

Endless 121

Chapter 121: The Phoenix Tactician

“You can have this, Nessia,” Charles said as he handed a bamboo steamer to the young lady, whom he had first met a few hours ago. “They’re custard buns.”

“Custard buns?” Nessia echoed, narrowing her clear blue eyes just a bit. “What are custard buns?”

With her stern tone, thin-rimmed spectacles, and neat braid, she reminded Charles of a librarian or teacher. “It’s hard to explain,” Charles said hastily. “Here, let me show you.”

“Okay.”

Charles held the steamer a distance from Nessia before lifting the lid to show her it was not a trap.

The young lady’s gaze softened a little as she saw three white buns inside. She reached out and picked one of them. Still unsure what custard was, she took a small bite.

“S-Sweet!” Nessia exclaimed in surprise and delight, all hesitation gone. She came from a poor family, so she rarely got to enjoy sweets and desserts. Unsurprisingly, they’d become one of her few weaknesses.

If Renard had trust issues, Nessia had a sweet tooth.

She simply had zero resistance against sweet things. As a result, her impression of Charles improved drastically.

That aside, the young man had also saved her from two Rank 2 Dire Wolves.

After he saved her earlier, the young lady proposed forming a party together so they could watch each other’s backs.

Charles also had a weakness. Luckily for Nessia, that weakness happened to be his soft spot for the opposite gender. He readily agreed to her suggestion. But it didn't take long for him to realize that he had indeed made the right decision, as Nessia proved to be a very capable teammate.

Nessia was a mage, but she specialized in creating magical formations.

Although she could fight normally as a mage, her true skill shone when she had enough prep time to create devastating magical arrays that could trap anything inside them.

She was one of the Heroines of ELO and held the title of Phoenix Tactician.

"Where did you get this, Charles?" Nessia thought to ask after she finished eating one of the custard buns. "This must be expensive, right?"

"I don't know if it's expensive or not, but a friend gave them to me," Charles replied. "Its name is Dim Dim. Before we entered the trial, it gave us a week's worth of food called dim sum. So, just eat as much as you want. I still have more."

As if to prove his point, Charles took out another bamboo steamer from his storage ring.

He then opened it to reveal a roasted pork bun, which he liked very much.

Nessia was intrigued, so she also tried one.

Although it wasn't sweet, it was still very delicious. The lady visibly found it tasty, and Charles subconsciously smiled at the sight of how happy his acquaintance looked while eating.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that the majority of the trial takers were commoners. Given Frieden Academy's ten thousand gold tuition fee, obviously only the rich families could afford to pay for it.

Since they have a few things in common, Charles and Nessia hit it off right away.

Although it was still too early to call each other friends, they had found each other trustworthy enough to form a team.

“You said you have two other companions who are also on the island, right?” Nessia asked after she had her fill. “What are they like?”

“They’re good people,” Charles answered. “One of them is a Catkin, and her name is Lavinia. She’s very strong and specializes in using the sword whip. From my observation, she’s a very competitive person.

“The second one is Alex. He’s someone who prefers to use shields in combat. If I remember correctly, his job class should be an Oathkeeper. He’s a very mysterious person and also my savior. I owe him a debt that I don’t know if I can ever repay in this lifetime.”

“He sounds like a great person,” Nessia commented.

“He is.” Charles nodded. “And accompanying him on his journey is Dim Dim. Dim Dim is the one I mentioned earlier.”

“Oh! I’d love to meet Dim Dim.” Nessia smiled sweetly. “I’m going to be its close friend no matter what.”

“... You’re drooling, Nessia.”

“Oh, excuse me.”

The young lady wiped the corner of her lips in embarrassment.

For her, eating something sweet was a luxury. If she could eat what she liked for free, then wouldn’t that be the best thing ever?

Charles could tell what the young lady was thinking, so he could only shake his head helplessly.

However, knowing Dim Dim, the little one would probably be more than happy to befriend Nessia and give her lots of delicious food to eat.

'Yeah, I can already see that happening,' Charles thought, amused, before looking outside of their cave. 'I hope they're safe. Especially Alex. After all, he got injured because of me.'

Every word he had told Nessia was sincere. He felt indebted to Alex and his comrades, who had helped him, a complete stranger to them.

They could have easily left him behind to die, but they didn't.

Instead, they carried him until they could no longer move forward.

All of them had fought tooth and nail until the arrival of reinforcements.

Charles even felt guiltier at the fact that he had attacked those who had helped him.

While it was true that he hadn't been himself at that time, what happened still happened. Just the thought that he could've killed the people risking their lives to save him made him shudder.

Fortunately, he had eventually snapped out of it. Thanks to Alex repeatedly bashing his head with a shield, he had been brought back to his senses.

"You should get some rest, Nessia," Charles said. "I'll keep watch for seven hours. We will swap after that."

"Okay." Nessia agreed because she was truly tired. "Good night, Charles."

"Good night." Charles nodded before shifting his attention back to the entrance of the cave, marking the start of his vigil for the night.

Chapter 122: Small Time Villain [Part 1]

Nothing much happened during the first night of the trial, save for the purple mist expanding inward towards the island.

This forced the trial takers staying at the outskirts, where it was originally safe, to head to the center of the island, where most of the trial takers were located.

Unlike Lavinia, not all trial takers actively eliminated their competitors. However, despite playing it safe, an unlucky few got ejected from the island after being defeated by monsters.

Dim Dim found a small cave behind a waterfall, allowing Alex to rest without worries for the night.

When morning came, Alex started planning his next course of action while consulting his map.

A few large dots—red, orange, yellow, and blue—blinked ominously on the map. However, they were where they had been yesterday, indicating that the four Boss Monsters had not moved around the previous night. All of them were Rank 4 Monsters, and it would require a team of people in order to defeat them.

Alex believed that even if he, Charles, and Lavinia were to work together as a team, defeating the monster was still impossible.

‘But if Renard and Nessia are with us, it might be possible,’ Alex thought.

Of course, he wasn’t too keen on facing such monsters, especially since his left arm had still not recovered enough to hold a shield.

Speaking of Charles and Lavinia, two green dots showed that they had not been eliminated from the trial.

Another green dot revealed that Renard was only two miles away from Alex.

If he wished for it, he could easily cover that distance and meet up with one of the main Heroes of ELO.

'The problem is... he has trust issues.' Alex smiled wryly. 'Even in the game, other support characters find it difficult to gain his trust. I even thought he'd be alone forever.'

Back then, Alex had even thought of making the hard-headed Renard marry a rock just for the laughs.

Fortunately, there was a supporting character who managed to worm her way into the Protagonist's heart, allowing him to have a "happily ever after" ending.

That said, Alex had put a lot of effort into raising the affection level of said character because she was the only one whom Renard didn't feel distrust in his story quest.

'I wonder if I can help him win her heart in the academy,' Alex wondered as his half-smile widened into a smirk. 'Then again, it's none of my business how he should live his life.'

This was no longer a game, and Alex was now unable to see the characters' affection meters.

Even so, he would like to form a strong bond with the three main Heroes and the three main Heroines. If his guess was right, which was reasonable given his Hell Mode, his life in Frieden Academy wouldn't be a peaceful one.

In fact, a bit of anxiety was seeping into him. Each character had their own routes and a set of antagonists who would make their lives miserable.

