

# **Endless Leveling Done Right! #Chapter 31: The Reason For The Sudden Change Of Events - Read Endless Leveling Done Right! Chapter 31: The Reason For The Sudden Change Of Events**

## *Chapter 31 - The Reason For The Sudden Change Of Events*

"My poor hips," Alex groaned, massaging the sore spot where Cairo had struck him with his stiff wooden sword.

"You need to work more on your control, Alex," Cairo said. "I know you got swept by the flow last night, but a real warrior keeps their clarity at all times."

"Yes, Master," Alex replied. "I won't do it again. Next time, I'll drink in moderation."

"Good." Cairo nodded. "You at least know how to admit your mistake. If you can do that, there's still hope for you."

Alex's glance landed on Dim Dim, who was taking a nap in the shade. While he was hot and sweaty from training, the little one was under the cool shade, relaxing.

When he had been eating breakfast in the tavern, he had come across his Master. After a quick chat, they had agreed to spar two hours later.

The town was under lockdown due to the danger of a monster outbreak, so doing missions outside was out of the question. With that restriction, the master and disciple decided to just use their time to train.

With a shield in hand, Alex was able to block most of Cairo's attacks.

The Catkin Swordsman had his right hand behind his back, deliberately using only his left to attack Alex.

Cairo was ambidextrous, which meant he could wield his sword with both hands. However, his right hand was slightly stronger than his left, so he was handicapping himself against Alex.

He also held back with his movement technique, allowing Alex to block and deflect most of his attacks.

"Master, can you increase your speed?" Alex asked. "I want to test something. Can you move as fast as the Red-Eyed Zebra Jumping Spider?"

"Sure." Cairo nodded, genuinely happy that his disciple wished to improve by challenging himself. "Ready?"

"Ready!" Alex braced himself, raising his sword and shield in a defensive position.

A moment later, he saw a blur fly past his eye.

Before Alex could react, pain spread into his arm as the Catkin's sword strike finally registered in his brain.

Cairo moved so fast, reminding the young man of his battle of life and death against the Red-Eyed Zebra Jumping Spider.

A creature that ambushed its prey, leaving them unaware of what was happening until it was already too late.

Alex heightened his senses to the best of his abilities.

Although he understood that this was a mere sparring match, the pressure his Master exuded was that of a wild beast out to kill him.

When Cairo stopped targeting his exposed body parts and focused on attacking Alex's shield, the young man understood that even with a shield, he couldn't completely guarantee his safety.

Cairo watched as his disciple got pushed back step by step every time his sword struck the shield at its center.

A loud thud spread through the surroundings as Alex landed on his back and rolled a few meters away before coming to a complete stop.

"Oww..."

Alex felt as if he had been hit by a car and wondered if his left arm was still attached to his body.

It was currently paralyzed, numbed by the repeated impacts.

As he lay on the ground, he thought the same thing would have happened if he had met the attack of the two-meter-long jumping spider head-on.

Fortunately, he still hadn't had a shield back then.

If he did, he would have been bolder, then he'd have been completely caught by surprise, unable to resist as the monster dealt the killing blow.

"Are you alright?" Cairo asked, extending his hand to his disciple.

"No, Master," Alex replied as he accepted the Catkin's help. "It hurts so much. I can no longer feel my left arm."

"You'll get used to it."

"... I don't want to get used to it."

Cairo smiled faintly before using his fist to lightly bump the young man's chest.

"When you use a shield, you have no choice but to get used to getting hit," Cairo explained. "That's why you need to learn skills that will help you tank hits. Have you already taken your first Job Change?"

"Not yet, Master," Alex answered. "But I will get it soon."

Alex glanced at his status page to see his current stats.

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Alex Stratos

Age: 17

Mana: (N/A)

Job Class: (N/A)

Strength - 12

Intelligence - 8

Dexterity - 1

Agility - 30

Constitution - 16

Stamina - 16

Magic - 0

Luck - 4

Available Stat Points: 0

AP: 40

Active Skills: (N/A)

Passive Skills: Improved Stone Throw, Head Shot.

[Difficulty Level: Hell Mode]

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Alex only needed four more stat points in Constitution before he could qualify for the Shielder Job Class, which would increase his defensive abilities.

He estimated that he only needed a few more trips to the forest and to occasionally kill some monsters to level up enough for his Job Change.

Unfortunately, they were now stuck in a lockdown, which meant they couldn't leave the city, let alone go to the Floating Forest.

