

Endless 181

Chapter 181: The Hunt Begins [Part 2]

Bob, Grint, and Jorven were completely doing a great job as a team, as they went deeper inside the forest.

They had already managed to get ten red badges after fighting Horned Rabbits.

They were quite pleased with themselves until they saw Fran rubbing the bellies of five forest wolves which had recognized her as someone stronger than them.

The Dwarf was also holding an orange badge in her hand, which proved that the wolves were badge carriers as well.

Bob, and his team might have already gotten ten points, but Fran had easily gotten fifteen points without too much trouble.

Since Fran was from Alex's class, the three teenagers didn't plan on stealing her badges.

This was just a class activity, but Bob, Grint, and Jorven did not want to risk offending Alex, since they had teamed up together in the second trial of the academy. However, the badges of students from other classes were fair game to them.

Bob was a very competitive individual. As long as it didn't cross his bottom line, or go against his conscience, he would do anything in his power to win.

The three teenagers gave Fran one last glance before darting deeper into the forest, where the stronger monsters with badges worth more points were located.

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Charles, who had found a secluded place for himself, placed his hand on the ground and created a summoning magic circle.

“Come out, Weaver Ants.”

A few seconds later, dozens of reddish-brown ants that were each a meter long appeared around Charles.

“Find the monsters that have red, orange, yellow, or green badges,” Charles ordered. “Restrain the monsters you think you can defeat and retrieve their badges.

“If you see a monster that you can’t defeat, call for me. Go in groups of six to ensure a higher chance of success. Remember, don’t kill any monsters. Do I make myself clear?”

His minions answered him with raspy clicks, informing him that they understood and would follow his command.

With that, the small ant army that numbered over fifty spread out into the forest to join the hunt.

Charles was not embarrassed that he had summoned his minions to help him get as many badges as possible. He needed academy points in order to get the pill that would cure Eris’ disease. He had little choice but to take these kinds of challenges seriously.

Alex was now about a mile deep inside the Mistral Weave Forest.

Roars, screeches, shouts, and screams from both the beasts and the students participating in the hunting game could be easily heard.

They were interrupted and drowned out by the occasional explosion that proved how intense this survival game was.

Suddenly, the Dim Sum God on top of his head warned him that a few monsters had surrounded him.

Alex looked around him, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Just as he was wondering if the monsters were hiding under the ground, he saw something move from the corner of his eye.

A red fruit was flying in his direction, forcing Alex to summon Everguard to block it.

The sound of something splatting on his shield reached his ears. The corner of Alex's lips twitched.

A moment later, a monkey laughed in delight. Alex turned to see who was responsible.

There, sitting proudly on a thick branch, was a Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkey, its eyes gleaming with mischief.

Something on its chest shimmered faintly from the dappled light. Alex squinted to see that it was a yellow badge tied loosely around the monkey's neck with thin vines.

The monkey hooted again and juggled three more red fruits that resembled pomegranates from Earth. Clearly, it was enjoying the game far more than any of the students.

Of course, it wasn't alone.

Five more monkeys laughed at Alex. Like the first, each of them carried red fruits that they planned to throw at the poor student. As they were high up near the tree canopy, Alex had little chance of catching their projectiles.

The monkeys had already traumatized quite a few students by staining their uniforms—and their bodies—red with the juice of the pomegranate-like fruits they liked to throw.

These monkeys were not only mischievous but quite strong as well.

They were all Rank 2 Monsters. Moreover, as they were in their natural habitat, they had a home-ground advantage over the students.

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< Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkey >

“The forest’s mischief-maker. It doesn’t fight fair—because it doesn’t have to.”

Monster Rank: Rank 2 Monster

Monster Grade: Common

Attribute: Wind / Nature

Species: Throwing Monkey

Health: 370 / 370

Attack: 35 – 55

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“This is going to be troublesome,” Alex muttered as he lowered Everguard, the juices from the fruit dripping lazily off its surface. “But, not impossible.”

Dim Dim regarded the monkeys with sparkling eyes. In its opinion, the monkeys were its comrades because they had the same passion as it did. This shared passion, of course, was the noble art of throwing stuff.

The Dim Sum God didn’t say anything, but it didn’t need to. The monkeys seemed to have understood the feelings behind Dim Dim’s look because they waved warmly at it. The little bun waved right back.

Alex didn't know if he should laugh or cry because his partner-in-crime had befriended the monsters planning to gang up on him.

"Dim Dim, take this seriously!" Alex said. "We're going to fight them now!"

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim sported a look filled with determination. It even pointed at the monkeys, telling them to fight properly.

Of course, the monkey didn't need to be told what they planned to do. They immediately went to action.

As if to prove that they were indeed treating this game seriously, one of the monkeys launched a fruit. This time, it was aimed at Dim Dim.

The Dim Sum God didn't hold back either. Dim Dim promptly summoned a rock to throw at the fruit, hitting it dead centre before it had the chance to reach Alex's head.

However, the monkeys' weapon of choice was fragile and very, very juicy. The moment the rock hit the fruit, its contents gushed out and rained down on Alex, who hurriedly tried to evade.

The monkeys cackled and bounded higher into the tree canopy, moving with impossible agility.

Their teamwork and coordination could bring any student to their knees. Since this was just a game, the monkeys were only using fruits that would cover their victims in red juice.

However, if their lives were on the line and they had to go all out, they would be throwing something more dangerous. With their accuracy, that would not bode well for their enemies.

Just as one of the monkeys was about to jump to another tree branch, Alex threw Everguard with perfect timing.

“Shield Boomerang!”

Since the monkey couldn’t dodge mid-jump, it had no choice but to use its arms to block the flying shield heading straight for it.

A resounding clang spread inside the forest. Alex had landed a hit and the monkey was now crashing down to the ground.

Not wanting to let this opportunity slip by, Alex made his next move. He used Shield Charge to cross the gap between him and his target.

The monkey hadn’t even managed to stand up properly when Alex’s shield rammed against its head, sending it flying once more.

The stun effect of Shield Charge activated, allowing Alex to snatch the badge from the monkey’s neck. This elicited angry shouts from its companions.

“Haters gonna hate,” Alex remarked with a smirk before placing the yellow badge inside his pouch.

The defeated monkey rubbed its sore head and bum, but it made no move to attack Alex.

A moment later, it jumped back up the tree it had aimed for and landed on one of the branches.

The monkey then hooted and cackled, prompting Dim Dim to giggle too. Alex could not understand what the monkey meant, but it had the sportsmanship to say “Nice one!” However, the battle with the other monkeys was far from over.

In order to avenge their “dead” comrade, they once again bombarded Alex with fruits, carefully aiming at his blind spots.

Faced with such a threat, Alex summoned Svalinn. He used the two shields to block the attacks of the monkeys, who were now fighting him a little more seriously.

Chapter 182: The Red Terror Of Mistral Weave Forest [Part 1]

"We have some interesting kids this year," Professor Gareth muttered as he observed everything taking place inside the Mistral Weave Forest using his ability, Overlord's Gaze.

With his omniscience, he had locked onto a handful of individuals. But so far, the one who caught his fancy best was none other than Charles Lambert.

'Is he a Summoner?' Professor Gareth wondered. 'But this kind of summoning requires a lot of mana. Based on his body's mana flow, it doesn't seem like he has a lot of magic power.'

At the start, Charles had only summoned Rank 1 Weaver Ants. Although their ranks were low, it was impressive that the young man had summoned over fifty of them at once, attracting Professor Gareth's notice.

This was no small feat even by the standards of Third and Fourth Year summoners. In fact, the majority of them could only summon about ten at a time.

But it didn't end there.

What perplexed the Professor was the fact that Charles now had over a hundred ants scuttling in the forest. Ten of them were even Rank 2 Soldier Weaver Ants.

Ten or more Weaver Ants formed a squad, and each squad was led by a Soldier Ant to hunt bigger and stronger prey.

Their tactic was rather simple. The Soldier Ant would engage an opponent and keep it distracted while the Weaver Ants unleashed silk threads to bind it, rendering it immobile.

The Soldier Ant would then grab the enemy's badge and hand it over to one of the Weaver Ants, who would immediately leave to deliver it to their master, Charles.

Since the silk threads didn't last long, the trapped monsters could usually break free within five minutes.

By then, the small team of ants would already be looking for their next prey, ready to repeat the process over and over again.

The Professor then shifted his attention to the Dwarf girl, who was also collecting badges at a steady pace.

