

Drin looked down and narrowed his eyes when he heard Gladius explain about placing the Field Boss as a decoy. Then he looked at Tuan as if trying to understand something about him.

'I checked that Ogre Lord myself. He was no decoy. At least he wasn't when I checked him out. Did they only make him weak on the last day? Or did Tuan find a way to solo-kill a quasi Ogre Overlord?'

Drin was just thinking along those lines when he heard Gladius' words.

"The Ogre Lord was only supposed to get weak when you approached him intending to fight. This was a test of courage. It would have lost its meaning if everybody could figure out that the monster was a decoy."

Drin smiled mirthlessly when he heard this aptly placed explanation. He stopped thinking about his loss and sighed. He thought that maybe he was getting jealous of Tuan because he snatched his first place.

Almost every other contestant had the same thoughts as Drin running in their heads. They finally put it to rest when they heard Gladius speak. But for all of Gladius' talks, his rational explanation was a cover-up. He didn't want people to know that the Ogre Lord's array setup had malfunctioned after all.

"Tuan has not only won our hearts with his display of courage against the Ogre Lord but also has won a genuine transcendent-grade artifact that he received as a monster drop.

Ace Tuan Aag, all your efforts have made it possible for you to have these achievements. We thank you for showing us the valorous way with which you fought these days. Please accept this gift as your championship reward as well."

Gladius sent a sophisticated-looking ammolite stone toward Tuan using levitation magic. The latter caught it instantly and infused it with his mana. Due to its precious and fine workmanship, it was also an expensive storage space artifact.

In the next moment, a large spectral screen was emitted from the stone, which displayed the contents inside. Loads and loads of Extols were displayed by the spectral display, indicating that Tuan had indeed received 100 thousand Extols that was promised to him.

'Damn. They could have given this to me normally. There was no need for such a flashy display.'

Eren sighed and kept the storage space. He then bowed towards Gladius, letting him know that he was fine with the gift he had received. The latter smiled and talked more about his performance.

Eren's platform was finally sent back when Gladius was done speaking about him. By bringing Drin's platform forward, he then started speaking about him and his battles. Drin was going to receive 40 thousand Extols as a second placeholder.

Eren knew that the subsequent prize money and items for the rest of the rankers were only going to get lower in terms of their value as the rank decreased. This was the reason the contestants were fighting about better ranks even though they knew they wouldn't be able to win the tournament anyway.

When Gladius was finally down with the last contestant, Silvera Rehrook, he concluded this year's Titus tournament and bid adieu to his viewers. The contestant also joined him by waving hands at the viewers that had slowly started to leave the premises.

Just when Tuan thought he could move on to his next set of plans, Gladius told all the contestants that there was going to be a celebratory banquet for all the Top 10 placeholders tonight.

Chapter 573 Banquet and Self-Promotion

"I... I am sorry for acting on impulse, Tuan Aag. The days inside that ruined city were a bit stressful for me. Plus, we were all sent there to fight against each other. I hope we can look past our initial conflict and stay as acquaintances."

Lily offered a friendly handshake to Tuan which the latter accepted quickly while greeting her with a mild smile. Tonight was banquet night for all the Top 10 placeholders. It was meant to congratulate the contestants that had stayed till the last day of the tournament.

All the city officials, a few members of the Titus family, and some merchant families were invited to the event. It was hosted at a lavish restaurant's open terrace that was located in the heart of the city of Arangar.

Tuan Aag was seen to be in formals. He had worn a simple white-colored shirt and navy-blue pants. There was a runic detail of Fire Wings on the shirt below his left shoulder, near the heart. It would illuminate with fire-element mana from time to time. One had to say that the butcher was well-dressed for the occasion.

Lily had worn a black colored dress that accentuated her pear-shaped body. Her dress would sometimes reflect the chandelier light falling on it strangely, making it as if Lily's body had become one with the night's darkness. Tuan could tell that every outfit that was sent to contestants' rooms was given a personal touch according to each ranker.

Tuan shook hands with Lily and pressed them firmly before responding.

"Indeed, Miss Lily. We fought together as one raid team after our quarrel. I also like to apologize to you for being heavy-handed on your ass... as I was saying... Err... sorry for "that" hit. Please know that it was in the heat of the battle.

Even though that was not on the best of terms, I'd like to call you, Ketsu, and Wilder my allies outside the competition as well. And I hope we see each other again even after this banquet as allies."

Lily's cheeks had a tinge of red when she heard Tuan talking about slapping her ass. She could still feel Tuan's palms on her butt cheeks as if the slap had just been delivered.

With the residual effects of Tuan's immature soul sense and Sins series ability fusion still lingering on her, she couldn't help but get more involved in Tuan and his affairs as she talked with him.

Lily also wondered how a dreadful man like Tuan whom she had come to know in the previous week could talk so casually like a completely different person. She was curious about Tuan's next plans. So she didn't shy away from asking him.

"What would you do with all that money, Tuan?"

'Bunch of monster girls, elven ales, and Sativa sticks!'

Layla spoke in Eren's mind as if answering Lily's question in his stead.

She had come to him through her pendant adobe after he stepped out of the subspace.

Tuan could be seen having a stiff face all of a sudden with a vein on his forehead threatening to pop out. Lily wondered if she had asked him something very personal.

"Tuan, I asked out of curiosity. If you are not comfortable..."

Lily tried to ease the matter. But Tuan's response came soon after.

"Hehehe... I just remembered something that I had forgotten to do. There's this brat that I want to beat up. But they keep disappearing on me from time to time."

The butcher spoke and left everyone listening to him puzzled. He smiled awkwardly and coughed to clear his throat before speaking again.

"I don't mind answering your question, Lily. I owe this money to one of my trusted friends named Eren Idril. He is starting a guild. So he could use this money to lay a better foundation.

Eren is an honest man and an exceptional ranker. And I see him becoming a very successful leader in the future.

Both Katalina and I will be joining that guild. That's why we decided to cooperate after knowing that we both would be joining the same guild."

Katalina joined Tuan just as he finished explaining. She found it difficult to suppress her laugh that threatened to slip out of her pursed lips when she heard the butcher tooting his own horn.

She had worn a slip dress with frill details at the bottom. Her seductive curves as well as her captivating stride made Tuan excited about the night following his banquet.

Lily looked at Katalina to confirm Tuan's claim. By that time, Kat had gotten better control over her emotions and maintained a stoic face. She nodded affirmatively at Lily while handing Tuan a drink that she had brought along with her own.

"Tuan, you are joining a guild? I mean with your reputation now, you can join almost any guild that you see fit. Hahaha!"

Wilder spoke out loud while patting Tuan's shoulder. Apparently, he heard his conversation with Lily and walked right in between their conversation.