The worst part? There was a possibility that all of these "encounters" could happen at the same time. Just the thought of dealing with them sent shivers down his spine.

Alex remembered the evil professor hiding his identity as a devil worshipper and the witch who made sure that all couples in the academy would break up out of jealousy.

These initial Mini-Bosses at the start of the school year were quite annoying, and the funny thing was that... since there were six main characters, they also had six main routes.

Suddenly, Alex felt like maybe enrolling at the academy wasn't a good idea anymore.

'I'll cross that bridge when I get there,' Alex decided. 'Besides, I'm sure that the Heroes and Heroines will be able to deal with their fated encounters on their own.'

At least, he hoped they would. For the sake of his peaceful academy life.

After organizing his thoughts, Alex decided to actively regroup with Lavinia since she was closest to his location.

The young lady was at least six miles away, but the distance wasn't so far that Alex couldn't meet her within the day.

There were only two more days before the trial ended, so regrouping with his friends was his top priority.

'I'm sure I'll meet Renard at the center of the island sooner or later,' Alex thought. 'I'll make him join our team by hook or by crook.'

The young man chuckled evilly.

Sure, Renard was strong. But he would be no match if Alex, Lavinia, and Charles worked together.

The Main Hero's trust issues didn't matter.

Alex was certain that Renard would agree to join his party or risk being eliminated by them.

Of course, Alex had no intention of eliminating one of the Heroes of ELO. It would be a waste to do that to a cheat character.

Not to mention, the last thing he wanted was to make the Berserker Juggernaut fall into the evil route with him as the nemesis.

ELO gave players the freedom to choose which kind of ending they wanted, and one of them was treading the dark path, where the characters became the enemies of the world.

This made the game very versatile.

Good didn't always prevail, and being a villain wasn't always bad.

The unpredictability was thrilling.

There was even a famous quote that one of the Heroes said after becoming a villain.

'They tried to stop me from doing what I want, so I stopped them from existing.'

And that was the truth. That former hero eliminated the High Council of Avalon and hung the councillors' heads on the city walls as a constant reminder—to both residents and travellers—that he was someone not even the royal family could touch.

But if there was one person whom Alex wouldn't want to see take the evil path the most, it would be none other than Nessia.

Renard could still be countered because he focused on strength and combat ability.

But Nessia was a brilliant strategist.

Simply put, Alex would rather become Renard's enemy than Nessia's enemy.

How did he know this?

The answer was really simple.

It was because he had played the three Heroes and the three Heroines of ELO as a way to pass the time.

As such, he knew them extremely well and understood who among the six were truly dangerous.

“Time to wake up, Dim Dim,” Alex said softly as he poked the sleeping bun and squished its soft cheeks.

A few pokes later, Dim Dim opened its eyes and yawned. The sight made Alex understand why the little guy liked to poke him when waking him up.

“Dim Dim?”

“Yes, it’s already morning,” Alex replied. “Let’s eat first, then we’ll meet up with Lavinia, okay?”

“Dim.” Dim Dim nodded with a sleepy face, eliciting a smile from the young man.

He then took out a pot from his storage ring and placed it over the small campfire they had made last night.

After boiling some water, he took out two cups, some cocoa powder, and a loaf of bread from his storage ring.

“Would you like your hot chocolate sweet, Dim Dim?”

“Dim.”

“Okay.”

After giving the Dim Sum God a cup of hot chocolate, Alex tore a piece of the bread and dipped it into his own cup.

The two ate in silence, enjoying the food they had brought for this trip.

Alex had just finished drinking his hot chocolate when the sound of fighting reached his ears.

Dim Dim quickly finished the last bit of its hot chocolate before jumping to the top of the young man's head, already prepared to investigate the commotion.

'I'll check it out just in case it's someone I know,' Alex thought as he hurriedly stored his items inside his storage ring.

Once outside, it didn't take long for him to find out what was happening.

And just as he expected, he saw another familiar face, though it was someone he'd rather not see in the second trial of Frieden Academy.

Chapter 123: Small Time Villain [Part 2]

In games, you usually find those annoying side characters that liked to make things difficult for the Main Characters.

These characters could be considered "small time villains" because they were the lackeys of the main antagonists, who were supporting them from the back.

Alex was now looking at such a person, and he was none other than Bob Wylde.

One of the small-time villains in the story.

He was one of the people that would become the lackey of the main antagonist of either Renard, or Nessia.

He was a commoner, who wished to ingratiate himself to nobles, hoping that they would make him their subordinate once he graduated from the academy.

The academy didn't lack shady people, but Bob was on another level.

What was worse was that the name was very common, and almost all the Bobs in the game were either shady characters, or part of a secret organization who wanted to break the peace of the world.

Currently, Bob was in a group of three trial takers, who were fighting against a group of Goblin Warriors, and Archers.

The Trial Takers were fighting as a team, and a glance was enough to tell them that they had the advantage in this fight.

'But, all of them have just become Rankers,' Alex thought. 'If they were stronger, they would have already insta-killed these goblins with a single strike.'

Alex might be injured, but if he fought against these three teenage boys, he was confident that with Dim Dim's help, he would be able to defeat them easily.

Five minutes later, the seven goblins died and turned into particles of light, leaving behind their cores.

"This trial is so easy," Bob said as he picked up one of the cores on the ground. "It's such a shame that instead of encountering other candidates, we encountered goblins instead."

"True." One of his team members nodded. "We have defeated ten candidates so far. Fortunately they are always alone. If they only accepted to be part of our team then they didn't have to be eliminated."

"They're stupid." Bob sneered. "Instead of taking the easy way out, they thought that they could survive on their own. If everyone is like them, we might not even have to wait until the time of the trial is up. We can just eliminate them all now."

“As expected of Bob!” the boot licker in the team said. “As long as you are our leader, this trial is a piece of cake!”

“Hahaha! Didn’t I tell you guys?” Bob laughed. “Just stick with me, and I’ll help you learn this trial easily!”

Alex, and Dim Dim, who were watching the teenage boy from a distance, were very tempted to throw some brittle vials on his face.

‘Should I eliminate him now, so that he will not trouble Renard, and Nessia in the academy?’ Alex thought. ‘But, if I do that, it might impact their character growth.’

Although Bob was only a small-time-villain, it didn’t change the fact that he had allowed Renard, and Nessia to overcome some of their insecurities.

Also, some of the encounters in the academy required his assistance, which made the villain a very important part in the initial start of the academy arc.

‘Consider yourself lucky,’ Alex thought. ‘You still have some use in the bigger picture.’

But, just as Alex was about to leave, he stepped into a wooden branch, which made a cracking sound, catching the attention of the group of three, who immediately looked in his direction.

“Who’s there?!” Bob shouted. “Reveal yourself!”

Alex facepalmed because he couldn’t believe that he made a rookie mistake, which was very common in fantasy stories.

“Dim Dim, I made a decision,” Alex said.

“Dim?”

“Let’s beat them up!”

“Dim Dim!”

The young man went out of his hiding place, and looked at the three teenage boys, who already had their weapons at the ready.

The moment they saw Alex, and his left arm that was still in a cast, Bob, and his two sidekicks felt more confident that they could easily defeat the newcomer in a fight.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” Bob smirked. “What’s your name?”

