

Endless 111

Chapter 111: He Who Challenges His Own Destiny

Lavinia believed she had grown stronger.

Stronger than when she had been in the Etherion Domain.

The complete helplessness she had felt during those days never stopped haunting her in her dreams.

In those dreams, every time she felt like everything was about to come crashing down, the figure of a young man would always appear before her, shielding her from the danger that would have left her broken otherwise.

Lavinia believed that, with her sword whip in hand, she could always stand tall and show the world of the might of the Clawford Tribe.

Sure, she could instantly kill Rank 1 Monsters. Rank 2 Monsters didn't pose a threat to her either, unless they were coming at her in a group.

But she understood that sometimes, there were instances when she would be unable to dodge an attack and had to take the brunt of it using her body.

However, today was not that day.

For someone else was enduring the blows that were meant for her.

"Grrhhh—ungh!" A growl-like sound escaped Alex's lips as he tanked a blow from a monster called Lizardman Berserker, a Rank 3 Mini Boss.

Lavinia watched as Alex crashed against the wall of the dungeon, coughing up a mouthful of blood.

The Lizard Man Berserker then turned its attention to Lavinia, raising its axe to slash her in half.

Some distance away, Cairo and Roselia were busy holding off Aurhorn, so they couldn't come to her rescue in time.

The young lady gritted her teeth and used her sword whip to grab hold of a Lizardman a few meters away from her.

With a strong tug, she pulled herself forward, dodging the attack of the Lizardman Berserker at the last second.

Just as the Mini Boss was about to attack Lavinia a second time, a flying shield collided with the side of its face, making it stagger.

The monster shifted its attention to Alex and roared in anger before charging at him with wanton abandon.

"Diiiiiiiiim Diiiiiiiiiiiiim!"

The Dim Sum God jumped across the walls of the dungeon, zigzagging over the heads of various monsters. Once close enough, it threw two brittle vials at the Mini Boss, hitting its head with great accuracy.

Dim Dim didn't pause and threw two more brittle vials, making sure the Mini Boss would be unable to target any of its friends for a short period of time.

The little one fought just as hard as everyone else.

Seeing Alex was about to be attacked by six Dire Wolves, Lavinia lunged in his direction, raising her sword whip to strike the surrounding monsters.

The weapon in her hand split into three mid-swing, hitting enemies in a wide cone with a serrated edge, dealing Bleed and Critical hits.

“Razor Requiem!”

Lavinia imbued her full strength in this strike, which allowed her to cleave the Dire Wolves in half with her AOE attack.

“Are you alright?!” Lavinia helped Alex stand up, looking very anxious at his beaten and battered appearance.

“Tis’ but a scratch,” Alex replied.

“What nonsense are you talking about?! You’re seriously injured!”

“I just wanted to say that line at least once in my life to make myself look cool, but you ruined it.”

“You still have the strength to crack jokes at this point?”

Lavinia took out a few pills from her storage ring and directly stuffed them into Alex’s mouth.

“It’s not as effective as healing potions, but it’s the best I have now,” Lavinia said. “Rest up a bit. I will handle the rest.”

Just like a warrior princess, Lavinia used her original skill, Lashstep Mirage, to whip the ground, propelling herself, backward, and sideways, leaving behind a blurry afterimage that confused her enemies.

Alex had suffered so much protecting everyone, and it was now her turn to protect him.

When Dim Dim saw what Lavinia was doing, it fought alongside her by throwing brittle vials left and right.

When the Dim Sum God ran out of vials to throw, it started throwing rocks, not caring that rocks didn't deal much damage against its targets.

What mattered was that it had the monsters' attention, buying its teammates precious time.

Alex's vision started to blur, but he could still see the faint light in the distance, marking the exit that led to the City of Harmonia.

Unfortunately, they were in an intersection with eight paths, and the monsters were pouring in from three of them, blocking their way.

They were so close to the exit. But the continuous battles and running had left them very exhausted. Now, they were on the verge of collapse.

Elaine was fighting against Lizardmen while protecting Charles, who was still unconscious behind her.

Just as Alex thought that things couldn't get any worse, he saw a purple blur run past him, headed towards Elaine.

Alex didn't even need to think and used his skill, Oathkeeper's Duty, to instantly teleport himself to her side, just in time to block Aurhorn's deadly charge.

A cry of agony escaped the Boss Monster's lips as it received the reflected damage of its charge.

The young man, on the other hand, fell on top of the unconscious Charles with a pained groan.

Alex felt a searing pain in his shoulder and understood that he might have broken it after tanking Aurhorn's powerful charge for the umpteenth time. While his legs hadn't been injured, they felt paralyzed. He no longer had the strength to stand up.

The only saving grace was that the stun effect of the Oathkeeper's Duty had been activated, allowing Elaine to thrust her sword at the Twilight Stag's remaining eye, blinding it completely.

“Alex!” Lavinia didn’t hesitate and ran towards the fallen young man, killing the monsters in her path.

She was covered in injuries and cuts, but the sight of the Oathkeeper covered in blood had made her forget her own wounds.

The only thing on her mind was to make sure that Alex wouldn’t die. Unknowingly, she fought more desperately than ever.

Cairo took a single step forward before instantly teleporting beside his sister.

The two Catkins fought back to back in one final desperate effort to help their comrades.

They were now pushed into a corner, sticking near the wall, as they made their last stand.

A wall of monsters blocked their path, preventing them from going anywhere.

Aurhorn, who had lost its vision, entered a berserk state and rampaged, not caring if it killed friend or foe.

However, before the Stag of Twilight could kill more of its allied monsters, a ripple spread inside the dungeon, causing all the monsters to flinch.

“Hah... Hah...”

The teenage boy who had remained unconscious for a long time slowly opened his eyes.

He gently moved Alex away, making sure that his injury wouldn’t worsen as he propped himself up from the ground.

Charles Lambert stood up and scanned the monsters around him, making them take a step back instinctively.

His eyes then turned golden before his entire body was covered in a black carapace streaked with gold.

Cracking sounds echoed eerily inside the dungeon as Charles clenched his fists.

He then shifted his attention to the Stag of Twilight, who had repeatedly tried to kill him while he was unconscious.

An otherworldly screech escaped Charles' lips as he jumped toward Aurhorn.

His hands turned into dark claws that spelled impending doom to all—not just those who had tried to take his life, but even the people who had risked everything to protect him too.

He, who was supposed to die in the Dungeon of Beginnings, bared his fangs and claws at the destiny he refused to yield to.

Chapter 112: Void-Touched

A few minutes before Charles regained consciousness...

"How long do you plan to sleep?" asked an amused voice of a young lady. "If you don't wake up soon, you'll really die, you know?"

Charles slowly opened his eyes and found himself in a white-colored world, which stretched as far as the eye could see.

'Where am I?' Charles thought. 'What happened?'

After briefly searching his own mind, he remembered running alongside Lavinia when something hit him out of the blue. Intense pain followed, but he soon blacked out and was no longer aware of what happened next.

“Hah... You’re so helpless. But since I’m in a good mood, I will let you see what’s happening inside the dungeon.”

The space in front of Charles rippled until he could clearly see the scene currently taking place inside the Dungeon of Beginnings.

He watched as Alex and his new comrades fought hard to protect him from the Purple Stag, which seemed hell-bent on killing him.

“I don’t know who you are, but please, let me return!” Charles pleaded. “I need to help them.”

“Help them?” The voice chuckled. “What can you do to help them?”

“I can fight!” Charles replied.

“Of course, you can,” the voice stated. “But you don’t even know the proper way to fight. With your current strength, it will be impossible for you to defeat them.

“However, if you manage to control your true powers, you can save your friends. Are you ready to embrace your destiny?”

The young man didn’t need to think before answering this question. Right now, all that mattered was that he could join the battle so that he and his friends could live.

“What must I do?” Charles asked.

“Fight against your destiny,” the voice replied seriously. “You’re someone who isn’t supposed to live. And yet, someone has knowingly risked his life to change that fate and give you a new shot at life.”

The image then focused on Alex, who was now covered in wounds.

He could barely lift the shield in his left hand, but he still blocked the attack that was meant for Elaine, causing him to collapse on top of Charles before losing consciousness.

“Remember this, Charles Lambert. Your life no longer belongs to you. Someone is willing to pay the price just so you can live another day. Even if the world becomes your enemy, he alone will not. Do not forget that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In front of Charles, a black orb then appeared, oozing with powerful fluctuations.