The rest of the rankers got curious after hearing Wilder and started walking toward Tuan. The latter smiled cunningly before responding.

"Oh, I'll not be joining any well-established guilds, Wilder. They are too rigid and don't care enough about us low-level rankers. Even the most friendly guilds will fail to provide fast growth for low-level rankers.

The most popular names are only centered around providing high-ranking entities with the resources they need. I'm not ready to invest my time and work in a place where it only benefits others for the most part."

Eren looked at the growing audience that was gathering around him. He took a short pause and took a small gulp from his wine glass before speaking up.

"Therefore, I'll be joining my friend Eren's guild, the White Raven Guild. This guild will be a game-changer in Edinburgh's history, I'm telling you. Hehehe! Remember its name well. Soon this name will make the headlines in Edinburgh. You guys can come and contact me if you want to join when that time comes. Hehe!"

The butcher started praising the guild and the guild creator, AKA himself, with his glib tongue. When he was done, his audience started asking him various things about the guild, which allowed him to talk about the guild's base of operation and its field of expertise.

A lot of rankers and merchants had come to realize that White Raven was just a freshly established guild. On paper, it didn't matter much. Some merchants also contacted their information sources on the spot and came to know that the guild only had one asset that was deadlier than the dead in terms of monetary gains.

Yet, since it was Tuan Aag, the champion of this year's tournament speaking about it, the listeners decided to make a note of the White Raven guild. They would at least check it out in a few days, if there was anything to check out that is.

'Self-promotion at its finest. Do you feel no shame in blowing your own trumpet, Eren?'

Layla spoke again. Tuan wasn't angry at the criticism made by someone who he considered to be a cheeky brat frozen in time. He chuckled before replying to her as he was busy talking with other rankers, merchants, and contestants.

'Nobody would promote my guild for me, Layla. And it needs promotion. Badly at that. So I got to improvise.'

This is business.'

The appointment with the Derringers was drawing close. The butcher was doing everything in his capacity to ensure that his newfound guild gets the start he wanted it to have.

"Well played, Tuan."

The audience near Tuan stopped speaking when they heard a known mana-imbued voice. They looked at the approaching figure and started gossiping on their own.

"If I stay in second place, I'll give you all of the Extols I would win."

A chuckle was heard made by the same voice when it spoke the sentence as if it wasn't its own.

"That was the deception-of-the-year statement for me. Deceptive... but good."

Tuan also recognized the voice that came from behind him when he was busy talking with Bianka. The latter had also come to congratulate him as well as know more about the White Raven guild he had talked so much about. He looked back and saw Drin Dawn approaching him with a wine glass in his hands and a smile on his face.

Tuan chuckled when Drin reminded him how he had set him up. Drin came to realize that Tuan had no intention of paying him any extols now that he understood the meaning behind his condition. But Drin wasn't someone who couldn't move on from things that had happened in the past. He and Tuan talked about various things, especially about the quasi-Ogre Overload.

Tuan invited him to check out the White Raven guild in the future as well as they talked. The latter looked hesitant at first. But when the butcher was done explaining things to him, Drin was convinced that he needed to find start-up guilds like these for his own growth.

The butcher had lit a fire of curiosity in the minds of every ranker, contestant, and merchant contact he had met at the banquet. After all, a brand-new guild like White Raven could use the talents he encountered on the night of the banquet.

Chapter 574 Legalizing Ill-Gotten Gains

"What did they ask you?"

Altashia asked Eren right away when she saw him leave the army administration building located inside their camp. Their squad was questioned one by one regarding the disappearance of Sidro Zas. Altashia, Dianna, and the rest of the team had already been questioned.

Eren sighed before answering.

"What could they ask me? The usual, you know.

They asked me about my interaction with Sid. This wasn't something that could be hidden in the army anyway. So I told them the truth. That things weren't all smooth between me and him.

But I also said that the signs of conflict were always raised by Sid. And I dealt with them by not acting on them for the most part."

Altashia nodded when she heard Eren speak the truth. She had also reported the same thing in her report so that Eren could be kept out of being blamed for Sid's disappearance.

Eren and Altashia started walking towards the army gates where the rest of the team was waiting for them. This was another regular monster clean-up assignment that they had received that needed to be done within 3-4 days.

Eren pondered for a bit and looked at the sky. He sighed once again before adding up.

"I also told them about a strange encounter I had with Sid just a few hours before he's supposed disappearance. He had come to meet me. I didn't tell you guys because it didn't seem relevant to me at that time. But I guess I failed to register the kind of hell he was suffering through at that time."

Altashia raised her eyebrows and looked at Eren as she walked beside him. A gentle breeze caressed her bouncy blonde hair. Her keen blue eyes stared at the butcher and registered how charming he looked in the morning light.

She didn't ask Eren to elaborate with words. She just pinched his arm as they were walking side by side, letting him know that she wanted to know more.

"Ouch! You know, Al, someday, I'm gonna have to pinch you in the same way. You won't be able to complain at that time. Just saying!"

Eren caressed the red skin that was pinched by Altashia and soothed it by gently tapping his finger over it. As a result, Altashia pinched him again while pouting.

Eren was reminded of his aunt Nina when she did that for the second time. She too liked to pinch him from time to time. He wondered if all the beautiful women he liked were made from the same mold.

'I sure know how to pick them.'

Eren thought to himself and chuckled to himself. He then resumed his serious stance after flirting with Altashia in his own way before continuing.

"Sid had come to meet me one day, I guess just before his disappearance. He looked upset. I thought he was about to start another fight with me. So I was going to leave but he started his speech with an apology."

Altashia had surprised expressions on her face when she heard Eren talking about Sid apologizing to him. Before she could ask some more, Eren continued.

"I know what you are thinking. Why would Sid apologize when he's been trying to mess with me for so long, right? Frankly, I don't know the answer to that question myself.

But I could tell at that time that the guy was hurting.

Maybe all those jeers and taunts aimed at me were just his defense mechanism trying to make sense of his situation.

He didn't get the position he wanted. He didn't get the girl he wanted. So all he could do at that time was channel his anger on one guy that was the reason behind both of them being taken away from him. They all flocked to the same guy who appeared out of the blue. Who could not get angry at such a lucky man? I know I would."

Altashia listened to Eren and nodded her head as she continued walking with Eren. Then she understood the meaning behind Eren's words and pushed him with both her hands.

"I... I am not your girl. Hmph!"

Eren chuckled a bit and carried on with his explanation.

"My point is.... Now that I look back, I can understand Sid a bit. His anger was not well-placed. But I could see why it would affect the way it had affected him. After all, who gets a second chance at life when it fucks you out of nowhere?"

