

Endless 501

Chapter 501: Breaking The Limits [Part 1]

Alex thought that the number of participants that would watch the final match would decrease because every candidate from Solara was now out of the picture.

But, to his surprise, the Colosseum was once again filled to the brim with people, which made him smile widely.

'... I can already see my profits waving at me after this tournament is over,' Alex thought.

Dim Dim had no idea what Alex was thinking. It was busy waving at crowds that were cheering the two of them.

After the little bun's dominating performance during its fight against Gus, it had gained many fans among the audience, and even the little boys, and girls on the streets that they passed along the way called its name, and even asked if they could hug the Dim Sum God.

Of course, Alex granted their wish, and some of the little girls even kissed Dim Dim's cheeks, making the little bun smile happily.

Alex already knew that Dim Dim was drawn to children because in its eyes, they were innocent, so making them happy made it happy.

"I would like to thank everyone for coming here today," Alex said, his voice reaching every corner of the Colosseum with the help of a microphone that Dim Dim lent to him.

"Many have come to fight here in the Sun Tourney, and today, we will witness the fight of the last two survivors, who managed to overcome all odds and reach the Finals."

The young man paused as two projections appeared above his head.

They were none other than Charles, and Renard, who would be fighting against each other in a few minutes.

“Although the Sun Tourney ends today, I hope that we will see more of it in the future,’ Alex stated. “I hope that you all enjoyed being here, just as much as I enjoyed hosting this tournament.”

The crowd cheered as if to say that they did enjoy watching the battles in the tournament.

“And, without further delay... let me introduce our finalists!” Alex shouted as he pointed to the right side of the arena.

“Hailing from Briarwood Village, and the Dark Horse of the tournament, let us all welcome, Charles Lambert!”

As soon as his name was called, Charles stepped out of the waiting area, and walked confidently towards the arena.

Cheers descended from the audience stands, with Nessia clapping her hands while standing up.

She couldn’t help but feel very proud because the one standing at the arena was none other than her boyfriend.

Truth be told, now that Charles had stepped into the limelight, Nessia was feeling a little worried that he would become too popular among the First Years.

Even now, some of the ladies from noble houses were looking at her boyfriend with great interest.

Some of them had managed to get some credible information about Charles, and found out that he was only a commoner.

But, instead of feeling repulsed, the ladies became more smitten because they always loved a story where a commoner did their best to win the heart of a princess.

For them, this was the most romantic setup, and Charles fit their idea of a prince wearing commoner's clothes.

Girls wanted someone strong to protect them, and seeing the young man claw his way from the bottom up, was a wonderful story for them.

Charles stood and waved at the crowd, knowing that they had come to be entertained.

In fact, Alex was the one who told his two friends to cooperate a bit and wave at the crowds to hype them up before the battle.

No one wanted to support a snobbish guy, so doing the opposite would win them some brownie points.

"And now, I present to you, the young man who had created the spark, which paved the path for this tournament!" Alex pointed to the left side of the Colosseum. "Everyone, let us welcome the Saintess' close fiancé—errr friend! Renard Vale!"

Renard sighed before stepping out of the waiting area. 'I swear this guy is doing this on purpose.'

Since Alex put him on the spot, he no longer felt inclined to follow his club president's advice to wave at the crowd.

Renard simply walked with confidence, not paying attention to the countless gazes that had locked on to his body.

High above the VIP Area, the Saintess sighed internally.

'Alex, I'll make sure to have a proper talk with you later,' Lady Celestria thought. 'You're such a troublemaker.'

It was at that moment when the Saintess thought of something that would make the annoying announcer suffer after the tournament ended.

She knew that Alex had a percentage of the profit in this tournament. But, since he annoyed her, she decided to use something that many big earners hate the most.

And that was none other than taxes.

'Let's see if you can still smile later after I'm done with you.' Lady Celestria smirked, already imagining the young man's pained expression when he would need to pay a hefty tax for doing business in the Kingdom of Solara.

Alex had no idea that he had pissed the wrong person, looked at Renard with a helpless smile.

Seeing that Mr. I-have-trust-issues was being stubborn, he decided to not provoke him any further.

"Well then, are both fighters ready?" Alex asked.

"Ready," Charles replied.

"Yes," Renard answered.

With both fighters giving their consent, Alex raised his hand.

But, instead of him giving the signal to start the match, someone else did the honors.

"Battle Start!" Dim Dim said before pulling the string of a party popper, shooting confetti in the air with a bang.