“Go forth, Challenger,” the voice said. “Challenge your destiny until it bends to your will.”

Charles reached out to the black orb and pressed it over his chest.

A moment later, a blood-curdling scream escaped his lips as the black orb merged with his body, taking root deep inside his heart and soul.

— — —

Present Time...

The Stag of Twilight, Aurhorn, could no longer see, which was probably for the best.

The person whom it had tried to kill over and over again was now biting its neck like a savage animal that hungered for flesh and blood.

Charles, whose entire body was covered in black armor with gold stripes, wrapped his arms around the Boss Monster’s body and started to feast upon its flesh.

The other Dungeon Monsters roared in anger and lunged in his direction, ignoring Alex and the rest, who were on their last legs.

They threw themselves into the fray as if they had lost all reason. Their instincts strongly urged them to kill Charles by any means necessary.

It didn't matter how many of them died. As long as they were able to complete their mission, that would be enough.

Charles, who seemed to have also entered a berserk state, welcomed them all with open arms and a mouth filled to the brim with razor-sharp teeth.

It was a gruesome sight.

It was a fight of monsters against a monster, who wished nothing more than to devour and eliminate anything in existence.

While this was happening, Alex finally regained his consciousness, but he was thoroughly incapable of moving his body.

He forced himself to look at the battle. There, he saw the black-armored creature fighting tooth and nail against countless monsters surrounding it.

Suddenly, a blue window screen appeared in front of him, making his eyes widen in shock.

— — —

< Charles Lambert >

"The stars do not whisper, they scream my name."

Monster Rank: Rank 3 Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Legendary

Type: Void-Touched

Status: Forced Monsterfication (Berserk State)

Health: ?????? / ??????

Mana: ?????? / ??????

Active Skills: ????

Passive Skills: ????, Challenger's Mark.

< ???? >

— I died in silence. What came back doesn't need your mercy.

< Void-Touched >

— To be Void-Touched is neither a blessing nor a curse. It is a condition of survival beyond the edge of sanity.

— To be Void-Touched is to be remembered by something the world tried to forget.

— — —

"V-Void-Touched?!" Alex gasped after reading Charles' status window.

He could only see the information of monsters, never the status window of people in the world of Arcana.

The fact that he could see Charles' status meant that the teenage boy had transformed into a monster.

But Alex felt relieved after seeing his status of "forced monsterfication".

This meant that his friend still hadn't reached the point of no return. In other words, the teen could still be saved.

Due to the countless particles of light that were shining around Charles, who was in a berserk state, it was hard to see him with the naked eye.

Aurhorn, who had terrorized them earlier, was now lying on the floor with its legs broken, unable to stand.

The most it could do was to move by dragging its body bit by bit, but doing so was futile.

Even in his berserk state, as he continued to fight the monsters around him, Charles made sure that his prey wouldn't be able to get away.

"M-Master," Alex called out to Cairo, prompting the latter to crouch down to help him.

"Don't talk," Cairo said before taking out a purple potion. "Just drink this. It will hurt, but it's better than nothing."

Alex didn't hesitate and drank the bitter potion, which made his throat burn as if he were chugging a bottle of vodka.

Heat washed over his body, making him regain a bit of his strength.

“Master, we need to stop Charles before he completely becomes corrupted,” Alex said after regaining the ability to talk. “If we let him continue in that state, he will really turn into a monster, unable to return to being human.”

“Okay,” Cairo replied.

Alex was familiar with the term Void-Touched as it was part of ELO’s lore.

The Void-Touched were neither good nor evil.

But since they acted on their primal instincts, they were treated as monsters who attacked anything that they deemed hostile to them.

Some were naturally born as monsters, while others were transformed into monsters after meeting certain requirements that no one had discovered in the game.

The Rank 6 in the Global Rankings of ELO was a Void-Touched who could freely transform into a monster at will.

Last but not least, it was said that only thirteen Void-Touched could exist at a time.

Just as Alex and Cairo were about to make their move, Aurhorn, which had made things extremely difficult for all of them, cried out in distress for one last time before turning into particles of light.

Chapter 113: A Fool’s Journey

Charles had torn off Aurhorn’s head from its body. The brutality horrified his allies, but he appeared completely unfazed.

The monsters continued to attack him, but he was simply too strong and too fast for them to defeat.

Even the joined forces of the Rank 3 Lizardmen and the Mini Boss Lizardman Berserker failed to stop his rampage. They perished by his hands in less than a minute.

Just as Alex's mind went into overdrive thinking of what to do next, Charles shifted his attention to them.

The black knight then let out a horrifying roar before charging in their direction.

However, when Charles was only a few meters away from Alex, a black blur flew past him.

The next second, the black knight's body slammed into the wall.

A young lady wearing a fox mask had arrived, kicking Charles away from Alex just in time.

Alex knew the perfect opportunity had come and immediately used Shield Charge to close the distance and smash his shield on Charles' head.

Sparks flew as the young man's shield hit the black helmet with a loud clang.

"Wake up, Charles!" Alex roared. "Shield Bash!"

Another clanging sound echoed inside the dungeon as Alex desperately and repeatedly slammed his shield on the black knight's head.

"Shield Bash!"

"Shield Bash!"

"Shield Bash!"

"Shield Bash!"

"Shield Bash!"

“Shield Bash!”

Just looking at this scene made everyone’s teeth itch. Well, it was a very cruel scene.

“W-Wait!” Charles, who was back in control of his body, cried out. “I’m awak—arghh!”

Unable to stop in time, Alex smacked the pitiful boy once more, causing him to lose the consciousness he had just regained.

“Alex, stop!” Cairo grabbed hold of Alex’s left arm while Lavinia held his right, stopping him from pummeling the already unconscious boy.

“Ah!” Alex finally snapped out of his daze and realized Charles had already reverted to his human form.

He had truly felt desperate earlier, so he had hit Charles like the latter was a stubborn whack-a-mole mole without stopping. Not to mention, the sound of his shield hitting the black knight’s helmet had numbed his eardrums, so he had temporarily gone deaf.

At that moment, the sound of guards arriving in the dungeon reached their ears.

“Everyone, are you alright?!”

“What the?! Is this really a monster outbreak?!”

“Damn! Protect the trial takers now!”

“Peace Keepers, advance!”

The Peace Keepers, who were the private army of Frieden Academy, clashed with the monsters who were still active in the vicinity.

While this was happening, several of the medics summoned a stretcher and carefully laid Charles on it.

“Take the injured outside of the dungeon!” the Captain of the Peace Keepers ordered.

““Yes, Sir!””

Alex, who was almost like a spent candle, didn’t resist and allowed several Clerics to put him on a stretcher as well.

His left arm was broken, and his right arm also felt as if it would soon break.

Cairo and the others were still able to walk with some assistance, so they simply left on their own two feet.

After Charles exited the dungeon, the effect of Challenger’s Mark also dissipated.

However, this didn’t mean the monsters on the first floor would immediately return to the lower floors.

The various Professors, like Professor Elias, and their escorts were ordered to eliminate the remaining monsters and investigate the cause of the monster outbreak.

However, none of them would find the real reason because Alex’s group had already prepared for this in advance.

They simply said they had heard rumbling sounds inside the dungeon, and before they knew it, monsters from the lower floors had started to appear along their path.

But after this chaotic interrogation ended, Alex tried to ask who the person wearing the fox mask was, claiming that he wanted to thank them for coming to their rescue.

However, the Peace Keepers only said that the young man would meet that person in the academy and that he could just thank them personally when they see each other again.

After the Peace Keepers left, Lavinia entered the infirmary room where Alex was being treated and sat on the bed.

“Are you feeling better?” Lavinia asked, looking at the temporary cast on Alex’s left arm.

“I’ll live,” Alex replied. “Thank you, Lavinia. You saved me a couple of times earlier.”

“What are you talking about?” Lavinia shook her head. “You saved me a couple of times as well, so let’s call it even.”

“Okay.” Alex smiled. “By the way, have you seen that person wearing a fox mask? I want to thank him.”

“You mean thank ‘her,’” Lavinia corrected.

“Her?” Alex blinked. “She’s a girl?”

“Yes.” Lavinia nodded.

“How do you know?”

“Women’s intuition.”

“...”