Eren said and placed his arm across Altashia's shoulder in a friendly manner. He placed a significant part of his body weight on her before continuing.

"So that day, when I was out near the city of Ainari with Dianna, Sid came to me and apologized. He admitted that all the disagreements between us were initiated by him because of his personal reasons.

Dianna and I then invited him to join us on a leisure hunt. We talked about various things that day before our topic of discussion turned towards the element of lightning.

At that Dianna left us. But we kept on hunting and talking. I talked to Sid about my attainments in lightning and return, and he shared some of his gains with me.

He also told me that contracting the red lightning bull helped him greatly in understanding the nature of red lightning. He recommended contracting the same beast to me if I ever wanted to pursue different attainments in lightning."

Eren had created his fake alibi with Dianna after he had branded her with his Sine Series ability. He told Dianna he was with her when he last saw Sid so that the case wouldn't have him as a suspect from the very beginning. She had included his version of events in her report as well.

The butcher knew how critical it was for an investigation to start in the right direction. Because it would produce different results with each new start when things were blurry. So it was imperative for him as well to make sure that the investigation didn't start in the right direction. After all, he was already on schedule with Eliza's plan. He couldn't afford to get entangled in any conspiracy, no matter if he was the brains behind it or not.

This time, it wasn't difficult for Altashia to believe Eren. That's because rankers with the same element often exchange notes about their achievements in the way of the elements with each other. It was supposed to benefit both parties involved. So it was a common practice among all the ranker communities.

"I told these things to the panel assigned to investigate Sid's disappearance as well. Now that the guy is presumed to be dead, I guess I and those inspection guys are thinking the same thing. That Sid was trying to do something extreme to himself using an unsafe cultist remedy.

That's why he came to meet me that day and talked about our attainments. Maybe he was trying to break into the next rank while using my elemental attainments as the catalyst. And maybe the sorry he said was just in case he doesn't survive the procedure."

Eren said while sighing. This was a not-so-common practice among rankers who sought quick breakthroughs. Yet, it wasn't that rare either.

In cultist ways, one could either reach the skies or die trying. So Sid's apology to Eren could be seen as him signing his will in case things didn't work out for him.

Eren and Altashia walked in silence for a while. They could see the squad members waiting for them. Eren finally let go of Altashia's shoulders and started walking alongside her. With a stoic expression on his face, he added up.

"I guess it's safe to say that... Sid couldn't make it. Maybe he felt like he was getting stagnant and got desperate. And paid the price for it.

I couldn't prevent him from taking such extreme measures for his growth because I couldn't see his next move. Maybe I had no right to interfere in his affairs in the first place.

Strangely, he chose me to talk with when he was at that crossroads of his life. A ranker's life is fragile. I understand this more than anything now.

To be honest, I don't feel sorry for his death. But I do feel honored that he said sorry to me before his death. The least I could do for him as a way to show my gratitude for giving me this closure is to gain attainment in red lightning.

I have made my intentions known to the Army administrative office. And they are ready to provide me with the necessary resources in exchange for my contribution points."

The butcher explained to Altashia as he kept on walking beside her. If Sid's soul was there, it would have cursed Eren for even making use of the inquiry into his disappearance to his advantage. The butcher drained the former red-lightning ranker of his existence. And yet it wasn't enough. It didn't matter that the guy was no longer there. The butcher still found some use in his post-disappearance procedure.

Eren and Altashia then joined their squad and embarked on their mission. Everyone in the squad could see that Eren was getting close to both Altashia and Dianna. He would often switch between talking and flirting with them occasionally whenever he had a chance to do so.

Eren had also informed his squad about his intentions to get a red lightning bull as a contract beast. He borrowed some army points from Arjun as well to get his hands on runic steles about red lightning from the army treasury.

Eren needed to lay the foundation for his usage of red lightning and Ertaur. After all, his duel with Altashia was drawing closer. He needed to use all his trump cards against her if he wanted to win.

Chapter 575 [Bonus] Money, Status, and Power

"Eren, are you not worried that Altashia will see your closeness with me as a sign for her to back off from involving herself with you?"

Dianna asked as she led Eren into the Remus Auction House, one of the most sought-after attractions in the city of Ainari among various ranker communities. Because tonight was the night of the quarterly auction.

Quarterly auction events held by House Remus were especially attractive to rankers of any rank. That was because it would contain unique treasures and resources usually not found even on the black markets.

"Hehehe! It seems like you don't know how your kind operates or you have a natural blind spot for it. Most women are attracted to a successful man who already has someone in his life. It's like a litmus test for you girls to measure a man's worth.

It may sound presumptuous and whatnot. But it is what it is.

Women try to run away from the fact that they can like a guy for being rich and promiscuous. And I can understand why they may like such men. It's the denial of this natural selection that irks me a bit.

Women say that they would want to be paired with a good man. Good men who are naive believe this to be true. Then you gals go ahead and kick those guys in their balls."

Eren chuckled and saw Dianna's blank expressions. She was slowly starting to develop stress lines on her forehead. But the butcher knew he could confide in her just fine because he had branded her.

He was also glad for the fact that he had retained her personality while branding her. That way, he could see her change of expression and get amused by it.

Eren shook his head as he stared blankly in front of him. As if he were lost in a distant memory of once being one of those good-hearted human beings himself.

He also felt that he was not doing justice to women who had stood by their words and stuck with their men in the hour of their need. Like the one woman who had his back when he was at his lowest in the previous timeline. So he cleared some air around it.

"Perhaps a few women are indeed like that, liking men for their sincere heart and honest intentions. Maybe some women like to see the good in men that they have yet to see for themselves. Perhaps these strong women make their men stronger just by embracing them without any ulterior motive.

Such women are rarer than Legendary-tier monsters and beasts.

And fortunately or unfortunately, stray values don't define the median.

Not accepting the basic rule of natural selection is women's flaw. Guys have their fatal flaws too, maybe we have them more than women. But for all the shortcomings we have, for the most part, we are true to ourselves and what we need.

You won't normally find a male, ranker or otherwise, that likes a girl for the wealth she has. Or the skills or ranking status she has earned. We see their physical characteristics first and foremost. The personality and all those nuances come later on. I don't care how shallow it might sound, that is the truth I have come across.

I may be generalizing a lot here. There would only be a few exceptions to this rule too. But as I said, stray values don't define the median.

As far as status symbols are concerned, most men are impartial to the accomplishments women may or may not have made in their lifetimes. That's not something most women can do while choosing their mates."

Eren had just completed his mandatory mission assigned to Altashia's squad in the army. During that time, Eren talked a lot more than usual with Dianna. So the latter had asked him the question taking that into account.