As he mindlessly read the information on his Status Page again and again, the young man was struck by an epiphany. All this time, maybe there was a reason why things progressed differently in the Town of Thaloria.

'Did the level of difficulty affect the events in the Town of Thaloria?' Alex wondered.

He never looked at the situation from this angle before. But now that it had crossed his mind, his thoughts stuck on it, and he couldn't help but wonder if the monster outbreak might really happen.

'Hell mode...' Alex bit his lip in frustration. 'Does this also mean that if I go to Briarwood Village to help Charles, the difficulty level will also be increased to Hell Mode?'

Charles' story quest only had one ending.

Death.

There was no escape for the NPC, Charles Lambert, because he was doomed to die in his tutorial quest.

That had only changed when Alex had managed to clear the quest, which had taken him a year.

"What's wrong?" Cairo asked. "You look pale."

"Master, do you know of a place where I can fight against Rank 1 Monsters?" Alex asked. "I need to gain experience point—errr, battle experience as soon as possible to improve my fighting style."

"Do you wish to leave the city?" Cairo inquired. "I know of a place. But we will need to take an airship to get there. It is six hours away from the Town of Thaloria."

"Where are we going, Master?" Alex asked.

"The Crawford Tribe," Cairo answered. "My hometown."

The Catkin thought this was the perfect opportunity to let Alex meet his grandfather, who also wished to see his disciple.

There were also many monster habitats around the Crawford Tribe, perfect for Alex's request and training.

With the threat of a monster outbreak hanging over Thaloria, Alex knew he couldn't put off his Job Change any longer.

The earlier he got to it, the more time he had to learn and practice some Shield Skills exclusive to the players who played tank characters in the game.

After making their preparations, the two headed to the airport and bought tickets for an airship, which would be making a stop at the Crawford Tribe's ancestral lands.

'I'll be back.' Alex stared at the Floating Islands of Thaloria growing smaller with each passing second until they slowly disappeared from view.

Although the monster outbreak would be a very dangerous event, it also brought opportunities.

If Alex was able to seize that opportunity, he believed that he would become one step closer to his goal of helping the pitiful young man, who didn't know what kind of fate awaited him in the Dungeon of Beginnings.

### *Chapter 32 - The Stairs Of Trial*

Etherion Village, nestled at the base of Mount Etherion, was home to the Crawford Tribe.

Looking at the village from above the sky, it did seem shaped like a giant claw. Alex thought that the name fitted Cairo's tribe perfectly.

"Those disembarking at Etherion Village, please get ready," announced the captain of the airship. "We will be landing shortly."

Cairo tapped his disciple's shoulder, reminding the young man to follow him to the back of the airship, where the doors would be opened shortly.

"Are you ready to go, Dim Dim?" Alex asked the Dim Sum God, who was currently perched on top of his head.

"Dim Dim~" Dim Dim nodded happily.

A few minutes later, the airship landed at its designated spot, where passengers would descend.

Just like Cairo, there were a few other Catkins from the Town of Thaloria returning to their respective tribes.

A few of them had decided to evacuate, fearing that they would be swept up by the monster outbreak that might indeed happen and endanger their lives.

Cairo had thought that Alex also planned to escape to safety and was using the excuse of looking for a place where he could fight Rank 1 Monsters.

However, after observing the young man's demeanor, the Catkin could tell that Alex wasn't trying to escape.

No.

He seemed serious about getting stronger within a short period of time before returning to the Town of Thaloria.

"Master, I plan to use this opportunity to get a Job Class. That's why I need to fight monsters to gain some battle experience."

When he heard those words from his disciple, Cairo realized Alex wasn't someone who ran away from danger unless it was absolutely necessary.

The courage he had shown to save some of the hostages from the Goblins proved that he was willing to take risks, even in the face of danger.

"This place is just like how I imagined it to be, Master," Alex commented. "The houses are built from wood, and they look really nice."

"I'm glad you like it," Cairo replied with a smile on his face. He felt proud that his disciple was impressed by his hometown. "Now, follow me. I'm bringing you to my home. You'll also meet my grandfather. Just remember that he's a very strict person, so make sure to behave yourself."

"Yes, Master." Alex nodded. "Let's behave, okay, Dim Dim?"

"Dim Dim~"

As the two strolled along the streets of the village, the young man noticed that people bowed in Cairo's direction when he walked past them.

The Catkin had no reaction whatsoever and simply continued to walk as if he was already used to this treatment.