“What?” Lavinia arched an eyebrow. “You don’t believe me?”

“Of course, I believe you,” Alex answered, not wanting to prolong this topic any longer. “How is Charles?”

A giggle escaped Lavinia’s lips after hearing the young man’s question.

“His face is black and blue after a certain Oathkeeper smacked him repeatedly on the head with a heavy shield,” Lavinia said in a teasing tone.

“Lavinia, you know I have a special skill,” Alex said.

“What skill?” Lavinia arched an eyebrow.

“A skill that makes me forget about embarrassing things that happened to me,” Alex stated. “So, I have no recollection of what happened inside the dungeon. Everything is a blur to me right now.”

“What a very convenient skill.” Lavinia sneered. “It seems you will be forgetting a lot of things from this point onward.”

Alex chuckled, only to wince in pain immediately. The injuries he had received wouldn’t heal right away, so he had no choice but to bear with them.

“Lavinia, thank you,” Alex said.

“I just said that we’re even. Why are you thanking me again?” Lavinia asked.

“It’s because you helped Charles clear the dungeon,” Alex replied softly. “You have no idea how thankful I am to you, to Master, Elaine, Efa, and Roselia for accompanying us in this journey.

“If one of you hadn’t been there, we might not have been able to make it. So, thank you very much.”

Lavinia didn't respond right away and simply held Alex's gaze. She had been taught the ways of spies, so she could tell that he was being sincere with his words.

"You're welcome," Lavinia replied after a minute had passed. "But my help isn't free. You now owe me a favor."

"Okay." Alex nodded. "As long as it's within my ability, I'll do it."

"Mmm." Lavinia smiled. "Rest for now. The second phase of the Trial of Frieden Academy will start in two days. We're just halfway done."

After saying those words, Lavinia left the room so Alex could rest.

A few hours later...

Poke

"Nghh..."

Poke *Poke*

"Ngh.. Mnh...."

Poke *Poke* *Poke*

"Nghh!"

Poke *Poke* *Poke* *Poke*

“Oh my God! Have mercy on me, Dim Dim!”

“Dim~”

The Dim Sum God giggled because it had finally managed to wake Alex.

“Dim Dim,” Dim Dim said, lightly poking Alex’s cheek.

“You want me to go with you?” Alex asked before shifting his gaze to the window of his room.

The first rays of sunlight were peeking through his window, which meant that morning had finally come.

“Can I rest for a few more minutes?” Alex inquired.

Dim Dim shook its head. “Dim.”

“It’s that important?”

“Dim!”

Alex was still exhausted, but he couldn’t help but wonder where the Dim Sum God planned to take him. Besides, Dim Dim looked very serious, so he decided to follow the little guy instead of getting poked into oblivion.

The young man followed behind Dim Dim, who was humming a tune as they strolled on the streets of the City of Harmonia.

The location they were in seemed like a private place, based on the meager number of people on the streets.

A few minutes later, Dim Dim pointed at a sign in the distance with a smile on its face.

Sunveil Orphanage.

Just as Alex was about to ask why Dim Dim had brought him to such a place, the Dim Sum God motioned for him to follow.

Alex smiled faintly and followed Dim Dim towards the gate.

He didn't go inside and only peeked.

However, when he saw the familiar teenage boy in the distance, he finally understood where Dim Dim had taken him.

Charles was hugging a little girl who seemed to be around five years old.

She was crying and hugging her brother very tightly, as if she had missed him terribly.

At that moment, Alex felt something warm and wet slide down the side of his face.

He used his right hand to touch his cheek and confirmed that tears were indeed streaming down his face.

"I see," Alex said softly. "So this is the continuation of your story, Charles."

Charles Lambert's Tutorial Quest had been deemed impossible to clear.

Countless players, even professional gamers, had tried, and all had given up in the end.

After spending nearly a year playing Story Mode, Alex had finally been able to complete his quest, but he had never seen what happened next.

What was happening right before his eyes was something that 99.99% of the player base of ELO wouldn't witness in their lifetimes.

Charles reunited with his sister, Eris, who was suffering from the disease, Child's Bane.

A disease that had a 100% fatality rate among children, preventing them from reaching the age of ten.

Charles might have finished his tutorial quest, but his story was far from over.

Until he found a way to cure his little sister from the disease, the teenage boy would face more challenges and hardships in his life in the academy.

Suddenly, Alex felt something soft press over his cheeks, wiping his tears away.

"Thank you, Dim Dim," Alex said as the Dim Sum God smiled faintly.

But despite all this, Alex's tears continued to fall because he felt that his heart was finally at peace.

Charles Lambert had defied his destiny, and the continuation of his story was finally about to begin.

Chapter 114: Mission Rewards [Part 1]

Alex and Dim Dim returned to the infirmary, not wanting to disturb the touching reunion of Charles and his little sister.

His injuries had yet to heal completely, but he had mostly recovered from his ordeals in the dungeon—well, except for his arm, which was currently in a cast and couldn't really move.

Alex found the Peace Keeper in charge of him and expressed his gratitude before officially discharging. He then left, planning to meet up with his master and friends.

When he was near the inn, he met a familiar pair of Adventurers, who quickly approached him after they caught sight of him.

"Alex!" Efa waved in his direction as her smile lit up her face.

"Good morning, Efa," Alex greeted. "Good morning, Elaine."

"Dim Dim~"

"Good morning, Alex," Elaine replied. "Good morning, Dim Dim."

"Hey, are you sure you can leave the infirmary?" Efa asked, her eyes drawn to the cast on the young man's arm. "Won't you have problems taking the second trial tomorrow?"

"Even if I have problems, I still need to go," Alex answered. "Don't worry. I have Dim Dim with me. With the two of us working together, we can definitely wing it. Isn't that right, Dim Dim?"

"Ahem~" Dim Dim stood up straighter and taller, as if telling Efa and Elaine that it would take care of Alex, no problem!

The two had originally planned to visit Alex in the infirmary. But since he was already headed to the inn where they stayed, the two ladies assisted him.

"I won't get lost!" Alex protested to no avail as Elaine and Efa insisted on walking behind him so they could keep an eye on him like he was a toddler learning to walk.

When they entered the inn, Alex saw his master sipping a cup of coffee in the lobby.

"You look better now," Cairo remarked as soon as he saw Alex. "I'm sure even your mother wouldn't have recognized you if she had seen you a few hours ago."

'... Actually, I don't know who my mom is,' Alex thought. 'In any case, even if I had grown up with her, I don't look the same as before, so she probably wouldn't have recognized me.'

Of course, the young man kept this thought inside his head and just smiled at his master, who had helped him a lot in the Trial of Beginnings.

"Tomorrow, you'll be taking the true trial of Frieden Academy," Cairo said seriously. "Many say it's harder than the first trial, so..."

"I doubt it," Alex replied before the Catkin could finish speaking. "I mean, can Frieden Academy's second trial possibly be harder than everything we went through in the dungeon, Master?"

Cairo blinked once, then twice, before shaking his head.

"No," Cairo replied. "If the second trial surpasses the difficulty of the one we went through, then they won't have new students this year."

"Right?" Alex smirked. "It's not like you experience a Dungeon Outbreak and fight against Rank 3 and Rank 4 Monsters every day. But just to be safe, we need to stock up on our secret weapon, Dim Dim."

"Dim!" Dim Dim nodded seriously.

The Dim Sum God had run out of brittle vials, which it used to throw at its enemies.

"Have you eaten yet?" Cairo inquired because it seemed like if he didn't say anything quickly, his disciple would forget about eating and leave to shop for some brittle vials and chili and pepper powders.

"Not yet," Alex answered. "I want to eat something good. I've only been drinking bitter potions."

Cairo chuckled. He'd seen his disciple drink them, and it was pretty obvious how much the latter hated them. But what choice did he have? Those bitter potions helped him recover faster.

At that moment, Lavinia and Roselia also appeared.

The former visibly brightened up after seeing Alex. So relieved was the young lady of the Hartwell Clan that she did not notice her brother and maid shaking their heads helplessly.

It was just too obvious how Lavinia turned cheery the very moment she saw that the young man was faring better and seemed to be on his way to a full recovery.

After breakfast, Alex and Dim Dim went out to shop, intending to stock up on everything they might need for the trial.

Since Lavinia had nothing to do, she volunteered to accompany him to the shop.

Roselia was Lavinia's bodyguard, so she naturally tagged along.

