

H. Academy 81

Chapter 81 Chapter 19.3 - Before the dungeon

'Sigh...' Ethan sighed to himself as he started walking to the entrance of the academy. The last week had been fairly stressful for him since he watched the footage of the monsters running rampant in Nexoria City after the attack.

'How strong those monsters were....Even that amount of hunters was not enough to stop them.' Watching the footage, he understood one simple thing. Being a hunter and awakened was a blessing.

He saw non-awakened people getting massacred by the monsters until the hunters helped. They were completely helpless and couldn't do anything against the strong.

However, being awakened didn't mean Hunters were unbeatable. No, rather than that, he saw hunters on the verge of dying countless times, and at that moment, he understood why her father and her siblings would always say being a hunter was not as easy and cool as it looked.

'Without the effort and strength, being awakened is meaningless.'

He himself had recently awakened, and he knew how hard it was to go against those monsters as a normal person. He saw the students in one of the most prestigious academies struggling against monsters.

'I should get stronger soon. I can't stay the weak me as before.' He wanted to help others, clearing gates. Just like his father, the one he looked up to, he wanted to be a hero.

That was one of the two reasons why he accepted Emily's request. First, he wanted to have more experience, but he didn't want to request it from his family. He wanted to stand on his own; you may call it his pride as a man.

Secondly, he wanted to help the girl. After hearing about Emily's condition, he wanted to help her. It was his innate desire.

And here, he was on his way to his second real dungeon exploration.

"Hey, Ethan. Where are you going?" At that moment, he heard the familiar sound of his best friend.

Lucas called out as he spotted Ethan striding through the academy grounds.

"I have something to do," Ethan replied.

"Ah... Is it about that dungeon? Heeeeh... You've been invited?" Lucas teased, a playful grin on his face.

"Tch. Shut up," Ethan muttered, clearly not in the mood for teasing.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. When are you coming back?" Lucas asked, genuinely curious.

"I don't know, maybe around evening?" Ethan replied, his thoughts still focused on his upcoming dungeon expedition with Emily.

"I see. Then, let's hang out sometime later. It's been a while. I want to call some girls," Lucas suggested, nudging Ethan.

Ethan hesitated for a moment before relenting. "You know I don't like hanging out with girls."

"Come on. Give it a chance, huh? We won't stay as students for long anyway," Lucas reasoned.

"Fine, fine. I'll come," Ethan agreed, albeit reluctantly.

"Promise," Lucas said, holding out his pinky finger. Looking at his friend behaving childishly, he couldn't help but shake his head. Lucas was always like that, but he was glad Lucas was the way he was.

Ethan sighed but hooked his own pinky around Lucas's. "I can't. You know dungeons can be unpredictable." Though he still wanted to leave leverage for himself.

Lucas chuckled. "Hmm... Then, call me when you need help."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "You think I'll need your help?"

Lucas grinned mischievously. "You bastard. Did you forget you awakened later than us? Do you want me to beat you?"

Ethan rolled his eyes but couldn't help but crack a small smile. "Sigh... Okay, I'll give you a call later."

"Then, I will be waiting for your call."

After that, he left, waving his hands leaving Lucas back there. Ethan continued on his way to the meeting point for the dungeon expedition. He took a lift, and he reached there after 30 minutes of the ride.

As he arrived at the designated location, he spotted Emily and the other members of the expedition.

"Ah, Ethan. You are here." Seeing Ethan arrive, Emily came to him immediately, reaching at him with a smile.

The place he was in right now was the building of a guild, but Ethan could see how different it was from his family's.

The difference between classes was showing itself from the design and fashion alone, but even then, he could see the building was clearly neglected.

Even though this guild hall seemed neglected, he could sense the determination and hope in Emily's eyes.

"We are waiting for the last member to arrive, and then we are ready to go." Just as Emily was about to speak, suddenly she saw the person they had been waiting for.

"Ah, he is here." Saying that her eyes turned to the newcomer, and there they could see him walking--black pants, a black t-shirt, and a jacket with a hood over his head.

"Astron?"

And cold purple-eyes.

After the message came from the Azure Crest Guild, I immediately started preparing myself.

Since, according to my profile, I didn't have any experience as a Hunter, they probably waited for other people to reach out to them.

But, from the start, I already knew this position would be empty. Since, in the game, there were no archers at the party, and the healer was the demon-contractor.

Therefore, I had already finished my preparations.

'Silencer.'

The first one was to order a specific silencer for my gun. Since this one was not a brand product but rather a specific one from a blacksmith, the silencer needed to be made specifically, and it took a while.

'Bunch of potions, antidotes, and light-attribute bullets.

Aside from that, those three were also necessary for the incoming expedition.

'And lastly, food and water supply for one month, high-quality tent, and a lot of magazines.'

These whole things almost made my real spatial bracelet filled to the brim, but they were all necessary.

After everything was ready, I made my way to the meeting point. It wasn't hard to find the place, since the address was already sent to me by them.

And, here we were.

"Astron?" In front of our dumb-looking protagonist and the girl with a slightly scorn expression on her face, I reached my destination.

"I thought it may be someone else, but it was you, huh?" Emily said, her gaze sweeping me.

"....." I didn't reply and overlooked her scorn. It was something I was expecting anyway. If I was in her place, I would also get slightly mad when the weakest of the academy participated in the dungeon exploration that was going to determine the future of her guild.

"Sigh....Sorry. I am under a lot of pressure nowadays." Realizing that causing a scene and antagonizing me randomly would clearly be a wrong action, Emily sighed and apologized.

'She is clearly befitting to be a leader.' Comparing her reaction to another girl, I could see the differences between them clearly.

"Come, we will start our briefing." Emily gestured for us to follow her as she entered the guild hall. The scene was the same as in the game. At the start, this place was showing clear signs of being neglected, but it was rather because of their low budget.

'Though this will change in the future.'

Remembering how this place transformed after only two years, I could clearly see the potential they had.

Emily led us into a room where they would discuss their strategies for the dungeon exploration.

CREAK

As the door opened, it revealed four people inside, three women and one man. Immediately, the woman at the front came to our side, looking at us with clear, shining eyes.

'Anya Guzman.'

I immediately remembered her from the game.

"Wow, you really are handsome."

As she would welcome the player with those words immediately. Considering Ethan's face, it was pretty normal since he would become a model and live his life without swinging his weapon once if he wanted.

"... Thank you?"

Ethan clearly looked perplexed at the sudden behavior of the woman.' Certainly, in the game, he also gave the same reaction since he was such a guy.

BONK

"Sigh....Sister Anya, please calm down. We are not here to play." Emily bonked the head of the woman as she turned her attention to the people inside.

"He is Ethan, the one I had talked about. And, this is Astron, the Archer of our party."

"Oh....This one is not that bad either." Anya said, coming at me. Though before he could come at me, she was bonked at her head.

"What did I tell you now?"

"Okay, okay."

After she introduced us, Emily wasted no time and gestured for us to sit at the table.

"No need to be stiff... Here are the rest of the party members."

Gesturing her hand to the inside of the room, she said, and the others started introducing themselves one by one.

"I am Faye Barnes. Nice to meet you."

"Hari Fulton, nice to meet you."

Looking at the others waving their hands, Ethan responded with a smile as he threw a questioning gaze at me, filled with curiosity. It seemed he was wondering why I was here, but he would probably come to his answers on his own.

Just like that, we went nearside to the other two sitting on the chairs.

Thinking that, I started looking at the girls in front of me.

Recalling this event from the game, I remembered their names.

'Faye Barnes. She is 18 years old, and her future is not that bright. A sword user and the vanguard of the group. She is using a claymore; what a weird choice for someone this petite.'

I thought while observing her bodily features.

She was a girl with bob pink hair, purple eyes, and petite features, but her muscles certainly looked strong. At least stronger than me.

In the game, she didn't have a bright future since she wouldn't be able to advance further as a Hunter and would stay as she was.

After that, I turned my head to the next person.

'Hari Fulton. She is 19 years old. She is a self-educated hunter and has never attended any academy. For a self-taught, she is pretty talented with her two curved swords. She has a medium-fire affinity, and she is also proficient with fire magic. She joined the Azure guild one year ago.'

Long yellow hair with ocean-clear blue eyes and a slender body. She is beautiful, but not as much as the main cast.

Thirdly, our captain.

'Anya Guzman. She is 20 years old. However, she started training late since she was sick at the beginning. She graduated from a small Hunter Academy after two years of attending one year ago and has been working with Azure Crest Guild since then. She is a spear and shield user. She is also an earth attributed user, so she will be the tank of our group.'

Observing her body, I mused to myself.

'As expected, her body had already adapted to using shields. Her muscles on her back and core are well developed, but her legs are the strongest place of hers. The exposed scars on her body show she liked her job as a Hunter.

I thought, looking at the slightly open top she was wearing. From her exposed tanned skin, you can see the muscles and her toned body. Coupled with her brown hair and brown eyes, she had a weird aura around her, making me remember a certain type of warrior-woman-filled race of the past.

And lastly, the young man with black hair standing on the backside. He had an amicable and easy-going expression on his face, but they did little to hide the fact that something about him was different.

'Fred Nilsen. Aka, Thousand-Faced.'

He was the target of today's expedition.

Chapter 82 Chapter 19.4 - Before the dungeon

"Uh, I'm Fred Nilsen," he introduced himself, his voice slightly shaky as if he were trying to hide his nervousness. "I'll, um, be your healer for this expedition. It's, uh, my first mission, so, uh, please bear with me."

He was stuttering as if he didn't have any experience, but in fact, this was nothing but a lie. Even though I knew him from the game, with my [Perceptive Insight], I could see the little motions he made, signaling that he was lying.

Of course, some may think I put my attention to those points since I am conscious of him, but this is wrong.

I always watch how people use their bodies while speaking. Unless they are experienced enough to control themselves, it always gives me enough information to use.

"No problem, Mister Fred. Everyone will have a first, anyway. By the way, can I call you Fred?"

"Um....Y-you can call me Fred, i-it is fine."

"Good. Fred will be our healer of the expedition." Anya said, taking the role of the captain of the party. "Now, I will start the briefing."

Anya projected the map of the 'Forest of Rain' on the holographic display and continued with the briefing.

"The dungeon we will be visiting is a forest-type dungeon, 'Forest of Rain.' From the mana wavelength, it was estimated that the rank of the dungeon is intermediate rank 4, as you have already been briefed about it. The boss monster is the Spirit of Embertree, a peak rank-4 monster. It's a formidable foe, so we need to be cautious."

She highlighted certain areas on the map. "Our route will take us through various terrain, including dense forests, rivers, and caves. We'll encounter different creatures along the way, so stay alert."

Anya pointed to the formation we would use. "Now, for our party formation: I'll be at the front, leading the way as the tanker. Faye and Hari, you two are our main damage dealers. Ethan and Emily, you'll be our secondary damage dealers and cover the rearguard. Astron, your role as a marksman will be to scout and protect Fred, our healer, who will be at the center."

She spoke, seizing at the people inside the party. From the looks of it, she was assessing the strength of each person one by one. It was a pretty common procedure that was made by the captain since the textbook example tactics mostly wouldn't work perfectly while in the real dungeon.

"Of course, this is just the on-paper formation. According to the situation, we will change it and adapt it to the environment. Any questions?"

Seeing her coming like that, there weren't any other questions. Of course, in the game, this part was where we would be able to choose talk options, etc., but I didn't have any questions. After all, I knew most of the contents of the dungeon anyway.

"Then, let me give you a last final reminder." Seizing everyone with her penetrating eyes, Anya released her aura, pressuring us from the start.

"I am the leader of the party, and I want the absolute commitment. You will listen to whatever I say, and you won't ever act alone. Understood."

This was one of her initial characteristics. Anya was one of the reasons why Emily's guild would rise in the ranks. She is an incredibly talented leader with good situational awareness. Therefore, I didn't have any problem with listening to her instructions.

This was also going to be a good example for me to refer to in the future while exploring more and more dungeons.

"""""" Yes. """"""

Everyone accepted her words without any ounce of hesitation; after all, that was the charisma of the leader who would lead.

