

Endless 171

Chapter 171: Endless Horizon's Secret Weapon

"Hey, how does a club become a Crest Club?" Alex asked.

He had always wondered what was the difference between the Crest Clubs and every other club.

"Good question!" Chuck immediately jumped at the opportunity to enlighten his best friend about what set the Crest Clubs apart from the so-called ordinary clubs. "In order to become a Crest Club, that club must first make great contributions to the academy."

Alex furrowed his brows a little. "Great contributions?"

"Yes, and there are many ways to do that," Chuck replied. "The easiest and most straightforward way is giving the academy big amounts of money. For example, the Merchant Alliance, which is one of the twelve Crest Clubs, controls businesses inside and outside of the academy. It shares the profits with the school.

"However, a club can become a Crest Club by racking up achievements that will make Frieden Academy's influence and prestige rise! For example, through inter-academy competitions and other contests.

"Of course, you can also do volunteer work. But that is already covered by the White Cross Foundation, which is also a Crest Club. They do community service, humanitarian work, and relief missions to places that have encountered tragedies, spreading the influence of Frieden Academy far and wide."

Alex rubbed his chin because he was now getting a clearer picture of why these clubs were able to stand tall above the rest.

"Then, what about the Lionheart Club?" Alex inquired. "The one where your brother is a part of."

"The Lionheart Club dabbles on politics," Chuck replied.

“Politics?” Alex blinked. “They became a Crest Club just because of that?”

“Alex, don’t underestimate politics.” Chuck wagged his finger. “With a single order from a noble, private armies can be mobilized. The original goal of the Lionheart Club revolved around the concept of Noblesse Oblige.

“Those born with power, wealth, or high social status have a moral obligation to act with honor, generosity, and responsibility, especially toward those who are less privileged.”

Caspian might not be the most dishonourable, petty, and imprudent person he knew, but that spoiled scion was definitely high up on the list.

Chuck could tell what Alex was thinking. “At least,” he said, “that should have been their mission. But over the years, it has just become a club of elitists. It’s really sad to see it happen this way.”

“Now, the club only accepts members of the Royal Families as well as the first and second sons and daughters of Earls, Marquess, and Dukes.

“Younger children from these families are not accepted, so obviously all the sons and daughters of Viscounts and Barons are also considered too lowly to be part of their club.”

“... Wow, talk about elitism,” Nessia sneered. “So, they’re just a bunch of pricks who have gathered together in a club to talk about their lineages so they can feel important?”

Chuck smiled bitterly. “Yes. It’s really sad that such a noble club has now turned into a gathering of noble pricks.”

Alex had originally wanted all of them, but especially Chuck, to become part of the Obsidian Fang so they wouldn’t get bullied by the Lionheart Club.

But since all of them couldn’t be accepted, they had decided to make a club of their own.

Chuck's explanation about the true nature of the Crest Clubs filled Alex with determination.

"Okay, let's do it!" Alex exclaimed with conviction. "Let's make Endless Horizon the thirteenth Crest Club of the academy."

""Huh?!""

Lavinia, Charles, Nessia, and Chuck looked at the young man as if he was out of his mind.

"I know what you guys are thinking." Alex smirked. "But we have a secret weapon!"

"Secret weapon?" Chuck blinked. "What secret weapon?"

"Behold!" Alex said as he picked up Dim Dim as it was busy eating some cookies on top of the table.
"This is our secret weapon!"

"Dim?" Dim Dim blinked in confusion, having been interrupted mid-bite.

"Alex, what are you talking about?" Nessia frowned. "And please, put Dim Dim down. Can't you see it is eating?"

"Oh. Sorry about that, Dim Dim."

"Dim Dim~"

Alex then sat down to explain how he would elevate their club's status to a Crest Club.

"Tell me, why is the Obsidian Fang a Crest Club?" Alex asked Chuck.

“It’s because they regularly clear dungeons and do explorations,” Chuck replied. “They give the academy shares of their dungeon loot. They also create guidebooks on how to deal with dungeon monsters.”

Nessia’s face lit up at those words and she leaned in to better hear what Chuck was about to say.

“This helps other explorers, including other students of the academy, by teaching them the weaknesses of various monsters and how to fight them effectively.

“Also, the Obsidian Fang goes on expeditions to explore ruins, ancient cities, and other undiscovered or forgotten places. They keep meticulous records of these expeditions as well.”

“That’s it?” Alex asked.

“What do you mean that’s it?” Chuck frowned. “The library of the academy has many of their published books. Data compiled through hundreds of years since the academy’s founding. It’s not a feat anyone can accomplish.”

“Don’t worry. If that’s the only thing that the Obsidian Fang can do, I’m sure we can do better,” Alex replied with confidence before glancing at Dim Dim, who was happily munching on cookies.

When it came to knowledge about the world of Arcana, the combined efforts of the club members of the Obsidian Fang for the past hundreds of years couldn’t even begin to compare to what Dim Dim knew.

In fact, even if they managed to collect all the information about the Elarion Continent, where the Kingdom of Avalon was located, it was just one of the seven continents of the world of Arcana.

There were more mysteries that were left to be discovered, and all of this information was something that Dim Dim knew.

“Alex, let me just be clear about something,” Chuck said in a solemn tone. “You plan to challenge the authority of the Obsidian Fang?”

"I don't plan to challenge anyone," Alex replied. "This is what you call healthy competition. Isn't that what being a student of the academy is all about?"

"I can already foresee another Crest Club becoming our enemy in the future." Nessia facepalmed. "Maybe I shouldn't have joined this club."

"O-Oi! No take backs!" Chuck immediately crossed his arms into an X to tell Nessia that she wasn't allowed to quit their club.

Nessia negated Chuck's earnestness by simply looking away. "Just know," she said without facing Alex, "that if I become a ghost because of this club's shenanigans, I will haunt you till the day you die."

"Don't worry, you won't turn into one," Alex replied with confidence.

After all, Nessia was the future Phoenix Tactician.

A Strategic-Class Mage who could always find her way out of the most tricky situation.

With such a strategist as a member of their club, Alex was confident that they would be able to go a long way when it came to dungeon expeditions and field explorations.

'It's too bad Renard joined the Obsidian Fang,' Alex thought. 'Well, with his ability, it's only a matter of time before he becomes part of it.'

But, just as Alex was thinking along these lines, they heard a knock on the door.

Since Chuck was the closest to the door, he didn't hesitate to open it to see who it was.

Everyone's eyes landed on Renard, who looked as if he had swallowed a fly.

"Did you manage to join Obsidian Fang?" Alex asked.

“...No,” Renard answered.

“Huh?” Alex looked at the young man in disbelief. “You weren’t able to join it? Did you fail their trial?”

“I didn’t fail!” Renard replied. “I... I just gave my spot to someone that needed it more than me.”

“Someone who needs it more than you?” Alex tilted his head. “Who?”

“Phoebe.” Renard leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms over his chest. “I gave my spot to Phoebe.”

“Oh?” Alex smiled mischievously. “I didn’t know that the two of you were that close.”

“Shut up!” Renard, who twitched like someone had grabbed his tail by surprise, glared daggers at Alex. “She said that I shouldn’t join the Obsidian Fang because I would not be able to grow stronger by joining them.”

“So why are you here?” asked Nessia pointedly.

“Phoebe said that I should join your club instead. So, that’s why I’m here. Don’t get the wrong idea, okay?”

Alex gave Phoebe two thumbs-up in his heart after hearing Renard’s explanation.

He didn’t know why the young Seer of the Silver-Horned Tribe had asked the teenage boy with trust issues to find them instead.

The other thing that surprised him was the fact that Renard actually trusted Phoebe’s advice instead of ignoring her!

Alex's train of thought was suddenly interrupted when Renard's voice reached his ears.

"So, are you guys forming a club or what?" Renard scratched his head in frustration. "If not, I'm going to leave."

Chuck hastily grabbed Renard's hand and shook it happily.

"Welcome to the Endless Horizon Club," Chuck exclaimed warmly. "We will become the thirteenth Crest Club in the future, so you will become one of its Elders if you join now!"

Renard clicked his tongue because Chuck was too enthusiastic for his taste.

Still, he glanced at Alex and told him to add his name to the list of club members before leaving the room without a second glance.

Even he didn't know why he had followed Phoebe's advice.

However, for some reason, the words of the young lady had sounded so compelling. It was as if she had been making some kind of prophecy.

A prophecy that caused a ripple of casualty in the world, where someone named Alex Stratos, shouldn't exist.

Chapter 172: He Has Found His Match

Three days had passed since Alex received the document approving their club application.

Now that their club, Endless Horizon, was official, he and his friends decided to look for a place to be their club room.

"Sorry, but this room is already taken," said the secretary of the student council, Cassandra, to Alex. "Actually, due to the number of club applications we received, all the rooms designated for club activities are already taken."

The lady, who was in her early twenties, looked at the handsome young man with a sweet smile on her face.

She had taken it upon herself to meet with the members of Endless Horizon after receiving their request for their own club room.

Although they were now an official club, the student council president, Theo, refused to make things easy for them.

Not only were they not given any funds, but they were also deprived of a club room.

He believed that by doing so, the members of Endless Horizon would feel disillusioned, prompting them to dissolve their club on their own.

"Is that so?" Alex replied with a smile as sweet as Cassandra's. 'You b*tch, do you really think I don't know what kind of person you are?'

