

Endless 261

Chapter 261: Melodies Of Steel [Part 1]

Alex had been in the Dwarven Ruins before, though not in person. Back when he had still been playing ELO, he had challenged the ruins a few times.

However, this was his first time entering the tunnel leading to the Morgim Trial, representing Oath and Honor.

As he walked deeper into the tunnel, something bothered him. It wasn't the seemingly endless length of the tunnel.

No.

It was the sound of footsteps from behind.

By right, all he had to do was to turn around and the mystery should've been solved, but no matter where he looked and how many times he checked, there was no one at all.

At least, not within the range of his eyes and the Mimic Lantern.

"Who's there?" Alex summoned Everguard, ready to bash whatever creature was stalking him.

A moment later, a mischievous voice reached his ear.

"Guess who?"

Alex didn't even need to make a guess since he recognized the voice right away.

"Lumi," Alex replied. "So I guess Lotte is with you as well."

The sound of footsteps grew stronger.

It didn't take long before he saw Lotte and Lumi enter the range of his Mimic Lantern.

Latifa was still sleeping soundly in Lotte's arms, most likely oblivious to everything happening around her.

"Why are you girls here?" Alex asked.

"Why can't we be here?" Lumi countered with her arms crossed over her chest. "We're also taking the trial. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, there is nothing wrong with it," Alex answered. "I'm just surprised you chose this trial over the others."

Lotte was easy to talk to, but Lumi had a little attitude.

She was the most aggressive among Latifa's Alters, but Alex inferred that she represented a suppressed part of Latifa.

Since her consciousness had different personalities, the young man assumed they were the sides of Latifa others weren't able to see.

For example, Lumi was like a chihuahua that would bark at anyone, including a God, if she felt like it.

But as someone who had pursued the Latifa Route, Alex knew she was also the purest among Latifa's Alters.

The moment Lumi trusted someone, she would trust them completely and even allow them to fluff her fluffy tail.

“Sorry, but Lumi insisted that we pick this trial. She felt like it’s the most interesting one among the bunch,” Lotte commented.

“Right!” Lumi nodded. “It’s not like I chose to go here because of you, you know? Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Alex wanted to scratch his head, but since Dim Dim was basically his beanie, he scratched the little bun’s head instead. The little guy giggled in delight.

“Just be careful, okay?” Alex said. “We don’t know what kind of danger we’ll face in this trial. Please protect Latifa to the best of your abilities.”

“Hmph!” Lumi glared. “You don’t have to state the obvious!”

Alex briefly wondered if chihuahuas were a type of fox before raising his hands up in appeasement. Lumi’s glare did not soften, but she didn’t say anything more either. Alex resumed his journey, holding his Mimic Lantern to light the way.

The two fox ladies followed behind him without saying anything else.

After walking for some time, they finally arrived at a spacious hall, which looked like a throne room.

It was not abandoned.

On the throne was a person wearing a full set of knightly armor and a golden crown.

Obviously, the sitter was the King of this place.

“Hello?” Alex called out to the King, hoping to get a reaction. “We’ve come to take the Morgim Trial.”

For a moment, there was only silence.

Then...

CLANG.

The armored figure moved.

Its hand, protected by an intricate gauntlet, slowly rose from the armrest and reached for the massive sword resting against the throne.

The sound of metal scraping against stone echoed throughout the chamber as the blade was lifted.

Lotte instinctively took a step back. Lumi's ears perked up, tail bristling with tension.

Alex gripped Everguard tighter.

Then, the knight stood up, his movements measured and deliberate.

A golden glow radiated from beneath his helm.

Twin lights—no, eyes—locked onto Alex as the knight descended the stairs of the dais like a judge ready to deliver his verdict.

"Three who seek the Oath. One with fractured souls. One with fractured fate. One with fractured will," the knight said, voice echoing as if a dozen others were speaking at once. "Who among you carries the burden of the Heart?"

"What burden?" Alex asked, not knowing how to answer a question he didn't understand.

The knight's helm tilted slightly, as if scrutinizing the young man.

“The Trial of Morgim is not a challenge of strength nor cunning,” the knight said after half a minute of silence. “It is a trial of resolve. To swear an Oath is to bind yourself, not in name—but in soul. To falter is to fall. To fall... is to burn.”

At that final word, the room darkened.

The torches that lined the hall extinguished themselves one by one.

Then, the floor beneath them cracked and split open, as if the ruin itself were reacting to the knight’s words.

“W-What’s happening?” Lotte cried out, holding Latifa tightly.

“An illusion?” Lumi growled, her hands glowing with magic.

But Alex didn’t move. He recognized this part. At least, something like it.

This wasn’t just a cut scene.

It was a descent.

A test.

Without warning, the floor beneath their feet gave way and darkness swallowed them whole.

When Alex opened his eyes, he stood alone in a vast chamber of silver and flame.

An endless smithy stretched before him, its anvils glowing. Runes hovered midair like fireflies.

Lining the room were giant statues of Dwarven warriors with weapons broken, shields shattered, and armors cracked.

Each statue bore a word inscribed in stone:

“HONOR.”

“LOYALTY.”

“SACRIFICE.”

“BETRAYAL.”

In the center stood a black anvil and atop it was a single shield—Alex’s shield.

Everguard.

But it looked different. Its surface was cracked. As if it had tasted failure.

Alex didn’t know if Everguard had broken in the past when in the hands of its original owner, the First Oathkeeper, Leonard the Everguard.

He only knew that after his battle against the Mutant Spider, the shield had fulfilled its last oath and broke apart. After that, Ramza had asked Alex for the broken fragments so it could be reforged.

After its repair, Everguard had been returned to the silver-haired young man, symbolizing the beginning of the new Oathkeeper’s era.

Seeing the familiar shield littered with cracks, Alex couldn’t help but wonder what this test was about.

He then tried to summon the Everguard that he possessed, but it didn't appear.

Instead, the cracked shield on the anvil rose and flew towards Alex. His hand instinctively reached out to grab it, but it crashed into his palm with such force that he flinched.

"No way..." Alex couldn't help but stare at the shield in disbelief. It was already so damaged that he was surprised it hadn't shattered when he'd caught it.

He didn't know if he was in an illusionary world or not, but one thing was clear.

The shield in his hand could only take one last hit before it broke apart.

Not wanting to break the shield, Alex tried to keep it inside his storage ring, but it refused to budge.

After trying a few more times, he reluctantly placed the shield on his left arm so he could carry it with him.

"Svalinn." Alex tried to summon his other shield, but it seemed like no shields wanted to obey him today!

He tried to summon it a couple more times, but the first sentient shield in his possession was nowhere to be found.

"Dim Dim?" Alex shouted as he scanned the vast smithy. "Latifa? Lotte? Lumi? Are any of you here?!"

No answer came.

Instead, he heard a loud metallic clang, as if something very hard was hitting a piece of metal.

Alex turned to the source of the sound and saw a substantial bronze gate that was firmly shut.

A second later, the gate shook as if hit by something like a battering ram. The young man's face turned solemn.

Dirt and rubble started to fall from the ceiling as the attack on the gate continued.

Alex could feel it.

Right behind the gate, something or someone dangerous was trying to break in with brute force.

Alex tried to summon his sword, but nothing happened.

Defenseless except for a shield that might not even last till the next blow, the young man desperately looked around for something he could use to protect himself.

His eyes landed on a hammer resting beside forge. It was not a traditional weapon, but it would do. He dashed towards it.

The hammer was barely in Alex's hand when a final clang freed the bronze gate from its hinges and sent it crashing into the floor with a deafening thud.

Alex took a fighting stance and faced the creature which made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Chapter 262: Melodies Of Steel [Part 2]

Latifa woke up abruptly when she felt her body fall on something soft and bouncy.

"Ugh..."

The young fox lady slowly propped herself up and looked around her, still half asleep.

She was currently on a bed, but it wasn't as comfortable as the bed in the clock tower, which she had claimed as her own.

"Lotte?" Latifa called out. "Lumi?"

Originally, she had called them sisters, but since Alex had named them, she decided it would be a good idea to address them by name.

It gave her Alters more individuality, which was something that she hadn't thought was necessary.

In the past, she had considered her Alters different parts of her. It would be weird to give them names aside from her own.

But Alex had insisted that while they were technically her, they also had their own personalities. It would be best if they were given names to differentiate them from one another.

And so, Latifa called out to Lotte and Lumi, who wouldn't stray too far from her because they were her protectors.

"Uh... I'm so sleepy," Latifa rubbed her eyes, trying to stay awake while waiting for her Alters to return.

But no matter how much she tried to call out to them, the two didn't appear.

Something was wrong.

Latifa lightly patted her cheeks till she was more alert.

There was a time to sleep and there was a time to move.

And right now, it was definitely not the time to sleep! She would be a fool to doze off in a strange place without her protectors by her side.

Also, it was too noisy to sleep. Loud booming sounds reverberating around her like she was under some kind of attack.

The young lady got up and walked to the closest window to see what was happening.

What she saw made her eyes widen in shock.

Flames and black smoke engulfed the stone walls as balls of fire descended from the sky.

Whatever drowsiness she still had instantly evaporated. She was now fully awake as war cries, curses, and fighting reached her ears.

“H-Huh?!” Latifa gasped in disbelief as she tried to make sense of her surroundings. From the looks of it, she was in a castle that was under siege. “Is this a dream? Am I still asleep?”

As if to answer her, a fireball flew straight towards her.

Latifa only had a few seconds to run as far as she could from the window before the fireball struck. The resulting explosion sent chunks of stone, glass, and metal flying everywhere.

