

Endless 251

Chapter 251: Turning Enemies Into Friends [Part 1]

With Theo and Professor Gareth taking the lead, the incident soon wrapped up completely.

Two days after the student assembly, the President of the Lionheart Society, Chester Blackvale, stepped down from his position and withdrew from the academy.

But he didn't go alone. As Alex had required, the student who had targeted Nessia also left the academy as well.

On paper, they weren't expelled but left because they couldn't stand the injustice done to them.

Their excuse left a bad taste in Alex's mouth, but he didn't say anything about it. As long as they were no longer part of the academy, all was good.

The club president position of a Crest Club couldn't be left empty, so Prince Edward was quickly pushed to be the new president of the Lionheart Society.

The first thing he did was a purge, kicking out every member who had a bad reputation. He also vowed that as long as he was the president, the Lionheart Society would stay true to the goal of *Noblesse Oblige*.

Many students welcomed this change, especially the commoners who had been abused by the members of nobility.

With the third prince of the Kingdom of Avalon taking command, they hoped that they would no longer be persecuted in the academy.

Of course, this was merely a hope.

There was no guarantee that the nobles would suddenly change their attitude and treat the commoners any differently.

But, one thing was clear.

None of them would dare touch even a single hair of Alex's club members for everyone now feared the young man, who earned the moniker Blackmail King of the Academy.

The consequences Lionheart Society and the other Crest Clubs who had played a role in the harassment of the members of Endless Horizon faced for what they had done was enough lesson for all to know that they were untouchables.

After the incident reached a conclusion, many commoners and even some low-ranking nobles reached out to Chuck, Charles, Nessia, and Vaan, hoping to form connections with them.

As for Renard, they avoided him like a plague—he was simply too scary. A single glare from him was enough to send them all running.

What about Alex?

Well, none of them dared to get close to him!

Even Dim Dim, who regularly patrolled the academy with Daisy the Doom Cow, was now seen as a dangerous monster despite how cute it was!

In the Headquarters of the Merchant Alliance...

"Who was it?" the President of the Merchant Alliance, Preston Kingsley, asked the officers of his club, who avoided meeting his eyes. "Who among you guys ratted us out?"

"You have all seen the projection that day. That room is within the private chambers of our club room, where only we can enter! It is impossible for anyone else to make a recording here with all the layers of security we have in place. So, who is the traitor among you? Speak now before I personally interrogate every single one of you!"

All the officers of the Merchant Alliance glanced at each other, hoping to see the “spy” who had made them suffer during the past two days.

After checking the inventory of everything purchased from the Merchant Alliance, the staff had tallied the prices of each item.

They were given an ultimatum of reimbursing the academy everything or disbanding their club.

The one who led this investigation was none other than Theo, who was more than happy to bring down the Merchant Alliance since he considered it one of his political enemies.

With the club controlling the economy of the academy, the student council president hadn’t dared to antagonize them in the past.

But things were different now.

They were now under his mercy. Even Preston had to take two steps back and appease the person whom he had looked down in the past.

The shock he received from seeing the projection that day still haunted him in his dreams.

Every person inside the room was an officer he had personally selected. This meant that he trusted them enough to work with him and share his secrets.

But now, that trust was broken. The enraged club president glared at his officers, ordering them to confess now while he was still being nice!

The same thing was happening in the Lionheart Society Club Room.

Prince Edward had also arrived at the conclusion that there must be a spy among the officers of the club, which had resulted in their public shaming.

This was also the reason why he did a purge—he hoped the same incident wouldn't happen again.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that all the Clubs, as well as the nobles, who were implicated all arrived at the same thought.

There was a traitor amongst their midst and they must be identified at all cost!

But what they didn't know was that everything was just a ploy by Alex.

As someone who had played the game countless times, Alex knew of the security measures in each club room.

In fact, no one would be able to enter them unless they knew the passwords that would unlock the enchanted doors.

It was similar to the clock tower's defensive formation.

Only those whom Alex had given permission could access their inner club room.

Unfortunately for them, Alex had joined all the Crest Clubs in different playthroughs, so he was aware of these hidden passwords and rooms.

But the real MVPs were actually Lotte and Nessia.

Nessia had created the magical formations that made it very difficult for the recording crystal to be detected.

Lotte had been the one to infiltrate the club rooms and plant several recording crystals in places that couldn't be seen easily.

Of course, Alex had taught her how to bypass the security features of each club room, giving her access to the inner chambers and secret rooms.

There really was no spy.

It was just a means to cast suspicion on all the members of each club, making them wary of each other.

Just as Preston was about to lose his temper because none of his officers came clean, a knock sounded from the door of their conference room.

“We are in a meeting!” Preston shouted. “I said that no one is allowed to disturb us!”

“P-President, Alex Stratos has come. He says he wants to meet you!” one of the members replied from the other side of the door.

Clearly, he didn’t want to disobey his president’s orders, but Alex said that if he didn’t see the president, he would release more evidence and have their club disbanded.

The Blackmail King was already a feared existence in the academy, so the club member didn’t have a choice but to report to his superiors.

Preston’s face turned grim after hearing the Blackmail King’s name.

He had already paid a million academy points to that devilish young man. He had also been forced to give the academy a refund.

Not only that, but he was now forced to align himself with the Student Council, whom he had believed couldn’t touch a single strand of his hair.

All of this was the fault of Alex Stratos, who had now come to their club for who-knows-what reason!

“Send him in!” Preston hissed.

As if waiting for that moment, the door of the conference room opened, and Alex Stratos walked in as if he owned the place.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” Alex said. “Especially to my spies who have helped me tremendously. I will secretly send you the academy points as promised, so please, continue working hard for my sake.”

The sound of something snapping reached everyone’s ears as Preston broke the magical pen in his hands.

Alex’s words were the confirmation he needed—there were indeed spies inside his club, bribed by the enemy!

Of course, the young man was just fanning the flames that didn’t exist in the first place.

He had just visited the other Crest Clubs and struck a deal with them, ending all future hostilities on both sides.

Alex didn’t want to have many enemies in the academy, so this step was important. He wanted himself and his club members to grow stronger without having too many flies buzzing around them.

The Merchant Alliance was the last one the young man visited because it was the club whose assistance would be of utmost importance if he wanted to achieve some of the goals he had as a student of Frieden Academy.

Chapter 252: Turning Enemies Into Friends [Part 2]

“Why are you here?” Preston demanded.

“I came here for one thing and one thing only,” Alex declared. “I want a Platinum Card of the Merchant Alliance. Please give me one.”

“Only our VIP Customers can get the Platinum Card.” Preston glared at the young man. “I’m sorry, but you’re not qualified.”

The Platinum Card of the Merchant Alliance was one of the most useful items in the academy.

Not only did it give a 10% discount on items sold in stores affiliated with the Merchant Alliance, but it also gave a 20% discount on some travel expenses, which was especially useful for long distance travels like airships.

As for short distance travels to the next city or town, such a card would grant its holder a 50% discount.

People with the Platinum Card were also given access to the VIP lounges that were available in every transport station, where they could rest.

Last but not least, everyone who possessed the Platinum Cards were treated as VIPs by the establishments who were part of the Merchant Alliance.

As Alex planned to take his club outside of the academy for expeditions, having the Platinum Card would make their lives easier.

“I plan to become the Merchant Alliance’s VIP Customer, so please give me a Platinum Card,” Alex replied.

“I think you’re making a misunderstanding here,” Preston sneered. “You need to become a VIP Customer first before you are given a Platinum Card.”

Alex smiled faintly. “Are you giving me the card or should I expose another scandal? Trust me, what happened during the student assembly is nothing compared to the dirt I have on you guys.”

“Damn you. Are you threatening me?!” Preston growled.

Alex blinked. “Yes,” he replied matter-of-factly. “So, do you feel threatened?”

Preston and the members of his club all glared hatefully at the young man, who was now synonymous to a monster in their eyes.

Even the cute little bun on top of his head looked like a small devil who had come to make them pay their debts like a loanshark.

Preston closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"I'll have your platinum card ready in a few days," Preston conceded with barely restrained anger.

"Good." Alex nodded. "Like I said, I plan to become a VIP Customer of the Merchant Alliance. I know that this may sound unconvincing coming from me, but I do hope that we all get along from this day onward.

"Don't worry. No matter what you guys do from this point onward, I will turn a blind eye to it. What happened during the Student Assembly will be the first and last time that I put you guys under the spotlight.

"Of course, this only applies if you guys don't mess with me first. So I hope we will all get along and no longer make things difficult for everyone, okay?"

Preston and the other members of the Merchant Alliance calmed down a little—just a little—after hearing Alex's words.

"Can we trust you?" Preston inquired.

