

Vile 701

Chapter 701 A Wanted Man's Way of Having Fun

Lightning Vines!

Bert raised his hands toward the incoming Shambler Lords and a wave of lightning mana surged all around him. The green lightning streaks appeared and began grabbing onto the incoming monsters like the vines of predatory trees.

"Grrrrrr!"

The Monster Lords growled when they were subjected to Bert's unique lightning-powered attack. But the scariest part was yet to come for them.

Lightning wasn't that effective against plant-based monsters because of their affinity with wood elements and their lightning-resisting properties. However, what if the lightning fuses with water and the fusion changes the derived element into something entirely different?

Bert had jumped over the Shambler Lords' heads when they were restrained in their positions by his lightning vines. He cast his next ability when he was sure that the monsters wouldn't be able to run away.

"Lightning Wave!"

Bert's AoE enhanced the effects the lightning vines were delivering on the Shambler Lords. It first conjured a dense mass of green water and trapped the three monsters inside a liquid sphere.

The elemental fusion between lightning and water increased the potency of lightning to a whole new level. Inside the transparent, green-tinted sphere one could see that the three Shambler Lords were writhing in pain and agony as their bodies started to chip down because of the overwhelming lightning effect.

The lightning vines started to multiply at a rapid pace inside the lightning-fused water. The nature of this water seemed no different than normal water as it looked liquified and free-flowing. Yet, the fact that Bert, who had jumped over the Monster Lords' heads beforehand, could stand over the giant sphere attested that the nature of the water wasn't as simple as it let out to be.

Arizihana was shocked that a lightning element user could use their lightning like that. She had never heard of anyone with this ability. And the way with which Bert took care of all three Monster Lords at once without breaking a sweat told her that this was not the extent of his powers.

'What in the world is this man? Is he some old monster in disguise?'

Arizihana had this thought as she watched Bert jump down from the sphere he had created with his ability. She could already predict what must have happened to the three Shambler Lords who had come to her to commit suicide.

Thud! Thus! Thud!

The water sphere that had entrapped three monsters within it dissipated after Bert jumped down from it. And the monster bodies crashed onto the ground with loud thuds.

Bert looked at Arizihana and Romel who were still not done with fighting with their lot of monsters. He frowned before commenting.

"You might want to focus on your battles. If I end up killing all those monsters, I'll take their corpses for myself."

Arizihana and Romel looked at each other when they heard Bert's statement. They had agreed before entering the Mini Monster Canyon that the corpses of monsters will be kept by those who kill them.

The two couldn't believe that a D-Ranker would have dibs on lower leveled monsters just because of the arrangements they had made beforehand. They gritted their teeth and focused on their respective battles.

On the market, the Shambler corpses sold for a lot of money. A Shambler Soldier costs 100 Extols, while the body of a Shambler Leader could be sold for up to 300 Extols. The bodies of Shambler Lords were even more precious and could be auctioned off at various places.

With his daggers in hand, Bert kept his eyes on his surroundings in silence. Seeing that things were under control, he didn't try to help the two rankers anymore.

The two people took care of their business after 10 or so minutes. Just when they were about to move to a different spot to continue their hunt, Bert felt something glow in his storage space.

This was an array disk meant to be used for long-distance communication. Someone was trying to contact him from outside the separate dimension. He needed to go outside to tap into this channel of communication.

'It can probably wait. I'll see what this dimension has to offer first.'

Bert pondered before leading the two rankers with him to a distant location. Just like most of the rankers who had come here, he was checking Minerva's Utopia out.

He could see why the separate dimension was generating so much hype across all the ranker communities. Even cultists were mixed in the crowds. This space was a treasure trove for potioners and rakers of other inclinations alike. They could easily earn double what they had paid for coming here. Even with all the charges the management of Minerva's Utopia imposed on the rankers, it was worth it.

'That bastard fox surpassed my expectations.'

Bert couldn't believe that he once attended the same academy as the owner of White Raven city and saw him as just another pebble. Now that he looked back, he felt like his past was all a dream.

He was once the promising heir of a baron who was set to enter the prestigious Royal Renar academy. But then the twist of fate had landed him in LA where he shined once again with his sheer talent and hard work. Just when he thought that things could finally take off for him, he was labeled with the title of the Osan Woods butcher.

He had his appearance changed because he still had an active bounty placed on his head. His entire existence had deviated from his previous self. So much so that even his grandfather Isen Osan won't be able to recognize him.

Bert was none other than Ivor Osan. He had come here to check things out and meet up with Eren and Layla. However, he was unable to reach either with the means given to him by Eliza. So he had decided to spend his time exploring Minerva's Utopia.

Of course, he didn't contact anybody other than these two. He was very cautious of his identity. That's why he picked Romel when the guy tried to swindle him. A thief like Romel was easier to deal with than a ranker with any known or unknown connections.

Chapter 702 Lensa's Test of Patience

Ivor was very impressed with the progress Eren had made over these months while he was busy fighting wraiths and whatnot. He was sure that he couldn't have done something of this magnitude even with his previous connections and reach.

Perhaps he went through his own version of hell. A person doesn't change overnight. They don't start a pseudo empire like this on a whim.'

Ivor thought to himself before concentrating on the task at hand. He was enjoying his time in this separate dimension. Unlike the previous separate dimension he was forced to stay inside, this place wasn't trying to overtly kill him. So it was natural that he was having a good time venting out his stress on monsters.

The eastern testing grounds.

This was the test of patience, conducted inside a greenhouse. It boasted a flower-shaped structure with four distinct energy barriers serving as the four petals of the flower.

The roof of each building was transparent, while the energy barriers served as its walls. Each of the four sections of the greenhouse harnessed four different ranks of mana from rank F to C.

Meeli would send the participants to the greenhouse according to their ranks, where a test would be administered. The rankers would be judged independently by Meeli as per the expertise they had shown as per their rank and the ingredients they had been given.

The test of patience tested rankers for their patience in handling the raw ingredients. This was an essential pre-procedure in potion making. As such, it was no surprise that Minerva's Utopia would undergo the same test.

This test also judged the rankers by the points they scored out of 100. The top three placeholders would be given special rewards per test. The rewards this time were the raw ingredients and precious herbs.