As the flames spread throughout the room, the young lady propped herself up from the floor.

She had managed to cast a purple barrier around herself right before the fireball hit her room. Although it had managed to protect her from much of the fire and shrapnel, she hadn’t been able to maintain her footing.

Knowing that staying put would be a very, very bad idea, Latifa rushed towards the only door in the room. However, it opened abruptly before she could even touch the handle.

“Princess, are you hurt?!” two dwarven ladies armed with axes exclaimed in unison.

“You must have mistaken me for someone else,” Latifa replied as the two dwarves checked her body for injuries. “I’m not a princ—”

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 6% >

< Current Synchronization Rate 10% >

— — —

Latifa’s eyebrows shot up as her mouth started speaking on its own.

“Kara, Runa, what is happening?” Latifa asked. “Why are we getting attacked all of a sudden?!”

Kara, whose dark hair was tied in a bun to keep it out of her face and way, sighed. “They are the chieftains of the Barbarian Tribes who have been invited to participate in the great ceremony of our forefathers, Princess,” she replied grimly.

“It seems that they came with the intention to take over this castle by force. They used the ceremony as an excuse to bring their armies.”

As Kara explained the situation, she grabbed the princess’s hand and pulled her into the hallway. They must head to the shelter deeper inside the palace and there was no time to lose.

Runa, a freckled redhead, also spoke her mind.

“I believe that they are also angry because our King rejected their proposal of marrying you to the Barbarian King. The King didn’t wish for you to become the Barbarian King’s fourth wife. But I’m sure that they have other reasons for conspiring to attack us.”

The two dwarves were the princess's shield maidens, whose duty was to ensure her safety.

Latifa could tell that the two dwarves, who seemed to be around the same age as Fran, were incredibly strong.

However, she still didn't understand why she suddenly knew their names. It was as if she had known them for a long time.

'Just what is going on?' Latifa tried to summon her Alters once more, but her connection with Lotte and Lumi seemed to be blocked by some kind of mysterious power.

Latifa gritted her teeth as another explosion rocked the walls of the hallway behind them, showering debris everywhere.

This wasn't just a vision, an illusion, or a dream.

It felt too real.

Her power also had something to do with illusions, but she just knew that she would not be able to break out of it using her own willpower.

The pounding of her heart, the heat of the flames, the grip of her worried shield maiden—it was as if she had lived in this body for years, not minutes.

But the most terrifying part wasn't the siege. It was the creeping realization that she was becoming someone else without intending to.

Every once in a while, her lips parted and she heard herself saying things she didn't know anything about.

Her mouth moved faster than her mind. It was like something else was guiding her actions.

Or someone else's memories were bleeding into her own.

"Where is the King?!" Latifa blurted, her voice laced with a panic she didn't recognize.

"His Majesty is holding the gate with the Royal Guard," Kara replied as she blocked a falling beam with her axe. "He said... if they are to take the castle, they'll have to climb over his corpse."

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< Synchronization Rate increased by 12% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 22% >

— — —

Latifa's knees buckled.

Visions exploded in her mind.

Images of a dwarven princess—young, proud, radiant—dancing in the royal halls...

Forging bonds with Kara and Runa...

Weeping behind her veil as she refused the Barbarian King's hand in marriage...

Whispering to a knight in secret beneath the moonlight...

The memories weren't hers.

But they were becoming part of her.

No. Latifa pressed her hand against her chest, trying to reclaim herself.

I'm not her. I'm not this princess. I'm Latifa.

And yet...

"Princess, please!" Runa shouted as a spell blew up yet another section of the hallway.

The two shield maidens pushed Latifa down and used their bodies to shield her from the explosion.

"Are you alright, Princess?!" Kara asked frantically as she helped Latifa to her feet. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," Latifa complained. "I got hurt when the two of you slammed my body on the floor."

The possibility that the princess was suffering from brain damage due to the explosion crossed the shield maidens' minds, but this was something for future them to deal with. Kara grabbed the princess's arm and half pulled, half dragged her as they made their escape.

Latifa could feel herself being slowly taken over.

For the first time since entering Frieden Academy, the young fox lady felt fear because she couldn't use the powers that she had once wielded as freely as breathing.

As chaos and destruction descended upon them, the two shield maidens pulled a torch from its mount. That section of the hallway gave way to reveal a hidden path.

"I'll go first," Runa said as she held the torch and led the way.

Latifa followed behind her.

Kara only caught up with them after making sure that the wall had returned to its rightful place, preventing anyone from coming after them.

As the three descended into the dark hidden tunnel, the sound of explosions faded away.

But instead of feeling relief, Latifa felt more anxious. The strange voice inside her head spoke again, making her bite her lip in frustration.

< Synchronization Rate increased by 3% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 25% >

Latifa couldn't help but feel that she was losing something very important.

And she was indeed losing them.

Her memories. Her identity.

But as she lost these things, she also gained a few others.

Memories of the dwarven princess, who was now currently on the run as her peaceful kingdom went up in flames.

Her desire to find the ancient relics of her ancestors.

And her belief in the prophecy that whoever could reclaim those relics would become a Demigod and rule the entire continent of Elarion.

Chapter 263: Melodies Of Steel [Part 3]

Inside a place called the Echo Forge, Alex currently held a steel hammer in one hand and a cracked Everguard in the other.

As the gates fell, a monster came into view. The Minotaur-like creature, equipped with a war axe, stepped inside the smithy and looked around.

It seemed to be looking for someone, but no matter how thoroughly it looked around, there was nothing aside from broken weapons and shields—the vast hall was completely empty.

The three-meter-tall Minotaur entered the room, followed by six Barbarians, each holding either a sword or an axe.

“There’s nothing here,” one of the Barbarians said after taking a quick look in the room. “They must have gone out to defend the East Gate.”

“Foolish dwarves. The diversion we made easily tricked them.” Another barbarian chuckled. “They should have sent more defenders to their west gate. It’s more fun that way.”

“You should be thankful we managed to break through without much resistance,” commented the Barbarian who seemed to be their leader. “Let’s go. We need to make a detour and complete our mission of capturing Princess Yvraine.”

“I don’t know if the Barbarian King is serious about making her a concubine or not, but a trophy in the form of a beautiful dwarven princess is certainly nice.”

The barbarians laughed at the same time as they left the room together.

Except for the Minotaur—it sniffed the air in suspicion and narrowed its eyes.

It paid close attention to its surroundings, especially the dwarven statues lined up along the walls of the forge.

But seeing that nothing seemed to be out of place, the Minotaur finally left and followed its allies to infiltrate the Dwarven Fortress.

Ten minutes later...

One of the statues opened up slightly like a coffin.

During that tense moment, Alex heard a voice inside his head.

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< Synchronization Rate increased by 12% >

< Current Synchronization Rate 12% >

— — —

He was initially confused about what it meant, but he could roughly guess what happened after a flood of memories assaulted his senses. Thanks to the information he gained, he learned he could hide in one of the statues, as the Founder of the forge had deliberately designed it that way.

While the information certainly saved Alex, the timing had been very tight.

In the memory he gained, he found himself being addressed by one of the blacksmiths. A solemn expression immediately appeared on his face, for he had been called a supposedly unfamiliar name—Kael.

"I'm not Kael," Alex muttered. "I'm Alex."

The young man tried to shake off the feeling of anxiety that had clung to his senses. For now, he needed to find Latifa, Lotte, Lumi, and Dim Dim, who seemed to have disappeared after he opened his eyes.

With a determined gaze, he straightened his back and made his way toward the broken gate, peeking out of it to check if there were any enemies around.

He didn't possess his storage ring, nor could he use any of his skills and special abilities.

The only thing that he could use to fight and protect himself was a cracked Everguard and the dwarven hammer he took from the forge.

What were his chances of winning if he stumbled upon a raiding group of Barbarians?

Zero.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 3% >

< Current Synchronization Rate 15% >

— — —

Alex shuddered as visions of the dwarven princess, Princess Yvraine, appeared inside his mind.

However, instead of a dwarf, the princess he saw was Latifa, which made Alex forget how to breathe for a brief moment.

'Oh no!' Alex instinctively knew that they were in danger.

Although he didn't have any proof, there was a high chance that Latifa was also under the effect of "synchronization," which would force her into the role of the princess the Barbarians were looking for.

'Damn it!' Alex cursed internally as he made his way to the fortress, using a path only known to blacksmiths.

As he neared the Princess' room, loud explosions reverberated in the surroundings.

The siege grew more intense as Alex ran through hallways continuously getting hit by spells that had bypassed the defensive walls.

After a few minutes of sprinting, he finally reached the princess' room, only to find it drowning in flames.

At the sight of the dilapidated area, worry poured into Alex's heart, knowing Latifa must've been unable to use her powers as well.

Compared to an ordinary human girl, the foxkin was certainly stronger. But her strength meant nothing against a naturally strong Barbarian, let alone those who are part of the military.

Based on Alex's experience, Latifa certainly couldn't use the abilities of her Job Class, Celestial Walker, either, so he couldn't help but worry.

In his eyes, Latifa was now a helpless lady out of her element and could be easily defeated by one of Dim's brittle vials!

"Latif—Princess! Where are you?!" Alex shouted in the hallways, trying desperately to search Kael's memory of where the princess might have gone.

Just as he was thinking of what to do next, he heard hurried footsteps running in his direction.

Alex immediately raised his hammer and shield, ready to fight whatever was about to meet him at the end of the hallway.

He was like the string of a bow that was pulled to its limit. The moment that string was released, he would either fight or run away as befitting of the situation.

