

Endless 101

Chapter 101: The Young Miss Has Traveled Far To Give You A Gift

“Young Miss, you seem to be in high spirits today,” Roselia lightly said with a smile. “Are you perhaps looking forward to meeting Sir Alex?”

“What are you talking about?” Lavinia frowned. “I’m simply delivering Everguard and meeting my brother.”

“I see.” Roselia nodded in understanding. “I apologize for the misunderstanding.”

She said nothing about the young lady’s bright eyes as the latter gazed at the distant Briar Mountain with a faint smile playing on her lips, obviously looking forward to seeing someone.

Two days ago, they had left their tribe and traveled to the City of Harmonia, where they had picked up Everguard. They had rested in the capital city for the night, planning to deliver the shield to Alex the next day. And today, they had boarded the airship that would pass over Briarwood Village.

A few minutes after their small conversation, the airship started its descent a kilometer away from the small village.

Just like what Alex and Cairo had done, the pair walked the rest of the way, attracting the attention of the villagers who were working on their fields.

“According to the Young Master, they’re currently staying at the village’s only inn,” Roselia stated. “We should head there first, My Lady.”

“Very well,” Lavinia replied.

Her walking speed increased a bit, and Roselia noticed that there seemed to be some kind of spring to her step.

Clearly, she was excited to meet someone as fast as possible. The maid didn't need to ask to know who that someone was.

When they arrived at the village plaza, the sound of children laughing reached their ears.

There, they saw a familiar little white bun, chasing children as they played a game of tag.

"Dim Dim!" Lavinia called out, making the Dim Sum God look in her direction.

"Dim!" Dim Dim waved its hand and headed in her direction to greet her.

The young lady then picked Dim Dim up from the ground and asked a question, "Where is Ale— I mean, where is my brother?"

Since Cairo was always with Alex, she believed the young man would be wherever her brother was.

"Dim Dim~" The Dim Sum God pointed at the inn.

"Thank you, Dim Dim," Lavinia replied. "I will go look for him now. Do you want to continue playing with your friends?"

"Dim!" Dim Dim nodded before jumping off the young lady's hands and running after the children, who were patiently waiting for it to finish talking to the beautiful Catkin.

Lavinia couldn't help but smile. Alex's little friend seemed to be very popular with the kids. That made her feel happy for some reason.

The two entered the inn and, fortunately, found Cairo on the first floor eating lunch, saving them the trouble of asking for his room.

"Brother!" Lavinia called out as soon as she saw him.

“Lavinia?” Cairo looked pleasantly surprised at the sight of his sister. “What are you doing here with Roselia?”

“I greet the Young Master.” Roselia bowed respectfully. “The Young Miss has personally come to deliver Everguard back to Sir Alex.”

Quick on the uptake, Cairo grinned. He already had an idea of who sent Lavinia to carry out this mission.

“Did Grandpa ask you to come?” he inquired.

“Yes, Brother,” Lavinia replied. “Grandpa said that someone from the Hartwell Family must personally deliver Everguard to Alex as a demonstration of our sincerity and friendship.”

“Sure...” Cairo smirked, knowing what exactly his grandfather was thinking. “But if you’re looking for Alex, he’s not here at the moment.”

A look of disappointment briefly flashed across Lavinia’s face.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“He’s currently training someone,” Cairo replied. “Let me finish my lunch first, and I’ll take you to him.”

Lavinia nodded and took the seat across from her brother before she began asking about everything that had happened since they last saw each other.

Cairo, who liked to share his stories with his sister, eagerly talked about the battle in the Town of Thaloria and the things that they had done in Briarwood Village.

After listening to the story from start to end, Lavinia suddenly thought of an idea.

“Brother, I’ll take the Trial of Frieden Academy as well,” she declared.

“Huh?” Cairo looked at his sister in surprise. “I thought Grandpa already handled your enrollment?”

“Even if he did, there’s no rule saying I can’t take the trial,” Lavinia argued.

“Well, you’re not wrong, but...” Cairo was about to say something more when he caught sight of Roselia’s expression. Standing behind Lavinia, the maid was subtly signaling him to just go along with the young lady’s plan.

However, instead of agreeing, Cairo firmly shook his head and said no. This surprised even Roselia, who had thought the Swordsman would agree.

“Why?” Lavinia frowned. “Are you saying I can’t take the trial because Grandpa already made arrangements? Or are you saying no because you think that I cannot clear the trial?”

“It’s not about that,” Cairo answered evenly. “This year’s trial is a bit different from past years’. It’s more dangerous. I’ll explain it to you later. Let’s find Alex first.”

Lavinia was about to complain and insist on taking the trial. However, when she heard that her brother was about to take her to see Alex, she quietened down and decided to keep her complaints for later!

After leaving the inn, the three Catkins traveled to the outskirts of the village where Charles lived.

When they neared the teenage boy’s house, they heard the sound of weapons clashing. Lavinia’s ears perked up when she detected the voices of two people talking over the ruckus.

“Using Shield Bash should be illegal!”

“Nonsense. Will your enemy listen when you tell them they can’t block or dodge your sword strike?”

Cairo, Lavinia, and Roselia looked at the two humans sparring with real weapons.

After observing for a few seconds, it was quite obvious who one was stronger. It was none other than the young man with short silver hair and blue eyes.

Alex was a Rank 2 Oathkeeper, while Charles had just become Ranker. He had also yet to change his Job Class.

The Oathkeeper had the advantage in both strength, speed, and power, allowing him to parry, block, and deflect Charles' attacks before bashing him with his shield.

"Ugh..." The teen boy groaned in pain as he staggered a few steps back after getting hit by a Shield Bash on his chest.

Alex didn't follow up with another attack, having sensed that some people had come to watch them.

When he saw Cairo, Lavinia, and Roselia watching them from a distance, the young man smiled and waved in their direction.

If not for the fact that her brother and her handmaiden were with her, Lavinia might have waved back. However, as she had a reputation to maintain, she simply nodded to acknowledge Alex's greeting while sporting a calm expression.

Charles also noticed the newcomers, so he sheathed his sword, understanding that his sparring session with Alex was now over.

"It's been a while, Lavinia and Roselia," Alex said as he walked towards the Catkins. "I hope both of you have been well."

Seeing that Lavinia didn't plan to answer, Roselia bowed and gave her reply.

"We have been well, Sir Alex," the maid said. "The young miss has traveled far to give you a gift."

“A gift?” Alex blinked once, then twice, before looking at the beautiful young lady who was considered the princess of the Clawford Tribe.

“Yes, a gift,” Lavinia replied as she summoned a round shield from her storage ring. Alex’s eyes widened in surprise. “I have come to personally hand Everguard to our Oathkeeper.”

The round shield had been reforged and looked grander than before.

Clearly, the blacksmith responsible had added his own personal touch, making the shield look like it could belong to a member of the royal family.

Seeing how surprised and happy Alex looked, Lavinia felt that the time she had spent traveling was all worth it.

Cairo and Roselia shared a knowing glance with each other.

Although Lavinia tried her best to hide it, she failed to notice and hold back the sweet and happy smile adorning her face as the Oathkeeper held the round shield with both hands and admired it with genuine satisfaction in his eyes.

Chapter 102: Lavinia’s Trump Card

Alex looked at Everguard with great satisfaction. Not only did the shield get a new look, but it was also much sturdier than before.

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< Everguard >

“You hold it not because you are unafraid, but because someone has to be brave.”

Item Grade: Super Rare

Type: Shield

Stats: Defense +74

Active Skills: Taunt [EX], Shield Boomerang,

Passive Skills: Guardian's Core, Last Bastion, Guts, Charm Immunity, Petrification Immunity, Aegis Riposte.

< Shield Boomerang >

Stamina Cost: 10

Range: 100 meters.

— Spinning with the force of an unbroken Oath, the shield returns to its master after completing its mission.

— Deals damage equivalent to the Oathkeeper's Constitution and Strength Stat Parameters.

< Guardian's Core >

— Everguard draws strength directly from Alex's lifeforce, setting its defense equal to his Constitution.

< Aegis Riposte >

— Upon blocking a melee attack, Everguard reflects a small portion of the damage back at the attacker.

— Reflects 5% melee damage for each successful block.

— When the Oathkeeper enters a seriously injured state, Aegis Riposte will get an upgrade, and reflect 50% melee damage for each successful block.

Note: It is more than a shield. It is the promise that the new Oathkeeper has made, and the weight he will bear until the end.