The potioners were supposed to take the test specifically. That's why those who had gathered here for the test were mostly potioneering experts.

The test had already started. The participants concentrated on the test they had been assigned by Meeli.

Lensa was maintaining a steady flow of mana to imbue into Yellow Fire Flower, which was placed inside an array in front of her work table. This was the raw ingredient she had been given to work with.

The Yellow Fire flower was a very delicate raw ingredient. Pour too much mana and it would burn with the yellow flames it would create around itself. And pour too little, it would refuse to bloom.

To process such an Ace-ranked raw ingredient, an array was needed. Lensa was quite an expert in potioning herself, thanks to the basics taught by Dan. She had successfully cast an array with her mana before placing the raw ingredient she had been given by Meeli.

The flower was just about to bloom and her test was going to be over after three hours of utmost concentration and patience. However, she suddenly experienced a mana interference caused by another ranker and her mana flow stopped.

Fwoosh!

The Yellow Fire flower caught fire inside the array and started burning immediately. The mana interference faced by Lensa resulted in her array facing a malfunction.

Lensa had failed the test.

The elf girl was very angry as she watched her Yellow Fire flower burn in its flames. She wasn't angry because she had failed the test. But she was angry because she failed it. After all, someone else meddled.

Lensa looked at the source of that mana signature that caused the interference. She found out to be a girl who was giving her test not too far away from her desk.

Lensa saw that it was a human girl with red eyes and black hair. She had dressed sophisticatedly. And she carried herself with a sense of superiority only she felt about herself. When Lensa turned to look at this girl, the girl looked back and flashed a welcoming smile. Mixed within that smile was a hint of mockery.

Lensa refused to resort to the same tactics now that she was out of the test and its competition. But she wasn't someone to let this slide easily either.

"Madam Meeli, may I have a word?"

Lensa imbued her voice in mana and made it so that other competitors wouldn't get disturbed by her voice. Meeli who was seen sitting quietly on the raised platform placed in front of all the participants opened her eyes and stretched her neck to look at the source of the voice.

Meeli flew towards Lensa in the blink of an eye before responding.

"Can I help you, child?"

Lensa found it awkward that someone who looked like a child called her a child. But she ignored what had just happened.

Hearing this, Meeli sighed and looked at the girl who had interfered briefly. She then shook her head before responding to Lensa.

"I know what just happened, child. I was paying attention, you know.

But there's something you need to understand. As part of the patience test, you should handle the raw ingredients with care. While external interference is unfortunate, potioners are expected to handle it on their own by being prepared for it beforehand.

Because you were not prepared for interference, you failed the test by default. Thus, I am sorry to say that the result won't change for you even if I acknowledge that it was not completely your fault."

Meeli said and sighed. She then looked at the girl who had interfered unjustly in Lensa's test but didn't say anything. For the participants who were still processing their ingredients, the test was ongoing. They weren't aware of the clash that had happened between the two girls. And Meeli wanted to keep it that way until the test was over.

Lensa clenched her fists when she heard Meeli's statement. But she couldn't do anything about it now that the test was over for her. Just when she was about to use her tattoo to get herself out of the testing grounds, she was stopped by Meeli.

It seemed that Meeli was not done with Lensa. The caretaker of the separate dimension looked at the cheater girl who was occupied with her work. The caretaker accessed the information embedded in the tattoo and found out the girl's name— Sienna Slughorn.

Chapter 703 Leveling the Playing Field

Meeli comforted Lensa with her pats on her shoulders before speaking up.

'I know I'm being harsh on you, my child. But the rules are set by my master and I can't break them. This would also serve as a reminder for you to never be careless in any of your tasks at hand.

From all these bitter experiences, you are only meant to grow as a professional. It is also meant to train you to be better potioner if you are indeed planning to pursue the path of potioneering seriously.

I see talent in you. Don't worry. You can try the test again after a month. The difficulty would increase since it would be your second time performing the same test. But I'm sure a patient girl like you would pass it the next time with flying colors.'

Meeli smiled and telepathically communicated with Lensa through the tattoo. She patted her head by floating in the air before coming down just as quickly. She then looked at Sienna before resuming her position on the raised platform.

A few hours flew by quickly.

Some of the participants were done with their tests. Only a handful had managed to process their ingredients in the right manner. Most had failed their tests. But they still waited to see who would be the placeholders.

There was a tough competition between nine rankers who were doing everything right from the looks of it. Sienna was among them. She was about to be done with her raw ingredients as well.

The test wasn't time-bound. One could complete the test anytime within 24 hours. In other words, if they had done everything right, they could have been the placeholders.

However, there was a catch. If two participants scored the same for any of the first three spots, then in that case the time at which the participants consumed to process the ingredient would be considered to be a tie-breaker. The one who used less time to process their raw ingredients optimally would win.

This was why the participants tried their best to finish their tests as soon as possible while processing their raw ingredients in the right manner. This was also the reason why Sienna had decided to disturb not just Sienna but also a lot of other participants that were doing well in their tests.

Their tests would be over too soon for the scion of Slughorn to do anything about them. So she failed them by using underhanded tactics.

The reason she had decided to do that was that she considered that most of the people she had messed with knew who she was. She was wearing the crest of Slughorn over the right shoulder of her blouse like a medal of honor. This told people that she couldn't be messed with because of the family that stood behind her.

And it worked for most participants. At least nobody wanted to get into trouble with the Slughorns for a test they could just repeat. Lensa was the only one who didn't care about Sienna's background.

The participants who were kicked out of their competition didn't receive any concession from Meeli. However, they were also told to wait for the official results.

We waited for a few more minutes. Just as Sienna was about to process her raw ingredients and pass her test, a mana interference occurred. The interference was so strong that not only did it cause her to lose concentration, the raw ingredient she was processing turned into ash in an instant because of the interference's negative effects.

Sienna was livid. Her face turned red. Her bloodshot eyes turned redder. And her mana signature fluctuated wildly attesting to her mental condition.

"Who the..."

Sienna followed the origin of the interference with her mana sense and found it to be originating from Meeli— the caretaker of Minerva's Utopia. She was so aghast by that realization that she became speechless. It took a while for her to access her vocal cords again.