As for Cairo, Efa, and Elaine, they decided to visit the Adventurer's Guild of the City of Harmonia, planning to see if there were decent quests that could be finished within a day.

Knowing they couldn't accompany Alex, Lavinia, and Charles in the second trial, they decided they'd just do their best to cheer them on from the side.

Alex and his entourage soon arrived at the shop that sold brittle vials. Watching the young man and the bun chuckle evilly to themselves after buying over five hundred brittle vials from the confused shopkeeper, Lavinia and Roselia couldn't help but smile.

Dim Dim then proposed buying a few ingredients, so their trump cards would have some variety.

Alex wholeheartedly agreed, and so the two bought a few other things aside from chili powder and black pepper powder.

After returning to the inn, the Dim Sum God started working and happily poured the mixtures inside the brittle vials, which it considered its secret weapon.

On the other hand, Alex opened his status page to see the notifications that had appeared last night.

He hadn't read it because he had been in a state of complete exhaustion and pain.

Now that he felt better, he took some time to read the notifications, which confirmed that he had completed one of his missions.

< You have completed a Hidden Quest! >

< Quest Name: The Oathkeeper's First Oath >

— You could have turned away. You could have forgotten. Yet in a fleeting moment, you chose to defy the world's silence and bind yourself to a promise unseen by most.

— Deep beneath the weave of fate, something ancient stirs. It is watching, weighing, waiting for the conclusion of your Oath.

— Fulfill your first Oath, and step onto a path veiled in mist and shadow, where loyalty carves deeper than any blade, and broken promises echo forever.

— Know this: the Oath remembers, even if you forget. So, Oathkeeper, don't make promises you can't keep.

< Quest Objective: Help Charles Lambert reach the Town of Harmonia through the Dungeon of Beginnings. >

< Rewards >

2,000 Arcana Points, 2 High-Grade Magic Crystals, One Random Legendary Item Ticket, Rare Skill Book: Shield of Thorns, Rare Skill Book: Enchant Holy.

< Bonus Rewards >

— You have created a unique skill called Rear-End Thrust.

< Rear-End Thrust >

“They’ll never shit—err sit the same way again.”

— Damage of this skill scales with the combined stats of Agility, Dexterity, and Strength.

— An attack that bypasses all defenses and deals true damage.

— Always deal critical damage, always personal.

— Deals extra damage against humans.

— This attack can hit incorporeal enemies even if they don’t have a physical body.

———

< Hidden Consequence has been unlocked! >

— Charles Lambert will treat you as a good friend and will never betray you for life.

— Void-Touched Creatures will not act aggressively against you, even if you happen to meet them for the first time.

Alex couldn't believe his eyes. The rewards for the Oathkeeper's First Oath had far surpassed his expectations.

Although the corner of his lips twitched as he read about the unique skill, Rear-End Thrust, everything else was great!

What made him especially happy was the ticket that allowed him to acquire a random Legendary Item!

This golden ticket was up for sale at the Arcana Shop, but it cost 500,000 Arcana Points.

"I wonder what I will get," Alex muttered as he held the golden ticket in his hands.

Since he received it for free, he decided to activate the ticket and acquire a Legendary Item, which he hoped would be extremely useful to him.

Chapter 115: Mission Rewards [Part 2]

Dim Dim carefully mixed the ingredients they had bought, trying different combinations and storing them inside the brittle vials. While the Dim Sum God busied itself, Alex decided to use the golden ticket to get a legendary item.

A brilliant light flashed as the ticket started fading. The young man looked at it with bated breath, waiting for his legendary item to appear.

A moment later, the golden light receded, leaving only an item floating in front of Alex. At the sight of it, he blinked in confusion.

"Huh?" He looked at his 'legendary item' that didn't look legendary at all. "What is this?!"

Floating in front of him was a wooden sandal, which could be seen anywhere in the world.

However, for some reason, it looked strangely familiar.

Alex reached out to grab the sandal, and a blue window screen appeared to show its information.

— —

< Grandma Agnes' Sandal >

“More effective than fire, poison, and prayers combined.”

Item Grade: Legendary

Type: Melee / Throwing Weapon

Stats:

— Attack +50 when used against normal monsters.

— Attack +500 When used against Insect-type monsters and Insect Humanoids.

— Grants the passive skill, Insect Slayer [EX]

— Deals True Damage

— This weapon is now soul-bound to Alex Stratos.

Melee Weapon Bonus Effect:

— Inflicts a 1000% increase in damage on Insect Type enemies and Insectoid Humanoids.

— Has a 10% chance to insta-kill insect monsters with each smack.

— Deals massive Critical Damage to insect-type monsters (Attack x4)

Throwing Weapon Bonus Effect:

— It can be thrown six times a day, and will always hit its target even if it travels at the speed of sound. The sandal will teleport instantly back to your hand after it hits its target.

< Insect Slayer [EX] >

— Insect Type Monsters and Insect Humanoids fear you.

— Has a 30% chance of making Insect Type Monsters and Insect Humanoids flee after seeing you.

— Decrease the Physical and Magical attacks of Insect Type Monsters and Insect Humanoids by 50% within a mile-wide radius.

— Decrease the Attack Speed and Movement Speed of Insect Type Monsters and Insect Humanoids by 50% within a mile-wide radius.

— Bypass the defenses of Insect Type Monsters and Insect Humanoids.

— —

“I knew it!” Alex did a fist pump after seeing the information about the Legendary Sandal in his hand.

There was a very famous ELO Player who specialized in bug extermination. His Global Ranking was in the top 300, but people didn't look down on him.

Why?

Because he had, on his own, killed the Legendary Boss Monster, Beelzebub, as well as a few other Insect Boss Monsters that even Raid Teams had failed to defeat.

When it came to insect extermination, no one else in the game could outdo him, for he wielded the very same sandal that was now in Alex's possession.

The only weapon in the game that could insta-kill a Boss Monster.

And thus, the man had been hailed as the one and only Insect Slayer.

He always went to battle holding a single sandal, but no one knew if that sandal was just for display or the real deal.

Now, Alex could confirm it was the real deal. He was very happy to acquire the ultimate insect killer!

"Damn, I now have so many options in mind," Alex muttered.

He could practically raid Insect-type Dungeons and farm experience points without assistance or problems.

With this sandal in hand, he no longer had anything to fear, even if he were up against Rank 5 and Rank 6 Boss Monsters.

As long as they were Insect-Type, they were as good as experience points in his eyes.

Unfortunately, there were only two Insect-Type Dungeons in the Kingdom of Avalon, and both were under the control of Frieden Academy.

'I'll cross that bridge when I get there.' Alex sighed. 'I'm just glad I don't have to worry about Insect-Type Monsters anymore.'

In the game, Insect-Type Monsters were one of the hardest enemies to fight, especially when you were out in the wild.

Insect swarms might not be common, but they were just as dangerous as facing a monster stampede.

The young man then kept his new weapon inside his storage ring and used the two High-Grade Magic Crystals to increase his Magic Points.

He also consumed the two skill books, allowing him to learn Shield of Thorns and Enchant Holy Element.

Truth be told, Alex had wanted to use his Rare [EX] Skill Book to learn the skill Enchant Element [EX]. This would allow him to enchant his shields with a random elemental effect. Moreover, if he used it often enough, he would learn new skills like Fire Shield, Water Shield, Earth Shield, and Wind Shield.

He had put off using the rare skill book because other good [EX] Skills complemented his Job Class, and he didn't want to rush and regret it.

However, since he already had the skills, Enchant Fire, and Enchant Holy, he decided to just buy the rest of the Elemental Skill Books, which cost 5,000 AP each, through the Arcana Shop.

Enchant Elemental [EX] might be a good skill, but the elemental buffs that could be gotten from it were random.

In the end, Alex thought it would be better if he could freely choose the element he would infuse his items with, making them more effective in battle.

His passive skill, Shield of Thorns, was also a very good addition to his arsenal.

Everguard had a 5% damage reflect for successfully blocking physical attacks.

The Shield of Thorns was a passive skill that reflected 10% physical damage for each successful block.

This raised Alex's damage reflect ability to 15%, which would become more annoying as he became stronger.

The young man then checked his character information and smiled. He liked what he was seeing.