The young man, who was quite curious why this was happening, decided to ask his master a question.

"Master, why are they bowing to you?" he asked.

"It's because I belong to the Hartwell Clan," Cairo replied. "My great-great-grandpa founded the Crawford Tribe, and he's also a hero recognized by everyone. I'm just basking in the limelight of my predecessors."

"I see." Alex nodded.

Although the Catkin downplayed his background, the young man understood that his master was akin to royalty in the Crawford Tribe.

This made him very happy. It was a good thing that his master was a true bigshot.

Not only was Cairo a future Heaven's Sword, the title given to the strongest Swordsman among the Catkins, but he was also a prince.

Knowing that he had skills and wealth to back himself up, Alex decided to shamelessly hug the leg of his master, as that would make things easier for him in the Kingdom of Avalon.

"We're here," Cairo announced as he stood at the foot of a stone staircase, which led to a high ledge overlooking the entire Crawford Tribe.

By Alex's estimation, it would take anywhere between eight hundred to a thousand steps just to reach the residence of the Hartwell Clan.

The two then began their climb in silence.

Truth be told, the climb wasn't difficult. After all, Alex had been running every day, carrying a basket filled with stones on his back.

But while the climb was truly no big deal to him, by the time he and his master reached the halfway mark, he was surprised to find himself breathing heavily.

"Starting from this point, all the steps you take will make you feel as if your body is getting heavier, albeit slightly," Cairo explained. "The members of the Hartwell family need to take this trial once. But after completing it, we no longer have to do it again.

"Those who wish to have an audience with my clan must climb these stairs and prove that they are worthy. Take your time climbing. In the meantime, I'll inform my family about you.

"It doesn't matter if it takes you a few days to reach the top. I'll ask some of our servants to give you food and water whenever you need it."

Cairo then lightly tapped his disciple's shoulder to encourage him to do his best before climbing up the rest of the staircase as if he was just taking a casual stroll.

Alex gritted his teeth and took as many steps as he could.

However, after climbing a hundred more steps, he felt as if he could no longer lift his foot.

The young man then looked at the gate in the distance with a frown.

According to his estimation, he would only need around three to four hundred more steps to reach his destination.

"Dim Dim, do you think you can reach that gate if you go alone?" Alex asked the Dim Sum God.

"Dim." Dim Dim pondered before jumping off Alex's head.

The little one then started to jump on the stairs as if there was nothing that could stop it from reaching its goal.

"Dim Dim!"

Dim Dim stood proudly at the top of the stairs and looked down at Alex, making the young man smile wryly.

"Let's try this," Alex muttered as he used his hand to grab his right leg and used all of his strength to lift it up.

He managed to lift it high enough to make it land on the next step.

Using that opportunity, he repeated the same for his other leg and succeeded as well.

But when he tried to pull off the same move, he was unable to lift it high enough to cross the next step.

After many trials and errors, Alex deemed that he could no longer do it.

Panting for breath, the young man decided to sit down and recalled his master's words.

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"It doesn't matter if it takes you a few days to reach the top. I'll ask some of our servants to give you food and water when you need it."

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'Days?' Alex blinked. 'It might take me days to reach the top?!"

After remembering that this trial of the Hartwell Clan was something he had to pass no matter what, Alex felt as if he was about to suffer a headache.

Even as he sat, he could feel a pressure descending on his body, preventing him from taking the next step.

But just as the young man was contemplating what to do next, he heard a notification sound inside his head, followed by a small blue window screen appearing in front of him.

[Constitution +1]

The young man froze for a bit after seeing the notification window.

A moment later, a devilish smile appeared on his face before he laughed out loud.

Cairo and his grandfather, who were observing Alex from the main residence, saw the young man laugh out of the blue.

"Did your disciple lose his mind already?" Cairo's grandpa, Ramza, asked with a look of contempt on his face.

"No," Cairo replied. "That's not the laugh of someone who has lost his mind. It is the laugh of someone who seems to have struck gold."

"Really?" Ramza asked doubtfully.

"Maybe?" Cairo shrugged. "Anyway, it will probably take him a few days before he reaches the gate. I'll go and tell the servants to bring him food and water later."

The Swordsman left his grandfather's room, leaving the Patriarch to observe the young human, who was laughing as if he had found a bug in the game that he could exploit to his advantage.