The young man was so tempted to give the secretary of the student council the middle finger, but he knew that if he were to really do so, he would immediately be sent to the disciplinary room.

She was Theo's underling and thus moved according to his wishes. This was why she was one of the most hated ladies in the academy, especially those who opposed Theo from the shadows.

"Yes, I'm really sorry about this." Cassandra pressed her hands together in apology. "But all the clubrooms are already taken, and there is nothing that we can do."

Alex nodded, pretending to believe and understand the secretary's apparent helplessness while secretly laughing in his heart.

'Kukuku! Let's see how long you can keep up this farce,' Alex thought as he stole a glance at his club members. As expected, they looked very disappointed.

Cassandra was paying close attention to Alex and his friends. The moment she saw their disappointed expressions, she knew she had succeeded in the task assigned to her by Theo.

"It's really a shame," Alex pretended to concede before sighing dramatically. "Then I guess I have no choice but to ask the Headmaster. Come on, guys, let's go!"

Alex immediately walked away, making Cassandra's body stiffen.

"W-Wait, why are you going to look for the Headmaster?" Cassandra demanded as she blocked Alex's path. Her hands were now on her waist, and her eyes were fixed on him in a glare that betrayed her real opinion of him and his friends.

"Have you not seen our club application form?" Alex asked innocently, but the corner of his lips rose into a smirk. "We clearly listed the Headmaster as our Faculty Advisor."

"But the Headmaster has told the president that he will find a different advisor for your club," Cassandra replied, doing her best to keep her voice from breaking.

"Right?" Alex's smirk widened. "But before the Headmaster assigns a new advisor for our club, he's still technically our advisor. Since you said there's no longer any club rooms available, I'll just have to report exactly what you told me so we'll know what to do next."

Alex watched in satisfaction as realization dawned on Cassandra. "I'm sure he will understand," he continued, "and will not cause trouble for the student council. Well, then, Miss Cassandra. Have a good day."

Dim Dim smiled evilly and even gave Cassandra a wink.

The Headmaster visited the Dim Sum God from time to time in an attempt to get the sigils back. Without fail, Dim Dim always said no. Rather than getting offended, the Headmaster was amused.

In fact, he would offer bribes like cookies, candies, and other snacks and desserts to Dim Dim, hoping to redeem the sigils back cheaply.

However, who was Dim Dim?

It was the Dim Sum God! Such obvious schemes wouldn't trick it!

Lavinia, who seemed to understand what was happening, narrowed her eyes.

However, she didn't make any move to stop Alex's subtle blackmail since she also felt angry.

Her grandfather had won a bet against the Headmaster during the second trial.

They had been friends for a long time, so she knew that Rowan wouldn't try to make things difficult for them.

She already knew they wouldn't receive any funding for their club because the Headmaster had personally sent her a message to inform her about this.

However, denying them a club room was something that Rowan would not do, especially since her grandfather would definitely nag at the old man for being stingy.

"Wait, give me a moment!" Cassandra took out an artifact that looked like a small notebook from her pocket and opened it.

Everything under the jurisdiction of the academy was listed in it, including the rooms allocated for the new clubs that had been recently approved.

"I just double-checked and found that there is still one room that is available," Cassandra said as if she were doing Alex a huge favor. "I will be awarding this room to your club. You guys are very lucky!"

But contrary to her expectations, Alex simply raised his hands, rejecting her offer.

"No thanks," Alex replied. "That room you overlooked was probably a small random area. Maybe it's also inconvenient to locate. I'm still going to the Headmaster. He'll certainly come up with a better solution."

"Hey, are you making fun of me?" Cassandra asked, her tone dripping with venom. "I just said we are giving you your club room."

"And I just said that I am going to talk to the Headmaster," Alex retorted. "What? You're going to stop me? Can you stop me? Don't you know that Dim Dim and the Headmaster are BFFs?"

Before Cassandra could react, Alex moved closer to her and whispered something in her ear.

"Tell this to the president," Alex said in a voice low enough that only Cassandra could hear. "If he thinks he can bully us, think again. You have no idea who you're dealing with."

The young man pulled back and walked away. Or rather, he tried to walk away. However, Cassandra grabbed his hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"What do you want?" Cassandra asked.

"What do you think?" Alex asked back.

"I can't read minds."

"Then you should learn how to read minds."

Cassandra longed to slap the young man and use any means necessary to make herself out to be the victim.

However, she didn't dare to.

Alex was staring straight at her like he could see through her soul and knew everything about her.

Also, if the Headmaster got involved, an investigation might be conducted. In that case, everything would be brought to light.

This would become very disadvantageous for the student council president and her because their enemies might use this opportunity to complain about them abusing their authority.

"You... Do you really want to make an enemy of the President and me?" Cassandra asked. Any vestige of friendliness in her tone was long gone. "Can you handle the consequences of going against us?"

"Is that consequence something the Headmaster can't deal with?" Alex sneered.

"I think you're underestimating us too much," Cassandra said coolly. "There is nothing we can't do."

"Perfect!" Alex gave Cassandra a thumbs-up, making the latter frown. "Chuck, did you get that?"

"I recorded everything perfectly!" Chuck showed the recording crystal, which made Cassandra's face turn grim.

Without any ounce of hesitation, Cassandra snapped her fingers. The crystal in the teenage boy's hand promptly shattered.

"Ooops." Cassandra smirked. "It seems that your evidence is gone. What can you do now?"

"Ooops." Alex chuckled. "Do you think we only have one recording crystal?"

Cassandra's smirk lost its mirth after she heard Alex's reply.

"Where is it?" Cassandra grabbed hold of his collar and pulled him to her until their faces were only a few inches apart.

“Do you really think I’ll show it to you?” Alex replied casually. “I am going to give you five seconds to release me. Or else...

“You.”

“Will.”

“Regret.”

“It.”

Cassandra reluctantly released the young man, but she was still glaring at him.

If looks could kill, Alex would have died a thousand times already.

“Tell me, what do you want?” Cassandra asked. “Let’s settle this civilly.”

The secretary of the student council was too dense to notice that Alex had manipulated her into escalating things from the beginning.

He knew that if he mentioned the Headmaster, Cassandra would backpedal and try to smooth things out. The young man was well aware that the secretary of the student council was just testing the waters.

She wanted to know more about Alex and try to understand what made him tick.

But Alex didn’t want that.

He knew that Cassandra was a sadist who liked to step on the weak and helpless behind closed doors.

Even if he talked to her politely and tried to patch things up, it would only be a temporary solution.

He knew what kind of people Theo and Cassandra were.

They would continue to test him and use any schemes at their disposal to deal with them.

Alex didn't want that to happen, so he needed to escalate things, which would make the two understand that he was a ticking time bomb that they shouldn't poke lest it blow up in their faces.

In the highest tower of the academy, a young lady wearing a fox mask was observing Alex's exchange with Cassandra.

The mask covered most of her face, making it difficult to discern what she was thinking.

However, her eyes gleamed with a tinge of amusement, as if she were finding this incident quite entertaining.

"I guess Theo failed, huh?" Rowan, who was standing behind the young lady, chuckled. "It seems he has found his match. What do you think?"

"Theo is not his match," the young lady replied.

"You think highly of him." Rowan was surprised by his disciple's response.

"..." The masked lady didn't reply. However, that was more than enough to tell the Headmaster of Frieden Academy everything he needed to know.

Chapter 173: Alex Versus The Student Council

"So, you're Alex Stratos," Theo said as he looked at the young man, who was sipping his tea like a boss.

The other members of the student council had also gathered in the room, making Lavinia, Charles, Renard, Chuck, and Nessia feel pressured.

Alex had told Cassandra that if she wanted this to be settled peacefully, she would need to set up a meeting so that the members of Endless Horizon could talk to the president.

However, the club members—with the exception of Alex and Dim Dim—didn't expect that the entirety of the student council would be present during the discussion as well.

"It's nice to be popular, because I don't have to introduce myself to others," Alex replied. "Well then, I'm a very busy person, so let's go down to business. I know you hate commoners and scholarship students.

"And I'm sure that you have a reason for doing so. But, that is that and this is this. If you are going to abuse your authority as the student council president, I'll just take this matter to the Headmaster and let him mediate."

"Do you think," Theo asked with confidence, "that the Headmaster is bored enough to handle something as insignificant as this?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Alex answered. "However, no one will know unless I try, right? If the Headmaster won't see me, I'll just launch a protest and shout that we haven't been given fundings and a club room even though we are an official club whose application has been approved.

"I'm sure that the reporters of the Frieden Times will have a field day with that. I can already see the headlines. 'Student Council President Bullies Scholarship Students. Is Frieden Academy Really A Place That Values Equality?' I'll make sure to get a copy, and make it my family's heirloom."

The members of the student council all frowned because their intimidation tactic—which worked on other First Years—was obviously ineffective against Alex.

"I like this kid," a Fourth Year, who was at least two-meters tall, said with a smile. "I just don't know where his confidence is coming from."

“Would you like to find out?” Alex chuckled. “You might wet your pants if you do.”

“Oh?” the Sergeant at Arms of the student council, who literally used force to settle disputes, arched an eyebrow. “Do you think I will?”

“Yes.” Alex nodded.

There was no way that he could say that the one who had sent him to Arcana was a God, and that the little bun perched on top of his head was another God.