I could see Ethan looking at Anya with serious eyes, clearly impressed by her. However, different from other talented people with egos, he had pure intentions.

That was the reason why he was suited to become the main character of the game. A good person with a clear sense of appreciation for others, not a brat.

Even though he is not fully mature, he is mature enough to appreciate others, and this is enough.

"Then, we can leave."

With those words, she stood up and started walking to the outside.

"The van will take us to the related place. Let's not waste any more time."

After that, we reached the entrance of the guild, and we found the waiting van, its engine humming softly.

Anya took place in the front seat while others sat in the back.

WROOM!

As the engine started working, the caravan moved.

"Hey," Ethan began, his tone suggesting he was determined to start a conversation. Astron ignored him, staring out of the window as the scenery whizzed by.

"Astron, I am talking to you," Ethan persisted, not one to be deterred easily.

Astron turned his head slightly, casting a sideways glance at Ethan. "What?"

Ethan leaned in closer, clearly unfazed by Astron's curt response. "I never thought I would see you here," he remarked a hint of surprise in his voice.

'Tch....This bastard now will speak about how he wouldn't expect me to join dungeon explorations.'

Astron grumbled under his breath, unable to hide his irritation any longer. "So what? Can't the last rank of the academy join dungeon explorations?"

Ethan's brow furrowed, but he remained undeterred. "I just meant... It's unexpected, that's all. You always struck me as someone who likes to train. To be honest, since you are the last rank, I thought you would hone your skills in the academy first."

Astron's frustration boiled over, and he shot back with a harsh retort, not mincing words. "Look, Ethan, not all of us have the luxury of sitting behind the academy walls and living in delusion. Some of us need money, and we need it now. I'm not some little baby who can afford to play at being a hero in training forever."

He crossed his arms, leaning back in his seat, a scowl etched on his face. Astron was well aware of his standing in the academy, and normally he wouldn't care. However, considering Emily was there as well, she might have had unnecessary thoughts.

"So, you're implying that you've joined dungeon explorations purely for the money, correct?" Ethan inquired, trying to dig deeper into Astron's motivations. He rather had a smile like he was enjoying how Astron replied to his words.

Astron's response was curt and to the point. "Yes."

Ethan persisted, a hint of genuine concern in his voice. "And why do you need it? Maybe I can help."

Astron's irritation flared once more, and he shot back, "None of your business."

Ethan let out a sigh of exasperation. "You know, you're both cranky and stubborn. If you go on like this, you won't make any friends."

Astron's response was swift and dismissive. "Who said I need friends? I'm perfectly fine on my own."

"...."

Silence hung in the air for a moment as Ethan contemplated Astron's words. Finally, he conceded, though not without a hint of resignation.

"Right? Now, shut your mouth and focus. We are not here to chit-chat." With those last words, Astron cut him off, looking at the map of the dungeon.

Emily, her patience wearing thin, decided to intervene, her voice carrying a harsh edge as she addressed Astron.

"Astron, do you have to be so rude?" Her words were blunt, her frustration evident as she turned a stern gaze on him.

She then shifted her attention to Ethan, whose bemused smile hadn't faded.

Astron met her stern look with defiance. "I'm not being rude. What's rude is poking your nose into other people's business."

With a sigh of exasperation, Emily continued, her tone unwavering. "Astron, we're a team now, and teamwork requires cooperation and respect. Being rude to your team members won't help us succeed in the dungeon."

"..." Astron once again raised his head and thought about his actions and realized he was being slightly angry.

'Wait?'

THUMP

At that moment, his heart immediately started beating faster, just as before.

'This bastard.'

And he realized the reason why, immediately throwing a gaze at the healer who had a smile.

'He is already using his skill.'

Looking at others like that, he realized the others had yet to be affected by the skill.

'Probably because their stats are higher.'

He understood the reason why he was behaving angrier than usual, but to not show it, he still chose to behave like a brat.

"I don't need a lecture on teamwork. I have my reasons for being here, and I don't expect anyone to understand."

'This is too cringe.'

He cringed inwardly, but he continued his act as if he was angry.

Emily, her patience thoroughly tested, took a step back, her expression hardening as she addressed Astron one last time. "Fine, Astron," she said, her voice now carrying a tone of finality. "If you're determined to act like a brat and push everyone away, then so be it. I won't waste any more of my time trying to reason with you."

She turned away from Astron and refocused her attention on Ethan, who had been caught in the crossfire of their heated exchange. With a shake of her head, she muttered under her breath, "Some people are beyond help."

Ethan's face twitched as he found himself awkwardly sandwiched between the escalating tension. He wasn't quite sure how to mediate the situation, especially given Astron's stubborn demeanor and Emily's clear frustration.

However, amidst the growing discord within the group, there was one person who seemed oddly pleased with the unfolding drama – Fred. His cunning mind immediately grasped the dynamics at play and saw an opportunity.

'This is sooner than I expected,' Fred thought to himself, watching the interpersonal conflicts within the caravan. He had keenly observed the people involved and quickly realized the root cause of the friction.

'This guy is the weak link,' he concluded, referring to Astron. The young man with purple eyes had acted out first according to his skill.

And despite feeling a subtle chill from Astron's gaze, Fred dismissed it with confidence.

'There's no way a mere academy student can threaten me,' Fred mused, brushing off any potential concerns.

He had heard what they just said about Astron's low rank and his need for money, which only fueled Fred's ambitious plans further.

'Maybe I can even persuade him to join our side,' Fred thought, formulating a clear strategy in his mind, leveraging his emotion-amplifying skill, [Volatility].

Fred's thoughts raced with excitement. 'Today is my lucky day. I never expected to be presented with an opportunity to secure the heir of Hartleys. Perhaps, if I play my cards right, I might even obtain a coveted seed of Wrath for this achievement.'

As the caravan continued its journey toward the unknown, Fred's scheming mind worked overtime, eager to exploit the rifts forming within the group for his own gain.

However, the expression on Fred's face wasn't able to escape Astron's notice.

The cracks that were forming in the party were the bait he had thrown at him after all.

Chapter 83 Chapter 20.1 - Dungeon

"We've arrived. We'll leave the car here since it won't be of any use inside the dungeon," Anya announced as the caravan came to a stop.

Exiting the car, we were greeted by a vast and unfamiliar landscape. Dungeon entrances weren't always conveniently located within cities, so Hunters often had to travel to reach their destinations.

"The dungeon has a limit of seven people entering. Once we're inside, it'll be closed to access, and we'll lose our connection to the outside world. Any questions?" Anya inquired.

A resounding chorus of "No!" echoed from the team members.

"Good. Is everyone prepared?" Anya continued. These were all questions asked in order to relieve the tension since, at this point, even if one was not prepared, it wouldn't matter.

"Yes," the team confirmed in unison.

"Alright, then. We're entering now," Anya said, tapping her watch to send a notification to the guild.

As the members were looking around, they were clearly surprised.

"To think a dungeon could appear in such a place," Ethan mumbled to himself.

"Dungeons are appearing everywhere around the world. It does not necessarily need to be in the middle of the city. And most of the time, the dungeons that are entrusted to guilds are in such places since they are the cheapest ones." I spoke.

"You seem to know quite a lot about dungeons."

"I just read a lot.

"Then how come your grades are at this bottom."

"I don't read the knowledge that won't be helpful to me even if it is pushed by the academy."

"Heh....Julia says the same."

"Julia says it because she is dumb. I am not like her."

"Sure, sure."

As I was talking with Ethan, Anya approached us. "Come on, guys," she urged, leading the way.

THUMP

As I was walking further, suddenly, I felt the demonic mana being released, though it was subtle.

'This guy....Is he trying to temper the gate? No, since the others sensed nothing, it shouldn't be something big.'

Of course, even if he was doing something, in the game, nothing had happened inside here about the gate, so it shouldn't be something hurtful.

'And, right now, I can't inform others either.'

WRRRR!

As we entered the yellow gate, the same wave of nausea washed over us, though I managed to keep it under control.

"Hmm? Isn't this your first time entering a gate? You seem to be handling it well," Emily observed, looking at me.

"Burgh-!"

Clearly, I was different from the guy on the sides who was puking and emptying everything inside his stomach.

"It is. I am just holding it well."

"We'll need that resilience," Anya chimed in. "Now, let's go. First, we'll explore the dungeon and gather any resources we can find."

As I looked around, the environment inside was just as any other person would expect.

A type of Amazon Forest surrounded us, coupled with the heavy rain and hot atmosphere; it was pretty sultry.

It resembled the first dungeon I visited inside the black market, but this one's mana density was a lot higher than others, mainly because this one was filled with a lot stronger monsters.

"We will encounter goblins and lizardmen inside the outskirts of the forest. Be prepared." Anya informed.

'Right. This dungeon had goblins and lizardmen in the first part.'

Of course, when it comes to the world of games, everyone knows the most common mob character.

Goblins.

A small type of humanoid monster that likes to ambush and copulate with human females.

I took my position within the group, positioned behind the frontline fighters. Our formation was the one we discussed before.

In the middle was Fred, a position of healer. It is the best place for one to be protected and healing and buffing but, at the same time, the best place for one to debuff and curse others.

'This was the reason why demon contractors later abused this position.'

I could see him still acting as if he was inexperienced, clearly looking like he was afraid, but in fact, he was slowly spreading mana to attract monsters.

On my right side was Ethan, and on my left side was Emily. They will be the ones to protect the rearguard, which will be me in this case.

Though the absence of a scout was apparent, I refrained from volunteering for the role, citing my supposed inexperience. Instead, I remained in the rear.

This was to make sure Fred wouldn't know about my sightseeing abilities and, at the same time, observe him and the terrain from a safer space.

However, despite my reserved position, my senses remained sharp thanks to my [Perceptive Insight.]

'Hmm, a stench of blood. Recently, an animal died here.'

I detected the smell of blood in the air while slowly activating my [Keen Eye].

'A group of five. They haven't noticed us yet. Let's see when she will notice.'

This was also a good test to see how far my senses went compared to stronger Hunters. I was sure Anna was on the level of rank-4 to rank-5 right now. Since there was no definitive explanation of one's parameters, it was mostly impossible to know one's rank.

And it didn't take too long for Anya to notice that either. In only a matter of seconds, she did the same.

"Sniff, sniff. A group of five in front, get prepared," Anya also seemed to sense the monsters since she signaled as she moved cautiously toward the goblins.

Although the rank of goblins can vary according to the mana level of the dungeon, generally, they are classified as intermediate rank-2 monsters.

And since the strength of a monster is stronger than a human of the same level, a cautious approach is required.

"Newbies, you will be the one to fight those. Be prepared."

Signaling me and Ethan, Anya said.

'Hmm, straight to the point, good.'

This was how the parties worked. As the leader, she needed to assess our strengths to have a more clear grasp of the scene.

"Ethan, you know what to do, right?" Anya asked, looking at him.

"Yes."

"Astron."

"Yes."

"Then, you may go."

"Huff..." I relaxed my breath, not taking my eyes off the goblins and Ethan, observing his muscles.

'He will dash to the right.'

And from the way he clenched his muscles and positioned himself, it was obvious.

SWOOSH DASH

Ethan bolted toward the goblins on the right side as I anticipated, drawing their attention. It was my cue to act.

His spear moved like a serpent as he immediately slashed the first goblin from his chest.

SPURT

"KIEEEK!"

I grabbed my bow and swiftly knocked two arrows. My fingers moved with practiced ease, aligning the shots in my mind. I imbued my bow with my mana, increasing the strength of the arrows.

'I should use white color right now.' Even though I had figured out how to change the colors of my mana, I still didn't know what exactly they did aside from some clues.

SWISH SPLURT

My arrows found their mark, but the goblins proved tougher than expected. They staggered but didn't go down. They were wounded, but not fatally.

'This....'

"KIEEEK!" "KIEEEEK!"

The goblins, seeing their kin injured, started to scream in their guttural language. They were frantic, but Ethan reached them before they could react further.

SWOOSH SPLURT

With a swift, precise strike, he slashed the chest of the first goblin, his movements a blur of deadly grace.

'As expected, with spear, he is the best.'