“Bob,” Alex replied.

“How did you know my name?” Bob frowned.

“No.” Alex shook his head. “My name is Bob.”

“... Are you kidding me?” the corner of Bob’s lips twitched because he didn’t know how to feel when someone with the same name as him was much more handsome than him!

“My name is Bob.” Alex repeated.

“I heard you for the first time.” Bob’s frown deepened. “Is your name really Bob?”

“Yes,” Alex replied. “What’s your name?”

“... Bob,” Bob answered after a bit of hesitation.

“You’re a Bob too?” Alex smiled. “Then, that makes us sworn brothers. How about we team up, and pass this trial together? As you can see, I’m injured right now, so having teammates is a good thing.”

Alex wanted to beat the crap out of Bob and his sidekicks, but an idea suddenly popped inside his head.

Since the name Bob was very common in the game, he wanted to know how Bob would react after meeting someone with the same name.

“You know what, fine,” Bob said as he returned his sword to its scabbard. “Since we have the same name, and both of us are handsome, we can be friends.”

Not only was he shameless, and resourceful, he also looked decent enough to become part of the Antagonists’ circle, allowing him to become their perfect lackey.

“That’s great!” Alex replied. “With the four of us, passing this trial will be a breeze.”

The young man then moved closer to his three new friends, and offered them some dim sum.

There was a famous saying that the way to a person’s heart is through their stomach.

Since Alex couldn’t get rid of Bob at the moment, he decided to befriend them for the time being.

Fortunately, the dim sum was delicious enough to make the three teenagers approve of Alex as their comrade, which made Dim Dim a bit disappointed because it was unable to use its brittle vials.

With new friends in his team, Alex, and his merry band headed towards the center of the island in order to meet up with Lavinia, who was still on the hunt for trial takers to eliminate as part of her training.

Chapter 124: New Threats

“By the way, Bob, since we have the same name, and it will be confusing if we were to call each other out, just call me Alex,” Alex said.

“Hahaha.” Bob chuckled. “So, your real name is Alex huh? That was a nice play of words earlier. I almost thought that your name is really Bob. Relax, I like you so I’ll let you live.”

The teenage boy smirked not minding one bit that Alex had lied to him.

“Eh? His name is not Bob?” one of Bob’s lackeys blinked in confusion. “Bob, we can’t trust this guy. He is a liar.”

“That’s right,” the other lackey commented. “How can we trust someone who lied to us?”

“It’s fine.” Bob raised his hand to stop the two boys from saying any complaints. “Let’s just say that I was tricked. But, since we’re already together as a team, let’s let bygones be bygones, okay?”

After seeing Bob’s reply, Alex had to admit that he had to reevaluate his impression of the teenage boy, whom he referred to as a small-time-villain.

According to the ELO Wiki, Bob was eighteen-years-old, had short black hair with streaks of red on its edges, and always had a smirking grin as if it was a mask to cover his true thoughts.

Looking at him now, Alex could tell that he was indeed a shady character with decent looks that could captivate the ladies if he tried.

But, that was also what made him so dangerous in the game.

‘He isn’t quick to anger, and yet, I can tell that he also didn’t want to make me his enemy,’ Alex thought. ‘Still, I can’t let my guard down. There is still a chance that he might backstab me later. Better be safe than sorry.’

What he didn’t know was that Bob had a different reason why he didn’t want to clash with Alex.

‘Although he looks injured, he might just be faking it to lower our guard,’ Bob smiled calmly on the surface. But deep inside, he was on guard against Alex. ‘This guy is stronger than me!’

The two sized each other before coming to an agreement.

“Allies for now?” Alex asked.

“Allies for now.” Bob nodded in agreement. “Until this trial ends.”

“Good,” Alex smiled. “Allow me to introduce myself again. My name is Alex Stratos, just call me Alex.”

The young man then stretched out his right hand for a handshake.

“Bob Wylde.” Bob accepted the handshake. “Just call me Bob.”

“I’m Grint Varka,” the teenage boy with blonde hair and green eyes said.

He had long hair that was tied in a ponytail, making him look like someone born from a decent family.

“Jorven Brakk,” Jorven introduced himself. “Just call me Jorven.”

Jorven was quite tall for his age, approaching nearly two meters in height. He had a sturdy body, making Alex think that he came from a family of warriors.

His short brown hair, and eyes, made him look like an average guy that you could see anywhere. If not for the fact that he was towering above the three other teenagers, he would look like someone, who could easily fade in the crowd without needing to try.

“So, Alex, what are your plans for this second trial?” Bob asked.

“I have two friends taking this trial with me,” Alex replied. “I plan to meet up with them as soon as possible.”

"Are they strong?" Bob asked with great curiosity.

"Yes," Alex replied.

"Stronger than you?"

"Stronger than me."

After hearing Alex's reply, Bob was more eager to meet these two strong people. If they were to become part of their team, wouldn't that make them one of the strongest teams in the second trial?

If that happened, they no longer had to worry about other candidates trying to eliminate them.

"This island is huge," Bob stated. "Finding them will not be easy."

"What you say is true, but finding them is not really difficult," Alex said. "After all, I have Dim Dim with me."

"Ahem!" Dim Dim proudly raised its body, which Grint and Jorven found very amusing.

"I've been meaning to ask since earlier, but what kind of creature is that?" Bob asked. "It's not a slime, right?"

"No," Alex answered. "Dim Dim is Nature Spirit."

"A Nature Spirit?" Bob looked at the little guy perched on top of Alex's head in disbelief. "Aren't they very rare?"

"They are." Alex nodded. "So, Dim Dim is very special."

Alex knew that there would be many people who would ask him what kind of creature Dim Dim was. After wracking his head, he decided to refer to Dim Dim as a Nature Spirit because they come in different forms.

Dim Dim agreed with this plan because no one would believe Alex if he told them that the cute little bun that was always with him was an actual God.

"I see." Bob rubbed his chin. "So, with his help, we will be able to reunite with your strong friends, right?"

"Right," Alex replied.

"So, what are we waiting for?"

"Dim Dim, please lead the way."

"Dim Dim!"

An hour later, Alex, and Bob heard the sound of fighting from somewhere.

Wanting to investigate, the four of them headed to where the sounds were coming from.

There, they saw a group attacking a Catkin, who was fighting with a fearless smile on her face.

"Wow!" Grint gasped. "She's strong."

"Indeed." Jorven nodded in agreement.

Bob, who was wondering if this was one of Alex's comrades, suddenly saw the young man charged towards the battle with a shield strapped on his right arm.

Lavinia, who was concentrating on fighting what was in front of her, suddenly heard a cry of pain from behind her.

When she turned around, she saw a shield flying towards another teenager, who was wielding a bow in the distance.

How could she not recognize Everguard when she was the one that personally delivered it to Alex?

A faint smile appeared on her face as she glanced at the young man, who had come to help her to fight those who had tried to ambush her a while ago.

"I'll take care of these two," Alex said. "You deal with those three."

"Good." Lavinia agreed before running towards the three teenagers, who suddenly lost their momentum after their allies were attacked out of nowhere.

The three tried to run away in different directions in order to escape the strong Catkin, whom they thought would be an easy prey.

Unfortunately for them, Alex didn't come alone.