However, since he was the Oathkeeper, he also had the backing of the Hartwell Clan.

And the Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan, Ramza, was a close friend of the Headmaster.

‘This is the power of connections!’ Alex smiled as he placed his cup on top of the table, looking very relaxed and not the least bit intimidated by the glares of the people in the student council.

Frankly, there was no need for him to be scared of them.

In fact, they should be scared of him!

He knew a lot of secrets about these people since they were characters in the game!

Just like how he was able to play with Cassandra, he was confident that he could make these arrogant young men and women understand that their authority was not absolute.

“Alex Stratos,” Theo stated. “You appeared at the Floating Islands of Thaloria and applied as an adventurer three months ago. You have also become the Oathkeeper of Clawford Tribe, which is one of the powerful factions in the Kingdom of Avalon.

“Is that the reason why you’re acting very confident right now? Do you think your backing is strong enough?”

Theo gave Lavinia a brief glance before shifting his attention back to the young man, who looked very smug right now.

“Are you not curious?” Alex said as if he wasn’t too surprised about Theo doing a background check on him.

“Curious about what?” Theo asked back, looking like a true noble who was very proficient in wordplay.

“Are you not curious that even with the help of the Shadow Union and the Whispering Tower, you are unable to learn anything about me aside from the fact that I first appeared in the Town of Thaloria three months ago?” Alex inquired.

At the mention of the two powerful organizations that ordinary people didn’t know about, Theo and Cassandra couldn’t help but give Alex a second look.

“I’m very disappointed.” Alex sighed. “I’m this famous, and yet you know very little about me. Are you sure you want someone like me as your enemy?”

“I admit that I have underestimated you.” Theo rested his chin on the back of his intertwined fingers. “So, you do have some sort of backing for you to be this confident in facing me.”

“Why should I be afraid of the eldest son of a mere Ducal Family from Solara?” Alex answered. “You’re not even a Prince, so why are you acting like one?”

Alex wanted to create an image of someone that had a very powerful backing so that Theo would stop messing with him in the future.

The student council president only understood the words of power.

Only those who possessed it were the people whom he treated as equals.

This was the reason why Alex couldn't look weak in front of him.

The fact that he knew about the two intelligence gathering organizations—the Shadow Union and the Whispering Tower—was enough to make those with power understand that he was also a part of their world.

"What do you want?" Theo asked, no longer wanting to continue the farce that he had started. "Do you want funds for your club and a club room that is second only to what the Crest Clubs get?"

"Neither," Alex replied. "What I want is permission to build a clubhouse in the Mistral Weave Forest."

"What?" Theo frowned. "You plan to build a clubhouse in the forest that belongs to the academy?"

"Yes."

"No." Theo shook his head. "That is private property, and I don't have the power to give you permission to use it."

Alex looked like he had expected the president's answer.

In fact, he didn't believe that he would be given permission to build anything in the forest that was teeming up with Spirits and Monsters.

'Welp, it was worth a try,' Alex thought. 'I guess it's too early to gain access to that location.'

One of the places that he wished to visit with permission from the academy was the Mistral Weave Forest.

Certain events revolved in that location, and if possible, Alex wanted to monopolize them before others could discover its secrets.

“Then, I want access to it,” Alex decided to try his luck.

“No.” Theo’s reply was firm. “The only time that students are allowed to enter the Forest is when they are under the supervision of a Professor, or if there are any exercises that require students to explore it.

“Even the Obsidian Fang have to submit the required paperwork before they can enter the forest, and even then, their requests are not automatically approved by the academy.”

Alex then asked for a few more things, but Theo rejected all of them.

“Why are you asking for access to the places that are forbidden to students?” Cassandra glared at the young man, who kept on making ridiculous requests. “Are you testing our patience?”

“Fine.” Alex shrugged helplessly. He accepted that none of the areas he wanted to go were accessible at this time. “I have two conditions. The first is that you guys will not make things difficult for us.

“I know we started on the wrong foot, but we are not enemies. In fact, Endless Horizon might become the student council’s greatest ally during this year. Of course, I know that my words are hard to believe, but I assure you that we will be fighting on the same side.

“Lastly, I want our clubhouse to be in the clock tower. You will approve of this right? If not, I’ll just go ask the Headmaster. I’m sure that he will understand my circumstances.”

Alex wasn’t aware that the Headmaster was observing him at this very moment, alongside the young lady wearing a fox mask.

Rowan wanted to know how this confrontation with the student council would end.

However, he didn't expect that he would be able to gather some information about the mysterious young man, who was currently acting as if he had complete control of the discussion.

"The clock tower?" Theo pondered for a bit before agreeing. "Fine. From now on, you can use the clock tower as your clubhouse. I'll handle the paperwork. You guys can go now."

"Thanks, president." Alex remembered to be gracious and signaled for his club members to follow him.

Only when they were a safe distance away from the student council room did Chuck grab hold of Alex's arm and look at him as if he was some kind of deity.

"Damn! You were so cool earlier!" Chuck exclaimed. "You managed to hold your ground against the president! No one in the academy would dare to do what you did! Are you perhaps a prince that is hiding his true identity?"

Chuck might not be thinking too deeply about this, but their friends' ears perked up at his words. They didn't show it, but they all wanted to hear Alex's reply.

"No comment," Alex replied with a smile. "Just know that if you follow me, I will take you flying."

"From now on, you are my sworn brother," Chuck declared. "I'll follow you!"

Alex chuckled because he was starting to get used to Chuck's antics.

Although he didn't manage to gain access to some of the exclusive locations in the academy, he was still able to get the room in the clock tower that he wanted.

One of the Major Events in the academy would happen in the clock tower.

If Alex could get there first, he would be able to make enough preparations to prevent a calamity from descending into the academy.

Chapter 174: First Alchemy Class

“Welcome to the Alchemy Class, future alchemists,” said a middle-aged lady smilingly. Her voice was soothing and calm, likely due to the patience born from the countless trials and errors she had to go through as an alchemist.

The lady was Professor Zanna Noxley, one of the most popular professors in the academy.

Her shoulder-length dark brown hair was streaked with gray and curled softly at the ends. Silver-rimmed glasses perched on her nose, making her hazel eyes gleam even more brightly behind the lenses.

Overall, her temper was gentle and sweet, especially toward aspiring alchemists.

It was also for this very reason that Alex felt pity for her. He knew better than anyone that there was one giant troublemaker in her class.

And that was none other than... Chuck No Rizz.

“Chuck, listen okay?” Alex said patiently. “No matter what happens, no matter how tempted you are, never, ever, create a spark in the alchemy class. This is especially true when we’re doing experiments, got it?”

“Got it, no sparks.” Charles nodded. “Alex, you’re funny. Do you think of me as a child who doesn’t know how to behave?”

Alex was sorely tempted to say yes, but he resisted the urge. He simply smiled and patted his friend. Luckily, it seemed that his reminder did not dampen Chuck’s enthusiasm for the lesson.

Just like most classes, the Alchemy Class allowed students from Class E up to Class B to study together.

Class A had their own Alchemy Class and were supervised by another instructor.

As Professor Zanna listed the ground rules she expected her students to follow, Alex's eyes wandered around the classroom and landed on a beautiful fox lady who was resting her head on her arms and sleeping peacefully.

She was none other than the sleeping beauty of the academy, Latifa Everglen.

Her cascade of pale rose-gold locks tumbled around her shoulders like falling petals.

Latifa's skin was soft and fair. Her faint breathing as she slept gave Alex the strong urge to poke her cheeks just once.

However, Alex was certain that if he were to act on this impulse, half of the boys in Class D would unite to bury him six feet under.

The three fluffy tails behind her back signified her current rank, which was a Rank 3 Celestial Walker.

Although she was asleep, one of her three consciousnesses was paying close attention to the class.

She gained one more consciousness with every rank she reached, allowing her to multitask without needing to wake up.

"Alex, the guys in Class D are glaring at us," Chuck whispered. "So stop looking at Latifa before they come here and bite us."

Alex blinked before glancing at the boys of Class D. Indeed, as Chuck had said, they were glaring at the guy who had the audacity to stare at their class's sleeping beauty.

Clearly, they were feeling overprotective of her. They had even gone as far as choosing seats around her so they could protect her from all sides while she slept.

Years of experience informed Professor Zanna that her class was about to get rowdy. She clapped her hands loudly to catch everyone's attention.

“Today, we will be performing a simple alchemy exercise,” Professor Zanna said. “As you may already know, the most important potion that you must bring into your adventures is a health potion.”

Seeing that her students’ attention was back on her, she continued, “I’m sure some of you here have already dabbled in the arts of alchemy and can already craft their own potions.

“That is all well and good, but since this is a class meant to teach everyone, I hope those who know more about potion crafting can be patient so the rest of the class can learn.”

Alex’s experience was limited to crafting healing salves, not potions. Given his lack of funds in the past, he had limited himself to the most basic of healing remedies out of thriftiness.

But now that he had some money to splurge, he intended to make some health potions for himself and his club members. After all, they would be with him when he explored monster zones and dived into dungeons.

Professor Zanna presented a few ingredients on top of her table and began to explain the process of potion crafting.

After her explanation ended, the alchemy professor then took out a small vial filled with ruby-red liquid, which shimmered faintly under the light.

“This is a properly brewed low-grade health potion,” Professor Zanna said. “It may look simple, but a single mistake in the heating process, the wrong stirring rhythm, or an incorrect ratio can turn it into anything from a bitter syrup or explosive.”