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'I do need ranged attacks. This Shield Boomerang is a good addition,' Alex thought. 'Guardian's Core is also very interesting—the higher my constitution stat, the higher my defense.'

Knockback Immunity was gone now, but Alex didn't mind it too much. It was not a bad thing at all. Besides, he would just have to be strong enough to endure each blow and firmly plant both feet on the ground.

Last but not least, Alex examined the skill Aegis Riposte, which reflected a portion of an attacker's melee damage after a successful block.

Although it only returned 5% damage when Alex was uninjured, it was still a practical skill.

He only had to block and the enemy would suffer damage. He could already tell how annoyed his enemies would be whenever their attacks were reflected back at them.

'This skill is broken,' Alex thought. 'Sure, five percent might seem little, but if someone tries to deal a killing blow on me, they will be in a world of pain once I block their attack.'

The young man chuckled evilly, already itching to test his new shield. However, he fought the urge to head to the Dungeon of Beginnings immediately and thanked Lavinia for bringing the shield to him.

"Thank you, Lavinia," Alex said. "With Everguard, I feel like I've become twice as strong."

"I'm glad you like it," she replied.

As there was only a week left before the Trial of Frieden Academy started, she had made sure to get the shield to Alex as quickly as possible.

"By the way, I also plan to take the trial inside the Dungeon of Beginnings," Lavinia stated.

Since her brother had said no earlier, she decided to tell Alex about it, hoping the latter would support her decision.

Unexpectedly, Alex reacted the same way as her brother.

"You shouldn't." The young man shook his head. "If you plan to enroll in the academy, you should just pay the tuition fee instead. I'm sure the Hartwell Clan has enough funds for that."

Lavinia immediately pouted. She had initially thought the young man would be on her side. Worse, Alex hadn't even hesitated before telling her to take the easy way out.

"You're going, aren't you? So why can't I?" Lavinia pressed, doing her best to keep her voice as calm as possible. "I'm stronger than you."

Alex glanced at his master, as if asking whether he should tell the young lady about the real reason why they didn't want her to take the trial.

After pondering for a few seconds, Cairo nodded, signaling Alex to tell Lavinia the truth.

The last thing he wanted to happen was to sour Lavinia's relationship with him and Alex because of a misunderstanding.

"Okay, please listen to me carefully," Alex said. "I'll tell you why you can't come with us. But before that, let me introduce you to our new friend, Charles."

“Charles, this is Lavinia. She’s my master’s little sister. Lavinia, this is Charles. He’s also a trial taker and will be taking the Trial of Frieden Academy with us in the dungeon.”

After the two greeted each other, Lavinia shifted her gaze to Alex with her arms crossed over her chest. Clearly, she wanted to hear a proper explanation for why she couldn’t join them in the Dungeon of Beginnings.

As Alex started explaining, Roselia gradually switched sides. The maid also felt that her young mistress shouldn’t enter the dungeon, for it would be too dangerous for her.

Lavinia now understood that Alex was concerned for her safety, but she couldn’t help but feel conflicted.

“You’re still going even though it’s very dangerous?” she asked.

“Yes,” Alex replied. “Charles is my friend, so I want to help him too.”

Charles looked at the young man gratefully, not expecting that Alex would volunteer to help him clear the Dungeon of Beginnings.

The three of them had already witnessed the effect of Charles’ skill, Challenger’s Mark, during their expedition into the Hidden Dungeon in Briar Mountain.

It had only been a small dungeon, yet it had made Charles keenly aware of how challenging the Trial of Frieden Academy would be.

Alex had already spoken to Charles, expressing his and Cairo’s desire to help the teen find the exit leading to the City of Harmonia. The young man had even added that they would wait until all the trial takers had cleared the trial before they entered the dungeon to ensure that no one else would be involved in the impending calamity that might befall them.

Just as Alex thought that he had convinced Lavinia about the dangers of the trial, the beautiful Catkin held his gaze with a determined look in her eyes.

"I still want to go," Lavinia insisted.

"You can't." Alex shook his head. "How can I face your grandfather and brother if anything happens to you?"

"Are you worried about me, Alex?"

"Of course, I am. How can I not worry? That's a dungeon outbreak, you know?"

Lavinia smiled, satisfied after hearing what she wanted to hear.

However, that hadn't made her any less strong-willed. She was still going to speak her mind without holding back.

"I think you're misunderstanding something, Alex," the Catkin replied. "I want to come along to increase your chances of survival. With me there, any unexpected variables along the way can be dealt with faster.

"I am faster and stronger than you. Besides, if I'm going, Roselia has to join us as well." The young lady then looked at her handmaiden with a confident smile.

But seeing Alex about to try to convince her again, she decided to use her trump card.

"Did you know?" Lavinia smirked. "Roselia is a Rank 4 Horizon Striker. Since she is duty-bound to protect me, you don't have to worry about my safety. Isn't that right, Roselia?"

"Yes," the handmaiden replied. "I will do my best to protect you, My Lady, even at the cost of my life."

Dumbfounded, Alex looked at the maid who had given him food during his stay in the Hartwell Residence.

He didn't expect that the mild and mannered Roselia was actually a Rank 4 Horizon Striker.

What did this mean?

It meant that the lovely maid was stronger than his master!

"Well, if you insist, then I guess you can go," Alex replied. "However, you will follow my orders. If you can't do that, I will not allow you to come with us even if Roselia is a Rank 4 Horizon Striker."

"Okay." Lavinia nodded. "I will listen to you."

The young lady's face brightened now that she was finally allowed to join their dungeon expedition.

She had trained hard after separating from Alex, and she wanted to show him just how much she had improved during the time that they hadn't seen each other.

Meanwhile, Cairo could only sigh internally. There was nothing he could do when his sister had her mind set on something.

'Maybe this is for the best,' Cairo thought. 'A strong sword can only be sharpened through the baptism of fire. If Lavinia experiences a dungeon outbreak now, she will gain valuable experience that can lead to her growth.'

Since the Hartwell Clan had been the pillars of the Clawford Tribe, all of its members should be able to overcome trials to become stronger.

While he was still a little worried about his sister, Cairo decided to have a private talk with Roselia later to ensure that she would prioritize Lavinia's safety and take her away by force if needed.

Chapter 103: The Day Of The Trial

It was finally the day of the Trial of Frieden Academy.

The representative from Frieden Academy, accompanied by six youths, listed the names of the challengers who wanted to undergo the trial.

“This year, each candidate is allowed to bring a maximum of two companions.

“It used to be four, but after a dramatic increase in candidate deaths due to rogue companions, we have decided to change the rules. In addition, every companion must wear this bracelet. Tamper with the bracelet or break any other rule, and the academy’s Seekers will personally punish you.

“So, don’t think about breaking this rule. Or else...”

The professor and the six third-year students would stand guard by the dungeon entrance and ensure that the rules were followed.

“Usually, only one or two people will take the trial from this village,” Professor Elias stated while looking at Alex, Charles, and Lavinia. “But it seems that three people are going this year.”

The professor then shifted his attention to Cairo and Roselia, who were going to accompany Alex and Lavinia respectively.

Since candidates teaming up inside the dungeon wasn’t an issue, they could take Charles with them without problems.

For the academy, the Trial of Beginnings wasn’t really a big deal.

It was more like a formality since the true trial would start in the academy.

That trial had a very high failure rate.

In fact, only one out of every five hundred people passed every year.

There were even years when no one passed the trial at all, leaving many ordinary folks disillusioned about ever making it into the academy.

“The trial doesn’t have any deadline... is what I’d like to say, but it actually does,” Professor Elias explained. “The second trial will start in Frieden Academy after five days. So, you need to get into the academy before then.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll finish the trial in a few hours. If not, and you get lost, it might take days. But don’t worry. We’ll head in after five days to rescue any straggler stuck inside.”

Professor Elias then glanced at Cairo and Roselia before nodding his head in satisfaction.

He could tell that the two of them were strong, so he deemed that the three candidates they were accompanying would likely clear the trial without much difficulty.

“Just remember this: killing a candidate inside the dungeon will automatically disqualify you from the trial,” Professor Elias declared. “Not only that, but you will also be banned from entering the academy for life. So complete this trial fairly and don’t be stupid!”

Alex, Lavinia, and Charles nodded.

They had no intention of killing people inside the dungeon, so this wouldn’t be an issue for them.

“You and your escorts need to wear these bracelets,” the professor went on. “It’s the rule of this year’s trial.”