"What is the meaning of this, madam Meeli? I thought you were supposed to be neutral. Why did you..."

Boom!

Kirrr!

Fwoosh!

All the participants still taking the tests were agitated by Sienna's sudden mana fluctuation and her voice. Almost all of their raw ingredients were wasted just before they passed the test.

They all looked at Sienna with hate and malice when that happened. Then they were about to complain to Meeli about their predicament when Sienna's voice was heard once again.

"See what you did? Did you fail us all by doing that? It's on you madam Meeli. What could you possibly..."

Sienna was about to say something when she was lifted off the ground by an unknown force. All the air in her lungs was sucked out of her while she struggled to breathe.

Meeli looked cute and child-like. But she was the caretaker of the separate dimension. A separate dimension that was created by a Sage. Anything that was made by a Sage was not something rankers of Sienna's level could mess with.

Just like Layla, Sienna was also a Homunculus. She could only operate within the boundaries set by her master at the time of her creation. Preventing mana interference from affecting the participant's performance was not her job. However, keeping things fair for everyone was imperative.

Thus, Meeli chose to introduce a mana interference for Sienna at a crucial time. She also allowed the Slughorn girl to affect others' tests because that was not against the rules her master had set.

Therefore, Sienna's disruption resulted in no one receiving rewards. Everybody failed. Those who failed recently looked pissed. However, those who had gotten out of the test early had smiles on their faces as they were watching the cause of their trouble suffering miserably.

Now that all the participants had failed, Meeli didn't have to hold back anymore. She immediately took it upon herself to handle the troublemaker.

Sienna had a terrified look in her eyes as she was facing suffocation. The anger she felt a few moments earlier was nowhere to be found. She clenched her chest with one hand and her neck with the other while trying to inhale air by opening her mouth wide.

But there was no sound coming from her mouth. The scion of Slughorn suffered silently.

Chapter 704 A Sage's Expectations

It was only when Sienna thought that she was going to die did Meeli release her from her suffering. Unlike her usual good-natured and smiling attitude, the caretaker flashed a malevolent smile at the now-coughing girl before speaking up.

"Consider this your first and last warning, little girl. This is not a place where you can just mess around without suffering any consequences.

I did what I had to do to deal with a brat like you. I didn't stop you when you were interfering with the rest of the participants, did I?"

The reason I didn't stop you was also the reason I interfered with your work. Had you surpassed my interference and would have still managed to succeed in the test, I would have considered you as one of the placeholders."

Meeli spun her wooden staff swiftly and floated in the air. She looked at all the failed participants with serious expressions before speaking up.

"True potioners are always ready for real-life experiences. You won't always find yourself in the safe environment of your potion labs. The real challenge and skill are when you can concoct potions on the fly-- in the blink of an eye and use them to overwhelm your opponents or change everything around you instantly.

They always regarded Master Minerva as a gifted potioner. Someone who could concoct potions from the most mundane of ingredients. She did that while avoiding all the apparatus and the cozy environments of the potion labs."

Not everybody knew about Minerva from the bygone era. So most of the participants were shocked when they heard that Minerva could concoct potions on the fly. They couldn't even comprehend the techniques involved for any potioner to achieve that.

"Well... she was a Sage ranker. At that level, I'm sure she could..."

Someone in the audience ignored Sienna's coughing noises and spoke up. It seemed that they were trying to make sense of Minerva's achievements.

"You are not getting it."

Meeli cut off the person's sentence abruptly and spoke up. She flew even higher and sat in the air with her legs folded, resting her wooden staff on them. She then rested her hands on her knees before speaking up.

"Master Minerva started her potioning career like any other ranker. She wasn't gifted in the field. Not really. With sheer determination, she rose through her ranks and overcame her difficulties.

Concoctions on the fly are nothing new. And at the Sage level, anybody could do it. There were a lot of examples of Sages who were not even potioners earlier in their lives managing to pull off such a feat just because they were in the Sage rank."

Meeli spoke and seemed to be taking a long breath. She fixed her eyes on the students and thought of something before addressing them.

"So taking dirt, grass, and other ranked or unranked ingredients and pairing them with mana is not impossible for Sages. But can you guys do the same thing while being a lower-ranked entity?"

Do you know any potioners in your generation that could concoct potions while battling with their opponents? Do you know anybody from your generation who can concoct potions that are a rank or two above them? All while only being in the Ace or let's say Adept rank?"

Meeli smirked at the audience after speaking about her master's accomplishments. Her voice was laced with pride when she said that.

There was something special about Minerva, even among the Sages of old and recent times. Thus, Meeli did not shy away from letting the participants know who was the person that had created this intricate setup for them.

By this time, Sienna had stopped coughing and come to her senses. She knew better not to disturb Meeli in her speech this time. Her background as a scion of one of the biggest houses in the kingdom held no value inside Sage's separate dimension. With Meeli's actions, Sienna was made aware of this fact.

Meeli pursed her lips and looked at the void before voicing her thoughts.

"It is easy to label someone as a prodigy or a genius in their fields. By doing that, humans ignore the efforts it took for those personalities to reach where they reached.

Nothing is free in this world. Everything had a price. Expertise comes at a cost of sacrifices and hardships. Success comes at the cost of failing so many times that it might break you.

I'll be blunt: you young and naive rankers need to establish your foundations right now if you ever wish to see the world from its highest peaks.

My master wants someone who can become a future Sage to inherit her legacy. So of course she'd want them to be proficient in potion concoction while they are still a lower-ranked entity.

Her standards in looking for an inheritor may seem high and unattainable from your point of view. So I suggest you give up on trying to secure her legacy if you feel it's too much hassle. But I won't allow a mediocre ranker to get their hands on what belongs to my master. Do you guys understand?"

A unique mana pulse was generated from Meeli after she said what she had in her mind. That pulse told everyone that Meeli was not a normal human or halfling.

After that mana pulse was washed over the participants, they felt an extreme weight had been placed on their shoulders. Their minds made them feel like they were trapped in a terrible wind storm.

In the next moment, that pressure was dissolved. The pressure was only felt for a fraction of a second. But everyone was terrified of what Sage's remnant could do them in that fraction of time.

They refocused their gazes on Meeli who was floating motionlessly above them and heard her speak once again.