'She's that prodigy the Headmaster has personally invited to the academy.' Professor Gareth narrowed his eyes. 'Well, I guess she has the skill to back it up.'

Of course, the one he was looking at was none other than Fran.

Standing below five feet, the Dwarven Berserker was able to make short work of the monsters that she encountered along the way.

Some of them even submitted to her before the battle began.

Why?

Because of Fran's Subclass.

Her Subclass was Beast Tamer, granting her a strong empathy with beasts and monsters alike.

'Only an hour remains before this hunt ends.' Professor Gareth sighed. Things were just starting to get interesting, but the game of hunter and the hunted was already halfway done.

Suddenly, he caught another subtle change deeper in the forest. The corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly.

'... This kid and that small white creature are interesting too.' As he observed the situation Alex and Dim Dim had found themselves in, Professor Gareth didn't know if he should laugh or cry. 'How did they manage to befriend those mischievous kids?'

Somewhere in the Mistral Weave Forest...

“You damn traitors!”

“Bastards! Whose side are you on?!”

“I’ll complain to Gareth later! You won’t get away with this, you stupid monkeys!”

Dim Dim hummed as a refreshing breeze washed over its body.

Currently, it was perched on top of the head of one of its new friends, a Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkey.

Over thirty monkeys were doing a sweep in the forest, targeting the other monsters who were supposed to be their “comrades” in this game of Hunter and the Hunted.

After Alex had soundly defeated the six monkeys, Dim Dim had started chatting with them. It even praised them for their throwing skills.

The little bun and the monkeys hit it off right away, and soon, they became bosom buddies!

When Alex and Dim Dim left to hunt the other monsters to gain some badges, the six monkeys followed them.

In the end, they decided to help Alex in his fights, earning them insults from the other indignant monkeys.

But the monkeys didn't care.

For them, this was the funniest thing ever.

It was not like they had ever gotten along with every inhabitant of Mistral Weave Forest. And since Dim Dim was now their friend, they decided to help it!

Also, it was fun throwing fruits at the other monsters whom they didn't like anyway!

Dim Dim was very happy that its new friends came to help it and Alex..

The six monkeys even invited other monkeys to join the fun. These new monkeys were more than happy to meet another throwing fanatic like Dim Dim.

Just like the first six monkeys, the other monkeys hit it off with the little bun right away.

Now, over thirty Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkeys followed Alex. They even helped him find other badge-carrying monsters.

Alex knew that he was being carried by Dim Dim and its new friends. Of course, he wasn't stupid, so he naturally had no complaints.

Right now, he was accumulating badges without even needing to fight. His monkey allies would just snatch the badges from the other monsters and pass them to Alex for free.

'This is so easy.' Alex chuckled as he accepted another badge that a monkey was handing over to him. 'I guess Hell Mode has been turned off for this event.'

But just as the monkeys were about to look for their next target, a loud roar shook the forest, alarming both the students and the monsters participating in the game.

Alex blinked once, then twice, and coughed lightly.

“I didn’t just set up a death flag, right?” Alex muttered as he, Dim Dim, and the monkeys ran toward the source of the roar.

Outside the Forest...

Professor Gareth’s face turned solemn when he realized what had happened.

‘These kids!’ Professor Gareth left his desk and charged straight into the forest. ‘I hope Grumpy doesn’t forget he can’t kill my students!’

While he hadn’t originally planned on intervening, this was an exception.

It was one thing for students to get injured, but dying was quite another.

Although they had signed Death Waivers, the Professor had no intention of letting anyone die under his watch.

Grumpy was one of the handful of Rank 5 Monsters that the Professor had asked to participate in the game of Hunter and Hunted.

However, its eyes were now gleaming with a crimson light, indicating that it had—for some reason—entered a berserk state of mind.

As the Professor hurried to the scene, Bob, Grint, and Jorven were also running. To be more specific, they were running away.

Hot on their heels was a Red Ape that stood over three meters tall.

Around its neck hung a violet badge, which was something that only the bravest—or the stupidest—of students would try to get.

Seeing how the three were running desperately for their lives, they might have done something to trigger Grumpy's berserk mode, which left it unable to determine friend from foe.

Charles, who was nearby, saw through the eyes of the ants that his three acquaintances were being chased by a Rank 5 Monster.

The teenage boy hesitated for the briefest of moments before ordering his Ant Army to rally to him as he charged ahead to catch up to the Rank 5 Monster that seemed to be out for blood.

Chapter 183: The Red Terror Of Mistral Weave Forest [Part 2]

A few minutes before the angry roar reverberated inside the forest...

"Look, that monster has a violet badge on its neck," Bob said as he pointed at a Red Ape eating some fruits while resting under the shade of a tree.

"Bob, you're not thinking what I think you're thinking, right?" Grint asked anxiously.

"Since that monster has a violet badge, I'm sure it's very strong," Bob replied. "But our goal is to get the badge, not to fight it. With your ability, I think we stand a chance of getting the badge, right?"

Grint hesitated for a bit before nodding. "Yes, we might have a chance."

"Then let's do it." Bob gave his friend an encouraging thumbs-up. "We'll just steal the badge and then escape as soon as we get it. Problem solved, right?"

"Right..."

Bob then laid out his grand plan for getting the badge.

When he was done speaking, Grint weighed the pros and cons of the idea. In the end, he thought that it was very feasible, so he decided to give it a try.

“But will you and Jorven be fine?” Grint inquired. “Distracting that monster is a gamble, you know?”

“Since it’s wearing a badge, it’s probably one of Professor Gareth’s monster acquaintances,” Bob replied. “It might hurt us a bit, but it won’t kill us. Even though we did sign those Death Waivers, I’m sure the Professor would not have picked any random monster to carry a badge. At the very least, he would not have picked a monster that couldn’t even control itself from killing his students.”

Earlier in the game, Bob had noticed that the monsters either fled or stopped bothering the students the moment they lost their badges.

Because of this, he had reason to believe that Professor Gareth had instructed the monsters to stop pursuing the students once their badges were taken from them.

And he was right.

The Professor had carefully selected monsters that would not actively kill the teenagers.

Even the Red Ape, which was a Rank 5 Monster, wouldn’t necessarily attack the students and kill them just for fun.

While Bob, Grint, and Jorven were busy discussing their plan, they were being watched.

On top of a tree branch stood a person observing the three students and the Red Ape.

The hint of a smile tugged the corner of his lips, and he took out a dark red vial from his storage ring.

“Hey, Mr. Ape, do you want a banana?” Bob asked as he flaunted the banana in his hand like it was a rainbow-colored cat’s eye with mysterious powers.

The Red Ape looked at the teenage boy disdainfully. Clearly, a single banana was not enough to tempt it.

The Ape even scratched its bum, pointedly ignoring Bob's sorry attempts.

Just as Bob was about to say something to attract the Ape's attention, something whizzed past him.

All he saw was a blur before the sound of something breaking reached his ears.

A moment later, the easy-going Ape suddenly unleashed a thunderous roar. Its eyes, which had been as calm as a lake on a peaceful day, suddenly turned crimson.

Bob, Grint, and Jorven had already doubted that their plan could really work, but the wave of bloodlust washing over them banished all doubts. Their plan was definitely not going to work.

Killing intent oozed out of the Red Ape whose crimson eyes were now locked on their bodies.

"Run!" Bob shouted as he grabbed the arms of his two friends, pulling them away with him.

Thanks to his quick reaction, Grint and Jorven were snapped out from their daze and finally found the strength in their legs to start running as well.

The three darted through the trees, hoping that it would allow them to escape the Ape's pursuit.

But it was all for naught.

The Red Ape didn't even bother to evade the trees. It simply bulldozed through them, snapping them like twigs as it charged at the first creatures it saw after falling into a berserk state.

Bob knew that the only way to survive this incident was to buy as much time as possible until help arrived.

Although he wasn't certain, he chose to believe that the Professor and the other students had heard the roar and would come to their rescue.

"Split up!" Bob ordered. "I'll distract it, the two of you run in different directions! Don't worry, I'll handle..."

Before he even finished his sentence, Grint had already fled to the east, and Jorven to the west. This gave Bob the strong urge to flip them the bird.

However, he tossed this thought aside because Grint and Jorven understood his intentions.

Although he hated to admit it, he had grown close to his two sidekicks who always followed his lead.

Since that was the case, he decided to act like a true leader and lure the monster away from his friends.