Even though he was ranked on the lower side of the academy, his strength at this point should be around the rank-3 to rank-4.

The force of his attack sent the goblin sprawling, and she didn't hesitate to deal with the next one.

SWOOSH SPURT

I followed up with another shot, this time using a stronger arrow that buried itself in the chest of the goblin, ending its life.

Ethan was engaged with the last goblin, and despite the creature's instinctual attempts to defend itself with its knife, it couldn't withstand the relentless onslaught.

CLANK CLANK SWOOSH SWOOSH

Albeit the last one managed to block Ethan's strikes with his knife out of instinct, of course, without intelligence, it wasn't able to block the third one following.

THUD THUD THUD THUD THUD

With a loud sound, five of them fell to the ground, dying immediately.

Swinging her spear into the air to clear the blood on it, Ethan started returning.

Ethan turned back with a satisfied expression, wiping the sweat from his brow. "What do you think?" Looking at me with a clear smirk, he asked.

'Ah...This guy is also affected by Fred's skills at this point.'

I knew looking for confirmation was not Ethan-like, but actually, it was something he wanted.

Since he awakened later as a child, he actually sought other people's confirmation from the corner of his heart since he was always discarded as useless in his family, even though he was not treated badly.

"You did well," I acknowledged, hiding my true capabilities behind a façade of inexperience. "But remember, caution is key. These creatures can surprise you."

If there was one thing that I had learned in the dungeons and in the game, it was the fact that one should never trust the dead-lying monsters.

SWOOSH

Before he could reply, I released another arrow, firing it just past his face. The arrow struck the goblin that had tried to attack him from behind, ending its threat.

"Huh?" Ethan turned to see the goblin's lifeless form, its posture revealing its final intent.

"You forgot to make sure the goblin was dead," I pointed out with a cold voice, maintaining the appearance of a rookie. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

However, this was not normal, knowing Ethan's capabilities.

'His senses are getting affected.'

This was also in the game; it seems Fred had laid quite a lot of debuffs for the party.

CLAP CLAP

"You both are good. It seems this raid won't be hard at all," Anya praised us, her expression proud.

However, she wasn't done with her feedback. She approached us, her tone serious. "However, know that those goblins are the weakest ones. They were intermediate rank-2, so, Astron, next time, use stronger arrows or more than one arrow on each goblin, clear?"

"Yes," I nodded. While I had hidden my true capabilities during the fight, I knew I needed to step up when facing stronger foes.

"And, Ethan. As Astron said, always make sure to kill your enemy before you turn your back on them."

Ethan nodded sheepishly, acknowledging his lapse in vigilance. "I know, I was just careless."

"Good, let's keep going," Anya said, resuming our march into the dungeon. As we ventured deeper, it became clear that our group of F-rank adventurers would be handling the monster encounters directly.

'A group of seven goblins ahead,'

I sensed the presence of our next challenge as we continued down the passage.

Anya issued her instructions swiftly, dividing tasks among our group. "Group of seven. Fred, Emily, and Ethan get ready. Fred, you will use your spells if necessary. Astron, just watch and don't intervene unless the situation is dire."

"Understood," I replied, ready to gauge the abilities of my party. I was also curious about Emily's skills.

Without hesitation, Emily and Ethan dashed forward, their agility and combat skills evident in their swift movements.

Ethan reached the goblins first due to his superior stats and footwork, his spear ready to strike.

SWOOSH CLANK SPURT

Ethan's blade cleaved through one goblin, ending its life swiftly. Another goblin managed to block his attack, but their momentum was broken.

SWOOSH SPURT

Emily was quick to join the fray, her blade flashing as she attacked. Her strikes were precise, and she dispatched one goblin swiftly.

CLANK

Her second strike was thwarted by the goblin's gear, but it staggered under the force of her blow.

"KREEEK!" "KREEEK!"

SWOOSH SLASH

As Emily dodged a goblin's attack and struck its arm, Ethan utilized the reach of his spear to pierce another goblin from a distance, preventing it from reaching her.

PIERCE SPURT

However, the goblins displayed varying tactics. Not all of them relied on melee combat. Two goblins fired arrows, targeting Emily.

Ethan blocked one with his spear, but the second arrow found its mark, piercing his leg. The arrow was tainted with poison, and greenish fluid dripped from the wound.

GRAB SPLURT

Ethan swiftly removed the arrow and clenched it in her hand. Blood spurted from the wound, but Fred, our healer, was quick to react.

"Purify. Heal."

With his spells, he first purified the poison and then healed Ethan's wound.

"Thanks," Ethan nodded in gratitude, his focus returning to the battle.

Ethan resumed her assault, now more vigilant about the arrows and other projectiles.

SLASH SWOOSH SPURT

With Emily and Fred's support, Ethan dominated the battle, ensuring the goblins were swiftly dispatched without sustaining any further wounds.

After the skirmish, we resumed our exploration of the dungeon. However, our progress was interrupted by a sudden, blood-curdling scream.

"CREEEEK!"

The source of the sound was dangerously close, and we braced ourselves for what might come next.

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After Ethan and Emily efficiently dispatched the remaining monsters, we continued our journey through the dungeon. However, our progress was soon interrupted by a piercing scream that seemed dangerously close.

CREEEK!

My instincts, finely honed as a ranger, should have detected any nearby threats, but this scream seemed to have materialized out of nowhere, unnerving me.

'It is pretty close, yet I didn't even sense it. What is this?' I pondered internally, perplexed by the mysterious nature of the scream.

Anya, with her greater experience, provided some clarity. "There is a goblin settlement close to this place. This voice is nothing but an illusion to intimidate monsters coming closer."

"A Goblin Shaman?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"Yes, there should be. Only they are capable of using magic like this," Anya confirmed.

Understanding that this was likely a result of illusion magic, I relaxed somewhat. 'I see. If that was illusion magic, then it makes sense why I was not able to feel the pressure since there wasn't even something strong in the first place.'

In fact, there was also a goblin shaman in the settlement, but this was the first time I had heard about a goblin shaman using illusion magic to create such a thing. The game hadn't mentioned that. I knew goblin shaman's existence and the monsters inside the settlement.

"What rank Goblin Shamans are?"

"Depends. But, since there is a settlement, they should be around low-intermediate rank-3."

"I see."

With this directive, we continued our exploration, wary of what lay ahead.

While walking, I made use of my [Keen Eye] skill, attempting to locate any potential threats or gain insight into the dungeon's layout. However, the thick forest limited my abilities to some extent.

TAP TAP TAP,

Also, the continuously pouring rain didn't do any help either. After we had walked a certain amount of time, the forest started getting filled by the rain constantly.

However, our progress was soon halted by the appearance of a mysterious barrier. Anya approached it, her hand making contact with the shimmering field.

"We have reached the barrier of the first stage." She confirmed, slightly moving her hand.

This dungeon was a staged one, different from the ones I had ventured into so far.

Stage dungeons are type dungeons where you need to progress stage by stage, and your freedom of venturing would be limited. To pass the stages, one needs to obtain the related dungeon fragment, releasing the barriers.

This one, for instance, had two stages; the first one was the goblin settlement, and the second one was the one where the boss resided. Of course, this is when you don't count the hidden stage, which I will explore on my own.

And these types of dungeons were pretty rare, too. This must have been the reason why Emily was this adamant about not leaving this dungeon's rights until she was desperate.

Anya, her attention now shifting to me, inquired about my scouting abilities. "Astron, do you have any scouting skills?"

I paused for a moment, deciding how to respond. I needed to maintain my facade of limited abilities so that Fred would lower his guard against me without being suspicious of my true potential.

"My scouting skills are somewhat limited in this environment," I admitted, choosing my words carefully. "The dense forest and the rain obscure my vision and make it challenging to use my skills effectively."

In fact, that was not necessarily wrong. [Keen Eye]'s usage was limited, and [Perceptive Insight] was not omnipotent.

Also, they probably won't need my skills since, in the game, a player could just brute force his way.

"I see," Anya replied, nodding her head. "As expected, we will need to brute force our way. From the rank of the dungeon and the density of mana, the settlement shouldn't be an issue for our group."

However, not everyone shared Anya's sentiments. Emily and Faye, who had previously expressed doubts about my capabilities, couldn't resist the urge to click their tongues in annoyance.

"Guess we shouldn't have expected much from a newbie anyway," Emily muttered, her words dripping with sarcasm. She exchanged a knowing look with Faye, who wore an equally unimpressed expression.

Faye was a girl who didn't talk much from the start, different from Hari. She didn't try to communicate too much, but it seemed the effects of Fred's skill were finally showing.

However, I didn't say anything in response as I simply moved into the formation. It was not like I was being scorned for the first time in my life anyway.

TAP TAP TAP

The rain continued to pour relentlessly, drenching us to the bone as we ventured further into the dense forest.

Anya seemed unfazed by the weather, her determined steps unwavering. However, the rest of the party couldn't help but express their frustration.

Emily, her brown hair now clinging to her face, protested with an irritated tone. "Ugh, this rain is so annoying. Can't it just stop for once?"

Faye chimed in, her usually composed demeanor slipping. "And these goblins... They're so disgusting. I can't stand the sight of them."

Anya nodded in agreement, though her irritation was rather more subtle, and it was directed at the circumstances than the monsters themselves. "Agreed. We should deal with them quickly and move on. This rain is making everything more challenging than it needs to be."

'As expected, even Anya is starting to get affected. Though, it is taking a lot longer time for her.'

Their complaints seemed to extend to every aspect of our journey, from the weather to the monsters we encountered. It was as if they were actively searching for things to criticize, their frustration mounting with each passing moment.

Knowing that in the game, Fred was able to cause distrust in the party after everyone passed the first stage, I knew we were safe for now until Anya gave in.

After what felt like a never-ending trek through the rain-soaked forest, we finally stumbled upon our first patrol of goblins.

'Seven Goblins, huh? I guess our captain wants her members to warm up before proceeding with the fight.'

Without hesitation, Anya assigned the task to two of our group members. "Hari, Faye, deal with these goblins. We need to clear them out fast."

Hari, a skilled warrior with dual swords at his disposal, stepped forward confidently. "Leave it to me. They won't know what hit them."

Faye, her irritation momentarily forgotten in the face of battle, hefted her claymore with a determined expression. "I'll make sure they regret crossing our path."

The two of them advanced towards the goblin patrol, their weapons at the ready. It was clear that they were itching for a fight, eager to take out their frustrations on these monsters. Anya and Emily watched closely, their eyes fixed on the impending battle.

'They are losing their control pretty soon; I guess this Fred guy shouldn't be underestimated.'

Though, as I threw a sneaky glance at Fred, a small smile was on his face, clearly enjoying the fact that his plans were working.

I stayed back since I was not ordered. This was still an opportunity for me to observe the party dynamics and gather information about our surroundings. Ethan also seemed slightly weird, but I knew he was a guy with a slightly different emotional base than others. Rather than feeling angered, he will feel the need to prove himself and will fight eagerly.

SWOOSH SWOSOH

Hari and Faye closed the distance between them and the goblin patrol swiftly, their weapons gleaming ominously in the rain. The goblins, initially unaware of our presence, were taken by surprise.

SWOOSH

Hari, the agile swordsman, lunged forward with remarkable speed. His dual swords moved in a blur, striking with precision.

SLASH THUD SPURT

One goblin fell, clutching its throat as blood spurted between its fingers.

SLASH THUD

Another goblin attempted to retaliate, but before it could make a move, Faye was upon it. With her claymore, she delivered a powerful horizontal swing that cleaved the goblin in two.

The rain quickly turned the ground beneath them into a muddy mess, splattering them with each strike.

"KIEEEK!"

The remaining goblins, realizing they were under attack, rallied to defend themselves. They brandished crude weapons – rusted blades, wooden clubs, and even a makeshift slingshot.

But it was too late for them. Anya had made a wise choice in selecting Hari and Faye for this task. Their coordination was impeccable.

'Certainly, they are a very good team working together. Their moves are not lacking too much either, though Hari is certainly a lot better thanks to her education.'

While Hari engaged the goblins in close combat, Faye kept her distance, using the claymore's reach to her advantage.