Bob, Grint, and Jorven joined the fight, eliminating two of the three teenagers that Lavinia was pursuing.

Alex, on the other hand, had eliminated the archer by bashing him to oblivion with his shield.

As for the last remaining enemy, Lavinia made short work of him after dealing with the leader of the group that ambushed her.

“Thank you for the help,” Lavinia said to Alex.

“You still would have won even if you fought them alone,” Alex replied. “Still, it’s nice to see you safe, Lavinia.”

“You too, Alex.” Lavinia smiled. “And it seems that you’ve formed a team of your own.”

Alex nodded and introduced Bob, Grint, and Jorven to the Catkin, who had made a very strong impression on them.

“Alex didn’t lie when he said that you were strong, My Lady,” Bob, who could sense that Lavinia wasn’t a commoner, said in a respectful tone. “My name is Bob Wylde, and I am one of Alex’s teammates.”

He then introduced Grint, and Jorven to the Catkin, hoping that they would also join their team to make it stronger.

Lavinia had no plans on joining any team aside from Alex, and Charles. But, seeing that the Oathkeeper didn’t seem to mind the three teenager’s company, Lavinia agreed to join their team as well.

“Do you know where Charles is?” Lavinia asked.

“Yes,” Alex replied. “Dim Dim will find him.”

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim nodded.

Although Alex could easily find them on the map, It was best if he gave all the credit to Dim Dim because this would save a lot of trouble for him.

After a short break, the four then headed northeast to meet up with Charles, who was currently traveling together with Nessia.

While this was happening, a faint ripple spread inside the island, making everyone stop for a brief moment.

Suddenly, the voice of the Headmaster of the academy, Rowan, reached their ears.

“The Boss Monsters seals are now undone. They can now start to roam the island, so pay close attention to your surroundings!”

Alex opened his map, and confirmed that the Boss Monsters had indeed started to move.

This would make the survival rate of the candidates much harder because not only did they have to worry about the other trial takers, and the monsters in the island, they now have to worry about four Rank 4 Boss Monsters, who were very eager to eliminate them without mercy.

Chapter 125: Reunion Of Friends

“Do you think our team can take those Boss Monsters down?” Bob asked Alex as they followed Dim Dim. “You know what they say—the greater the danger, the greater the rewards.”

“I didn’t know that you liked to live your life dangerously,” Alex replied. “It will be best if we don’t mess with those monsters. A Rank 4 Monster is not something we can fight on our own.”

Alex had already fought against a Rank 3 Named Monster, Aurhorn the Stag of Twilight.

It had been a very cunning monster, even using hit-and-run tactics against them.

If Cairo, Elaine, and Efa were with him, he would definitely not hesitate to challenge such a creature.

But Bob, Grint, and Jorven had just become Rankers, and they were not strong enough to deal with that kind of Boss Monster.

“Alex is right,” Lavinia commented. “I think you haven’t seen a Rank 4 Boss Monster in your life, so you dare to say such a thing without worry.”

“Is it really that strong?” Bob frowned. “I saw a Rank 2 Boss Monster in the past, and a party of Adventurers in my hometown was able to defeat it.”

“A Rank 2 Boss Monster is not really that much of a concern compared to a Rank 4 Boss Monster,” Lavinia explained. “In fact, ten of those will not be enough to fight against a single Rank 4 Boss Monster.”

After she made an easy-to-understand comparison, Bob finally understood what kind of existence a Rank 4 Boss Monster was.

Because of this, he decided to change the subject and ask about Alex’s last comrade, Charles.

Since he was already very impressed by Lavinia, he was looking forward to meeting Alex’s other friend, who would definitely make their team stronger.

Fortunately, Charles was also headed toward the center of the island, so Alex’s group found him just an hour before sunset.

However, when Alex saw the person accompanying Charles, he couldn’t help but smile. One of his guesses was confirmed.

Nessia was also taking the trial, and it seemed that she and Charles had formed a team together.

‘What a stroke of luck,’ Alex thought as he waved at his friend, who was now heading in their direction.

“Alex! Lavinia!” Charles exclaimed. “It’s good to see both of you safe. By the way, this is my friend, Nessia. She’s a very talented Mage. Nessia, these are my friends, Alex and Lavinia. They’re the people I’ve been telling you about.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet the two of you,” Nessia greeted with a courteous smile. “Charles only has praises for his two friends, and it seems that the two of you are indeed no ordinary Rankers.”

Nessia had been observing Alex and Lavinia as she followed behind Charles.

Of course, she also greeted Bob, Grint, and Jorven politely since first impressions mattered.

Now that the three friends had finally reunited, the group decided to find a safe place to rest for the night.

Just like always, Dim Dim led the way. A few minutes later, it found a small cave, which could easily be defended by two people while the rest slept for the night.

While having dinner, naturally sponsored by Dim Dim, the group happily chatted with each other and shared some stories about themselves.

When Charles told them about what had happened to them in the Dungeon of Beginnings, Nessia, Bob, Grint, and Jorven thought he was just joking.

However, when Alex and Lavinia confirmed that it was the truth, the four teenagers couldn't help but look at them in disbelief.

"How did you manage to survive and escape until help arrived?" Nessia fixed her glasses with her middle finger as she asked her question.

"We just got lucky," Alex replied. "It seems the academy sensed that something was going on inside the dungeon, so they promptly sent Peace Keepers to our rescue."

He didn't want to make the story sound too ridiculous, so he gave Charles a telling look to remind the teen not to say anything else.

Nessia, who was very good at observing people, saw this but chose not to say anything. She then expertly changed the subject and asked how Dim Dim was able to create food out of thin air.

"Dim Dim is a nature spirit," Bob said with a smile. "Isn't that right, Alex?"

“Yep,” Alex nodded. “Dim Dim is a Nature Spirit that helped me when I was lost around the area of the Floating Islands of Thaloria.”

“Oh, you came from the Town of Thaloria!” Nessia’s eyes sparkled in wonder. “I was there a year ago, and even now, I still find the place truly magical. Imagine so many floating stones the size of mountains in one place. Truly a breathtaking sight to behold from a distance.”

After the group chatted for a bit, Bob decided to once again ask the most important question of all.

“We still have two days before the trial ends,” Bob said. “What plans do you have in mind? Should we continue to hide here and wait until it’s over, or should we actively eliminate some trial takers?”

Lavinia and Charles instinctively look at Alex, which everyone noticed.

Clearly, the two had recognized the young man as their temporary leader for the second trial.

“Actually, there’s someone else that I want to recruit for our team,” Alex said. “His name is Renard, and I met him shortly after we were sent to this island. I believe he will also be an indispensable helper if we manage to bring him to our group.

“After we succeed in making him a part of our team, we should find a place to defend until this trial ends.”

The young man then gave Nessia a sideways glance because he knew that the young lady was very good at creating magical formations.

Although she was still far from becoming the Phoenix Tactician, he was sure she would be able to help them create a formation that would fend off most threats on the island.

“What will you do if this Renard fellow doesn’t agree to join us?” Grint asked.

"If he doesn't agree, then we will make him agree," Alex said. As he and Dim Dim grinned evilly, Lavinia and Alex could only smile faintly. "By force if we have to."

"Bro, you sound so evil right now." Bob smirked. "I like that!"