Dianna had also registered Altashia stealing glances at them while the duo was talking or co-operating in the clean-up mission.

Dianna was going to object to Eren's point of view with a frown on her face. But Eren continued his "wise sage" speech some more.

"Besides, Altashia would find it unnatural that I suddenly stopped talking to you after I branded you. Or distanced myself from you.

Us getting close to each other when she is still undecided about her feelings towards me is what's natural. That way, she'd get jealous. And jealousy is the fire I want her to burn in for the time being."

Eren chuckled and took a long drag out of his smoke. As he indulged in a subtle high that was provided to him by the Stellar Sativa, he let his mind wander off some more and spoke up.

"I know what I'm saying may seem like I'm reaching. And maybe I'm. But this is something I have come to believe in after recollecting the scenes of my past. After picking up the fallen pieces of myself and constructing myself anew.

I'm not arrogant enough to believe that my beliefs are 100 percent right. But they are mine. I accept them without any hesitation.

There's something powerful in the belief that is based on one's life, Dianna. It has the power to bend reality into a version you see fit for yourself."

Dianna seemed like she wanted to respond to the butcher's statements that sounded more like an inner monologue than a conversion. But it seemed that he wasn't done. He saw her wanting to speak up and held his hand to make her pause before continuing. As if he had already understood what she was trying to say.

"Don't think I look at all the women the same way, Dianna. And don't think I want to disparage any of them.

I don't see the women I've branded as them losing their individuality. I want them to grow with me if they haven't already surpassed me. After all, you all are the ones I can count on if and when the shit hits the fan.

People can live their lives however they want, as long as they can find peace with it. But there are some fundamentals to life that are blatantly obvious."

Eren took out the fancy storage space jewelry he had received from the Titus tournament. He imbued his mana and let it project the content inside it to Dianna. Loads and loads of Extols are arranged in neat piles.

With such an extravagant display of his newfound wealth, the butcher spoke up with surety in the truth of life he had found for himself.

"Money. Status. And Power.

These are the biggest chic magnets. And they are a lot more than that. They are the pursuits of life that a man should aspire to have above all else. No matter which timelines or worlds we live in."

Eren chuckled and commented. Dianna had a hard time arguing with him when she was half agreeing with him herself. It felt to her like Eren had had his range of experiences with women in the past, which he couldn't shake out of his psyche.

Dianna sighed and found solace in the fact that Eren did not put all the women in the same category. She had come to realize that she was branded by an old soul in a young gun's body.

"How are the preparations?"

Eren asked after he was seated in a private chamber that had a couple of sofa chairs and a coffee table. Dianna was sitting beside him with her legs crossed seductively.

In front of them was a spectral screen. It was displaying an empty stage that only had its lights on. The auction had not yet begun.

"Everything is just how you wanted it to be. But are you sure, Eren? Won't it be easier if..."

Dianna wanted to say something but she was abruptly cut off by the butcher's next statement.

"Don't worry, Dianna. My plan won't ruin House Remus' reputation. In addition, it won't cause any trouble for you."

Eren said and took out his Sativa Stick. After abandoning Tuan's avatar, he enjoyed smoking even more than before. He had decided that he would take occasional breaks from smoking or drinking just so that he could enjoy them more when he does it.

Dianna shook her head before replying.

"I'm not worried about House Remus anymore. Not even myself. I'm more worried about the repercussions it may have on you if you ever...."

Eren chuckled before cutting Dianna off once again.

"Everyone is innocent until they are caught. So don't worry. We just have to make sure that we don't get caught."

As soon as the butcher had said it, the large spectral screen in front of him showed signs of activity. The stage lights turned brighter before a brunette in her late 20s appeared on stage seemingly out of nowhere. She had worn an elegant dress that made her look even more stunning than she naturally was.

"Good evening ladies, gentlemen, and respected rankers from all fields. House Remus is pleased to host its Quarterly Auction Event. Most of you know the rules. But I'd say them anyway, in case of new patrons joining us."

The brunette started describing basic rules about the auction, which Eren listened to keenly. He had already been briefed by Dianna regarding the same. So this time, he was just revising his plan in his head while listening to the rules.

The brunette then officially started the auction. She began with basic ranking resources in the Novice rankers before moving on to the Ace ranks. The transcendent-grade resources were kept for the last.

Chapter 576 The Robbers and The Robbed

"The next item on our bid is a stalk of five Simbelmyne flowers. For those of you who don't know, the description of this precious herb should be updated on your spectral screens.

This is a transcendent-grade treasure. It is a sought-after herb by many alchemy and potion manufacturing labs. Instead of selling it through the usual demand chain, we have brought this stalk into the open sale as a way to show commitment toward our patrons.

A bid for the five Simbelmyne flowers begins at 35K Extols. The patrons are allowed to raise the bid as and when they see fit, as set by the rules mentioned earlier."

The brunette host announced the bid Eren was waiting on. Even Layla couldn't keep quiet in her pendant abode. After analyzing that the chamber was secure and that only Dianna who had been branded by Eren was with him, the young witch appeared out in the open.

"Who the fuck...!"

"Calm down, Dianna. She's one of us."

Eren calmed Dianna down before she could create a fuss seeing Layla appearing in the chamber out of nowhere. He also used his mark to pacify her by mentally establishing a connection with her.

"Eren... is she your daughter?"

Diana looked at the cute teen girl while asking the question. She was wary of her because she couldn't sense her rank. She could not confirm that the young girl was a mortal either. The fear of the unknown was an instinct.

Eren laughed out loud before he made it clear.

"Hahaha! No. But I can only hope she calls me "Daddy" one day, Hehe!

Anyway. My point is, don't worry about her."

While looking at the back of Layla, Eren reassured Dianna. The young witch was busy staring at the screen and confirming the state of the flower. She had confirmed that the flowers were in just the right condition for their need. Now she just needed to immerse them in the right potion to preserve them.

Dianna found relief when she confirmed that Eren hadn't branded an early teenager like her. She then mirthlessly laughed at herself for setting boundaries for Eren like his wife.

'But.... This is no ordinary girl. Even though I can't sense her ranking status, I can feel a subtle pressure. As if she is a walking potion-bomb.'

Dianna thought to herself and observed Layla with keen eyes. She then looked at Eren to explain her identity to her.

The butcher felt Dianna's thoughts and smiled at her mildly. He raised his hand in her direction and held hers in his. 'Later.' He mentally sent her the message he wanted to convey to her.

The young witch was wearing a dark green dress with her signature witch hat that was also of the same color. Layla looked charming and bursting with youth when she appeared and made her presence known to Dianna.