He then watched as Alex, Lavinia, Charles, Cairo, and Roselia wore the bracelets on their wrists.

“Dim Dim?” Dim Dim pointed at itself, asking the professor to give it a bracelet as well.

"Familiars don't need bracelets," Professor Elias said in amusement. "Sorry, little one."

Dim Dim looked very disappointed and looked at him with puppy-like eyes.

"... Even if you look at me like that." Professor Elias scratched his head. For some reason, he felt like he shouldn't make the little one cry.

The middle-aged man would normally ignore something like this, but since he had many bracelets in his possession, he gave in and passed one to the Dim Sum God.

Since Dim Dim's hands weren't big enough for the bracelet to fit, the Professor simply placed the item on top of the white bun's head like a crown. Dim Dim smiled happily.

"Anyway, the trial will start in an hour," Professor Elias said after looking at his pocket watch. "You are free to enter the dungeon then."

Just as Alex was about to brief everyone on his plan one more time, he noticed two familiar people running in their direction.

"Alex!" Efa shouted while waving her hand.

Running behind her was Elaine, who had traveled alongside Efa, to Briarwood Village via airship.

They had just arrived, and both were feeling anxious because they thought that they had already missed Alex and Cairo.

"Sorry, we're late!" Efa said as she hugged Alex tightly. "The airship had some problems, so the flight was delayed."

Lavinia, who saw that Alex was being hugged by the pretty and petite lady, tugged on her brother's clothes.

“Who is she?” she asked.

“They are Alex’s friends from the Town of Thaloria,” Cairo replied. “The girl hugging Alex is Efa. She is a Scout. That Swordswoman over there with the long red hair is Elaine. They have a good relationship with Alex.”

“Why are they here?” Lavinia inquired.

“If I remember correctly, they told Alex that they would help him clear the trial as a way to repay their debt,” Cairo explained. “He saved them from Goblins in the past, and the two of them are indebted to him.”

“Are they just his friends?” Lavinia eyed the ladies, who were now both hugging Alex from the front and the back.

Seeing Alex’s reaction, he seemed genuinely happy to see Efa and Elaine in Briarwood Village.

“They are just his friends,” Cairo replied, knowing what his sister was thinking. “At least for now.”

Lavinia nodded. She could see that Alex was at ease when interacting with the two girls. From that alone, she could tell that they were very close to him.

The young lady had been taught about the arts of espionage at a young age, so her observation skills were better than most.

Coupled with her innate superhuman senses as a Catkin, her observational skills were enhanced by a notch, allowing her to read the body language of people and know when they were lying or not.

The two girls were a bit touchy, but she could tell they were just teasing Alex to see his reaction.

“Since the two of you are here, that means that both of you are now Rank 3, right?” Alex asked.

“Yes,” Efa replied with a smug smile on her face. “We are now stronger than before. In fact, when we went to the temple, we found some interesting Job Classes we didn’t expect would open for us. Elaine and I chose the best. Just wait. We’ll show you how strong we’ve become.”

Elaine nodded with a confident smile on her face. “Don’t worry. We’ll make sure you pass this trial easily.”

Professor Elias approached Alex and asked if the two of them were his hired help for the trial.

“The two of them will be guarding him, not me,” Alex pointed at Charles, catching the latter by surprise.

“Me?” Charles pointed at himself.

“Yes, you.” Efa, who was quick to befriend people, approached Charles and shook his hand. “My name is Efa. I am a Rank 3 Shadow Scout. Pleased to make your acquaintance!”

“My name is Elaine, Rank 3 Flame Swordsman,” Elaine introduced herself.

“I-I am Charles,” the teen boy replied. “Rank 1 Jobless.”

The teenage boy then glanced at Alex, using eye contact to ask him to explain the situation.

“Efa and Elaine are my friends from the Town of Thaloria,” Alex said. “They wanted to help me in the trial, but since each candidate can only bring two companions with them, it is best if they accompany you instead.”

“You already know this, but we will need all the help we can get, right? So just let them protect you this one time.”

Charles had a conflicted look on his face because he knew how dangerous this dungeon run was going to be.

For ordinary people, it might only be a walk in the park.

But for Charles, it would be a life-and-death situation.

He didn't want to involve others in this dangerous situation as much as possible. Because if anything happened to them inside the dungeon, he might not be able to handle the guilt.

"Trust them," Alex said firmly. "Don't worry. As long as you follow the plan, we will not fail this mission."

Charles took a deep breath before looking at Efa and Elaine with gratitude.

"Thank you for coming," Charles said. "Please take care of me inside the dungeon."

"Of course," Efa replied and patted the teenage boy's shoulder. "I didn't know that Alex's friend is also a good-looking guy. I like good-looking people, so I'll make sure to protect you."

"T-Thank you?"

"You're welcome."

"Um, the two of you should wear these bracelets first," Professor Elias interrupted. "This is part of the protocol for this year's test."

After giving the bracelets to Efa and Elaine, the professor once again explained the rules of the trial.

An hour later, the Trial of Frieden Academy officially started.

And with it, Alex and the others finally executed their plan.

Chapter 104: Just What Are They Thinking?

"Sir, they're eating."

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir. They’re currently eating lunch in the inn.”

Professor Elias blinked once, then twice, before turning to the third-year student, who had been assigned to guard the dungeon entrance against unauthorized entry with him.

“Let me get this straight,” Professor Elias said. “The trial already started two and a half hours ago, yet they decided to have lunch instead of going inside the dungeon?”

“Yes, professor,” the student replied.

“Does that make any sense to you?”

“No, sir. I also don’t know why they’re doing this.”

Nearly three hours ago, after Professor Elias had declared the beginning of the trial, Alex had proposed that their team execute their plan. Everyone had then agreed and followed the silver-haired young man back to the inn, piquing Professor Elias’ curiosity.

At that time, the professor had thought that they simply wanted to hold a brief last-minute strategy meeting before attempting to clear the trial. And as per his duty, he had stayed by the dungeon’s entrance, serving as gatekeeper.

Later, he realized he had been waiting for two hours, and he had yet to see even the hair of the candidates supposed to enter the dungeon.

Worried that something might have happened to them, he sent one of his students to the village’s only inn to check if the candidates had encountered some sort of problem.

To the student's surprise, the challengers were happily munching on their food without a care in the world. After collecting himself, the student left to report the absurd scene to Professor Elias, who was also justifiably caught by surprise.

"... Well, I guess they just decided to eat first before taking the trial," Professor Elias said. "Let them be."

"Yes, Professor." The third-year nodded.

But three more hours passed, and Professor Eliad had still yet to see their shadow. Out of patience, he sent another student to check on the group of candidates.

When the student returned, he reported the candidates were now sparring with their hired escorts.

"Maybe they're doing some last-minute training, sir?" The third-year smiled. "Or maybe they are just warming up before they enter the dungeon."

"You might be right." Professor Elias nodded. "When I was their age, I was also very diligent with my training. I guess they will come after they're done warming up."

Another three hours later...

The sky had already turned into deep shades of orange and purple as the sun slowly set over the horizon.

Night was coming, and the candidates were still nowhere in sight!

Professor Elias sighed before shaking his head helplessly.

"Kids these days really waste a lot of their time," Professor Elias muttered. "The three of you guard the entrance. After five hours, the three of you will swap with them. Do I make myself clear?"

""Yes, professor!""

The professor then headed to the inn.

When he entered, he saw Alex and his group having a lively conversation as they ate their dinner.

Professor Elias snorted and asked the innkeeper to bring his dinner to his room.

He didn't even give Alex's group a second glance and retired for the night.

The next day...

"Professor, are they still not coming?" one of the third-years asked. "It's already noon."

"Maybe they chickened out?" another third-year suggested. "I mean, maybe we overestimated them too much."

Professor Elias didn't comment and simply sat in the shade, fanning himself.

When he had first seen Cairo, Roselia, Efa, and Elaine, he had quickly assessed their strengths and confirmed they were at least decent fighters. As such, there was no reason for Alex's group to worry about the monsters on the first floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

Sure, the monsters might be more numerous compared to other dungeons in the kingdom, but they were still just Rank 1 Monsters.

They didn't pose a threat to Alex's group, which had at least four Rank 3 fighters accompanying them.

'Strange...' Professor Elias thought. 'Just what are they thinking?'

A few hours later, the sun had set once more, and the professor returned to the inn to rest.