Before you can pull off what my master did, you need to show your worthwhile you are still in the Ace or Adept rank. Thus, the rules. I would revoke anyone's entrance in the separate dimension permanently if they question how my master has set up the rules."

Meeli said before looking at Sienna who had stood up and was looking at her with scared expressions on her face. She smirked at the scion of Slughorn before concluding.

"Being evil may look easy and tempting. But it has its own set of consequences. Don't try to walk on the path if you are not ready to face the repercussions of walking on it."

Chapter 705 Lensa vs. Sienna

Everyone was disqualified.

This was the first batch of participants in Minerva's Utopia since it was opened to rankers that got out without anyone clearing the test. It was bound to create waves when the news of it spread in the future.

The participants in the test were bound to tell the aspirants what the objective of the test was, as well as the stance of Meeli, the caretaker of each separate dimension.

The participants would then begin preparing to give tests in which they were expecting some kind of interference. They would also start training for multi-layered concoctions and multi-front processing of

raw ingredients. This one disqualification of an entire batch was bound to take all the tests of Minerva's Utopia to new heights.

Lensa sighed when she found herself outside the greenhouse. She was disappointed that she didn't get to finish the test. Her inability to grasp the true objective of the test made her realize how incompetent she was.

'Potions and processing of raw ingredients! Guess I'll study these fields a bit more before coming here. I'm sure Grandpa Dan is pretty experienced in both fields.'

Lensa considered studying both fields seriously for the time being. Only then would she visit the separate dimension once again after this trip. She had come here to meet with Eren. But after doing some inquiries, she found out that he had been out on some mission. And that it would be a while for him to come back.

But it was not like she was in a hurry anyway. So she decided to check out Minerva's Utopia. Her uncle Devon had brought her to White Raven city. Dan Carren was staying in New Beginnings.

Just like every other renowned house, the House Carren also ran a business in the city of New Beginnings. Dan Carren was overseeing the business now that they were in the Duchy of Nightshade.

"It was you who complained to the caretaker, didn't you?"

Lensa was lost in her thoughts when she heard a voice from behind her. She saw Sienna walking towards her with a bunch of rankers in tow. It looked like she hadn't come alone to take the test.

"Hm? I just reported your uncalled-for actions. You expect me to let it slide off?"

Lensa wasn't afraid of Sienna even when she was with a lot of rankers. She didn't like to brag about her house. Even so, she was more than willing to use the card if and when it made sense to do so.

Lensa's bold stance irked Sienna some more. The illusion spell that was cast on her made her forget the painful memories. But it didn't change her from who she was. Thus, when she forgot about the incident that had happened to her, she became the same person she always was. She always believed that her family had her back.

"That's right. I'm sure you must have known who I am at this point. But in case you don't know, I'm Sienna Slughorn of the House Slughorn. I would change that tone if I were in your shoes."

Sienna spoke with an evil grin on her face. They were the rankers assigned to Sienna under the house of Slughorn. They had already prevented her from causing too much trouble.

One of the rankers who was walking behind Sienna was an Adept ranked old man named Regan. He was way too old to be allowed to take tests. His potential as a powerful entity was on the verge of being exhausted. So he was only allowed entry inside Minerva's Utopia but he couldn't take tests. The only thing he could do was to explore the separate dimension and hunt for resources himself.

However, Regan couldn't really do that either since he was in charge of taking care of Sienna. So he had waited outside the greenhouse for her to finish her test.

Regan saw that Sienna's rash personality was still acting up and he had a headache. He then looked at Sienna, who appeared to be a seemingly normal elf. Or as normal as an elf could be with no background.

'Maybe this time she'll just scare the girl without causing anything serious. I should create an exception for this. Allow her to blow some steam off.'

Regan kept his thoughts to himself and maintained the silence. It allowed Sienna to be bolder in her attitude. Lenza wasn't impressed even when she had an Adept ranked bodyguard in her entourage.

"Sienna Slughorn? I think I have heard that name before. Anyway, does being a member of House Slughorn give you a free pass to mess with anybody? Do you think I'd be scared into saying sorry to you for the wrong deeds you committed yourself just because you have your goons with you?"

I've had it. Now I want some kind of apology from you. Apologize to me and all the other participants who are gathered around us who have been disqualified.

I don't want to create a ruckus here inside Sage Minerva's space. But that doesn't mean I would be afraid of you or your house."

Regan frowned when he heard his statement. He thought that the young elf girl would retreat after hearing the house Slughorn's name. But instead, she had retaliated more wildly than he had anticipated. Regan realized that the elf girl's background wouldn't be so simple.

Regan stepped forward and held Sienna's hand, preventing her from approaching Lenza than she already had. He then pondered a bit before using his mana signature to apply pressure on Lenza.

His purpose was to calm the potential conflict between the two girls and avoid unnecessary trouble. He also telepathically told Sienna to stand down and not say any more words. But in doing so, he had ignored the low-ranked members of House Slughorn who were assigned to her detail.

Lenza suddenly found herself in a pinch because the other rankers in Sienna's entourage treated Regan's actions as giving them a go. This was to suppress the elf that was troubling Sienna. They surrounded the two girls and Regan in the next moment, waiting for Regan's orders.

Lenza was suddenly very angry because of the way things were progressing. She had thought that she was already being lenient by not trying to cause trouble with Sienna. Sienna had technically disqualified everyone because of the stunt she had pulled off. But it turns out some people were just born to create trouble.

'Have it your way then!'

Chapter 706 Canceling Political Marriage

'Have it your way then!'

Lenza thought and cast her ability. In the next moment, a distinct mana pulse was felt in the surroundings as a series of ice lens systems was created over Lenza's head in the air. The lenses started making sharp creaking noises as they were charged with light element mana all at once.

"This is..."

Regan gulped empty air and looked at the source of the threatening mana pulse that was floating above Lensa's head. He cursed Sienna for messing with someone like this elf. Someone who had the power to take care of him and all the others he was with while still being an Ace rank.

"Wait!"

Regan finally decided to interfere directly. He looked at Lensa carefully while keeping tabs on the ticking time bomb she had created before asking her.

"Who are you?"

