

Endless Leveling Done Right!

Chapter 36 - I Decided To Make An Exception

< Congratulations! You have cleared a Hidden Quest! >

< Quest Name: Trial of the Heart >

Rewards: 200 Arcana Points, +2 Bonus to all Stats!

Note: You have now gained the recognition of the Hartwell Clan, and they will treat you as a friend from this point onwards.

After seeing the extra rewards from the Hidden Quest, Alex couldn't help but grin from ear to ear.

Sure, there were Bonus Stages in ELO where players could farm gold and experience.

But out of everything he knew, this was the only one that handed out a jaw-dropping amount of stat points, pushing his strength to a whole new level.

Alex Stratos

Age: 17

Mana: (N/A)

Job Class: (N/A)

Strength - 21

Intelligence - 17

Dexterity - 10

Agility - 40

Constitution - 38

Stamina - 38

Magic - 0

Luck - 4

Available Stat Points: 0

AP: 240

Active Skills: (N/A)

Passive Skills: Improved Stone Throw, Head Shot.

[Difficulty Level: Hell Mode]

'I'm now close to becoming a ranker,' Alex thought.

The ranking systems of humans and monsters were very different from each other.

Anyone with combined stat points under 150 was still considered an ordinary person.

Only after breaking past 151 would they be referred to as rankers.

Just like monsters, those in Rank 1 were just the tip of the iceberg.

The ranks went all the way to Rank 9, the highest rank anyone could achieve.

Anyone who went beyond this point was called a paragon.

Right now, Alex had 126 combined stat points, bringing him very close to the threshold of Rank 1.

'I'm glad I came here,' Alex thought as the Ninja carried him inside the residence.

Roselia trailed behind their guest, quiet and composed, just as a loyal maid should be.

A few minutes later, they reached a bronze door, its surface embossed with the emblem of a claw.

"Master, I am here," the Ninja said.

"Enter."

Roselia opened the door, helping the Ninja carry a weakened Alex.

Gently placing him on the couch, the Ninja tapped a few pressure points on Alex's body, allowing him to regain control of his limbs.

"Thank you," Alex said.

The Ninja nodded before melding with the shadows.

"You sure made a commotion, young man."

An amused yet firm voice reached Alex's ears.

As the young man's gaze adjusted to the darkness, he saw a middle-aged Catkin sitting on what seemed like a throne made from bronze.

Cairo stood behind his grandfather and looked at his disciple encouragingly.

"Greetings, my lord." Alex stood up, then bowed respectfully. "I hope I didn't do anything to offend you and the Hartwell Clan."

"You did offend my granddaughter, Lavinia," Ramza replied with a smile. "She is now sulking inside her room and refuses to come out to have dinner with me. She's probably in her rebellious phase, just like your master."

"Anyway, introductions are in order. My name is Ramza Hartwell, and I am the Patriarch of the Crawford Tribe. I already know your name, so you don't need to introduce yourself."

Ramza stared at the young man and his little white pet perched on top of his head. After a minute of observing their guest, he spoke in a calm and friendly manner.

"You mentioned that you don't really plan to become a Swordsman," Ramza stated. "And yet you are learning sword skills from my grandson. Don't you think that it's a waste of both of your time if you continue your master-disciple relationship?"

"I don't think it's a waste," Alex answered without hesitation. "If my enemy underestimates me and assumes I have no means to fight back, I can launch a surprise attack and tilt the battle to my favor."

"So you plan to play the pig eating the tiger, huh?" Ramza smirked. "You're such an ambitious boy."

"Any skill is worth having," Alex replied. "Because everyone in this world is given endless possibilities."

The concept of ELO was to allow players to do anything they liked.

Aside from Class Specific Skills, anyone could learn any skill as long as they were willing to put time, effort, and resources into making it happen.

Anyone in the Mage Class could become a battle mage if they learned how to wield weapons or trained in martial arts.

Swordsmen could become magic swordsmen if they absorbed enough magic crystals, which would allow them to wield magic.

Learning many Job Classes could also unlock Hidden and Prestige classes, allowing people to experiment with different builds and strategies.