Suddenly, over a dozen dwarven warriors appeared in the hallway, each wearing light armor and carrying weapons like hammers, maces, and swords.

“Kael!” one of the Dwarves recognized the young man. “It’s good that you’re alive. Where is the princess?!”

“She’s no longer here when I arrived,” Alex replied as he tried to recall the name of the dwarf that was talking to him.

As if humoring him, he heard a familiar notification inside of his head.

< Synchronization Rate increased by 5% >

< Current Synchronization Rate 20% >

“F*ck...” Alex cursed after hearing that his synchronization rate had gone up.”

“My name is not F*ck, It’s Fokar!” the dwarf named Fokar corrected. “Did your head get hit by one of those spells that destroyed these walls? Snap out of it if you’re a dwarf!”

“But I’m not a dwar...”

“Shut up and come with us! We’re going to beat the crap out of those barbarians who infiltrated the East Gate!”

Alex frowned. “But the Princess?”

“Look, Kael, I know that you and the princess are... rather close despite your gap in status, but you need to look at the bigger picture,” Fokar said calmly. “Her Shield Maidens will make sure to protect her. Kara and Runa might be young, but those lasses are stronger than you.

“So stop dazing like the apprentice smith you are, and start swinging that hammer! Come with us now!”

After saying what he wanted to say, Fokar led the dwarves to that path that Alex had taken earlier.

This was the fastest way to reach the west gate, so they all headed there with determined looks on their faces.

Alex was torn between finding Latifa and fighting alongside the dwarves who had treated Kael like a true friend.

In the end, he decided to follow them. Getting rid of the invaders would ensure the princess’ safety as well.

As soon as they arrived on the lower floors of the fortress, they met a barbarian raiding group, and a battle immediately commenced.

The dwarves fighting alongside Alex might be short, but they were no pushovers.

They were Dwarven Reavers, which was a rank higher than ordinary warriors.

The Ranks of the Dwarven Military were Dwarven Warriors, Dwarven Reavers, Chosen, and Champions.

Alex was the apprentice of the smith, whose main role was to forge weapons, armors, and shields.

But despite all that, Alex could feel strength within his arms, which he had never felt before.

The hammer in his hand didn't feel like a stranger but a friend that had accompanied him all his life.

Familiar words escaped his lips as he raised his hammer to attack the Barbarian who was charging in his direction.

"Hammer of All Seasons First Form!" Alex roared.

"Bone Breaker!"

Alex swung his hammer after evading the war axe of the Barbarian by a hairsbreadth.

A resounding crack reached his ears as his hammer smashed at the Barbarian's armor, denting it deeply, soon followed by a loud cry in pain.

But Alex's attack didn't end there.

As if he were forging a weapon, his hammer hummed in both excitement and fervor as its Master connected his follow-up attack with a backhand blow that hit his opponent's head, giving a resounding crack.

Alex didn't even need to look because he was certain that the Barbarian was now dead.

His blood boiled as the battle lust took hold of his senses.

With a roar that came from the very depths of the dwarf named Kael, Alex swung his hammer once more, the melodies of steel echoing within the fortress where Dwarves and Barbarians fought to the death!

Chapter 264: Melodies Of Steel [Part 4]

The clangor of battle grew louder, sharper, until it became a deafening chorus of ringing metal and dying screams.

Alex—no, Kael—breathed heavily, blood dripping from the corner of his lips.

There were some blows he was forced to take, as he was saving the cracked Everguard for a crucial blow. After all, it was severely damaged and could only block one attack.

The Reavers beside him fought like beasts, hammering Barbarians into the ground with every blow. But even with the surge of newfound strength and memories, he could feel it.

Something was wrong.

Something was missing.

Latifa.

He turned his gaze toward the upper halls, where faint traces of green light flickered behind the layers of smoke and ash.

A strange scent wafted toward him. It was not the stench of burning wood or scorched metal, but the scent of living things.

Moss. Flowers. Something impossibly out of place on a mountain under siege.

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< Synchronization Rate increased by 4% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 24% >

— — —

Alex stumbled back, clutching his head as more memories abruptly surged into his head. This time, not of Kael forging weapons or standing beside dwarves—

But of standing watch outside the royal Grove Chamber, where the princess would disappear for hours to sing to the blooming stone.

“The Verdant Stone is not just our legacy, Kael,” she had once said. “It’s our future. Even in ruin... it grows.”

Alex gasped.

“Latifa...”

He turned to Fokar, who was smashing a barbarian’s kneecap in with a two-handed maul, making the enemy cry out in pain as he collapsed to the floor.

But he didn’t shout for long because Fokar ended his suffering with his next strike, bringing down his maul on the barbarian’s head without mercy.

Alex could feel the workings of magic in the air, and it belonged to none other than the Princess, whose whereabouts were currently unknown.

‘Maybe she saw me and is helping me in this fight,’ Alex thought.

While he didn't have proof, he believed that this power, which felt familiar to Kael's memories, was indeed from the princess, who was very dear in his heart.

"Snap out of it, Kael!" Fokar shouted as he blocked one of the barbarians who had lunged at Alex, while he was in a daze. "Get your sh*t together! We are at war! This is no place for head in the clouds!"

Suddenly, the sounds of horns spread across the battlefield, making Fokar's face brighten.

"They're here!" Fokar laughed as the sound of countless hooves reached his ears.

Something jumped from the destroyed wall of the fortress, entering the battlefield and charging at one of the minotaurs fighting against the dwarves in the distance.

"For Stone and Steel!" a dwarf wearing full armor, riding on the back of a Mountain War Goat, raised his hammer in defiance.

""For Stone and Steel!""

More dwarves equipped with heavy armor and mounted on Mountain War Goats appeared, reinforcing the dwarven defenders in protecting their home.

"For Stone and Steel!" Fokar roared as he and the other Reavers felt emboldened by the appearance of the Dwarven Chosens.

They were the mounted defenders of their kingdom and were usually at the front lines of any war that was being waged against their race!

All Reavers wished to become a Chosen, but the trial to become one was extremely hard to pass.

This meant that all these newcomers possessed a strength that would even make the Minotaurs weary of them!

The Minotaur's War Axe collided with the Dwarven Champion's hammer, sending sparks flying at the point of contact.

But instead of being pushed back, the Dwarf properly blocked the attack, allowing the War Goat to ram its horns at the Minotaur's... ahem.

That place that must not be named.

As men, Alex and Fokar could feel the Minotaur's pain, perfectly understanding its soundless scream. Its body bent forward as it succumbed to the otherworldly pain it just experienced.

But that was a mistake.

As its head lowered, the Dwarven Chosen swung its hammer upward, hitting the Minotaur's jaw, thus dealing serious damage to his enemy.

"Die!" Another Dwarven Chosen commanded its Wargoat to jump over his comrade and delivered the final blow towards the monster who dared to attack their home.

The charge of the Chosens were like a wave that crashed to the Barbarian and Minotaur ranks like a train that couldn't be stopped.

And just as Alex thought that this scene couldn't become any cooler, a giant bear decked in full armor appeared.

On its back was a dwarf wearing golden armor, which made Fokar and the other Dwarven Reavers cheer.

"For Stone and Steel!" The Dwarven Champion, who was stronger than the Chosens, arrived and started a one-sided massacre.

Five minutes later, the sounds of horns reached everyone's ears.

These horns didn't belong to the dwarves, but the Barbarians.

"They're finally retreating." Fokar sighed as he used his maul to support his body.

Before meeting Alex—currently Kael, he and his men had fought their way toward the courtyard of the fortress, resulting to many of his comrades being killed in battle.

He wished he could have saved more, but the Minotaurs were truly strong.

At least six dwarves were needed to fight against one of them, and among those six, the chances of two or more dying against it was quite high.

Alex watched with awe as the Dwarven Chosens and the Champion charged at the retreating Barbarians, not showing them any mercy.

His heart was beating so fast, and aside from awe, he could also feel other emotions.

Pride, longing, envy were just among the emotions he felt as he looked at these powerful warriors, who represented their race.

Alex wiped the sweat and blood from his brow, his fingers still wrapped tightly around the haft of his dwarven hammer.

The ground trembled with the rhythmic stomps of hooves and war cries, as the last of the barbarian war bands broke formation and retreated through the breach in the western wall.

"Stone be praised..." one of the younger Reavers muttered, falling to his knees in exhaustion. His armor was dented, his face smeared with soot and blood.

Fokar patted Alex on the shoulder. "We live another day, Kael. That counts for something."

Alex nodded, though his thoughts were elsewhere. The green light he'd seen earlier still glowed faintly through the smoke curling from the upper halls.

And it hadn't disappeared.

It pulsed.

Like a heartbeat.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 5% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 29% >

— — —

"Fokar," Alex said quietly. "The Princess... I think she's still inside the Grove Chamber."

Fokar's tired expression hardened. "Then what in the molten pits are we standing around for?"

"I'll go alone. You're wounded."

"Don't be thick," Fokar growled. "You may be swinging that hammer like a Reaver, but you're still green. If something's wrong up there, and it ain't just some glowing mushrooms, you'll need someone watching your back."

Alex nodded, thankful but tense. Something about that light made him feel unsettled.

The two dwarves made their way through a side passage that curved behind the main forge halls.

The air grew cooler, and that strange floral scent intensified. Where the smoke of battle had earlier choked the air, now it was filled with the scent of blooming moss, damp soil, and something older and wilder.

When they reached the arched stone doorway of the Grove Chamber, they froze.

Vines.

Thick, glowing green vines pulsed along the carved stone, moving slowly like serpents asleep in their coils. The great doors had been split open.

And inside, they saw her.