"You can draft a Magic Oath if you like," Alex replied. "If you and your officers are willing to sign it, I will sign it too. That way, all of us can be at ease that we will no longer treat each other as enemies."

The prospect of Alex blackmailing their club again had always stressed Preston out. Hearing this compromise made some of the anger he felt subside a bit.

“Very well. We will draft that Magic Oath now.” Preston wanted to strike while the iron was still hot. He certainly didn’t want to give Alex time to change his mind!

The young man was more than happy to accept Preston’s proposal since he genuinely didn’t want to create too many enemies in the academy.

An hour later, the young man left the Merchant Alliance with a smile on his face.

“It’s finally over, Dim Dim,” Alex said. “Hah... that was so taxing.”

“Dim.” Dim Dim nodded.

After seeing that all the clubs wished to end all hostilities with them, the little bun was also finally able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, a faint breeze blew over Alex, and a beautiful fox lady materialized beside him.

“Good work, Alex,” Lotte said sweetly.

“Thank you for acting as a bodyguard,” Alex replied. “Things became a bit dicey in some places, but I’m glad that we managed to talk it out properly.”

“Right,” Lotte agreed.

Alex had visited the Crest Clubs with only Dim Dim so they wouldn’t feel too intimidated.

Of course, he understood that things might become dangerous. To be on the safe side, he had asked Lotte to accompany him.

Since she could turn invisible and pass through walls like a ghost, she would be able to call for help if Alex really needed it.

The young lady observed Alex while he walked toward the clock tower. He was going to tell the other members of Endless Horizon the result of his meetings with the other clubs.

In her eyes, Alex seemed like a very reckless person.

Not only had he tried to solve the incident in the Mistral Weave Forest using the resources of their club, but he also dared to challenge the Crest Clubs and the Nobles who had bullied his club members.

Sometimes, she wondered how he was able to do those things. Logically, no ordinary First Year, especially not one who was a commoner, should've been able to do it.

'Is he really a commoner?' Lotte thought as she walked beside the young man. 'Or does he come from a powerful family that can handle the backlash of his actions?'

Lotte had only known Alex for a short time, but that was enough for her to be involved in a few dangerous situations that she had never expected to be part of.

Lucius' kidnapping, the Battle Royale, and the counterattack of their club, Endless Horizon.

She believed that as she and Latifa stayed by the young man's side, it was inevitable for them to be dragged into more dangerous situations.

However, she deemed that Alex wasn't a bad person.

A reckless and mysterious one, but a bad person? No.

"By the way, Lotte, can you tell Lumi to watch over Latifa next weekend?" Alex asked. "I want you to accompany us on an adventure to the Heracle Mountains."

“The Heracle Mountains?” Lotte mused. “What are we going to do there?”

“Explore an uncharted ruin,” Alex answered. “We will leave the academy right after classes end next Friday. Since Monday and Tuesday are special holidays, we will have four days to explore the ruins”

“How did you know that there is a ruin?” Lotte inquired.

“Do you remember Mark and Spencer?” Alex replied. “The two Fourth Years who tried to kidnap Dim Dim? They discovered that ruin during their summer vacation, but they haven’t returned since then.”

“So, why are we going to go there?” Lotte asked. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“I guess?” Alex replied. “But I’m sure we will be fine.”

The ruins were indeed dangerous, but not something that his club members couldn’t overcome.

The reason why he wished to visit it with Mark and Spencer was because these two Fourth Years had become popular in the forums of ELO because their quest led them to one of the most mythical places in the world.

The Tower of the Hermit.

According to the player who had discovered it, the Library would give any player the ability to choose one book among its collection, which numbered in the thousands.

Each of these books possessed a unique skill, some of which were Legendary Grade.

These books were also called Grimoires.

Alex had tried to visit the Tower of the Hermit directly without undergoing the proper steps, thinking they weren’t necessary.

But the tower hadn't appeared in the location where it was supposed to be.

Only by taking the Chain Quest in its proper order did the tower appear, which allowed Alex to gain a Legendary Grade Skill that helped him become one of the strongest tankers in the game.

However this time, he planned to choose a different grimoire, which he believed would become more useful to him in his current situation.

Lotte pondered for a while but still agreed to accompany Alex and her club members to the Heracle Mountains.

The trip was going to be slightly expensive, which was why Alex wanted to get a Platinum Card from the Merchant Alliance. There were few things as irresistible as a good discount.

Chapter 253: Power Corrupts, And Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely

Fran glanced at Dim Dim, who was happily humming a tune while helping her plant lettuce seeds in her personal garden.

The little bun was in an unusually good mood, which made the dwarf girl wonder why.

"You're in a good mood today, Dim Dim," Fran commented with a smile.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim nodded.

"Did anything happen?" Fran inquired.

"Dim Dim!"

"You and your club are going on a trip this Friday?"

“Dim Dim!”

“And you’re going to the Heracle Mountains?”

The Dim Sum God nodded before continuing to hum as it planted seeds. It turned away, a few seconds shy of seeing Fran frown a little after hearing its answer.

‘They can’t possibly go to that place, right?’ Fran thought. ‘It’s not a site that can be easily accessed using normal means after all.’

When she and her brother had been traveling the Kingdom, they had stumbled upon ruins in the Heracle Mountains.

It was a Dwarven Ruin, dating back nearly two thousand years.

According to the Dwarven Glyphs written on its ancient walls, it was once a place of worship and also the gateway to a mystical Archive that granted special rewards to those who were worthy enough to find it.

Fran and Finn both loved adventures, so they had decided to embark on a journey to find this mystical place.

And after several months, they had finally found it. There, they obtained special skills they had kept hidden to this day.

The only time they had used those skills was when their lives were truly in danger.

And that only happened twice in their short lifetime.

No one alive had witnessed these abilities, for those who had were already six feet under.

Wanting to know more, Fran decided to pry for more answers from the little bun, who had already covered half her garden while planting lettuce seeds.

“Dim Dim, are you guys just going to do some hiking or something?” Fran inquired.

Dim Dim shook its head. “Dim Dim!”

“... You’re going to explore an ancient ruin?” Fran’s hand, which was holding her little shovel, trembled a bit.

Dim Dim nodded. “Dim!”

Fran’s face became solemn after hearing the little bun’s confirmation.

“I see. Just be careful, okay? Exploring ancient ruins is dangerous after all.”

“Dim Dim~”

After their conversation ended, Dim Dim continued to plant while Fran was lost in thought.

She and her brother had had quite a smooth experience when exploring the Dwarven Ruin since they were protected by their Dwarven Bloodline.

None of the traps had activated, and the layers of Dwarven Magic hadn’t harmed them.

However, for other races, the ruin was akin to a deadly labyrinth, preventing those who wished to know its secrets from succeeding.

Two hours later, the Dim Sum God bade Fran goodbye. She then went to look for her brother, rushing to tell him about Endless Horizon’s intention to scale the Heracle Mountains.

"I see..." Finn furrowed his brows as he paused his task of chopping wood. "But Fran, this is not something we should intervene with. You already saw the message left by our ancestors, right? Only those who are worthy will be able to find the Tower of the Hermit."

"Can we at least warn them of the dangers?" Fran asked.

Finn pondered for a while before reluctantly nodding his head. "But only tell Alex. However, do not tell him everything. This is a trial. If they are found unworthy due to our intervention, their efforts will be in vain."

"I understand," Fran replied. "I'll only tell Alex what I can."

After the discussion, Fran went to the Ironheart Dormitory to look for Alex.

Finn watched his sister's back until she disappeared before heaving a sigh.

"I just hope none of them will die on this trip," Finn muttered.

He could still remember the countless human and demihuman skeletons they had passed in the inner regions of the ruin.

Clearly, there had been other hopeful explorers seeking to unravel the ruin's secrets but had failed to leave the place alive.

Also, those who had succeeded would definitely keep this secret among themselves. Even if they did share this secret, they would only share it with trusted family members and friends.

"Power corrupts," Finn said softly. "And absolute power corrupts absolutely."

He didn't know if Alex and his club members would even be able to clear the first stage, which was just the starting point of an epic adventure.

Finn just wished that at the end of their journey, they would become wise enough to make the right choice.

That way, the world they lived in would become a better place, just as the Hermit had intended when he collaborated with the Tower, who was also a Deity that governed the world of Arcana.

Ironheart Dormitory...

"... Fran, did you and your brother manage to clear the ruin in the Heracle Mountain?" Alex asked in a serious tone after hearing her warning.

"Yes," Fran answered. "We cleared it two years ago."

"Then, did you find the location of the Tower of the Hermit?"

"... How did you know about the Tower of the Hermit?"

The young lady's answer was enough to confirm Alex's suspicion.

In the game, Fran had this overpowered ability that didn't match her cute and petite appearance.