That was the beauty of Endless Leveling Online.

"The reason I had my people bring you here for a discussion is because I want to offer you an opportunity," Ramza declared. "Two days from now, the Etherion Domain is going to open.

"The members of the younger generation will explore the region and look for treasures and opportunities.

"Normally, only those who belong to the Crawford Tribe are allowed to enter this domain. However, there were exceptions in the past. And just like my forefathers before me, I have decided to make an exception this time as well.

"Since you are my grandson's disciple, and you came here a few days before the Etherion Domain will open, I believe this is a fated meeting between us. Would you like to know more about the domain?"

"Yes," Alex answered immediately.

Ramza nodded. "Good. The Etherion Domain is similar to a dungeon. However, if you travel toward the east on the second floor, you will find a temple.

"This temple is like any other you'll find in the Kingdom of Avalon. It allows you to choose your Job Class, but there's a catch." Ramza smiled faintly, raising a finger.

Since the Etherion Domain was a special domain, it probably had its own secrets, which were monopolized by the Catkins.

"If you are lucky, you might be able to acquire a Hidden Class," the Patriarch continued. "There are three or four Hidden Classes in the Etherion Domain. One of these Hidden Classes is the Ninja Class.

"As you have seen for yourself, the Hartwell Clan has a few of these Ninjas who serve and protect our family from the shadows. But since you want to choose the Shielder Job Class, this means being a Ninja might not suit you."

"The three other Hidden Classes you can obtain inside the domain are Demon Slayer, Horizon Striker, and... Oathkeeper."

Alex's face became serious when he heard the Job Class Oathkeeper.

All Job Classes in ELO have three stages.

Put simply, everyone started with a basic class, like a Swordsman, before advancing to something more specialized.

Whether it was a Knight, Magic Swordsman, Gladiator, or any number of others, there were many paths to choose from.

And after taking an advanced class—say, Knight, it could be ascended even further once certain conditions were met.

Some Hidden Job Classes follow this same path of progression as well.

The Oathkeeper was one of them.

It had three stages, with Oathkeeper being its most basic form.

When Alex had just started his journey in ELO, the Oathkeeper Job Class was one of his top choices. Unfortunately, he was unable to get it.

The Shield Savant, on the other hand, was a special Hidden Class that belonged to the Legendary Category.

It was already in its most perfect form, so there had been no need for him to ascend to another class.

'There's no conflict if I get Oathkeeper before I become a Shield Savant,' Alex mused. 'In fact, it will be more beneficial this way because the Oathkeeper's abilities will stay with me even after I become a Shield Savant.'

After making up his mind, Alex looked at Ramza with determination.

"Thank you, my lord, for giving me this opportunity," Alex said. "Please allow me to participate in challenging the Etherion Domain."

Ramza nodded. "Then, I will see you in two days. Cairo, take care of your disciple."

"Yes, Grandpa," Cairo replied.

Truth be told, it was the Catkin Swordsman who had personally asked his grandfather to let Alex join the group of young Catkins entering the Etherion Domain after completing their coming-of-age ceremony.

For hundreds of years, ever since the Crawford Tribe settled at the foot of Etherion Mountain, not a single person had managed to obtain the Oathkeeper Job Class hidden within the domain.

Cairo, and perhaps even Ramza, hoped that Alex might be the exception. That he'd somehow get lucky and uncover the Job Class hidden by their ancestor, Leonard Hartwell.

Whether or not the young man would succeed, however, would depend entirely on his luck and the choices he made once inside the Etherion Domain.

Chapter 37 - Murphy's Law

When Alex had left the Town of Thaloria a few days ago, he only had one goal in mind.

Increase his Constitution as fast as possible by fighting Rank 1 Monsters and leveling up. Only when he was satisfied with his stats would he go to the temple to change his Class and become a Shielder.

Unexpectedly, the trip to the Hartwell Residence boosted his stats, swiftly surpassing his initial goal.

And the pleasant surprise didn't end there.

He was given the chance to join the Crawford Tribe Catkins—those who had just completed their coming-of-age ceremony—in challenging the Etherion Domain.