— —

Alex Stratos

Age: 17

Alignment: Chaotic Good

Mana: 162/162

Job Class: Oathkeeper

Strength – 50 [+6]

Intelligence – 30 [+3]

Dexterity – 20 [+3]

Agility – 109 [+3]

Constitution – 71 [+4]

Stamina – 71 [+4]

Magic – 159 [+3]

Luck – 24 [+3]

Available Stat Points: 0

AP: 4,440

Active Skills: Oathkeeper's Duty, Shield [EX], Shield Bash, Unyielding Pact, Echo of the Sworn, Balance Breaker, Shield Charge, Rear-Ender Thrust, Enchant Fire, Enchant Holy

Passive Skills: Improved Stone Throw, Head Shot, Rebuke of Steel, Shield of Thorns

— —

'With these stats, I'm no longer in the bottom tier of the First Years in the academy,' Alex mused. 'But compared to the Main Characters, I'm still just a side character like Charles. After all, they are the true Protagonists, born with cheat skills and abilities.'

After heaving a deep sigh, Alex helped Dim Dim mix their ingredients. As his left arm was still injured and he had been advised to avoid using it for the next few days, the Dim Sum God was the one to carry out the delicate task of filling the glass vials.

Alex's injury also meant that he had to rely on his partner to help him overcome the last trial they would face before entering the academy gates as its scholarship students.

Chapter 116: The Second Trial Begins

“Good luck to all of you.” Cairo lightly smiled at Alex, Lavinia, and Charles.

“The three of you should pass, okay?” Efa smirked as she hugged Alex, Lavinia, and Charles at once. “If not, this big sister will P.U.N.I.S.H you individually.”

“After all we’ve been through, I’m sure the three of you will be fine,” Elaine stated. “But do not be overconfident. Especially you, Alex. You’re injured right now, so don’t do anything reckless, alright?”

“I won’t do anything reckless,” Alex promised.

Roselia leaned closer to Lavinia, who was beside her, and whispered something in the young lady’s ears.

“Alex is injured right now,” Roselia muttered. “This is the perfect time for you to score some brownie points, My Lady.”

“... Roselia, what are you talking about?” Lavinia was as composed as ever.

“I’m sure you understand what I’m talking about, My Lady,” the handmaiden replied. “As you can see, Alex has this odd ability to attract people to him. If you don’t use this opportunity to improve your relationship with him, you might have a hard time once he becomes popular in the academy.”

The maid then lightly tapped Lavinia’s shoulder and gave her a few more words of encouragement.

Checking the time on the clock on the wall, Cairo decided that they should now head to the academy so the three trial takers wouldn’t be late for their second trial.

They walked for fifteen minutes before reaching the path that led to Frieden Academy.

And just as Alex had expected, it was filled with many trial takers. The sight of the crowd made him scratch his head.

'There must be at least a thousand trial takers here,' Alex thought. 'I wonder what kind of trial we'll be taking today.'

As the group walked towards the gate, the Guards stationed there blocked their path.

"Only trial takers are allowed beyond this point," the one of the Guards said. "Anyone else, please, just wait for the results of the trial."

Cairo, Efa, and Elaine complied without complaints.

"This is as far as we go." Cairo patted Alex's shoulder. "If you fail, get ready to suffer hellish training."

"I won't fail, Master," Alex replied firmly.

The young man then shot a brief glance at Efa and Elaine, who were giving a pep talk to Lavinia and Charles.

If he failed the second trial, he wouldn't have to worry about Cairo's hellish training. After all, what awaited him would be the system's death by snusnu.

In any case, he had no intention of failing, so he promised his master that he would pass the test without fail.

After passing through the gates, the Guards led the trial takers to the grand plaza of Frieden Academy, where a stage had been built just for this event.

A few minutes later, an old man with white hair and a white beard climbed up the stage with a faint smile on his face.

His blue eyes scanned the aspiring scholarship students of the academy, as if checking if there were any promising individuals who had come this year.

Alex immediately recognized the old man. Thanks to the game, of course. The other party was none other than the Headmaster of Frieden Academy, Rowan Valdemont, and one of the Thirteen Paragons of the World of Arcana.

The Paragons were the strongest beings in this world. Their presence commanded awe, fear, and admiration from those who had the honor of seeing them in the flesh.

"I welcome you all to Frieden Academy," Rowan said. "I'm sure many of you have traveled far just to be here, but only a select few will remain to study within the academy's walls."

"However, know this. Even if you fail, it is not the end, for you can always try again next year. There is no age limit to learning. So, don't give up hope, and always strive for excellence."

The Headmaster's speech was met with silence, but all the trial takers looked at him with determination.

Rowan also understood that everyone must be feeling anxious about the upcoming trial, so he smiled and explained the rules of the second trial of Frieden Academy.

"This year, the staff of the academy have decided to conduct the second trial on a deserted island," Rowan explained. "The format will be a battle royale, and all of you will be sent there to eliminate each other. The last twenty survivors will be accepted as the scholarship students of the academy."

As soon as the format of the second test was announced, the trial takers couldn't help but look at each other.

Before those words, everyone had seen each other as mere strangers.

But now, they saw each other as potential enemies.

The atmosphere in the venue suddenly turned tense, as if a war was about to erupt at any moment.

However, the Headmaster's voice reached everyone's ears, forcing them to once again focus their attention on him.

"Don't worry. No one can die from this examination. Once you deal a killing blow to someone, they will immediately be teleported out of the domain. With this, everyone can fight to the fullest without worries."

The worry in the hearts of the trial takers decreased drastically after they heard that none of them would be killed in the process.

"Aside from your fellow trial takers, you should also be wary of the island's environment," Rowan added. "There are Rank 1 up to Rank 3 Monsters that roam the land and sky. There are also four Rank 4 Boss Monsters, each one located on the North, South, East, and West of the island.

"If these Boss Monsters are defeated, they will drop a sigil. The one who touched the sigil will automatically be teleported out of the island, and become a scholarship student.

"We will only accept twenty scholars this year. However, those who could get the sigil will not be counted among those twenty scholars. This means we can have up to twenty-four eligible individuals this year. So, do not be afraid to challenge yourselves.

"However, let me say this to avoid any misunderstandings in the future. Those four Boss Monsters are very powerful. Even forming a team might not be enough to take it down, so challenge them at your own risk."

Rowen gazed at the trial takers before continuing his explanation.

"This trial will last for three days. Also, a mist will appear at the outer edges of the island and slowly expand every hour. This will decrease the space where all of you can fight and hide.

"If more than twenty candidates still remain in the last two hours of the trial, a swarm of monsters will appear. They will then proceed to eliminate as many candidates as possible until only twenty are left.

“However, on the extremely rare occasion that there are more than twenty survivors after the duration of the second trial ends, all of these survivors will become scholars of the academy.”

After hearing that entirety of Rowan’s explanation, the trial takers felt more optimistic, believing that they only needed to survive until the time ran out to pass the trial.

But the Professors of Frieden Academy only regarded the hopeful candidates with barely-disguised pity.

The monster swarm was the last resort of the second trial to weed out the excess trial takers.

What did this mean? This meant that their chances of surviving it were actually very low.

“I’ll give you all a minute to compose yourselves before I send you all inside my domain,” Rowan declared. “Prepare your heart, body, and mind, for this might just be the hardest trial that you will take in your teenage years.”

Alex glanced at Lavinia and Charles, and the two nodded back at him.

“Let’s try to regroup as fast as possible,” Alex said. “Dim Dim and I will find the two of you no matter what.”

“Ahem!” Dim Dim raised its body, as if telling everyone they could count on it to find them.

“You don’t have to hurry to find us,” Lavinia replied. “Just survive, and we will definitely meet without fail.”

Charles nodded. “I’ll see you all inside the domain.”

A minute later, Rowan raised his hand, which was holding a small crystal ball.

Suddenly, the participants turned into beams of light and flew toward the crystal ball until none of them was left.

Chapter 117: Survivors Of A Calamity

Alex found himself standing on a beach after regaining his senses.

Fortunately, no one else was around. This was a deliberate decision made by Rowan to ensure that every candidate had enough time and space to ready themselves before they started the trial.

The island was at least sixteen square miles. The thousand trial takers were spread out across the entire island, and they had all been teleported a distance away from each other.

But Alex knew that thirty minutes from now, the giant island would gradually shrink, forcing those on the edges to move closer to the center.

Being sent to the outer edges might seem advantageous to him, but in truth, it was not the case at all.