SWOOSH THUD

Hari ducked under a clumsy swing from a goblin and countered with a swift upward thrust. Another goblin charged at him from the side, but Faye anticipated its movement. With a single, precise swing, she severed its arm at the shoulder.

Within moments, the fight was over. The goblin patrol lay defeated on the muddy forest floor, their crude weapons scattered around them.

Anya nodded in satisfaction. "Good work, both of you. Let's keep moving. The goblin settlement can't be far now."

As they finished, the two returned; however, at that moment, Ethan approached me.

"Hey, Astron. Don't you think something is strange?" And he asked.

'It seems he is finally catching things up.'

"What do you mean?" I asked, feigning ignorance. I could see Fred's gaze on us, but Ethan didn't seem to feel it.

"I feel like my senses are becoming null....I don't know...It is kind of weird."

In the game, the same line was there, and it was a foreshadowing of Fred's betrayal. Certainly, the protagonist was the protagonist.

"I feel the same, but it is probably because it is the first time we are inside a dungeon. I heard things like this could happen quite a lot." I shrugged and shut him off. "Anyway, don't chicken and focus on what is in front of you."

"Okay."

Not long after dealing with the goblin patrol, another one and another one appeared. However, dealing with them was not hard, as it took only a matter of seconds to kill those monsters.

And just like that, we finally reached the outskirts of the goblin settlement.

It was a ramshackle collection of huts and crude fortifications nestled amidst the dense trees. The rain had let up slightly, but the ground was still slick and muddy.

Anya signaled for us to proceed cautiously. "Remember, we're here to clear this settlement efficiently. We can't afford to waste much time. Don't forget the formation; it shouldn't be that hard for us to deal with these two."

Normally, while attacking such a settlement, a plan would be made. After all, even though we can deal with the monsters overwhelmingly, there is a whole other stage that needs to be cleared.

However, clearly, Anya's judgment was also clouded.

Slowly, we advanced, careful not to alert the goblins to our presence. I watched as Anya, Faye, Hari, and even Emily moved with a practiced ease, their experience in dungeons evident in their every step.

Anya turned her gaze towards me. "Astron, from here, you should be able to see how many monsters are there." We were in a relatively clear area now, and my vision was not obstructed.

Everyone knew that those with Archery occupations often had keen eyesight, and even though my occupation was Weapon Master, it still worked for me.

I began my observations, scanning the settlement with my [Keen Eye]. "There are forty normal goblins, eight goblin warriors, and one goblin shaman in the settlement. The goblin shaman and six of the goblin warriors are inside a hut in the middle of the settlement. Two goblin warriors are guarding the entrance."

Anya nodded at my report. "How many scouts and patrols?"

"This settlement isn't advanced. They haven't built any scout towers, and I don't see any traps from here, either. Either their traps are well-hidden, or they haven't set any."

"Good. In that case, we should be able to eliminate them. The rain has also started to subside, so fire-related skills should be more effective. Hari, how are your skills?"

In response, Hari raised her hand and created a small fire with a swoosh. "Certainly, it's a lot better now. The water psions in the air seem to be reduced."

"Psions or whatever? Tell me, how much of your power you can use?"

"Around %80."

"Then, we are good."

With those words, Anya looked at our faces.

"Get ready. We will start after a second."

Just like that, the first challenge of the dungeon started.

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With those words, Anya glanced at each of everyone in turn. "Get ready. We will start after a second."

Hearing this, all of the party nodded their heads, certainly looking happy. Of course, they were going to be considering they were waiting for this stage to end.

'This is getting better and better.' Fred couldn't help but laugh inwardly. Everything was going as he expected. Just as he was informed, this dungeon terrain was a forest type, and it was constantly raining.

This made him easily able to use his skills without people noticing since he was skillfully mixing psions with the rain droplets.

'This Hartley is a problem, though.' He thought.

That blue-haired bastard was the first one to think something was wrong, and almost all the others were about to believe him.

'Thanks to lord that this kid is stupid.' He changed his gaze to his benefactor, who unknowingly saved his whole operation. 'As expected, the sense I got from him is wrong. There is no way this kid can do something to me.' Even though he got a weird sense from his purple gaze, Fred dismissed it immediately.

However, the party would no longer go to wait.

"Let's go. Everyone, get ready."

With those words, the group started moving, everyone already ready for the battle.

Anya stood at the forefront of the group, her shield held high and her spear at the ready. She was the designated tank for this operation, and she had a particular skill set for this role.

Her shield bore a taunting enchantment designed to amplify the strength of her skill [Taunting Cry] and draw the aggression of the enemy toward her.

"Astron, you may start."

As she said, Astron immediately raised his bow and enchanted it with his mana. Then, the only thing left was firing arrows at goblins he saw as isolated.

SWOOSH SWOOSH SWOOSH

As the arrows flew rapidly, most of them found their mark.

THUD THUD

As the bodies of the monsters fell to the ground, the Goblin Warrior's attention, of course, turned to the sound. The arrows were silent, but the falling sound got their attention.

"ROAR!"

And with a loud roar they were grieving their fallen kin.

Then, the goblin warriors, standing guard at the entrance of the settlement, noticed the intruders.

GROWL

With a menacing growl, they brandished their weapons and charged toward Anya, who was standing in the front. But she was more than prepared.

"Bring them to me!"

Anya shouted, activating her [Taunting Cry] skill.

SWOOSH ROOOAR!

The effect was immediate, as the goblin warriors redirected their focus solely onto her, leaving her companions free to engage the horde of smaller goblins that swarmed towards them.

CLANK THUD

With a swift and precise movement of her shield, she deflected the first strike, the force vibrating through her arm. The goblin warrior staggered back momentarily, and in that split second, Anya struck. Her spear pierced the creature's chest, eliciting a guttural scream.

ROAR!

"Faye! Hari!" She immediately signaled her party members.

SWOOSH

Hari, the agile dual-blade wielder, dashed forward like a whirlwind of steel.

SWIRL

Fire danced along the edges of her blades, and with a series of precise strikes, she engaged the goblin warriors.

SPURT

Her blades pierced through the skin of the first goblin warrior. The monster couldn't defend itself as it was taunted by Anya on the front.

SWOOSH

Beside her, Faye, her claymore raised high, activated her body-strengthening abilities.

"AAAAH!"

With a mighty swing, she joined the fray, her weapon cleaving through the air and adding to the relentless assault.

SPURT

Blood spurted from the wound she made as Faye's sword wounded the warrior. However, it was still not enough.

CLANK

The other goblin warrior lunged at Anya from the side, but Hari intercepted it. Her blades met the creature's, and they engaged in a dazzling dance of steel.

The goblin struggled to match Hari's skill, its movements becoming increasingly frantic. But he was still able to defend itself since Hari's attack couldn't penetrate its skin while the goblin warrior was moving, leaving rather shallow wounds.

"Bring them to me!"

However, Anya's taunt skill marked the end. As [Taunting Cry] sounded, the Goblin Warriors' attention momentarily turned to the woman with spear and shield.

And that was what proved to be fatal.

In that split second, Hari and Faye seized the opportunity, their coordinated attacks executed with flawless precision.

SWOOSH

Hari, with her dual blades swirling like a deadly dance, closed in on the goblin warrior she had engaged.

"Blade of Ablaze."

SWIRL

Fire flickered along the edges of her blades, casting an eerie glow in the dim light.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

With lightning-fast strikes, she capitalized on the distraction caused by Anya's taunt.

SPURT

Hari's blades, guided by both her extraordinary skill and the fiery enchantments, found their mark. They pierced through the goblin's tough skin, plunging deep into its chest.

"ROOOAR!"

The creature's guttural scream was cut short as its lifeblood gushed forth, staining the forest floor crimson.

SWOOSH

At the same time, Faye, her claymore raised high above her head, brought her immense strength into play.

"RAAA!"

Her body, fortified by her enhancing abilities, was a force to be reckoned with. With a mighty swing, her claymore descended like a merciless executioner's axe.

CRACK

The force behind her strike was staggering, leaving no room for the goblin warrior to defend himself. The heavy blade cleaved through the air, meeting its target with brutal efficiency.

SPURT

The goblin warrior's body was torn asunder, the claymore's edge cutting through bone and sinew as though they were paper. It let out a gurgled cry of agony before collapsing; its life snuffed out in an instant.

With both goblin warriors vanquished, the tide of battle began to shift. The smaller goblins, bereft of their leaders and disoriented by the sudden turn of events, hesitated for a moment.

This hesitation was all Anya's group needed. Their fierce and coordinated assault had disheartened the goblin warriors and sent shockwaves through the horde.

"Kieeeeek!"

Meanwhile, at the rear of the group, Ethan gripped his spear tightly. He was a talented fighter, but his lack of experience was evident.

He had watched in awe as Anya, Hari, and Faye engaged the goblin warriors. Now, it was his turn to prove himself.

SWOOSH SWIRL

"Spear of Heart. Horizontal Sweep of Qilin."

Remembering his household's technique, he relaxed his breathing. Winds started surging through his body as he instinctively manipulated the psions of wind around him. It was his innate talent he himself wasn't aware of.

'Everyone is working hard. I should push myself as well.'

SWOOSH

And with a smooth move, he rushed to the goblins coming from the sides.

"Ethan. Never forget. A spear is never meant to be a sword; it needs to be long and strong like an elephant, but it needs to be swift like a wind."

As he remembered the words of his father, he couldn't help but put a smile on his face.

'Just like as you said, father. Like a wind.'

SWOOSH

And with a smooth move, he swept the feet of the approaching goblins.

STAB STAB STAB STAB

His training had paid off, and his strikes were becoming more precise. With a deft thrust, he impaled goblins through their chests, his eyes focused and determined.

KIEK!

"What?" However, at that moment, he saw another goblin hidden behind the leaves. His senses couldn't pick it up, as if he never knew there was a goblin.

SWOOSH

As the goblin attacked him from his blind point, Ethan breached himself for incoming pain.

SWISH THUD

However, the attack never came. In the place where the attack was supposed to be stood a staggering body trying its best to stand on its feet.

"Astron."

With an arrow impaled on its chest.

"Thanks, man."

With a smile on his face, Ethan stabbed the monster from its neck, killing it immediately.

SWOOSH

Emily, more experienced but aware of Ethan's raw strength and talent, fought on the other side, covering the goblins coming from there.

Her swordsmanship was precise and efficient enough, and she knew the importance of her role of protecting the rearguard. Even though she was feeling irritated at the boy behind him for some reason, this wasn't enough to cloud her judgment.

CLANG! CLANG!

The clash of steel echoed through the forest as Emily held her ground, her focus unyielding.

SWOOSH

But the goblins were relentless, and their numbers seemed endless. In the heat of battle, one managed to slip past her defenses, its crude blade slashing across her arm.

"Ah!" Emily winced, feeling the searing pain in her arm. Blood welled from the wound, staining her armor. She couldn't afford to falter, not now.

Her posture was slightly broken, but she had been injured countless times. She was not a princess who would falter at the slightest pain.

"Grrr...." She gritted her teeth and pushed forward.

However, at that moment, she felt her body getting lighter as a small and warm light enveloped her.

"I-I w-will help you."

A stuttering voice came behind her, as she looked at the young man whose hands were shining.

Fred, attuned to the flow of battle, sensed her distress. He used a healing skill, his mana knitting the wound together and staunching the bleeding.

HEAL

Emily felt the pain subside as the magic worked its mending touch.

"Thanks."

SWOOSH

With renewed determination, she continued to fend off the goblins. Her blade was a whirlwind of death, and she dispatched them with.

SWISH THUD

Beside her, Astron, the archer, had her back. His arrows flew true, taking down goblins that dared to approach Emily from a distance. His presence was a silent reassurance in the chaos of battle.

"Tch...."

However, amongst the feeling of battle, she didn't realize the fact that she was getting tired more easily, and her emotions were swaying a lot stronger than before.

SWISH SWISH

Astron, positioned strategically at a safe distance, continued to send a steady stream of arrows into the approaching goblin horde.

His shots were accurate, but these goblins were tougher than the ones they initially countered. However, he didn't mind.