Bob turned to look behind him and saw that the Ape was only a few meters away from him.

He knew that he didn't have much time before it caught up, so he had to do something before he was seriously injured by its attack.

Unfortunately, because he turned back, he failed to notice the inconsiderate tree root that was right in front of him.

The teenage boy tripped and fell on the ground hard.

Although he was in pain and in shock, Bob still had the presence of mind to roll over to his right to evade the Red Ape's fist that was about to turn him into meat paste.

A loud boom erupted in the forest as the monster's fist smashed into the ground where Bob had originally fallen a while ago.

The teenage boy was barely able to evade that strike, but he still managed to pull it at the last second.

He then forced himself to stand up and keep running.

However, the monster was not going to let him escape. It lunged at Bob with the intention to kill.

"Shield Charge!"

Alex slammed his shield against the side of the Red Ape's body, pushing it aside with enough force to prevent it from crashing toward Bob, who didn't have the time to run away.

The Red Ape crashed into a tree instead, destroying it completely.

"Run Bob!" Alex shouted. "Dim Dim! Distract it!"

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim replied and threw a brittle vial on the Red Ape's head with uncanny accuracy.

The sound of glass shattering was quickly followed by a thunderous roar that seemed to shake even the ground itself.

Dim Dim's acid vial had taken effect. It was the only thing that was strong enough to cause a bit of damage to the Rank 5 Monster, which was currently not in the right state of mind.

The Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkeys all cried out to Dim Dim, making their intentions known.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim understood what its friends were saying, so it didn't hesitate to jump up high and fling dozens of brittle vials towards its friends, which caught them easily.

“Dim!” Dim Dim pointed its small hand towards the Red Ape, as if commanding an army to fight against it.

The Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkeys mobilized to obey its order and unleashed a barrage of brittle vials, covering the Red Ape’s body with acid.

The smell of something sour and acrid spread in the surroundings, accompanied by the sound of something sizzling.

Despite all this, the Red Ape remained strong. It even uprooted one of the trees beside it to use as a club. It smashed its new weapon against the trees where the Crimson-Furred Monkeys were perched at.

White smoke rose up from the Red Ape’s body—the result of being hit by dozens of brittle vials from every direction.

Knowing that this was not the time to hold back, Dim Dim kept on unloading its brittle vials to its friends.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim shouted at Alex.

“Thanks, Dim Dim!” Alex yelled back. “Bob, let’s go! The monkeys will buy us time to escape!”

The two boys then started to run while the monkeys distracted the rampaging ape, which had shifted its attention to them.

It was also at that moment when Charles and his Ant Army arrived from the opposite side of the forest.

Seeing that Dim Dim and the monkeys were distracting the Red Ape, a plan started to take shape inside his head.

“Go!” Charles ordered his Ant Army, which didn’t hesitate to charge forward, obeying their master’s command.

When they came into range, all of them immediately unleashed silk threads to bind the monster's body, hampering its movements.

However, a Rank 5 Monster was still a Rank 5 Monster.

It easily snapped the silk threads and unleashed a defiant roar, pounding its chest to assert its dominion.

But the Ants weren't fazed. They swarmed its body despite seeing their kins turn into particles of light after getting smashed, stomped, thrown, and bitten by the rampaging Ape, whose anger couldn't be sated by killing a bunch of small fries.

Chapter 184: The Red Terror Of Mistral Weave Forest [Part 3]

The Red Ape's thunderous roars spread in the forest as it rampaged against the swarm of Ants that attacked it without care for their lives.

Charles had ordered his minions to attack the Red Ape, so that Alex and Bob could get a head start as they ran away to escape its line of sight.

After giving his orders, the teenage boy also made himself scarce because facing off against a Rank 5 Monster with his current strength was suicide.

Professor Gareth, who had seen everything, gave Alex and Charles a thumbs-up in his heart.

If the two of them hadn't braved the danger to save their fellow student, it was highly possible that Bob might have died today.

'Damn it! Why did Grumpy suddenly turn berserk?' Professor Gareth had known the Red Ape for years, and although it lived up to its name at times, it wouldn't attack any students without good reason.

In fact, this was true for most of the beasts living inside the forest.

The Lord of the Forest, who ruled over all the monsters, had forbidden them from attacking the students of Frieden Academy unless it was in self-defense or if their lives were on the line. Obviously, they could not kill the students either.

High-ranking monsters didn't dare to disobey this rule, so Professor Gareth was assuming that Bob and his friends might have attacked Grumpy with the intent to kill.

'Still, dealing with three students should be very easy for Grumpy,' Professor Gareth thought. 'There is no need for it to enter a berserk state for that.'

Given the urgency of the situation, the Professor had only one solution.

'I'll knock out Grumpy first and question Bob later.'

Having made his decision, Professor Gareth finally appeared before Grumpy, ready to engage the Red Ape in battle.

"Grumpy, no treats for you for a month!" Professor Gareth shouted as he body-slammed the Red Ape, sending it crashing through several trees.

However, the Red Ape wouldn't be downed by such an attack. It stood up, angrier than before, and thumped its chest before unleashing a deafening roar of dominance.

A moment later, it lunged at the Professor. The ensuing fist fight obliterated their surroundings.

[E/N: RIP trees]

From a distance, the instigator who had flung the vial at the Red Ape smiled faintly before disappearing into the shadows.

Although it was quite unfortunate that no students had died today, this incident would still be enough to make things difficult for Professor Gareth for a while.

Meanwhile, Alex, Bob, Grint, and Jorven were telling all the students they met to leave the forest as fast as possible.

They cut straight to the chase and informed their peers that staying in the forest meant certain death because a Rank 5 Monster had gone berserk.

It wasn't hard to convince the other students because all of them had heard that blood-curdling roar that made their faces turn pale.

The teenagers left the forest one by one. Alex, Dim Dim, and the Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkeys stayed behind to look for more students to warn.

Just as Alex was about to head to the western side of the forest, he saw a Dwarf girl riding a Rank 3 Alpha Forest Wolf. They were followed by a dozen Rank 2 Forest Wolves.

"What's happening, Alex?" Fran asked as soon as their eyes met. She noticed that the young man seemed to be searching for something.

"Fran! It's good to see that you're safe!" Alex replied. "A Rank 5 Red Ape is currently rampaging in the northeastern area. I am looking for other students so I can warn them to leave the forest for their safety."

"Understood. I'll help you!" Fran had already known that something was amiss, prompting her to seek the Alpha Wolf's assistance. The Alpha Wolf had agreed to accompany her and investigate the disturbance.

"Thanks!" Alex gave the young lady a thumbs-up before running to the east to look for other students.

Fran didn't hesitate to ask the Alpha Wolf to spread the word to his underlings.

A wolf howl reverberated through the forest. All the Forest Wolves under the Alpha Wolf's command mobilized to heed its order.

Half an hour later, almost all the students had already evacuated from the forest.

Alex, Fran, Charles, Bob, Grint, and Jorven still remained in the forest. They had all teamed up to search for straggling students.

“Are you sure that all the students are now safe, Dim Dim?” Alex asked.

“Dim!”

“Good.” Alex sighed as he looked to the northeast. He could not see the Red Ape or Professor Gareth, but he knew roughly where they were from the former’s roars.

The Red Ape was a Wandering Field Boss, so it was stronger than most Rank 5 Monsters.

Even Professor Gareth wouldn’t be able to quickly beat it on his own, but that was fine with the middle-aged Professor.

He knew what Alex and his friends were doing, so his goal was not to defeat Grumpy but to buy his students enough time to evacuate everyone.

He was also waiting for the Red Ape’s berserk state to die down instead of fighting it to the death.

Fortunately, Grumpy’s movements were starting to get sluggish, which meant that the effect of its berserk mode was slowly coming to an end.

Five minutes later, the eyes of the Red Ape finally returned to normal and its body collapsed on the ground. It no longer had the strength to continue fighting because it had pushed itself to the limit, exhausting it completely.

Seeing that the Red Ape was unconscious, a sigh escaped Professor Gareth’s lips.

“You’ve finally calmed down,” Professor Gareth said wearily.

He then took out a magical rope to tie up the Ape’s limbs, just in case.

When that was done, he contacted some of the Professors in the academy to inform them of the incident that had just transpired.

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Outside of the Forest...

“Ouch!” Bob couldn’t help but cry out in pain after getting slapped by the nurse, Rin.

“Are you really a man?” Rin asked in disdain. “I used Heal Slap on you, so your injuries should have recovered by now. Now, get out of my sight before I slap you again!”