She was a Dwarven Berserker, which Alex had found quite surprising after meeting her character for the first time.

But after adding her to his main party, he had realized that she possessed a Legendary Grade Skill so powerful that it made people question if she was really a dwarf or not.

'I see, so that's how she got that skill,' Alex realized. 'A dwarf can't possibly have such a broken skill. If she went to the Tower of the Hermit, then I can now understand why she has it.'

Seeing that Alex seemed to be deep in thought, Fran assumed that the young man took her words seriously, which made her feel relieved.

"Thank you, Fran," Alex said after a few minutes of silence. "I promise you that we will be careful and prioritize our safety. But we still need to go. As you may already know, my end goal is to reach the Tower of the Hermit."

Fran desperately wanted to ask Alex how he knew about the Tower of the Hermit. However, since the young man did not seem forthcoming, she decided to respect his privacy.

"Be very careful of the traps, both physical and magical," Fran reminded in a serious tone. "Bring enough food, water, medical supplies, and anything that you might need during an emergency. Tackle the ruin as if you are tackling a high-level Dungeon."

"I understand," Alex replied. "We will do everything in our power to ensure our safety. Thank you, Fran."

The two looked at each other with a smile before a loud cough caught their attention.

"Um, can you even see me?" Chuck, who had been ignored all this time, asked. "I wanted to say a few things too, but it's rather difficult to insert myself in the discussion!"

"Calm down, Chuck," Alex said. "We haven't forgotten about you. In fact, I will now assign you to an important mission!"

Alex lightly tapped the bracelet on his wrist, which stored the academy points that he had received from the Crest Clubs and the Nobles that he had blackmailed.

He then passed two hundred thousand academy points to Chuck, whose eyes widened in surprise.

“Buy the necessary supplies that we will need for our expedition from the Merchant Alliance,” Alex ordered. “Also, take this Platinum Card with you so that you can get discounts. If someone asks why we are hoarding things, tell them that we are planning a dungeon expedition.”

“Yes, Sir!” Chuck saluted and headed towards the door. You could practically hear the “ka-ching” in his mind.

But just as he was passing Alex, the troublemaker patted his roommate’s shoulder and gave him a wink that said, “I’ll give the two of you some private time, so make sure to use it wisely!”

Of course, Alex had no idea what that wink was for. He simply assumed that Chuck was assuring him that he would carry out this “mission” properly.

Fran also bade Alex goodbye since she was already done with what she had come here for.

Although she was still worried, she also understood that everyone had their own destiny to fulfill.

If Alex and his club members were fated to find the Tower of the Hermit even without her warning, then they would be able to clear the trial and make it back to the academy.

But the Dwarven Ruin was simply the first step.

They had to take several more steps until they arrived at their final destination, which would grant them the power that resonated with them the most.

Chapter 254: Give Him A Reason, And He Will Slay Demons

Charles eyed the ornate box that Alex had given to him just now.

“What’s this?” Charles asked, unable to hide his curiosity.

“Open it, and you’ll find out,” Alex replied with a hint of mischief in his voice.

Knowing that this was the only logical thing to do, the teenage boy agreed and opened the box.

However, his eyes widened in shock when he saw the tear-shaped pill that was inside of it.

“This...” Charles muttered.

— — —

< Aurelia’s Tear >

“A single tear to mend what fate has broken.”

— — —

There was no way he wouldn’t recognize the medicine that would cure his little sister’s disease.

The teenage boy looked up at Alex, who was looking back at him with a smile.

“You could have chosen to join the Obsidian Fang to get the medicine for Eris,” Alex said softly. “But you chose to stay with us despite the fact that we were being harassed by students with powerful backers. I’m sure you hesitated many times before deciding whether you should stay or leave.

“But in the end, you stayed, and that is all that matters. You already know that I squeezed the Crest Clubs hard and made them compensate us with millions of Arcana Points, right? Since that is the case, sparing some of it for your sister’s medicine is not a big deal.”

Charles could feel his eyes moisten as he did his best to hold back the emotions that were rising up in his chest.

Yes. He could have joined the Obsidian Fang to get the cure for his little sister.

But he stayed.

The reason?

It was because after thinking long and hard, he realized it all boiled down to one thing.

If Alex hadn't helped him, he wouldn't have been able to escape the Dungeon of Beginnings and reunite with his sisters.

If he could abandon the person whom he was indebted to, especially at a time when everyone was their enemy, how could he still call himself a human?

With great determination, Charles had decided to stay, endure, and save up enough points so that he could buy his sister's medicine without compromising himself and betraying his friends.

He had known that it might take him a year or two or maybe even longer to save up enough, but he had made up his mind.

And now, he was holding the medicine for his sister in his own hands.

"Go," Alex said before putting Dim Dim on top of Charles' head. "Take Dim Dim with you. I'm sure it wants to see Eris and play with the kids in the orphanage."

"Ahem!" Dim Dim proudly lifted its body, telling Alex that it would accomplish its mission without fail.

"Thank you, Alex." Chuck finally found his voice again. "I promise to repay you in the future."

"Okay." Alex smirked. "I'll put that on your tab."

Charles nodded and left to look for his older sister, Vivian, who was also studying in the academy as a Second Year.

He wanted this moment to be special. He wanted to take her to the orphanage so that they could celebrate as a family.

Alex watched as the teenage boy, whose story quest had been deemed impossible by the player base, disappeared in the distance. He could feel his heart swelling with joy.

After playing Charles' story quest for nearly a year, Eris was no different from a little sister in Alex's eyes.

Like them, he was an orphan and didn't have a family. Perhaps that was the reason why he had persevered and completed Charles' playthrough.

Alex could be very stubborn, and there was a quote that had inspired him to do his best during his younger years.

"Give a man a goal, and he will walk through fire. Give him a reason, and he will slay demons."

With the help of the Eris Brotherhood, a group of dedicated people determined to clear Charles' story quest, Alex had managed to grasp every opportunity presented to him.

This had led him to completing his goal and meeting the God of Games, Eriol, who had sent him to Arcana... in a roundabout fashion.

"That's so sweet of you, Alex."

The young man almost jumped up in fright when he heard someone speaking behind him.

He hastily turned around and saw a very cute young lady... who wasn't really a lady.

Vaan looked at Alex with a sweet smile, as if he had seen something that further increased his admiration and respect for his savior.

He had wanted to know more about his club members, so he had found some time to chat with them.

The pretty boy had asked them how they had become friends with Alex. Their stories, especially Charles' and Lavinia's, had made his heart skip a beat.

When he had learnt about Renard's chance meeting with Alex, he had almost died laughing at Dim Dim's naughtiness.

Renard had smacked Vaan's head back then for laughing too hard, but even the pain couldn't stop him from laughing till tears welled up in his eyes.

"Vaan, are you planning to give me a heart attack?!" Alex asked while patting his chest in order to calm himself down. "I swear, my heart almost jumped out of my chest, you know?"

"It's quite unfortunate that it didn't," Vaan replied with a sigh. "Otherwise, I would have caught it and locked it away so Lavinia couldn't steal it from me."

Alex blinked once, then twice, confused why the pretty boy was bringing Lavinia up.

But as if to toy with Alex's feelings, another voice spoke behind him, making him jump in shock a second time.

"I heard that."

Lavinia had stealthily appeared behind Alex, catching the latter by surprise.

"You. Two. Should. Stop. Doing. That!" Alex, whose right hand was patting his chest, insisted. "Are you two planning to kill me? You want me to die that badly?"

Lavinia and Vaan smiled at the same time before giving each other a knowing glance.

“You’ve worked hard, President,” Vaan said, linking arms with the young man. “Come. Let’s go to the cafeteria. I’ll treat you to a parfait.”

Alex didn’t resist and allowed himself to be pulled by a smiling Vaan, who secretly stuck out his tongue at Lavinia,

The young Catkin’s lips twitched after seeing the pretty boy’s triumphant smirk.

‘He’s just messing with you, Lavinia,’ Lavinia thought. ‘Alex simply plays along with his whims because he knows that Vaan is a boy who needs to keep his act as a girl intact.’

And Lavinia was right.

For Alex, Vaan was like that mischievous friend who liked nothing more than messing with people around him.

Having a mischievous side as well, he simply played along, laughing internally at the guys who were jealous of him.

I mean, how could he not laugh?

If those lovestruck fools had known that the cute lady who was always around Alex was actually a boy, wouldn’t they all have smashed their heads against a wall in order to cool themselves off?

However, Lavinia also had a stubborn side.

Suddenly, Alex felt someone hold his right hand, making him glance at Lavinia, who simply looked back at him.

“What?” Lavinia asked. “Can’t I go with you guys to the cafeteria?”

“Well, you can.” Alex blinked before glancing at his hand, which was held by the young lady. “But what is this?”