Alex's group was having dinner again, but this time, he wasn't able to endure his curiosity and approached them.

"Have you all changed your minds?" Professor Elias asked. "Are you no longer interested in taking the trial?"

"We're still going to take the trial, professor," Alex replied.

"Then why won't you enter the dungeon?" Professor Elias asked in confusion.

"Because it's still not the right time to do that, professor," Alex answered.

"Not the right time?" Professor Elias sneered. "Are you playing some kind of handicap game? Have you forgotten that you need to get into the academy before the second trial begins? Instead of wasting time here, all of you should just enter the dungeon and get it over and done with!"

Alex smiled apologetically to the professor, knowing that the middle-aged man meant well and only wanted them to finish the trial even a day sooner.

"Don't worry, sir," Alex stated. "We'll enter the dungeon in two days."

Unable to tolerate any more nonsense, Professor Elias scoffed and decided not to waste any more of his time. If he could, he would disqualify them for making light of the Trial of Beginnings. Unfortunately, that wasn't allowed.

The rule only stated that anyone still stuck inside the dungeon after five days would no longer be able to take the second trial in the academy.

There were four days left. Technically speaking, as long as Alex's group cleared the trial within this time, they could still take the second test of the academy.

“Suit yourselves, but don’t come crying to me when you fail.” Professor Elias glared at Alex before walking away.

“Looks like he thinks we’re making fun of this trial,” Charles said with a wry smile.

“What he thinks doesn’t matter,” Alex replied. “We need to give the other candidates some time to clear the trial. Otherwise, they would be in danger when the dungeon monsters from the lower floors head to the first floor.

“We will wait for one more day. After that, Master, Elaine, Efa, and I will enter the dungeon to help the candidates who are still stuck inside. Only after we’ve confirmed that the dungeon is clear will it be safe for you to enter.”

The Map of Forgotten Paths had a cooldown of an entire day, so it would really take them two days before they could take the trial earnestly.

Given their combined strength, Alex had reasoned that, at most, they would only need a few hours to clear the dungeon and find the exit to the City of Harmonia.

They were not being lazy or inconsiderate to Professor Elias.

They just wanted to prevent people from dying unjustly due to Charles’ Challenger’s Mark.

Chapter 105: You Really Look Like A Villain Right Now

“Are you finally entering the dungeon?” asked Dwayne, one of the third-years from Frieden Academy.

“Not exactly,” Alex replied. “But we do plan on entering the dungeon at midnight.”

The three third-year students currently on guard duty simultaneously looked at the group of six people standing before them.

Alex, Cairo, Lavinia, Roselia, Elaine, and Efa were in full combat gear, ready for battle. They planned to first scout the dungeon and check if there were still trial takers inside.

If they found some lost lambs inside, they would guide them to the exit so they would not be affected by Charles' Challenger's Mark once the latter finally entered the dungeon.

Charles had been left in the inn with Dim Dim, who had been asked to watch over him.

The teenager was well aware of the plan and hoped that Alex and the others would be able to lead everyone to safety. Only then could he finally challenge the dungeon. Hopefully, he could do so by tomorrow midnight.

Roselia looked at her pocket watch. "Thirty seconds before the first floor resets."

Everyone nodded in acknowledgment and waited for the final seconds to tick by.

"We can enter now," Roselia reported.

Just as planned, they waited for two more minutes before stepping into the dungeon, just as the terrain of the first floor was starting to stabilize. As soon as the changes stopped, Alex immediately activated his Map of Forgotten Paths.

"There are still around twenty people inside the dungeon," Alex reported. "Follow me!"

Since they were in a hurry, the group ran as fast as they could, with Cairo and Efa leading the charge.

Alex and Lavinia were at the center of the formation, while Elaine and Roselia guarded the rear.

"Turn right at the next intersection, then turn left!" Alex shouted.

Cairo and Efa followed his directions without hesitation, cutting down every monster that lunged at them along the way.

“Who are you people?!” asked an anxious voice, coming from a young lady being guarded by two lady adventurers. “A-Are you here to kill us?!”

“No,” Alex replied. “We’re here to lead you to the exit.”

“And why should we believe you?” retorted the young lady as she reached for her weapon, ready to move as soon as Alex showed any sign of hostility.

“Because if you don’t, we’ll have no choice but to knock you guys out and carry you outside of the dungeon,” Alex answered coldly. “We don’t have much time, so it’s up to you whether you will believe us or not.”

“Wow, you really look like a villain right now,” Lavinia commented. “Very convincing.”

“Thank you.” Alex smirked.

Knowing they were completely outnumbered, the young lady finally relented. However, Alex didn’t immediately take them to the exit.

There were three more groups near them. He asked Lavinia and Roselia to stay and watch over the first party they had met inside the dungeon while his team picked up the others.

Just like the first party, the second party was also very wary of them.

“Thanks but no thanks,” a teenage boy with short blonde hair scoffed, not even bothering to hide his contempt. “We can find the exit on our own. No need for you to hel—argghh!”

Cairo smacked the living lights out of the teenage boy, and he collapsed on the ground.

“How about the two of you?” the Catkin asked the escorts of the teenage boy. “Are you going to come willingly, or should we negotiate using our weapons?”

“W-We’ll go with you!” one of the escorts replied anxiously.

“Good, pick them up and follow these two ladies,” Alex instructed. “There’s still another party waiting there. We’ll just pick them up first. After that, we will all travel to the exit. Elaine, Efa, make sure to guide them well.”

“Got it.”

“You can count on us, Alex!”

Alex and Cairo didn’t waste anymore time and headed to their next destination.

Fortunately, the third party was desperate to find the exit, so they were quick to trust the master-disciple duo, who guided them to the meeting place.

“Now, please follow me,” Alex said. “There are still a few stragglers left, and we want to get them out as soon as possible.”

As they traveled along the winding path that led to the exit to the City of Harmonia, Alex and Cairo often separated from the main group to pick up the nearest trial takers to their location.

Just like Alex expected, helping the trial takers wasn’t easy.

He didn’t bring them directly to the exit, only to the halfway point.

He then left them clear instructions as to what path to take, so they could reach the exit by themselves.

It took them nearly eight hours to evacuate everyone from the dungeon. The Map of Forgotten Paths had long lost its effect, but before the cooldown started, Alex had marked the areas where the rest of the trial takers were last located.

On top of that, Catkins had an uncanny ability to remember the paths they had taken.

The same could also be said for Efa, who was now a Shadow Scout.

“Have we gotten everyone out?” Cairo inquired.

“I think so, Master,” Alex answered. “Now, let’s head to the fourth floor of the dungeon to check if the Mini Boss has respawned.”

Alex had also marked the location of the secret path that led to the fourth floor on his map when he could still use the Map of Forgotten Paths.

When they reached the fourth floor, they decided to split into two teams to look for the Mini Boss.

Alex could see the location of his party members on the map, so he was confident about instantaneously locating them.

Alex, Cairo, and Elaine formed one team, while Lavinia, Roselia, and Efa formed another.

Their lineups were pretty balanced and should be able to deal with most situations within the fourth floor of the dungeon.

Two hours later, Alex’s team found Vraxis, the Thornforged, and didn’t hesitate to engage it in combat.

Since Cairo could practically solo the Mini Boss and he had the help of both Alex and Elaine—who was now a Rank 3 Flame Swordsman—the battle didn’t last very long.

After Vraxis was defeated, the Boss Monster dropped two items—the Thorn Sword and Thorn Boots.

Cairo handed the rare equipment to Alex, and the latter gratefully accepted them. In any case, they were very valuable items.

— — —

< Thorn Boots >

Type: Armor (Boots)

Item Grade: Rare

Bonus Effects:

— Grants 10% movement speed when moving through natural terrain (forests, grasslands).

— Grants +50% Climbing Speed and ensures secure footing on unstable or slippery surfaces (ice, mud, rocky cliffs).

— — —

< Thorn Sword >

Type: Weapon (One-Handed Sword)

Item Grade: Rare

Attack: 42–58

Bonus Effects:

- Grants +15% Armor Penetration.
- Increase bleed damage by 20%
- Tangled Rage (Passive): When Bleeding enemies are nearby, gain +10% attack speed.

'With this, we won't have to worry about Vraxis ambushing us tomorrow.' Alex breathed a little easier because one of the most annoying monsters had been dealt with. 'Time to meet up with Lavinia and the others.'

During this nearly ten-hour dungeon dive, Alex was able to gain three levels, which was a good thing.