'I am not here to kill goblins; my job is to cover their backs and watch this bastard.'

The goblins closed the distance quickly, but he let Ethan and Emily do the job as he and Fred supported the party from behind.

His eyes were constantly observing around, absorbing every bit of movement. Whenever a person was in need of assistance, he fired arrows and intercepted the Goblin's movements.

SWISH SWISH

Arrows were not deadly, but they did their job as a support, and this was enough for the party.

As the battle raged on, the rain-soaked forest echoed with the clash of steel and the cries of combat.

The remaining goblin warriors and their sinister shaman emerged from their hut, sensing the impending defeat of their kin.

ROAR!

_____?_____

I hope you liked this chapter. I am trying to improve my writing when it comes to group fighting, and I wanted to give details to each member.

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The remaining goblin warriors and their sinister shaman emerged from their hut, sensing the impending defeat of their kin.

ROAR!

With a collective roar, the goblin warriors charged forward, determined to protect their shaman. It was their innate instinct to do such a movement.

'Evolved Species.'

They would be the ones that would lead monsters, and Goblin Shaman was one of them.

However, the Goblin Warriors weren't enough to move as they wanted. They were met with the fierce resistance of Anya, Hari, and Faye, the vanguard of the party.

CLANK

Anya, stalwart and unwavering, raised her shield to meet the oncoming onslaught. Her spear, an extension of her will, struck with precision.

"Faye, Hannah. Get ready." She immediately analyzed the remaining Goblin Warriors and the state of the battlefield with her eyes.

'The smaller goblins are mostly defeated. Good, newbies will be able to follow us soon; this should serve them as a good experience.' She thought, readying herself.

"Follow my lead."

She activated her other skill [Earth Impale], sending forth jagged stone spikes from the ground to impale the goblin warriors.

THUD CRACK

The earth responded to her command, and the goblins met a grisly end as the stone spikes pierced their flesh.

"GRRRRRR....." The monsters growled, trying to get rid of the spikes sticking at their feet.

"Now. Hari."

"Understood, captain."

Hearing this, Hari dashed through the melee like a whirlwind of blades. Her dual blades moved with grace and precision, finding gaps in the goblins' defenses and striking with deadly accuracy.

Fire danced along the edges of her weapons, further adding to their destructive power.

SPURT SWOOSH

Blood sprayed as her blades found their marks, and the goblin warriors fell one by one. Despite their initial aggression, they were no match for the combined might of Anya's tanking and Hari's precision.

"Bring them to me!" Following that, Anya once again used her skill [Taunting Cry].

Anya's [Taunting Cry] skill ensured their undivided attention, and she bore the brunt of their attacks, her shield taking the punishment.

"Faye!"

"Yes!"

Faye, muscles bulging from her body-strengthening ability, swung her claymore with devastating force. Her strikes cleaved through armor and bone alike, sending goblins flying with each swing.

CRASH SWOOSH

The earth trembled beneath the onslaught of her blows, and the goblin warriors were crushed under her relentless assault. Their attempts to defend themselves proved futile as Faye's claymore tore through their ranks.

Meanwhile, at the rear of the party, Astron and Fred provided invaluable support. Astron's arrows found their marks, weakening the goblins and disrupting their formations. His keen eyes spotted threats from afar, and his shots were true.

SWISH SWOOSH

He moved swiftly, firing with precision and covering Ethan and Emily's backs as they continued to deal with the remaining swarm of smaller goblins. His focus never wavered as he maintained his vigilance over the battlefield.

No one here could deny his contribution to the fight. The value he provided was not excessive, but it was decisive.

And Fred, hidden amidst the chaos, cast his spells, but he never forgot how to behave like he did.

"H-heal."

"E-Emily. I-I will cover for you."

"I-Illuminate."

He used the skills that every basic healer had, but he actually did the bare minimum.

He used his healing magic to mend wounds and keep the party in fighting shape.

However, beneath his benevolent exterior, he secretly sowed discord among his comrades, subtly eroding their trust in one another.

As the goblin warriors and shamans pushed forward, they found themselves outnumbered and outmatched. The relentless onslaught of Anya, Hari, and Faye was too much for them to handle.

Of course, the shaman attempted to use its magic.

'Not on my watch.'

But, Astron's arrows disrupted its concentration. Arrows were swift and fast, and they didn't require the manipulation of mana as the goblin shaman did.

And Shamans rather had a different way of using their magic. They would need to chant, and this was a disadvantage for them.

SWISH THUD

The arrows find their mark, but the Goblin Shaman was prepared for such an attack. The necklace on its neck defended his skin, forming a barrier.

However, even though the Goblin Shaman was alive, thanks to Astron's cautious approach and a constant eye on it, it was never able to finish its chant.

'I know you from the game already.'

And that was thanks to his knowledge of the game, something he had an advantage over.

"Good Job, Astron!" Anya's voice echoed as she threw a gaze at her. Anya also realized what Astron was doing, and she had a small smile on her face.

The morale of the party was immediately raised after the constant slaughter of the goblins.

'Now you are making that face.'

And Astron could see Fred's expression getting dirty for a second.

'You are getting restless, and you shall not worry. I will not let you go.'

With their leader and most important member getting rendered useless, the remaining goblin warriors fought with desperation, but it was in vain.

THUD SPURT THUD SPURT THUD SPURT THUD SPURT

One by one, they fell to the coordinated efforts of Anya's party. At some point, even Ethan and Emily were able to join the fight and were able to confront a stronger monster.

THUD

"Ha!"

The battle reached its crescendo, and with a final, determined strike, the last goblin warrior was brought to the ground by the spear that would lead the future.

"Well done, Ethan."

Anya and others looked at Ethan, who finished the last Goblin Warrior on his own.

"You are certainly a Hartley."

SPURT THUD

Hari said as she slashed the head of the Goblin Shaman.

Silence descended upon the rain-soaked forest, broken only by the heavy breathing of Anya's party. The goblin settlement had been vanquished, and the party stood victorious.

Anya, her shield and spear still at the ready, surveyed the battlefield. "Is everyone alright?"

The party members, though weary, nodded in affirmation. The rain still poured down on their heads, and the smell of blood and battle lingered around.

Countless bodies of goblins could be seen, some of them with burn marks, some of them with their bodies skewered, some of them with their body parts missing.

One thing was certain.

The battle was won.

"Then, it is time to loot then."

With Anya's words, Hunters started the most irritating thing for themselves, something that would normally be left for porters.

Gathering the loot.

"We will set up a camp before proceeding further."

Anya said as she looked into the loot we had gathered.

"Everyone seems to be tired as well."

There was a reason why multiple-staged dungeons were sought for and rare. It was because the monster rate inside dungeons was a lot higher than others.

The reason for that was simple. Since the boundaries were blocked by the mana barrier, the monsters didn't need to engage in territorial wars, which would mean the monsters wouldn't lose their lives as well.

This was the reason why there were this many goblins there. After all, 47 goblins, eight goblin warriors, and one goblin shaman is by no means a low number.

The second reason why multiple-staged dungeons are sought is the opportunity to rest before attempting to challenge the second and further stages.

Just like we were doing.

"Since the dungeon has a different 2.5 times faster time flow than the outside world, we are allowed to spend a day here." Anya briefed, looking at her watch. "After eight hours of outside time, if we don't come, a rescue team will be sent."

"Understood."

As everyone started setting up their own camp, I took a moment to reflect on the battle.

'Certainly, it was a lot different from the game.'

Playing a game and doing it in reality was different. When you are putting your life and other people's lives on the line, this is when you understand how dangerous Hunter's job is.

'At the same time, how easy it is if you proceed as a team.'

There was a reason why the Academy constantly pressured us to have good teamwork. This is because the number of Hunter is scarce, and it is a very important resource that needs to be preserved.

With his, I could easily see the effects of teamwork certainly.

Having a tanker taking agro, and melee hunters taking down others, and ranger and healer supporting melee's.

This was certainly a good part formation rather than focusing on melee damage dealers.

'But, this is where the magician's value is evident.'

Knowing Irina and how she was able to sweep through the battlefield using her magic, I could easily say magicians were certainly broken.

'It is sad that her attitude is bad.'

Of course, not everyone shone through the teamwork. There were certain people like me who rather preferred to be alone.

This is because most of my power actually relies on my stealth.

[Shadowborne] trait is something that requires me to utilize constant ability for position-changing advantage, and it is not something I can do with a group.

However, I was able to improve quite a lot in this fight.

'I feel like my sight is getting better.'

The more I fought in such a wide-range fight, the more I felt like I was getting better at spatial awareness. And this is something very important for a hunter like me.

I sat on a makeshift chair that is used to rest in dungeons while munching on some of the provisions we had brought with us, which most hunters jokingly referred to as "dungeon snacks."

Lost in my thoughts, I realized that the others were engaged in a discussion about their performances in the battle.

Ethan was the first to share his thoughts, his youthful enthusiasm evident. "That was more intense than I expected. But it was a good fight."

Emily, cleaning her gleaming sword with a practiced hand, nodded in agreement. "Agreed. Although," she paused, her gaze briefly flickering in my direction, "I wasn't expecting some of us to be so... inexperienced."

"No." Just as Emily was about to speak further, Anya chimed in. She strolled over to me, her expression thoughtful. "Hey, Astron," she began, "Are you sure this is your first time?"

I met her gaze, a touch of surprise coloring my features. "Yes, it is. Why do you think it's not?"

Anya's eyes held a genuine curiosity as she continued, "If it is your first time, then you are really talented." She said as she gestured to the place where the Goblin Shaman was standing. "You were really quick to figure out the Golbin Shaman, and even while fighting with others, you never missed intercepting its chant. It is not something I see often in newbies."

"It is quite a talk coming from someone who can watch other people's fights while confronting six Goblin Warriors at the same time."

"Don't put me in the same boat as others, young man. You may regret it."

"....You are right....."

"But, you have really surprised me. I thought you would be a liability, but your support was really clean and swift. I guess it is your innate talent?"

"...."

"Anyway, keep it up." With her praise, Anya turned her attention to Fred, who had been quietly tending to his duties as the group's healer and buffer during our discussion.

Just like that, everyone started their one-hour rest.

"Let's go." Anya's voice was resolute as she led the group onward, and we followed her, leaving the place we camped behind.

As we walked, we soon arrived at the center of the goblin settlement, where a peculiar statue of a tree spirit holding an orb stood. Anya wasted no time and struck the statue's arm with her weapon, severing it cleanly. The orb fell to the ground with a soft thud.

"This is the core of the first barrier and the first dungeon fragment," Anya explained, her tone matter-of-fact.

With the dungeon fragment in our possession, we were ready to move on to the second stage of the dungeon.....

And there I could see the smile on Fred's face looking at the fragment....

'I guess he will do his job soon.....'

Chapter 87 Chapter 20.5 - Dungeon

"This is the core of the first barrier and the first dungeon fragment."

As we acquired the dungeon fragment, we were ready to leave the first stage.

'The second stage will be a lot uncomfortable.' I thought.

With our steps taking us to the barrier, we saw it was already lifted. This was because the dungeon fragment that was supplying it with energy was already in our possession.

"From this moment on, we will encounter different types of monsters, and the environment will change. Stay alert and listen to my every command."

Different from the first stage, Anya's voice was a lot more serious this time. It was because she herself knew how dangerous arrogance could be in such an environment.

"Understood, captain," Ethan spoke first.

"" Understood, captain."" And the others followed his words.

"Good."

As we ventured deeper into the dungeon, the environment began to change.

The air grew thick with an eerie, swirling fog that obscured our vision and made every step feel like a journey into the unknown.

'Now, this is the second stage, I know.'

Looking at the thick fog covering our vision, I recalled the contents of the second stage. This was where Fred escaped using the fog to his advantage after stealing the dungeon fragments while everyone was fighting with the boss.

However, this thick fog that enveloped us was not only disorienting but also uncomfortable.

'It has the property of nullifying one's senses.'

This fog was a fog that made the person inhaling sleepy. It would cling to your skin, leaving a damp, clammy feeling that was both unpleasant and itchy.