The word “explosive” seemed to be a cue that prompted Alex to immediately look at Chuck. His roommate responded by lifting both hands defensively.

“What? I haven’t even touched anything yet,” Chuck protested.

Alex didn't know if the teenage boy said "yet" on purpose to imply he might indeed do something some other time.

"Fire has always been the tool of alchemy," Professor Zanna went on, not noticing the tension between Alex and Chuck. "Alchemists usually use magic flames that are readily available in the market.

"However, many alchemists also go out of their way to look for 'special flames' that are part of the Heavenly Flame Rankings, and I am one of them."

To demonstrate, Professor Zanna lifted her ring finger and a green flame rose up from it.

"This flame is called the Emerald Flame, and it helps increase the quality of my potions.

"It is ranked eighty in the Heavenly Flame Rankings and is very useful in the crafting of magical artifacts, especially when precious gems or magic crystals are used as ingredients.

"Alchemy doesn't only revolve around crafting potions and pills. It can also be used to craft magical items. So, I hope that all of you will strive to become wonderful alchemists that can make this world a better place."

The Professor then returned to her alchemy table and started to craft the low-quality healing potion.

"For now, just watch me," Professor Zanna said. "In our next class, all of you will craft a healing potion of your own, so make sure that you pay attention now, okay?"

She then glanced at the sleeping beauty in her class, but made no move to wake her up or scold her.

The staff of the academy had already been told about Latifa's unique circumstances. All of them had also been asked to be understanding of her.

Alex, Dim Dim, and Chuck watched as the Professor added the ingredients one by one to her alchemy pot. As the mixture was heated up, a few wisps of smoke floated out from it.

Professor Zanna's movements were fluid, almost mesmerizing.

Her hand never hesitated as she poured crushed moon herbs into the pot before stirring quickly to ensure an even mixture.

When the solution had been mixed properly, she carefully added a single drop of salamander's blood into the cauldron. The blood hit the blend with a faint hissing sound.

"She's good," Chuck whispered, his eyes wide as he leaned in. "I bet she could turn swamp water into wine."

Dim Dim, who was perched contentedly on Alex's head, blinked because it knew that Professor Zanna had already done such a thing.

A few minutes later, the mixture in the cauldron suddenly turned a vivid crimson, emitting a sweet herbal scent.

With a flick of her finger, Professor Zanna lowered the heat. The Emerald Flame danced obediently to her will.

Then, she removed the pot from the heat entirely and poured the contents into a waiting vial. The liquid settled like molten rubies inside the glass, radiant and potent.

"This is the correct result," Professor Zanna said, raising the vial for the class to see. "Notice the consistency, the color, and the clarity? For basic potion crafting, these are the three things you rely on to assess if you've done a good job."

A few students clapped in awe while some scribbled down notes frantically.

"Any questions before we wrap up today's demonstration?" Professor Zanna asked gently.

A few hands rose up, including Chuck's.

However, when the teenage boy started to ask where he could get his own Heavenly Flame, the whole class looked at him as if he was out of his mind.

Heavenly Flames weren't cabbages you could just grab in the market.

If someone knew where to find one, they would definitely keep it a secret so that such a treasure would belong only to them.

Chapter 175: Guys, No Matter What You Do, Don't Run

"It's a shame that Professor Zanna doesn't know where the other Heavenly Flames are located." Chuck sighed.

"Even if she knows, she won't tell anyone where they are," Alex pointed out. "Some believe that the reason they are called Heavenly Flames is because only the ones chosen by heaven can find them."

"Alex, I think you're forgetting something very important." Chuck flipped his hair before pointing at his own face with his thumb. "I am one of those Chosen Ones!"

Alex and Dim Dim patted Chuck's shoulder while giving him the "sure you are" gaze.

Nessia, who was following behind them, giggled because she was finding their banter quite amusing.

She had also been in the alchemy class earlier because she planned to master alchemy as well.

"I think the only thing you're chosen for is chaos," Nessia teased. "Heaven probably took one look at you and said, 'The world needs chaos,' and then sent you on your merry way."

Chuck gasped, clutching his chest as if mortally wounded. "Ouch. That one hurts, Ness. Right here."

The teenage boy pointed dramatically at his heart, even going as far as to grimace as if he was truly hurt by her words.

From the top of Alex's head, Dim Dim mimicked Chuck's pose, clutching its tiny chest with its little hand.

It was the one that had made the world of Arcana so wasn't Chuck technically born due to the wishes of the world it had created?

"Don't encourage him," Alex said dryly, reaching up to keep Dim Dim from falling off.

The group passed under the ivy-laced archway that connected the Alchemy Hall to the rest of the academy grounds.

The marble path sparkled subtly under the warm afternoon sun and the subtle scent of herbs and incense from alchemy class still clung to their robes.

As they walked, Alex spoke again, more contemplative this time.

"Still, the Heavenly Flames... It makes you wonder if they really choose people, or if people are just chasing myths." Alex knew of the Heavenly Flames, and had even tried to look for one in the game.

However, he hadn't found any no matter how hard he looked. Even those who had been able to acquire these flames attested that it was due to luck. "It was a fortuitous encounter," a player had said. "I didn't expect it."

"I mean, what if both are true?" Nessia suggested. "What if they don't appear until someone worthy is looking?"

Chuck scratched his head. "So... if I want one, I just have to look really hard while being worthy?"

"Pretty much." Alex smirked. "Good luck with that second part."

“Hey!”

Alex, Dim Dim, and Nessia burst out laughing. Chuck pretended to be insulted for a few seconds before breaking into a toothy grin.

However, when the laughter faded, Alex glanced at Nessia. He sighed in his heart.

Not only did Nessia acquire a Heavenly Flame in the game, it was ranked fourth in the Heavenly Flame Rankings!

It was none other than the Phoenix Flames, which allowed her to show the world why she was one of the three Main Heroines of the world of Arcana.

As the group walked near the garden of the academy, they saw someone who should still be sleeping inside the Alchemy Classroom.

Latifa Everglen.

Or rather, a projection of her.

The ethereal fox girl walked slowly between the flowerbeds, her rose-gold hair flowing with phantom grace.

Her three spectral tails glided behind her in a dreamy arc. Students passing by either didn’t notice her or, more likely, were simply unable to see her astral projection.

But to those attuned to mana, like Alex, Chuck, and Nessia, the air shimmered faintly with spiritual resonance.

“Is this the fabled Astral Projection?” Nessia asked, eyes wide.

"Maybe," Alex replied. "This is the first time I'm seeing it with my own eyes."

"That's kind of cool," Chuck commented. "If I had that power, I would definitely travel the world with one consciousness and let the other one study here in the academy."

Suddenly, Latifa's spirit form stopped walking and glanced at their direction.

Perhaps she had heard them talking about her. She smiled at them before giving them a polite bow.

A moment later, she disappeared, turning into particles of light. Clearly, she had somewhere to go.

'I wonder where she's going,' Alex thought as he made a turn. 'Still, it's nice to see h—'

At that moment, his face smashed into something big and wide that was blocking their path towards the Ironheart Dormitory.

"What the..." Chuck's eyes were practically bulging out of his sockets. Right in front of them was a Rank 4 Monster.

"A Doom Cow." Nessia froze after identifying the monster. "Guys, no matter what you do, don't run."

Chuck, who was about to do just that, gulped. He was relieved that Nessia's warning had reached him in time, but he couldn't help but wonder what would've happened had he ran.

The answer was that Doom Cow might have gouged him with its demonic horns had he tried to escape.

Standing before them was a cow that was slightly over two-meters tall.

It was taller than a war horse, and its massive muscular frame was wrapped in a dark hide that looks like charred stone rather than flesh.

Deep cracks ran along its flanks and shoulders, glowing faintly with red-orange light—like veins of magma pulsing with barely-concealed rage beneath the surface.

Two jagged obsidian horns curved forward from its skull, threatening to pierce anyone who was foolish—or unlucky—enough to anger it.

Surprisingly, its crimson eyes didn't look wild or mindless.

They were cold, intelligent and calculating.

Its gaze was not that of a common animal. Rather, it looked at them like it was passing a verdict.

And right now, it seemed to be judging whether the three teenagers were going to be its early dinner.

A tense standoff took place as the students stared back at the Rank 4 Monster, which was known for its aggressiveness and fiery personality.

Suddenly, the Doom Cow lowered its head towards Alex, making the young man flinch.

Just as he was about to summon Svalinn, he heard a giggle on top of his head. For a split second, Alex was at an utter loss, unable to decide his next move.

The Doom Cow was licking Dim Dim, and the Dim Sum God giggled because it felt ticklish.

Alex, Chuck, and Nessia instantly assumed that the monster was licking the little bun to know if it was delicious or not.

“What are you doing, Daisy?”

A familiar voice reached the three teenagers' ears. They turned to the speaker and saw Fran, the Dwarf girl, in farmer's clothing.

She was even wearing a straw hat that complemented the rest of her outfit.

"Moooo!" the Doom Cow—which apparently answered to the name Daisy—replied.

"Sorry if she scared you." Fran bowed in apology to her classmates whose faces were more than a little pale from their encounter with Daisy. "She's a good girl. It just so happens that she likes to patrol the academy from time to time."

The Doom Cow snorted before resuming to lick Dim Dim, which prompted the little bun to giggle once more.