"You guys are back?" Professor Elias, who was guarding the gate, was surprised when he saw Alex's group emerging from the dungeon.

Judging from their expressions, he could tell that they were very exhausted, which made him chuckle.

He thought that the group had gotten lost and decided to withdraw for the time being.

"Don't worry. You still have a few days before the second trial starts," Professor Elias reminded them. "Don't lose hope and continue to do your best, everyone."

Alex and the others were too tired to say anything, so they didn't bother explaining to the professor, who was looking at them with a smug grin on his face.

They knew that the middle-aged man was finding joy in their hardship, but even if they told him everything, he probably wouldn't understand.

When the group returned to the inn, everyone quickly let themselves collapse on their beds.

Tonight, they would once again dive inside the dungeon and face a threat that none of the other trial takers needed to face.

Charles felt guilty, knowing everyone was working hard for his sake.

The least he could do was follow the plan and hope that, by the time the sun rose the next day, he and the others would have safely arrived in the City of Harmonia, where a new Chapter of his life was about to begin.

Chapter 106: The Calm Before The Storm

When Alex opened his eyes, he found his limbs tied to the bedposts, spreadeagle. For obvious reasons, this wasn't how he expected to wake up.

Not only that, but seated by his bed were Elaine and Efa, wearing only their undergarments.

"Alex, it's quite unfortunate, but you failed your mission." Elaine caressed the young man's chest with a smile.

"And as punishment, it is time for you to die by snusnu," Efa cooed seductively.

"W-Wait!" Alex replied. "How did we fail? What happened?!"

However, the two pretty ladies didn't give any reply and simply ravaged the young man and sucked him dry.

"Awww..." Alex painfully opened his eyes and raised his hand to rub his head.

He had fallen from his bed, and it was enough to wake him up from his sleep.

“A dream?” Alex muttered as he looked at his surroundings.

The room was rather dark, with only the faint light of the magic lamp illuminating it.

‘What time is it?’ Alex groggily reached out to the magic lamp to increase the brightness of its light, allowing him to see his surroundings more clearly.

Squinting his eyes at the clock hanging on the wall, he could tell it was almost ten o’clock.

He still felt very exhausted, understandably so since their expedition in the dungeon had been taxing. However, he believed that the dream he had woken up from significantly contributed to his tiredness.

“Death by snusnu...” Alex muttered. “What a way to go.”

He had almost forgotten the consequences of failing his mission.

The dream he just had was painfully realistic, reminding him of the fate that awaited him if he failed his mission.

‘I should meet up with the others first,’ Alex thought as he took a healing potion from his storage ring and drank its contents.

The punishment waiting for him if he failed had been too scary, so he decided to drink a potion to ensure he was in his optimal condition. A minute later, the exhaustion and body pain he felt completely faded.

He then left his room and headed downstairs for some food before starting the trial.

When he arrived, he saw Charles, Dim Dim, and Cairo eating together.

"You're finally awake," Cairo said with a smile. "Did you have a nice dream?"

"... That's one way to look at it, Master," Alex replied before taking a seat.

Since it was already late, the innkeeper was no longer taking any orders.

But food had never been a problem with Dim Dim around.

The Dim Sum God took out a few bamboo steamers filled with shrimp dumplings, pork dumplings, turnip cake, and sticky rice dumplings.

Starved, Alex quickly grabbed a dumpling and happily munched on it. He had skipped breakfast and lunch, so this supper was practically his first and last meal for the day.

"So, what are your thoughts regarding the upcoming trial?" Cairo inquired. "Have you prepared your heart and mind?"

Alex chewed and swallowed before replying. "Truth be told, Master, I'm afraid. I'm painfully aware of how difficult this trial would be."

"You make it sound like you've experienced it yourself." Cairo could tell his disciple wasn't lying, and he could even vaguely sense a subtle unease emanating from the latter's body.

Alex only smiled. If he told his master that he had already experienced it countless times in the past, his master would struggle to believe him.

Charles Lambert's tutorial quest had been deemed impossible to clear. And although Alex had cleared it once, he believed it was purely out of luck that he had happened to continuously make the right choices and pick the right paths.

"Dim Dim." Dim Dim patted Alex's hand as if to tell him that everything was going to be fine.

The Dim Sum God was very sensitive to the feelings of the people and creatures around it, so it could tell Alex was quite worried about their upcoming dungeon expedition despite trying to look calm on the surface.

“You’re not alone.”

Those were the words that Dim Dim said just now, effectively calming the young man’s troubled heart.

Back then, he had to clear the dungeon alone. But this time, he had dependable comrades who would weather the storm with him.

Aside from him, Charles, and Lavinia, everyone else in their party was Rank 3 and above.

Roselia was even a Rank 4 Horizon Striker. Technically speaking, she was stronger than Cairo.

But Ranks weren’t everything.

Sometimes, someone could surpass the difference in Rank if they were talented enough.

Alex had seen at least six people in ELO who could do that, and they were none other than the three main Heroes and the three Heroines of Story Mode.

Whom he would meet in Frieden Academy if he was lucky to survive the Dungeon of Beginnings.

“Oh, look like we’re not the only ones who are up.”

Alex, Cairo, Charles, and Dim Dim looked at the direction of the stairs and saw Elaine and Efa walking towards them.

“Did you sleep well, Alex?” Efa playfully asked as she sat beside the young man. “Did you perhaps see me in your dreams?”

The corner of Alex’s lips twitched. He had indeed seen Efa in his dreams.

He had seen her everything, and after that, he had died.

“Oh, was I right?” Efa smirked. “You’re getting a little red, Alex. Did you perhaps have a naughty dream about me?”

“O-Of course not,” Alex insisted. “Dim Dim, give Efa and Elaine some food, so they won’t go hungry later.”

“Dim Dim~” the Dim Sum god asked the two Adventurers what they wanted to eat.

A few seconds later, it summoned bamboo steamers containing the food closest to what Efa and Elaine wanted to eat.

“I didn’t know chicken feet could taste so good,” Elaine remarked after taking a bite. “Dim Dim, you’re amazing.”

“Ahem!” The Dim Sum God raised its body, happy that it was being praised.

Efa also ate with a satisfied look on her face and complimented Dim Dim as well.

Not long after, Lavinia and Roselia also descended from the stairs and joined them for supper.

Everyone appeared somewhat relaxed and even seemed to be looking forward to this dungeon run that they would be doing in a few hours.

‘I wish I could be as calm as them,’ Alex thought. ‘Perhaps this is the confidence of the strong.’

The young man watched his team chat happily with each other, enjoying the calm before the storm.

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Fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings...

A cocoon suddenly spawned in the location where the Mini Boss, Vraxis, had died earlier.

The cocoon grew larger and larger until it stood three meters tall. Its body then glowed in a purple light and pulsed like a beating heart.

Half an hour later, the cocoon broke apart, and a stag-like creature emerged from it.

It looked similar to Vraxis, but there were key differences between them.

Its body was entirely purple, except its stag-like antlers and its eyes, both of which were golden in color.

The creature then roared loudly as if informing everyone that it had finally been born.

The Monsters of the fourth floor of the dungeon felt compelled to heed its call and make their way toward it.

(A/N: This is the rarity hierarchy of monsters in ELO: Common, Rare , Mutant, Super Rare, Named, Legendary, Divine. The higher the monster's rarity level, the stronger it is compared to the monsters of the same Rank.)

— — —

< Aurhorn the Stag of Twilight >

Monster Rank: Rank 3 Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Named

Type: Wandering Boss Monster

Health: 6,800 / 6,800

Attack: 200 – 450

Active Skills: Gleaming Rush, Twilight Bolt, Pulse of the Deepwood.

< Gleaming Rush >

– Charges forward in a blinding sprint, dealing heavy physical damage and inflicting a brief stun.

< Twilight Bolt >

– Channels golden energy through its antlers to fire a searing magical blast at distant targets.

< Pulse of the Deepwood >

– Slams its hooves into the ground, releasing a shockwave that damages and knocks back nearby enemies.

Note: The Twilight Stag is no guardian. It is a butcher draped in splendor. Aurhorn's golden horns rake the battlefield, shattering steel and bone alike. Mercy has no place in the wilds it calls home.

— — —

It was a Named Monster that was smarter and stronger than most monsters of its Rank. This powerful creature shouldn't have been born on the fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings because it was more suited to its lower floors.

However, now that it roamed the fourth floor, one thing was certain.