Latifa.

No—Yvraine.

She stood barefoot at the center of the chamber, surrounded by the roots of the Verdant Stone.

Her hair drifted as if caught in an unseen breeze, and from her palms flowed tendrils of emerald light that weaved through the roots and into the walls themselves.

Around her, three barbarians lay unconscious, cocooned in vines that had erupted from the very ground.

One of them was still twitching, a faint groan escaping his lips before a vine wrapped tightly around his throat and silenced him. “Latifa!”

Alex took a step forward.

She didn't turn.

But her voice came, soft and ethereal, layered with a presence that didn't fully belong to her.

"Kael..."

His breath hitched.

It wasn't just her voice—it was the Princess' too.

Alex knew that just like him, Latifa was currently under the effects of synchronization.

He didn't know if the heart beating inside his chest was still his own or Kael's.

But the mere sight of the lady made his body move automatically.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 2% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 31% >

— — —

A moment later, Alex was holding one of his Queens, and the latter simply rested her head on his shoulders and hugged him in return.

Chapter 265: The War-Forged Past [Part 1]

A few hours later...

“This is bad, Latifa,” Alex said. “Like, really bad.”

Their battle against the Barbarians had yet to end. The latter had merely retreated a good distance away from the Fortress, waiting for the next opportunity to attack.

It was fortunate that the Dwarven Warriors reacted in time and had sent reinforcements to the Western Gate at the crucial moment. Otherwise, the fortress might’ve fallen.

After all, the Barbarians had played tricks, catching them unprepared. No doubt that the defenders played their role well, but they were eventually overwhelmed from behind their ranks.

The Reavers from different teams had moved in unison, knowing this was a crucial time in the war.

Fokar’s team had been an exception, detouring for the Princess’ room since they were closest to it.

The Princess they initially failed to find in her quarters now sat in a room located within the inner part of the fortress, guarded by her two shield maidens, and Fokar and his subordinates.

Earlier, she had asked the others to give them space for a while, as she wanted to talk with Alex—or in their eyes, Kael.

Although her request seemed inappropriate—for she was a princess and the other was a mere apprentice smith, no one said anything and quietly complied. Those close to the pair knew that they were childhood sweethearts, and they also trusted that Kael knew what to and what not to do.

“You’re right.” Latifa sighed. “This synchronization thing is scary. I can’t use my powers nor can I call out to Lotte and Lumi. My storage ring is also nowhere to be found, and I can’t use my items.”

The young lady then looked at Alex, her face a little red, and her heart beating faster inside her chest.

“Also, I think this girl, Princess Yvraine, is rather fond of her childhood friend, Kael,” Latifa said as she lowered her head to avoid looking directly at Alex.

Just being in the same room with him had increased her synchronization rate, which made her heart skip a beat.

“How high is your synchronization rate right now, Latifa?” Alex inquired.

“It’s 35%,” Latifa answered. “How about you?”

“34%,” Alex answered. “It increased by 2% after we hugged, and 1% after we entered this room.”

“Yes, the same happened to me,” Latifa stated. “And every time it happens, I feel like I’m becoming one with Yvraine. I act and speak subconsciously without meaning to. Alex, will we lose ourselves completely if the synchronization rate increases to 100%?”

“The possibility exists,” Alex nodded. “Perhaps we need to do something in this trial before we completely reach that stage. Like a goal... or something that will complete a mission.”

As if waiting for that moment, Alex once again heard a notification sound inside his head.

And this time, he saw a blue window screen appear in front of him.

— — —

[You Have Unlocked An Arcana Quest!]

[Quest Name: The War-Forged Past]

— First part of 3 Chain Quests.

[Mission: Defeat the Barbarian King and his army.]

— The mission will fail if Princess Yvraine dies.

— The mission will fail if Kael dies.

< Mission Rewards: ??? >

< Mission Failure: Death by Decapitation >

[Optional Mission]

— Awaken the Verdant Throne

< Optional Mission Rewards: ??? >

— — —

“An Arcana Quest?”

The one who spoke wasn’t Alex but Latifa.

A confused expression graced the young lady’s face as this was the first time a blue window appeared before her.

Alex was just as surprised, albeit for a different reason. He didn’t think that someone aside from him would receive a mission notification in this manner.

Unbeknownst to Alex, all Arcana Quests had this format. Regardless of who, the ones who stumble upon them would receive a notification the same way he normally did as if guided by a higher power.

“Failure to do the mission is... huh?!” Latifa’s face turned pale when she saw the information written on the status screen.

“It’s death by decapitation, right?” Alex commented, reading what was written on his window screen.

“Oh... did you get this weird message too?” Latifa looked at Alex anxiously. “The penalty for me is different. If this mission fails, I will become the Barbarian King’s concubine and become his slave for life.”

Alex shuddered after hearing Latifa’s reply.

‘Barbarian King... I initially had no grudge against you. But you asked for it. It’s personal now,’ Alex clenched his fists. ‘I’m going to kill you even if it’s the last thing I do!’

He was more concerned about Latifa becoming the Barbarian King’s concubine slave than his own death by decapitation!

— —

Alex took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down despite the storm of emotions brewing inside him.

He couldn’t afford to lose his cool now. Especially not when his and Latifa’s lives were literally on the line.

“Alright,” Alex said, his voice steady. “First, we need to figure out how to stop our synchronization rate from rising. If it keeps rising every time we interact, we’ll lose control before the real battle even starts.”

Latifa nodded, clutching her chest where her heart was pounding wildly. "But what can we do? It's not like we can stay away from each other in this situation."

Alex's eyes narrowed as he mulled over their predicament. Then, a glimmer of realization struck him.

"This trial is called The War-Forged Past, right? It's forcing us to relive Princess Yvraine's, and Kael's memories," Alex said. "Maybe the synchronization isn't just a curse... maybe it's a key."

Latifa tilted her head. "A key to what?"

"To understand the past of the people we are currently portraying. To unlock their regrets," Alex answered. "Maybe we need to resolve something they couldn't. That might be the real condition for clearing this quest."

Suddenly, the ground rumbled. Dust trickled from the ceiling, and the distant sounds of war drums echoed through the stone halls of the fortress.

"They're coming again," Latifa said, her voice tense.

Alex glanced at the quest window still floating before him. The optional mission caught his eye.

Awaken the Verdant Throne.

"What is the Verdant Throne?" Alex asked.

Latifa's brows furrowed. "It's an ancient relic... a living throne said to have the power to command nature itself. Yvraine's family guarded it for generations. It's located somewhere in this fortress, or maybe the mountain where this fortress is built. I just don't have enough of Yvraine's memories to know where it is."

"Then we'll find it," Alex declared. "If we can awaken that throne, maybe we can stop the Barbarians and end this synchronization madness at the same time."

“But we’re running out of time,” Latifa murmured, looking down at her trembling hands. “Our synchronization rates are already above 30%. Once we hit 50%, I’m afraid we’ll start losing control of who we are...”

“Then let’s make sure we finish this before that happens,” Alex said firmly. “Latifa, you’re not going to become anyone’s concubine. I’ll stake my life on it.”

The young lady felt her face flush but nodded with a determined glint in her eyes. She extended her hand toward Alex.

“Together?” Latifa asked.

Alex grasped her hand without hesitation. “Together.”

The two stared at each other’s eyes, as if being drawn by something they had been holding back all this time.

The synchronization rate surged immediately.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 2% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 36% >

Note: Careful there, bro. At this rate, something else might rise, and it’s certainly not the Shield Hero.

— — —

Although the familiar notification sound notified them of the increase, neither of them flinched. The warmth of each other's hands was a promise, not a threat.

Alex even forgot about the weird note at the end, which never happened before.

A knock echoed from the door. Fokar's voice followed. "Kael, the Barbarians have resumed their attacks. We need to go."

Alex's eyes flashed with resolve. "I will fight to protect this place. For the time being, look for clues about the Verdant Throne."

Latifa nodded in understanding. "I will try to find it. I'm sure that it's somewhere in this Fortress."

"Make sure to take Kara and Runa with you."

"I will. Don't worry, and keep yourself safe as well."

The strong urge to hug Latifa washed over Alex's senses, but he forcibly held back his impulse by jumping backward.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to land properly and lost balance falling on the floor.

Latifa, who was near him, reached out in order to stop Alex's fall.

Although she managed to grab him, she didn't have the strength to support his body, so she also fell on the floor with him.

The sudden thud alarmed Kara, Runa, and Fokar, which made the three force the door open, only to find Princess Yvraine lying on top of Alex, with the latter hugging her waist.

"..."

“ ... ”

The two shield maidens were rendered speechless. However, the captain of the Reavers managed to snap out from his daze and glared at the young man, who was still holding the princess.

“... What the bloody hell are you doing, Kael?! Now is not the time for this nonsense!” Fokar shouted.

Latifa hastily propped herself up and backed away, prompting Kara, and Runa to come to her aid and see if she was alright.

Alex, on the other hand, was grabbed by an angry Fokar and dragged to the door, pulling him to the battlefield to fight the Barbarians.

Seeing his helpless form, a giggle escaped Latifa’s lips.

Although the incident just now had increased her synchronization rate by another 1%, she didn’t feel too bad about it.

Clearly, Princess Yvraine had deep feelings for Kael, and this accident was something that affirmed her of the princess’ feelings for the apprentice smith, who was her childhood friend.

The other Reavers gave Alex the “I know what you did last summer” gaze, and all of them had mischievous smiles on their faces.

But since they were headed for battle, these smiles soon disappeared as the sound of dwarven horns spread in the surroundings.