"S-She won't eat Dim Dim, right?" Alex asked, fearing that the lick would turn into a chomp later on.

"I wonder?" Fran replied in a teasing tone, which made Alex's heart skip a beat.

The cute dwarf smirked and Alex wished that he had a camera to snap some photos. Fran was usually quite serious and stoic. It was very rare for her to show this cute side of her in public.

"Daisy, let's go." Fran lightly tapped the side of the cow's body. "Captain is looking for you."

Daisy obeyed, but not before mooing at Dim Dim.

The Dim Sum God nodded before jumping on top of Daisy's head like it was hitchhiking for a ride.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim said to Alex.

"You want to play with your new friend?"

“Dim!”

“Okay, just be careful that Daisy doesn’t eat you,” Alex reminded the Dim Sum God. The moment the words left his lips, he knew he was probably worrying too much. Dim Dim could get along well with anyone and anything.

“Dim!” Dim Dim saluted before lightly patting Daisy’s head, telling her that they could now go and play together.

Alex watched as the Doom Cow walked away, seemingly happy that she had found someone to spend time with in the academy.

Fran bade them goodbye before following Daisy, which was just one of the several monsters that she was looking after.

“I didn’t know that Doom Cows could be tamed like that,” Chuck said only after the Doom Cow disappeared from his sight. “I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

As a Fire Mage, Chuck hated anything that was fire resistant.

The Doom Cow was a fire-breathing monster. Naturally, it was quite resistant to flames.

“Will Dim Dim really be okay?” Nessia asked. “What if Daisy eats it?”

Alex was also still a little worried. After a brief internal struggle, he decided to follow Fran and make sure that his little partner wouldn’t get eaten by its new close friend.

Chapter 176: Alex’s Choice

Shortly after ELO’s release, many players had wondered why the Headmaster allowed Fran and her twin brother, Finn, to have their own farm in the academy.

Compared to other farms, this farm certainly wasn't that big as it spanned only nine hundred square meters. However, it still took up a decent bit of space on the academy's private lands.

Fran was also a member of the Farmer's Club, which was headed by Finn.

The Dwarf siblings mostly cared for a dozen beasts as well as planted crops like cherry tomatoes, lettuce, garlic, and anything else that caught their fancy.

'It looks the same as in the game,' Alex noted when he arrived at the farm that was a good distance away from the Ironheart Dormitory.

The academy had many teleportation gates, and people mostly used them to travel around with ease.

This made Alex wonder how the Doom Cow, Daisy, was able to use the teleporter on her own.

Since Fran was one of his favorite characters in the game, he was very familiar with her romance route. However, he had never seen Daisy among the beasts on the farm.

'Could she be here because of the butterfly effect?' Alex thought.

Ever since his arrival in Arcana, he had changed the fate of Charles Lambert, who was supposed to die in the Dungeon of Beginnings.

Of course, Charles' life was not the only one he had altered.

Unbeknownst to Alex, he had also changed the fates of the Cairo, Lavinia, as well as the other Catkins who had challenged the Etherion Domain with him.

Lavinia wasn't supposed to enroll at the academy, and would have lived her life differently.

But, after meeting Alex, her fate had shifted a bit, opening a different branch leading to a different future.

“Are you worried about Dim Dim?” Fran asked, noticing that Alex was paying close attention to the little bun, who was being introduced by Daisy to the rest of the monsters on the farm.

“A little bit,” Alex replied while doing his best to keep his lips from twitching.

The young man couldn’t help but feel anxious because almost all the farm animals were now licking the Dim Sum God. Thoroughly tickled, Dim Dim was giggling non-stop.

“They won’t eat, Dim Dim, right?” Alex asked.

“They won’t,” Fran replied. “Probably.”

“...” Alex’s heart was pounding like a jackhammer against his ribcage. He didn’t know if this was caused by the threat of one of the animals accidentally gobbling Dim Dim up or by the sight of Fran’s playful side.

Suddenly, the Dwarf smiled faintly and placed her hand over her chest.

“Let me once again introduce myself to you,” Fran said. “My name is Fran Terra. I know that we already introduced ourselves in the class, but I don’t really like to speak so formally with people outside of classes.

“And, since I believe that Dim Dim will be a regular guest in our farm, I can already consider it a friend. As you are its guardian, we’ll be seeing each other very often as well. In that case, just call me Fran, and I’ll just call you Alex. Do we have a deal?”

“Nice to meet you, Fran,” Alex said, extending his hand for a handshake. “My name is Alex Stratos. Just call me Alex.”

Fran looked at Alex's hand before glancing at her own hands, which were a little dirty because she had been tending to her garden when she noticed that Daisy had left the farm without permission.

She had been in a hurry to look for Daisy because people might treat the Doom Cow as an aggressive monster and attack her.

"M-My hands are a little dirty right now," Fran stammered, her voice tinged with embarrassment.

"I don't mind," Alex said. "Besides, I don't think your hands are dirty. Those are the hands of someone who is a hard worker."

The cute Dwarf blushed after hearing Alex's words. Perhaps due to his encouragement, she reluctantly shook his hand after cleaning her hands up a bit with her handkerchief.

Fran's hand was rough.

It wasn't the delicate and soft hand of a noble lady who had been pampered all her life.

Alex could feel the strength from her handshake, which made him realize that she was indeed someone worthy of his respect.

Suddenly, Fran asked the young man a question that made his heart skip a beat.

"Alex, out of curiosity, if you were to grow something with your own hands... what would you plant first?" Fran asked.

The young man couldn't help but feel surprised because this question was a trigger that would allow him to advance into the Fran Route.

Even without a system notification, Alex knew by heart the multiple choices that would appear when Fran asked this question to the protagonist.

— — —

< A choice appears before the player >

Question: What will you plant?

- A) A golden fruit tree — its fruits are rare and valuable. Selling them will bring in a fortune.
- B) A spikeroose vine — beautiful but dangerous. A perfect blend of elegance and defense.
- C) A healing herb bed — they take patience to grow, but they help people and animals alike.
- D) A fire pepper bush — spicy, aggressive, and fast-growing. Great for a quick meal or a prank.
- E) “Nothing, honestly. I’d just clear it and use it for something more useful than growing weeds.”

— — —

Those were the multiple choices that would affect Fran’s impression of the player.

The correct answer was C, a healing herb bed.

The neutral answers were A, B, and D. Players who picked these answers could have a friendly relationship with Fran.

Choosing E would give Fran a bad impression of the protagonist and the Farmville Route would henceforth be permanently sealed off.

Just as Alex was about to give the ideal answer, he suddenly paused and bit his lip.

'No, not like this.' Alex involuntarily clenched his fist because this wasn't what he wanted.

He was incredibly fond of Fran. If someone were to ask him whether he wanted to unlock her romance route, the answer would be a definite yes.

But Arcana was no longer the setting of a game to Alex.

He didn't want his relationship with Fran to be fake, successful only because he knew in advance what responses would please her the most. He craved a relationship that wasn't dictated and limited by multiple choice questions.

Seeing his expression, Fran frowned, wondering why the simple question left the young man looking like he was fighting an internal battle.

"Are you alright?" Fran asked.

"Yes," Alex replied. "It's just that your question was a bit sudden that I momentarily had an existential crisis."

"... Huh?" Fran blinked in confusion.

"No, please don't mind me, I'm just saying nonsense." Alex coughed lightly before finally giving his answer. "I think, if I were given a plot of land, I'd probably plant a random seed that I got by chance.

"Maybe the seed would give birth to something weird, stubborn, or impossible to grow in this environment. Maybe, deep inside, I want to know if something unexpected could take root. Something that is not determined by choices or any power that would force an outcome that is already set in stone."

As Alex answered this question, he gazed at Fran in a sincere and gentle manner. He didn't want to repeat the answer that he had already said countless times in the past just to make her part of his world.

This time, he would not choose a predetermined answer.

He would give her a sincere answer even if it might sour her impression of him.

A long silence passed before Fran smiled faintly.

“... I wasn’t expecting that kind of answer,” Fran admitted before glancing at the animals, who had started to eat the food inside the bamboo steamers that Dim Dim had summoned.

“I know,” Alex replied.

“... You know?”

“Um, nothing!”

“You’re weird, Alex.” Fran smirked. “But, not in a bad way.”

After saying those words, the cute Dwarf left the young man to see what kind of food Dim Dim was giving the monsters, who seemed to be very happy with its taste.

Alex pressed his hand over his chest, which was still beating hard.

He knew that he had done the right thing by giving a different answer from the choices that were available in the game.

Whether his answer had planted a seed in Fran’s heart or not, it didn’t really matter.

‘We can start as friends,’ Alex thought. ‘That is how it should be.’

So, with a clear conscience, Alex watched as Dim Dim offered Fran a bamboo steamer containing custard buns, which would soon become her favorite snack.

Chapter 177: You Couldn't Have A Rainbow Without A Little Rain

"If I was given a choice on what to plant on an empty land, I would definitely plant a healing herb bed," Chuck said. "Not only would I be able to save up on healing potions, I could sell it for money as well."

Chuck gave Alex a winning smile, confident that his answer was perfect.

However, reality was quite different from his expectations, and also more cruel.

"From now on, you're dead to me," Alex declared while doing his best to stop himself from hacking his roommate to pieces.