Sienna wanted to say something to Lensa and all her other companions. But Regan shushed her by putting pressure on her. His job was to keep Sienna safe. And Lensa's ability was too dangerous to consider her as someone ordinary.

Lensa stared at Regan with a frown on her face. She then glanced at Sienna, who looked a bit troubled at the time. The elf prodigy then glanced around and narrowed her eyes while replying.

"Oh? Now, do you want to know about me? After finding out that I am not so easy to deal with?"

I'm guessing that this miss of yours is used to causing trouble. That's why so many retainers have been assigned to her.

Sienna Slughorn, huh? Hm? Wait a minute!"

Lensa suddenly had a surprised look on her face as she looked at Sienna with newfound curiosity. Although she hadn't watched the clip, she was aware of the conspiracy that surrounded her.

It was later established through multiple whitewashes from Hour Slughorn that the clip with Sienna in it was fake. But that didn't help Sienna from getting forgotten in people's minds.

"You mean the Sienna Slughorn that was rumored to be part of..."

Regan's stress lines increased when he realized that Lensa had connected the dots and recognized Sienna for the scandal she was part of. It was his responsibility not to mess with the illusion spell that was cast on her. He had to make sure she wasn't explicitly reminded of the events that had happened to her.

So he coughed before cutting Lensa's speech.

"Um... yeah. The keyword is "rumored" to be, young miss. Can we talk about your identity now?"

Sienna was very puzzled when she heard the talks between Regan and Lensa. She didn't know what they were talking about. But by this point, she had regained her cool. She had also come to realize that Lensa had a superior ability in her arsenal that made even her guard Regan nervous. So she decided to heed Regan's advice and stopped trying to spew venom toward Lensa with her mouth. At least for now.

Lensa canceled the activation of her ability when she saw that Regan had backed away. She still was not pacified. But she wasn't a conflict-seeking person either. So she decided to give her name.

"I am Lensa Carren from the city of Silvermoon."

Lensa said simply. However, her words were loud in Regan's ears. He looked at Lensa incredulously before looking at the young girl from his own house who needed his assistance in almost everything.

'This... this fucking brat is always trying to create trouble for the entire Slughorn house. It's like someone has assigned her with a sacrilegious mission to dig the graves of herself and those who support her with her own hands.'

Regan cursed Sienna when he heard the word Carren from Lensa's statement. He then cursed his luck for having to take care of such a pampered child in an adult's body.

Regan felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest. However, he was glad that things hadn't gotten worse yet.

'Lensa Carren... Lensa Carren... Lensa Carren... where have I heard this name?'

Sienna mumbled Lensa's name to herself before getting puzzled by it. It took her a while to remember a particular conversation she had way back with Ken and his "friend" at the time.

Ken's friend, who she didn't bother to remember the name of, told her about this name. He had told her that Ken was now engaged to this elf girl, making her drop the idea of having Ken to herself.

"You... so you are that bitch who slept with Ken and trapped him!"

Sienna couldn't help feeling a sudden burst of anger when she realized Lensa's identity. Ken was going to be her prized possession. His family's status would have helped her strengthen her own position in both the Houses, giving her even more power to do whatever she wanted to do.

Unlike Lensa who was running away from political marriages, Sienna was all for it. But all her plans to bring these two Houses together were ruined by the elf girl who was in front of her.

Lensa looked extremely angry. Regan was stunned by Sienna's words, which made him tongue-tied more than ever. The rankers surrounding them were just as confused by the developments.

It was Sienna who decided to speak up.

"Ken still belongs to me, you bitch. You better forget all about him and look for someone else to satisfy your kinks. I'm all that he needs when he finishes his on-field assignment."

Lensa was taken aback by Sienna's words before a smile appeared on her face. This bratty girl had given her the reason she had been looking for a very long time.

"Hehehe! Take him. I don't want him anyway. Hehehe! Just take him."

Lensa couldn't help chuckling while replying to Sienna. With this, she had the perfect excuse to turn down her political marriage— blatant claims of this kind from another renowned House in the kingdom.

Sienna suddenly felt something was off. She wasn't expecting Lensa to come on board with her wishes so easily. It was as if Lensa had been running away from Ken all along. Even she was beginning to question claiming him for her own ends.

Then she heard Sienna's chuckle and assumed that she was mocking her. She couldn't help but throw another challenge at her.

"You are laughing now. But let me assure you that you and your clan need to pay the price of your arrogance. House Slughorn would never..."

"Enough..."

Regan finally yelled at Sienna with his crazy eyes. The latter could see that they were turning bloodshot while feeling overwhelmed by his aura. The old man was finally angry at her. Alas, it was too late.

"Oh yeah? Now that it has come to that, I don't want your apology, Sienna. Not anymore. House Carren will deal with House Slughorn in its own way. Consider Ken as my parting gift for what you and your clan are about to face."

Lensa spoke calmly. Then she started walking toward the teleportation array without any fear of the rankers who were surrounding her. Regan watched Lensa walk away from them and couldn't help laughing bitterly. A strained relationship between the two Houses was inevitable with today's events.

Chapter 707 Test of Bravery

The southern testing grounds. Minerva's Utopia.

There was a limestone circular platform in an open space, which was surrounded by the vegetation exclusive to Minerva's Utopia. This circular platform was levitating 40 meters above the ground and there were phantom stairs one could use to get on it.

The circular platform had a radius of 20 miles, allowing it to host loads of participants in one go. The platform had a distinct mana signature that let the participants know that it was an A-Ranked artifact itself.

This platform tested one's battle potential. However, nobody was dueling over the platform. Every participant that was on the platform could be found seated with their legs folded and eyes closed.

The platform sent the participants' consciousness to an illusory space that would render their opponents for them. They would be paired up randomly in the illusory space, making them fight each other without any bodily harm being done to them in reality.

It was only when they became exhausted in the illusory world that they would give up the battle. Until then they would keep on fighting to score more points out of 100 units.

The battles would become more difficult as one kept on gaining points in the battle. A player who was close to scoring 100 points would face more difficult battles. It would also increase the difficulty by making the player closer to reaching 100 points face multiple opponents as well as renditions of unknown opponents who weren't present on the platform as participants in reality.