Domains were mysterious pocket dimensions that appeared without rhyme or reason. Some families had discovered these places over the years and kept them secret, passing access to them through generations to maintain their advantage.

The Hartwell Clan had been one of those families.

But unlike others, they hadn't hoarded the Etherion Domain for themselves. Instead, they had chosen to share it with the Crawford Tribe, allowing any youth from the Crawford Tribe to enter as soon as they were of age.

This decision had not only strengthened the tribe's younger generation but also cemented the Crawford Tribe's status as the overlords of Etherion Mountain.

"Master, your grandpa said the Etherion Domain is similar to a dungeon and has several floors. How deep is it exactly?"

"Ten floors," Cairo answered. "The first and second floors only have Rank 1 Monsters, so it's relatively safe for beginners like you. Also, the teenagers who will be challenging it are fifteen to sixteen years old."

Cairo smirked as he stared pointedly at Alex, as if to point out that his disciple, at seventeen, would be the oldest participant.

For the Catkins, the coming-of-age ceremony took place when they turned fifteen. By then, most had already undergone years of rigorous training to become warriors.

In the harsh environment they lived in, survival required knowing how to defend oneself, which was why training at a young age was mandatory.

Among everyone in the Crawford Tribe, members of the Hartwell Clan were the ones who went through the most intense training.

Since they were considered royalty by their people, it was their duty to ensure that they had the means to protect those who were under their wing.

"The lower you go, the stronger the monsters. At the bottom, there are Rank 5 Monsters," Cairo explained.

"So the third and fourth floors have Rank 2 Monsters," Alex inferred. "The fifth and sixth have Rank 3. Floors seven and eight are Rank 4. And finally, the ninth and tenth floors are home to Rank 5 monsters."

The young man pondered for a while and assessed the power levels of the monsters inside the Etherion Domain.

With his current stats, fighting Rank 1 Monsters posed no problem at all.

As for Rank 2 Monsters, he might be able to win against them as long as he stuck to his usual hit-and-run tactics. However, they would only be effective if his opponents were slower than him.

If he were to face a red-eyed zebra jumping spider again, it would become a battle of life and death.

Alex had no plans on risking his life at all, especially since his chances of winning against one were only ten percent—that was already a generous estimate.

As if understanding what he was thinking, Cairo smiled and said something that put his mind at ease.

"There will be Guardians standing over the entrance of the third floor," the Catkin explained. "Every year, there are many fearless and hot-blooded teenagers who feel like they can easily defeat a Rank 2 Monster just because Rank 1 Monsters don't pose a challenge to them.

"After multiple casualties because of that line of thinking, our tribe established a safety measure. Now, there are guards stationed to prevent anyone from sneaking into the third and fourth floors of the domain.

"Unless something out of the norm happens, you and the rest will just be fighting against feral dogs, horned rabbits, and wild boars."

Alex looked at his master with a conflicted expression on his face.

"Master, please don't raise flags," he finally said.

"What flags?" Cairo blinked in confusion. "I don't even have a flag."

Dim Dim giggled as it was the only one who understood what Alex was trying to say. But, since "raising a flag" was a term popular only on Earth, the people of Arcana had no idea what it signified.

"Master, there's a law called Murphy's Law," Alex explained. "This law states that anything that can possibly go wrong will go wrong. So, you shouldn't mention things that can go wrong because it MIGHT happen."

Cairo frowned, but still nodded in understanding.

"I will be more careful in the future," he promised.

There was an age-old saying among the Dragons that words contain power. Once something was said, the laws of the world could sometimes make it manifest.

As she had been standing at the corner of the room awaiting Cairo's order, Roselia also paid close attention to the conversation.

Just like the Young Master, this was the first time she had heard of the so-called Murphy's Law.

But for some reason, she didn't dismiss Alex's words as complete nonsense. She figured it wouldn't hurt to be more careful in saying things in the future.

"Master, are there any rules I need to follow when I'm inside the domain?" Alex inquired.

"Yes, there are a few rules that you need to remember," Cairo replied. "The first rule is that you can compete with everyone inside the dungeon, but you are not allowed to kill anyone."