"O-Oi! What are you doing?!" Chuck felt genuine fear because Alex had summoned his sword and was holding it with both hands. "What's wrong man?! I just answered your question honestly!"

"Hah... You bastard, you plan to take away my Queen, huh?" Alex asked coldly. "Demon Slaying Arts First Form..."

Purple flames coated the young man's sword. The sight was impressive but also undeniably eerie.

Chuck shuddered. He had inadvertently given the answer that would trigger Fran's Romance Route. Those words had filled Alex with a strong urge to eliminate the troublemaker once and for all.

"C-Calm down, Alex!" Chuck raised both of his hands in surrender. "What's wrong? Talk to me! Did I make a mistake? Did I answer wrongly?! At least tell me what I did wrong!"

For a brief moment, Alex hesitated. His rattled roommate let out a sigh of relief, naively believing the worst to be over.

However, what Chuck didn't know was that Alex was only thinking of what to cut off first.

Chuck's head, or Chuck's lower head.

"Okay, I'll just make you an eunuch," Alex decided. "That is fine."

"Heeeelp!" Chuck hurriedly created a barrier before leaving the room in haste. "Murder!"

He was not experienced enough to know that what he had sensed from his roommate was true killing intent. However, his survival instincts told him that if he stayed inside the room for even a moment longer, he would definitely end up an eunuch.

Chuck might not be as clever as Nessia, but he knew lower heads generally didn't regenerate after getting sliced off.

After Chuck had made a successful escape from the room, Alex sighed before pinching the bridge of his nose.

The purple flames in his sword also vanished as he retracted the power of the Demon Slaying Arts.

'I'm feeling unstable because of what has happened today,' Alex realized. 'I went too far.'

On a whim, he had just asked Chuck Fran's question.

However, he hadn't expected that Chuck would give the answer needed to unlock Fran's Route.

The moment those words had left Chuck's lips, Alex had suddenly felt a strong urge of eliminating this potential love rival to prevent any future problems from arising.

After taking a few deep breaths to calm himself down, Alex collapsed onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, his sword now resting harmlessly by his side.

"...Damn it," Alex muttered.

It wasn't really Chuck's fault. The guy just liked money and efficiency.

Healing herbs were the logical choice. A good one, even.

The right one.

And maybe that was what pissed Alex off more than anything else.

Fran hadn't told him it was a test.

But back then her eyes had that quiet weight in them. It was the kind of look someone gave when they wanted to know if the person they were talking to was someone that they could get along well with.

He had frozen back then.

Not because he hadn't known the answer, but because giving the correct answer had felt like cheating.

Like lying to win someone's heart.

He couldn't do that. Not to Fran. Not to himself.

So, he gave his own answer. An answer that was not part of the multiple choices that were presented to the player in the game.

And she smiled at him when he gave that answer.

She didn't do it because she thought that his answer was the right answer.

She had smiled simply because it was unexpected.

"I'm a mess." Alex sighed. "I should say sorry to Chuck later. He didn't do anything wrong."

Just as he was thinking of apologizing to his roommate, the door of his room opened. Chuck timidly reappeared, but he wasn't alone.

Fran entered the room behind him. Dim Dim was perched on top of her head.

Seeing the two of them together, Alex again reached for his sword.

'On second thought, maybe it's time to eliminate this troublemaker once and for all.' Alex rose up from the bed while holding the sword, sending Chuck into a panic once more.

"See?!" Chuck looked at Dim Dim. "I told you that Alex had gone crazy!"

Dim Dim studied Alex, eyeing him from head to toe, before a dawn of realization descended upon it.

"Dim Dim~"

"What do you mean you'll put flowers on my grave, Dim Dim? Whose side are you on?!"

"My side, obviously," Alex commented before keeping his sword back inside his storage ring. "Thank you for returning Dim Dim safely to the Dormitory, Fran."

"You're welcome," Fran replied before glancing at Chuck, who was hiding behind her.

Obviously, this didn't work because Chuck was taller than her, so it was impossible for him to hide behind her.

“Don’t worry, Chuck,” Alex assured. “I won’t kill you... yet.”

“What do you mean ‘yet?’!” Chuck complained. “Don’t just kill off people without telling them the reason you fool!”

Fran looked quite amused at the exchange the two were having.

Even Dim Dim, who was still on top of her head, chuckled because it, too, was finding this exchange quite hilarious.

“Well then, I will return to my room before an issue arises,” Fran said. “Come visit the farm whenever you’re free, Dim Dim. Everyone seems to like you.”

“Ahem!” Dim Dim raised its body proudly before promising Fran that it would do just that whenever it had time to spare.

After bidding goodbye to Alex and Chuck, Fran returned to the East Wing, where the girls’ rooms were located.

“I see... So that’s it.” Chuck slammed his fist on the palm of his hand, as if finally understanding the situation.

The teenage boy then smiled mischievously before patting Alex’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Alex, I understand perfectly!” Chuck said. “Although I am more handsome and cooler than you, I have no intention of stealing the apple of your eye. In fact, I can even be your wingman. So, you like Fran huh? Just say the word, and this love expert will help with the matchmaking.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Alex said before heaving a deep sigh. “Sorry, Chuck. I just got carried away earlier. You did nothing wrong.”

“No.” Chuck shook his head. “I know that you got jealous because you thought that I’d steal your crush. You have every reason to be worried because I am such an amazing, dashing, charismatic, and devastatingly good-looking man.”

He flipped his hair back, despite it being completely unstyled.

“I mean, who wouldn’t fall for this face?” Chuck asked, pointing at himself. “My jawline could cut steel, my eyes sparkle like twin suns, and this smile? Bro, this smile could end wars.”

Alex and Dim Dim stared at the teenage boy blankly, wondering what kind of herbs Chuck was smoking.

However, the troublemaker wasn’t done praising himself.

“My presence alone can make flowers bloom, birds sing, and low-level mobs surrender before the fight even begins,” Chuck added. “Children cheer when I pass by. Dogs bark less. I’m basically a living, breathing natural phenomenon.”

“Chuck...”

“I even have perfect skin, Alex. Perfect. You think healing herbs are impressive? I am the herb.”

“Chuck.”

“What?”

“Shut up.”

Chuck grinned, not minding Alex’s exasperated gaze. “I forgive you, bro. Jealousy makes people do crazy things. But don’t you worry. This legendary wingman has your back. Operation ‘Get Fran to Notice You More Than She Notices Me’ is now underway!”

Alex groaned and covered his face with a pillow.

Dim Dim chuckled because it was really entertained by how things were playing out. It was quite happy because Alex's best friend truly looked out for him.

As for how things would play out?

Dim Dim didn't know.

Many people believed that Gods were omnipotent and omniscient.

However, this wasn't really the case.

Even Gods had things that were outside of their control, and those were the things that made life a roller coaster ride with its ups and downs.

However, more than anything else, Dim Dim wanted Alex to live his life to the fullest, and enjoy his brand new adventure in a world where his story was just beginning.

The future was unclear.

Romance routes were never guaranteed in real life.

Last, but not the least, Alex was trying to shape his own destiny, using his own choices that weren't available in the game.

For Dim Dim, that was enough.

Everybody wanted happiness, nobody wanted pain, but you couldn't have a rainbow without a little rain.

Chapter 178: The Clock Tower's Secret [Part 1]

"Here is the key to the clock tower," Theo said as he handed a key to Alex.

"Just remember—the clock tower is one of the most important facilities in the academy. If you or your club members damage it in any way, you will be punished according to the academy's rules. Did I make myself clear?"

Alex nodded. "Yes."

Theo eyed the First Year student for nearly half a minute before gesturing for him to leave.

"Since we have nothing left to discuss, you may leave," Theo stated.

"Alright," Alex replied. "Thanks for the key."

When the young man had closed the door behind him, Cassandra clicked her tongue in annoyance.

Clearly, she didn't like Alex. Defying the student council president was one of the reasons, but another was that she suspected the young man knew things about her, which the public shouldn't be aware of.

"Do not interfere with him again, Cassandra," Theo instructed. "The Headmaster's disciple came to look for me and gave me a warning."

"Himea personally came to give you a warning?" Cassandra looked at the student council president in surprise. Himea had been the Headmaster's spokesperson since the start of the school term, but Cassandra had assumed that this issue was beneath her notice.

"Yes," Theo answered. "She stated in no uncertain terms that the student council should stop bothering Alex. You understand what that means, right?"

Cassandra frowned, but still reluctantly nodded in the end.

“If that is the Headmaster’s will, then I will no longer mess with them again.” Cassandra sighed. “Just who is that brat anyway? Even the Headmaster has to give him face.”

Theo looked at the document that he was about to sign for a few more minutes as if he were lost in thought.

Even with the intelligence network of the underworld, the Shadow Union, the Mage Intelligence Agency, and the Whispering Tower, not a single information about Alex had been dug up. Theo knew exactly as much about Alex now as he had back then—that Alex had arrived at the Town of Thaloria on his own before becoming the Oathkeeper of the Clawford Tribe.

That was it.

No other notable information about him surfaced no matter how many agents and mages were sent to investigate.

It was as if he had appeared out of thin air.

Also, no records of the Nature Spirit, Dim Dim, could be found in any history records.

The boy and the little bun were both mysterious existences that defied investigation.

‘Just who are you, Alex Stratos?’ Theo wondered before finally signing the document that approved of the clock tower’s temporary residents, the Endless Horizon Club.