"Eren, I'd have indulged in our routine spat with you. But now is not the time. Look, the bid has already reached 48K Extols. You know we HAVE to get these flowers, you know that right?"

Layla said earnestly after she looked back at Eren who was still seated on his comfy sofa chair behind her. Layla didn't pay attention to Dianna or her question and walked toward Eren. Seeing that there was no other place to sit, she stuck her tongue out to Eren before sitting on his lap.

Eren didn't mind and let her sit as he finished up his smoke. He then looked at Dianna who was looking at him suspiciously before smiling mirthlessly.

"This is not what it looks like. She just pretends to be naive."

Eren pulled Layla's cheeks as he spoke. He then picked up the array disk that was on the coffee table in front of him. He imbued it with his mana and operated on it.

"VIP chamber 9 has put forward the amount of 55K Extols for the flowers."

A spectral screen could be seen appearing right in the middle of the stage. It was visible to all the patrons participating in the bid. It was refreshed and showed the entry of VIP chamber 9 and the bid amount that was pitched by its occupant, which was Eren.

"55K won't cut it, Eren. Bid for a higher amount. Scare your competition off."

Layla said while adjusting herself on Eren's lap. The latter shook his head in denial before speaking up.

"The ones who are bidding work for potioneing labs or well-established alchemy masters. Or work as apprentices under potioners. Even if that host says that she has kept the stalk away from those potion labs by selling them here, all the auction is doing right now is skipping a fixed price range offered by the demand and supply chains that are connected to such labs and potioners.

By doing that, it is trying to get a better deal out of the existing and upcoming stalks of herbs the House Remus has in store for them. This is yet another market strategy to drive up prices. Those bidders that you see are not as interested in raising the price as you think they are. But they have deep pockets to match my bid just fine."

Layla was about to ask him something. But Eren knew what she and Dianna were thinking and answered the questions that had been raised in their minds soon enough.

"I'm bidding knowing all this because it'd be fun to make those rich bastards spend more. Also, I can't reserve a private chamber with 10K Extols and not participate at all. That would look suspicious. So I'll just bid on everything else to mess with them.

After the auction for transcendent-grade items is completed, it will sell the old items it has in stock in lots. Dianna says that instead of the individual items, it'll be mystery boxes that will be auctioned off, which will contain various useful and useless things. Kind of like a flea market for the rich. I'll buy something cheap that catches my eye at that time."

Eren said as he looked intently at the screen. His bid amount was topped by another bidder. But he only added 2K to Eren's offer. The butcher smiled when his predictions turned out to be true.

Layla twitched her nose and muttered in displeasure.

"This is not even that rare of an herb. Why are they engaging in petty fights like these by bidding so low?"

Then she looked at Eren and asked in frustration. As if all of her fantasies were getting crushed by Eren's prudence all the time.

"I don't know why you want to play so safe when you have so many trump cards. Why do you have to be so sneaky all the time? Can't you just come out in the open and demand what's yours?"

My suggestions still stand. Drop a bid amount of 80K to shock all the bidders out there. Then they'd think you are some kind of bigshot and let you have the flower.

But then they'd try to ambush you and try their luck at getting their hands on the flower for free by killing you. But you'd be..."

Layla narrated her thoughts as if she could see the future unfold before her eyes. By this time, the highest bid for the flowers had risen only to 55K.

Eren chuckled heartily as he interrupted Layla before she could continue with her fantasies.

"Maybe you have read too many fantasies, Layla. Or maybe, there would indeed be an ambush set in place for those who take up all those transcendent-grade items for themselves. Cliched stories are based on real human emotions that are cranked up to max after all.

In either case, you are still confused about the side I'm on in these stories, real or fantastical. I'll not be the one defending the items that I bought with my own money in this case."

Eren said and picked Layla up from his lap and made her stand up. He then got up and walked towards the spectral screen. As he watched the product details and bid amount update, he narrowed his eyes and spoke slowly.

"Because I'm the one who robs."

Chapter 577 Collecting Trophies

The dense forest outside the city of Ainari. Waning crescent moon night.

"You devil... May the almighty Vulcan... burn your soul to... Ugh!"

A fire-element ranker who was looking to be in his late 30s was seen saying his last words before his body started to mummify at a rapid pace. His mana storage and his life essence were sucked out of his body before he could offer any more resistance.

The ranker died while cursing the man who had pierced his gut with his pale bare hands. He had worn a weird-looking mask that hid his facial features.

"Did you get it?"

Eren asked Layla who was seen searching for something on the dead bodies of men who had already died and been mummified. She opened the palm of one such dead body and poured a concoction she had in her vial onto it. Soon after, an ID stone was extracted from his wrinkled, mummified hands.

Layla picked it up and closed her eyes to examine it. She flashed a cheerful grin as she confirmed something she was looking for.

"Hehe. Yes. Eren, this mugging business is so exciting. I never thought of the other side of the coin in the stories I had read about. That the bad guys can break it big if they plan ahead and plan well."

Eren had amassed 100k Extols so he could attend the auction by showing that he had enough wealth to participate. Dianna had sent him an invite to the auction because of her position in the family. However, she was nowhere near the family hierarchy to allow him to attend the event without skipping that requirement.

The 100K Extols he had won were only meant for him to gain entry into the auction event in the VIP chamber. Of course, he had to pay 10K Extols just to reserve that chamber for himself. But that was a

price he was willing to pay for his anonymity. Though not without cursing the House Remus for their way of doing business.

Eren smirked at Layla before releasing the fire element ranker. He wondered who this Vulcan fellow was. But he let the matter go after feeling that his stats had increased slightly yet again.

The butcher smiled and accessed his Status Window.

Name- Eren Elijah Idril (Verified)

Organizations- Edinburgh Army (Nightshade duchy) Lionhearts Adventurers' Academy

Academic Status- Class 2/C

Ranked Status: Not applicable due to on-field assignment

Base Stats:

HP- 13.4 / 13.4

MP- 12.2 / 12.2

STR- 12.5

AGI- 13.9

INT- 10.2

BTP~ 62 (Exceeded normal standards set for Solid Stage Ace Rank)

BTP Visibility- Private

Ranking Status: E-Rank (Solid Core Stage)

'Heh! I became one of those geniuses that are above the normal standards.'

Eren smirked when he saw his BTP value had exceeded the normal limit of Solid Stage of Ace rank. He was very proud of his accomplishments. After all, this was the first time in both of his timelines that he had achieved a feat like this.

'This is all due to Life Drain and Domain of Wrath. Maybe what Nina said was true. A person's abilities reflect their desires and needs. I wanted to be stronger faster so my abilities were manifested keeping my desires in sight.'