The most fortunate in this trial were those who had been sent closer to the center, for they could get to searching for a hiding spot early on and buy themselves a day or two of peace where they wouldn't need to find anyone.

Meanwhile, Alex would have to constantly move closer to the center, which meant that he was more likely to encounter potential enemies.

Of course, this wasn't that much of a problem. After all, Alex had a cheat!

The young man immediately opened his status page and checked his map for his current location.

Four dots the size of a quail egg blinked at the north, south, east, and west of the island, as if signifying the four cardinal directions.

The dots were red, orange, yellow, and blue.

Alex immediately recognized these threats as the Boss Monsters, which the Headmaster had mentioned earlier.

Aside from that, he also saw two green blinking dots on the map, which represented his allies, Lavinia and Charles.

The young lady was located near the center of the map, while Charles was sent to the northern edge of the island.

Alex was in the south, so if he wished to reunite with his friends, he would need to head to the center and regroup with Lavinia first.

'I knew this would not be easy,' Alex thought as he stared at the map. Most of it was still shrouded in black fog, signifying unexplored territory.

He could only access the paths and other information after he passed through them.

'Let's see if this works,' Alex mused as he activated the Map of Forgotten Paths.

Immediately, several yellow blinking dots appeared on the map. At the sight of that, the young man did a fist bump.

The yellow blinking dots were labeled as "treasures," which confirmed his assumption that there were treasures scattered around the island.

"Dim Dim, let's do a bit of treasure hunting first," Alex said. "Let's avoid any confrontation for now. So, if you sense anyone around, warn me right away."

Dim Dim nodded in understanding. "Dim!"

Since he only had three hours to collect treasures, Alex no longer hesitated and ran toward the nearest yellow dot. Despite his excitement, he reminded himself to remain alert.

North of the Island...

Charles slowly explored his surroundings, making sure to be as careful as possible.

After unlocking his ability, Void-Touched, he had become more sensitive to signs of life around him.

He didn't want to fight anyone if possible. But that didn't mean he would not retaliate if he was targeted by the other trial takers.

His priority was to regroup with Alex and Lavinia since they were the only people he could trust on the island.

'I better play it safe,' Charles thought.

The teenage boy then pressed both of his hands on the ground. After a few seconds, a magic circle formed around him.

A moment later, eight black ants, each roughly the length of a forearm, appeared around him.

"Scout the area and report to me immediately if you encounter monsters and humans," Charles commanded.

The Ants heeded their master's command and spread out. Although Charles was still in the process of learning his new powers, he could already do this much.

At the center of the Island...

A trial taker turned into particles of light as Lavinia's sword whip pierced through their body.

After going through a dungeon outbreak, the young lady had not only grown stronger but also more proficient in using her skills and abilities.

While she didn't know where she currently was, she believed that Alex and Dim Dim would come to find her.

All she needed to do was survive until then.

Just like Charles, Lavinia didn't trust anyone aside from her friends.

The young man she killed earlier had tried to ambush her. Unfortunately for him, Lavinia had already detected his presence and deliberately feigned weakness to bait him out of hiding.

"You chose the wrong target," Lavinia muttered before walking away. "One down, 998 to go."

Unlike others who planned to hide, the young lady wished to challenge herself and seek other candidates to fight against.

She wanted to push herself to the limit and see just how far she could go in the second trial.

For her, this trial was only meant to hone her skills further.

Unlike Alex and Charles, who had no backing, Lavinia was different.

Her grandfather was friends with the Headmaster of the Academy, and her tuition fee had already been paid.

She had decided to join the trial to accompany Alex simply out of worry.

Aside from seeking strong opponents, her goal was to help the young man pass the trial so both of them could study together in the academy.

'Now, where should I go?' Lavinia wondered.

Unlike Alex, who had a map, the other trial takers had no idea where they currently were.

Because of this, they simply followed their gut instincts and hoped that they could avoid any confrontations until the last day of the battle royale.

— —

Outside of the domain...

The staff of the academy were looking over hundreds of projections that appeared in the plaza.

Each projection represented a candidate, allowing the Professors to see if there were any outstanding teenagers among the applicants for this year's scholarship test.

"Another one disappeared," a Professor commented. "It seems some of our aspiring students are very eager to eliminate their competitors."

"I hope we can get some talented students this year," a Professor commented. "The scholarship students last year weren't bad, but they're average at best."

"Isn't that why we have decided to limit the number of scholarship students to twenty and switched the trial format to a battle royale?" another teacher replied. "I'm sure we can find some swans among the chickens."

Rowan listened to the discussion of his staff before shifting his gaze to a projection showing Alex and Dim Dim.

He had been paying close attention to Alex, Charles, and Lavinia, the trio who experienced the Dungeon Outbreak together.

During the investigation, the Professors had been left baffled because the magical energy reading of the Dungeon of Beginnings had turned out to be normal.

What did this mean?

This meant that a dungeon outbreak couldn't possibly have happened because there was no reason for it to happen.

However, a dungeon outbreak "did" happen, which made the Headmaster very suspicious of the three trial takers, the survivors of a calamity no one had seen coming.

Chapter 118: So, Are We Betting Or Not?

"It's really too bad we can't watch the second trial." Efa sighed. "Waiting like this makes me anxious."

Elaine couldn't agree more. She also found it hard to sit still, knowing that Alex was participating in the second trial after barely recovering from his injuries.

She could still remember how the young man had tried to dissuade them from going to Briarwood Village in order to repay their debt to him.

Only after the incident transpired did she realize why the young man had told them they could only come after they became Rank 3 in their respective professions.

'If I had gone there as a Rank 2 Swordsman, I'd probably be dead by now,' Elaine thought. 'Good thing we listened to Alex.'

For her, Alex was an enigma.

He had arrived at the Town of Thaloria with Dim Dim and claimed he came from a very faraway place.

Back then, he was just starting out as an adventurer, and yet, he came to save him despite him being the weakest of them all.

The young man then left and returned as the Oathkeeper, who had the entire Clawford Tribe backing him up.

Then, he went to Briarwood Village to help a complete stranger and even asked his master, Cairo, to accompany him. That alone proved he had already known the Dungeon Outbreak would happen.

Of course, Elaine was very tempted to ask Alex many questions, but she felt he would only change the subject if she tried to get to the bottom of this.

The Flame Swordsman then glanced at Cairo, who was sipping his tea sparingly. Among the three of them, the Catkin likely knew the most about Alex.

"Is there a problem?" Cairo asked after noticing Elaine's gaze.

"No." Elaine shook her head. "I'm just thinking that Alex is really a mysterious person."

"That he is," Cairo replied as he placed his teacup back on the table. "He once told me he's some kind of Seer that can see visions of the future."

"It's not only Alex who is mysterious, you know?" Efa commented. "Dim Dim is also quite mysterious. I mean, I've never seen something like it. Is it a monster? Is it a pet? Or is it something else?"

"Dim Dim doesn't seem like a monster," Elaine said. "Maybe it's some kind of spirit? I don't feel any malice or hostility coming from it."

“Do you remember the time when Alex got drunk?” Efa smirked. “I asked him what kind of Monster Dim Dim was, and he told me that Dim Dim wasn’t a monster but a Deity.”

“A Deity?” Cairo smiled. “Well, maybe it is? There are quite a few Deities in the world, and we can’t possibly say that we know all of them. If Alex says Dim Dim is a deity, then it must really be a deity.”

Roselia, who was listening silently to the conversation, suddenly glanced at the door of the restaurant.

In walked an old Catkin with an eyepatch over his left eye and a smile on his face.

Lavinia’s handmaiden immediately stood up and bowed respectfully to the current Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan.

“Greetings, Sir,” Roselia said while still bowing her head.

“At ease, Roselia,” Ramza replied before taking the seat opposite his grandson. “It seems all of you had an amazing adventure as of late.”

Cairo glanced pointedly at Roselia to silently ask her if she had told his grandfather about what had happened inside the Dungeon of Beginnings.

However, the maid firmly shook her head because she had never done such a thing.

Lavinia had asked Roselia to keep their experiences in the dungeon a secret because she didn’t want her grandfather to know about the dangers she had faced.

“Roselia didn’t tell me anything,” Ramza said in order to clear any misunderstandings. “The Headmaster of the Academy did. We’re old friends—he and I.”

Cairo turned his attention back to the Hartwell Patriarch. “What are you doing here, Grandfather?”