“Make sure they don’t slip past us!” Fokar ordered as he ran, holding his maul firmly with both hands. “If any of you guys die, I swear I’ll kill you a second time. So don’t die, okay?!”

“”Aye!””

And with that, Alex, and Fokar headed to the courtyard, where the battle had once again started in full swing.

Chapter 266: The War-Forged Past [Part 2]

After Alex left for battle, Latifa decided to ask her shield maidens, Kara and Runa, if they knew anything about the Verdant Throne.

“I’ve only heard of the Verdant Throne from stories told by my grandpa,” Kara said. “He said that before our great ancestors settled here, the UL-Khazir Mountain, they once lived in a place called the Verdant Valley.

“Unlike most dwarves, who built underground cities and kingdoms, our ancestors lived a life similar to elves. Within the Verdant Valley, a towering tree, which many believe was similar to the World Tree of the Elves, stood tall and proud.

“Our ancestors lived in its roots and built houses around it. But then, a monster stampede broke out and attacked our valley.

“While we managed to resist the first wave, the second and the third wave caused many of our people to die en masse.

“That was when the Dwarven King decided to leave. He realized that the powerful life force coming from the giant tree was the reason for the waves of monster stampedes. But before leaving, they took away the tree’s one and only seed, which they called the Verdant Seed.

“After our great ancestors migrated here, the King had planted that seed. A day later, the seed grew into a small tree shaped like a throne. Since then, people started calling it the Verdant Throne. Unfortunately, the Verdant Throne apparently disappeared all of a sudden, and no one had seen it again.”

Runa nodded because this was also the story that she knew. “Princess, shouldn’t the royal family have more information about the Verdant Throne than us?”

“I-I might still be a little muddle-headed due to the shock I felt when the fighting began,” Latifa replied. “But we need to find the Verdant Throne. It might be able to stop this war and protect our people from the Barbarians.”

Kara and Runa nodded in understanding, remembering a certain prophecy. The gist of it was simple—once the Verdant Throne was found, a hero would emerge among their people and protect them from those who wished to bring them harm.

A moment later, the princess flinched as she held her head. Her synchronization rate had once again gone up.

But this time, clues of where the Verdant Throne was located appeared inside her head.

‘39%,’ Latifa thought as the blue window once again informed her of the increase of her synchronization level.

But unlike Alex, her status window didn’t have any notes with added information.

“We’ll search the Inner Sanctum first,” Latifa declared after regaining her composure. “If the Verdant Throne is tied to our ancestors, then it must be hidden in the deepest part of the fortress, where outsiders can’t defile it.”

Kara and Runa exchanged glances, both understanding the weight of their mission. “Understood, Princess,” they said in unison.

“Also...” Latifa paused, touching her chest as the faint pulse of synchronization still lingered, “Alex—I mean, Kael—will be buying us time. We mustn’t let his efforts be in vain.”

“Don’t worry, Princess.” Runa grinned, patting the pommel of her blade, which she had picked up from the armory. “If anyone or anything tries to get in our way, we’ll cut them down.”

The trio exited the room, traversing the dimly lit stone hallways of the fortress.

Every so often, the ground would quake from the catapults and battering rams hammering the outer walls. The defenders' shouts echoed through the corridors, but the Inner Sanctum remained eerily quiet, as if untouched by the chaos outside.

— — —

Meanwhile within the courtyard of the Fortress...

The sound of weapons clashing against each other drowned the cries of the dying and the scream of those who wish to kill their foes.

Alex swung his hammer with strength and accuracy, dealing decisive blows to his enemies.

To his astonishment, his cracked shield, Everguard, had received a few blows but still didn't break.

At first, the young man did his best to not use the shield. But time soon came when he could neither parry with his hammer nor evade in time, leaving him no choice but to raise the dilapidated shield.

Since this was war, Alex didn't have the leisure of fighting enemies one-on-one. Sometimes, it was two against one, and even three versus one.

Of course, this also applied to his enemies as well.

Dwarves would always help their comrades who were in need, and he received plenty of help from Fokar, as well as the other Reavers fighting alongside him.

Still, the number of death among the dwarves continuously rose as the battle raged on.

Even some of Fokar's subordinates perished, making the dwarven captain fight more mercilessly, as if to avenge his fallen comrades.

As for Alex, while he fought valiantly, he didn't dare to use his shield to block more than necessary. After blocking a couple attacks, the shield's cracks had widened to the point where they encompassed the entire surface area.

Just as he was about to look for another enemy to fight, he heard a notification sound inside his head, and a blue window screen appeared in front of him.

— — —

[Optional Quest: Seek the Verdant Throne]

— Princess Yvraine has triggered a hidden clue!

Hint: The Verdant Throne slumbers where roots once breathed life into the stone.

— — —

'A place where the roots once breathed life into the stone?' Alex frowned as he wracked up Kael's memory for any places that matched the hint that was given to him.

But what he saw in his memory was a small room within the fortress where he and Princess Yvraine shared their first kiss, which heated the young man's cheeks.

Since the image of the princess in his memory was none other than Latifa, the young man couldn't help but feel his heart skip a beat.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 4% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 40% >

Note: Now I know what you did last summer, you sweet summer child.

— — —

Alex let out a low groan, frustrated at the intrusive notification.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on his embarrassment.

The hint had been delivered, and the synchronization rate wasn't going to stop climbing unless he acted fast.

He glanced toward the western walls, where the Barbarians were pressing hard against the defenders. The second gate was visibly buckling. Once it fell, the courtyard would undoubtedly be overrun.

He was torn whether he should go to where the Princess was at, or stay with Fokar to defend the courtyard.

Perhaps knowing that they were in great danger, Fokar ran in Alex's direction and grabbed his arm.

"Listen, Kael," Fokar said in a serious tone. "Someone must defend the princess, and I can entrust that task to no one here but you. Go to her, and leave this place to us!"

"But..." Alex felt his eyes moisten as his synchronization rate once again rose.

Fokar was more than just a dwarven captain to him.

He was someone who took care of Alex as if he were a family member. Hearing the captain ask him to leave the dangerous battlefield knowing that he himself might die fighting, Alex uncontrollably felt sad.

“Go.” Fokar said, pushing Alex away. “If something happens to her, I’ll piss on your body after I kill you.”

Alex hesitated a bit as he watched the dwarf let out his war cry and charge at the enemy with his maul raised high.

In the end, Alex gritted his teeth and left to look for the princess, rushing to the location where they had shared a very intimate moment together.

It was a place that only the members of the royal family could access, for their blood was a requirement to undo the seal leading to the underground cistern that had been declared off-limits for hundreds of years.

— — —

As Alex ran toward the location in his memories, Latifa, Kara, and Runa had reached the entrance to the old Root Cistern, deep within the Inner Sanctum.

The entrance was sealed by a heavy stone door, inscribed with ancient runes that glowed faintly as they approached.

“This is it,” Latifa whispered. The pulse within her chest grew stronger, guiding her like a heartbeat in sync with the fortress itself.

Kara and Runa immediately moved to inspect the door. “It’s sealed tight. We’ll need to break it open,” Runa said, already unsheathing her sword.

“No,” Latifa said, placing her hand on the runes. “It doesn’t need brute force.”

The moment her hand made contact, the runes pulsed in response. A blue window screen appeared before her.

— — —

[Synchronization Threshold Met: 40%]

— Bloodline Resonance Detected.

— Verdant Cistern Access Granted.

— — —

The massive stone door rumbled as ancient mechanisms awakened after centuries of slumber. Slowly, the passage opened, revealing a dim, root-laden tunnel that descended deeper into the earth.

“Let’s go,” Latifa said, her determination unwavering.

Something was calling out to her deep within the tunnel, so she followed her instincts and headed down with her two shield maidens.

The stone door closed behind her, as if to make sure that no one else would be able to enter aside from those who possessed the bloodline of the Verdant Royal Family.

Chapter 267: The Verdant Prophecy, and Its Guardian [Part 1]

By the time Alex arrived, twenty minutes had passed since Latifa entered the sealed stone door.

According to Kael’s memory, only the members of the Royal Family and those whom they had permitted to enter would be able to pass by this door.

He didn’t know if he had permission, but since he was already there, it wouldn’t kill him to try and open it.

The moment his hands touched the sealed stone door, a notification window appeared in front of him.

— — —

[Synchronization Threshold Met: 40%]

— Kael Ironsworn has been granted permission to enter by Princess Yvraine Verdant.

— Verdant Cistern Access Granted.

— — —

The heavy stone door slowly opened, revealing a passage that matched Alex's memory. Without hesitation, he ran in, hoping to see if Latifa was within the secret chamber only the royal family could enter.

The door slowly closed behind him, sealing shut and barring anyone else from entering.

Just as Alex was about to make a right turn, he suddenly received a blow in the stomach, making him groan in pain.

Before he could even understand what had happened to him, a palm strike hit his face, making him stagger backward.

The two-hit combo had rattled his brain, making him blank out and collapse on the ground with a heavy thud.

Alex then felt something press over his body, preventing him from moving.

"Don't move or you're dead."

A cold, merciless voice reached the young man's ears. But he was still in a state of shock, unable to understand what had just happened.

“Um? Runa, isn’t that Kael?” Kara emerged from the tunnel and looked at the young man, whom her sister had intercepted, thinking that he was an enemy.

“Stand back, Kara,” Runa replied. “Only the members of the Royal Family can enter this place. We managed to enter thanks to the princess’s help. But there should be no reason for Kael to be able to enter this place. Don’t you find that suspicious?”

Runa had only been serving the princess for two years, so she didn’t know how close Princess Yvraine and Kael really were.