"Breaking their bones, cutting off their limbs, blinding them, or anything that could cripple them during this expedition which may result in their death is punishable by our laws."

"How about when it's self-defense?" Alex asked. "Sometimes, it will be hard not to injure someone when they attack with the intention to hurt you."

"Self-defense is justified," Cairo answered. "The domain will automatically kick everyone out of the dungeon after ten days. After that, we will investigate whether the challengers are seriously hurt by their peers."

"We are promoting healthy competition. Eliminating rivals inside the domain doesn't count as healthy competition. There have been instances like that in the past. So, Alex, if you see someone is about to be harmed by the other Catkins, I order you as my disciple to help them."

"Yes, Master." Alex nodded. "I'll do my best. You'll help me too, right, Dim Dim?"

"Dim Dim~" The Dim Sum God nodded in affirmation.

Cairo smiled. "Good. Now, rest properly. After two days, you will follow everyone to the hidden passage that will lead you inside the Etherion Mountain. Truth be told, humans aren't supposed to be allowed to take the test, but my grandfather made an exception.

"So, don't take it to heart if some of the Catkins are hostile to you when you enter the dungeon. If they attack you, you have my permission to defend yourself and break their legs."

"Thank you, Master," Alex answered.

Ever since the increase of his stats he had been yearning to fight against a Rank 1 monster in close combat.

Back then, he had been too afraid to engage one in a direct confrontation, relying on throwing stones or using a bow and arrow to damage them.

But Alex understood that he couldn't always do that.

Now that he had become stronger, he wanted to learn how to fight properly and put the lessons that he had learned from his master to the test.

Chapter 38 - Etherion Domain [Part 1]

Two days passed in a blur, and before Alex knew it, he was already standing in front of a giant bronze gate with the same claw emblem he had seen in the residence of the Hartwell Clan.

Gathered around him were at least thirty Catkins, all of whom were fifteen or sixteen years old.

While some of them looked at Alex with a friendly gaze, there were a handful who didn't find having a human join them inside the domain very amusing.

Cairo had already warned Alex that some Catkins might show hostility to him inside the domain.

For now, they were still reining it in because the Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan was there to keep everyone in check.

But once they were inside the dungeon, there would no longer be any adults to get in their way.

This meant that they could do anything they wanted, and finally teach the human a lesson he wouldn't forget.

Surprisingly, Lavinia was also there. But unlike the rest who were looking at Alex, the young lady didn't even bother to glance in his direction.

For her, whether Alex joined the trial, or not was of no importance to her. She was more interested on how to acquire one of the Hidden Classes that could only be gained inside the Etherion Domain.

The Catkin Swordsman had only sighed and told Alex to do his best to stay away from his sister.

"These guys are giving me second-rate villain vibes," Alex whispered to the Dim Sum God, who was now perched on his shoulder.

"Dim Dim." Dim Dim nodded.

"Remember, this is an opportunity for all of you," Ramza stated. "Entry to the domain will give you an opportunity to test your skills, as well as gain treasures along the way.

"You may compete with each other, but killing and crippling your fellow competitors will not be tolerated. Anyone proven guilty will be subjected to the law, and I will make sure that you regret it for the rest of your lives."

A subtle killing intent wafted from Ramza's body, making the teenagers stiffen from where they stood.

Even those who were thinking of doing bad things to Alex inside the domain started to hesitate.

They knew the young man was the disciple of the scion of the Hartwell Clan.

Would it really be wise to offend such a character?

While they were mulling over these thoughts, Ramza waved his hand and gave an order.

"Open the gate!"

The guards standing by the gate pushed it open, revealing a portal.

"Enter one by one," Ramza said. "You will be teleported to a random spot on the first floor. All of you may go to the second floor, but the third floor is off-limits. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, My Lord!"

One by one, the teenage Catkins entered the portal.

Alex stood beside his master, intending to go last.

Ramza approved of Alex's decision because the Elders of the Crawford Tribe had also gathered for this special event.

He could tell at a glance that three of the ten Elders didn't like that a human had been given permission to enter their domain.

However, out of respect for Ramza, they reluctantly agreed to it.

When everyone else had already entered the portal, Cairo gave the young man's back a light push.