A few minutes later inside the Ironheart Dormitory...

“I have returned,” Alex declared. “And look what I got?”

The young man showed the silver key to his club members, who had gathered in the common room of their dormitory.

"A key?" Chuck arched an eyebrow. "What's so special about it?"

"Of course, it's special," Alex insisted. "This is the key to our club room, and we are now going there to check our new hideout!"

Everyone perked up after hearing that. Everyone, of course, except Renard, who looked very bored.

Since they already had the key, the group didn't hesitate to head to the Clock Tower, which was located at the very center of the academy grounds.

"I'm so excited," Nessia admitted. "I wonder what the inside of the clock tower looks like?"

"You will have to be careful when you enter the clock tower," Alex replied. "If you enter it without permission, you will be trapped within a maze."

"Maze?" Nessia blinked. "What maze?"

"You'll find out in a second." Alex inserted the key into the keyhole, and a resounding click reached their ears.

As the young man opened the door, they found themselves looking at a circular staircase that led to the top of the building.

However, they really didn't need to take the stairs. There was a magic circle for teleportation, located at the center of the clock tower. It could send anyone who stepped into it to the top floor.

"Where's the maze?" Nessia asked. "I don't see any maze."

Aside from the circular staircase, as well as the teleporter, there was nothing amiss inside the clock tower.

“Try using the stairs or the teleporter,” Alex said while grinning mischievously.

Nessia was undeterred. She was curious, and she knew that Alex would not cause her harm. Besides, she didn’t want to take the stairs, so she didn’t hesitate to approach the teleporter.

However, she had only taken six steps when she suddenly stopped walking.

Chuck and the others waited, but the young lady didn’t move.

A few tense seconds slipped by, but she still didn’t move. Charles stepped in front of her and waved his hand directly in front of her eyes.

He even snapped his fingers a few times, but Nessia just stared blankly in front of her, not even daring to blink.

‘I think it’s about time,’ Alex thought before tapping Nessia’s shoulder. The young lady’s eyes widened in shock.

“I was trapped inside a maze,” Nessia said as her body shuddered uncontrollably. “That was some high-level illusion magic. Whoever made that magic array is a true master.”

“You were trapped in an illusion?” Chuck asked. “But we only saw you stop walking while staring blankly into space. For a moment, I thought you had suddenly suffered a stroke.”

Nessia ignored Chuck’s comment and simply shifted her attention to Alex, who seemed to be very much aware of what she had experienced.

“If there’s time, I want you to study the magic formation here in the clock tower,” Alex promised in a serious tone. “It will help advance your knowledge about magic formations. If used at the right moment, we can also trap our enemies inside of it in the future.”

Nessia agreed immediately. After all, what she had experienced was truly profound.

The moment she had been trapped inside that illusory world, she had been filled with fear. However, she had also felt excited because she could recognize the brilliance behind the construction of this magic formation.

With that thought in mind, she was more than happy to stay in the clock tower and learn the inner workings of the magical formation that had trapped her.

“Okay, all of you stand before me,” Alex said. “I will need to give you all the authority to enter the clock tower, so you will not be trapped in the illusory maze like what happened to Nessia earlier.”

The club members did as he said and formed a semi-circle. He raised the silver key, which now glowed faintly with blue runes etched along its surface.

“I, Alex Stratos, recognized president of the Endless Horizon Club, grant all of you access to the Clock Tower,” he declared, channeling a small pulse of mana through the key.

A soft hum echoed throughout the tower, and a faint shimmer surrounded each member one by one, like a passing breeze, before fading into their bodies.

“That’s it?” Charles asked, raising an eyebrow. “No chanting or blood ritual?”

Alex chuckled. “What do you think this is? A cult?”

“Wait, should we make one?” Chuck, always ready to jump on a chance to be chaotic, saw Alex’s sarcastic reply as a wonderful opportunity.

Alex simply smirked in response. The key merged with his hand, allowing him to access the clock tower at any time he wished.

The main reason he chose the clock tower as their club’s headquarters was due to its high security.

If someone tried to invade it by force, they would be trapped inside an illusion.

Even if the invaders managed to break free from the illusion, there were twelve more magical traps waiting for them, which would grow in severity each time one was broken.

Each Crest Club had their own special headquarters, accessible only by their members.

Since Alex's goal was to make Endless Horizon the thirteenth Crest Club in the future, he would need a club room that surpassed even the gimmick of the top clubs in the academy.

"Come, let's check the club room." Alex signalled for his friends to follow him.

When all of them had stepped inside the teleporter circle, the young man said, "Up."

A moment later, the group found themselves in a spacious room that could easily fit two hundred people.

The circular room was lined with worn but elegant bookshelves.

At the center stood a round stone table, covered with carvings of constellations and surrounded by mismatched but cozy chairs.

Seeing this scene, Alex couldn't help but remember the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

It really looked like a place meant to host a secret society that could plan for world domination.

"Whoa," Chuck muttered. "This place looks like a hideout for ancient scholars."

Nessia's eyes were already scanning the formation on the stone platform. "Some of the runes etched here are pre-Runic... They're old—like really old."

Alex nodded. "This place was once used by the founder of the academy. It's no ordinary clock tower. It's a relic. It had been sealed from public use for centuries."

"Wait!" Nessia said as she looked up from the runic magic she had been studying closely. She had been so transfixed by the etchings on the round table that she had overlooked something important. "We're allowed to use this? Are you sure we can use this place as our club room?"

"Calm down, Nessia. We've been granted temporary stewardship," Alex explained. "As long as we don't wreck anything or blow up the tower, it's ours for now."

Lavinia walked toward the glass windows that gave a scenic view of the academy. "This... this might actually be the perfect base for us. We are at the center of the academy, and if we have a telescope, we can practically observe anyone if we want to."

"Nice idea!" Chuck snapped his fingers. "I'll buy a telescope tomorrow!"

The teenage boy even laughed like a third-rate villain, sounding like he was up to no good!

Everyone in the room looked at the troublemaker, already worried that he intended to use the telescope for something bad.

"O-Oi, why are you all looking at me as if I'm some kind of criminal?!" Chuck exclaimed. "I haven't done anything... yet."

Alex sighed, but he no longer paid attention to his roommate and explored the club room with everyone.

Chapter 179: The Clock Tower's Secret [Part 2]

Nessia was paying close attention to the runes that were embedded on the walls of the club room, which had the power to prevent anyone from spying inside their club room.

It also had a soundproofing effect, which prevented anyone from eavesdropping.

Of course, what everyone didn't know was that the clock tower was actually going to play an important role in the future events of the academy.

'Six months from now, the second arc of the story will begin,' Alex thought. 'But now that I have acquired the Clock Tower Key, I will be able to prepare for that incident.'

The young man then shifted his attention to Nessia, who was busy scribbling down the runic formations on the wall, making sure that she was copying it properly.

She didn't know it yet, but she would be absolutely crucial in preventing that future incident from spiralling out of control.

'Come to think of it, what first arc would happen first?' Alex pondered a bit.

The Story Arcs of ELO depended on which of the three main Heroes or three main Heroines the player chose at the start of the game.

Since they have different story lines, their story arcs weren't the same.

At that moment, a chill ran down Alex's spine as he thought of an absurd possibility.

'That can't possibly happen... right?' Alex could already feel the beads of sweat forming on his forehead after he thought of something that made him feel anxious.

Since he was not playing the game as a player, and all the protagonists were in the academy, the possibility of their individual story arcs all happening around the same time was high.

If all of those incidents might become reality... Alex felt a major headache was coming.

'Alex, just trust the Heroes,' Alex attempted to reassure himself. 'They're not the protagonists of the story for nothing, right? They're born for this!'

The young man then shifted his attention to Renard, who was reading a book in the corner of the room.

Some people might think that Renard was a battle junkie who only had brawn but no brains, but he was actually a person who liked to read.

His mother was a scholar, while his father was a warrior.

The teenage boy had been raised with love and care by both of his parents, giving him the knowledge of both worlds.

Although he spent the majority of his time training how to fight, Renard would still spend at least an hour reading every day to expand his knowledge.

'Renard's first arc should be about someone becoming jealous of him and challenging him to a duel,' Alex recalled. 'That person will then lose the duel and become the laughing stock of the nobles. After that, he will fall into despair, allowing the small-time villain of the academy to corrupt him.'

His attention turned to the future Phoenix Tactician. 'Nessia's first arc is about her fighting the Water Sorceress of Class A in the group competition. She will lose that battle because the lackeys of the water mage spiked her and her team member's drinks before the match.'

Then, she would be blamed by Class B for losing to Class A.

The bullying would then begin. It would be so relentless that even the calm Nessia would suffer mentally.

After giving it some thought, Alex realized that it was highly possible for both arcs to happen automatically because they didn't coincide with each other.

However, if this were really the case then all the major arcs of each of the protagonists would happen, which was a very dangerous possibility.

'Calm down, maybe I'm just overthinking things.' Alex lightly patted his chest in an effort to banish these terrifying thoughts. 'There's no way that such a thing will happen, right? If it does then this academy will be destroyed six times over!'

After giving it some thought, Alex decided to approach Lavinia, who was also in Class B, just like Nessia.

"Lavinia, I need a favor," Alex said.

"What favor?" Lavinia asked, feeling a little happy that Alex was relying on her.

"You see, it's about this..." Alex then whispered Nessia's first story arc to the beautiful Catkin.