Alex, who was about to ask Rin to heal the bruises on his body, suddenly changed his mind after hearing and seeing that loud, crisp slap. Rin was all but done with Bob, but Alex could still hear that slap ringing in his ears.

The twin nurses were slapping, punching, and kicking the injured boys.

As for the girls who were injured, the nurses only used Tenderizing Touch. The ladies soon fell asleep due to how relaxing the twin healers’ touch was.

The boys who saw this couldn’t help but think that they were being discriminated against. Unfortunately, there was really nothing they could do about it.

When Rin and Lin were finally done with their work, they picked up the little bun that had been assisting them in treating their patients.

“Dim Dim, I heard that you helped rescue the students earlier?” Lin asked with a smile.

“Dim!”

“Good boy, are you hurt?” Rin inquired.

Dim Dim shook its head. “Dim!”

Although it wasn’t injured, the two nurses started to give the little bun some tender loving care. The boys, including Alex, could only look at Dim Dim with envy.

Suddenly, Alex felt someone tugging the corner of his shirt.

“If you’re hurt, you can just drink this potion,” Fran said, a potion in her hand.

“This is just minor bruises,” Alex replied. “Using a potion is a bit wasteful.”

“It’s just a low quality healing potion, so it’s not that precious,” Fran insisted. “I carry a lot of them because I use them to tend to the beasts in our farm.”

After hearing her reply, Alex accepted her offer and thanked her.

A few minutes later, Professor Gareth finally left the forest and asked everyone to gather in front of him.

“Although it is regrettable, we will have to stop our little game today,” Professor Gareth declared. “However, the scores will still be tallied, and the top three players will be awarded the Academy Points that they rightfully deserve.

“I do realize that this game was far more difficult than I originally envisioned. It might have even traumatized some of you. As such, I will be making some changes to the rewards to reflect that.”

Professor Gareth then scanned the faces of the students who had experienced quite an ordeal inside the forest.

“The one with the highest score in the badge collection will get 3,000 Academy Points,” Professor Gareth announced. “The second place will get 1,000 Academy Points. The third place will get 500 Points. Last, but not least, all the students who participated will be awarded 100 Academy Points!”

This sudden declaration made the students cheer because the Academy Points were the currency used in Frieden Academy.

Since none of them were seriously hurt, they gratefully accepted the rewards.

Professor Gareth didn’t care that he was spending more points than he had originally intended.

This was the least he could do to compensate everyone.

“Now, I will be adding up the points,” Professor Gareth said before snapping his fingers.

All the pouches that the students were holding glowed faintly and flew above the Professor’s head.

Half a minute later, a projection that tallied everyone’s score appeared.

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Top 1 = Charles Lambert (481 Points)

Top 2 = Fran Terra (242 Points)

Top 3 = Alex Stratos (143 Points)

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Alex was quite surprised that Charles had gotten a lot of points in a short period of time.

What he didn't know was that Charles had also managed to get Grumpy's violet badge. That was actually the second reason why he had asked his minions to attack the powerful monster.

As if waiting for that moment, a notification sounded in Alex's head, informing him that his quest had also been completed.

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< Hidden Quest Completed! >

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.

[Calculating Rewards...]

[Alex Stratos is in Third Place. However, since he has saved the life of a fellow student and helped to evacuate everyone, his efforts will also be considered when calculating his reward.]

[Reward calculation completed!]

Rewards: 3,000 Arcana Points.

Alex did a fist pump because it had been a while since he earned so many Arcana Points, which was something that he really needed right now.

He planned to buy the Rare Skill Book, Multitask, from the Arcana Shop. It cost a whopping 20,000 Arcana Points.

He now had 18,940 Points and the book was almost within reach.

'I hope I always get missions like this.' Alex couldn't help but smile from ear to ear due to how happy he was.

Although there were a lot of ups and downs that happened today, no one was hurt.

Everyone was awarded Academy Points, and Alex got Arcana Points as well.

Charles, who had managed to get first place, was also very pleased because he had really pushed himself to win this event.

His only goal was to collect enough points to buy the cure for his sister, which was one of the main reasons why he decided to take the scholarship test of Friden Academy.

Chapter 185: The Memory Dial [Part 1]

After giving the students the compensation they deserved, Professor Gareth called Bob, Grint, and Jorven and asked them to follow him to his office.

The other Professors had taken the Red Ape, Grumpy, and placed it temporarily in a shelter.

No one had expected such a situation to occur. However, everyone also knew that Professor Gareth would never deliberately put the students in real danger, so they willingly cooperated with him to investigate and uncover the truth.

“So you only planned to steal the badge from Grumpy,” Professor Gareth said. “But before the three of you could push through with your plan, something flew past you and collided with Grumpy’s body?”

“Yes, Sir,” Bob replied. “It was fast, so I didn’t see it clearly. But I heard something like glass breaking. I’ve seen Alex’s nature spirit, Dim Dim, throw brittle vials in the past, so I’m guessing someone else might’ve done the same to the Red Ape.”

Professor Gareth frowned as he continued to question Bob. “Did you see anyone suspicious, by any chance, near the surroundings when this happened?”

“No, Professor.” Bob shook his head. “Everything happened so fast, and the only thing we could think of at that time was to run for our lives.”

Grint and Jorven both nodded in agreement because that was indeed the case.

They were too panicked to pay attention to their surroundings and simply ran as fast as they could.

“Understood.” Professor Gareth sighed. “Thank you for answering my questions. I hope you learned a lesson from this incident.”

“”Yes, Professor.””

The three teenagers had indeed learned a valuable lesson, and that was...

Beware of flying potions!

Of course, they had no intention of picking fights they couldn't win against monsters that were stronger than they were. Their plan to steal the Red Ape's violet badge was a carefully calculated risk, which was the only reason why they had gone ahead with it.

He believed that, even if the Red Ape were to hurt them, it would not leave them with serious injuries.

His instinct had told him as much, and it had never failed him.

When the three teenagers left his office, Professor Gareth stood up and glanced out of the window that overlooked the Mistral Weave Forest.

'It happened on the day the Headmaster went to visit an acquaintance because of an important research material,' Professor Gareth mused. 'Coincidence? More like a planned incident.'

This wasn't the first time a suspicious event had happened in the academy. Fortunately, the Professors had been able to act in time to fix the problems and prevent them from spiraling out of control.

If Alex and Charles hadn't arrived in time to help Bob and his friends, there was a high chance that one of them would have died.

Professor Gareth knew that he got lucky this time. However, he didn't plan to take this lying down. No matter how slim the chance, he would continue to look for any traces left by the perpetrator.

Ironheart Dormitory...

The students were still in a state of shock. Currently, they were gathered at the common room of the dormitory, making it more crowded than usual.

Charles, who received the highest points during the Hunter x Hunted event, became the hot topic.

“How did you do it?” Alex asked Charles.

“I had a lot of help from my ants,” Charles replied in a volume that only Alex could hear.

Alex had seen Charles summon some ants during the Second Trial of the Academy, but he had never asked him how he did it.

Everyone had their secrets, and Alex respected everyone’s privacy.

“Alex, I knew you were brave, but now, I can’t help but think that you’re a bit suicidal,” Charles said seriously. “I understand you wanted to save Bob, but what would have happened had the Red Ape proven to be stronger than you expected?”

Alex scratched the back of his head, unable to refute his friend’s implication. However, his body had moved on its own after seeing an acquaintance in mortal danger.

“I mean, I wasn’t alone at that time,” Alex replied. “Dim Dim and the Crimson Furred Monkeys were with me. I am sure they would have also come to my rescue.”

Charles smiled wryly, but didn’t insist on the topic.

He owed Alex many things, especially during the dungeon expedition in the Dungeon of Beginnings.

“Just make sure you don’t kick the bucket until I have properly repaid you for all the help you gave me,” Charles stated, raising his fist for a fist bump, which Alex happily imitated.

“Don’t worry, I don’t have plans on dying anytime soon.” Alex smirked before glancing at Dim Dim, who was being hand-fed cookies by Fran.

Dim Dim looked very happy as it ate one cookie after another. The hearts of the girls in the Common Room melted at this cute sight.

“Seriously, what is that thing?” one of the students whispered. “A new breed of slime?”

“Alex said Dim Dim is a Nature Spirit,” another student replied. “Although it looks like a slime, it is very different from a slime. Its body is firmer, but it’s still smooth and squishy.