“I’m just making sure that our Club President will not get lost,” Lavinia replied with a straight face, which made Vaan giggle. “The academy is huge, you know?”

“Today is a special day, president,” Vaan commented lightly. “So don’t think too much and just enjoy the company of two beautiful girls.”

“Only one is a girl though?” Alex pointed out.

Vaan giggled because Alex was the only one who would play along with his whims without feeling burdened.

He had been trapped within his own body for many years, with Willow using it for whatever caught her fancy.

He had suffered through her actions, so he now felt like he should live freely like the wind, unbound by any shackles, and do whatever he wanted under the sun.

More than anything else, the pretty boy also wanted to repay his debt to Alex, just like Charles, who had left to see his sisters.

Vaan had heard that Lavinia wished to become the strongest sword to assist the strongest shield.

That was fine, for he didn’t wield the sword.

What he wielded was the spear, and he would pierce through any obstacles that blocked the path of his savior, whom he believed would continue to stand at the front lines and fight those who threatened those whom he held sacred.

Chapter 255: Second Chance At Life

Charles and his older sister, Vivian, couldn't suppress their anxiety as they looked at Eris, their younger sister.

After the little girl took Aurelia's Tear, she clutched her chest with a pained expression, tears brimming in her eyes as she endured the agony.

"Eris, does it hurt?" Charles asked worriedly.

The young man only knew that Aurelia's Tear could cure his sister, but he did not know how it worked. It was pretty simple—Aurelia's Tear would erase all traces of Child's Bane in Eris' body, curing her in the process. However, the purification process was painful.

It wasn't extremely painful. At least it didn't hurt as much as flare-ups caused by the disease.

But for children, pain was pain.

So, the little girl looked up at her brother with teary eyes and said...

"Bwather it hurts!" Eris cried. "Wuwuwu!"

"Eris!" Vivian hugged her little sister, holding her close. She made sure not to hug her too tightly, lest her little sister got even more hurt.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim encouraged Eris to be strong and pressed its cheek gently against hers, giving the little girl moral and physical support.

Charles also held her sister's hand, telling her that he was there and that everything was going to be fine.

The fourth person inside the room looked at this scene and bit her lips.

She was Eris' and Vivian's biological Aunt, the one who had taken both of them to the City of Harmonia.

Her name was Helen Lambert.

She was also the Headmistress of the Sunveil Orphanage.

Since she wanted to look after her sister's children, she had brought them to the City of Harmonia.

Vivian wished to find the cure for Eris, so Helen had paid for her tuition fees.

She might not look much, but she was actually from a Noble Family.

Her sister had eloped with a commoner, which she thought was very foolish. Knowing the suffering her sister must've faced, she hated Eris' and Vivian's father.

However, she couldn't possibly hate the children of her sister. So, when her sibling died, she decided to take them in and treat them as her own.

As for Charles?

Since he wasn't the biological child of her sister, she treated him with indifference.

Helen even went as far as telling him that if he couldn't pass the scholarship test of Frieden Academy, he shouldn't even attempt to show his face before his sisters again.

To her surprise, Charles had managed to become a student of Frieden Academy, showing that he had potential.

Although reluctant, Helen had acknowledged his efforts and allowed him to see Eris and Vivian. She hadn't been hopeful, but she had accepted his help. After all, his goal was to find the cure for her youngest niece's disease as well.

Honestly, Helen had believed that it would take a miracle to cure Eris.

She just didn't expect that the miracle she was waiting for would happen so soon! In fact, it happened only a few months after the new school term had started.

Seeing the three siblings embrace each other with tears streaming down their faces, Helen knew that she would be worse than a monster if she were to forcefully separate them again.

Most importantly, Charles was the one who had acquired Aurelia's Tear, which was the only medicine capable of curing Child's Bane.

This medicine was extremely hard to get since the ingredients needed were incredibly rare. Not to mention, the demand was higher than the supply.

With only one cure known to work on the disease, many viewed it as a death sentence and pitied the unfortunate children who acquired them at a young age.

Several minutes later, Eris opened her eyes.

The pain plaguing her had disappeared completely, and now her body felt strong and healthy.

Even so, since her older siblings and Dim Dim were still crying, she continued to sob with them.

Only after half an hour did everyone calm down.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim raised its hand and proposed something.

“A celebration party?” Charles looked at the little bun, who nodded its head firmly.

“Let’s do it!” Vivian said with a smile before kissing her sister’s cheek for the fifth time due to how happy she was. “Let’s celebrate!”

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim took out a party popper from its dimensional storage and popped it, sending confetti flying around the room.

This made Eris beam brightly and she clapped her hands happily.

“Very well. We will celebrate.”

Helen finally spoke as she walked toward the siblings.

She then glanced at Charles and told him that she wanted to have a private talk with him after the party.

Charles readily agreed. He had wanted to talk to his Aunt since the time she took his sisters away from him.

The children of the orphanage, especially the younger ones, didn’t understand why they suddenly had an influx of good food. There was even a cake on their dining table!

Only the older ones understood that a miracle had happened—Eris was finally cured of her illness.

Of course, aside from the good food and desserts, Dim Dim made sure to put its dim sums on the table as well.

Dim Dim had always enjoyed spending time with children, because in its eyes, they were the seeds of the next generation.

Nurturing them, helping them, and making them smile was something that it believed paved the way for a brighter tomorrow.

The party lasted until the sun had set.

Vivian asked her Aunt to allow her to stay overnight, which Helen permitted without hesitation.

She then took Charles to her office so they could have a heart-to-heart talk with each other.

"Before anything else, I would like to thank you for helping Eris," Helen said and bowed her head towards Charles.

"I also want to apologize for the treatment you have received from me. Make no mistake, I still believe I was right to be cautious. But after what you've done for my niece, I can no longer forbid you from spending time with them because you've earned it."

Charles looked at the middle-aged lady, who had once looked very intimidating to him. But seeing her in this state, he now understood that she had her own circumstances for treating him the way she did.

"Thank you, Lady Helen," Charles replied.

"Aunt," Helen stated as she looked at the young man with a steady gaze. "Call me Aunt from now on."

Charles was surprised at first, but his heart felt warm because this only meant one thing.

Helen had accepted him as one of her family members, just like how his adoptive parents had treated him as their real child when they were still alive.

Dim Dim peeked at this scene from the window of Helen's office and smiled faintly.

The little bun was someone who really liked to read stories with happy endings.

But of course, Charles' story was far from ending.

It had just begun, just like Alex's adventure in the world of Arcana.

Dim Dim knew that the young man would face many tough challenges in the future, but that was fine.

It would be there to support him and fight alongside him.

Not wanting to spy any longer, Dim Dim moved away from the window and climbed down the walls of the orphanage.

It returned to the main living room, where the children were happily chatting with each other.

"Dim Dim!" Eris pointed at the little bun, who had just entered through the window.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim waved at Eris, who ran in its direction to hold it in her hands.

The little girl then kissed Dim Dim's cheek, making the little bun giggle.

It allowed itself to be hugged by the little girl, who had found her second chance at life.

Chapter 256: Final Preparations

Lotte watched the little bun perched on top of Latifa's chest with a faint smile on her face.

The Dim Sum God extended its little, stubby arm until its hand was only a few centimeters away from Latifa's nose.

There was a serious expression on Dim Dim's face, and anyone who didn't know better would assume it was about to do something really, really, reeeeeeeally important.

Suddenly, its free hand rose up to hold its right hand, stopping it from poking the sleeping beauty's nose.

Lotte had seen this scene a few times since joining the Endless Horizon Club.

Dim Dim had promised it would not poke Latifa's nose if she joined their club. Till now, the Dim Sum God had kept its word even though the defenseless girl's nose was the perfect poking target!

Chuck watched Dim Dim with amusement and was even egging the little bun to do it.

"Poke!" Chuck chanted. "Poke! Poke! Poke!"

"Shut up, Chuck." Lotte glared at the teenage boy, who simply chuckled in response.

Alex only shook his head as he watched his little partner struggle internally. It wanted to keep its promise, but Latifa's nose looked so tempting!

Shifting his attention to his other club members, Alex started their meeting.

"It is already Wednesday," Alex said. "I hope that all of you have finished your preparations by now. If not, you still have two days to prepare for the trip. Take note that this trip will not be a walk in the park.

"We will not be going to the Heracle Mountains for a picnic. We will be exploring an ancient ruin that is filled with traps, magic defenses, and possibly monsters."

Alex couldn't share too much information about the ruin because if he did, his club members would ask him how he knew so much since a seer was not supposed to be all-knowing!

"Our seniors, Mr. Mark and Mr. Spencer, will be our guides. Although they are indeed strong, we cannot rely on them for our safety," Alex added. "Also, Princess, you cannot bring any of your personal guards to this trip. I hope you keep that in mind."