Unlike her, Kara had served the princess for nearly seven years, and she had been witness to their close relationship.

“Get off of him, Runa,” ordered Princess Yvraine as she emerged from the tunnel. “I’ve given Kael permission to enter this place, so he can go here even without me.”

“Huh?!” Runa looked at the Princess in disbelief. But since her employer had already clarified, there was no longer any need for her to harm the young man more than she needed to.

The shield maiden reluctantly propped herself up before glancing at Alex and the Princess with suspicion.

Latifa hurriedly went to Alex’s side, and touched the side of his face.

“Restoration.” Latifa said softly.

A green glow emerged from her hand, which spread to the entirety of the young man’s body.

The pain Alex felt instantly disappeared, and the injuries he suffered healed at a very fast rate.

He could even feel his stamina recovering, making him sigh due to how good it felt after being healed by the princess.

“Do you feel better?” Latifa extended her hand to help Alex stand up.

“Thank you,” Alex replied. “I feel better now.”

He accepted Latifa’s gesture and allowed himself to be pulled up by her.

Unfortunately, it also triggered a notification sound, which made the two teenagers flinch at the same time.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 1% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 41% >

— — —

Latifa hastily took a step back as if electrocuted by Alex’s touch, making Runa narrow her eyes and stand between Kael and the princess.

“You shouldn’t act too closely to the Princess,” Runa said in a serious tone.

“I understand. I will be more careful in the future,” Alex replied.

He then gave Latifa an apologetic glance, to which the young lady responded with a helpless smile. Both of them were unable to stop the synchronization rate from rising on certain occasions.

Alex deemed that changing the topic would help them stir the tension away from their surroundings, so he asked the question that mattered the most.

“Have you found the Verdant Throne?” Alex asked.

Latifa shook her head. “We were just about to explore the depths of this place when we heard footsteps behind us. Runa asked Kara to protect me while she dealt with the intruder.”

“Hmph!” Runa crossed her arms over her chest, not feeling a bit sorry about what she had done earlier.

If the intruder wasn’t Alex, Runa would have already gone in for the kill.

She only stopped herself because she recognized him after her palm strike landed on his face and knocked him to the ground.

“Then we should hurry,” Alex stated anxiously. “The Barbarians are gaining ground inside the Fortress. The sooner we find the Verdant Throne, the better.”

He didn’t know what kind of power the Verdant Throne possessed, but he hoped that it had the ability to drive off the invaders from the fortress.

Latifa also understood the urgency of the situation, so she started running to the center of the underground cistern.

Kara and Runa ran alongside her, while Alex remained a few steps behind.

He was surprised to see Latifa running so fast since he never imagined her as a very athletic person.

Actually, he was right.

Latifa was a very lazy person. But her body was that of Princess Yvraine, who was a very active princess and often snuck out of the castle just to meet with the apprentice smith at least twice a week.

After running for a few minutes, they finally arrived at the center of the cistern, where a stone chamber was located.

There were many stone chambers at the center of the cistern, which was a wide open space.

But the biggest of them all was the most special one.

According to the history of the Verdant Royal Family, their Guardian was sealed inside of it.

Only when the Kingdom was in danger would they be allowed to call upon its help.

The King, and Queen of Ul-Khazir Kingdom were currently paying their respect to the Ancestral Grounds of their family, which was located in a different mountain.

This was also the reason why the Barbarian chose to attack the castle—they knew the King and Queen were away, bringing with them a sizeable entourage, leaving only half of the Defenders in the Fortress.

Not to mention, there was a member of the Royal Family who remained and could possibly tell them the whereabouts of the Verdant Throne.

The Ancient Relic they believed held the key to conquer the entire continent.

Alex glanced at one of the stone chambers near the entrance, which made his heart skip a beat.

Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but Latifa also glanced in the same stone chamber that he was looking at.

When both of them realized that they might be thinking of the same thing, the two blushed at the same time, which increased both of their synchronization rates to forty-four percent!

Kara smiled faintly, while Runa looked at the two suspiciously.

Clearly, one of the shield maidens was an accomplice to a secret that happened not long ago.

“Let’s open the Guardian’s Chamber,” Latifa hurriedly walked toward the largest stone chamber with a beet-red face.

Alex did his best to remain calm as he followed behind the princess who didn’t dare to look at his face right now.

Kara and Runa followed as well, curious if the princess could really open the Guardian’s Chamber and call upon their deity.

The gate made of pure mithril, runic symbols carved onto its surface, faintly glowed the moment it perceived that Princess Yvraine held the bloodline of the Verdant Royal Family.

However, it didn’t open.

Latifa’s eyes narrowed as she traced her fingers along the ancient runes.

The symbols shimmered faintly beneath her touch, as if awakening after centuries of slumber.

Alex stepped closer, and without meaning to, his hand brushed against the mithril gate as well.

Another notification chimed in their ears.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased to 50% >

— You are eligible to read the Verdant Prophecy.

— — —

The runes suddenly flared to life, and the ancient language transformed before their eyes, rearranging themselves into words they could understand.

A voice, neither male nor female, resonated within the chamber. It was not loud, yet it echoed in their minds with an undeniable weight.

“When the Verdant Line falters, and the blood of kin stains the sacred soil—

A Guardian shall awaken, not by crown nor decree, but by the hand of the Oathbound.”

“Two hearts entwined, yet unspoken, would be tested by The World.”

“One who bears the Verdant Blood, and one who bears the Burden of the Broken Oath.”

“Together, they shall awaken the Verdant Throne.”

“Together, they shall summon the Guardian of Verdance, who slumbers beyond Time.”

“But heed this—”

“Should their bond shatter, the Verdant Throne shall wither, and with it, the last hope of Ul-Khazir.”

Alex seemed to understand what he needed to do, so he pressed his hand firmly on the mithril gate, intending to forcing it open.

A second later, Latifa's hand pressed over his, creating a ripple of magic on the gate, which once again re-arranged the runes until they clicked like the turning of a lock.

The Mithril gate slowly opened.

Kara and Runa took a fighting stance, ready to fight anything that might harm their princess.

The inside of the stone chamber was dark, but it didn't take long for them to see a light in the distance.

Alex and Latifa glanced at each other and nodded at the same time.

The two walked in and approached the source of the light.

When they got closer, Alex's eyes widened in shock when he saw...

A little white bun, eating some potato chips while watching television.

A small headset could be seen on Dim Dim's body, which might have been the reason why it didn't hear the sound of the gate opening.

However, when the little bun sensed a presence behind it, it turned around and gazed at the newcomers.

Dim Dim, who was still holding a potato chip in its hand, looked at Alex and Latifa before taking a bite of the potato chip, creating a crisp and crunchy sound that echoed inside the Guardian's Chamber of Ul-Khazir.

Chapter 268: The Verdant Prophecy, and Its Guardian [Part 2]

“W-What is this cute thing?!” Kara rubbed her cheek against Dim Dim’s cheek, which made Alex scratch the back of his head.

Even Latifa was taken aback when she saw that the Guardian of the Royal Family was actually the little bun—the very same childish creature who would not hesitate to poke her nose if not for the promise it made to her back then!

“Kara, why are you acting like this?” Runa said in a serious tone before taking Dim Dim away from her hand. “Time’s up. It’s my turn now!”

Runa then rubbed her cheek on Dim Dim’s cheek, making the latter giggle as it felt very ticklish.

The television Dim Dim was watching on a while ago had vanished without a trace, same for the bag of potato chips it was eating from just a while ago.

Clearly, they were things that shouldn’t exist in this world, which might be the reason why Dim Dim took them away as soon as it recognized Alex and Latifa.

While the two maids were fighting for the little bun’s attention, the young man and the fox lady explored the stone chamber, hoping to find clues about what to do next.

They already thought of the possibility that Dim Dim might be playing the part of the “Guardian” of the Verdant Royal Family, but just to make sure that they didn’t miss any clue, the two explored every nook and cranny of the stone chamber.

Unfortunately, they didn’t find anything, making them sigh in disappointment.

“It’s no use,” Alex muttered as he inspected every nook and cranny of the stone chamber. “There’s nothing here but moss and dust.”

Latifa sighed before frowning deeply. “Could the prophecy have been... wrong?”

"I don't think so," Alex replied. "I think we just haven't understood the prophecy properly. In order to clear this trial, we must defeat the Barbarian King. Finding the Verdant Throne is an optional mission.

"This means that even if we don't find it, as long as we defeat the Barbarian King, we will meet the requirements to clear this trial."

"So, you're saying that it is easier to just defeat the Barbarian King instead of doing the optional mission and solving the prophecy?" Latifa inquired.

"Actually, I think defeating the Barbarian King will be easier if we complete the optional mission first, then solve the prophecy," Alex answered in a serious tone. "Right now, the Defenders are barely holding the Barbarian Army back. Once the Barbarian King joins the fight, we might not have a chance to defeat him."

Latifa then glanced at their "little giggling guardian," whom the two maids were fighting over and pondered for a while.

"Since Dim Dim seems to be the Guardian, does that mean that it has the power to defeat the Barbarians?" Latifa asked.

"Well, it will be best to ask it directly," Alex shrugged as he walked towards the two maids. "Okay, girls, let me borrow Dim Dim first. I need to ask it a few questions."

Kara and Runa were about to say no, but Princess Yvraine looked at the two of them with her hands crossed over her chest.

Clearly, saying no wasn't an option.

The two girls reluctantly handed the little bun in Alex's hands, making Dim Dim smile faintly.

"You're Dim Dim right?" Alex asked.

“Dim!” Dim Dim nodded.