Grint and Jovern also smiled as it matched their way of doing things. If they hadn't met Alex earlier, the three of them might still be actively hunting candidates and forcing them to join their group.

Of course, those who refused would be eliminated, so they couldn't join other groups and potentially threaten the trio in the future.

Chapter 126: A Hellish Game Of Cat And Mouse

I am Renard Vale, seventeen years old.

At the moment, I was taking the second trial to become a scholarship student of Frieden Academy.

It was rough at the start, but thanks to the skills I had honed during my younger years, I managed to survive until now.

I faced many monsters and fellow trial takers in the second round, but I was able to eliminate them all.

Not to brag, but I was confident about being one of the last twenty survivors in this trial. Once I succeeded, I would have achieved my goal.

At least, I was confident of that until two hours ago.

As always, I was minding my own business when suddenly, a little white bun-like monster appeared out of nowhere.

It shouted, "Dim Dim!" and several other people instantly arrived, surrounding me on all sides.

“We meet again, Renard,” said a handsome young man with short silver hair as he looked at me with a smirk and an evil glint in his eyes. “Would you like to become my comrade?”

“You, I remember you. Your name is Alex, right?” I replied while glancing at the people who surrounded me. “Didn’t I tell you I have no plans to join a group?!”

After checking their stances and expressions, I could roughly deduce that at least three of them posed a serious threat against me.

This put me at a great disadvantage, and I was forced to weigh my chances of survival.

“I will give you one last chance to change your mind,” Alex said with a smirk. “Join us, or be eliminated. There is no other choice.”

“Kukuku!” The little white bun monster’s evil laugh made me frown.

It was holding some kind of vial containing a blue liquid.

Although I had no idea what was inside of it, my gut instinct was telling me that if I got hit by that, I would probably be scarred for life.

“Look, why are you forcing me to join your team?” I asked. “Don’t you have enough members? Why must you force me to join you?”

After hearing my reply, I saw some hesitation on the faces of Alex’s team members.

‘It’s now or never!’ Seeing a chance, I ran with all of my might, leaving behind the group that surrounded me.

To my surprise, none of them made any effort to follow me, so I managed to get away pretty easily.

I thought that after that encounter, I would no longer meet them again.

I was wrong.

Very wrong.

No matter what I did, no matter where I went, that cursed little white creature would pop out of nowhere and shout, “Dim Dim,” followed by the appearance of the same group of people.

Soon, it became a game of tag, the kind where I always had to be on the move to escape their pursuit.

Minutes passed...

Hours passed...

As I tried my best to escape, I encountered monsters, trial takers, or both of them at the same time.

Still, that little white monster never failed to show up wherever I went, making me wonder if I had somehow offended the little ancestor in my past life.

When the sun was at its zenith, I finally found some breathing time.

Dim Dim hadn’t appeared for the past hour, and I thought it must be having lunch with those hateful trial takers who kept on bothering me non-stop.

I didn’t want to admit it, but I was a little grateful that they showed me mercy each time and didn’t eliminate me.

Though that mercy also meant that I was constantly on edge.

Perhaps reaching my limit, I sensed that I needed to take a number two. Naturally, I searched for a place where I could do my business in peace.

I had just lowered my pants when suddenly, the little white bun appeared again.

The two of us stared at each other for several seconds before...

“Dim Dim!”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Damn it! Damn it! Why?!

Couldn’t it have waited for ten minutes?!

Even five minutes would do!

...Why must it appear at this critical time when I need to take a dump?!

I tried to pull my pants up mid-squat. I did not succeed. Instead, I stumbled over a root and fell on a very unfortunately shaped rock, hitting the place that must not be named.

My scream echoed through the forest like a dying goose honking out its last will.

The little white bun blinked innocently at me, tilting its head in that disturbing and sweet way like it had absolutely no idea what was happening.

“Dim Dim?”

“Of course, I’m not alright, damn it!” I replied through bitter tears, almost losing control over my bowels.

But the worst was not over yet.

Hearing the footsteps of several people running in my direction, I pulled up my pants and ran away, for my life, dignity, and pride depended on it.

“Dim Dim!”

The damnable little monster followed me through the underbush like a sugar-fueled ping pong ball.

I screamed a manly scream.

A scream filled with dignity.

The kind of scream that only happened when your emotional support pants were half unzipped and a sentient white dumpling was trying to force friendship upon you.

I dashed through the trees like a panicked squirrel during mating season, crashing through every bush like nature owed me money.

“Renard!” Alex’s voice rang out behind me, calm and far too reasonable for someone chasing a guy desperate to find a place—any place, to unload the things that were desperately trying to force themselves out of his body.

“Just listen to us! We just want you to join our team!” Alex shouted. “Don’t worry, just say the word, and your suffering will end!”

“Damn you!” I shouted back in anger. “I’ll kill you! I swear I’ll kill you!”

As soon as I finished doing my business, I would risk everything, even my life, to kill this son of a b*tch, who had unleashed this little white demonic thing to make my life a living hell!

With unbelievable speed and uncanny accuracy, Dim Dim landed on my head and shouted.

“Dim Dim!”

I could hear the pride in its voice. It was delighted that it had completed its mission.

“Renard, I swear—just give us five minutes to explain,” Alex shouted from behind. “We’re not enemies! After you become our teammate, I promise to leave you alone so you can take a dump!”

“Damn you!” I didn’t know what happened to me back then, but something in me snapped. “I’ll kill you! You bastard!”

I stopped running away, and instead charged in Alex’s direction with the intent to kill.

“Let’s just die together!” I screamed, ready to bring the bastard to hell with me.

I had never been cornered so much in my life. I had never hated someone so much as I hated this young man before me who went by the name, Alex.

He was still looking at me with that devilish smile that I desperately wanted to wipe off his face.

Alex didn’t even flinch as I charged at him like a constipated war god.

He just stood there. Calm. Serene. Smug. The kind of smugness that made me want to punch him until his mother couldn’t recognize him anymore.

“Let’s just die together!” I roared. Fury fueled my strength and shame raised my power.

But just as I was about to reach Alex, ready to unleash every ounce of fury, frustration, and intestinal pressure, he calmly stepped to the side.

Perhaps due to the ground elevation, or perhaps I was blinded by fury, I didn't notice that there was a small pit right behind him.

And just like that, I fell into the pit like a captured prey, fuming in anger.

"You can finish doing your business there," Alex said without peeking down the hole. "Call out to me when you're done. Um, do you need something to wipe it? I have some paper..."

Dim Dim jumped off my head, and bounced off the walls of the pit, getting out of it in a few seconds.

A moment later, a few pieces of paper fell down on my head, making me wish that I could strangle the silver-haired devil to oblivion.

But now that the chase had ended, I finally gave up and did what I had to do.

However, deep inside, I shuddered a bit because I had a feeling that if I didn't accept Alex's invitation to form a party with him, this hellish game of cat and mouse would begin once more.

Chapter 127: Temporary Truce

"Bob, I'm glad we didn't make Alex and Dim Dim our enemy," Grint said, looking very pale as he eyed the young man from afar.

"He's a devil," Jorven commented, his voice slightly higher than normal due to the madness he had just witnessed. "I feel so sorry for Renard. If I were in his shoes, I would have gone crazy, and I definitely wouldn't have lasted as long."