"I understand," Princess Xenia replied. "But I will not be allowed to go unless I have at least one escort with me."

"Is Chuck not enough?" Alex asked. "He's your reliable fiancé, right?"

"... Do you really think he's reliable?" Princess Xenia asked dubiously.

"Not at all," Alex answered without hesitation. Not even a second after that, he accurately caught the rubber ball that Chuck had thrown in his direction.

Vaan giggled while Lavinia smiled faintly.

The antics between the two roommates were already a common thing in their eyes.

"I guess you can bring your Godfather with you," Alex stated after giving it some thought. "Sir Alphonse should be enough as a bodyguard, right?"

The middle-aged man with gray hair and an even grayer beard had left a good impression on Alex during their fishing trip with the princess.

He had conducted himself well as a Knight, making sure that the princess was safe at all times.

"However, you are not to tell him where we are going," Alex insisted. "Just tell him that you are going on a trip on Friday after classes end, so he should be ready by then."

"Very well." Princess Xenia nodded. "I'm sure Uncle will be able to protect me if the need ever arises."

Of course, Princess Xenia was also a warrior princess, so she could protect herself. However, having a Rank 5 Knight as a bodyguard would put her family at ease.

“Lotte, make sure that Lumi is back by Friday, okay?” Alex said as he turned his attention to the young fox lady. “Latifa has to be there as well, so one of you needs to carry her.”

“Yes, we already talked about it.” Lotte blinked. “And, by the way, you have a terrible naming sense according to Lumi.”

Latifa’s alter personalities didn’t really have names.

Latifa only called them “Sis” since she believed that all of them, including herself, were of the same existence.

However, the players in the game who chose Latifa’s route couldn’t possibly call all of them Sis as well, so they gave them names.

Alex had thought long and hard on what names to give them, but in the end, he decided their names should all start with L.

Lotte, Lumi, Lulu, and Lala.

Perhaps Latifa had also felt that simply calling her Alters Sis could be quite confusing when she was talking to other people, so she had accepted the names for Lotte and Lumi.

As for Lulu and Lala? They would have to wait until Latifa gained five tails, bringing forth two more Alters.

Currently the young lady only had three tails, so only Lotte and Lumi accompanied her.

Fighting her was similar to fighting multiple people at once, making her one of the secret Mini Bosses in Frieden Academy.

Alex, who had been told that he had a bad naming sense, only smirked before glancing in Renard’s direction.

“What are you looking at?” Renard demanded, glaring at his president.

“Nothing.” Alex smiled faintly.

There was an incident in the game when Renard left his party during the expedition of the Ruin in the Heracle Mountains.

The teenage boy said that something was calling out to him, and he left the party without explaining more.

No one knew what happened after Renard left, but he was in the final room when the expedition ended.

This incident didn’t always happen. In some of Alex’s playthroughs, Renard stayed in the party until the expedition ended.

Alex couldn’t help but feel a little conflicted about this matter—should he let Renard wander alone or should he accompany the hot-headed loner with trust issues just in case that “something” called out to him again?

“Nessia, please prepare some defensive runes,” Alex added

“Okay,” the bespectacled young lady replied without looking up from the Codex of Eternal Weave.

Alex then glanced at Vaan, who was resting his chin on the back of her intertwined hands.

“Vaan, I will give you two hundred thousand academy points, so please buy some soul-strengthening charms from the Exchange Center today,” Alex said.

“Yes, Sir.” Vaan playfully gave his president a salute, not even questioning why he was asked to get some soul-strengthening charms.

Truth be told, Vaan was suffering from a soul injury after Willow had forcefully taken over his body.

Also, the last attack that Willow had unleashed, which Alex had reflected back to her, had washed over Vaan's body.

It had been impossible for the teenage boy to remain unscathed after getting hit directly by that attack.

Vaan might look fine on the surface, smiling even, but Dim Dim had told Alex that behind closed doors, the teenage boy was suffering and was always in pain.

This was also why Alex never pushed him away, patiently playing along with the pretty boy's antics.

If teasing alleviated the pain he felt, the young man would not hesitate to let Vaan tease him so he could distract himself from the pain.

The Soul-Strengthening Charms cost 50,000 Academy Points each.

They could heal, slowly but surely, the injuries of the soul.

Alex hadn't been able to afford it back then, but now he could.

He had given Charles the cure for his sister a day ago, and it was now Vaan's turn to get his own treatment.

Since the expedition was bound to be dangerous, Alex wanted everyone to be at their peak condition when they challenged the ruin.

'I just hope that my preparations are enough,' Alex thought as he scanned the faces of his club members. 'This lineup is strong, so we might not have any problems in clearing the ruins.'

But Alex believed that being over-prepared was better than being under-prepared.

After all, he possessed Hell Mode Difficulty.

He had already accepted that this was his default setting in the world of Arcana, so for better or for worse, he had to face each challenge with everything he had.

Chapter 257: A Promise Under The Starry Sky

The day everyone had been waiting for finally arrived.

As soon as classes ended, the members of Endless Horizon returned to their dorms to shower and change into suitable clothes for the trip.

Within an hour, all of them had gathered at the academy's gates, where a few carriages waited for them.

The transportation had been arranged by Princess Xenia, the sponsor of their trip to the Heracle Mountains.

If not for the fact that she was Chuck's fiancée, Alex might have given her a kiss. Thanks to her, they didn't need to pay for travel expenses.

It wasn't just the carriages. They also needed to take an airship to Heracle City, located at the mountain's base. Princess Xenia had that covered as well.

No, she wouldn't be paying for the tickets. It's beneath her to buy airship tickets like a commoner. She had her personal airship.

"Good afternoon, Young Master Chuck."

Mary, Princess Xenia's handmaiden and close friend, bowed her head respectfully.

Her long dark hair was neatly tied into a double bun on top of her head. She was certainly pretty.

Though, Alex felt that her updo was a little incongruous. It was popular on Earth, which made it seem out of place in Arcana. Besides, she was wearing her maid uniform, which looked very stylish on her.

As much as Alex didn't want to admit it, there were very few men who didn't want to have their own battle maid serving them and acting as their bodyguard.

After Mary rose up, her brown eyes lingered a few seconds longer on Alex before she shifted it to Chuck, who was her employer's fiance.

"Chuck, you will be riding on my carriage," Princess Xenia said.

"I understand." Chuck nodded.

He and the princess had an agreement that they would continue their act as an engaged couple until both of them achieved their own goals.

Princess Xenia wished for freedom while Chuck only wished to find the cure for his mother.

Alex had millions of academy points, but even with that, finding the ingredients to create the medicine for Chuck's mother was extremely hard.

Of course, he could buy the ingredients from the Arcana Shop if he wanted to, but they were costly there as well.

Right now, Alex wanted to prioritize strengthening himself. If he couldn't even save himself from danger, how could he save others from it?

Princess Xenia, Chuck, and Mary were in the first carriage.

Charles, Nessia, and Renard followed them in the second one.

Alex, Vaan, and Lavinia took the third.

Mark, Spencer, and Alphonse, Princess Xenia's godfather, were in the fourth carriage.

As for Latifa? She had the fifth carriage all to herself.

Of course, Lotte and Lumi were with her, making sure that their original body wouldn't get left behind in the academy since she couldn't be bothered to wake up.

As the carriages headed to the airship that was currently parked at one of Harmonia's ports, Xenia decided this was a good time to have a private talk with her darling fiancé.

"I already spoke to Alex yesterday. He agreed to let Mary join our club," Princess Xenia said. "Since she is duty-bound to stay by my side, I cannot leave her behind."

"Well, I don't mind her joining the club," Chuck replied. "In fact, it would be weirder if she didn't join since she's your maid."

Princess Xenia nodded. "You're right. I feel bad leaving her outside the clock tower to wait for me every day."

Mary didn't join the conversation and simply kept her eyes lowered as if she was in deep meditation.

She had always been very polite when talking to Chuck, but whether she truly liked him or not was something that only the pretty maid knew.

"Still, I wonder why Alex didn't want me to bring more guards to this expedition," Princess Xenia mused. "He only allowed Mary and Uncle to accompany me. Do you know the reason why?"

"I don't," Chuck answered honestly. "But Alex must have a good reason for doing so. He always does."

"Chuck," Princess Xenia said, her tone suddenly serious. "I ran a background check on Alex, but I could uncover nothing about his origin. It will be more prudent to not trust him completely."

Chuck narrowed his eyes dramatically, hoping to use humor to ease the tension. "Are you sowing discord between us because you are jealous of my bond with him? Are you envious that he sleeps in the same room with me every day?"