“Are you playing the role of the Guardian right now?”

“Dim!”

“Then, do you have any fighting abilities?”

Instead of answering, Dim Dim simply reached out to its side and took out a brittle vial from its dimensional storage, which it proudly showed to Alex.

“Ahem!” Dim Dim raised its body, as if waiting for it to be praised.

Alex didn’t know if he should laugh or cry. By the looks of it, the little guardian’s fighting abilities revolved around throwing brittle vials and alchemy bombs at its enemies.

Something that Dim Dim already did in their adventures.

Latifa covered her mouth, trying not to laugh at Dim Dim’s smug expression, while Kara and Runa exchanged troubled glances.

“...That’s it?” Runa asked in disbelief. “Our Guardian throws glass bottles at enemies?”

Dim Dim puffed up its cheeks, clearly offended by the lack of appreciation for its brittle vial.

As if to give the little dwarf a demonstration, it threw the brittle vial into the air.

Before it could hit the ground, a burst of green energy caught it, suspending it mid-air.

A second later, the vial exploded, but instead of simply unleashing powdered red chili peppers and black peppers everywhere, a powerful shockwave demolished the side of the stone chamber, creating a big hole in it.

The power of the shockwave also pushed Alex, Latifa, Kara, and Runa away, making them look at the giant hole in the wall in shock.

“Ahem!” Dim Dim once again raised its body proudly before giving Runa the “do you now understand the greatness of my brittle vials?” gaze.

Runa’s eye twitched as she stared at the gaping hole Dim Dim had just casually blasted through what was supposed to be an indestructible stone chamber.

“I...” Runa opened her mouth, then closed it again. “...I apologize for my earlier comment, Guardian Dim Dim.”

“Dim!” Dim Dim nodded firmly, forgiving the dwarf who thought that its brittle vials were just simple bottles.

“Good job, Dim Dim!” Alex said. “My partner is so strong!”

“Ahem!”

Latifa smiled faintly because this proved that Dim Dim was indeed the Guardian of the Verdant Royal Family and had the strength to back it up.

“Dim Dim, do you know about the prophecy of the Verdant Throne?” Latifa asked the little bun, who looked very satisfied after it was praised by Alex.

Dim Dim nodded. “Dim!”

“Then do you know where the Verdant Throne is?” Latifa asked.

Dim Dim nodded once more.

“Great! Then tell us where it is,” Alex urged the little bun to tell them its location, so they could acquire it as soon as possible.

“Dim!”

Without any hesitation, Dim Dim pointed in the direction of the Verdant Throne, which made Alex, Latifa, Kara, and Runa look in the direction where it was pointing at.

The fox lady blinked once then twice because Dim Dim was pointing in her direction.

As if to make sure that the little bun was pointing at something else, Latifa stepped aside and looked behind her.

Hoping to see where Dim Dim was pointing at.

But when she stepped aside, Dim Dim’s hand moved to follow her direction.

“Dim Dim!”

“Eh? The Verdant Throne is inside Latifa?”

“Dim!”

The young lady finally confirmed that Dim Dim was indeed pointing at her, not at something behind her.

“The Verdant Throne is inside my body?” Latifa asked in confirmation.

“Dim!” Dim Dim nodded.

A pin-drop silence descended within the chamber for nearly half a minute before Latifa broke out of her daze.

“Then, how do I bring it out?” Latifa asked. “Do you know the way, Dim Dim?”

This time, Dim Dim shook its head.

It only knew that the Verdant Throne was inside Latifa. As for how to summon this power at will, it knew nothing about it.

“Let’s go outside first and reread the prophecy,” Alex proposed. “Maybe the answer is there.”

Latifa nodded in agreement, so they left the chamber and closed the mithril gate behind them.

After that, they once again pressed their hands on its surface, allowing the runes to rearrange themselves, making them hear the prophecy once more.

Chapter 269: The One Who Bears The Broken Oath [Part 1]

“When the Verdant Line falters, and the blood of kin stains the sacred soil—

A Guardian shall awaken, not by crown nor decree, but by the hand of the Oathbound.”

“Two hearts entwined yet unspoken would be tested by The World.”

“One who bears the Verdant Blood, and one who bears the burden of the Broken Oath.”

“Together, they shall awaken the Verdant Throne.”

“Together, they shall summon the Guardian of Verdance, who slumbers beyond Time.”

“But heed this—”

“Should their bond shatter, the Verdant Throne shall wither, and with it, the last hope of Ul-Khazir.”

Alex and Latifa had re-read this prophecy at least three times to commit it to memory.

There was no denying that the Princess was the one who bore the Verdant Blood, but they were unsure about the one who bore the burden of the Broken Oath.

Fortunately, the candidate was obvious.

Latifa looked at Alex, and Alex looked at her.

“Dim Dim, am I the one who bears the burden of the Broken Oath?” Alex asked the Dim Sum God, who knew everything about Arcana.

“Dim!” Dim Dim nodded.

“I knew it.” Alex scratched the back of his head.

The runes on the mithril gate had stated that those who bore the Verdant Blood and the Broken Oath shall summon the Guardian of Verdance, which they believed to be Dim Dim.

And together, they should awaken the Verdant Throne.

The only question was...

How?

Alex could feel his heart beating faster inside his chest as he did his best to avert his gaze from Latifa.

While he understood that interacting with her was not ideal for their situation—the increasing synchronization rate—it was simply hard to control it.

It seemed that Princess Yvraine and Kael were very much in love with each other. Every touch, every gaze, every time they were together was like a guaranteed setting for the synchronization rate to go up.

Just as he ruminated about these things, Latifa walked up to him and held his hand.

“Kael, I have a feeling that this fortress will fall very soon,” Latifa said softly. “I just want you to know one thing and one thing only. I’ve wished to spend my life with you. Not as the princess of this kingdom, but as a lady who wish to be with you for life.”

Alex heard that familiar notification sound inside his head, but he ignored it as he raised his head to look at the young lady he loved.

“Princess, my heart only beats for your sake,” Alex replied, cringing deep inside as his rational mind found the line very cheesy. “Even if the flames of the Everforged were to die out completely, the flames in my heart will continue to burn because of you.”

Princess Yvraine and Kael had taken over Latifa’s and Alex’s consciousness, reliving this part of history that no one else was able to see.

Kara covered Dim Dim’s eyes, believing that the little bun was too innocent to see such a thing.

Runa, on the other hand, didn’t know if she should intervene or not because the Princess and the Apprentice Blacksmith were now hugging each other.

— — —

< Current Synchronization Rate: 50% >

Note: You're halfway there, bro.

— — —

Memories of their sweet and intimate moment inside the stone chamber flooded Alex's mind.

His heart was beating so fast, he feared it was a pinch away from literally jumping out of his chest.

Suddenly, Alex and Latifa shuddered before both of them hurriedly took a step back.

They had both regained control over their bodies and, with it, some clues on how to call out the Verdant Throne.

Latifa's face flushed, her hand trembling slightly as she looked at Alex with wide eyes.

The connection between them was influenced by Princess Yvraine's and Kael's memories, and just by looking at Alex, she couldn't help but feel the urge to hug and even kiss him.

This feeling made her feel very anxious since she didn't really understand what love was.

Thanks to Princess Yvraine's strong feelings, the young lady who normally only slept and dreamt had gained an inkling about love, as well as some other unfamiliar feelings she never knew before.

It made her feel lost, anxious, and stressed out.

However, it wasn't all that bad. Along with it were the feelings of wonder and expectation, as well as other emotions other young ladies her age ought to feel in this situation.

There was just one more issue. Princess Yvraine's memories of her intimate moments with Kael keep replaying in her mind, making her cheeks burn in embarrassment.

Why?

Because in those memories, she saw herself and Alex do those things.

How could she not feel any embarrassment after seeing those scenes?!

She then took a deep breath before looking at Alex, who seemed deep in thought.

"I think the key to clearing this trial is by raising our synchronization rate," Latifa said softly. "If we recover more of Princess Yvraine's and Kael's memories, we might be able to summon the Verdant Throne. I just fear we'd lose ourselves if it's too high."

"You're right," Alex replied.

"But it's not just about feelings, right?" Latifa sighed.

Alex nodded, his expression serious now. "No. The Verdant Throne is tied to a bond that's more than affection. It's... conviction. An unbreakable oath between two people."

"Oathbound..." Latifa's gaze became solemn as she gazed at the prophecy once more.

Kara finally stepped forward. "Princess and Sir Kael, I think it means that both of you need to declare your bond. The Verdant Throne doesn't respond to vague feelings. It needs a pact. An Oath."

Alex's heart sank.

An oath. Just the word alone reminded him of the Oath of the Heart.

The one he had sworn to uphold... and the one he feared to break.

Suddenly, the underground chamber shook, making Latifa fall into Alex's arms.

Having a beauty in his arms would normally make him bashful, but there was no time to appreciate such a blessing when the quaking kept getting stronger.

"An earthquake?!" Kara gasped in shock. "Princess, be careful!"

"Dim!" Dim Dim jumped on Alex's head to prevent them from getting separated.

Runa had already lost her balance, falling to the ground on her bum, and was desperately trying to regain her balance.

A magic circle appeared under them, which Princess Yvraine recognized as a teleportation spell.

But before she could say anything, all of them turned into particles of light and were teleported out of the underground chamber before it collapsed completely.

When the four of them regained their senses, they were assaulted by the sound of battle happening around them.

"W-What?!" Runa, who had first regained her bearings, cried out in alarm as they found themselves in the middle of a battle between the Dwarves, the Barbarians, and the Minotaurs.