*Chapter 33 - I Don't Chase Glory, I Hold The Line So Others Can Claim It [Part 1]*

A day after Alex and Cairo had arrived at the Hartwell Residence...

"Ready, Dim Dim?" Alex asked.

"Dim." Dim Dim nodded.

The Dim Sum God had a determined look on its face.

Both of them were currently at the base of the stairs, looking up at the residence in the distance.

"On the count of three!" Alex said. "One... two..."

"Three!" Dim Dim shouted before jumping on the first step.

But the Dim Sum God didn't stop there. It hurried up the stairs, leaving Alex behind.

"Wait! You cheated!" Alex exclaimed as he ran after the Dim Sum God, who was giggling as it jumped from one stair to the next.

Ramza, his family, and the servants, who were paying close attention to Alex, didn't know how to react to the young man's actions.

Although Cairo had known the young man longer than the others, he was just as clueless about why his disciple was behaving this way.

He watched as the young man and Dim Dim climbed up the stairs.

When Alex was about to take the 398th step, he and the Dim Sum God both jumped at the same time.

A moment later, the young man's foot landed on the 404th step, while Dim Dim landed on the 405th.

"Ahem!" Dim Dim raised its body, feeling proud of itself for being a step ahead of Alex.

"Good job, Dim Dim!" Alex chuckled as he patted the Dim Sum God's head, who was very pleased with its victory.

[Constitution +1]

[Agility +1]

Seeing the notification that had appeared in front of him, Alex's smile became wider.

Despite the fact that he could no longer move due to the power of gravity holding him in place, he was very pleased because his Agility and Constitution had gone up by one more point.

'I knew it! This staircase is meant for training,' Alex thought. 'As long as I keep making good progress climbing it, I'll get a boost in my status points as a reward.'

'Now I understand how the Hartwell Family and their subordinates can get stronger by simply climbing these stairs. I'm glad I came here!'

"You sure are a very interesting human."

The voice of a young lady reached Alex's ear, prompting him to look at the top of the stairs, where a beautiful Catkin, who seemed to be around his age, was staring down at him.

Standing beside the young lady was a Catkin maid holding a basket.

"Master Alex, I have come to bring you your breakfast as per the order of the Young Master," the maid, who went by the name Roselia, said respectfully.

"Thank you, Roselia," Alex replied. "What are we having today?"

"Ham and cheese sandwiches." Roselia went down the stairs and handed the basket of food to the young man. "There are also two bottles of milk in it. Please enjoy your breakfast."

"Thank you." Alex smiled at the pretty maid before moving down the staircase.

Roselia was the maid who had delivered dinner to Alex a day ago as ordered by Cairo. Truth be told, she was very curious about her Young Master's disciple.

She couldn't understand why Cairo had chosen to make a human his disciple when countless Catkins in the Crawford Tribe would jump at the opportunity of having the Catkin Swordsman as their master.

News had already spread throughout the tribe that Alex was Cairo's disciple, and now, many teenage Catkins were eager to challenge him to see for themselves what had made him worthy of being chosen by someone from the Hartwell Clan.

Unfortunately, they didn't dare go up the stairs that led to the Hartwell Residence because only those who genuinely wished to have an audience with them were allowed to climb them.

Although no one could see them, there were hidden guards stationed around the mountain paying close attention to those climbing the stairs.

Anyone looking for trouble would face their wrath, so the hot-blooded Catkins could only wait until Alex left the safety of the Hartwell Residence.

Alex, who had no idea that he was now the center of attention, walked down the stairs until the pressure descending on him eased up a bit.

He then sat down on the stairs and invited Dim Dim to have breakfast together.

"Let's eat, Dim Dim."

"Dim Dim~"

The two ate happily, enjoying the view of the town in the distance, oblivious to the countless gazes that were looking in their direction.

"Say, why did my brother choose you as his disciple?" The pretty Catkin walked down the stairs and stood two steps away from Alex. "My brother isn't a very social person. Did you trick him into making you his disciple?"

Alex didn't answer right away. He had been guilty of approaching Cairo with ulterior motives from knowing that the latter was going to be a very important character in the world of Arcadia.

"Although you're not completely right, you're not wrong either," Alex answered after organizing his thoughts. "You see, I am somewhat of an oracle. The moment I laid eyes on your brother, I just knew he was an extraordinary person."

"It's like meeting a swan in a tavern filled with ducks. He just had an air that made him stand out from the crowd, you know? So, I thought, why not befriend someone so amazing?"