“I heard it talks,” another replied. “But only to Alex.”

“The only thing I hear from its mouth is Dim or Dim Dim!”

“Guys, you don’t know anything. I was there in the Trial of Music, and that little bun sang a song.”

“Really? I have some friends in the Music Club. If you’re lying, I can easily expose you.”

“Go and ask them. In fact, go and ask Professor Arienna instead. She was the one who conducted the tests back then.”

“I heard that it throws things at people when provoked.”

“Then don’t make it angry. Problem solved, right?”

Alex pretended not to hear the rumors flying around about Dim Dim. Most of what they said was true, so he didn’t plan on correcting them.

In fact, the young man believed that Dim Dim had been addicted to throwing things as of late.

This was the main reason why it had hit it off with the Crimson-Furred Throwing Monkeys, who shared the same passion.

Meanwhile, Charles leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes for a brief moment of rest.

The day's events had taken a toll on everyone. Although the danger had passed, the tension lingered in the air.

Suddenly, the door to the dormitory common room swung open, revealing Bob, Grint, and Jorven. They had just returned from being questioned by the Professor.

Naturally, Alex and the rest asked what had happened, so Bob explained everything from the start.

"Something threw some kind of vial or potion at the Boss, then it immediately went berserk?" Alex frowned. "I thought you guys were courting death as usual. It turns out someone else triggered that mess."

The corner of Bob's lips twitched. He thought it was obvious that he wasn't someone foolish enough to like courting death. However, since Alex had saved him, he just sighed and voiced out his suspicion.

"Someone definitely threw something at the Red Ape," Bob said solemnly. "Professor Gareth is searching for clues about the mastermind. I hope he catches that person. When I get my hands on him..."

Bob smacked his palm with his fist to indicate he would beat the crap out of the person who had almost gotten him killed.

As Bob went on about his doom plan for the mastermind, Alex frowned before glancing at Dim Dim, who was also looking in his direction.

The young man possessed an artifact that could replay past events. If he used that to find the culprit...

"Dim!" Dim Dim said, as if reading Alex's thoughts.

It then thanked Fran for the cookies before jumping on top of its partner's head.

Clearly, it wanted to get to the bottom of this because its fun had been cut short by the unknown individual who had caused Grumpy to lose control.

Chapter 186: The Memory Dial [Part 2]

After leaving the Ironheart Dormitory, Alex went to look for Professor Gareth.

Fortunately, the Professor was still in his office, so Alex managed to see him without too much trouble.

“You have an artifact that can replay scenes of the crime?” Professor Gareth looked at Alex in disbelief. “Something like that exist?”

“Yes, Professor,” Alex replied. “But if possible, please keep this a secret. It’s one of my most prized artifacts, so I don’t want anyone trying to steal it from me.”

This sounded like a reasonable concern, but it was far from the truth. In reality, Alex had nothing to worry about.

Why?

It was because his super rare artifact, Memory Dial, was soulbound to him. Still, that didn’t mean Alex wanted to be on guard all the time so he could fend against opponents coveting it.

< Memory Dial >

“Some memories are better left buried.”

Item Grade: Super Rare

Type: Accessory

Active Skills: Echo Recall

< Echo Recall >

— When this skill is activated, the owner of the Memory Dial can see the past events that happened in the location where they are standing.

— You can choose a specific date and time, or you can just let the artifact play the most memorable event that happened in your location.

Effect: Creates a temporary illusion that replays what happened within a 20-meter radius around you. This illusion will only last for five minutes.

Skill Cooldown: 48 hours

After Alex explained how the Memory Dial worked, the Professor took the young man back to the scene of the crime, so he could use the artifact.

When they arrived at the spot where Bob, Grint, and Jorven had first met Grumpy, Alex took out his pocket watch.

It didn't look like anything special. In fact, its hands also weren't moving, which would make most people assume that it was just a cheap and broken pocket watch.

However, the moment Alex activated it, the minute and hour hands started to spin counter-clockwise as if rewinding time.

A projection of Grumpy, Bob, Grint, and Jorven appeared. Although he had already been told of the artifact's power, Professor Gareth's eyes still widened in shock.

However, after his initial surprise, he scanned the surroundings to look for anyone who might have caused the Red Ape to become berserk.

Suddenly, the Professor saw a vial flying towards Grumpy. It shattered when it hit the Red Ape's chest, releasing the dark red potion within.

The Professor glanced in the direction where the vial was thrown, but the range of Echo Recall was limited.

"If only we could expand the effect of this artifact, it would be many times better." Professor Gareth sighed.

"You're right, Profess..." Alex wasn't able to finish whatever he was going to say next because a blue window screen appeared in front of him.

— — —

< Would you like to expand the range of the Memory Dial for 2,000 Arcana Points? >

< if you choose this option, not only will its range extend to 100 meters, the duration of its effect will also be extended to twenty minutes. >

< Would you like to purchase this option? >

< Yes / No >

— — —

Alex blinked once then twice after looking at the option in front of him.

He wanted to choose yes, but if he did, he would lose his hard-earned Arcana Points.

'Alex, this is more important,' he reminded himself as he gritted his teeth. 'Arcana Points can be earned later, but lives once lost are lost forever. You cannot sit around and hope that the person responsible will just suddenly develop a conscience and stop trying to cause trouble.'

He knew what should be done, but that didn't make it easier to part with 2,000 Arcana Points. With a heavy heart, Alex chose the option to upgrade his Memory Dial.

The moment the upgrade started, the Memory Dial was bathed in a golden light.

A ripple of magic then expanded outward, allowing more things to appear in their surroundings.

"Dim!" Dim Dim, an expert when it came to throwing things, pointed to where the mysterious instigator must have stood, prompting Alex to run in that direction.

The effect of the Memory Dial moved alongside Alex, replaying the events that had happened in the past.

This filled Professor Gareth with hope, and he followed Alex, who was being guided by Dim Dim.

A moment later, a figure finally appeared. After recognizing the perpetrator, Alex's jaw dropped. His identity answered some questions, but raised even more.

Professor Gareth, who could also see the culprit, felt his hope replaced by disbelief. The person in the trees was someone very familiar to him.

It was none other than his adopted son, Lucius, who often accompanied him during his class.

""Impossible.""

Alex and Professor Gareth said at the same time.

The two then glanced at each other for saying the same thing, albeit for different reasons.

Professor Gareth didn't believe that his adopted son could do something like this, especially since Lucius was a Third Year student of the academy and was part of the Student Council.

Alex didn't believe that it was Lucius because he was one of the main supporting characters who helped the Protagonists in overcoming the incidents and tragedies that transpired in the academy.

A few minutes passed until the effect of the Memory Dial faded away.

Even so, the two were still unable to accept what they had seen.

"Alex, I have a favor to ask," Professor Gareth said, his voice grim.

"Yes, Professor?" Alex looked at the Professor, who was very pale after witnessing the truth.

"Please keep this as a secret for now. I will interrogate Lucius and get to the bottom of this. If you do this favor for me, I promise that I will repay it in the future."

Alex hesitated a little but ended up agreeing.

However, he had two conditions.

"Please keep my involvement in this matter a secret, Professor," Alex stated. "Also, please tell me the real reason why Luc... I mean, the Treasurer of the Student Council did something like this."

Alex suspected that Lucius Thornwell might have been ordered by the Student Council President, Theo, to disrupt Professor Gareth's class.

But he immediately tossed this idea to the side.

Even though Alex and Theo had a bad start, he knew that the Student Council President would not go as far as to kill a student just for the sake of petty revenge.

Something—or someone—else must have pushed Lucius Thornwell to do such a thing, and Alex wanted to find out the real reason why.

“Understood,” Professor Gareth promised. “I will keep your involvement a secret, and I will also tell you why my adopted son did it. I only ask that you keep this matter to yourself as well.”

“Okay, Professor,” Alex replied. “We have a deal.”

After thanking Alex, Professor Gareth awarded him 5,000 Academy Points as thanks for helping him with the investigation.

The young man fervently wished that Lucius wasn’t really the one responsible because if it was really him... things would definitely be more complicated in the future.

This was especially true since Lucius was a supporting character, who would play important roles in future events in the academy.

Chapter 187: The Chrono Maze [Part 1]

Alex left the forest with a heavy heart.

He was still thinking about the incident with Lucius when a faint shimmering light suddenly blocked his path.

Alex’s eyes widened in shock as this light then transformed into a fox girl with three tails.