Princess Xenia rolled her eyes. "You know that's not what I mean. It's just that his background is a complete mystery. Many people have grown curious about him, especially after the Battle Royale. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has tried to find his..."

"Find his weakness, right?" Chuck pursed his lips. "That's the first thing that noble families do when they want to control someone, especially commoners. If he has a family or lover, they can be used as hostages against him if he does something out of bounds."

Chuck knew all about it, which was also the reason why even though Frieden Academy promoted equality among its students, it was impossible for them to truly become equals since their ranks were already determined since they were born.

Nobles and Commoners.

There would always be a distinction between these classes, and it had been around even before Chuck and Princess Xenia existed.

"You know, I've also wondered why Alex thinks differently from me," Chuck said as he admired the scenery.

They were currently traveling along the streets of Harmonia. With the symbol of the Royal Family blazoned on every carriage, everyone made sure to make way for them.

This was the kind of treatment that only those born in royalty possessed, a privilege countless people wished to have. From the eyes of outsiders, the life of a prince or princess guaranteed luxury and grandeur.

“Whenever I talk to Alex, I feel like I’m talking to an older brother instead of a teen my age,” Chuck continued. “Also, he always makes me feel like he is running toward a goal, unlike me who just coasts along.

“I think I envy that part of him. He’s confident about everything he does. Having a goal in life is a blessing. I can’t be like him. For young nobles, life can suddenly turn upside down depending on the will of the head of the family.”

The teenage boy sighed before turning his gaze absentmindedly towards the luxurious interior of the carriage. There were countless noble sons and daughters who had been disowned due to various reasons, forcing them to fend for themselves in this cruel world.

While Chuck hadn’t technically been disowned by his father, he might as well have been since none of his siblings cared for him.

In their eyes, he was just a bastard son who happened to share the same bloodline as them.

This was why Chuck was attracted to people like Alex.

People who were free and had a goal they pursued with everything they had.

“You idolize him, don’t you?” Princess Xenia asked, her voice unusually soft.

“Yes, but don’t tell him,” Chuck replied. “Alex will definitely tease me about it if he knows that I look up to him. Not only as an individual but a friend.”

“Then do you want to be like him, Young Master?” Mary, who had been listening to the conversation, chimed in.

“Become like him? Definitely not.” Chuck flipped his hair. “I am more handsome, more charismatic, and more suave than him.”

Xenia suddenly wondered if taking the veil wasn't so terrible an idea after all.

“I admire his traits, yes, and I'm glad to be his friend. But I will not wish to be in the same shoes as him. Both of us are meant to become great men, but I'll always be a level above due to my good looks and personality.”

The corner of Princess Xenia's and Mary's lips twitched. Chuck was too full of himself.

In fact, they wanted to know where his confidence was coming from!

A few minutes later, they finally arrived at the port and boarded the airship.

Mark and Spencer hadn't expected that a member of the Royal Family would be with them. In any case, with her around, they made sure to be on their best behavior.

They had thought Endless Horizon was just an ordinary club, but after the whole fiasco with Dim Dim, they no longer dared to look down on this club!

In fact, they were even thinking that forming a good relationship with this rising club would be a good investment for their future!

“Everyone, please follow me inside the cabin of the ship,” Princess Xenia said. “It will take us seven hours to reach our destination. The cooks have already prepared our dinner. I hope that all of you will like it.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Alex replied on behalf of his club members, who were still amazed by the VIP Treatment they were receiving from Princess Xenia's staff.

Just as expected, the dinner was indeed great.

Once Alex was done eating, he felt full both in quality and quantity.

Two hours later, Alex looked at the scenery from high up in the sky.

The stars twinkled above his head and the land below spread for miles on end.

The lights coming from the houses on the ground were like candles in the dark, illuminating the path that only they could appreciate right now.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” Lavinia asked as she stood beside Alex.

The wind made her long hair flutter, but the young lady didn’t make any effort to tie it down.

“It is beautiful,” Alex agreed. “Very different from my homeland.”

This was the first time that Alex had spoken about his homeland to Lavinia. She often wondered where Alex came from, but she didn’t dare to ask because she didn’t want to pry.

However, her curiosity finally got the best of her.

“What is your homeland like?” Lavinia inquired. “Is it located in the north, east, south, or west of this continent?”

Dim Dim smiled faintly. This question was a little hard to answer.

“Maybe it’s located in the north,” Alex replied. “At least, it is according to my backstory.”

“Your what?” Lavinia blinked. “Your backstory?”

“Mmm.” Alex hummed. “Maybe I will tell you more about my hometown in the future, Lavinia. It will sound like an unbelievable story, but I hope you will not laugh at me when I do tell you about it.”

“I won’t laugh,” Lavinia promised. “As long as you tell me the truth.”

“Very well. It’s a promise then.” Alex raised his pinky finger. “Ah... Do you know what a pinky promise is?”

“This is the first time I’m hearing about it,” Lavinia admitted. “Still, since it’s a promise, you better keep it.” She mirrored Alex’s gesture and he smiled before linking his pinky fingers with hers.

“Of course I will. You have my word,” Alex vowed.

Dim Dim felt a little left out, so it crawled down from Alex’s head and also extended its hand to join the promise as well.

Alex and Lavinia looked at the little bun before laughing at the same time.

Under the starry sky, a promise witnessed by a God had been made.

As for when this promise would be realized, only Alex and time would be able to tell.

Chapter 258: Finding The Ancient Ruin

The journey was smooth-sailing. Before everyone knew it, they had already arrived at their destination.

Given how dark the sky was, it was too late to start their explorations. They decided to get a good night’s rest and scale the mountain at sunrise.

Thanks to Princess Xenia’s reliable and competent retainers, everyone was able to have a simple breakfast before they started their hike up the mountain.

The airship couldn't traverse the Heracle Mountain since there was a mysterious force that made airships lose control when they got too close.

If one were to look at the mountain from a distance, they would only see half of the mountain, for the rest were always covered by dark clouds, hugging its body like a black cloak.

There was a constant stream of missing people reports. Most of them scaled the mountain in an attempt to reach its peak, but they never came back nor were they heard from ever again.

"Captain, please be careful," the Vice Captain of Princess Xenia's personal guards said in a serious tone.

"I will," Sir Alphonse assured. "All of you are to stay here and wait for our return. If we are not back after four days, please send a rescue party after us."

"Yes, Sir!" The Vice Captain saluted.

The other guards did the same and bade their Captain and Princess goodbye.

Mark and Spencer took the lead since only the two of them knew where the entrance of the ruin was located.

"Remember, do not wander around on your own," Mark reminded everyone. "Pay close attention to the people around you. In fact, it will be best to pair up so we can look out for each other's safety."

"It's better to be safe than sorry," Spencer added. "This mountain is very mysterious and may mess with your senses."

Alex took their reminder seriously and assigned everyone into pairs.

"I'll pair up with Alex!" Vaan volunteered.

“Sure,” Alex agreed easily. “Renard, who do you want to pair up with?”

“No one,” Renard replied flatly. “I will only be responsible for myself.”

Alex sighed but did not try to change Mr. I-Have-Trust-Issues’ mind.

“Lavinia and Chuck, the two of you will look after each other,” Alex stated.

“Okay.” Chuck nodded.

Lavinia hummed before glancing at Vaan, who was giving her a mischievous smile.

Alex then looked at Latifa, who was being carried by Lotte and guarded by Lumi.

She didn’t need anyone else to look after her since she already had two Alters ensuring her safety.

As for Princess Xenia? That was a question that didn’t need to be asked.

Mary and Alphonse walked a few steps behind the Princess, making sure that she was always within sight.

Everyone in the club was fit. Even Chuck, who seemed like a sheltered noble that hadn’t experienced many hardships, was in good physical condition.

The hike itself wasn’t that hard since they were following a trail that local hikers used to climb the mountain.

However, a few hours later, Mark and Spencer veered from the main trail, which didn’t surprise Alex one bit.

The two appeared so certain of where they were heading that it seemed impossible for them to get lost even if they tried.

However, if normal people were to take the same route as the two Fourth Years, most of them would probably find themselves disoriented because everything around them looked the same.

Four more hours passed, and they came across an overgrown path covered with a thick fog.

Mark and Spencer stopped and took out a rope from their storage ring.

Mark tied the rope around his waist and passed the end to Spencer, who did the same.

"Here, Alex," Spencer said. "Tie the rope around your waist and pass it to the others. The fog will be very thick and visibility will be reduced to a meter or two.

"This is the part where we might get lost from the main group, so it will be best if we are all tied up together. That way, we can ensure no one will end up wandering aimlessly into the fog."

Alex nodded and did as he was told.

"Tie it for me, Alex," Vaan said, raising his hands and doing a peace sign.

"You're so lazy," Alex complained, but he still tied the rope around Vaan's waist before handing the end to Lavinia.