“What else?” Ramza shrugged. “I came to see if Alex and Lavinia will pass the second trial of the academy. So, the four of you should come with me.”

“Where are we going?” Cairo inquired.

“Where else?” Ramza smirked. “The academy, of course.”

“But they’re not allowing anyone to enter the academy grounds during this time.”

“That only applies to people with no connections. Now, enough talk. Let’s go.”

Ramza had only visited the restaurant because his Ninjas had told him that Cairo was there. Now that he had found his grandson, it was time they went to the academy.

Several minutes later, they were stopped at the gate by the guards of the academy.

However, the guards’ tone instantly became more polite after Ramza showed them a golden emblem. They courteously opened the gate so the Patriarch and his entourage could enter.

“See?” Ramza chuckled. “Cairo, you’re very strong, but sometimes, being strong is not enough. You also need to build relationships. When you continue your journey, be like your disciple and talk to people more. You’ll never know who you’ll meet along the way.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Cairo replied. “I will keep this in mind.”

Ramza nodded. He had noticed some changes in his grandson, and he was sure most of it could be attributed to Alex.

The Cairo of the past would have roamed the land in silence, alone, striking down Demon Worshipers and any evil crossing his path.

But being strong meant that you chose to walk the path of loneliness.

He didn't want his grandson to suffer such a fate, so he was quite thankful to Alex.

Back then, Cairo and he hadn't really talked a lot. But now, they could hold a proper conversation, and he could feel his grandson mellowing out a bit.

When they arrived at the plaza, the Headmaster of Frieden Academy chuckled as he shook hands with Ramza.

"You old coot, I don't understand what you're trying to do," Rowan said. "You've already paid the tuition of your granddaughter, so why is she still taking the trial to become a scholarship student? Have you suddenly changed your mind, you stingy miser?"

"Well, my granddaughter has her reasons for joining the trial," Ramza replied. "Anyway, since I have already paid the tuition, I'm not taking it back. I'm not a stingy miser, you know?"

Rowan grinned before waving his hand.

Three of the projections that were hanging in the sky flew in their direction, showing Alex, Lavinia, and Charles.

Ramza immediately recognized the Oathkeeper and his granddaughter. However, he did not recognize the teenage boy.

"Is he Charles?" Ramza asked his grandson.

"Yes, Grandfather," Cairo answered. "He's the reason why Alex went to Briarwood Village."

Cairo had mentioned that Alex planned to meet someone in Briarwood Village, and it had piqued Ramza's curiosity.

However, he hadn't bothered to launch an investigation on the teen lest he offend Alex.

"Hmmm..." Ramza stroked his beard thoughtfully as he paid close attention to the teenage boy who might have been the reason why his grandchildren had experienced something similar to a Dungeon Outbreak.

"Do you know these two young men?" Rowan asked. "Why did you let them take the trial when you can just pay for their tuition as well? Are you hoarding your gold as dowry for your grandson and granddaughter?"

"Something like that," Ramza replied casually. "So, what do you think? Do they have a chance of passing the second trial?"

"The second trial just started, so I don't know if they can pass it," Rowan answered. "But I will tell you this—many talented individuals are taking the trial this year.

"Unless they regroup with each other, they might all get eliminated before the trial ends. This is especially true for that young man with a broken arm."

Ramza turned to look at the projection of Alex, who seemed to be walking confidently in a particular direction.

A minute later, everyone saw the young man finding a treasure chest covered by shrubs. The old Catkin smirked in delight.

"Hey, old friend, would you like to bet with me?" Ramza asked. "If I win, you'll owe me a favor. If you win, I'll owe you a favor. How does that sound?"

"That depends on what kind of bet we are going to have," Rowan answered. "Last time, you tricked me. I will not be fooled a second time."

Ramza chuckled because he had indeed used an underhanded method to win his previous bet with the Headmaster.

“This time, there will be no tricks,” Ramza promised. “I just want to bet that this young man with the broken arm will pass this trial of yours.”

“Oh? You seem very confident.” Rowan smiled. “But I personally created the rules for this year’s second trial. I guarantee it will not be an easy challenge. Do you still want to bet with me?”

“Of course.” Ramza nodded. “So, are we betting or not?”

“Sure.” Rowan glanced at Alex and Dim Dim, who had started throwing rocks at the treasure chest, making Cairo facepalm in embarrassment.

“It’s not a Mimic this time, Dim Dim,” Alex said with a smile.

“Dim!”

Ramza and the rest watched as the young man stored the treasure chest inside his storage ring before leaving his location.

The young man seemed to be in a hurry to go somewhere else.

A few minutes later, he found another treasure chest, then another, and another.

This made the corner of Rowan’s lips twitch. After all, he had personally hidden those treasure chests as rewards for the lucky trial takers who would find them by accident. Supposedly.

Chapter 119: Steel And Strength [Part 1]

Finding a treasure chest once could be considered a stroke of luck.

Finding another in the span of fifteen minutes could still be attributed to luck.

Finding a third treasure chest half an hour later would make anyone think Alex had been born under a lucky star.

But finding a fourth and fifth was enough to make Rowan suspect that this was no mere coincidence.

Especially since the boy seemed to know where exactly the treasures were hidden.

“Who is that kid, Ramza?” Rowan asked. “How is he finding the treasure chests I painstakingly hid with so easily?”

“Him?” Ramza chuckled. “He’s the Oathkeeper of the Clawford Tribe.”

“The Oathkeeper of your tribe?” Rowan frowned. “Surely, you jest. Your clan has never produced an Oathkeeper since your founder died of old age.”

“Right.” Ramza nodded. “But that’s no longer the case. He really is the Oathkeeper of our tribe, so please, take care of him when he becomes a student of your academy.”

Rowan narrowed his eyes at the young man, who seemed to know exactly where his treasure chests were hidden.

“Are you sure,” the Headmaster asked dryly, “that he’s the Oathkeeper, not a Treasure Seeker?”

“Why can’t he be both?” Ramza chuckled. “Well, I have high hopes for him. I hope he really passes this trial, so he can study with my granddaughter at your academy.”

While the two old men were talking, Alex briefly stopped his treasure-hunting activities because Dim Dim warned him that someone was nearby.

The pair immediately hid behind a tree. Once they were safely concealed, Alex looked at where the Dim Sum God was pointing.

A minute later, a young man with short black hair appeared.

In this world, black hair wasn't that uncommon. Even those with silver hair, like Alex, could be found here and there.

However, the young man's body stiffened when he saw the black-haired guy because he recognized him right away.

'Renard?' Alex thought. 'What is he doing here? I thought he got a special admission from the Headmaster to study in the academy?'

Before playing Charles Lambert's story quest, one must first clear the route of one of the three main Heroes or three main Heroines first.

Renard Vale was one of the three Heroes of Endless Leveling Online, and Alex happened to have played this character in the past as well.

He was a commoner born in a village called Windhollow Reach.

It was a secluded village in the mountains located high in the Sylph Shade Highlands, known for its perpetual breezes and floating skybridges strung between cliffs.

One day, a Wyvern attacked their village and nearly wiped out half of its inhabitants.

Fortunately, an Adventurer was passing through and defeated the monster.

Seeing the battle, the boy who was only ten years old at that time, aspired to become someone strong like the savior of their village.

He would then study at Frieden Academy and become one of the future pillars of the Kingdom of Avalon.

'Wait, if he's here, does that mean Nessia is also here?' Alex wondered.

Nessia was one of the three main Heroines of the story. Many female gamers picked her for their first playthrough.

Just like Renard, she was a commoner, but her specialty was in magic.

In fact, Nessia would be known in the future as the Phoenix Tactician because, unlike other Mages, she liked to create magical formations that trapped and incapacitated her opponents.

'Now, what should I do?' Alex mused. 'Should I approach him and ask that we form a team together?'

Alex was very tempted to do that because Renard was a Cheat Character.

He possessed the passive skill Heir of Titans [EX].

Heir of Titans [Passive Skill].

This skill was completely broken because it automatically adds +1 Strength every single time you invested a Stat Point into any stat parameter.

Put a point into Agility? +1 Strength.

Wanted to raise your Constitution? Still +1 Strength.

Even if you allocated a point to Intelligence, it didn't matter because the Strength Stat went up anyway.

If you invested a point into Strength itself, then two points were added instead.