Any creature aside from the Monsters residing in the dungeon was fair game.

It was an unrivaled force of nature. Only the presence of equal might could stop the Twilight Stag's mad charge... Or become its next victim, trampled beneath its hooves.

Chapter 107: The Beginning Of The End [Part 1]

"Do you finally plan to clear the dungeon this time?" Dwayne asked Alex.

"Yes," Alex replied. "Before that, can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?" Dwayne frowned.

"What would the academy do if a dungeon outbreak occurs during this trial?" Alex inquired.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Dwayne's frown deepened. "How could that be? Before the trial, the professors double-checked the chances of a dungeon outbreak. If it was that risky, do you think the Academy would keep the trial going?"

Before Alex could answer, the third-year student continued, "Besides, the academy sends its staff to the Dungeon of Beginnings each year? In any case, a dungeon outbreak during the trial is just as possible as the sun rising from the west."

Alex crossed his arms over his chest and eyed Dwayne steadily. "I'm talking about the teeny tiny chance it happens," Alex insisted. "What will the academy do then?"

Finding this question incredibly absurd, Dwayne didn't even bother to reply. He was inclined to believe that Alex was just messing with him, so he decided to no longer entertain his questions.

"Don't waste my time. Just go inside the dungeon already." Dwayne was very tempted to kick the annoying young man who was more handsome than him.

Alex sighed. It was pointless, so he no longer bothered the pitiful student, who had no idea what was about to happen.

"We will go as planned," Alex said as he faced Charles. "Master, Efa, and I will go first. Once we deem that the coast is clear, Efa will come out and tell you to come in. Don't forget our battle formation. Understand?"

Charles nodded. "I understand."

The young man then shifted his gaze to Lavinia, Elaine, Efa, and Roselia.

"Let's survive no matter what," Alex said.

Everyone nodded seriously, which elicited smirks from Dwayne and the other third-years.

"You'll only fight Rank 1 Monsters," Dwayne pointed out. "Why are you being overly dramatic?"

Alex and the rest ignored Dwayne and walked to the entrance of the dungeon.

"Are you ready, Dim Dim?" Alex asked his partner in crime.

"Dim Dim!" The Dim Sum God nodded.

The young man took a deep breath to calm his nerves before stepping into the dungeon.

As soon as he entered the dungeon, he activated his Map of Forgotten Paths to check if there were still any trial takers left inside.

Fortunately, there were no other green blinking dots on the map aside from the ones that represented Cairo and Efa.

“Coast is clear,” Alex said. “Bring him in, Efa.”

Efa nodded and left the dungeon to fetch Charles and the rest.

As soon as Charles entered the dungeon, Alex felt a faint ripple of energy pass through him, expanding to the rest of the dungeon.

Without question, he understood that it was caused by the passive skill of the person he wanted to protect.

Challenger’s Mark.

The skill that had made Charles Lambert’s tutorial quest an impossible mission.

“Follow me!” Alex shouted as he started sprinting.

Cairo and Efa ran along his left and right side, serving as the vanguards who would eliminate any of the monsters that would block their path.

Lavinia and Charles were right behind them, while Roselia and Elaine guarded the rear.

It was a race against time. The sooner they reached the exit, the safer they would be.

Suddenly, the ground beneath seemed to tremble, and Alex's expression turned solemn.

"Turn right!" Alex shouted.

He was directing everyone to take the shortest route to the exit, regardless of how many monsters blocked their way.

As soon as the group made a turn, a dozen Crag Wolves lunged at them with jaws ready to strike.

Cairo and Efa drew their weapons and insta-killed the monsters with a single strike.

By the time the monsters turned into particles of light and dropped their cores, Alex and his group were already past them.

The longer they ran, the more monsters blocked their way. And this time, they faced thirty Horned Rabbits that bounced off the walls, making their attack patterns unpredictable.

Unfortunately for these monsters, their tactics had no effect on Cairo and Elaine, as both were faster and stronger.

"Turn left!" Alex said.

Like before, they were once again ambushed by a larger group of monsters. This time, dozens of Black Bats and Feral Boars charged at them as if they had gone mad.

Cairo, Efa, and Alex dealt with them, cutting a path for them to continue their journey.

'So far, so good,' Alex thought before glancing at his map. 'If we continue at this pace, we might reach the exit in two hours.'

He had already put some markings on the map, so even if the effect of the Map of Forgotten Paths disappeared, he already knew where he needed to go to reach the exit.

Half an hour later, the team managed to annihilate a monster group that had come from the second floor to the first floor.

They were still Rank 1 Monsters, so they were easily subdued by the vanguards.

“We will be passing one of the paths that lead to the second floor,” Alex stated. “Expect monsters to pour out from there, so everyone be careful!”

Cairo and Efa were not using any skills or big attacks to conserve their stamina.

They were still far from the exit, and the battles would only grow in intensity as they neared their destination.

Roselia and Elaine were positioned at the back for this reason. They could focus on running, thus preserving their strength.

Once the vanguards get tired, the two ladies would switch spots with them, giving the former a chance to rest even as they continued moving.

“Ugh!” Alex groaned as he blocked the attacks of three Red Caps, which were Goblins wearing red bandanas.

They were stronger than the average Goblin and were very agile monsters.

Red Caps were Rank 2 Monsters commonly seen on the third floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

For them to appear now only meant one thing.

The monsters on the third floor of the dungeon had finally arrived on the first floor.

“Prioritize breaking through. Don’t fight every monster you face!” Cairo shouted. “I will clear a path!”

Everyone understood that they shouldn’t remain in one place for a long time.

If they stopped advancing for even a minute, they would find themselves surrounded from all sides with nowhere to escape.

The last thing they wanted was for the monsters to create a blockade, hindering them from reaching the exit.

After brute-forcing their way against a dozen Red Caps, Alex once again shouted directions to his companions.

“The second path on the left!” Alex yelled.

The first path on the left was another entrance that led to the second floor, and he could already see a few monsters emerging from that path.

But just as Alex’s group was about to enter the second path on the left, something golden flashed at the corner of his eye.

A moment later, a pained cry reached his ears, prompting him to look back.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as Alex saw Charles getting rammed by the golden antlers of a purple stag that came out of nowhere.

The teenage boy was sent flying by the powerful impact.

Alex watched as Charles slowly slammed into the wall of the dungeon before falling on the ground face-first.

Time once again moved normally as Alex screamed at the fallen teenage boy, whom he had traveled to Briarwood Village to protect.

“Chaaaaaaaaaaaaarles!” Alex shouted as he raised his shield to charge at the purple stag, which had come to butcher those who dared challenge the Dungeon of Beginnings.

Chapter 108: The Beginning Of The End [Part 2]

Everything happened so fast, no one was able to react in time.

Even Cairo, who boasted speed that had made easy work of the Mini Boss, Vraxis, only saw a golden blur before one of his teammates was attacked.

“Chaaaaaaaaaaaaarles!”

Alex’s shout broke everyone from their daze, and they immediately moved to assist Alex’s fight against the purple stag that stood three meters tall.

Efa hurried to Charles’ side and checked his condition while her comrades clashed against the Boss Monster, which had taken them completely by surprise.

“Serpent Lash!” Lavinia’s sword whip extended like a deadly snake that was out for blood.

“Culling Blade!” Cairo closed the distance in a heartbeat and prepared to strike.

Alex, who had also activated his Shield Charge, closed in on the Boss Monster.

The three of them were attacking from three different directions, making sure that there was nowhere for the monster to run.

However, they might have misunderstood a very important detail.

Aurhorn, the Stag of Twilight, had no intention of escaping!

The moment Alex shouted, the Boss Monster had already raised its front hooves in preparation to unleash one of its skills—Pulse of the Deepwood.

Aurhorn slammed its hooves into the ground, releasing a shockwave that knocked Cairo and Lavinia backward.

Only Alex, whose Shield Charge helped him resist the shockwave, continued charging forward.

A few seconds later, he slammed his shield against the side of the Stag's body, making it stagger.

Elaine didn't miss this opportunity and unleashed one of her strongest skills at the monster at point-blank range.

"Inferno Slash!"

Her sword was coated with blazing flames, empowering her strike. However, the Stag's reaction speed was faster, and it used its golden antlers to cut through the Swordswoman's strike and push her toward the wall of the dungeon using brute force.

"Argh!" the Flame Swordswoman cried out in pain as she slammed into the wall.

But Aurhorn wasn't finished just yet.