Cairo and Ramza, who could overhear the conversation from their spot in the residence, listened in silence.

"Hah! So you admit you're just taking advantage of my brother!" the pretty Catkin sneered. "You're such a shameless person!"

"Hahaha! Well, I won't deny it," Alex answered. "But I didn't expect my master to be so righteous. Even though I was a complete stranger, he decided to teach me how to use a sword."

"I decided I couldn't possibly let that opportunity slip away, so I started calling him Master."

"Back then, Master was very uncomfortable whenever I called him that. He believed he didn't have the qualification to become a teacher because he himself was still learning the ways of the sword.

"It was just me calling him Master one-sidedly. Miss, your brother is a very kind and righteous person. He doesn't mind helping complete strangers and will even fight for the sake of the weak and the oppressed.

"I admit I had hidden motives when I approached him, but after getting to know him, his character won me over. Now, I'm really serious about becoming his student. To be honest, though, I intend to be a Shielder, not a Swordsman."

"Hah?" The pretty Catkin arched an eyebrow. "A Shielder? What's so good about a Shielder? As expected, you're just a coward hiding behind a shield."

She didn't even bother to hide the contempt in her voice as she looked at Alex in disdain.

But Alex didn't take her word to heart. He simply ate with Dim Dim and savored the taste of the sandwiches Roselia had prepared for him.

"What's wrong?" the pretty Catkin asked. "Why aren't you talking back? Aren't you even going to defend your dignity as a man?"

Alex glanced at the young lady, who seemed to be purposely picking a fight with him.

"I am Alex Stratos," he said. "This is Dim Dim. What is your name, Miss?"

"Lavinia," the pretty Catkin replied. "Lavinia Hartwell, that's my name. Are you now going to answer my question?"

"What was your question again?" Alex asked back in a teasing tone.

"You..." Lavinia glared at the young man, who seemed to be making fun of her.

"Ah, I remember." Alex raised his hand and gestured for the young lady not to say anything. "You asked me what's so good about a Shielder, right?"

"That's right." Lavinia nodded. "What's so good about it? How can it be any better than a Swordsman? Just hiding behind a shield—aren't you just a coward?"

A chuckle escaped Alex's lips because that was the funniest joke he had heard in his life.

His laughter made Lavinia glare at him even more.

Watching from the main residence, Cairo shook his head helplessly. His sister had simply never suffered any hardships in life.

She was treated as a princess and had been spoiled by their grandfather and parents.

However, he didn't make any move to stop her. Just like his sister, Cairo also believed that a Swordsman was much better than a Shielder who only hid behind the safety of a shield.

*Chapter 34 - I Don't Chase Glory, I Hold The Line So Others Can Claim It [Part 2]*

"Stop laughing!" Lavinia demanded. "You really are a coward. Instead of answering my question, you just hide behind your laughter."

"I'm sorry about that," Alex replied with a smile. "Do you use any weapons, Lavinia?"

"Of course," Lavinia answered. "Everyone in the Hartwell family is a warrior. I am a sword whip user."

"A sword whip?" Alex nodded. "That means that you are a very talented person. Only versatile people could master such a weapon. Then, which weapon is better? The sword or the sword whip?"

"Isn't it the same?" Lavinia sneered. "A sword whip is still a sword."

"Then, let me change the question." Alex smirked. "Does everyone in the Hartwell family only use a sword?"

Lavinia frowned, but she eventually replied. "Not everyone uses the sword. My grandfather wields the spear. Let me guess, you're going to ask me if the spear is better than the sword, right?"

The disdain in the young lady's voice was very evident, prompting those who were secretly eavesdropping on the conversation to regard Alex with contempt.

"Why not?" Alex grinned. "Which is better, the sword or the spear?"

"Both of them are good!" Lavinia, who had expected this question, already had her answer prepared. "Both of them are weapons that can kill their enemies. The point is, my grandfather and brother fight at the frontlines and don't run away from the enemy!"

Alex clapped his hands and nodded in agreement.

"You're right, both swords and spears are meant to attack and deal as much damage as possible."

Lavinia felt more confident after hearing the young man's reply. She thought that the young man would downplay the sword and the spear, which would make him an enemy of the Hartwells.

'I hope he messes things up,' Lavinia thought. 'That way, my brother will understand that he has made a mistake in choosing this coward as his disciple.'

She believed that as long as she was able to see an opportunity, she could make this young man understand that he had come to the wrong place.