"May fortune smile upon you," Cairo said.

"Thank you, Master," Alex replied. "I'm off."

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim waved goodbye at Cairo before looking at the portal in front of them.

A moment later, both Alex and the Dim Sum God disappeared.

The bronze gate then closed, not to open again until ten days later.

Cairo looked very calm on the surface. But deep inside, he was worried about his disciple.

Fighting monsters was one thing, but fighting Catkins, who had trained in combat from a young age, would not be easy.

Ramza cast the gate one last glance before gesturing for Cairo to follow him.

Knowing that staying wouldn't do anything, the Catkin Swordsman followed his grandfather until they reached the inner keep of their residence.

This was where the treasures, as well as the most guarded secrets of the Hartwell Clan, were kept.

"You're worried about your disciple, right?" Ramza asked.

"Yes," Cairo answered.

The old Catkin no longer said anything and simply took Cairo to a room the latter had never been in before.

Once the two of them were inside, the door behind them—covered by countless layers of magic formations—locked automatically, preventing anyone from getting inside.

The two then entered another door, and behind it was a very spacious room with dozens of mirrors that glowed faintly in the darkness.

One of the mirrors was at least two meters tall. Ramza then waved his hand at it, making its surface ripple.

A moment later, the image of a young man appeared, catching Cairo by surprise.

"This..." Cairo's eyes widened in shock because he didn't expect that his grandfather could actually monitor the things that were happening inside the Etherion Domain.

"How do you think we know whether someone has broken the rule or not?" Ramza asked with a smug look on his face. "Each of these mirrors represents one of the teenagers who has entered the domain. It will record everything they did from start to end."

"Those who show promise, as well as the right mentality, will be invited to become our retainers and will be provided resources matching their abilities. Since you are worried about your disciple, you can watch him here."

"Thank you, Grandfather," Cairo said before shifting his attention to the mirror.

Alex seemed to have appeared somewhere in the forest, and he was busy surveying his surroundings.

But a moment later, the Dim Sum God on top of his head suddenly started shouting.

Soon, twelve Feral Dogs appeared behind the trees and looked at Alex as if they had just found their lunch.

Alex and the dogs stared at each other for nearly half a minute before the teenage boy ran away with all of his might.

And just like Cairo and Ramza expected, the dogs ran after the young man like a pack of wolves going for the kill.

"... It seems that he got sent to the second floor." The corner of Ramza's lips twitched after seeing the unexpected turn of events. "Have you asked someone to do a natal astrology reading for your disciple? It might be a good idea to check whether he was born under an unlucky star."

"No," Cairo replied.

"I guess it's time for you to look for a new disciple."

"..."

The two knew that Alex was in danger, but there was simply no way for them to help him.

But just as the first feral dog lunged at Alex from behind, the young man passed something over to Dim Dim, which it threw at the dog behind them.

"Ei!" Dim Dim shouted as it flung one of the brittle vials that were filled with ground red chili and black pepper.

As soon as the vial broke, the dog yelped in pain. Its eyes and nose were assaulted by the deadly combination. Cairo and Ramza were unable to decide whether they should laugh or cry at the young man's antics.

Chapter 39 - Etherion Domain [Part 2]

"Ei!"

"Ei!"

"Ei!"

"Ei!"

Dim Dim threw one brittle vial after the other with uncanny accuracy, hitting the dogs closest to them right on the face.

The residue of the exploding powders also spread in the air, affecting the other dogs chasing Alex and Dim Dim.

A minute later, the group of feral dogs was completely neutralized. All of them howled in pain, unable to see properly due to the effect of the young man's home-made concoction.

Seeing that all of the monsters were down for the count, Alex charged in with a sword.

Before the young man entered the dungeon, Cairo had given him one of the swords he had used in the past.

It had been specially enchanted, which made it lighter and sharper than the other swords Alex had ever used. Most importantly, the sword was imbued with a skill that was perfect for the young man's current situation.

"Slash!"

With one powerful strike, Alex severed a feral dog's head from its body.

A moment later, its body turned into particles of light, leaving a red crystal behind.