“L-Latifa?” Alex asked, half wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him.

The fox girl looked at the young man with a complicated expression before speaking her mind.

"I saw everything that happened," Latifa said. "I need your help, Alex Stratos."

"What kind of help do you need?" asked Alex in curiosity, still wondering why the sleeping beauty of the academy appeared in front of him.

"Please come with me and help save Lucius," Latifa answered. "The one you saw in that illusion wasn't the real him."

Those words snapped Alex out of the joy of being approached by a pretty lady.

"Then why did you come to find me? You should have looked for a Professor and asked them to help you," Alex pointed out in a serious tone.

Latifa shook her head. "The demonic worshipers have many spies inside the academy. Some of them might even be part of the faculty. Even if I tell a Professor who isn't one of them, the risk of the news reaching them is still there, so I can't rely on them.

"However, the person I trust the most said I should look for you because you will know the way to find Lucius if I take you to him."

"Wait, did you say demonic worshipers?" Alex asked. "They're involved in this incident?"

The demonic worshipers were one of the antagonist organizations in the world of Arcana.

Based on his gaming experience, Alex knew that Latifa's fears were not unfounded. There were indeed two Professors who were part of this organization, though they wouldn't do anything major until the third Arc of the story.

"Yes." Latifa nodded.

“Then you should look for Professor Gareth. I’m sure he’s strong enough to save his son,” Alex stated.

“Professor Gareth will not be able to find Lucius,” Latifa explained. “His location is a bit special. Unless someone knows how to maneuver inside of it, they can easily get lost. The person I trust the most said that you’ll know what to do when you get there.”

Alex wanted to ask who was this person whom the fox girl trusted the most.

In the game, Latifa did not mention such a person, so he couldn’t determine if he knew that person or not.

But one thing was clear.

That person knew Alex.

‘Just who is that person?’ Alex mused even as he understood that this was not the time for that. The priority was to save Lucius and solve this mystery once and for all.

“I have a lot of questions, but I’ll ask the most important one,” Alex said. “Where is Lucius right now, and who is the one who appeared as Lucius earlier?”

“Lucius is at the Chrono Maze, and the one who impersonated him has the ability to copy the faces of other people,” Latifa explained without pointing out that Alex had asked two questions. “I just so happen to wander around the academy at the right time and saw him push Lucius inside the Chrono Maze.

“The only one who can navigate safely inside the maze is the Headmaster, but he is currently not around.”

The fox girl eyed Alex, wondering if he really knew how to navigate such a dangerous place.

"I see." Alex frowned.

He was quite familiar with the Chrono Maze since he had challenged that place many times in the game.

In fact, the majority of players of ELO already knew it inside out.

But how could Latifa's confidante have known with certainty that Alex was familiar with the Chrono Maze?

"Very well. I will find Lucius," Alex stated. "What will you do for the time being?"

"I will follow you," Latifa replied without hesitation. "That way, I can inform others and ask for help if you get trapped inside the Chrono Maze."

"Right," Alex nodded, "your power works like that."

Since Latifa had three tails, she could have three consciousnesses.

One of them would remain inside her body, sleeping, while the second would watch over her to ensure her safety.

The third consciousness could freely wander all over the academy like a ghost, doing things that the real Latifa couldn't do because she was mostly asleep.

"We need to save him fast before the fake Lucius can cause more trouble," Latifa said seriously "Even if I tell everyone that the current Lucius is a fake, no one will believe me. Not to mention, the demon worshipers might target me next if things get out of hand.

"I hope you can help save him. He is a member of the student council, and they will surely be grateful to you if you save him. Once they're indebted to you, your life in the academy will be much easier."

Although the student council president, Theo, didn't seem to be targeting Alex anymore, having the former indebted to him was indeed a good option.

Since they already knew where to go, the two hurried to the Chrono Maze, which was located at the northern edge of the academy.

Truth be told, it wasn't really a maze but a Dungeon.

It was filled with Rank 2 Monsters. Alex in the past would've struggled inside it.

But now, he was confident that he could deal with them, especially since he had cleared this dungeon many times in the past.

However, there was one particular monster that Alex was very wary of—the Mini Boss that wandered inside the dungeon called Mirror Doppelganger.

This monster had no fixed level and simply copied its opponents appearance, stats, and abilities.

It was a very annoying opponent since it would be just as strong as one of your team members who you could bring inside the dungeon.

When Alex finally arrived at the northern part of the academy, he didn't hesitate to head to the dungeon, which was supposed to be sealed at this point in time.

And just as he expected, the dungeon was indeed sealed, which made him wonder how the demon worshiper had been able to toss Lucius inside of it.

He had a vague idea of who the demon worshiper who had the ability to copy faces might be.

But until he was certain, he didn't want to make any assumptions.

"It won't budge." Latifa briefly materialized herself and tried to push open the gate, but her efforts were in vain. "It is sealed shut."

"You won't be able to open it just by pushing it," Alex explained. "This gate can be opened using a special password, and there's three of them."

Yes. Three passwords were needed to open the gate, but there was a gimmick to it.

The passwords changed every hour.

They were also affected by which day of the week it was.

As well as whether it was morning, afternoon, or evening.

Fortunately, the world of Arcana also used the same names for their days, which made things less complicated for Alex.

He then did some quick calculations inside of his head. The gimmick of the Chrono Maze was something most ELO Players knew by heart.

He needed three passwords, and they were the time of the day, the day of the week, as well as the cipher number of the day.

For example, to get the cipher number for Monday, convert the letters to their corresponding number in the alphabet and add everything together.

"Today is Monday, and it is one o'clock pm," Alex muttered. "That should be 72, and I need to add the time modifier, which is 2, since it's the afternoon. I got it!"

The young man then pressed his hand over the gate, and said with confidence. "Zenith, Monar, 74."

After saying those three passwords, the gate glowed faintly and opened wide.

Latifa raised her eyebrows in surprise. As much as she trusted her best friend's words, she had doubted whether Alex really could open the gate.

But after seeing him do so easily with her own eyes, she had no choice but to acknowledge that the young man was indeed the person who could save Lucius inside the Chrono Maze.

"Let's go," Alex said. "The gate will only remain open for two minutes, so we should go while we still can."

Latifa nodded and followed Alex inside the special dungeon, which she would be exploring for the first time since she enrolled in the academy.

Chapter 188: The Chrono Maze [Part 2]

When Alex, Dim Dim, and Latifa regained their senses, they found themselves in a spacious room with an obsidian floor.

However, when they looked up, they saw something, and Latifa's eyes widened in shock.

The interior of the Chrono Maze looked the same as it did in the game. It was an impossible labyrinth of ticking gears, floating platforms, stairs that seemed to go in every direction, countless doors, and shimmering transparent corridors that looped back on themselves once a wrong turn was taken.

Time hung heavy in the air, like the moment before a clock struck midnight.

A low humming filled the space, accompanied by the slow, rhythmic tick... tock... tick... tock that echoed in all directions.

Latifa looked at her surroundings, and quickly understood why this dungeon was forbidden to students.

"T-This place is indeed dangerous," Latifa stuttered. "I already understand why someone can get lost in this place. That shining gate at the top—is that the exit of the dungeon?"

“Yes,” Alex replied. “In order to leave this place, you must reach that location.”

“But how can you get there?” Latifa inquired. “Just a single mistake, and I feel like you’ll be trapped here for the rest of your life.”

“You’re not wrong,” Alex said. “This dungeon has a passive effect that disorients anyone who’s unfamiliar with it. The transparent walls might look like they’re standing still, but they shift positions every few minutes.”

As if to prove his words right, the shimmering corridors rearranged themselves, creating new paths and dead ends. Latifa shuddered.

Fortunately, she was an astral projection of herself, so she could return to her original body if the need ever arose.

Latifa tensed, but Alex didn’t even flinch.

He simply looked at the eight doors, which would bring him to a set location within the maze that would serve as his starting point.

“Dim Dim, can you sense Lucius?” Alex asked as he scanned the surroundings, hoping to catch a glimpse of the young man whom they had come to rescue.

“Dim!” Dim Dim pointed.

The two teenagers both looked in the direction it was pointing at and saw flashes of light in the distance.

Lucius was a mage, so those flashes of light meant that he was using his magic to fight against something.

Knowing that the time was tight, Alex took out another one of his artifacts, which was none other than the Mimic Lantern.

This lantern could detect if a treasure chest was a mimic or not.