These renditions were spectral apparitions without any facial features. They were superior to normal rankers and would come to fight the participants from time to time, making their job to score 100 points even more difficult.

Participants would also have to fight off hordes of mana beasts. It all depended on their performance, expertise, class type, and other personal factors.

However, it wasn't just the difficulty that increased the closer one was to scoring 100 points. The rewards one would get after facing incremental difficulties were also something to look forward to.

The southern city ground offered a variety of rewards to its participants. Of them all, chunks of precious Andrium and Extols were the most common rewards. The placeholders of each testing session would receive artifacts of their choice and preference.

The southern city ground was made for all the rankers. It was not focused on potioners and potion making. Thus, this testing ground attracted a massive crowd. Most participants would come here not to win, but to gain Andrium chunks and Extols.

The participants would also be awarded ranking techniques and spells if they have done exceptionally well. Some of the participants were also given runic steles they could use to enhance their elemental attainment.

Making profits was easy after performing well in the Test of Bravery. Most of the rankers who visited the separate dimension wanted to forever stay on this levitating platform and keep on earning rewards for all four days they were here.

Alas, just like all the other testing grounds, the southern testing ground only allowed participants to be on the platform for up to a day. After which they would be pulled out of their illusory space and sent out.

Test of Bravery! The southern testing grounds tested one's potential to stand against and fight the odds. As such, the test was inclined to get more difficult the closer one got to scoring 100 points.

Today was no different. The platform was hosting loads of participants at once. Around 10,000 participants were taking the test at this point in absolute silence.

One just had to sit and close their eyes for the platform to act on their consciousness. After which, they would not be in control of their bodies. However, their bodies were secured by the platform itself, raising a thin layer of energy barrier around each of them to prevent anyone from harming the participants.

The participants would keep a safe distance from each other. They would be teleported away to a different place if they forcefully tried to get close to any other participant who was immersed in the illusory space.

The illusory space rendered the same platform the participants' real bodies were currently occupying. However, there was no one except for their opponents. The space around the platform was also blurred and hazy, making the rankers realize that they were indeed in an illusory space.

A blonde young girl was sitting on the platform with her eyes closed. As with everyone else, her face painted a picture of stress. That's because she was currently engaged in a battle in the illusory space.

"Haaah!"

Shalen Croft took care of the participant that was attacking her. She had made extensive use of her poison-related spells and her crossbow in this round.

The arrows she had launched toward her opponent had no arrowheads. Instead, they were coated with a slimy yellow substance.

Shalen was an assassin and she had a poison element. Her poison was strong enough to make her opponents lose their motor functions and cause disharmony in their mana circuits. Lower ranked opponents would instantly get killed because of such poison entering their system.

Shalen had scored 64 points till now with her performance. She could keep tabs on her score by sending her mana sense into the tattoo that was etched over the back of her right hand.

Shalen had come to realize that the difficulty of her battles was increasing exponentially the closer she got to scoring 100 points. That's because she had just defeated 2 opponents and 4 apparitions back to back. However, unlike in previous instances, she was not given breathing room.

Another apparition appeared in the front right after the last apparition was taken care of. Shalen gritted her teeth and pulled out her duel daggers once again. She charged at her opponent who had no face and was wielding a spear.

Another long and tiring duel ensued once again. By the time Shalen was done with her most recent opponent, she was already exhausted and sweating buckets. She had decided that if any more opponents came at this point, she would immediately quit the test.

To her surprise and delight, Shalen was offered a sought-after break.

Chapter 708 Big Leagues' Games

A spectral screen appeared in front of Shalen with a countdown timer of 15 minutes. She had 15 minutes to recharge herself and get her act together before the next round of opponents appeared in front of her.

"Haaash!"

Shalen took a long breath and crashed on the spot. She lay on her back and started breathing heavily. Her bosoms heaved as she took long breaths.

"This fucking test. Fucccck! My arm!"

Shalen gripped her left arm's shoulder with her right hand and attempted to snap her dislocated shoulder. When she did, waves of pain and misery crashed onto her already exhausted psyche.

The injuries sustained in the illusory space were real-like. The illusory space followed the logic of the real world. As such, there was no way to ignore the pain felt by the sustained injuries.

Shalen had been fighting with her injuries for quite some time now. She had suffered other minor wounds all over her body as well. Thankfully, the illusory space also included whatever she had in her storage space. It allowed her to take out a vial of recovery potion from her storage and drink it.

Shalen was no stranger to pain and suffering. She had been working in the Escalon guild for quite some time now. Her superior was the Paladin of Pain herself. She made all of her subordinates go through various tests and procedures.

Thus, Shalen's pain tolerance level was quite high. However, there was something wrong with the test she was currently part of.

The illusory space intensified the feelings of pain and suffering multifold than the real world. There was a reason it was called the Test of Bravery.

The participants would always hesitate to march forward the longer they stayed inside the test, even when they knew the feelings of pain and suffering were not real. The feelings of pain would increase as they got closer to scoring 100 points.

The awareness of reality didn't exclude the participants from feeling an extreme sense of dread for the next participants and apparitions that they would battle against. No sane person would welcome ten or 20 times the feelings of pain. Especially if the injuries were already dreadful enough in real life.

Shalen was afraid to take the test because she was afraid of feeling a heightened sense of pain. She also wondered how the Paladin of Pain Reva Rain would handle the test when she was the one who was at the receiving end of such a test.

Shalen had been sent here as a normal ranker to perform a recon mission for Reva Rain under the orders of the Escalon guild. The guild had become thoroughly involved in the affairs of the White Raven guild when it was approached by a very influential ranker.

This influential ranker owned a condor-type demon beast. He had told them that they needed to finish all the lower-ranked entities of the White Raven guild as soon as possible.

It appeared that this ranker belonged to the other faction of House Montmorency that had been excluded from the arrangements the three factions had made concerning Minerva's Utopia. Therefore, the ranker's faction wanted an in by breaking the current order of the set-up.

The Escalon guild was a normal guild on the surface that was involved in clean-up operations in the Badlands. At least that was what the majority of the populace was made to believe. But under the facade of normalcy, the Escalon guild had its fingers dipped in a lot of shady pies.

The guild was happy to take on the mission. Especially when it had designs of its own on the White Raven guild. It was like getting paid for something one liked to do.