'Indeed, grabbing the anti-sleep pills and purifying potions was a good idea.' I thought, looking at our 'healer and priest.'

"Alright, guys," Anya's voice cut through the oppressive silence, "we're in the second stage now. This fog is going to be a challenge, but we can't afford to let it hinder us. Stay close, and keep your senses sharp."

Anya turned to me, her expression slightly showing expectation. "Astron, can you see anything through this fog?"

I squinted, trying to pierce through the thick haze. "Not much, Captain. It's like trying to see through a wall of cotton."

But, of course, this was a lie. I was able to see a lot better than others with my [Keen Eye], but I needed to make Fred feel safe. Thus, I didn't reveal much.

She nodded, her brows furrowed. "Then your marksmanship won't mean much."

"It won't mean as it used to, but I can find my own," I answered, looking at the thick fog. The normal range of sight was five meters, and it was not that ideal to use a bow.

"Astron, haven't you used daggers as your main weapon before?" At that moment, Ethan chimed in, saying the thing I was expecting him to say.

"Yes. I can also use daggers."

Hearing this, Anya nodded her head.

"Alright, everyone, listen up. We can't rely on our sight as much in this fog, so we'll have to trust our other senses. Astron, keep your ears sharp for any unusual sounds; you will use your dagger and protect Fred. Emily, Hari, be ready to react to anything you hear. Since your weapons are relatively short, you will need to stay on the rear back. Faye and Ethan, you will be the ones behind me. Since our range of movement is limited, we can't afford to move much and lose the group. You both will provide damage to my back. And, Fred. You will start using buffs from now on. Clear?"

The responses were unanimous, a chorus of "Yes" confirming our understanding of the formation and strategy. As instructed, everyone quickly assumed their positions, and our senses heightened as we braced ourselves for the challenges the foggy second stage would throw at us.

'This is similar to the game.'

In the game, Anya also did the same formation, but if one thing was different, then that would be rather than me being behind; it would be Emily who was covering Fred.

However, that was it. There was no point in comparing that anymore.

SCREECH

The eerie silence that followed was broken by an unexpected sound - a horrifying, piercing scream that echoed through the fog.

It sent shivers down my spine, and I instinctively gripped my daggers from my spatial ring, readying myself.

'Sylvans.'

Immediately remembering the contents and the names of the monsters, I readied myself.

"Ready for the confrontation," Anya's voice was a steadying presence as she warned us to prepare.

The fog, thick and oppressive, seemed to respond to her warning, swirling and shifting as if it held a sinister intelligence.

SWOOSH SCREECH!

Figures emerged from the dense mist, humanoid forms that moved with unnatural speed and agility.

They descended upon us like phantoms, leaping out from the fog, their intentions clear - they were here to attack.

SWOOSH

Without warning, one of these creatures lunged at me, seemingly materializing out of thin air.

Its clawed hands reached for my throat, and I barely had time to react.

CLANK

I deflected the attack, feeling the power behind it. Certainly, my weak body was showing its lacking from the start.

SWOOSH

However, that didn't mean anything.

'No need to cry for what I don't have.'

Imbuing my dagger with white-colored moon mana, I could feel my body getting lighter. My daggers skills with mana improved, especially thanks to Senior Maya's guidance.

SWOOSH

With a smooth step, I dashed to the monster with my other dagger, slashing it from its chest.

"KIEK!"

The monster screamed, but I couldn't afford to waste too much time.

SWOOSH

Dodging the following panicked claw attack, I took my stance.

'Internal Dagger Stance. Whispering Thorn.'

SLASH STAB SLASH

Using the art I have learned, I attacked with strong precision, targeting the weak points of the monster. In a second, I attacked three times.

THUD

And following that, the monster fell to the ground.

However, that wasn't the end. Several other monsters emerged, surrounding us from everywhere around.

SCREEEECH! KIEEEEK!

As the Sylvans closed in from all directions, I knew I had to protect Fred and the rest of the group from behind. Most of the weight was already on the front, leaving me with a relatively easy fight.

'Anya is really good at leading.' She was using her skill to taunt the monsters that were aiming to attack the rear. Thanks to that, the number of monsters was relatively lower for me to deal with.

My role in this fight was clear – using my agility and technique to fend off the attackers and keep them away and making sure that the Party would stick together.

SWOOSH

I moved swiftly, utilizing every part of my body, as I engaged the Sylvans.

Their movements might have looked swift and unpredictable, but I had already learned to read their patterns.

'The game is really different.'

Even though they wanted to give the atmosphere of dread, the game still fell short of reality.

SLASH, DODGE, PARRY.

With those three, I attacked and defended.

However, at that moment, I realized that Emily was about to make a common mistake.

'Tch.....The fog is already affecting her.'

She was getting away from the party thanks to her senses getting duller. Fred's debuffs and the effects of the fog probably made it a lot harder to judge where she was.

SWOOSH THUD

Throwing a small rock to her head, I shouted. "Emily, stay close to Fred! Don't go too far."

CLANK

"What?"

Realizing where she was, Emily immediately looked around and retreated.

"Thanks." And with a thank, she continued to fight.

"Tch."

Though, even amongst the battle, I could hear Fred clicking his tongue.

"Everyone, okay?"

After the first clash with Sylvans, we have clashed with five other groups. The clash was not that hard objectively, but the fact that the members of the party were constantly getting tired was not a good sign.

It was not physically tiring, but rather, it was mentally tiring.

"Captain, have you realized something was amiss?" Ethan asked, looking at the party members. He finally seemed to catch up with the effects of fog. "I feel like the fights are a lot harder than they should be."

"What do you mean? We are in the second stage. It is normal that the monsters will get stronger." Faye spoke, looking annoyed. She certainly wanted to get out of here as soon as possible.

Ethan's observation hung heavy in the air as everyone exchanged worried glances. The realization that something was indeed amiss in this fog-filled stage began to sink in. Faye's annoyance transformed into concern, and the tension in the party grew.

"No, it is not only monsters. I feel like it is getting harder to move my body," Ethan continued, his voice carrying unease. "Haven't you noticed? Sometimes, I forget where I am, and I feel like I am going to get lost in the fog. The sounds are also deceiving me, like something is disturbing my senses."

'Ah.....Indeed, Ethan is the same as in the game.'

The reason why Fred wasn't able to get everything he wanted from this dungeon was because Ethan would get more and more suspicious, and then he would finally realize Fred was the problem after a bunch of flashbacks.

'That scene was pretty cool.'

Anya, ever the observant leader, began to take stock of her own senses. She inspected her hand and inhaled the fog, her brow furrowing in concentration. "Indeed, now that you are pointing that out, I feel like my sense of smell is also disturbed."

As Anya raised her hand to halt our progress, we all gathered around, hanging on her words.

"This..." She began.

"It is because of the fog." I chimed in. At this point, there was no need to waste any more time. "I had been observing for a while now, but whenever I breathe the fog in, I feel like I am getting more and more shaky. I don't know the exact details, but something must be in the fog."

Ethan chimed in once more, confirming my 'suspicions'. "I thought the same. The fog is the only thing that always stays."

Anya nodded thoughtfully. "This must be Sleeping Mist, then. It makes a lot more sense now."

Without hesitation, she turned her attention to Fred, who seemed somewhat flustered. "Fred, use purification on everyone here."

"U-understood," Fred stammered, his hands trembling slightly as he began to cast his purifying magic.

The fog around us seemed to react, shifting and writhing as if it were alive. Fred's magic cut through the haze, and a cleansing wave washed over us.

Gradually, we felt the lethargy and disorientation lift. Our senses returned, and our bodies felt more agile.

However, I knew this was nothing but temporary. The reason why the demon followers decided to disguise themselves as healers was that they could temporarily disturb one's senses, making them feel a lot better.

They were healers, but at the same time, they had the skills to mask their demonic skills under the guise of healing.

THUMP

My fast-beating body was proof of that. This phenomenon occurred whenever demonic energy was near me, and from the looks of it, Fred was using his skill.

PISH!

Injecting the small potion in the syringe to my arm, I confirmed that. The healed wound I made just a second ago was actually still there, even though after Fred used his skill, it momentarily disappeared.

'He is finally playing his cards.'

Thinking that it was time for Boss Monster to come, I looked at our leader.

"Let's go.

And with Anya's words, everyone started walking, and it didn't take long for us to reach the lair of boss monsters either.

A huge rotten tree, and beneath it, laid the boss monster.

"Get ready for confrontation."

Chapter 88 Chapter 20.6 - Dungeon

As we entered the lair of the boss monster, an overpowering stench of decay assaulted our senses.

The massive tree-like creature, its twisted form writhing with corrupted branches and foul-looking foliage, stood at the heart of the chamber. Its hollow, empty eyes glared at us with malevolence.

'Putrid Embertree Spirit.'

A monster that is intermediate-high rank 4. A monster that can deal with everyone here on its own without batting an eye.

That being not enough, surrounding the Putrid Embertree Spirit were several Sylvans, their presence adding to the looming threat.

Then, there is a reason why this party was sure that we could defeat the boss monster even though it is individually stronger.

It is because we have the numbers advantage. Dealing with many people is something that has always been hard, no matter how strong a person is since it multiplies the possible scenarios that could happen in the fight.

However, then, what do you think is the most annoying type of boss monster?

The one that fights with other types of monsters under his command. This is because the resources that would be left to deal with the boss monster would be relatively lower than it was supposed to be, making it harder to deal with.

Because of this, Anya wasted no time, her command clear and precise.

"Astron, Ethan, Emily, cover for the weaker monsters. Keep the Sylvans off us while Fred will buff the party," she ordered, her shield and spear at the ready. The three of us nodded, positioning ourselves to defend against the approaching Sylvans.

Faye, Hari, and Anya stepped forward to confront the monstrous tree spirit. Faye hefted her claymore, her body-strengthening skill at its peak. Hari's dual blades danced with fiery energy, ready to strike. Anya's focus was on the boss monster itself; her shield raised protectively.

ROAR!

The Putrid Embertree Spirit, sensing our presence, let out an eerie, echoing roar that sent shivers down everyone's spines, making everyone feel dread.

It was the start of the fight where the boss monster would imbue everyone with the status effect [Fear].

"Fred, purification." Anya immediately instructed Fred, as she rushed to the monster readying itself for the attack.

"U-understood." And Fred did what was told.

The boss monster raised its massive, twisted limbs and, with a deafening roar, unleashed a barrage of corrupted branches imbued with dark nature magic.

SWOOSH SWOOSH SWOOSH

"No, you are not passing me!"

As Anya raised her shield, she shouted, activating her skill.

THUD THUD THUD

And the branches reached to her shield. This was the start of the attack.

SWOOSH SWOOSH

Anya, Faye, and Hari moved with a synchronicity that came from years of fighting together. Anya's shield deflected the Putrid Embertree Spirit's dark magic attacks, Faye's claymore cleaved through the corrupted branches, and Hari's fiery blades sliced into the creature's bark-like hide.

"Astron! Careful!"

Of course, they were not the only ones that were fighting.

SWOOSH THUD CRACK

The Sylvans attacked from the sides, their agility and strength making them more formidable opponents than before.

'These are stronger. I guess this is the buff of Putrid Embertree Spirit.'

The reason why this monster was a formidable opponent was not because it was only strong on its own but because it also had the ability to buff its own creations.

'Sylvans.'

I, Ethan, and Emily fought valiantly.

The two's coordination and teamwork improved with each encounter. Emily's swordsmanship was precise, and Ethan's spear thrusts deadly.

My dagger skills also continued to evolve without stopping since Sylvan's were faster than before.

Even though Ethan was a lot more talented in terms of combat, Emily was doing her part of the job. However, the effects of the fog and Fred's skills started taking a toll on their body, and this was showing now.

'It is about the time.'

The constant sounds and tremors of the boss fight was entering my senses, and this should be the same for Fred.

SWOOSH

And because of those noises, nobody saw the small needle that was amplified with green-colored mana reaching Fred.

"Ethan, cover me," Emily shouted, attempting to create some distance between herself and the relentless Sylvans.