Golden arcs of lightning danced on its antlers as it prepared one of its most lethal attacks.

It was planning to use another one of its skills, Twilight Bolt, while pinning Elaine to the wall.

This was Aurhorn's only ranged skill, but using it at point-blank range, especially when it was pinning its enemy, was just as effective and several times more lethal.

"Balance Breaker!" Alex's sword glowed with a faint blue light as he swung it at the Stag of Twilight.

A blue crescent blade emerged from his sword strike and hit the side of Aurhorn's head. The monster cried out in agony and fury, temporarily forgetting about its charge attack.

Balance Breaker was a sword strike that bypassed all defenses. It briefly staggered enemies who were targeting Alex's allies, interrupting spells or charging attacks if timed well.

The good thing about this skill was that it had a range of five meters, allowing Alex to deal damage from a short distance.

The moment Elaine was freed from the monster's hold, she immediately raised her sword and unleashed another attack at close range.

"Inferno Thrust!"

This time, her blazing sword stabbed Aurhorn's body, dealing significant damage to the Boss Monster.

< Aurhorn the Stag of Twilight >

Monster Rank: Rank 3 Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Named

Type: Wandering Boss Monster

Health: 6,336 / 6,800

Attack: 200 – 450

Active Skills: Gleaming Rush, Twilight Bolt, Pulse of the Deepwood.

'Sh*t!' Alex cursed internally after checking the information of the monster in front of him.

Cairo and Lavinia once again attacked the monster, but it decided to distance itself from the group to prepare another charge attack.

However, Roselia finally found an opportunity to strike and unleashed the full might of a Rank 4 Horizon Striker.

Holding a short sword in each hand, the maid of the Hartwell Clan unleashed a series of sword strikes that drew blood every time they landed.

'Too shallow.' Roselia frowned when she realised that the monster was tougher than she had expected.

Aurhorn, who understood that the Catkin wasn't a simple opponent, once again slammed its hooves on the ground and generated a shockwave that made Roselia skid several meters backward.

The Boss Monster then ran away to distance itself from the group in preparation for its range attack, Twilight Bolt.

A golden lightning flashed towards Roselia, prompting the Catkin to jump to her right and roll on the ground.

Alex, who finally regained a bit of composure, shared the information about their opponent.

"It's a Named Rank 3 Boss Monster called Aurhorn, the Stag of Twilight," Alex shouted at Roselia before glancing at Efa. "We can't afford to stay here. How is Charles?"

"He's still alive," Efa replied. "Barely alive!"

"Elaine, pick him up and run toward the second path on the left!" Alex ordered. "We can't afford to stay here any longer. More monsters are on their way!"

Elaine nodded and picked up the unconscious teenage boy and ran toward their original destination.

"Master, it's a straight path, but when you reach the next intersection, pick the right path. Dim Dim, you explain the rest to Master. Lavinia, go with them. Roselia and I will hold the rear!"

"Dim!" Dim Dim nodded and jumped onto Cairo's head.

The Catkin Swordsman looked at his disciple with a conflicted expression before running after Elaine and Efa, who had already gone ahead.

Since Roselia and Alex would stay behind, he needed to guard Charles, who had been knocked out cold.

"Be careful!" Lavinia said as she reluctantly followed behind her brother.

Alex nodded before blocking Aurhorn's Twilight Bolt, which had him skidding several meters away from where he originally stood.

Roselia noticed that more monsters were now gathering around them, so she ran toward Alex to make their retreat.

Given enough time, they might be able to defeat the Boss Monster. However, they had no such luxury!

All of them were painfully aware of this fact, so they did what they could and ran!

Aurhorn looked at its enemies with disdain before lowering its head for another charge attack.

It then charged forward, not caring that other dungeon monsters were blocking its path.

Dying cries from the monsters reverberated in the surroundings as the Stag of Twilight bulldozed through them, effectively converting all of them into particles of light.

The Challenger was still alive, and it compelled Aurhorn to go for the kill.

It would not stop until Charles Lambert and his comrades were all dead.

The unconscious boy's body emitted a very enticing scent that attracted all monsters, filling them with the desire to personally kill Charles and devour his flesh to attain the powers lying dormant inside his body.

Chapter 109: The Beginning Of The End [Part 3]

"It's coming!" Roselia warned.

"Roselia, Plan X!" Alex shouted.

The maid of the Hartwell Clan nodded in understanding and braced herself to face the charging stag.

Just as the beast closed in on Roselia, Alex slammed his sword against his shield with a resounding clang.

"Come here you piece of sh*t!" Alex roared, drawing its gaze.

< Taunt [EX] activated! >

Aurhorn's charge was forcibly canceled. The sudden change almost made the monster trip.

The Horizon Striker, who had been waiting for that moment, unleashed her chain combo.

"Ascendant Edge!" Roselia's short swords glowed purple as she unleashed six devastating strikes that emitted shock waves with every hit.

Aurhorn staggered upon impact, allowing Roselia to follow up with her second combo move.

"Gale Fang Drive!" Roselia lunged at the Boss Monster and unleashed another six alternating slashes, causing the monster to suffer increased bleed damage.

Her attack dealt 10% extra damage with each successive strike, and the final strike had a high chance of staggering its target.

The Horizon Striker was a Job Class that specialized in creating chain combos that made it very difficult for opponents to counterattack.

Roselia's consecutive strikes dealt increased damage and caused massive bleeding to her target, decreasing its Health Bar dramatically in seconds.

It was said that once the Horizon Striker's first combo connected, it was nearly impossible for it to be stopped!

After two consecutive chain combos, Roselia finally unleashed one of her finisher strikes.

"Blade Horizon!" She jumped up and made a single thrust targeting Aurhorn's eye.

When the attack connected, blood spurted out of the Boss Monster's eye and it shrieked in pain.

To the untrained eye, the maid's attack looked like she simply stabbed the monster's eye once.

However, in reality, Roselia stabbed the Boss Monster's right eye eight times, inflicting devastating damage with each hit.

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< Aurhorn the Stag of Twilight >

Monster Rank: Rank 3 Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Named

Type: Wandering Boss Monster

Health: 3,169 / 6,800

Attack: 200 – 450

Active Skills: Gleaming Rush, Twilight Bolt, Pulse of the Deepwood.

— — —

The maid's chain combo had dealt a lot of damage to the Boss Monster, bringing its health down drastically.

Alex stepped forward, ready to follow up with a Shield Bash, when the ground trembled beneath his feet. His eyes snapped toward the opening of the path they were blocking.

"Roselia, retreat!" Alex shouted after seeing dozens of Rank 2 Monsters headed in their direction.

As much as the young man wanted to finish the Boss Monster off, staying was not an option. Not to mention, Roselia had just unleashed three consecutive skills with her full power. Even without asking, he knew that she must be pretty exhausted.

As for Roselia, she was reluctant to leave, but she also understood that staying for more than a minute would result in their deaths. Without any hesitation, she followed Alex as they ran away from the horde of monsters about to catch up to them.

Aurhorn, who had suffered a one-sided beating from Roselia, roared in anger as blood streamed down from its injuries.

As a Named Monster, it was very intelligent, and it understood it could no longer treat its foes lightly.

Glancing at the pack of Rank 2 Dire Wolves behind it, the Boss Monster did the unexpected.

It charged at the pack of wolves, killing all that stood in its way.

Confused by the sudden betrayal, the wolves attacked Aurhorn. But with a single stomp of its hooves, it unleashed its skill, Pulse of the Deepwood, sending the Dire Wolves flying with a powerful shock wave.

The Stag of Twilight then began to eat the monster cores on the ground. As it ate, its injuries slowly closed up and healed.

The only saving grace was that the right eye Roselia had stabbed didn't regenerate, making Aurhorn roar in anger, which reverberated within the First Floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

"Looks like we just made it angrier," Alex noted as he continued to run as fast as he could.

"It's a shame," Roselia commented. "We could have killed it if there had been no interference."

Alex also found it quite regrettable, but the circumstances prevented them from having their way.

After checking his map, he saw that Cairo and the rest of their team were only six hundred meters away from them.

Monster cores littered the ground, which proved that their vanguard had met their fair share of trouble along the way.

“Alex, who is Charles to you?” Roselia asked. “And why are you doing all of this for him?”

“Didn’t we already talk about this in the past?” Alex replied.

“You only said that you wanted to help someone in Briarwood Village,” Roselia answered.

“But after asking Charles some questions, I found out that the two of you have only recently been acquainted with each other. I don’t understand why you are risking your life to save a complete stranger.”