The two fighters in the arena immediately took action, and clashed against each other.

This was the first time that the two of them would be fighting seriously against each other, and both of them were taking it seriously.

They exchanged a few blows, as if trying to assess the strength of their opponent, as well as how to break their rhythm.

With each collision, their speed, and attacks were gradually becoming faster, and stronger, creating booming sounds at every blow they unleashed.

Alex was paying close attention to this battle because he was also very curious on who would become the Champion of the Tournament.

Would it be Charles, the person whose destiny was changed by Alex.

Or, would it be Renard, one of the three Main Heroes of ELO.

One of them had an uncertain future, while the other was hailed as a Hero.

Alex was a little biased, and supported Charles more than Renard because he had a soft spot for the underdogs.

Besides, the time he had spent in playing the unique character, Charles Lambert, allowed him to understand his hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

Charles' future was completely blank.

No one knew what, where, and who he would be in the future.

But, Alex wanted to believe that Charles would make his name in the world of Arcana, reaching the height of where its protectors stood.

He genuinely wished that Charles would be there to fight alongside him, and the Heroes of Arcana, when the final battle to decide its future were to come.

After a few minutes of brutal engagement, the two fighters distanced themselves from each other as if they had come to an agreement.

Charles covered his body in black obsidian, while golden lightning bolts snaked around Renard's form, making him look like a Lightning God.

After staring at each other for nearly a minute, the two once again charged against each other.

They turned into a black, and golden comet that clashed repeatedly in the arena, as if they were forces of good and evil, who wanted to settle the score once and for all.

Chapter 502: Breaking The Limits [Part 2]

"I guess they didn't lie to me this time."

A man with shoulder-length white hair looked down on the arena after directly materializing in the VIP Balcony.

Duke Percival and Lady Celestria instantly turned solemn at the sight of the man whom their King labeled as a Calamity-Class Existence.

This person's strength was at the peak of Rank 8, making him one of the few individuals who shouldn't be provoked no matter what.

In fact, the King of Solara had once humbled himself and negotiated with the man who could destroy his kingdom if he wished to.

Fortunately, their talks had been fruitful, giving the man and his people the title of "Untouchables" within the Kingdom of Solara.

In fact, the Duke and the Saintess had a hunch that Charles was in the process of becoming a true Void-Touched.

They had sent people to monitor him but not provoke him in any way.

Since only thirteen Void-Touched could exist at a time, the man with shoulder-length white hair was overprotective of them.

Seeing that Charles' and Renard's battle was increasing in intensity, a small smile tugged at the corner of the white-haired man's lips.

His hair was white, but he didn't look old.

In fact, he looked quite handsome and seemed to only be in his early thirties.

His name was Morax.

A person who could move unhindered in the Kingdom of Solara. Those who dared to provoke or anger him would be put to death, not by him but the King of Solara himself.

It was part of the compromise that the King of Solara had proposed, which the leader of the Void-Touched had accepted.

The smile on Morax's face widened as the battle between the two teenagers reached new heights.

"They are treating each other as whetstones," Morax muttered. "Kids these days sure are feisty. I like it... Um?"

The Void-Touched's gaze subconsciously shifted to the little white creature on top of Alex's head, which made him frown.

As if sensing his gaze, Dim Dim turned around to look at him.

The eyes of the Void-Touched widened in shock when he confirmed his suspicions.

Dim Dim smiled faintly and pressed a little finger on its lips, as if telling Morax to remain silent.

Morax nodded before shifting his attention to the young man, whose head the little bun was perched on.

'Is he a servant of the Lovers?' Morax wondered after sensing the divinity of the Lovers' in Alex's body. 'But someone else has also put their mark on this child. By the looks of it, it's older than the Lovers.'

However, after digging deeper into Alex's hidden information, Morax shuddered when he realized that his assumption was wrong.

Aside from the Lovers, there were two other marks of divinity on Alex's body.

One was placed on his chest, where his heart was located.

And the other one was on the young man's forehead.

However, that wasn't the last of it.

Three other faint divinities were circling Alex's body like satellites.

This meant that three Apostles had a close relationship with Alex.

'Just who is this kid?' Morax mused. 'He has so many blessings on him. Is that even possible?'

Usually, a person could only receive one blessing from a Deity of Arcana. Having two was already pushing their luck to the limit.

And yet, Alex had three of them. He was also close to three Apostles that belonged to different Deities.

Since Duke Percival and Lady Celestria were paying close attention to Morax, they had seen the changes in his expression.