The young lady took one look at the rope in Alex's hand before raising her head to look him in the eye.

"I'm not good at tying ropes," Lavinia said calmly. "Can you tie it for me, Alex?"

"Umm... okay." Alex gently looped the rope around her waist. He couldn't help but notice how slim Lavinia's waist was compared to his.

He also had a bit of trouble. Tying the rope around a girl's waist wasn't that simple since he had to make sure that he didn't touch her body inappropriately.

Not to mention, he had to be mindful of where to look. He didn't want to be mistaken for a pervert who had the audacity to lust after his master's sister!

It didn't help that Lavinia's body was curvaceous, even though she was a warrior.

Vaan chuckled beside Alex, fully understanding what Lavinia was thinking.

When he was done, he passed the rope to Chuck, who easily tied the rope around his waist as if he had done it countless times in the past.

Renard, Charles, Nessia, Latifa, Princess Xenia, Mary, and Sir Alphonse did the same.

The Knight guarded the rear. Latifa, on the other hand, was at the middle of the queue, protected by Lotte and Lumi.

After making sure that the rope was tied securely to everyone, Mark led the way, passing through the mist that quickly engulfed his entire being.

The tug on the rope allowed the others to follow him even though they couldn't really see him through the fog.

"Dim Dim, make sure to not go anywhere, okay?" Alex reminded the little bun that was perched on top of his head. "You might really get lost here."

Dim Dim nodded. "Dim."

In the game, Alex had also entered this fog. In fact, there was even a walkthrough on how to navigate inside of it.

A hundred steps forward, fifty steps to the right, fifty steps to the left, and another hundred steps to the right.

That was how it was in the game, but real life was obviously different.

They had surpassed that number of steps and were steadily climbing higher.

Within the fog, several pairs of golden orbs observed them from a distance.

These orbs weren't really orbs, but the eyes of monsters who lived within the Heracle Mountain.

They were paying close attention to Alex and his companions.

Some of these monsters were daring enough to get closer to their group, standing only a few meters away from them.

Everyone was ready to fight, so whenever this happened, they would stop walking and hold their weapons at the ready.

The tense situation would only end when these monsters backed away.

But there were a few instances where Chuck and Nessia had to unleash Fire Bullets in the direction of these monsters, forcing them to flee using pure firepower!

Dim Dim also joined and threw some brittle vials at these monsters, making them cry out in pain after the mixture of chili peppers and black peppers exploded right on their faces.

The journey continued with everyone feeling on edge.

They could see something moving within the fog.

Shadows and misty apparitions that might only be the product of their over-active imagination...

Alex had to admit that it was a little stressful since even his map was unable to detect these monsters.

More hours passed before they finally came to a stop. It was time for a lunch break.

"How long will it take before we reach our destination?" Chuck asked the seniors, who had just finished eating the sandwiches they had prepared for the journey.

"I don't know," Mark said. "The entrance is sometimes near and sometimes far. We can only find it due to a special feeling."

"A special feeling?" Chuck frowned.

"It's hard to explain," Spencer replied. "All I can say is that finding the entrance to the ruin also depends on luck. We can feel the entrance when we get close, but it's not a fixed location. It's like... the entrance is teleporting or something."

"Huh?!" Chuck's face suddenly became pale after hearing Spencer's explanation. "Do you mean we can continue to hike and never find the entrance?"

"The short answer is yes," Mark admitted. "But I am certain we will find it eventually. It will just take some time... or."

The Fourth Year wasn't able to finish what he was going to say next because he felt a faint magical ripple a few meters away from where he was sitting.

It wasn't only him who felt it.

Spencer and Chuck also felt something in the distance, which suddenly popped out of nowhere.

“It’s here,” Mark exclaimed. “Let’s hurry before it disappears!”

The young man immediately urged everyone to follow him since the entrance to the ruin would disappear again after two or three minutes.

Everyone followed behind Mark, who seemed to have disappeared over a rocky wall of the mountain.

Spencer didn’t hesitate to follow behind and also passed through the rocky wall.

One by one, they entered the ruin’s entrance, which didn’t look like one.

They only knew that it was there because the rope that was tied around their waists was pulled in that direction.

When Alphonse crossed over to the other side, the monsters paying close attention to them rushed to follow them.

However, these monsters only slammed into the rocky wall for the entrance of the ruin had once again disappeared, teleporting somewhere within the mysterious mountain that was once a stronghold of the Dwarves during a time when the world had still been ripe with danger and chaos.

Chapter 259: The Room Of Destiny [Part 1]

“Is everyone alright?” Alex asked as he looked at his club members, who were still a little disoriented after entering the ancient dwarven ruin.

The space they found themselves in was illuminated by faintly glowing moss, giving off just enough light for them to see their surroundings.

“Just a little dizzy,” Chuck replied. “But this place sure has a high concentration of mana. I feel like I can spam an infinite number of spells inside this place.”

Nessia nodded in agreement. "You're right. It's like... the very air we breathe is mana."

Alex waited for everyone to regain their bearings. Meanwhile, Mark and Spencer were paying close attention to the dark tunnel in front of them.

It was too dark to see where the tunnel led to, but it was quite big, spanning at least ten meters in both width and height.

Big enough for giants to walk through it without problems.

Without any hesitation, Alex took out his Mimic Lantern from his storage ring.

This lantern was imbued with special properties, including the ability to detect invisible creatures, and traps as well as lighting up the footprints of beings that had passed by.

The moment the light illuminated his surroundings, Alex immediately saw many sets of footprints on the ground.

There were too many to count, serving as proof that once upon a time, this place had been a hub of activity when the Dwarves still lived on the Heracle Mountain.

"Senior Mark, you can hold this lantern to lead the way," Alex said as he handed the lantern to the Fourth Year. "It can see traps and invisible creatures."

"Isn't this a Mimic Lantern?" Mark held the lantern with fascination. "How much did it cost you to add those magical enchantments on this thing?"

"No comment," Alex replied. "It's a trade secret."

Alex didn't want to admit that he had haggled with the alchemist who had created the Mimic Lantern because the others might laugh at him.

Chuck and Nessia summoned small orbs of light around them, helping to illuminate the surroundings.

Since the ruins were overflowing with mana, maintaining these light orbs wouldn't pose any problem to them.

Mark and Spencer led the way. They were followed by Alex, Charles, and Renard.

Behind them were Princess Xenia, Mary, and Chuck.

Nessia was with Latifa, Lotte, and Lumi.

Lavinia stayed with Sir Alphonse at the back, guarding their rear.

Since Catkins had Darkvision, Lavinia was able to see within the darkness, allowing her to react if something crept up to them from behind.

Alex had asked her to guard the rear with Sir Alphonse because there was no telling what kind of creatures might attack them from the back as they headed deep inside the ruins.

The Knight protecting the Princess attached a small lantern to his hip, giving him enough light to see up to five meters around him.

He was already on high alert, holding a sword in his right hand.

The group traveled for nearly half an hour before they finally arrived at a spacious room with eight tunnels leading to different directions.

A rune in the ancient Dwarven language was inscribed above each tunnel.

"Seniors, how far did you explore the previous time?" Alex asked as everyone took a short break.

“Just up to here,” Mark replied. “We stumbled upon the entrance of the ruins by accident and we were ill-equipped to explore it.”

“Actually, both of us planned to explore this place after we graduated from the academy. We’ve told no one else about it,” Spencer commented. “When you asked whether we knew about this place, I was very surprised. I’ve been meaning to ask you how you learnt about the ruins.

The young man then explained that he was a Seer and had seen the two of them exploring the ruins.

Renard snorted while Charles smiled lightly because it had been through these “visions” that led Alex to him in Briarwood Village.

It was a very convenient lie. In fact, it was the perfect answer to such questions!

“Then, did your visions tell you which path to take?” Spencer asked.

Alex didn’t respond right away.

Why?

Because all the paths were correct.

Depending on what route they took, they would face trials that represented that path.

“Duraz, Kharad, Azgral, Vundain, Zudrim, Thurak, Morgrim, and Skaldir,” Nessia said softly as she read each of the runes above the entrances before them.

Alex wasn’t too surprised because Nessia was not only proficient in rune magic, she was also proficient in languages as well.

Aside from the common language of humans, she could also speak Elven, Dwarven, and the language of the Barbarians who dwelled in the west.

“Nessia, do you understand the meaning of those runes?” Princess Xenia asked.

Truth be told, she intended to recruit Nessia after they both graduated. It wouldn’t hurt to have such a talent under her employ.

Xenia could also endorse Nessia to her father so that the young lady would be given a position where she could use her abilities to the fullest.

The powers that be in Avalon were always looking for hidden gems, which they planned to nurture to become the foundation of their kingdom.