However, just as she was thinking along these lines, the young man raised a finger.

"But a sword and spear can still be stopped by a shield," Alex asserted. "You say those who use shields are cowards, right?"

"I do." Lavinia nodded. "It's the truth!"

"Well, let me tell you that you are wrong," Alex stated firmly. "Those who use shields are not cowards. Why? Because they are the ones who take the hits that are meant for others.

"A sword and a spear are meant to attack and kill, while a shield's purpose is always to protect. Those who wield it don't chase glory. They hold the line, so others can claim it."

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Lavinia scoffed. "Why take hits if you can just dodge? Are you a masochist?"

Alex decided to side-step the question, as if dodging the arrow with the label "masochist" that Lavinia had shot in his direction.

He wasn't a masochist, so he refused to be called one!

"Not everyone is as strong as you, Lavinia," Alex said before glancing in the direction of Etherion Village, where the rest of the Crawford Tribe lived. "Some people don't have the strength to protect themselves. Evading isn't always an option, so they just take hits."

"And, you see, the Crawford Tribe wasn't founded by sword or spear. It was founded by a shield."

"Again, what nonsense are you talking about?" Lavinia asked.

Last night, before sleeping, Alex had asked Dim Dim if it knew anything about the Crawford Tribe.

When it came to the game, Dim Dim was like a walking encyclopedia who knew almost anything about the history of Arcana.

And just as he had expected, the Dim Sum God told him the story of how the Crawford Tribe and Etherion Village came to be.

The village was founded over a thousand years ago by a Catkin who had been exiled from his tribe.

Along the way, he met several outcasts just like him.

Unlike Cairo and Lavinia, who were both talented, their ancestor had just been an average Catkin.

He didn't have any redeeming features, aside from the fact that he was a very stubborn person.

Just like a school of small fish, the outcasts banded together, forming a group.

None of them wished to become the leader, so they decided to hold an election.

Unfortunately, the one who was chosen to become their leader was Leonard Hartwell.

This ragtag group traveled across the land and faced many dangers together.

And... none of them was a warrior.

They were just a ragtag group of people who barely knew how to fight.

However, if there was one thing that humans and beastkins both had in common, it was their ability to adapt to their environment.

Wielding stones and wooden spears, they fought against the monsters that blocked their way.

Many died during those battles, and those who survived always feared that they might be the next ones to perish.

In the end, the people asked Leonard to join the battle and not just command from the back.

Left with no choice, the Catkin agreed to take the lead. But since he didn't know how to use swords, spears, bows, or any other weapons, he decided to choose the only thing that could preserve his life.

And that was none other than a shield.

Leonard and his small tribe went to the nearest town to take shelter for a few days.

Using that as an opportunity, the Catkin looked for a blacksmith who could forge him a shield.

Maybe he had been lucky, for the shop he entered was actually owned by a soon-to-be legendary blacksmith, who was in a bit of a slump.

No matter what kind of weapon he forged, he just couldn't seem to feel any inspiration from it.

Because of this, his talent stagnated, and his confidence hit rock bottom.

When Leonard entered his shop, he asked the Dwarf if he could forge something for him.

Feeling irritated that another client who wanted a custom-made weapon had come, the Dwarf asked Leonard to leave and told him that he no longer crafted weapons.

"I'm not here for a weapon. I'm here for a shield. The strongest and sturdiest shield that you can give me."

The Dwarf looked at the Catkin in disdain and was about to send him out of the shop when he realized something.

He had crafted more weapons than he could count. But he had yet to craft a shield or a suit of armor.

Intrigued, the blacksmith decided to take on the Catkin's commission.

For him, making a shield was just lumping hard metals together and trying to make them look decent.

At least, that was what he thought at that time. But as he started to forge the shield, the passion he had forgotten came back to him.

Slowly but surely, the shield took form. After the Dwarf finished his craft, he added runes on the shield, giving it special abilities.

The runes made the shield sturdier, and it also allowed its wielder to resist a blow that could potentially take their life.

But, still unsatisfied with the results, he put a special rune that allowed the shield to harness the willpower of the person wielding it, raising its defense even further.

The Dwarf, who would later be known as Marcus, named the shield Everguard.

He hoped that the first shield he crafted would continue to guard its wielder, as well as those whom its bearer wished to protect.

After gaining the shield, Leonard stood at the front lines, fearing for his life.

But with Everguard by his side, he managed to turn the tide in their favor.