However, Alex had paid extra gold to add some enchantments to it.

Currently, his Mimic Lantern had three other abilities.

Firstly, it allowed him to see invisible things within a five-meter radius.

Secondly, the lantern was to be able to detect traps within the range of its light.

Last but not least was a tracking ability. The lantern had been enchanted to reveal the most recent footprints or traces on the ground.

The moment the Mimic Lantern's light shone on them, they would glow in a bioluminescent light.

As soon as the lantern was lit, a set of footprints appeared, leading to the door that had the number six.

"...Number six it is," Alex muttered.

Without wasting time, he turned toward the sixth door and approached it confidently. The glowing footprints continued to pulse faintly under the light of the Mimic Lantern, guiding them to the path Lucius had taken.

Latifa followed behind, her eyes still darting left and right to make sure nothing snuck up on them.

Dim Dim, comfortably settled on Alex's head, tilted its head curiously, eyes locked on the shifting gears above.

The door opened on its own as they neared it, groaning like an ancient machine awakening from slumber.

The corridor beyond was dim and narrow, its walls shifting in hue from steel gray to soft violet.

The corridors only looked transparent on the outside, but if you were inside one, you would quickly realise you couldn't look through the walls to see the outside.

Gears embedded into the walls rotated slowly, and strange whispers drifted in and out, like echoes from the future... or the past.

"He's coming..."

"Run... before time eats you..."

"You should've turned left..."

Latifa's ears twitched. "What was that?"

"Echoes of those who wandered into this place in the past," Alex replied calmly. "This place remembers everyone who has entered. Every wrong move and every final scream stays in the maze forever."

"These voices can drive people crazy. If someone fails to overcome the voices, they would become a part of the dungeon, just like those before them. This is also the reason why entering the Chrono Maze is forbidden, and only the Headmaster can navigate through it without problems."

Latifa shivered. "How did this even pass dungeon safety regulations?"

Alex smirked without humor. "It didn't. That's why it was sealed."

What Alex didn't say was that Frieden Academy was purposely built to contain the Chrono Maze.

While some dungeon cities prospered because many adventurers would dive regularly to bring out useful materials from within, the Chrono Maze had been deemed too dangerous for normal adventurers to explore.

This was why it was confined within the academy grounds, preventing anyone from the City of Harmonia to wander in carelessly.

Alex and Latifa continued down the winding path, guided by the ever-glowing footprints that twisted and looped in ways no normal person could have followed without assistance.

"Hey, won't you get lost if you keep following that trail?" Latifa asked after twenty minutes had passed.

"It doesn't matter," Alex answered. "Our priority is to find Lucius first. We can worry about finding the right path after we secure him."

Just then, they came into a large hall with three paths that led to three different directions.

But since they were following Lucius' trail, it was a no-brainer that they had to choose the path at the center.

Suddenly, Dim Dim tensed up.

"Dim Dim!" The Dim Sum God pointed at the right path, warning Alex that something was coming.

The young man immediately slowed down.

"Hold this," Alex said as he handed the Mimic Lantern to Latifa, so he could take out Everguard and his sword.

Alex then faced the path that led to the right and adopted a defensive stance.

The sound of an eerie mechanical skittering echoed against the walls. From the darkness, a creature crawled out. To Alex's surprise, it wasn't walking on the floor but on the ceiling. When it saw Alex and Latifa, it paused briefly, allowing its body to hang like a spider's.

Its eyes were blank, glowing with distorted numbers. Its body was thin and hunched, like a broken marionette wearing pieces of antique armor welded to its bones.

< Gearmaw Pup >

"Bites with the hunger of a rewinded beast."

Monster Rank: Rank 2

Monster Grade: Uncommon

Attribute: Metal / Beast

Species: Clockwork Canine

Type: Maze Predator

Health: 520 / 520

Attack: 42 – 60

“Gearmaw Pup,” Alex murmured. “I missed seeing this thing.”

Latifa didn’t know how to feel after she vaguely heard Alex’s words.

A two-meter long mechanical spider that skittered about, as if waiting for the right moment to strike, did not seem like something anyone in the right mind would miss. In fact, Latifa would be glad if she never saw such a thing again.

Suddenly, it screeched and launched itself from the ceiling.

Alex already knew the Gearmaw Pup’s attack pattern, so he expertly dodged to his right before using his shield to bash its head, creating a clanging sound that echoed inside the dungeon.

The thing he liked about the Chrono Maze was that the monsters didn’t drop Monster Cores.

They instead dropped Magic Crystals, which would allow someone to use magic even if they weren’t innately gifted.

‘Time to get rich.’ Alex looked at the Gearmaw Pup as if it was made of gold coins that were just waiting for him to pick up from the ground.

Chapter 189: The Chrono Maze [Part 3]

[Level Up!]

A chuckle escaped Alex’s lips, not because of the notification sound of leveling up, but because a mid-grade magic crystal had dropped from the monster that he had just killed.

Latifa looked at the young man anxiously because he laughed every time he killed a monster inside the Chrono Maze.

Right now, he was holding a wooden sandal in his hand, which he had used to kill a Chrono Beetle with such ease that she had been left in complete shock.

Lastly, Alex would also say things like “I’m going to be rich!” or “Hahaha! Thank you demon worshiper! Thank you for giving me the opportunity to farm here!”

For a brief moment, the young lady wondered if Alex was really part of the righteous faction because he kept on thanking the demon worshiper that had sent Lucius inside the Forbidden Dungeon of Frieden Academy.

Dim Dim was also chuckling on top of Alex’s head, imitating its partner’s evil laugh.

The Chrono Maze was the best place to farm magic crystals, but it had a restriction.

Only those below the age of twenty may gather resources from it. Anyone older would not get any monster drops even if they wiped out all the monsters in the dungeon.

However, Magic Crystals didn’t always drop when you killed a monster.

There was a fifty percent chance that there would be no monster drop after a monster was defeated.

A forty percent chance that it would drop a low-grade magic crystal.

A nine percent chance that it would drop a mid-grade magic crystal.

And, finally, a one percent chance that it would drop a high-grade magic crystal.

The only time the odds of a high-grade magic crystal dropping rose to five percent was when the Mirror Doppelganger was defeated.

The increased odds matched the difficulty of fighting this monster, which could perfectly copy its target’s appearance, stats, and abilities.

So far, after killing nearly twenty monsters including the Gearmaw Pup, Winding Revenant, and Chrono Beetle, Alex had managed to get seven low-grade magic crystals and one mid-grade magic crystal.

The Chrono Maze was the place where players farmed magic crystals in the game. They used it to gain money as well as raise the magic stats of their characters.

Although there was a set amount of magic crystals that one person could absorb per grade, letting your non-magical characters unlock their magic affinities gave them more flexibility in battle.

In truth, Alex had long wanted to enter the Chrono Maze.

However, he had been too afraid to do so because the Headmaster of the Academy was its Guardian.

While he didn't know if the Headmaster would punish him for entering the dungeon without permission, he at least had an excuse that he could use this time. A Demon Worshiper imprisoning a student inside the Chrono Maze surely counted as an emergency!

Since Alex was a responsible student, and cared about his seniors, he braved all dangers and headed to the forbidden dungeon, even if it was forbidden!

What?

The Headmaster would ask him how he knew the password to enter the dungeon?

What a silly question!

Alex was a Seer! It just so happened that he had gotten a vision at the right moment telling him how to unlock the dungeon!

With all of these explanations already prepared, he no longer feared any punishment!

Besides, it was Latifa who had asked him for help. With an “accomplice” accompanying him, Alex would not have to worry about suffering alone, if he really was going to be punished!

The young man planned to farm as many magic crystals as he could because he didn’t know when he would be able to enter the Chrono Maze again.

Two hours later, the fox lady’s ears perked up as she heard the sound of explosions in the distance.

“Someone’s fighting!” Latifa informed Alex. “Let’s hurry!”

Alex nodded, and sprinted forward until they reached another intersection.

There, they saw a haggard looking young man fighting two Chrono Beetles at the same time.

“Dim Dim, I choose you!” Alex shouted as he threw Dim Dim, who was already armed with the wooden sandal.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim smacked the living daylight out of one of the Chrono Beetle with its sandal, sending the critter crashing towards the wall before it turned into particles of light.

“Ei!” Dim Dim then used the impact to bounce off the wall and lunge at the second Chrono Beetle, slapping it like the bug that it was.