Bob was also sweating buckets. He had never realized that the easy-going Alex and the innocent-looking Dim Dim had this crazy side in them.

Even now, the three could hear “kukuku” from the pair. This evil laughter made them swear in their hearts that they would never offend the monsters who had traumatized the poor teenage boy.

“Guys, remember, even after this trial ends, we must stay on his good side, okay?” Bob stated.

“”Yes!”” Grint and Jorven replied firmly as they sincerely never wanted to experience the hell that Renard had gone through.

Lavinia and Charles were also shaken, not expecting that Alex would have this cruel side to him.

They didn’t know why the young man was so hell-bent on recruiting Renard, but they also believed that he had a good reason for whatever he was doing.

“Maybe he saw a vision,” Lavinia said softly so that only Charles could hear. “Just like he saw that you needed his help.”

“I’m just glad he was at least very kind to me.” Charles shuddered. “I really pity Renard. If I were him, I’d hate Alex for life.”

While the two were discussing the incident in hushed tones, Nessia muttered something right beside them. Upon hearing her words, Lavinia and Charles couldn’t help but tremble.

“I give Alex and Dim Dim eight out of ten for psychological warfare,” Nessia muttered. “But if they had truly wanted to break him, they should have...”

It was not only Lavinia and Charles who heard Nessia talking to herself.

Bob, Grint, and Jorven all took a few steps away from the bespectacled girl, who was coming up with the perfect way to break Renald Vale completely and make him lose all hope in humanity.

"If I had been in charge of this operation, trust issues would have been the least of his worries," Nessia continued, sounding a little disappointed. "I could have made it so that if he even heard a word, he would have started suffering from PTSD and gone into a seizure..."

Lavinia and Charles also slowed down a little to distance themselves from the young lady. Despite her innocent and sweet appearance, she turned out to be more devilish than Alex and Dim Dim combined.

"Um, Renard, are you done?" Alex asked a few meters away from the hole. "If you need more papers..."

"..."

"Renard? Are you okay?"

"..."

"Dim Dim?"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

After hearing the scream, Nessia smirked and muttered something along the lines of "He finally snapped" before fixing her glasses with her middle finger.

"Renard, listen! Everything is going to be okay!" Alex, who sensed that Renard had finally lost it, peeked into the hole and tried to pacify the raging man, who had finished his business in peace.

"Come down here and tell that to my face!" Renard shouted, his face beet red from both anger, embarrassment, and humiliation. "I promise not to give you a quick and painless death! I will kill you first, then kill myself!"

A sigh escaped Alex's lips because he understood he might have gone too far and pushed Renard past his limit.

“Renard, listen to me,” Alex said calmly. “Have you forgotten the reason why you want to enter Frieden Academy?”

After hearing Alex’s words, Renard finally calmed down a bit, but he still glared at Alex, wishing nothing more than to punch him into oblivion.

“Renard, I’m similar to a Seer.” Alex knew that he needed to pacify the angry teenager, so he turned to his knowledge of the game. “I know the reason why you wish to enroll at the academy.

“Also, you’re right. What you are looking for is there. However, if you don’t pass this trial, you will never have a chance to meet her again.”

“...” Renard clenched and unclenched his fists several times, doing his best to rein in the anger that was about to go out of control.

A moment later, a shout erupted from the hole as the teenage boy repeatedly punched the wall of the pit, venting out his frustration.

Alex and Dim Dim watched and patiently waited until Renard finally regained his composure.

This took a full fifteen minutes, but after he had managed to vent out his frustration, he became a lot calmer and asked Alex to take him out of the hole.

Taking out a rope, Alex pulled Renard out and apologized to him.

“Dim Dim.” Dim Dim also apologized, but the teenage boy only glared at the two of them.

“This is not over,” Renard declared, barely restraining the anger in his voice. “After this trial ends, you and I will settle this score.”

“I understand.” Alex nodded. “We’ll settle it after we become scholarship students of the academy.”

After that brief discussion, Alex introduced Renard to his team.

Bob, Grint, and Jorven, who felt very sorry for Renard, did their best to cozy up to him.

However, Renard had trust issues, and this only intensified after this incident.

The three weren't too offended by Renard's reaction because they believed they would have acted the same if they had been in his position.

But now that their team was complete, they all looked at Alex for his next course of action.

"Right now, we have two options," Alex said. "The first is to find a place that will serve as our base until this trial ends. We will put defensive measures around it, making it as strong as possible.

"The next option is to hunt the Rank 4 Boss Monsters. Aside from getting the Sigil, I'm sure we would also get some valuable treasures if we are lucky."

The group looked at the young man as if he had gone crazy.

The first option was still fine since this was their goal.

As for the second option?

Madness.

Absolute madness.

But seeing how confident Alex looked, Lavinia tried to ask how he planned to defeat the Boss Monsters.

Alex didn't hide anything. After hearing his plan, the group realized that he might be on to something.

"I think we can do both," Nessia commented after hearing everything that Alex had to say. "We can create a safe place for us to stay as well as fight against a Boss Monster if it happens to stumble into our location. But for that to happen, we will need a few things."

Alex nodded because he already knew what Nessia wanted.

In fact, this was where the Phoenix Tactician's specialty was going to shine, giving them a higher chance of passing the second trial. The trial would only become more difficult the closer it was to the deadline, so Nessia's contributions mattered.

Alex believed that as long as everyone played their part, they might just be able to kill a Boss Monster and impress the Professors, who were closely paying attention to them right at this moment.

Ramza, Cairo, Elaine, Efa, and Roselia had sweated buckets after seeing Alex's and Dim Dim's shenanigans. The Headmaster, too, had witnessed the fiasco.

As to what Rowan thought of the two troublemakers, only he knew about it. However, it didn't change the fact that one of the Paragons of Arcana currently had a faint smile on his face.

Chapter 128: Actions Speak Louder Than Words

"Attack me, all of you," Nessia said with a fearless smile.

Alex believed that he first had to convince everyone that they'd be able to clear the trial as long as they fully cooperated. Earlier, he had pulled Nessia aside and privately talked to her.

The first step the young man had in mind was to show Nessia's talent and potential.

Actions spoke louder than words. This was the perfect opportunity to showcase the Phoenix Tactician's might.

"You asked for it." Without hesitation, Renard lunged at the young lady, who was confidently standing still while smiling slightly. "Don't cry when you get hurt later."

Alex smirked, aware of the other party's pent-up frustrations. Renard must've been itching to vent it all out. And now, he had a chance to do that.

Just as Renard was only a few meters from Nessia, the young lady lightly tapped her staff on the ground, activating the magic formation she had prepared beforehand.

A barrier rose to surround her and blocked Renard's fist from reaching her.

The impact was so powerful that a shockwave burst forth the instant his fist struck the barrier, sending a gust of wind rippling outward.

Still, the barrier held true, showing how perfectly it had tanked Renard's attack.

"What are you all waiting for?" Nessia asked. "I told you to attack me. Come, show me what all of you can do. Depending on your performance, I might revise some of my plans for the last day of the trial."

Bob glanced at Grint and Jorven, and the two nodded in understanding.

The three joined Renard in attacking the barrier without holding back.

Her curiosity also piqued, Lavinia unleashed her strongest skills, wanting to test just how strong the barrier was.