When they tried to deduce his line of sight, the two frowned at the same time.

'Did he notice how shameless Alex is?'

Duke Percival and Lady Celestria thought at the same time.

If Morax had focused on Charles and Renard, that would have been understandable.

However, Alex seemed to have attracted his attention, which was utterly baffling to Duke Percival and Lady Celestria. They could only assume that Morax was reacting that way because he disliked shameless people and their ilk.

Little did Alex know, yet another incredibly powerful but troublesome individual was observing closely.

His eyes were fixed on the battle that was starting to reach its limit.

A loud crack made everyone wince as Renard managed to land a direct hit on the black armored carapace that covered Charles' body.

But Charles also took that opportunity to counterattack, grabbing Renard's head with both hands before headbutting him.

However, the one who suffered more damage was not Renard but Charles himself.

“How can you headbutt the most hard-headed person ever?” Alex facepalmed. “That’s like challenging Chuck to a competition to see who is more shameless.”

Charles regretted his decision, but he was quick to get over it as well.

To buy time to regain his composure, he summoned a Rank 3 Obsidian Warrior Ant to engage Renard while he backed away.

Renard roared as he unleashed a punch at the Warrior Ant. But the ant held its ground and imitated its Master by headbutting Renard.

A screech of pain escaped the Ant as it suffered the same fate as its Master.

Although Renard was hurt by this attack, it hurt the Ant more.

“Why do you keep targeting my head?!” Renard exploded in equal parts frustration and bewilderment as he punched the Ant with all of his strength, sending it flying toward the barrier of the arena.

But he also made a mistake.

Charles had already regained his composure and attacked at the same time Renard unleashed his blow.

Left with no choice but to defend himself, Renard raised both of his arms to block Charles’ fist that was blazing with dark flames.

Knowing that these flames weren’t ordinary flames, he had the golden lightning bolts on his body concentrate on his arms so they would be able to block or mitigate whatever effect those black flames had.

A resounding boom, similar to the clap of thunder, reverberated through the arena. The powerful shock wave blew both fighters away.

Not wanting to give their opponent any advantages, both of them used the protective dome to launch themselves towards each other once more.

This time, they focused all their strength on one final attack, unanimously deciding to defeat their opponent and claim the title of Champion in one go.

Chapter 503: When The Void Whispers [Part 1]

At the very beginning, Charles had only wanted to reunite with his sisters and find a cure for Eris.

His little sister had been suffering from Child's Bane, a disease which doomed its sufferers to a short life.

When his older sister, Vivian, had found out that Frieden Academy was in possession of a pill that could cure Child's Bane, he had decided that he would get into the school no matter what it took.

Little had he known that the trial in the Dungeon of Beginnings should've been the last time he would be seen alive.

That had been his fate.

It would've been the end of his journey if not for Alex traveling all the way to Briarwood Village just to help him.

The young man could have taken the easier path.

But because he had known that ELO was not a game and that these characters were real, he had refused to turn a blind eye to someone meant to die helplessly.

It had been a huge gamble. Aware that he alone couldn't save Charles, Alex had asked his Master, Cairo, to help him.

Then, more helpers had come.

Elaine and Efa, the two adventurers he had once saved, had arrived to support them. They wanted to repay Alex, so they decided to accompany him in his dungeon expedition.

To his surprise, Lavinia and her maid, Roselia, had also come to help. While they didn't know why Alex, and Cairo would go all the way to Briarwood Village to help someone, they decided to join their group as well.

A full party of Rank 2 and Rank 4 Fighters had assembled to help clear the Dungeon of Beginnings.

Although there had been many ups and downs, they had been able to endure those deadly adventures until help had finally arrived.

Thanks to this, Charles had successfully reunited with his sisters and enrolled in Frieden Academy.

Alex had even bought the pill that could cure Eris. For this kindness, Charles was truly thankful.

Since the Void-Touched had achieved his initial goal, the only thing left for him to do was to repay Alex for being there when he had needed him the most.

And thus, Charles embraced the power that he gained through many chance encounters.

He didn't know if he was taking the right path or not. However, he had a feeling that he was going the correct way.

And now that he was facing Renard in the final match of the Sun Tourney, he understood that the path to growing stronger involved fighting with strong people like his friend and club member.

When he and his opponent clashed mid-air, they were both blown away by the force of their strike.

Agony flashed across Charles' face as his body slammed against the barrier.