Shalen was sent here to find out more about the separate dimension. She was also tasked with keeping a close eye on the White Raven guild by staying inside the city.

The reason Escalon guild was being cautious this time was because the previous team that was sent to mess with the White Raven team members who had ventured into the Monster Canyon was nowhere to be found.

An entire team of Escalon guild members disappeared into Monster Canyon. That in itself was not a strange event. Monster Canyon was called the graveyard of rankers for a reason. It would either make or break you. There was hardly any in between.

However, the guild found out that its team never even intercepted White Raven team members. It was attacked by a bunch of Orcs without them provoking the monsters in the first place.

All the attacks performed by these Orcs were targeted attacks. The Escalon team members were on the tails of the White Raven team members. Thus, they crossed the same region they did. However, it was only the Escalon team members who got jumped on.

Then again, the monsters in Monster Canyon were a weird bunch even by Badlands' standards. The Escalon guild had to move on from a substantial loss but they had to move on. That was especially true now that the money had been taken from that influential ranker.

The guild tried to intercept White Raven team members again after that event. However, they suffered the same fate. That's when the seniors inside the guild decided that they needed to reevaluate the battle prowess of the White Raven guild. They suspected that there were a bunch of experts protecting the White Raven members from the shadows.

With House Derringer and a faction of House Montmorency onboard, this was extremely possible. So, Escalon guild relayed the information they had collected so far on White Raven guild and sent it to the other faction of House Montmorency. Then it asked for the renewal of the initial plan.

To the guild's surprise, it was given sufficient time by the condor-owning ranker. However, he stated that he would send a bunch of people from his own faction to expedite the process when he sees it fit. He just wanted the Escalon guild to take the fall if and when the clean-up operation gets exposed to the two Houses.

Infighting was disastrous for the business. The other faction of House Montmorency understood that fact very well. It didn't want to take over a dying business.

The excluded faction of House Montmorency wanted the White Raven city to prosper even more than it was right now. So that when it takes care of Levine's faction, it would be handed a money-making machine in the form of Minerva's Utopia.

The Escalon guild was now stuck between a rock and a hard place. It couldn't back away from the arrangement. It could not proceed recklessly with its plan. All it could do now was figure out how to destroy the members of White Raven. That is, causing any ripples that might make the two Houses angry with the Escalon guild itself.

The Escalon guild and all its members were now walking on thin ice.

Shalen Croft was just another pawn in the big leagues' games. But she never had such a childhood when she wasn't used as a pawn. It was the same shit different day for her anyway.

"10.... 9... 8... 7..."

Meeli's emotionless voice was heard by Shalen when she was lost in her thoughts while lying down. She had recovered for the most part at this point. The frontal clash wasn't an assassin's forte. But that didn't make her quit the test. At least not yet.

Chapter 709 Layla and Ivor Teaming Up

"What's up?"

Ivor came out of the separate dimension after four days and contacted the person who was trying to reach him. He had walked through every test ground Minerva's Utopia had in these four days.

Ivor was most interested in the Test of Bravery. He had scored 89 points on that test which was the highest of all the four tests he had taken.

Ivor had received plenty of exceptional rewards for his performance in the southern testing grounds. He was also interested in exploring the separate dimension for all the other resources it contained.

However, he thought he should contact the person first and get it over with. He'd have to wait a month in the White Raven city for his next opportunity anyway.

"WHERE THE FUCK WERE YOU? I have been trying to contact you for the last four days."

An angry Layla appeared in front of Ivor. The array disk he was holding was only the size of his palm. Layla's image rendition was also tiny-like because of it.

Layla was seen staying at an inn that looked decent. She was seen sitting on her king-sized bed with a lot of books and scrolls open all over the bed near her. It was apparent she was still busy with her research.

"Um... I was busy exploring Minerva's Utopia. Why were you trying to contact me? And where are you anyway? I tried to contact you first before entering the separate dimension, you know."

Ivor replied with a frown on his face. He wondered how Eren could handle the bratty girl for so long.

"I am near the city of Lancelot. In a town not far from it. Come and meet me here."

Ivor was taken aback when he heard Layla was in the city of Lancelot. It was quite a journey from where he was currently. Although the city was still in the Nightshade duchy, it was 25 days' a colt ride away from the city of New Beginnings. One would have to use a teleportation array to reduce the journey time to a week.

Ivor couldn't use the teleportation array for obvious reasons. That meant he would have to spend 25 days traveling to get to Layla.

"Um... I wanted to check out Minerva's Utopia some more..."

Layla's irritated expressions turned into extreme annoyance when she heard Ivor's words. She cut him off swiftly.

"It's "Sage" Minerva's Utopia, Ivor. Haah! Never mind. You can check the place after we are done with our task."

Layla took a deep breath before continuing.

"Look, this is critical. I wouldn't have contacted you otherwise. Eren has gone off the grid so I can only ask you."

Ivor sighed when he heard Layla. He knew he couldn't avoid Layla due to the arrangement he had with Eliza. So he nodded at her before asking.

"Alright. I'll come where you are right now. But what am I supposed to do there? Did your cover get blown or something?"

Ivor said while walking towards White Raven's exit. He would have to rent a colt for a long journey and prepare for it by restocking on a few things. White Raven city had plenty of shops to suit his needs.

"No. Not really. Not by the Lancelots, at least.

But some people seem to be on my trail. I need to get rid of them. But I can't do that by getting involved myself. Otherwise, it'd backfire on me.

That's where you come in."

Ivor narrowed his eyes when he heard Layla speak. He didn't mind killing anyone. He was just worried about someone finding out his identity because of the incident he'd caused. Layla knew what he was thinking so she chuckled before speaking up.

"Hehehe. Don't worry. I'll give you plenty of Potion of Innocence. I can't use it myself because I am not like you guys. Otherwise, I would have killed those pests a long time ago."

Ivor had never heard of this potion. So Layla had to explain to him what it was and how it could be used. She also told him how Eren had used it to kill an entire army squad and later on join the same Edinburgh army without any issue.

"This... this Potion of Innocence... how can a potion like this exist? I need it."