Unfortunately, no Magic Crystals dropped this time, but that didn’t matter.

Lucius collapsed on the ground, panting for breath.

His glasses almost slid off his face, but he was too exhausted to rectify that.

The teenage boy was a Light Mage, so although he had offensive magic skills, he specialized more in support.

Fighting against monsters on his own had been very taxing for him even if they were just Rank 2 Monsters.

Also, he had been affected by anxiety and the fear of not being able to leave the Chrono Maze, which had further deteriorated his mental strength and willpower.

The moment he saw someone saving him, all the pressure he felt suddenly vanished, and he collapsed in both relief and exhaustion.

"Thank you for saving me," Lucius said as soon as he regained his composure. "Did the demon worshiper catch the two of you as well?"

He already recognized Alex and Dim Dim because it was impossible for him to not remember the young man.

There were only a handful of students who could face the student council president without feeling intimidated by his authority, and Alex was one of those people.

In fact, everyone in the Student Council was now aware of the young man and the new club he had founded, Endless Horizon.

"No," Alex replied. "This young lady here asked me to help rescue you from this place. By the way, how many days have you been here?"

"Days?" Latifa blinked in confusion. "At most he's just been here for eight hours."

"That may be true for the outside world," Alex explained, "but inside the Chrono Maze, a day here is equivalent to an hour outside of the dungeon. If he has been here for nearly eight hours, that also means that he has been here for nearly eight days."

The young man looked at the haggard-looking secretary of the student council with pity.

For someone who had been brought to this place by force, Lucius had certainly suffered some mental trauma from the constant whispering of the lost souls trapped in this place.

Perhaps because he was a Light Mage, Lucius had been able to keep himself sane by using purification magic on himself and casting light barriers to ward off the voices of the dungeon.

But, he was now nearing his limit.

'He might have stayed at the entrance for a few days before finally deciding to take a gamble and venture to find the exit,' Alex thought. 'Unfortunately, he reached many dead ends, so he had to backtrack many times.

'The only reason why we are able to catch up is because the most recent set of footprints glows brighter than the old ones. It saved us a lot of time when we tried to catch up to him.'

The scary part of the Chrono Maze was the countless looping pathways.

You could travel for many days, but you were actually only going around in circles because you kept on choosing the right path, which most people in mazes would do to find the exit.

The Chrono Maze didn't work that way.

In fact, by choosing to always go right in every choice, you would just loop around in a wide circle, failing helplessly to find the exit.

Chapter 190: Be Careful What You Wish For [Part 1]

"D-Do you have some food?" Lucius asked hoarsely. "I am very hungry. It has been three days since I last ate and drank anything."

"Of course," Alex replied. "Dim Dim, please give him something good to eat."

“Dim!” Dim Dim saluted before summoning some bamboo steamers containing roasted pork buns and dumplings to help Lucius recover his stamina and energy.

“Here is some water,” Alex said while handing a waterskin to the older boy.

“Thank you,” Lucius replied. “When we get out of here, I promise to put in a good word for you to the president.”

“Thank you!” Alex smiled widely after hearing that promise.

Getting the student council indebted to him would work wonders in the long run. Being on their good side was always a good thing.

After Lucius ate and drank his fill, he asked Alex and Latifa to let him sleep for a few hours.

Although sleeping right after eating was bad, Alex didn’t quibble. He knew Lucius had truly reached his limit both physically and mentally.

“Go ahead and sleep, Senior,” Alex said. “Even if you hear the sound of fighting, just ignore it. We will keep you safe.”

As Lucius had witnessed Dim Dim instantly killing the two Chrono Beetles, Alex’s words sounded very convincing to him.

The moment Lucius’ head hit the pillow that Alex had taken out of his storage ring, he was fast asleep.

Alex’s bed roll was not the most comfortable, but Lucius was so tired it felt like a king’s mattress.

Alex had already prepared many things for his own survival. He had known that sleeping outdoors might be a necessity one day, but he hadn’t expected that he would be providing the student council secretary a place to sleep.

Lucius' breathing soon fell into a deep, steady rhythm.

His body finally succumbed to the rest it so desperately needed. A light barrier carefully wrapped his body, preventing any outside interference from disturbing his sleep.

The voices that had haunted him for the past few days were kept at bay with this light.

However, those who weren't part of it had no choice but to listen to the creepy cries of despair, anger, and helplessness from the victims that had been claimed by the dungeon for the past hundreds of years.

Latifa's face paled because the voices were starting to get into her nerves.

"I can't believe that he managed to survive eight days of this torment," she murmured.

The walls of the dungeon shone faintly as its colors changed from time to time.

The ever-present voices of the victims still kept whispering in Alex's ears, but he didn't seem to be too disturbed by their presence.

He didn't have the ability to see the souls of people, so he did the only thing that he could do and conversed with them.

"Hey, can you guys lure some monsters to this location?" Alex asked. "If possible, just lure Chrono Beetles here, thank you!"

"T-This guy is weird. Does he want to die so badly?" one of the voices said.

"Should we do as he says and lure some monsters here?" a mischievous voice commented.

"Such an arrogant person, but I still wish that they can leave this place alive."

“Be careful, that Mirror Monster is roaming near this place. Make sure to not look at it when it comes!”

The voices kept on talking, and Alex kept on talking to them.

Latifa watched from the side, wondering if Alex had indeed gone crazy because he was now actually trying to communicate with the dungeon-bound spirits that were unable to leave the Chrono Maze for all eternity.

“...Are you actually holding a strategy meeting with the dead right now?” Latifa asked, her voice quiet but edged with disbelief.

Alex gave her a casual shrug. “They have eyes everywhere. Might as well use them.”

“You are insane.”

“I prefer the word resourceful.”

Latifa rubbed her temples and sighed.

She noticed that there were no longer any voices that whispered in her ear because all the spirits were now drawn to Alex.

What she didn’t know was that the young man was purposely distracting the spirits so that they would no longer bother Latifa and instead focus solely on him.

Of course, Latifa eventually reached this conclusion as well, and she eyed Alex gratefully.

‘I guess she’s right that bringing him here instead of a Professor is really the best choice,’ Latifa thought.

Alex was efficient, calm, and adaptable.

In fact, he didn't seem too bothered by the fact that he was inside the forbidden dungeon of the academy, which could trap someone in its maze until they drew their last breath.

She even had this wild thought that Alex was enjoying being trapped here in the Chrono Maze.

'That can't be possible, right?' Latifa frowned.

Even now, she believed that if her real body had been trapped here, her sanity might not have lasted more than a couple of days.

The more she thought about it, the more her opinion of Alex improved.

However, her impression of him went into free fall when he suddenly said something out of the blue.

"Guys, where are the monsters?" Alex asked. "Just lure them here, it doesn't matter how many they are. The more the merrier!"

The fox lady almost choked after hearing the young man's complaint.

Did he just... invite a monster stampede?

The whispering spirits fell into stunned silence. Even they couldn't believe what they had just heard.

"...Did he say the more the merrier?" one spirit whispered.

"Should we invite that Mirror Monster here so this guy will know his folly?" another spirit murmured.

Latifa glared at the young man, who was standing there casually with his hands on his hips as if he had just ordered snacks from his favorite fast food eatery instead of mechanical horrors that littered the Chrono Maze.

“Are you insane?” Latifa demanded. “Why are you asking for trouble?”

“Lucius will be sleeping for a few hours, and I don’t want to waste hours watching over him,” Alex answered in a matter-of-fact way. “Since that’s the case, why not be productive and kill monsters while we wait for him to wake up?”

“Look, he even added a soundproofing spell in his barrier, so he will be able to sleep through the fighting like a baby.”

Latifa stared at Alex, her mouth slightly open as her brain refused to process what she had just heard.

“...So your idea of being productive is turning this resting spot into a monster slaughter zone?” she asked.

Alex nodded confidently. “Exactly. Grinding efficiency. Relax, what can possibly go wrong?”

Just as the fox lady was about to give him a list of what could possibly go wrong, she saw something from the corner of her eye.

Latifa glanced at the edge of the corridor and saw something reflective heading in their direction.

Using her enhanced vision, she managed to see what it was. She shuddered, suddenly wishing she was myopic.

There was one particular monster that Alex had warned her about in the dungeon, that she shouldn’t look at no matter what.

And that was none other than the Mirror Doppelganger, which could perfectly copy the appearance and abilities of anyone unlucky enough to see their reflection in its mirror.