Eren looked at his haggard and wrinkled hands and thought to himself. He had already achieved the BTP score of 62 after his fight with Tim and Langdon had ended. A small increase in his stats with his recent victims wasn't enough to show up in his overall BTP value. Still, progress was progress.

Eren was worried about another problem after he saw his BTP value though. Even with his stats making progress, he didn't feel like there were signs of his breakthrough into the Adept rank. Despite being in the solid stage of the Ace rank with such a high BTP, it still felt as though his body as a vessel and his mana core as an energy source had not reached their saturation point.

This was a disadvantage of being one of the genius rankers. They exceeded the BTP values defined by their respective ranks. And yet, even with their enhanced stat values, they would be stuck in the same rank for a while.

Altashia was facing the same problem as well. Her BTP value had also exceeded Ace Rank. But her ranking breakthrough was nowhere in sight.

'Hm. Ever since I started using the Rootless technique, my agility stat is not increasing much. It's like every stat is trying to be on the same level. My intelligence stat has got the biggest boost among all those values.'

Eren analyzed his growth while retracting his Life Drain ability. His arms were once again in pain as a result of his actions. But by now, the butcher was getting used to it. And with each use of his ability, he felt like the pain was reducing.

"Eren.... Eren.... What are you thinking about? You are creeping me out here."

Layla started acting innocent and naive once she confirmed the stalk of the Simbelmyne flower was safe. Eren ignored her and called out his demon beast that was soaring in the skies somewhere near.

'Argo. Time to leave.'

Eren let his demon beast know that they were getting ready to leave. He then used the Potion of Innocence on the battle-scarred area after burning the bodies with his fire-element spells.

Eren had ambushed this group of rankers after they had left the Remus auction house. It was the same group that had obtained the stalks of Simbelmyne's flowers.

The Remus Auction House had taken every precaution it could to assure its clients that they would have a safe passage. Each group of patrons would be sent via spatial arrays to random locations outside the city of Ainari. This made it near impossible for anyone to keep track of anyone.

Too bad, Dianna had already rigged the patrons' exit.

Upon Eren's suggestion, Dianna had coated the entry tokens of the patrons that were involved in the auction with an almost undetectable tracking potion. Layla's potioneering knowledge along with the potion book that Eren had obtained from the Purgatory made it possible for him to concoct a potion like this.

Eren had never forgotten how he was ambushed by Team Claho in the middle of nowhere using their potions and gears. Therefore, he also sought out potions and gears that would allow him to do exactly that.

This was the potion Eren had created after three days of experiments. He didn't neglect his potioning practices while he worked on his other frontiers.

Layla had offered to help him to expedite his plans. After all, her personal stakes were also involved in the plan. But the butcher held on with his experiments and finally managed to concoct the potion to Layla's satisfaction.

Dianna played an instrumental role in setting this trap for the butcher. Without her involvement, he would have had to buy the stalk using his own money. Which was something he hadn't planned to do from the very beginning.

Eren had kept Dianna away from his robbery to avoid suspicion. She was told to wait at the auction house and not follow him. He assured her that things were in control, making her listen to his words.

Argo landed near Eren and flapped his wings to create a gale of fresh air. He didn't like the smell of low-quality food getting roasted so he cleared the air for himself.

Unlike his chimera form, Argo was in a complete eagle mode. He had learned to shapeshift in a unique way that was unlike other normal demon beasts. Where normal demon beasts could only change the size of their bodies, Argo had learned to take the forms of an eagle or lion completely.

Eren had stopped getting surprised with Argo's growth after he had realized that the beast was using his devour ability on every consumable mana beast he could get his paws on. Just like him, his beast was growing at an unbelievable speed.

"Where are we going?"

Layla asked while walking leisurely in the recently torched field. Eren smirked before answering her. He had a vial of potion in his hands that would change color whenever he moved it in a certain direction.

"Now that every ranker that was involved with the auction is marked with the tracking potion, it would be silly to be satisfied with one reward. It's time we maximize our gains when we still can before calling it quits."

Eren replied and climbed onto Argo's back. Layla smiled slyly and nodded. She disappeared from her position and sat near him, with her back against his torso. The trio was planning to try hunting a new prey or two tonight.

They had trophies to collect that didn't really belong to them.

Chapter 578 Runic Stele

"H... How? How did you break into Solid Stage so quickly?"

When she saw Eren approaching her with a charming smile, Altashia inquired. He continued walking and gave her a gentle hug before responding.

"Well... it seems Sid sharing his attainments and his experiences in using the Red Lightning helped me a lot. And when I used the red-lightning runic stele, I reaped far better gains than I thought I'd reap."

The butcher wasn't lying when he said he had progressed even further in the way of the elements than before. This was courtesy of the runic stele lent to him by the army. It was just that he had exaggerated its effects. He made the runic stele responsible for all the progress he had made, most of which was due to his abilities.

A runic stele was a metallic surface or a stone's face that was etched with runes made by at least a Grandmaster level ranker. Such a stele could only be carved by a ranker of this caliber who had reached a certain point in their elemental path.

Hence these runic steles were precious. They could only be obtained from official sources without going broke. Of course, the black market would also contain runic steles obtained by cultists during their explorations. But most of the time, such steles were counterfeits.

Then there were the runic steles, which were meant to harm the rankers that used them. Because of this, the legal method of obtaining these steles was more expensive, but also more reliable.

One also had to note that runic steles weren't common ranking resources. Only rankers who had backing or rankers who had made enough contributions to their establishments were privy to use them.

Furthermore, since the lightning element wasn't that common, the amount of army contribution points required to lend such a stele was no joke. That's why Eren had to use Arjun's help to get his hands on this precious ranking resource.

The runic stele for the red-lightning element that the butcher had received was a square-shaped metallic surface. It would spark with red lightning every time someone touched it.

This runic stele was created by a ranker with an official title of Red Ripple. In the stele's description that Eren had read before collecting it, Red Ripple was in the liquid Stage of the A-Rank at the time of creating it.

The ranker was expected to isolate themselves and find an ambiance that generated mana compatible with the stele and ranker's affinity. Then they were supposed to drink supplementary potions, if any, to ease their mana circuits and minds before touching the stele.

The stele could be used by rankers imbuing their element's mana into it. The stele would then slowly take control over the ranker's five senses. This would enable them to experience the spells, conditions, fragments of memories, and thoughts of the ranker that had created the stele.

Some steles would also contain the personal messages of the rankers who had made them. They might also contain the guidance recorded by such entities, enabling the low-level rankers to benefit greatly from them. Of course, such steles would cost even more.

Eren had not used runic steles in his previous timeline. He didn't have the reach he had today to get his hands on such premium stuff. He also had to thank his military status for this.