Ivor said, his face painted with disbelief. He felt like the world had changed drastically after he had come out of Purgatory. This single potion had the power to cause a lot of trouble for the Edinburgh kingdom and a lot of other active forces. And the potion was doing just that.

Ivor was trying to keep a low profile because of the bounty on his head. His changed appearance didn't assure him much because he knew that there were various ways he could be tracked by specialists if he made any wrong move.

But having the potion in his possession would give him freedom. If Ivor had any underground contacts like Eren, he wouldn't even need to depend on Layla for the potion. He could get it with a bit of effort as Eren was selling it in limited quantities there. Only it wasn't called the Potion Of Innocence in the black market. It was called Format History.

The most lucrative aspect of selling Format History was that it couldn't be counterfeited by any other potion manufacturers. A large chunk of Eren's earnings from the black market came from selling Format History at crazy prices.

"Hehehe. Of course, you need it. It was created by me, after all. The field of potioneering is boundless. That's why you don't need to obsess over Minerva's Utopia. The place is designed for potioners, and you are far from being one yourself.

If your only objective is to get the resources it has to offer, I can understand. However, you can do that any time when we are done with our affairs here.

I can even help you in your next exploration by providing you with the right guidance. But only after you take care of these pests for me."

Ivor nodded at Layla and paired his mana sense with the array disk. He then started preparing for the long journey ahead while keeping the audio channel open for Layla.

"By the way, who are the guys that are trying to get you?"

Chapter 710 Oliver The Loyal Hound

"By the way, who are the guys that are trying to get you?"

Ivor asked while stocking up on food rations. He had taken a runic storage unit containing packets of lamb jerky made of a ranked beast. He also stockpiled various potions. He had won a few precious potions inside Minerva's Utopia as rewards. But he needed to get his hands on regular potions nonetheless.

Layla was busy writing some stuff down in her book when she heard Ivor's question. She finished what she was doing and closed the book before laying down on her bed. She stared at the ceiling a bit to get her thoughts right before answering.

"Um... I don't know their identities exactly. I don't have time to pay attention to them. They are still far away from getting close to me after all. But I have my own ways to keep tabs on them.

They have someone in charge of them. He is named Oliver."

Ivor was about to pick another vial of potion from the potion shop. When he heard the name, he stopped and froze. That's because he had heard the name before. And he was sure he wasn't mistaking the person.

It was the name of one of the retainers Jason Renar had. He was very close to Jason, so he had met up with the guy too. The last time he met with Oliver was when he was forced to travel with Jason inside Purgatory.

Oliver was an Adept who had reached the solid mana core stage of the D-Rank. His real power lay in controlling various squads of Duke Arthur Renar.

"Arthur Renar!

Layla, you are being tracked by Arthur Renar's men. Oliver is his subordinate."

Ivor said to Layla, who opened her eyes in surprise. She had first thought that she was being tracked by someone because of the experiments she had conducted in passing.

But it turned out she was being followed by the subordinates of a man who had been followed by her and her Master Eliza. She listened to what Ivor knew about Oliver and his team with keen interest. She smiled lightly when he was done explaining.

"Heh! I was expecting that fool to act up. But not to this extent. It seems he is still looking for someone who can use the Seer array. Otherwise, I was very careful not to leave any traces of myself anywhere controversial.

That madman is unaware that the Seer array has its limitations. Especially when it is used on someone like me. He is about to drive his Seer madder one day at this rate."

Saying this, Layla sighed. She knew that Arthur had used the Seer array to track the Osan Woods butcher. It wasn't too difficult to guess that he had once again relied on it to find her now that she wasn't available for contact.

Layla was already expecting something like this. That's why she had taken many countermeasures against the Seer arrays. She had also kept herself from being directly involved in Eren's tasks. This was the reason why Arthur was unable to pinpoint her location even after making someone use their expertise in finding her.

Layla could do so many things to throw her pursuers off now that she had gotten additional information from Ivor. She wasn't scared of Oliver and the entire team he was with. If push came to shove, she would eliminate his entire crew in one go. But she didn't want to do something so dramatic. Something that would result in high-ranked entities getting involved in her affairs.

"Try to meet up with me as soon as I can. We need to plan a few things. I guess I need to relocate so that they won't get suspicious that we have designs on House Lancelot.

Let's be extra careful from now on since we know it would be Arthur's men we would have to fight against. We need to eliminate them cleverly. Damn it. I wish Eren was here. That guy knew how to handle this stuff better than anybody.

Anyway, we will have to deal with this problem ourselves. I'll contact you soon. Bye for now."

Layla said and quickly got up from her bed. If it was indeed Arthur's men following her, she couldn't take it easy anymore. The guy had the means and resources needed to corner her.

Layla first collected all her belongings from the room before breaking open a vial of a unique potion. It wasn't Potion of Innocence. But it would still do its job in keeping her identity mysterious for the most part.

Ivor hurried his shopping too. He then hired a unique colt for himself that was better than the average. He was interested in cornering Oliver too since it was because of him that he had gotten involved in the mess.

Ivor Osan was aware that Oliver was neither the root cause nor the only party involved in his misfortune. But he had to vent somehow. And Oliver was the right target for him to do so at this point.

'Oliver! You guys were part of the reason for me being labeled as the Osan Woods Butcher. I'll show you I can be much more than that when I see you.'

Ivor thought to himself and urged his colt to speed through the path. Meanwhile, Layla was nowhere to be found in the inn room she had hired for another week. It was as if she had just disappeared from the entire city.

"Sir Oliver, the readings from the array disk have changed all of a sudden. We can't even get the basic direction of the Homunculus we are tracking anymore."

Oliver was conducting his search for Layla when an old scholar came to report him. They were currently in the Lancelot mountain range, near an unnamed lake.

There were corpses of a bunch of mountain bandits lying not too far away from the unnamed lake. Oliver's men were examining these corpses. It looked like someone had experimented on them by using various potions. This was the first definitive clue Oliver had gotten regarding Layla.

He finally felt like he was getting close to his target. But it turned out that it was still as slippery as an eel. He smiled bitterly before saying something in passing.

"Lord Arthur is not going to like this."

Oliver looked at the old scholar and shook his head in disappointment. He then prepared himself to contact the Duke. Only he could set them on the right course.