However, Ethan's response was disheartening. His body felt sluggish, and he struggled to maintain his usual agility. "I'm trying, but my body doesn't move as I want," he confessed, his frustration palpable.

And, at that moment, I could see Ethan's attention immediately turning to Fred.

'He realized.'

"This! It is your doing, isn't it?" As he mumbled to himself, I could see the scene that happened in the game. He was now probably seeing the flashbacks and putting everything together as it was in the game.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" And with a loud shout, he immediately gathered all the attention on himself.

"What is it, Ethan?" I could hear Emily as she also turned her head to Ethan.

"This guy betrayed us." And Ethan confirmed it, clearly looking at Fred.

"What?"

"Tch."

Fred clicked his tongue; however, soon, his annoyance turned into a grin.

"I guess you really are a Hartley, huh? I was going to offer your head to the boss, but I guess this will be for later."

With a malevolent grin, Fred began to chant an incantation that was unmistakably forbidden
Demoniac Skill.

He was using his skill, [Volatility].

That skill was not only effective against the people but also against the monsters. No, it was a lot stronger against the monsters since they were rather more likely to be controlled by their instinct.

ROAR!

Just to prove that the Putrid Embertree Spirit, already weakened by our relentless assault, suddenly went into a frenzied rampage.

SWOOSH SWOOSH SWOOSH

Its corrupted branches flailed wildly, striking both Sylvans and our party members indiscriminately.

I dodged one, two, three, four....The number increased as I tried to defend myself.

However, given my physical limitations, I found myself unable to defend against the monster's ferocious onslaught.

SWOOSH THUD

"Kurgh!"

A massive branch struck me with brutal force, launching me through the air and leaving me disoriented and helpless.

I could feel the pain in every inch of my body; at least three of my bones were probably broken, and it was even hard to breathe.

"NO!" Anya's anguished cry was drowned out by the cacophony of battle. I felt myself spiraling uncontrollably through the air, away from the chaotic battleground.

"ASTRON!" I could also hear Ethan's voice and see his widened eyes.

And in the midst of the chaos, Fred seized his opportunity. With remarkable speed and stealth he had not shown before, he snatched the coveted dungeon fragments and vanished into the thick, obscuring fog.

As I descended toward the fog-shrouded ground, disoriented and nursing injuries, I could only watch as Fred was leaving the place with a smirk.

However, neither did he know that tiny little tendrils of green were connecting me and him....

As Astron disappeared into the thick fog, Ethan's heart ached with a mixture of anger and despair.

He desperately wanted to go after his fallen comrade, but the reality of their dire situation bore down on him like a crushing weight.

Ethan and other members of the party watched Astron fly and Fred leave; they were busy trying to fend off the attacks of the boss monster that was clearly in a frenzied state.

ROAR SWOOSH

With each of its roars, the Putrid Embertree Spirit attacked, and the ground trembled.

"I will save him."

CLANK

Ethan shouted as he fended off another attack from the monster, trying to make his way towards where Astron flew.

"NO!"

However, at that moment, someone blocked him. Before him stood Hari with her two blades.

"Ethan, I know you are upset, but right now, we can't afford to split ourselves."

SWOOSH

She spoke as she dodged another branch spurting from the ground.

However, Ethan's mind was on the guy who just flew. He wanted to rush at him as his comrade.

As Astron disappeared into the thick fog, Ethan's heart ached with a mixture of anger and despair. He desperately wanted to go after his fallen comrade, but the reality of their dire situation bore down on him like a crushing weight.

"I have to save him," Ethan declared with determination, trying to push his way past Hari, who had positioned herself as a barrier between him and Astron's last known location.

Hari, her fiery blades gleaming in the dim light, stood firm. "Ethan, I get it, but rushing in alone will only get you killed. We can't afford to split our forces now."

ROAR!

Another deafening roar from the Putrid Embertree Spirit punctuated her point, causing the very ground to quake. Sylvans closed in from all sides, their malevolent eyes fixed on the party, their movements unnaturally quick and coordinated.

Ethan's fists clenched in frustration. "But he's hurt! He's alone out there!"

Hari met Ethan's gaze, her own eyes filled with concern. "I know, but if you leave now, we'll be in the same situation as Astron, surrounded and outnumbered. We need to trust that he can take care of himself. Anya and the others are calling for help. We have to trust the team and regroup."

Ethan gritted his teeth, torn between his instinct to rescue Astron and the grim reality of their predicament.

'This....Why it has to be him?'

He still remembered the back he had shown at that time.

"There is no such person left."

The emotions in his words. The helplessness and loneliness.

And now, he was about to do the same thing just like others.

Leaving the weak link alone.

The weight of his decision pressed heavily on his shoulders, and he felt a burning sense of helplessness. He knew that leaving Astron behind was the right tactical choice, but it didn't make it any easier to accept.

CLENCH

He clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug into his palms, blood dripping from them. He threw a look into his spear as he remembered the words that his father spoke.

"When you understand that you can't save everyone, it is the time when you become a real hunter."

"Why? I want to be a hero."

"Hero, huh? You can be a hero if you want."

"Then-"

"But Ethan. One day, you will understand. Unless they have the power to back up their beliefs, no one will be able to stay as heroes in their lives."

'So this is what you meant by those words, father....'

Ethan realized the words his father spoke to him when he heard about his desire to be a hero.

Different from others, his father never went against his wishes to be a hero. He never ridiculed him, never said it was a foolish dream.

But he simply emphasized the importance of strength, and Ethan understood this fact a lot better now.

'It is because I am still weak.'

It was because he was weak that he was unable to save him all alone. If he was stronger and better...

'If I was a bit stronger...'

With a heavy heart, he nodded reluctantly. "Fine, let's regroup. But we better find him once this mess is over. We owe him that."

Hari's grip on her blades tightened, and she gave Ethan a solemn nod. "Agreed. We'll get through this together."

Together, they turned their attention back to the chaotic battlefield, where the Putrid Embertree Spirit's frenzied rampage showed no signs of slowing.

Just like that, Ethan took his first step into becoming the protagonist.

Chapter 89 Chapter 21.1 - First Hunt

"Kurgh-"

I spilled quite a lot of blood from my mouth as I flew into the fog and landed on the ground at a rapid speed. The branches that hit me had already crushed my bones.

THUD

And the moment I landed on the ground, the pain intensified. The shock caused my ribs to damage more, as I felt every anchor of my body aching.

'That hurts.'

I was on the ground, tasting the metallic tang of blood in my mouth, as I stared up at the fog-shrouded sky.

Pain radiated through my body, every broken bone and bruise a cruel reminder of the reason why I was here and the betrayal that had just unfolded.

'That bastard for sure used his skill with full power.'

The way Boss Monster reacted was certainly stronger than in the game. Either it was because I was feeling it in real life, or it was because he was feeling more concerned.

In any case, it didn't matter. Those were the details that I could think about alter; for now, my attention was elsewhere.

I could see him walking farther away, thanks to small tendrils connecting him and me.

"Huk!"

Summoning all the strength I could muster, I forced myself to sit up despite the agonizing pain that radiated from my chest. I could feel the shards of my broken ribs shifting inside me, like jagged knives threatening to puncture my lungs.

"Gurghk!"

Feeling the blood rushing to my throat, the urgency of the situation pushed me forward.

GULP

With trembling hands, I reached for one of the high-grade potions I carried and brought it to my lips, swallowing it in a single gulp.

The potion worked its magic, knitting my bones back together and staunching the internal bleeding.

'There goes my two thousand Valer.'

I could only grimace at the cost, knowing that the potion was worth a small fortune. But at this moment, I'd pay any price to continue the fight.

Pushing myself upright, I willed my body to move despite the lingering pain and weakness.

My senses felt heightened, and the oppressive fog seemed to thicken around me, distorting my surroundings and making it difficult to gauge the battle raging nearby.

CRUMBLE TOK

Even then, the tremors of the fight and the scene that was happening around me, I was able to pick all of that.

"Huff...."

After the potion had finally taken its full effect, I could feel the strength returning to my body, and the same comfortable feeling made me relaxed.

The injuries of my body healed one by one.

My priority right now was to catch that bastard and destroy him, and to do that, I needed to act as fast as I could.

As I took a tentative step forward, the distant sounds of the battle echoed in my ears, muffled by the thick fog.

However, before I could take more than a few strides, an unsettling presence loomed behind me.

SHRIEK! SWOOSH

I spun around just in time to see a group of Sylvans emerging from the dense fog. Their twisted, grotesque forms make me want to throw up again.

The Sylvans, with their gnarled limbs and malevolent grins, moved with a sinister grace. Clawed fingers reached for me, their intentions clear — they were here to finish what the Putrid Embertree Spirit had started.

But, this time, I was not going to hold back. After all, the fog was already covering everyone, and Fred had started escaping.

"Finally."

Reaching out my gun, I felt a heavy and cold metallic feeling.

'It has been a while.'

Raising the gun, I immediately pointed it to the Sylvan's approaching.

And pulled the trigger rapidly.

PIU! PIU! PIU!

The silencer I had equipped worked as intended, suppressing the deafening noise of gunfire. Instead, the shots were replaced by dull thuds, but the impact was anything but dull.

THUD THUD THUD

Their bodies fell to the ground one by one as I aimed at their heads. The power of the gun was slightly lowered thanks to the silencer, but since it was a close distance, it didn't matter too much.

SWOOSH

Dodging swiftly and spacing properly, I basically kept my distance and left them on the hang.

PIU! PIU! PIU!

With each shot, I imbued the bullets with my own mana, enhancing their firepower.

SHRIEK!

The bullets tore through the Sylvans, causing them to stumble and shriek in agony. It was a dance of death, and I was the reaper.

After firing a bunch of bullets and finishing my magazine, I made sure the monsters were all dead.

'Now it is time to hunt.'

Since I was able to use my gun, my fighting prowess was a lot higher than daggers or bows. And this proved to be a faster clearing choice.

Raising my head, I could feel the green tendrils that were connecting me to Fred getting weaker and weaker, and this alone showed he was getting away. Thanks to the small needle I had thrown, I could track him down, and this was exactly my plan.

'He will be able to leave the dungeon in just thirty minutes if he goes with his full power.

I didn't know the exact range limit for now, and I didn't want to gamble it. Since my wounds were completely healed at this point, I could now go into full power as well.

Immediately using my skill [Dash], I felt the increase in my strength, and my speed was rising.

The mana started getting sucked, and without stopping any second, I rushed forwards.

SWOOSH

I could trace where he was, thanks to my mana, and that was enough.

SWOOSH

The training I had been doing all this time was now proving to be helpful. My muscles and my form were clean, and thanks to that, I was able to run both fast and effectively.

My body felt lighter and more agile as if I could defy gravity itself. The mana consumption was substantial, but I had prepared for this moment. With each stride, I closed the gap between Fred and me, the distance between us shrinking with each heartbeat.

My senses were on high alert, and I could sense his presence ahead, a faint but distinct trail left by the needles I had implanted.

I followed it like a hunter tracking prey, my footsteps barely making a sound as I moved through the fog-shrouded landscape.

I was also using my second trait [Shadowborne] to erase my presence, and this made me able to go undetected by the leftover monsters that were lingering around.

Time seemed to blur as I ran, the seconds stretching into eternity. Of course, it wasn't that, but thanks to my low endurance, my muscles burned with exertion, and my lungs ached from the strain, but I pushed on.

'You are going to die here.'

And soon after reaching the Area of stage one, I was able to see where he was thanks to the fog that disappeared.

'Keen Eye.'

Thanks to my skill [Keen Eye], I could see him laying some traps inside the forest. He was also muttering to himself, and even though I couldn't hear what he was saying, I could read his lips.

"Killing Ethan Hartley, huh?" I whispered to myself, my lips curving into a cold smile.

The name Hartley carried weight in the world of Hunters, and it seemed Fred had his sights set on the biggest game.

'But that was not in the game. What caused the change?' As I asked this question, I got the answer immediately.

It was me.

'Though, if you changed your mind because of me, you are gravely mistaken.'

GULP GULP

Gulping two potions at the same time, I first renewed my stamina, and second, I renewed the mana I had used. I was not someone who was strong; thus, I needed to be in my peak condition all the time.