'Master is right,' Alex thought. 'This is just like a dungeon.'

The difference when killing monsters inside and outside the dungeon was very obvious.

When you kill normal monsters, they don't turn into particles of light. Their entire bodies would be left behind, allowing the Adventurers to dismantle their body parts and sell them to the Adventurer's Guild.

Meanwhile, the moment a dungeon monster was killed, its body would disappear and leave items behind.

The most common monster drop was a Monster Core, which was the core of their body.

Alex decided to use the Slash Skill five more times to instantly kill half of the feral dogs that had attacked him earlier.

As for the rest, he used sword strikes and sword thrusts to kill them.

The skill Slash required Stamina every time it was used.

Alex didn't want his Stamina reserves to decrease drastically when the expedition was just starting, so he resorted to normal attacks to finish the rest of the feral dogs.

Once all the dogs were dead, a familiar notification sound resounded inside the young man's head.

[Level Up!]

Alex was naturally happy about it, but he remained alert and watchful of his surroundings.

His stance remained ready to strike, and he did not even pick up the monster drops on the ground. He only lowered his guard when Dim Dim confirmed that there were no monsters nearby.

"That surprised me," Alex muttered before wiping his head with the back of his hand.
"Good thing I stocked up on my secret weapon before coming here."

The young man then picked up the red monster cores that were the size of his pinky finger on the ground.

He examined one of them because this was the first time he had seen a monster core in real life.

"It's harder than I thought," Alex mused before storing the red gem inside his storage ring.

He then glanced at the sword in his hand and smiled due to how amazing it was.

< Agile Edge >

Item Grade: Rare

Stats: +40 Attack

Active Skills: Slash

Passive Skills: Lesser Weight Reduction

< Slash >

Stamina Cost: 5

- The foundation of all swordplay—a strike that has ended countless battles.
- Multiplies your Sword Damage by two.

< Weight Reduction >

- The weight of the blade is reduced by a third, making your sword swings swifter and more precise.

'I got carried away,' Alex thought as he took a bite of one of Dim Dim's roasted pork buns to increase his stamina regeneration. 'I should use my stamina more effectively in the future.'

Using Slash had allowed him to instantly kill a feral dog. However, after he regained his calm, he realized that two sword strikes would have also been enough to kill one.

Conserving stamina was very important. The lower his stamina, the slower his speed and power—it affected not just his running but also the execution of his skills.

Also, the more stamina he had, the more physical skills he could use.

This was very different from magical skills, which consume Mana.

For Warrior Classes, stamina was comparable to mana.

After feeling that his stamina was starting to recover, Alex asked Dim Dim to climb up a tree and look for a place with water.

The Dim Sum God readily complied. A few minutes later, it returned and pointed in a direction.

"Dim!" Dim Dim said with confidence.

Alex nodded. "Okay, we will go that way."

Everyone who entered the Etherion Domain was given only one waterskin and one small pouch of beef jerky.

This domain, teeming with monsters, was perfect for teaching the members of the Crawford Tribe how to survive in the wild.

But, since it was a dungeon, there were treasure chests scattered around, giving the Catkins the opportunity to get something useful.

Alex checked his map and, to his surprise, he realized that he was actually on the second floor of the domain.

'I thought everyone would be sent to the first floor. Don't we have to manually get to the second floor to look for the temple?' he thought. 'Then, when we find it, we get to choose our first Professions, allowing us to use Class-exclusive skills from their branches.'

Of course, the young man thought that being sent to the second floor instead of the first floor was just a coincidence.

But when he remembered his default difficulty setting, he was starting to feel that he had been sent to the second floor on purpose.

'I just hope I don't meet with those troublesome kids and Lavinia,' Alex wished as he walked in the direction Dim Dim pointed at.

From time to time, Dim Dim would ask him to change direction because there were wild monsters in front of them.

For the time being, Alex decided not to engage with any monsters until he arrived at the river that Dim Dim had seen from the top of the tree.

"Not bad." Alex placed his hands on his waist as he looked at the river in front of him.

According to his estimation, the river was at least ten meters wide. The water was also crystal clear, allowing the young man to clearly see fish swimming around.