He would simply taunt his opponent, and the rest of the Crawford Tribe ganged up on whatever they were fighting.

Beaten and battered, Leonard and his tribe arrived at the foot of Mount Etherion.

It was a good place to settle down as it was surrounded by lush forests, rivers, and lakes.

Until the end of his life, Leonard stood at the front of any danger that their tribe was facing.

And because of this, the tribe members treated him and his family as their protectors, for they allowed the Crawford Tribe to survive.

This was why, even after hundreds of years, it remained a tradition for the Crawford Tribe to bow to the Hartwell Clan. It was a gesture of respect for the sacrifices their ancestor had made for their people.

"I don't chase glory," Alex repeated. "I hold the line, so others can claim it. Those were the words your great ancestor had said before he drew his last breath. As his descendant, you mustn't look down on those who wield the shield. After all, it was a shield that made all of this possible."

Dim Dim, who was now perched on top of Alex's head, nodded because what the young man had said was the truth.

"They spoke of heroes in legends, but the Crawford Tribe needed no myths," Alex said softly. "Leonard the Everguard was neither the strongest nor the swiftest, but in the moment of reckoning, he was the one who stood when no one else could."

Alex stood up, dusted off his pants, and walked down the stairs in a carefree manner.

Lavinia watched him go with a conflicted look on her face. However, the wind carried his words, allowing her to hear them.

"Everyone has something they hold sacred," Alex stated. "Regardless of whether we hold a sword, spear, stone, stick, or shield, there are times when we can't take a step back or dodge because behind us are things that we will risk our lives to protect."

Those secretly eavesdropping on the conversation didn't know how to feel about the young man who knew about their village's history.

At first, they had secretly ridiculed him when he had said he wished to be a Shielder instead of picking a Warrior Class.

But after hearing his tale, the contempt they had felt for him disappeared without a trace.

Cairo smiled faintly as he gazed at his grandfather, who was currently playing with his beard as he eyed the young man thoughtfully.

### *Chapter 35 - Alex's Gamble*

"Child, are you hungry? Come. Have lunch with us."

"Hey! Would you like to try our local drink? It's called Poncana."

"Hey, handsome~ How about you spend some fun time with us sisters? We'll make sure you don't regret it."

"Big brother, you're so cool!"

"Here, I picked up some excess bananas. It's good for your health, you know? Have some."

Alex blinked once, then twice, as he took the bananas offered to him by the granny he happened to pass along on the streets.

It was not only her. The entire village seemed to want to get to know him better. Some even invited him to eat with them.

Overwhelmed by the good graces of the villagers, Alex accepted what he could and politely declined what he couldn't.

Finally, after what seemed like eternity, Alex finally reached the staircase that served as the Trial of the Hartwell Clan.

"Dim Dim, do you know what is happening?" Alex asked.

"Dim." Dim Dim shook its head.

Just like Alex, the little one was also surprised to see everyone suddenly treating the young man exceptionally well.

Even those who had initially wished to challenge him for the position of Cairo's disciple had changed their minds and were now trying to befriend him.

"You're back, Master Alex," Roselia said in a respectful tone. "The Young Master asked me to take you to see him."

"Um?" Alex tilted his head in confusion. "But I still haven't cleared the Trial of the Hartwell Clan. How can I see him?"

Alex was treating the trial as a special training course where he could farm stat points without too much effort.

There was no way he would give up such a sweet deal since all he needed to do was to take two to three steps further in order to gain some stat points.

"You're right, Master Alex." Roselia nodded. "This is why I have come to give you this bracelet. Anyone who wears it will be exempted from the trial and can have an audience with the Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan."

"No thanks," Alex replied in a heartbeat. "I'll pass."

"... Huh?" Roselia, who was about to hand over the bracelet to the young man, paused because she thought she had misheard him.

"Sir Alex, did you just say that you'll pass up the opportunity to wear this bracelet and get exempted from the trial?"

"Yep." Alex nodded. "As my master's disciple, how can I possibly cheat on something like this? I want to gain the qualifications to meet the Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan fair and square. I have no intention of taking the easy way out!"

The young man's face was filled with righteousness, but he was starting to feel anxious deep inside.

According to his estimation, he could farm thirty to fifty stat points if he cleared the trial normally, which would be a big boon to his stats.

How could he possibly give up this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

'Meet the Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan? No thanks! No one is taking away these stat points from me!'

Roselia, who had no idea that Alex only wished to farm stat points, looked at the young man with admiration.