Eren was provided a complete set of items and ranking resources when he applied for a red-lightning runic stele. When he first used the stele, he couldn't gain anything from it. Then, during his third session, his attainments in the red-lightning aspect of lightning suddenly improved even further because of one particular instance that was recorded in the stele.

And yet, Eren didn't dwell on the stele much. Because comprehending all the experiences and thoughts that were recorded in the stele could take weeks on end if not months. And that was not something he was willing to invest in at this point. He was only using the stele as a reason for his attainment in the red lightning anyway. So he didn't mind.

Plus, the runic stele was going to stay with him for the upcoming months before he was required to submit it back to the army. So he had ample time to further his understanding of lightning.

The use of runic steles wasn't limited to rankers' statuses only. Anyone could use them, even if they were not as high ranked as a ranker who had created them. It was primarily concerned with the ranker's way of using the element, it was not rank bound for the most part.

It was a general rule that only Ace rank entities could use runic steles to gain and improve attainment in the elements. Since Novice rankers are not aware of the elemental aspect of their elements, they were not able to take advantage of the stele. Their path as a ranker had only begun when they were in the Novice rank after all.

"I... I'm speechless at your improvement, Eren. I could have never thought you'd be able to get into the Solid Stage of the Ace rank so soon."

Altashia said with expressions of bewilderment written on her face. Eren smiled and responded.

"Neither did I. But sometimes speaking your goals out loud helps you channel your efforts in the right direction. This is one of those instances."

Altashia also returned his smile with an understanding nod and a slight smile of her own before narrowing her eyes on him.

"So... are you looking for trouble with me?"

Eren smirked and did not reply verbally. He took out his two swords and imbued his mana into them, enabling them to bathe in the aura of their respective elements.

The Rigor Mortis was in his right hand while Anduril was in his left. Altashia narrowed her eyes on the Anduril. She felt she wanted to ask something. But on second thought, she decided to accept Eren's challenge right away.

"I should have figured it out after you invited me here of all places. Hehe!

Eren, I won't be easy on you just because you are my FRIEND. I hope you know that. Hehehe!"

Eren heard Altashia's statement and his smiling face was frozen. His dual-elemental mana stopped manifesting for a while before bursting into intense waves.

The butcher was angry about being friend zoned.

He was angry because, after all his progress with Altashia, she still dared to only refer to him as 'friend'. He knew Altashia was just trying to tease him. This was evident by the way she emphasized the word "friend" in a dramatic manner. But this was a tease he wasn't willing to overlook.

"Altashia darling. It's the other way around. Don't expect ME to go easy on you just because I want to tap that perky ass."

Chapter 579 Eren vs. Altashia P1

"Altashia darling. It's the other way around. Don't expect ME to go easy on you just because I want to tap that perky ass."

Eren said and flashed a cheerful smile at Altashia. The latter snorted in anger before commenting in displeasure.

"Hmph! I'll suck all that confidence out of you dry in a while. You just wait."

Altashia said while folding her hands. With a scornful look on her face that looked exaggerated to Eren, she added up.

"How do you want to do this? Use this army battle ring or take the duel outside where we can use our demon beasts?"

Eren had invited Altashia to meet him on the army battle ring designed to be used by soldiers. It was a standard open space with a rigid, limestone platform that was strengthened by earth-element runes. The battle ring was covered in a mana membrane that restricted spell output to the environment of the battle ring.

There were many battle rings close to each other. They were all inside a large stadium-like structure that was meant to be used by spectators who had come to watch or analyze the ongoing battles.

Other rankers were dueling with each other in different battle rings as well. But unlike the Arangar Colosseum, there were almost no spectators in the audience booth. Life in the army was hectic. Almost nobody was willing to use their free time to watch other army personnel duel with each other when they could step outside and live life a little.

Eren could understand the hidden meaning behind Altashia's proposal to change the venue. Altashia must have thought that Eren was still not completely prepared to take her on. And she didn't want to get him disappointed in his progress after he couldn't beat her. Furthermore, she was unwilling to compromise on her ethics or be lenient towards him, believing that it would also hamper his development.

So she was allowing Eren to use his demon beast in the battle. They both knew that Argo was superior to her Roo in terms of flight capabilities and aerial combat. Plus, Argo's inherent spells were getting more potent by the day.

In short, Altashia wanted to even the supposed odds in Eren's favor by allowing him to use Argo in the battle. Despite the haughty attitude, she was showing at the time, the butcher couldn't help but smile at the care Altashia was showing towards him.

'That kiss we shared has worked for sure. I was beginning to think that was all in my head after seeing Al trying to keep her distance from me. I wonder what's stopping her from being with me?'

Eren thought to himself. He had his communication line open with Layla, enabling her to eavesdrop on his thoughts.

'Gee... I don't know. The fact that you try to get into every girl's pants is attractive enough. What could keep a talented girl like Altashia from seeking your companionship?'

Eren again made a weird face as if he had just eaten something bitter and unpalatable when he heard Layla's response. He had it up to his neck this time. He decided to respond in a quiet voice that was devoid of any agitation.

'Keep on trying to roast me like that and I'll shove those Simbelmyne flowers up in a very dark place. A place where you won't be able to see them despite being closer than ever to you.

Imagine how those flowers would look if they were displayed like a peacock's plumage.'

Layla who was chuckling after making that comment suddenly got stiff and had angry expressions on her face. She was about to berate Eren some more but ultimately decided not to.

Angering Eren when he was trying to win Altashia's favor was not a smart idea. An idea that she had indulged in any way because of her irresistible urge to taunt Eren.

'Sometimes playing with fire makes you aware of its nature.'

Layla nodded to herself and justified her act of roasting Eren every chance she got. She then stopped keeping tabs on Eren and focused on the scrolls opened in front of her in her pendant abode while he dealt with his troubles outside.

"Haha! Argo has become even more threatening than what you are giving him credit for, Al. that bird brain learns that from me, after all.

Although I'm thankful for the care you show towards me despite acting opposite, I don't need it."

Eren smiled genuinely at Altashia and ended their banter by saying what he felt at the time.

"Let's not worry about each other, Al. Let's not worry about the outcome. Let's just give it our all and see who wins."

Altashia smiled at Eren as well before raising her head to look at the open sky that had the afternoon sun in full splendor acting as their witness.

"Enjoy the battle, huh?"

Altashia mumbled to herself and took out her scythe from her storage space. She immediately started spinning the oversized weapon around herself masterfully to get attuned to it.

While he stood still and gripped his weapons tightly, the butcher heard Altashia's mumbling.

"Enjoy the battle indeed."

"Hurry the fuck up, you latecomer elf. The duel between our captain and Eren is going to start anytime."