I crouched low, using the terrain and the shadows for cover.

Since we were inside the forest, where the light created more shadows, this was my place to hunt.

Going from shadow to shadow, I slowly decreased the distance until I deemed it enough.

'This should be fine.'

Fred hadn't noticed my approach yet, too consumed by his murderous intent. He continued to mumble about his plans, unaware of the danger that lurked just behind him.

I steadied my gun, feeling the cold metal in my hand. It was time to strike.

PIU!

With a steady hand and a calculated aim, I squeezed the trigger. The silenced pistol spat a muted thump, and the bullet flew with deadly precision, heading straight for Fred's head.

CRACK SPURT

The projectile struck true, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. A look of shock and pain crossed Fred's face as the bullet penetrated his skull. Blood rushed from the wound.

SWOOSH

But he didn't collapse. Instead, something strange happened. His body convulsed, and a sickly green aura enveloped him, casting an eerie glow in the fog. It was as if the demonic energy within him was fighting to keep him alive.

Fred staggered, clutching his head, blood oozing from the wound. He seemed to teeter on the brink of death, yet the demonic energy within him refused to let go.

Fred's body trembled with the aftermath of the gunshot wound, but his eyes blazed with a murderous intent that even sent shivers down my spine. Incredible amounts of pressure oozed from him as he used his mana.

"This is at least on the level of rank-4 or maybe rank-5?"

It was a lot higher than mine; however, compared to the rest of the party members, it was clear why he chose to betray.

But even then, the battle was going to be hard, and I knew it. But that didn't mean I was going to let him leave like that.

He spoke through gritted teeth, his voice laced with venom.

"You dare... attack me?" His words were barely coherent, distorted by pain and rage.

He looked around wildly, his gaze sweeping the forest as he tried to locate the source of the attack. But I remained hidden, well aware of the advantage darkness and silence provided.

"You think you can kill me with a mere gunshot?" Fred hissed, his voice a sinister whisper. "You underestimate me."

However, despite his bravado, he seemed disoriented and struggled to maintain his balance.

The demonic energy that coursed through him had saved his life, but it couldn't completely heal him. He was vulnerable, and I intended to exploit that weakness.

PIU!

I fired another gunshot after changing my position.

SPURT

And it landed just like it should have been.

"Kughh-"

And I could feel him coughing blood. He was covering his head with all his mana to defend himself from the bullets, but this made him more and more vulnerable to my attacks.

"Cough.....Come out, coward!" he spat, his voice laced with frustration. "Show yourself!"

This was the start of the tiring fight that I was going to drag on.

Chapter 90 Chapter 21.2 - First Hunt

What is the biggest advantage of guns in this world?

The answer to that is simple. Not high firepower as bows, but high attacking speed thanks to guns' mechanism.

However, there is one other thing that is advantageous.

When an archer is trying to attack someone, they will cover their arrows with mana by gathering them around the arrow, increasing its firepower.

And, if they are not that proficient and high-ranking marksman, the place where they attack from will still be in the range of the target's senses, and this will reveal their location.

However, because gun base firepower is high even without mana, and most of the time, the mana is hardly used to increase a gun's firepower, they don't have this negative advantage.

And this was exactly why I was able to hide in my tracks while still attacking constantly.

The silencer of my pistol and the small amounts of mana I was using were making it impossible to trace it.

"Cough.....Come out, coward! Show yourself!"

Fred's frustration grew with each gunshot, and his efforts to locate me became increasingly frantic. The misty forest played tricks on his senses, and his pain was slowly sapping his strength.

"You can't hide forever!" he roared, his voice echoing through the woods.

'I can. You don't need to worry.'

Thanks to shadows, I was even able to escape from the senses of Kaya Hartley, and I could certainly hide myself from Fred.

And hide I did, moving stealthily from tree to tree, my gun trained on him.

I knew I couldn't let up, couldn't give him a chance to retaliate.

'Keen Eye.'

My keen eye showed me the weak points of his body that were now slowly eroding thanks to the demonic mana that he was using to sustain his wounds.

PIU! PIU! PIU!

I continued to fire, my shots calculated and precise, targeting him in vulnerable spots. The bullets found their mark, causing him to cough up more blood and weaken his defenses.

Fred's breathing grew ragged, and he staggered, struggling to maintain his balance. He was on the brink of exhaustion, and I could see the fear in his eyes.

"Kurghk-!"

Blood flowed from his mouth as he coughed constantly. Like an injured soldier, he was trying his best to stay on his foot, but that was proving more and more hard.

"You won't... break me," he gasped between ragged breaths.

But then, his tone shifted, and he spoke with a sense of regret. "I didn't want... to use this."

I watched the scene as the aura around him changed.

THUMP

My heart rate increased with each passing time as the demonic energy around me increased.

The pressure emanating from Fred transformed, becoming darker, more menacing. It was as if he was tapping into a well of power he had been keeping in reserve.

His body contorted as he forced a transformation, and the air grew thick with an oppressive energy. Fred's eyes gleamed with an eerie, crimson light as his appearance shifted.

'You finally used the capsule.'

He had become a half-demon.

There was a reason why demon contractors were annoying to deal with. It was because they could use this capsule and force themselves to become a half-demon with the price of losing their strength for a while.

It worked like an overdrive.

Fred's voice dripped with hate as he spat out his words. "You think you've won? You think you can take me down like some common Hunter?"

'It is coming.'

And, as the mana surged around his body, I could see the eerie crimson light in his eyes intensifying.

ROAR!

He threw his head back with a maniacal roar. The sound was deafening, and as he roared, an onslaught of dark mana surged from his body, lashing out at the surrounding trees and ground.

The very air seemed to tremble under the force of his unleashed power. The ground shook violently, and trees were uprooted as the torrent of mana raged out of control.

SWOOSH

This was one of the skills that he would use as the boss in the future parts, where he would simply attack everything in the close proximity.

[Roar of Catastrophe]

SWOOSH

Activating my skill [Dash], I immediately increased the distance to get out of his attacking range.

Unless one had an artifact that defended themselves, it was impossible to evade this skill unless you were out of range.

Fred had turned into a destructive force of nature, and I knew the ways of destroying his figure.

After all, I was the one who knew his characteristics as a Demon and was prepared for this case.

In the midst of the chaos, I spotted Fred's form, now distorted and grotesque, as he embraced his demonic side.

THUMP

His laughter echoed through the forest, a chilling sound that sent shivers down my spine, thanks to the pressure emanating from him.

'But this is nothing compared to that time.'

However, I knew how it felt to be in the presence of someone strong, and Fred was not one of them. I forcefully calmed my body down as my mind cooled down.

"You can't escape, Astron!" he taunted, his voice carrying a twisted glee. "I'm going to tear you apart, piece by piece!"

At this point, it seemed he understood it was me who was aiming for his life, but it didn't matter at all.

"Escape? Why should I?"

I mumbled, looking at the bastard.

"In the end, you fell for it."

His wounds healed one by one thanks to his newly revealed half-demon form. His physical capabilities were top-notch and higher than any human could be at his rank.

However, in this world, everything has a price. If you are strong and big, you are going to be slower.

If you are fast and agile, your attacks won't hit as strong.

This was a world that was based on a game; thus, everything that could be targeted as an enemy had a weakness.

And Fred, who was the future boss of the also did.

'Weakness to attribute of light.'

Not all the demons are weak to Light Attribute, different from how their reputation worked. No, rather, there are even some demons that can use the magic attribute Light.

However, some of them do have the weakness of light magic.

'Vitalisanguis Clan.'

A clan that has a very high regeneration power uses the dark and demonic psions around the environment to increase the efficiency of their body circuits.

And, because they are utilizing dark mana, when they are attacked by light attribute psions, their body circuits will be interrupted, resulting in them not being able to regenerate as much as they did before.

'All of this....Just to kill one bastard...'

I grabbed the capsule that I bought from the academy. A special type of capsule that is filled with Light-Attribute mana and the size of the bullet for my gun.

I specifically ordered this capsule in this size just to make sure that I would be able to use it with it. It cost 10 thousand Valer to buy it, quite a lot.

But I didn't care. Since, just by grabbing the things this guy had, I could simply make it worth it, and even if it didn't, as long as I erased on more demon contractors, I was fine with it.

Putting it into the special thrower for that capsule, and raising my gun, I started getting ready.

"WHERE ARE YOU BASTARD!"

I could hear Fred's shouts from far away.

I reached into my bracelet and pulled out a small vial containing a shimmering potion labeled "Potion of Strength." Without hesitation, I uncorked it and downed the potion in a single gulp.

The surge of power from the Potion of Strength coursed through me. At this point, my bullets won't even damage his body thanks to his regeneration; thus, using the same tactic won't work.

However, he was still physically stronger, and his demonic abilities made him a formidable adversary. And since the capsule wasn't a bullet, I needed to use it from a closed distance.

'Dash.'

I activated my skill, and once again, I felt the surge of energy coursing through me.

SWOOSH

As I closed the distance, Fred's eyes widened, and a smirk appeared on his face.

"So, you finally decided to show yourself."

SWOOSH

Fred's attack came swiftly, a powerful right hook aimed directly at my face. He put his full force behind it, leveraging his immense strength to deliver a bone-crushing blow.

However, I had anticipated this move.

SWOOSH

With newfound agility and strength, I dodged his punch with a hair's breadth, feeling the rush of air as his fist narrowly missed my face.

"Grr.....I will kill you, as the price....You fucker!"

SWOOSH SWOOSH

Fred didn't miss a beat. He followed up with a sweeping low kick, aiming to knock me off balance. His leg moved like a blur, targeting my ankles with precision.

But, once again. Fred was still not a fighter but rather a worm that simply hid himself.

His movements were too easy to read, and my eyes immediately analyzed his muscles that were clenched. Normally, it would still be impossible for me to dodge his moves, but the potion was just around the range that made it possible.

SWISH

I was ready. I leaped over his leg, narrowly avoiding the sweep. Even the wind that was cursing through made me stagger backward slightly.

'I am going to die if I get hit even once.'

It was the dance of battle and death.

THUD

In mid-air, I spun around and delivered a swift kick to his back, using the momentum to create some distance between us, as well as to disrupt his balance.

And that worked just as I intended.

Fred staggered forward, clearly caught off guard by my agility that he hadn't observed before, and I was flying over him in the sky.

"You....You were hiding yo-"

And that wasn't the end, as I raised my gun and channeled as much mana I could to my gun, using [Lunar Enigma].

BANG!

The sound of a gunshot echoed, but this time, I had already taken the muzzle off to increase the power of my gun. I didn't want to take any risk.

THUD SPURT

The bullet pierced through Fred's chest, and blood spurted from the wound. But that was still not the end.

'Keen Eye.'

Raising the thrower of the Capsule, I aimed it right at the point where my bullet had pierced. The wound was already regenerating, and Fred was about to pick himself up.

PUF!

As I fired the capsule, it immediately pushed through the narrow opening that my bullet momentarily created.

BAM!

And exploded inside his body.

SPURT!

Blood spurted from his insides as the yellow-colored light shone through the wound.

THUD

With a smooth thud sound, I landed on the ground as I looked at my product.

"AH!

And for the first time after Fred had transformed, he screamed as if he was in pain.

"H-how....."

He staggered as his body circuits were being interrupted from inside. The power of regeneration didn't work as he wished.

"This whole time, Fred Nilsen.....No, should I say Fred Nickleson...The thousand faced.....'

I spoke, slowly approaching as my gun was raised.

"You were playing in my hand."

"Grr.....Huk!....."

Constantly, blood poured from his mouth and his wound as his body convulsed. The light attribute mana was spreading into his body like the cells of cancer, eating him from the inside.

"I WILL KILL YOU!"

SWOOSH

With a loud shout, he tried to grab me. But I was already expecting that.

THUD

Evading his attack just as before, I smashed his face with my feet, stepping on his head.

"One bullet, Fred Nickleson....."

I grabbed my gun and pointed it at his head.

"This is all it takes...."

And pulled the trigger.

BANG!

Those were the last words he heard before losing his life.

SPURT

As that one bullet pierced his head....