It didn't take long for the fighters of both sides to see the sudden appearance of the non-combatants, who all appeared out of nowhere.

"It's the princess!" one of the Barbarians recognized Princess Yvraine and shouted loudly. "Capture her as an offering for the Barbarian King!"

“Save the princess!” a Dwarven Warrior roared. “Don’t let her be captured by the Barbarians!”

The two sides clashed, one trying to get close to the princess to capture her and the other desperately blocking their path to protect her.

But the situation changed when the Minotaurs started charging in their direction in unison, sending dwarves flying in every direction.

“Damn it!” Alex cursed loudly as he swung his hammer to fend off a Barbarian who had tried to grab the Princess’ hand.

The young man didn’t know why they had been sent to the middle of the battlefield, where there was no place to run or hide.

As he was desperately swinging his hammer left and right, he noticed a red flag heading in their direction.

A nearly two-meter-tall man wearing a bull-cap helmet and wielding a giant sword entered his vision.

Although it was Alex’s first time encountering the figure, his instincts screamed the other party’s identity at him—the Barbarian King.

He was the one they needed to defeat in order to clear the Morgim Trial.

The Barbarian King’s presence was suffocating.

His every step caused the ground to tremble, and his crimson war-banner fluttered like a blood-soaked omen in the storm of battle.

The Minotaurs and Barbarians rallied behind him, their morale surging with a primal fury that even the Dwarves couldn’t withstand.

“That’s... that’s him.” Kara’s face paled as she positioned herself protectively in front of Latifa. “The Barbarian King. The one who united the scattered barbarian tribes!”

Runa’s body shuddered uncontrollably in the face of a mortal enemy she didn’t believe she could run from, let alone defeat.

The Barbarian King raised his sword, pointing its jagged edge toward Latifa. His voice was like a rolling avalanche, heavy and oppressive.

“Verdant Princess of Ul-Khazir, shall you surrender yourself peacefully, I will spare your people!” the Barbarian King shouted. “Agree, and I will grant you the privilege of becoming one of my wives. Refuse, and I will order mass slaughter of your people and make you a lowly plaything of mine!”

Alex gritted his teeth, stepping in front of Latifa with his hammer poised. “Sorry, pal. You’re not getting her.”

The Barbarian King chuckled, his lips curling into a grin beneath his bull-cap helmet.

“And who are you to defy me, boy?” the Barbarian King sneered. “Another fool who wants to play Hero?”

“I am no Hero,” Alex replied. “But I will not let you treat my Queen as your plaything!”

< Synchronization Rate increased by 10% >

< Current Synchronization Rate: 60% >

Note: New Achievement Unlocked! “Public Wife Declaration.” You just upgraded her title to Queen in front of a barbarian horde. Good luck surviving the next few minutes, my guy.

Alex wasn't able to stop herself from the heat of the moment from saying his inner thoughts.

Fortunately, he could say that it was the synchronization's fault at a later time if ever Latifa asked him why he suddenly called her his Queen.

Chapter 270: The One Who Bears The Broken Oath [Part 2]

The Barbarian King's smirk widened, as if amused by Alex's bold declaration.

"A Queen, huh?" the Barbarian King scoffed. "Then you shall watch as your so-called Queen is taken from you, boy. You're a fool who doesn't know his place."

Alex spun the hammer in his hand, adjusting his grip.

His heart pounded not from fear but from anger. The fire simmering beneath his calm exterior had been ignited by the Barbarian King's cruel words.

"Don't you think you talk too much for a glorified goat?" Alex retorted.

"Dim!" Dim Dim chimed in agreement from atop Alex's head, puffing its cheeks like a tiny, angry warlord.

The Barbarian King then took a single step, unleashing his aura at the same time.

The full power of a Rank 7 Barbarian burst forth, sending Alex flying as though he had been hit by a truck.

As that happened, Dim Dim jumped off at the perfect time and then threw a brittle vial at the Barbarian King, who reflexively sliced the battle in half.

The content of the vial scattered upon impact, sending an equally powerful shockwave at the Barbarian King.

Unfortunately, Dim Dim's move only forced the Barbarian King a single step backward, and the latter quickly followed up with an Aura Slash, which the Dim Sum God quickly evaded using its Air Strider Skill.

Just as Dim Dim was about to clash with the Barbarian King, a scream reached its ears, making it glance in the direction of Latifa.

The young lady had been grabbed by a Minotaur who wielded a wooden club in its right hand.

Kara and Runa were both on the ground, desperately trying to prop themselves up.

In the brief time Alex had been blown away by the Barbarian King, the Minotaur had moved, intending to capture the princess.

Kara and Runa did their best to block the attempt, but the opponent was too powerful for them to fight, which resulted in them being blown away by their clash.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim immediately used its Air Strider to head towards Latifa's direction, but the Barbarian King blocked its path.

The two clashed against each other, and another powerful shockwave erupted as they both used Auras to unleash their own powerful attacks to neutralize their opponent.

Unfortunately, the one who was on the losing end in that exchange was Dim Dim, who had been sent flying.

The Minotaur hurriedly retreated, protected by several Barbarian Thralls, as well as its own race.

"Let her go!"

A shout filled with anger spread in the battlefield as Alex charged forward.

The hammer in his hands was covered in golden flames, as if it had awakened some kind of power out of desperation.

“You will not take her from me!”

Blood spilled at the corner of his lips, but Alex didn’t hesitate to go all out in order to charge in the direction where Latifa was being taken.

He was like a War God who blazed forward to the biggest foe on the battlefield, ready to annihilate anything that stood in his way.

Unfortunately, while no one blocked him, the biggest threat on the battlefield was too powerful.

The Barbarian King clashed with Alex, forcing the latter to skid a few meters away.

The young man had still not recovered his balance when his sixth sense warned him that he was in grave danger.

Out of habit, he raised his left hand holding his cracked shield to protect himself from the Barbarian King’s follow-up attack.

“Die already!” the Barbarian King roared as he unleashed his strongest attack, intending to cut through Alex’s shield and the young man with a single sword strike.

A metallic clang spread in the surroundings as Everguard met with the Barbarian King’s sword.

Sparks flew as the two collided, followed by a pained cry as Alex was once again blown away by their clash.

The shield on his left hand shattered, and his arm was bent at a weird angle.

Everguard had managed to preserve his life. But in exchange, not only did it shatter, the momentum of the blow had also broken Alex's arm.

But it didn't end there.

The young man also suffered internal injuries as the remnants of the aura strike collided with his body, dealing serious injuries.

Just like a kite that had lost its strings, the young man fell and rolled several meters on the ground before finally coming to a stop.

He had suffered serious injuries and lost consciousness.

The only saving grace was that he was still alive.

The Chosen and the Champion of the Dwarves roared in anger and fury as they charged forward to reclaim their princess from their enemies.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim hurried to Alex's side and poured a potion on his mouth until nothing was left.

The little bun also poured a healing potion throughout the young man's body, but more on his broken arm, which had turned reddish black from its injury.

Alex's body twitched as the potion started taking effect, but the injuries he had sustained were beyond what potions alone could mend.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim frantically slapped Alex's cheeks with its tiny hands, trying to wake him up.

But Alex didn't respond.

All around them, the battlefield raged.

Kara and Runa were back on their feet, rallying all the Dwarves they could gather. But the sheer might of the Barbarians and Minotaurs was overwhelming.

The Barbarian King sneered as he watched Alex's broken body lying motionless on the ground before ordering his warriors to hold the line, so the Princess could be taken away to safety.

But in the middle of that chaos, something else stirred.

A faint, green glow began to pulse from Alex's chest.

It was dim at first, like the heartbeat of a dying ember.

But with every passing second, it grew stronger, pulsing in rhythm as if it were being fanned by something that had laid dormant inside of him for many years.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate: 65%... 70%... 75% >

— — —

Images flashed in his unconscious mind.

Princess Yvraine, kneeling beside a dying Kael, her tears mixing with his blood.

Kael, reaching out, grasping her hand, swearing an Oath that defied even death.

“I swear... even if this body shatters, my heart... my Oath... will never break.”

The scene shifted.

Latifa’s face.

Her tears.

Her voice called his name.

A moment later, he descended into the embrace of darkness.

A place where no light reached.

No sound.

No pain.

Just an empty, endless void.

But, within that place, a voice that didn’t belong to Alex stirred.

“I failed to protect the person very dear to me. Will you also fail to protect the one you wish to cherish all your life?”

No.

Alex moved his lips, but no words came. Though soundless, that was enough to relay his message to the dwarf who had died with regrets.

“Then what are you waiting for? I died, unable to fulfill my oath. Do you also plan to break yours?”

Kael’s voice then grew louder. His heart, filled with bitterness and pain, wished for a different ending than the one that happened in the past.

“Rise, Oathkeeper!” Kael shouted. “Rise and make your Oath!”

Alex’s body shuddered as if it had been electrocuted.

The green aura that emerged from his chest moved to his arm, snapping it back in place.

The injuries he received healed at a very fast rate, and the broken fragments of Everguard flew in his direction, rearranging themselves to reform back into a cracked shield.

His hammer, which lay a few meters away from him, also floated, covered in golden flames.

It then flew with determination, and a hand rose up to catch it.

— — —

< Synchronization Rate increased by 10% >

< Synchronization Rate 85% >

Note: Oathbreaker and Oathkeeper both said, “We’re done fighting with our inner demons. We’re on the same side now.”.

— — —

Alex's eyes slowly opened, and from the depths of his pupil, a purple flame burned brightly.

A single thought was on his mind, and that was to prevent the events that happened in the past from happening a second time in his own reality.