“I only know the meaning behind the words,” Nessia replied. “But I don’t know how exactly they relate to the tunnels.”

Alex originally planned to take everyone to the tunnel labelled Morgrim, which meant Oath in the Dwarven tongue.

However, after thinking about it, he thought that maybe he shouldn’t force the others to follow the same path as him.

In the game, the various tunnels had different rewards. After clearing a tunnel, a party member might gain some kind of enlightenment, a rare weapon, or even a bonus in their stats and abilities.

It didn’t seem fair to take the right to freely choose from them.

Just as he was pondering this line of thought, he saw Renard taking out a lantern from his storage ring.

The teenage boy then walked towards the tunnel with the word, Kharad, which meant War or Battle.

“Wait, Renard, where are you going?” Chuck asked. “It’s dangerous to explore this place alone.”

Renard glanced at his club member and frowned, but not in impatience. He actually looked uncertain. “Something is calling out to me in this tunnel.”

“Someone is calling you?” Chuck smirked. “Who is it? Mother Nature?”

Renard was very tempted to smack the living lights out of the troublemaker because anything related to “the call of nature” was taboo for him.

His experience with Dim Dim and Alex had left a deep scar inside his mind, so he didn’t like making a joke about it.

Seeing his reaction, Chuck hastily raised his hands in surrender and apologized.

“Sorry, my bad,” Chuck said, knowing that if he didn’t apologize in time there was a chance Renard might punch him into pulp.

He knew he shouldn’t underestimate Renard’s strength. And he knew that he shouldn’t underestimate his other club members’ sadism either! They might just enjoy watching him get beaten up!

Renard scoffed before glancing at Alex.

“I’m going this way,” Renard said firmly.

“I understand,” Alex answered. “Don’t worry. If you get lost, Dim Dim and I will find you.”

“Ahem!” Dim Dim stood straighter to back up Alex’s promise.

Just as Renard was about to enter the tunnel, someone else called out to him.

“Wait,” Charles said as he walked up to Renard. “I’m going with you. I feel that this is the path I should take as well.”

Renard nodded before taking a step toward the tunnel, not caring if Charles followed him or not.

“I guess this is where we part ways.” Charles smiled apologetically at Alex. “See you guys later.”

The teenage boy hurried to follow Renard, leaving the rest behind without a second glance.

This event happened in the game, so Alex had anticipated Renard’s reaction.

“Everyone, try to sense if any of these paths resonate with you,” Alex said after careful consideration. “If you feel something, don’t hesitate to challenge that path. You might just find something when you reach the end of the tunnel.”

This sounded far riskier than exploring a tunnel together, but the teenagers didn’t protest. Alex also asked Nessia to explain what each rune signified.

That way, those who were going to break off from the main group could have a hint about what they might encounter after exploring the path they had chosen.

Chapter 260: The Room Of Destiny [Part 2]

“This rune, Duraz, means Stone or Foundation,” Nessia explained. “It also symbolizes stability, earth, and endurance.

“The tunnel Renard and Charles chose is Kharad. It means War or Battle and is the symbol of valor and strength.

“Azgral means Flame or Forgefire. It also symbolizes creation, heat, and rebirth. Frankly, I feel a strong connection to this tunnel, so this is the path that I will explore later.”

Chuck sighed in relief because the tunnel was the same one he wanted to pick.

Although he couldn't sense anything from it, his gut instinct was telling him that this was the path that he needed to take.

"The next path is Vundain, meaning Wisdom or Lore," Nessia continued. "It is also the symbol of knowledge, secrets, and memory.

"This next tunnel is Zudrim. That is, Greed or Treasure. It also symbolizes wealth, temptation, and risk."

The two seniors' gaze lingered on the treasure tunnel even as Nessia started talking about the next one. Their hearts were set on exploring this tunnel after she finished her explanation.

"The sixth tunnel has the word, Thurak, which means Shadow or Silence." Nessia frowned. "It symbolizes stealth, death, and the unknown."

The young lady then moved on the seventh tunnel.

"Morgim," Nessia said as she looked pointedly at Alex. "It means Honor or Oath. It's the symbol of duty, honor, and sacrifice."

Nessia then shifted her attention to the last tunnel.

"Skaldir," Nessia stated. "The rune of Storm and Thunder. It symbolizes chaos, energy, and, strangely enough, power."

After the young lady finished her explanation, she gave Alex another look. She might understand these words, but that didn't mean she felt confident about everyone going their separate ways.

"This place is a testing site of sorts," Alex began, knowing that he needed to explain the dangers within the ruins so that his club members would be prepared to face anything thrown at them.

“The site wants to know who is worthy of accepting its legacy. Actually, this room is called the Room of Destiny. For only those who are destined to reach its end will gain enlightenment. It is also just the first step of our adventure.”

Alex paused for a bit before scanning the faces of his companions.

“I’ll tell you more about it after we clear this site. I believe that once we finish it, we will find ourselves at the exit of this mountain. That will be our meeting place.”

Everyone nodded in understanding before taking off.

Alex watched as Nessia and Chuck entered the third tunnel. He bade them goodbye and wished them good luck.

“Mary, do you sense anything from these paths?” Princess Xenia asked.

“I will go wherever the Princess goes,” Mary replied with conviction.

“Don’t be like that.” Princess Xenia looked at her most trusted aide, who had been with her since she was young. “This is an opportunity for you to become stronger. Use that power to protect me and ensure that I will be able to live a long and happy life.”

Mary hesitated because she really didn’t want to leave the princess’s side.

Although she did feel something from one of the tunnels, her priority was the princess’ safety.

“Don’t worry, Mary,” Sir Alphonse commented after noticing the young maid’s uncertainty. “I will be with the Princess. I promise to keep her safe, so please listen to her.”

“But...” Mary looked conflicted, but the Princess just hugged her and whispered something in her ear.

A minute later, the maid reluctantly nodded.

"Please be careful, Your Highness," Mary said in a serious tone. "If something happens to you, I will not be able to forgive myself."

"Relax. Nothing will happen to me." Princess Xenia patted her chest with confidence. "I'm with my uncle, so I'll be as safe as I'll ever be."

After that short talk, Mary looked at the sixth tunnel, whose rune symbolized stealth, death, and the unknown.

Even before Nessia had begun translating the runes, Mary had felt something in that tunnel calling out to her. However, she had deemed that protecting the princess was more important than heeding that call.

After Mary left, Princess Xenia glanced at Alex and waved him goodbye.

She entered the fourth tunnel, which stood for Wisdom or Lore.

Mark and Spencer had already headed to the tunnel that meant Greed or Treasure.

Clearly, they were hoping that they would find some treasures that would make them rich.

After deliberating for a bit, Lavinia tapped Alex's shoulder and let him know she had made up her mind. She walked into the same tunnel that Mary had chosen earlier.

"How about you, Vaan?" Alex asked. "Where are you going?"

"I don't really feel anything from any of these tunnels," Vaan replied. "But my father has taught me a trick that will tell me where I need to go."

“Oh?” Alex looked at the pretty boy with great interest. He also wanted to know what kind of teaching Vaan’s father had imparted.

Vaan summoned a magnificent spear that exuded a deadly presence.

A glance was enough to tell Alex that it wasn’t an ordinary weapon.

For a brief moment, he thought that the spear might be sentient because he heard it hum after Vaan touched its handle.

The young man watched as the pretty boy embedded the end of his spear into the spot on the ground that was equal distance from the entrance of each tunnel.

Then, with hands clasped together and eyes closed, the pretty boy recited something.

“O Great Spear of Slightly Better Judgment Than Me,

Point me toward destiny—or at least somewhere interesting.

If peril awaits, let it be dramatic.

If treasure awaits, let it be shiny.

And if monsters await...

Well, at least let me look cool in the fight.”

The spear gave a faint hum, almost like it was laughing or sighing in resignation.

A pulse of mana rippled out from it, brushing past the eight tunnels. Then, slowly but surely, the weapon tilted toward the direction of the eighth tunnel—Skaldir, the Rune of Storm and Thunder.

“Ha. Called it.” Vaan smirked, his half-lidded eyes glinting with amusement. “Guess chaos does suit me.”

“Are you sure about this?” Alex asked, not knowing if he should laugh or cry at the pretty boy’s antics.

“I trust my spear,” Vaan said. “It has a better track record than I do when it comes to decisions.”

And with a lazy wave, he turned and strolled into the tunnel of thunder, like he was going for a walk in the park and not a potentially deadly Dwarven Trial.

After making sure that his club members had all chosen the path they wished to challenge, Alex entered the seventh tunnel that stood for Honor and Oath.

He didn’t know what would be waiting for him at the end of the tunnel, but one thing was certain.

He would either learn something the easy way or the hard way.