Arjun was grabbed by his shirt collar and dragged into the army's practice arena that housed all the battle rings. He and Lyon were still quite a distance away from where he was supposed to meet his squadmates.

Arjun, who was busy reading a book at the time wearing scholarly specks, found his surroundings changing at a rapid pace while his body felt weightless. He tightened his grip on his almost-fallen book and recognized the person whose hand was holding him by his collar.

"Lyon... leave me ... you dwarf devil... Did you learn that weird spell just to drag me like this?"

Arjun's own voice seemed distant to him as he was dragged by Lyon using his movement spell. The dwarf tank member of Eren's team had gotten his hands on a new movement spell that allowed him to create a repulsion effect under his feet.

Plus, Lyon's inherent nature of 'absorb and repel' was more compatible with this movement spell than his previous one. This enabled him to use his legs as if they were springs. Contrary to what Arjun was thinking, Lyon had changed his movement spell because it had allowed him to increase his stature in the battle, if only temporarily.

It was only when he found Dianna seated in the spectator's zone of the arena did Lyon stop moving and let Arjun's collar go. Arjun fell flat on the ground as a result of his careless action.

Dianna was with the rest of Eren's squad mates who were all busy looking at a particular battle ring. She waved her hands at Lyon and Arjun when she saw them from a distance, telling them she had reserved seats for them.

"Did we miss anything?"

Lyon asked Dianna while looking in front of him and taking a seat beside her. Arjun took another seat beside her while adjusting his specks that he only used to wear to look like a cool and geeky elf. He had conveniently forgotten the fact that he was dragged into the arena like a dead weight by Lyon.

Dianna smiled and replied.

"Not at all. The duel will soon begin."

Chapter 580 Eren vs. Altashia P2

"The betting's open. Who do you think would win?"

Lyon asked while putting his hand forward in front of Dianna. He also looked at Arjun while doing that. Letting them know that he was in charge of handling the bets.

The rest of the squad members were equally excited. But they all wanted to bet on Altashia. Only Dianna was willing to bet on Eren. And upon her forced request, Arjun begrudgingly agreed to wager on Eren.

Since only two of them were willing to bet on Eren, they had to pay a higher amount than the rest of them. That was Lyon's way of doing business. He'd only invest a small amount of his money into this small-scale business. As a result, he'd get smaller profits. But his losses wouldn't weigh him down either.

Lyon also introduced other options on which his squad members could bet. For example, betting conditions like who would land the first hit? Or who would use support potions first? It could be said that this wasn't the dwarf's first rodeo.

Just when Lyon was done settling the betting business, he was prompted to grab his seat and keep quiet by Dianna. He obediently agreed to her stare and looked in his direction.

"It's about to go down, huh!"

Lyon rubbed his hands against each other and waited for the duel to end. No matter who won the duel, he knew he'd be in the profit because of the way he had set the bets.

"Dianna, why do you think Eren would win? Haven't you seen my duel with our captain? Do you think I'm weaker than Eren by that much margin?"

Eren and Altashia had drawn their weapons and had entered a mini staring contest when Arjun addressed Dianna with a curious look on his face. The latter smiled before responding honestly.

"Honestly, Arjun? I don't know how strong Eren is. But I know this much. Since he had chosen to challenge captain Altashia, he had his things figured out. Unlike you, Eren won't challenge the captain just for the challenge's sake."

Lyon agreed with Dianna's statement and added on.

"Arjun, you only challenge the captain knowing full well that you'd lose. It has become a way for you to gauge your progress, to see how you have improved since last time.

Eren... challenged the captain with the aim of winning. I can feel it. The guy has no intention of holding..."

Just when Lyon was about to finish his sentence, he felt a distinct mana pulse that went off in the battle ring. This pulse was also felt by the rest of his squad mates. He and everybody else stopped talking and extended their mana senses towards the battle ring.

Altashia had made the first move!

Swish!

The captain of her squad swung her massive scythe in Eren's direction and sent a flying slash toward him. She then disappeared from her position and appeared right behind Eren. but this time, she launched another bunch of flying slashes towards her right.

The spectators saw Eren's image blur before getting pierced by Altashia's slashes. But then they saw another bunch of slashes that their captain had sent in a completely different direction. Eren appeared on the other side of Altashia's flying attacks. This time, it looked like he wasn't willing to change his position in approaching his opponent.

"Heâ€¦ he is not trying to dodge. Is he mad?"

Arjun closed his book and gripped the railing that was in front of him before standing up from his seat. He criticized Eren for not trying to dodge Altashia's slashes. That's because her slashes had a unique peculiarity. They would carry her fire-element mana in a compressed form and react with her will and mana sense when landed upon the target. As a result, they would catch fire upon Altashia's command, no matter if they had dealt enough damage to their target or not.

Altashia's attacks dealt damage over time. So it was wise to dodge her attacks as much as possible. Arjun knew how agile Eren was. He knew he could dodge their captain's attacks if he wanted to even when it seemed like he had no chance of doing so.

But the next second, a cloud of red lightning bloomed in the middle of Eren and his incoming slashes. Instantly, a red lightning bull assumed his mana form before cladding itself with sparks of red lightning tongues.

The bull also charged at the incoming fiery slashes head-on while adjusting its two horns in alignment. A ball of lightning was formed between the two horns that the bull used to clash with the flying slashes.

Zoom!

There was no sound of clashing attacks at first. But then the ground on which the bull stood was ruptured and depressed while the bull cried in pain. Most of the flying attacks were handled by his inherent spell. But there were a few flying slashes that managed to land on his mana body. They immediately cut skin deep and wrapped the bull in a blazing fire.

This was within only a few moments after Eren and Alashia's duel had started. And the Queen of Scythe had already made her opponent's contract beast cry in pain. A few squad members lost their bets and had to pay Lyon as a result. He then took his cut and gave the money to those who had won this particular bet.

Eren seemed to have disappeared from his position. Then Arjun and others felt him appearing right over the bull's head. He used it as a platform to jump and approach Altashia with newfound vigor.

"He used his contract beast as a decoy. What a heartless fellow."

Lyon said, smirking. Dianna looked at him with a displeasing look at first. Then she sighed as if half agreeing with him.

"That's not it. At least that's not the whole picture. Eren has strengthened his contract beast by casting a defensive spell of his own on him. Look."

The bull that was covered in red lightning suddenly got covered in purple tongues of lightning as they formed a beastly cloak around his body. They got rid of the residual mana of Altashia's attack and wrapped his body in a protective layer completely.

The red bull now looked like it had a thin purple layer around its body. It roared and charged at Altashia while his master closed in on her from another direction.