One from your allocation, and one from the passive effect.

In other words, every point put in Strength became two.

What did this mean?

It meant that Renard was a character designed to become an unstoppable juggernaut no matter how he built his stats.

He could specialize in agility or magic for versatility and still grow stronger than pure melee specialists.

It wasn't just power.

It was inevitable.

He wasn't just growing stronger.

He was evolving into a small Titan!

But Renard had a flaw.

He had trust issues.

If Alex were to approach him now and introduce himself, there was a chance that the teenage boy would attack him. After all, this was the goal of the second trial.

To eliminate each other until only twenty were left.

However, Alex was still torn. If he managed to befriend Renard now, wouldn't he have an overpowered ally in the future?

After a brief internal battle, Alex decided to throw caution to the wind because the risk was worth it.

“Who’s there?!” Renard took a fighting stance when he sensed someone on his right side.

“Hi, my name is Alex,” Alex said. “Alex Stratos. I swear I am not a suspicious person.”

“... That’s what all suspicious people say,” Renard pointed out.

“Um, this might sound strange, but the moment I saw you, I felt like I could trust you with my life.”

“Please take your life back. I don’t want anything to do with it.”

Alex did his best to keep the smile on his face from breaking as he continued to talk to the teenager, who was still in a fighting stance.

“Look, I know both of us are here to compete to become scholarship students,” Alex said, switching his tone from friendly to serious. “But won’t it be better if we team up together? That way, I can watch your back, and you watch mine.”

“I don’t trust you,” Renard said calmly. “It will be best if we part ways here. I don’t trust anyone. And if you insist on messing with me, I’ll attack you. You have ten seconds to scram.”

“Wait!” Alex pointed at his left arm, which was still in a cast. “As you can see, my arm is broken. Do I look threatening to you?”

“You must be faking it to lower my guard.” Renard narrowed his eyes. “And even if your injury is real, that gives me more reason not to team up with you because you’ll just be a burden.

“Now, get out of my sight while I’m still being nice. I will count to ten. This is really the last time that I will show you mercy.”

“One... two... three...”

Alex thought carefully about his next move. He didn't know how strong Renard was at this point in time.

But when he had started playing this character in the game, his stats had just broken through to become a Rank 1 Berserker Juggernaut, which was a Legendary Job Class.

Alex was currently a Rank 2 Oathkeeper, so his stats weren't too shabby. Even if the two of them fought right now, that didn't mean that the young man would definitely lose to one of the main Heroes of ELO.

“Eight... Nine.. Ten.” Renard clenched his fist and prepared to lunge at his enemy. “I gave you fair warning, now die!”

The teenage boy didn't hesitate and attacked Alex even though the other party had a broken arm. The second trial was about eliminating competitors, so he didn't feel guilty about doing what he needed to do.

A moment later, a resounding clanging sound spread through the surroundings as the fist of the Berserker Juggernaut met the shield of the Oathkeeper.

Chapter 120: Steel And Strength [Part 2]

After blocking Renard's punch, Alex forcibly took a step back.

But that single exchange taught him an important detail.

'As expected, he had just become a Ranker,' Alex thought. 'I can do this!'

After his blow got blocked, Renard felt a prickle of pain on his punching fist, but he attributed it to the shield's toughness.

Little did he know that Alex could reflect 15% of the physical damage he received back to the attacker as long as he successfully blocked it.

So, Renard didn't overthink the pain and proceeded to unleash a flurry of punches and kicks at his opponent, who was expertly moving his shield to block all of his attacks.

"Dim!" Dim Dim, with a brittle vial already in its hand, asked Alex if it could join the battle.

"No, Dim Dim," Alex replied. "He's not an enemy. For now, keep an eye on other people who might ambush us while we're trading blows."

Dim Dim nodded before crawling up a tree to keep watch for the two young men currently fighting each other.

"Is hiding behind a shield all you can do?!" Renard asked, somewhat frustrated after Alex successfully blocked all of his attacks.

Granted, he was overwhelming his opponent with pure strength. But his fists were starting to hurt the more they collided with the young man's shield.

"I can do this all day," Alex replied in a teasing tone. "What's wrong? Is punching and kicking all you can do? Try something else."

Renard didn't let Alex's taunt get to him, but his blows became more powerful, forcing Alex to skid a few meters on the ground.

"You do realize, each time you hit my shield, you're somewhat informing everyone about our location, right?" Alex said calmly. "Is that what you want to happen?"

Hearing his opponent's words, Renard stopped his attacks.

Alex was right. That aside, his fists also started to feel sore, and the last thing he wanted to happen was to get injured during the first day of the trial.

He planned to survive for three days and become a scholarship student.

Lastly, while he believed he was physically stronger than Alex, he would not be able to defeat him in a short period of time when the latter was hiding behind a sturdy shield.

“So, a truce?” Alex proposed as he lowered his shield. “You might have felt it, right? I don’t have any hostility toward you.”

“I still don’t trust you,” Renard replied.

“I understand.” Alex nodded. “How can I make you trust me?”

“Get out of my sight. Only then will I trust you.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

Renard had trust issues, so even though Alex didn’t seem to direct any hostility toward him, he was still very wary of the young man.

Their exchanges taught him that the stranger who had approached him wasn’t simple and should be treated as a potential threat.

Alex pondered a bit before agreeing.

“Fine, I will stay out of your sight,” Alex replied.

“Good.” Renard eyed him one last time before walking away.

Alex didn't move and simply let the young man distance himself from him. However, a faint smile could be seen on his face.

"Dim!" Dim Dim called out to Alex, making the latter frown.

The Dim Sum God had just told him that there were a few people approaching their location.

Alex nodded and caught his partner as it jumped off the tree before running away to hide.

Just like Renard, he didn't want to attract any more attention to himself.

However, he didn't go too far, wanting to see if he would coincidentally meet another familiar face.

Unfortunately, the three people this time were not familiar to him. He sighed in disappointment.

But it wasn't all that bad. After meeting Renard, he could now see the other party's location on the map—he had marked him earlier during their exchange.

His Map had a function that allowed him to see the location of his teammates and other people whom he had added to the list.

The current maximum limit of people and creatures that his map could trace was a hundred.

So, even if Renard was moving away from him, he could tell exactly where the former was at any point in time.

Though there was one thing he was somewhat sad about. As Renard was not Alex's teammate, the areas that he explored would remain covered by fog on the map. This would prevent Alex from getting a clear view of the part of the island that Renard was at.

Just like Alex had done to Renard, he also marked the three people in the distance, so he could tell where they were located.

Dim Dim could easily warn him if there were others around him, but seeing them as green dots on the map gave him some peace of mind. He planned to do the same to other trial takers he might encounter, which he believed would make things easier for him later on.

'I've taken most of the treasure boxes near me,' Alex thought. 'Should I head to the center and look for a hiding place while the sun is still up?'

All in all, he had managed to collect nine treasure chests before meeting Renard.

His haul wasn't bad. Actually, not bad would be an understatement. After all, his haul had been so great that he had attracted the attention of the Headmaster of Frieden Academy, Rowan.

"Dim Dim, let's head to the center of the island as carefully as possible," Alex said. "Warn me as soon as there are people near us, okay?"

"Dim!" Dim Dim nodded.

The young man wanted to meet up with Lavinia and Charles as soon as possible.

Fortunately, he knew exactly where they were on the map. Though it would take some time for him to regroup with them.

As the young man made his way to the center of the island, the other trial takers had begun to form groups and eliminate those whom they deemed weak enough to defeat.

Little did Alex know, Charles had made contact with one of the main Heroines of the story, Nessia, who was also taking the trial to be admitted as a scholarship student in Frieden Academy.

As for Lavinia, she was characteristically eliminating other trial takers who had the misfortune of encountering her. To her, this trial was part of her training to improve her fighting ability.

While all of this was happening, four Boss Monsters observed their surroundings and waited for the countdown timer placed on them by the Headmaster to run out of time.

They were ordered not to hunt any of the trial takers during the first 24 hours of the trial, giving the latter some time to adjust to their environment.

Of course, if someone were foolish enough to challenge them, they had permission to fight back and eliminate their enemies.

As the hours of the first day of the trial flowed like the grains of sand inside an hourglass, the sun had finally set, covering the island in a blanket of darkness, which would pose a challenge to the trial takers, who all just wanted to be admitted to Frieden Academy.