'Instead of taking the easy way out, he chose to challenge the trial fair and square...' Roselia thought admiringly. 'It seems that I have underestimated the Young Master's disciple. Maybe I shouldn't have looked down on him when he first arrived.'

Cairo and Ramza, who also heard Alex's declaration, were moved.

"You got a good disciple," Ramza said.

Cairo only smiled at his grandfather's praise, but, deep inside, he was also touched to hear that his disciple wished to take this challenge as a man.

Unfortunately for Alex, the one who really wanted to meet him was not Cairo but Ramza himself.

"Bring him here kicking and screaming if you have to," Ramza ordered to no one in particular.

"Yes, Sir!"

Several shadows moved from the corner of the room and vanished from sight.

Just as Roselia was about to ask Alex to reconsider, she heard a voice inside her head, which made her stop whatever she was going to do next.

"I'm sorry, Sir Alex," Roselia bowed apologetically, "but the Master's words are absolute."

Alex suddenly had a bad premonition, making him take a guarded stance.

"Dim Dim!"

The young man hurriedly turned to look behind him because Dim Dim had warned him that someone was there.

The first figure he saw was someone wearing a skin-tight, black Ninja outfit. Before Alex could even do anything, the Ninja lightly touched his chin, making him feel as if he had lost control over his body.

Alex staggered as his knees gave way and fell face-first on the ground.

At least, that was what was supposed to happen.

However, instead of hitting the ground, his face hit something soft instead.

"Oh my~ I guess you're one of those aggressive types, huh?" the Ninja lady said with some amusement while patting the young man's head, which was currently planted on her chest.

"W-Why?" Alex asked.

"Why?" she giggled. "It's because the Master wishes for it, that's why. Roselia, the bracelet."

For a brief moment, the maid hesitated, but since this was the Patriarch's wish, she decided to obey.

But just as she was about to put the bracelet on the young man's wrist. Alex gritted his teeth and forced himself to say something first.

"Wait!" he shouted.

"Dim Dim!" echoed Dim Dim, who was glaring at the Ninja and the maid as well.

"I'm sorry, Sir Alex," Roselia replied. "This is the will of the Patriarch."

Two other Ninjas appeared beside Roselia, ensuring that Alex wouldn't be able to escape no matter what.

Although they thought that the cute little creature perched on Alex's head was harmless, they didn't want to take any chances.

The moment Dim Dim showed any signs of resistance, they would also neutralize it.

"Let me say something first!" Alex pleaded. "If you agree, I will comply and will no longer resist!"

He knew that he only had a small window of opportunity, so he decided to bet everything on the next words that he was about to say.

Roselia paused before glancing at the Ninja who was holding Alex.

The Ninja just shrugged to indicate that she didn't mind waiting for the young man to finish whatever he wanted to say.

"A-At least, carry me over the stairs without wearing that bracelet," Alex insisted. "I want to do it right."

The Ninjas glanced at each other and gave the young man a thumbs-up in their hearts.

"I will allow it."

A voice filled with authority descended upon the group, which made Roselia pull back her hand that was holding the bracelet.

"Well, then. Time to go, sweetheart." The Ninja lady giggled before carrying the young man like a princess.

She then sprinted up the staircase, flanked by the two Ninjas who served as escorts.

Roselia also sprinted up the stairs, following them with ease despite wearing a maid's clothes with a long skirt.

When the Ninja reached the halfway mark, she felt Alex's body getting heavier.

This meant that the trial was still active on the young man, who was being subjected to this immense pressure.

However, the Ninja only smiled faintly as if this wasn't a big deal to her.

Her speed slowed down a bit as she continued to run up the rest of the stairs, but she didn't stop running.

[Constitution +1]

[Strength +1]

[Dexterity +1]

[Agility +1]

[Intelligence +1]

[Constitution +...]

Alex looked at the blue window screen in front of him and was doing a fist pump internally.

The consecutive notification sounds inside his head were like music to his ears.

Just as he expected, he was able to gain the stat points because the effect of the trial was still active on him.

If he had worn the bracelet, he would have no longer needed to do the trial. The bonus stat points would've been gone as well.

Due to how happy he was, Alex had the strong urge to give the Ninja carrying him a kiss. This had been the fastest way he gained stat points ever since he arrived in Arcana.

When they finally reached the top of the staircase, Alex was laughing giddily inside his heart because he had managed to get thirty-five stat points in less than a minute.