His right arm, which he had used to unleash his strongest blow, hung loose by his side.

It was bent slightly, but noticeable enough for the spectators to tell that it was surely broken.

The knuckles of his right hand were also bleeding. Even the whites of his bones were exposed.

But his gaze never faltered.

He refused to surrender.

He refused to lose.

Even if it killed him, he would fight.

Even if he had to bite Renard, he would not back down!

High above the VIP balcony overlooking the arena, Morax smiled faintly.

“He’s going to awaken,” Morax noted. “But his opponent is also going for one last blow.”

Renard once again unleashed his ultimate skill, Limit Break. Golden lightning bolts snaked across his body and shattered the ground beneath his feet.

He was just as beaten and battered as Charles was, but his right arm wasn’t broken. Yes, he was bleeding, but he was already used to pain and suffering.

Back when Alex had played Renard’s character, he had even thought that the latter was a bonafide masochist.

Of course, he didn't dare to let Renard know about this.

Renard's right hand shone brightly like a miniature sun.

Seeing this, Alex couldn't help but gasp in shock because this was the initial materialization of Renard's killing blow, Dragon Rush [EX].

'It's only in the initial stages, which means he hasn't mastered it yet,' Alex thought. 'But I can tell he has truly trained his Berserker Dragon Barrage [EX] to its limits during this past month.'

In the game, the animation of Renard's Dragon Rush [EX] was awe-inspiring. It materialized an ancient golden dragon whose power could obliterate anyone below Rank 6.

However, after unleashing this attack, the young man would enter a lethargic state, which was why it could only be used as a finishing blow.

If it failed, Renard would be left utterly defenseless.

The hair on the back of Charles' neck stood on end. His sixth sense screamed at him, telling him that there was nothing he could do to block Renard's attack even though it would inevitably claim his life.

But Charles bit his lip, drawing blood. Strangely enough, that bit of pain was enough to help him overcome the fear and intimidation threatening to take hold of his senses.

He refused to fall. He refused to surrender!

He had seen how Alex challenged opponents stronger than him over and over again.

If he wished to stand beside his benefactor, he must also risk his life or die trying!

The grin on Morax's face widened when he sensed a familiar ripple coming from Charles' body.

And as if the world recognized his determination, the sky darkened.

The sudden change caught everyone completely by surprise.

Within the Colosseum, Renard was the only spot of light as the golden lightning all over him flickered.

The young man frowned because something... unknown was staring at him from the darkness.

In fact, it wasn't a single eye.

Countless eyes glowed in the dark, locking onto his body, which made him shudder involuntarily.

And within that darkness, aside from those eyes, he saw something darker than black.

He didn't understand how he was able to see it, but from that darkness, a silhouette of a young man that didn't look human gazed upon him.

Chapter 504: When The Void Whispers [Part 2]

"Dim Dim..." Dim Dim muttered, making Alex narrow his eyes.

The young man even subconsciously summoned Everguard and a few magical shields, threatened by the creature standing on the arena.

Suddenly, Renard and the silhouette of a golden dragon simultaneously roared.

He then charged toward the darkness, like a Hero of Light about to vanquish the greatest evil in the world.

Time seemed to slow down as Renard made his way towards his target.

Golden lightning bolts trailed in his wake as his fist shot forward, carrying the strength of a Golden Dragon's at its peak.

The creature within that darkness also made his move.

A single step.

A single breath.

A single heartbeat.

The arena trembled as an overwhelming pressure surged from Charles' body. It was as if an entire mountain suddenly moved from its thousands of years of slumber.

Renard's golden brilliance slammed into that ocean of darkness, yet it was not snuffed out. Instead, the two forces collided with a blinding flash that split the arena into black and gold.

A thunderous shockwave expanded outwards, rocking everything in its path.

The protective barrier around the arena cracked like glass under a hammer.

Students screamed.

Professors instinctively raised barriers.

Even Alex felt Everguard quiver in his hands as he braced himself.

At the center of the collision stood Charles.

His broken arm dangled uselessly.

His body shook violently.

Half of his figure was still Charles—bloodied and battered, but human.

The other half... had morphed into a shadowed outline, like something that stepped out of a rift between realities.

His right eye remained human, burning with unyielding resolve. But his left eye glowed a deep, unfathomable violet.

The color of the Void.

Renard's Dragon Rush [EX] hit him squarely in the chest.

Charles did not move.

The darkness behind him surged, forming a massive horned apparition whose countless eyes shone eerily in the darkness.