However, even with the combined attacks of five people, the barrier didn't show any signs of damage.

"Go, Charles." Alex lightly pushed the teenage boy's back. "Nessia doesn't like men without a backbone."

Charles blinked in confusion as he glanced at Alex and Dim Dim, who both had smirks plastered on their faces.

"I don't get what you're talking about, Alex," Charles replied.

"Sure. Just go and try to break her barrier first," Alex shooed the young man away. "Nessia is very good at observing people. As long as you fight seriously, she'll have a better idea of which role she should assign you to based on your specialties."

Without anything else to do, Charles joined the others in attacking Nessia's barrier.

It was a rather humorous sight. Unlike the bunch of teenagers chaotically attacking the barrier, the young lady on the other side looked calm and peaceful as she scribbled a few things in her journal. Occasionally, she glanced at the teenagers as if she was watching a documentary.

The barrier she had created was pretty simple and would automatically disappear in twenty minutes. As if to make up for its short duration, it was very sturdy, capable of tanking even the hits of a Rank 4 Monster.

Another downside was the heavy resource requirement. Erecting the barrier had seemed wasteful at first, but Alex had supplied everything needed.

Nessia's magic formation drew power from monster cores, and Alex had handed over several from his inventory to let her demonstrate her capabilities.

The cost was a little steep, but he considered it a worthwhile investment. After witnessing the results, he believed the others would be more eager to help gather more cores, allowing Nessia to build even stronger magic formations.

It didn't take long for everyone to realize that Nessia's barrier was the real deal.

When they started, they hadn't used their strongest skills. But seeing the barrier unaffected, they subconsciously started to attack with more ferocity. Before they knew it, they were already going all out, yet the barrier was still solid.

Then and there, they understood that the seemingly innocent and harmless young lady was a very talented Magic Formation Master.

Fifteen minutes later, Nessia lightly clapped her hands.

“Alright. That’s enough, everyone,” Nessia said. “I already have a rough estimate of your strengths.”

The teenagers stopped attacking, but it was very clear they now looked at her with a hint of respect, compared to when they first met her.

Even Lavinia, who prided herself on her strength, had to admit that this was the first time she had met a peer who truly made her understand that the world was a big place and that there were many talented people who surpassed even her abilities.

‘It seems I made the right decision to follow Alex to Frieden Academy,’ Lavinia thought. ‘I wonder if there are others like her who are around the same age as me.’

Her grandfather, Ramza, had also graduated from Frieden Academy, and he had nothing but praise for the young heroes he had met during his stay.

“Good job, everyone,” Alex said with a smile. “Now, do you believe me that there’s a possibility that we can defeat the Rank 4 Boss Monsters? Of course, we won’t actively hunt for them.

“We will prioritize our survival, but we should always be prepared for the possibility that the Boss Monsters will actively eliminate the trial takers.”

Renard scoffed. “Why didn’t you attack the barrier with us earlier?”

Clearly, the teenage boy was still holding a grudge against Alex and was being petty.

“There’s no need for me to do that since I already know how impressive Nessia is,” Alex replied. “Now, let’s talk about more important matters.”

Alex approached his comrades and shared his plan.

“We will split into three teams,” Alex stated. “Charles, Nessia, and Renard will form one team. Lavinia and I will form the other. Bob, Grint, and Jorven will form the last team.

“The three teams will spread out to hunt for monster cores. We will stay within a two-mile radius of this place. That way, if the other teams encounter problems, we can conveniently aid each other without fail.

“The cores we collect will be used to power Nessia’s magic formation. The more cores we have, the stronger the formation. We need to gather enough cores for two—one offensive, one defensive.

“Since the mists at the edge of the island will continue spreading inward, it’s only a matter of time before all the trial takers are gathered in one place. Fighting is inevitable, so it will be advantageous for us if we prepare for that as well.”

Now that they had experienced Nessia’s magic formation firsthand, everyone was very eager to help make Alex’s plan happen.

Even Renard, who was very stubborn and had trust issues, no longer said anything to oppose Alex’s plan.

After giving out a few reminders, the three teams set out to hunt monsters to collect their cores.

They were not aware that the Professors, who were always on a lookout for talented students, had already set their sights on Nessia, whom they believed was a worthy candidate to become a scholarship student of Frieden Academy.

Chapter 129: Danger Draws Near

“You seem to know Nessia a lot,” Lavinia commented as she and Alex followed Dim Dim, who was guiding them to the location of the nearest monster. “Have you met her before?”

“Well, it’s my first time seeing her in real life,” Alex answered truthfully. “But I’ve seen her in my vision, so I know what she’s capable of doing.”

“... Then did you see me in your vision as well?”

“Not at all.”

A pout appeared on Lavinia’s face, but since Alex was walking ahead of her, the young man didn’t see it.

“You saw Charles, and you also saw Nessia,” Lavinia said after a minute had passed. “I’m guessing you have also seen Renard, right? Since you went out of your way just to recruit him into our group, he must be someone special as well.”

“He’s more like a problem child,” Alex replied. “But it’s true that he has potential.”

“What about Bob?” Lavinia asked. “Did you know him as well?”

Alex wasn’t dense. He sensed that the young lady sounded a little disappointed, so he decided to tell a little white lie.

“No,” Alex answered. “I just met Bob on the way while I was looking for you and Charles. Since I’m injured, I decided to befriend them and avoid any unnecessary conflicts.”

Lavinia finally felt at ease. She wouldn’t know how to feel if all the people Alex had gathered were people he had seen in his visions. It would have meant he knew everyone but her.

If she were to learn the truth—that Alex actually knew Bob, Grint, and Jorven beforehand—the realization might sting. It would make her wonder why she, of all people, was the exception.

Alex’s words reached her ears as her thoughts ran along these lines.

“Lavinia, I believe meeting new people is one of the joys of life,” Alex said. “I may not have seen you in my visions, but after seeing how much you care about the Clawford Tribe and your drive to learn and push yourself, I consider myself lucky to have you here as a comrade.

“It puts me at ease knowing someone as capable as you has my back. Frieden Academy is full of prodigies—masters of swordplay, magic, words, or even a mix of them.

“They may surpass us in brains, strength, and strategy, but there’s only so much one person can do alone. That’s why we have to watch each other’s backs. It’s the only way to survive in a world like this.

“You know I’m only good at taking hits. So, I need someone to hit back for me. With you around, I believe no one’s going to get away with bullying me.”

Lavinia’s gaze and heart softened after hearing Alex’s heartfelt words. However, a faint blush appeared on her face when she realized that the young man’s words sounded like a confession to her.

Of course, that wasn’t Alex’s intention, and she knew that.

But she couldn’t help but smile. After all, the young man had just acknowledged her strength, even depending on her to watch his back.

Alex was the Oathkeeper. His goal was to become the strongest shield for those he vowed to protect.

She, on the other hand, was a sword. Someone meant to strike down anyone who dared to threaten those she cared about.

If Alex was going to be the strongest shield, then she would become...

‘The strongest sword,’ Lavinia mused as she gripped her sword whip more tightly. ‘That is the role that I need to play.’

“Dim!”

Dim Dim’s warning broke Lavinia from her daze. She turned her attention to the two Dire Wolves in front of them.

"I'll take the left, you take the right," Alex said as he summoned Everguard.