Not to mention, the flow of the river also wasn't strong, making it suitable for a swim.

"Dim Dim, are there water monsters in this river?" Alex asked.

"Dim." Dim Dim shook his head.

The young man nodded and looked around his surroundings.

Since he was going to stay inside the domain for ten days, he would need to find a safe place to sleep for the night.

'Maybe I should look for the temple's whereabouts,' Alex thought. 'That should be a safe place, right?'

While the young man was thinking about these things, a monster that shouldn't have appeared on the second floor of the domain broke out of a cocoon.

If Alex had seen this creature, he would have definitely started to panic because he had faced it in the past, and it had almost cost him his life.

It was none other than a red-eyed zebra jumping spider.

But there was one clear difference between this spider and the one Alex had fought in the past.

Instead of white and blue stripes covering its body, this jumping spider had red and black.

This monster was a mutant, more or less equivalent to a Rank 2 Boss Monster in terms of strength.

What made it truly dangerous was its ability to roam instead of staying in one place, hunting anything that caught its attention.

< Red-Striped Zebra Jumping Spider >

Monster Rank: Rank 2 Field Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Mutant

Health: 1,200/ 1,200

Attack: 70 - 150

Note: The unnatural mutation of this spider gives it both heightened agility and a deadly venom, making it a very formidable hunter.

Everyone was still unaware that such a dangerous monster had suddenly appeared on the second floor of the Etherion domain.

But just as the saying goes, ignorance was bliss.

Because the moment they got wind of its existence, all the confidence that the young Catkins had when they entered the dungeon would disappear like the fleeting clouds in the sky.

Chapter 40 - Etherion Domain [Part 3]

First Floor of the Etherion Domain...

The interior of dungeons normally didn't change, allowing Adventurers to properly map them.

But some dungeons were special and exempted from this standard. Alex was very familiar with one of them in the games—the Dungeon of Beginnings, which changed the layout of its interior every twenty-four hours.

This made mapping impossible.

In other words, those who wished to challenge it would have to rely on luck, instinct, and experience to find its exit.

The first floor of the Etherion Domain had a similar setup, making it the ideal training ground for Catkins who had just gone through their coming-of-age ceremony.

But Alex had skipped this stage and had been sent directly to the second floor after entering the domain.

While it may seem that he gained an advantage at the start, this wasn't entirely true.

After all, there was now a prowling Rank 2 Mutant Boss Monster on the second floor, raising the difficulty of the ten-day survival trial inside the domain.

'I didn't think finding the path to the second floor would be this difficult,' Lavinia thought as she walked north.

Suddenly, three feral dogs appeared and lunged at her with the intention to kill.

The young lady didn't panic and simply flicked her sword whip, slicing the three dogs in half.

They then turned into particles of light, leaving behind their monster cores.

Lavinia didn't even bother to pick up the fallen cores and simply continued to walk northwards.

Such low-level cores didn't interest her.

If Alex had been there, he would have nagged the young lady for wasting resources!

Unfortunately, Lavinia was one of those people who had been born with a golden spoon.

Her family was wealthy, and she didn't have to worry about how to find her next meal. She had also been raised in a safe environment and trained by the best teacher money could hire.

Simply put, she was a winner in life.

Even fighting Rank 2 Monsters one-on-one didn't pose a challenge to her, let alone threaten her.

The jumping spider that had almost killed Alex back then was something that Lavinia could kill in less than a minute.

But she would struggle if she faced three to five of them at once.

Even she would not be able to easily survive such an encounter.

The other Catkins that had entered the Domain also had similar skill levels.

Rank 1 Monsters didn't pose any threats to them unless an entire group attacked them.

A few minutes later, the young lady frowned and stopped walking.

"How long do you all plan to follow me?" Lavinia asked, glancing behind her.

There were four Catkins behind her, who all bowed the moment she looked in their direction.

"As we stumbled upon the young lady out of great fortune, we decided to ensure that you will safely reach the second floor," the most handsome of the group of Catkins replied. "No doubt that you are strong, my lady, but overconfidence is a slow and insidious killer."

The frown on Lavinia's face deepened after hearing the young man's words.