He had already informed his friends beforehand that he was some kind of Seer who could see the future.

Because of this, he could divulge what was going to happen next without attracting suspicion and unwanted questions.

Lavinia frowned after hearing Alex's explanation because she didn't want anyone to bully one of her friends.

She readily believed Alex's words because the young man wouldn't lie to her about something important, especially when it concerned their friends.

"I'll keep an eye on Nessia," Lavinia said firmly, her eyes narrowing with determination. "If anyone even thinks about bullying her, they'll have to go through me first."

Alex grinned. "Thanks. I knew I could count on you."

Lavinia puffed her chest proudly, her tail swishing behind her. "Of course, and I'll warn her not to drink anything before the competition because it might have been spiked by the rival class. I'll even bring our own drinks for good measure."

"Good." Alex gave her a thumbs-up, inwardly relieved that at least one of the dangerous arcs might be softened, or even prevented.

He then glanced at Renard before shaking his head.

'Nah, he's going to be fine,' Alex thought. 'He needed that small-time villain to become stronger.'

Alex had played Renard's character, and understood that his willpower wasn't something to trifle with.

If things were to really progress in the wrong direction, it would not be too late for Alex to step in.

In fact, Alex was even thinking that he shouldn't interfere too much with the growth of the Heroes.

Every challenge that they faced would take them closer to their ultimate builds, which would allow them to save the world.

If he shielded them from harm, it might even have a negative effect on their growth.

However, he also believed that Nessia didn't have to undergo the torture of being ostracized by her class for something that wasn't her fault.

Alex stared at the young lady, who was focused on copying the runic formations in her notebook.

Her crystal pen emitted a gentle glow with every symbol that she wrote.

Nessia had one Main Class and one Subclass in the game.

Her Main Class was the Phoenix Tactician, while her Subclass was a hidden class called Rune Saint.

Actually, Nessia would unlock the Rune Saint Job Class during her fifth Story Arc.

The trigger for that to happen was her entering the clock tower and discovering a special book that would teach her the true way to use Rune Magic.

In the original storyline, the Rune Saint class was meant to awaken only after Nessia had suffered and risen above rejection, her pain becoming the key to unlocking true understanding of Rune Magic.

But now, she was here before all of that.

Inside the place where the knowledge slept.

'If she finds the [Codex of Eternal Weave] this early... the balance of the Academy Arc could shift drastically,' Alex mused.

The young man glanced at the corner of the room, where the spiral staircase led to the higher levels of the clock tower.

The [Codex] wasn't on the first floor.

It was hidden inside the Temporal Archive, a subspace library locked behind a magical dimension, accessible only to those who had a natural affinity for Rune Magic.

He just hoped that Nessia wouldn't have to go through all that pain before finding the book that would change her life forever.

Chapter 180: The Hunt Begins [Part 1]

"Everyone, thank you for coming," a middle-aged man with graying hair said with a smile. "You may call me Professor Gareth, and I will be teaching you everything you need to know about survival."

Professor Gareth regarded his students with a warm gaze, and yet Alex could tell that he was undoubtedly strong.

It was not an overwhelming strength.

No. It was a quiet power, usually seen in those who didn't need to prove themselves to others, such as his master Cairo, who was currently traveling the kingdom of Avalon alongside Elaine and Efa.

'I wonder what is his rank?' Alex thought. 'Maybe Rank 5 or Rank 6.'

It was nearly impossible for Alex to know how strong the person he was facing was.

His appraisal skill only activated on Monsters, that he was seeing for the first time, and it didn't work on humans, demi-humans, or any race that couldn't be classified as monsters.

Just like most classes in the academy, this class was a joint class of Class E up to Class C.

Alex saw some familiar faces in Class E, notably Bob and his two sidekicks, Grint and Jorven.

But since classes had just started, he decided he would talk to them at a later time.

"As this is your first time in this class, I have prepared a special surprise for all of you," Professor Gareth stated.

A glance was enough for him to see that most of the students looked bored, but he wasn't worried because he had something in store that would motivate them to participate in the class.

"Right now, we stand at the eastern entrance of the Mistral Weave Forest. I have asked some beast friends of mine to play a game with you guys. All of them possess a badge. Your goal is to retrieve these badges."

Professor Gareth paused a little to see several students' eyes lit up with interest.

"Each badge has a different color, corresponding to different points. Red is one point, orange is three points, yellow is five points, and green is ten points. The rules of this game are simple. The one with the most points at the end of two hours will receive a thousand academy points from me."

As soon as the academy points were mentioned, everyone's gazes became serious. Professor Gareth smiled faintly because he finally had everyone's attention now.

"The second prize is two hundred points, and the third prize is a hundred academy points. I will now tell you the additional rules of this challenge. The first rule is that no killing is allowed.

"You are not allowed to kill any of the beasts who hold these colored badges. Anyone who does will get a demerit of a thousand academy points. Second, you may steal the badges from your fellow students, but you are not allowed to give them serious injuries.

"Those who break this rule will also get demerit points, and the severity of the punishment will depend on the severity of the student's injury. In addition, you are only allowed to place the badges inside these pouches. If you try to store the badges inside your storage bags and storage rings, the badges will disappear.

"Last, but not least, there are also special violet badges, which will give you a hundred points. However, it will be best that you don't try to challenge the monsters carrying them because they might just accidentally kill you guys."

Professor Gareth then lightly tapped a small table in front of him, which had several pieces of paper stacked on top of each other.

"Since there is a possibility that you guys will challenge the strong monsters that are way above your league in an attempt to get the first prize, everyone is required to sign a death waiver. I don't want to be blamed if any of you act cocky in the face of danger.

"If you don't want to participate, you may leave the class for today and come back next week. Well then, who wants to sign first?"

Despite his warning, none of the students hesitated. All of them quickly lined up to sign their death waivers.

When everyone had finished signing, Professor Gareth tucked the signed papers into a leather scroll case.

"Once you enter the forest, the survival game will officially begin," Professor Gareth explained. "You will have two hours. No more, no less. The badges will automatically activate when the time is up and you'll be summoned back here."

He then pointed toward the towering treeline of the Mistral Weave Forest. Mist curled along the forest floor and eerie bird cries echoed through the foliage.

"Inside that forest are dozens of beasts who have cooperated with me for years," Professor Gareth said calmly. "They won't go easy on you just because you're students."

"They'll hide, ambush, and flee just like real prey or predators in the wild. Remember, survival isn't just about strength. It's about awareness, adaptability, and knowing when to run. While my friends have been forbidden to kill any of you, that doesn't mean that they won't hurt you."

Alex arched an eyebrow. 'I guess he included the death waivers just to see our resolve and bravery,' he thought. Rigorous as Frieden Academy's curriculum was, it didn't seem like the sort that would turn a blind eye to Professors blithely sending inexperienced youths to their deaths as part of student orientation.

"I have invited our nurses from the infirmary to patch you all up, so try not to die, okay?" Gareth continued.

At those words, the twin nurses with long silver hair streaked with pale blue and violet waved at everyone.

“All those who get injured will be beaten up by us,” Lin declared, raising her right fist. “Don’t worry, we are professionals in beating people up without hurting them!”

“Even if you feel pain, it is just an illusion,” Rin commented. “We are very good at healing people, you know?”

Most of the First Years still didn’t know who Lin and Rin were.

However, it was just a matter of time before they became familiar with the twins’ tender loving care that consisted of a few slaps, a few punches, and a few kicks that would make them feel better.

Alex’s expression turned solemn, not because of the twins, but because he suddenly received a mission quest.

— — —

< Hidden Quest Unlocked! >

Mission: The Hunter and the Hunted

Goal: Try to get as many badges as you can.

Rewards: Will depend on the number of badges you acquired.

— — —

Seeing the contents of his quest, Alex took a deep breath and focused on the entrance of the forest.

“Dim Dim, get ready to support me.”

“Dim Dim~”

He could already sense the tension in the air as many students began activating buffs and checking their gear.

Professor Gareth waited for a few minutes before he raised a hand. “One final reminder! This is not a group challenge. You may team up if you wish, but the points you earn will be tallied individually. So if you share the spoils, do so wisely.”

With that, he took a small bronze whistle from his coat pocket and brought it to his lips.

A shrill note echoed through the clearing.

“BEGIN!”

The students surged forward, dashing into the misty forest with a mix of excitement and anxiety.

Some moved in groups while others darted in alone, hoping to claim an early advantage.

Alex walked at a calm pace.

Bob, Grint, and Jorven passed by him in a rush.

“Let’s goooo!” Bob shouted, leading his cronies forward.

“You coming, Alex?” Grint called over his shoulder.

Although they had only spent a short time together, they still shared a bond.

“I’ll catch up later,” Alex replied. “Do your best to stay alive, okay?”

Grint smirked and waved the young man goodbye before catching up with Bob and Jorven.

Alex glanced to his right just in time to see Charles disappear into the trees with a confident stride.

Fran lightly tapped Alex's shoulder before charging on ahead, moving to his left.

She now considered Alex as a friend, so she wished him luck before heading inside the forest.

As Alex finally entered the forest, a breeze rustled the leaves, carrying with it the scent of dew, wood, and something faintly... feral.

He could vaguely sense dozens of gazes landing on him, some curious, some cunning, and some outright hostile.

The hunt had begun for both the hunters and the hunted.