"Shield Charge!"

The young man suddenly accelerated. Soon, his shield smashed into a Dire Wolf's face. The wolf cried out in pain as it tumbled down to the ground due to the impact of Alex's attack.

"Serpent Lash!"

Lavinia's sword whip flew like a serpent about to sink its fangs into its prey without a shred of mercy.

The Rank 2 Dire Wolves, which would have made Alex run away in fear before, were no longer a threat to him.

Soon, the two Dire Wolves turned into particles of light, and Dim Dim happily collected their monster cores before keeping them inside its dimensional storage.

"Let's go, Dim Dim," Alex said. "We need to collect as many cores as possible before sunset."

"Dim!" Dim Dim nodded and guided Alex and Lavinia to the next location where they could hunt monsters.

While the two were busy killing monsters, Charles, Nessia, and Renard encountered a few trial takers along their way.

However, the trio didn't make any move to eliminate their fellow candidates, not even if the opposing party was traveling alone.

They weren't battle junkies like Lavinia. After a greeting or two, they simply parted ways from the other hopefuls and minded their own business.

Bob, Grint, and Jorven, who were focused on killing monsters, no longer actively hunted trial takers.

They were now looking at the bigger picture. Besides, after meeting Alex, they had understood how making enemies recklessly might bite them in the future.

The three had witnessed how Alex and Dim Dim tormented Renard before the latter joined their group.

Aside from that, they now knew how strong their team was. They truly believed that they had a higher chance of clearing the trial of the academy even without resorting to their old ways.

A mile away from the trio, a trial taker collapsed on the ground with an unwilling expression.

Soon, he turned into particles of light as he was ejected from the trial.

Standing over the spot where he vanished was a three-meter-tall red wolf, its twin horns jutting from its forehead like a fearsome unicorn.

Flames danced on its feet, making it look even more imposing.

It then scanned the surroundings as if looking for its next target.

A minute later, it ran towards a certain direction, where its next prey was about to meet its end.

Chapter 130: The Ember Howl Sovereign [Part 1]

The Dire Wolf turned into particles of light after Lavinia unleashed the finishing blow.

She and Alex had been hunting for three hours. Now, with the sun beginning its slow descent, it wouldn't be long before they had to head back to the meeting point.

Just as she was about to ask Alex if they should head farther west, she noticed the young man staring off into the space in front of him with a frown.

“Alex?” Lavinia asked as she approached him. “Is there something wrong? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“We need to quickly regroup with the others, Lavinia,” Alex replied as he continued to stare at his map. “A Boss Monster is near the vicinity.”

Aside from his team members, who were marked by green blinking dots on the map, he could also see the locations of the four Rank 4 Boss Monsters in real time.

Alex had been keeping a close eye on the Boss Monsters, ensuring his team wouldn’t get caught off guard by a surprise attack.

Originally, the red blinking dot, which was the size of a pigeon’s egg, had been heading eastward.

But for some reason, it changed its course and headed west, near the center of the island.

The bad news was that it was moving very close to Bob, Grint, and Jorven.

It was one of the four Boss Monsters, and its name was the Two-Horned Blaze Wolf.

“Dim Dim, guide Lavinia and look for Charles, Renard, and Nessia,” Alex ordered. “Tell them that a Boss Monster has appeared near us, and they should head to our meeting place to regroup.”

“I’ll look for Bob, Grunt, and Jovern and regroup with the rest right after. We don’t have much time, so please hurry!”

“Dim!” Dim Dim nodded before gesturing for Lavinia to follow.

The young lady threw Alex a meaningful glance before following the Dim Sum God to pass the young man's message to their comrades.

While Lavinia was running northeast, Alex sprinted east.

It was impossible for the four of them to defeat a Rank 4 Boss Monster. For a more solid shot at victory, all of the members of their team must be gathered in one place.

Although it would be difficult, it was not impossible.

For now, his priority was to bring Bob and the others back with him before the Boss Monster reached their location.

Somewhere near the center of the island...

"Did you guys hear something?" asked one of the trial takers, a frown creasing his brow as he turned to his comrade.

"Yes, I heard something," a young man replied. "It was faint, but I believe it's a scream... a human scream."

"Oi, please don't joke around," said another young man seriously. "What's the point of scaring each other?"

"No, they're not lying," the only lady in the group commented. "I thought I was just hearing things earlier, but now you guys confirmed it. That was indeed a scream."

The group of four warily looked at their surroundings, weapons drawn and ready to fight.

“Could it be monsters?” the leader of the group asked. “Or have they been eliminated by other trial takers?”

“That scream is faint, but I believe it was a scream of fear, not pain,” the young lady replied. “I have reason to believe it might be a monster... a strong monster.”

At the mention of ‘a strong monster’, everyone in the group thought of the same thing.

A Boss Monster.

Just as they were about to discuss their next move, the young lady gasped and pointed at the trees in the distance.

“I can sense something very strong in that direction,” the young lady said, looking very grim. “It’s no ordinary monster!”

“Sh*t!” the leader cursed. “Let’s run now!”

This was the best course of action they could think of, and they made the right call.

But there was just one little problem.

The Boss Monster was faster than them.

In just the span of a minute, the group of four saw a three-meter-tall red wolf with two horns protruding from its forehead.

Its feet were covered in flames, and it was approaching them very quickly!

“We can’t outrun it!” the leader shouted. “Prepare to fight!”

Knowing they really had no other choice but to fight, the group took a defensive formation and braced themselves for the incoming threat to their lives.

A few minutes later, raw, terrified screams echoed through the forest, sending chills down the spines of everyone who heard them.

“What’s that, Bob?” Grint asked. “Are those human screams?”

“Don’t think about that and just run!” Bob urged his friends. “Follow me. Now!”

Bob had experienced and done many shady things, like gambling, stealing, as well as other minor crimes.

There were times when his instinct would kick in, telling him whenever something dangerous was about to happen.

During those times, Bob would either keep a low profile, hide, or flee until the danger had passed.

And right now, his instincts warned him that if they didn’t leave the area soon, they’d be the next to scream their lungs out, just like those unfortunate souls they’d heard moments before.

Although Grint and Jorven didn’t have the same sixth sense as Bob, they could tell that there was something very dangerous near them.

So, they ran as fast as they could and followed their temporary leader to the best of their ability.

As the three ran like their lives depended on it, screams continued to spread inside the forest.

It seemed another group of trial takers had fallen victim to whatever was now prowling the island.

Suddenly, a vicious, powerful wolf howl reverberated in the surroundings, which confirmed their assumption.

“That’s not the howl of a Dire Wolf,” Jorven noted fearfully.

“Stop talking and just run!” Bob ordered. “Let’s find the others and tell them about this threat!”

Ten minutes later, another round of screams reached their ears.

But this time, the screams seemed much louder than before. The three teenagers turned pale from fright as they realised the enemy was now closer to them.

It was at that moment that Grint saw a familiar person running towards them.

“It’s Alex!” Grint pointed. “He has come for us!”

Bob raised both of his hands in front of him, forming an X, telling Alex not to come close to them.

Fortunately, the young man understood what they were saying, so he stopped and made a gesture for the three to hurry up so they could escape together.

When everyone thought the worst was finally over, Alex saw something red break past the trees in the forest, heading in their direction.