Roselia paused a little, as if choosing her words, before continuing, “Don’t get me wrong. I find what you are doing very noble and righteous. My only concern is the fact that you seem to know a lot about Charles while he knows very little about you.”

Alex frowned. “Now is not the time for this, Roselia. We need to survive first. You can ask me questions when we are safe in the City of Harmonia.”

“...” Roselia eyed the young man, but she no longer asked any questions.

She understood that this was indeed not the time and place to ask these things, and conversing while running would only wear them out faster and make them less alert.

The sound of fighting finally reached their ears as they caught up to the main group.

Cairo, Lavinia, and Efa were fighting the mobs, while Elaine kept Charles safe.

The Catkins siblings noticed Alex's and Roselia's arrival and breathed a sigh of relief.

"What happened to the Boss Monster?" Cairo asked. "Is it dead?"

"No," Alex replied. "We managed to inflict some serious injuries, but we were forced to retreat because the monsters were gathering at our location."

"How far are we from the exit?" Lavinia asked. Despite her look of determination, sweat dripped down her face, showing how tired she really was.

"Less than an hour away," Alex answered. "Let's go. The Boss Monster is now coming after us."

The young man was paying close attention to Aurhorn's movements because it was currently the greatest threat they faced on the First Floor.

"We need to hurry before Rank 3 Monsters start appearing," Roselia commented. "We cannot allow them to encircle us."

Everyone nodded, turning their full attention back to the desperate struggle toward an exit that felt impossibly far.

Chapter 110: The Beginning Of The End [Part 4]

At the Headmaster's Office of Frieden Academy...

"Strange." An old man frowned when he saw one of the crystal balls in his office glow faintly. "I thought all of the trial takers had finished clearing the Dungeon of Beginnings by now. It seems that there are still some stragglers left."

Curious, the old man specifically summoned the glowing crystal ball into his hand and took a peek at the scene it reflected.

The first thing he noticed was Charles being carried by Elaine. Nearby, Cairo, Lavinia, and Efa were fighting against Rank 2 Monsters, clearing a path for all of them.

One glance was enough to tell him Charles was seriously injured. The group was moving fast, desperately pushing toward the exit as swiftly as possible.

What made him frown, however, was that they were up against a dozen Rank 2 Red Caps—monsters that should only appear on the dungeon's third floor.

A moment later, the scene on the crystal ball changed, showing Alex and Roselia fighting off against the Rank 3 Boss Monster, Aurhorn.

"Huh?" The old man looked confused because the trial takers were clearly on the first floor of the dungeon, yet they were fighting monsters that shouldn't appear there. "What is going on?"

The first thing that popped into his mind was to personally go there to deal with the situation.

However, he was unable to leave the office at this time because he was also in the middle of something extremely important.

"Himea, come!" the old man ordered.

A moment later, the door of his office opened, and someone wearing a fox mask came in.

"Yes, Headmaster?" Himea asked.

Her soft and soothing voice was very pleasant to hear, but the Headmaster knew this wasn't the right time to appreciate it.

"Go to the Dungeon of Beginnings and save these people," the Headmaster ordered as he handed the crystal ball to his disciple. "It seems like a Dungeon Outbreak is happening in the Dungeon of Beginnings. Take this token and ask the Peace Keepers on duty to help you."

“Save them at all costs and inform the guards of the city to prepare for any overflow of monsters. I will also contact the Professors to inform them of the situation.”

Himea nodded and left the Headmaster’s office in a hurry.

However, she momentarily stopped running when she saw Alex appear in the crystal ball,

The young man was facing off against a purple stag with golden antlers that looked very much like a Boss Monster.

Not only could she see what was happening inside the crystal ball, but she could also hear them.

“Alex! Be careful!” Lavinia shouted, breaking Himea from her daze.

“Don’t worry about me!” Alex replied. “Make sure this monster doesn’t get anywhere near Charles! He’s their target!”

Seeing the danger Alex and the others were in, the young lady wearing a fox mask no longer hesitated and forcefully opened the window closest to her.

She then jumped out of it, not caring that she was at least thirty stories above the ground.

This was the fastest way to reach the gate of the academy where the Peace Keepers were currently stationed.

When she was only a few meters away from the ground, the young lady spun around in mid-air, creating a black whirlwind that cushioned her fall, allowing her to land gently on the ground.

Himea then imbued her feet with dark magic, creating a sonic blast that propelled her forward.

Clearly, she was using everything she could to reach her destination as fast as possible so she would be able to help the young man whom she had seen inside the crystal ball.

“Shield Charge!” Alex slammed his shield on the annoying Boss Monster that didn’t seem to know when to give up.

It had repeatedly used a hit-and-run tactic against them, targeting Charles at every opportunity it got.

Alex’s left hand was already feeling numb due to the number of times he forced himself to meet Aurhorn’s charge head-on.

With monsters attacking from the front and the back, the party didn’t have enough manpower to kill the Boss, who would retreat every time its health bar reduced to thirty percent.

It would then eat the monster cores on the ground to recover before returning to attack the beaten and battered group, who were doing their best to survive.

“Nghhh!” Alex groaned in pain as his shield clashed with Aurhorn’s charge that was aimed at Charles Lambert.

The Oathkeeper skidded several meters back, while Aurhorn took a step back after getting pushed by Alex’s desperate charge.

“Demon Slaying Arts Second Form!” Cairo raised his sword, making it shine in a golden light.

“Grand Cross!”

The moment the Catkin stabbed his sword into the ground, a golden flash of light expanded with him at the center.

This killed the monsters around them and pushed Aurhorn backward by a few meters, prompting it to once again run away to recover its health.

“Damn it!” Alex cursed in anger as frustration as Lavinia helped him up. “I want to kill that Boss so badly!”

Everyone was already tired, and Rank 3 Monsters were now starting to appear.

Clearly, monsters from the Fifth Floor of the Dungeon had also reached the first floor. The group had been delayed long enough by the Boss Monster and swarms of monsters for stronger monsters to descend.

“How far till we reach the exit?” Lavinia asked.

She tried to sound confident, but the anxiety in her voice was very apparent.

Still, no one pointed it out. All of them felt the same way.

“Twenty more minutes,” Alex answered. “Just a little more, and we will be able to leave this place.”

“It’s the last spurt, so let’s give it everything we have!” Elaine, who was carrying the unconscious Charles, tried to boost everyone’s morale.

“It’s just a few minutes away. We can do this!” Efa joined in, making Lavinia feel less anxious.

“Can you still move?” Roselia asked Alex, who had been taking all the beating to ensure that Charles remained safe.

“Don’t worry about me,” Alex answered. “I’ll make it out of this place alive, even if I have to crawl to the exit.”

Roselia smiled faintly. “It’s my turn to guard the rear. Go to the middle of the formation to recover for a bit.”

Alex nodded before taking out the last healing potion in his inventory. They had prepared for this expedition, but it was harder than he had expected.

‘Damn Hell Mode difficulty!’ Alex sighed in his heart.

He had already anticipated that their dungeon expedition would be hard, but he had never imagined it would be this challenging.

The appearance of the Rank 3 Monsters was worrying, especially since they were Lizardmen Warriors.

They were a race that knew how to use teamwork. Fighting a group of them was like fighting a group of Adventurers.

He also noticed blood seeping at the corner of Cairo’s lips, yet he never heard his master utter a single complaint along the journey.

The Catkin merely did his role—cut a path that would allow them to move forward.

“Master, please drink this potion,” Alex said as he tried to hand the potion to their second strongest fighter.

“You need it more than I do,” Cairo replied. “Drink it, Alex. You need to protect Charles at all costs. I already have my hands full, so I can’t split my attention and protect him as well.”

The young man bit his lip but still nodded and obeyed.

Drinking the health potion, Alex felt himself recovering slightly.

The pain in his shoulders, especially the side holding Everguard, lessened a bit, but he knew that this last stretch of their journey might be the most dangerous of all.

With a look of desperate determination, the group ran in a battle formation.

With a Boss Monster following them from behind and Rank 3 Lizardmen blocking their path from the front, they knew one single mistake could lead to some of them dying or, worse, a complete party annihilation.

Alex gritted his teeth as he prepared to clash with the Boss Monster one last time, protecting Charles from the gruesome fate that waited for him.

He wasn't aware that somewhere out there, a young lady wearing a fox mask was running as fast as she could in order to reach him before it was too late.