"While you speak true, do not forget that this is a trial meant to test everyone's abilities," Lavinia retorted. "Those who don't perform well will not get the chance to get the Hidden Classes available in this domain. Are all of you fine with mediocrity?"

The other Catkins suddenly felt anxious after hearing her words, but their leader merely smiled and gave his own reply.

"Worry not, my lady," the handsome Catkin said. "We are simply here to ensure that you will reach the second floor safely. When you are safely on the second floor, we will part ways.

"Besides, I believe that the Ninja Job Class can be unlocked by meeting certain conditions. And one of those conditions is to serve a lord, which the four of us can meet if we ensure your safety."

Lavinia didn't have any rebuttal to the young man's reply because it made sense.

Those who acquired the Ninja Job Class would be invited to become a retainer of the Hartwell Clan and entrusted with missions.

According to her grandfather, a person could gain this Hidden Profession if they truly wished to serve one master, similar to how someone could obtain the Knight Job Class by pledging fealty to the lord that they wanted to serve.

Ninja, Demon Slayer, Horizon Striker, and Oathkeeper.

Those were the four Hidden Professions that could be acquired inside the Etherion Domain.

Three of these Job Classes had been regularly unlocked, and only the Oathkeeper remained a mystery.

No one knew what kind of requirements were needed to unlock this Job Class, which had belonged to the founder of the Crawford Tribe.

There were even rumors that anyone who could acquire this profession would be highly regarded by the Hartwell Clan.

In the end, Lavinia no longer said anything and continued her journey.

The four Atkins also followed behind her, but they made sure to keep their distance. The last thing they wanted to do was annoy the Second Princess of the Hartwell Clan, whom the Patriarch treated like a priceless treasure.

Cairo and Ramza, who were also paying close attention to Lavinia, glanced at each other and smiled.

"She had learned to control her temper during the time that I was away in the village," Cairo remarked.

Ramza nodded. "Indeed. I raised her properly."

The smile on Cairo's face twitched after hearing his grandfather's shameless reply.

But he was also happy because even though his sister could be arrogant at times, she had a good head on her shoulders.

She would listen to reason and wouldn't use her background to throw her weight around like the spoiled noble scions in the capital city of Harmonia.

"Still, your disciple sure is interesting," Ramza commented as he looked at the mirror that displayed what was happening to Alex. "He fights like a Barbarian. Didn't you teach him how to fight using a sword?"

"I did," Cairo replied. "He is using the stances properly. However, he seems to subconsciously want to use his shield as well when fighting."

The young man was currently wielding his sword and shield while fighting against two feral dogs.

He would slash with his sword whenever they came too near and raise his shield to bash their heads if they lunged in his direction.

Although his fighting style wasn't as smooth and deadly as Cairo's sister, the brutality Alex showed made Ramza think of him as a Barbarian.

The old Patriarch winced when he heard the dull clang of a shield hitting the jaw of one of the feral dogs.

A few seconds later, the two feral dogs turned into particles of light while Alex panting for breath.

"Did you see that, Dim Dim?" Alex said after he regained his composure. "Fighting two Rank 1 Monsters is doable now!"

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim praised the young man because he had improved a lot since arriving in the world of Arcana.

Back then, Alex would use hit-and-run tactics by throwing stones and brittle vials at the enemies before moving in for the kill.

Now, he simply fought them without backing down, using everything Cairo had taught him.

"Well, then. Let's go find that temple before the sun sets," Alex proposed. "Can you help me find it, Dim Dim?"

"Dim Dim~" Dim Dim nodded before climbing the tallest tree, allowing it to get the best possible view of the surroundings.

The Dim Sum God made sure to lead Alex in battles against one or two opponents at the same time.

Dim Dim knew that Alex was still getting used to fighting in close combat, so it didn't plan on overwhelming him by making him fight a group of enemies at once.

After looking at its surroundings, Dim Dim caught a vile scent in the wind.

Its senses were telling it that there was something dangerous at the north side of the second floor of the domain.

Unfortunately, the temple the young man was looking for was also in the north, which would put him and the rest of the Catkins in harm's way.