Renard froze mid-strike, his fist quivering and pupils shrinking.

It felt as if he had punched the night sky itself... and the night sky had stared back.

Suddenly, the young man realized that his fist was being held in place by a black hand.

Charles' lips slowly parted. His voice echoed within the Colosseum, reaching every corner. Everyone whose hearts were beating at that moment heard his words.

“When the Void whispers despair into your bones... the only answer is to roar back and keep fighting.”

A loud crack then reached everyone's ears, followed by Renard's scream.

From behind Charles, a scorpion-like tail emerged, pointing its deadly tip at the young man, whose entire body was frozen as he faced such an existence for the first time.

Without even a warning, the deadly tail moved so fast that before anyone realized what was happening, it already pierced Renard's chest.

A few seconds later, the young man turned into particles of light, fading away in the darkness, leaving only Charles standing as if he was the only living creature left in the world.

"You managed to win," Morax said softly. "But at what cost?"

Even so, a faint smile still hung on the Void-Touched's lips because he was all too familiar with what was currently happening to Charles.

Having defeated his target, Charles glanced in Alex's direction.

The overwhelming darkness seemed to have gone out of control, and its next target was none other than Charles' savior.

"Alex... run!" Charles shouted.

He tried to control his body, but similar to what had happened to Vaan in the past, he was only a spectator who could watch helplessly as someone else used his body to hurt others, breaking his heart little by little.

But just as the darkness was about to swallow Alex whole, a silver light flew from the audience stands and clashed with the darkness.

"Hey, hands off, you filthy creature. Get your hands away from my friends."

Charles or whatever possessed his body roared in defiance as the power of darkness and that silver light contended with each other.

But the darkness was unable to overpower the silver light. Everyone saw Vaan standing proudly on a chariot that was being pulled by two Alicorns.

He was holding a white banner emblazoned with bold golden "VII" that seemed to glow with its own light.

Everyone marveled at the beauty of this "lady" knight in shining armor, unaware that "she" was a boy. Some of the guys even fell in love with Vaan at first sight.

"She" looked so majestic, so angelic, so righteous that it was hard to not fall for her charms.

And yet, he, who had sworn his fealty to his liege, Alex Stratos, would not sit by and allow anyone to hurt him under his watch.

Charles roared, his anger rising to the limit, yet Vaan was unfazed.

"Charge! Charge! CHARGE!" Vaan ordered, pointing his finger toward Charles, his voice carrying a law that couldn't be denied by the world.

The Alicorns and the chariot shone brightly, breaking the stalemate and pushing forward in one swift and unstoppable charge.

A pained cry escaped Charles as the Chariot bulldozed him, trampling over the darkness that had taken over his moment of weakness.

Morax frowned when he realized that the light that orbited around Alex like a small satellite had the same color as the "girl" currently saving him from the Void-Touched rampage.

'An Apostle of The Chariot,' Morax thought. 'I guess the show is over... at least for now.'

Vaan circled around the Colosseum in his chariot, dispersing the darkness in his wake.

After one full lap, the chariot charged toward Alex and stopped by his side.

Vaan looked at his liege with a faint smile and even extended his hand towards Alex.

Alex looked at the delicate young man, who could easily pass as a very cute girl. If not for the fact that he knew that Vaan was actually a guy, he might have accepted that hand and squealed, "My Hero~"

Instead, he simply raised his hand for a high five.

Vaan sighed helplessly, but he still grinned in the end and exchanged a high five with Alex, earning cheers from the crowd, who had finally regained their senses.

"The two of them look so good together," one of the ladies sighed.

"A match made in heaven!" another lady commented.

Lavinia glanced at Lumi, then lightly tapped her shoulder.

"Hey, have you confirmed that Vaan is a boy?" Lavinia asked.

"No," Lumi replied, looking conflicted. "Latifa asked, but I didn't want to do it. I respect Vaan's privacy, you know?"

"But you don't respect Alex's privacy," Lavinia countered.

"Yeah, because Vaan is actually human."

Lavinia snorted. She had once gone to Alex's room and seen Lumi inside. It's obvious that Lumi's interaction with the young man had changed.

Although she still dissed him in public, she spoiled him very much in private.

Feeling defensive, Lumi continued, "Vaan is Vaan. Alex is Alex. Why should I respect Alex's privacy? What privacy does a philandering scum deserve?"

Lavinia wanted to roll her eyes. However, she resisted the urge and simply looked back at the arena.

Vaan had already dismounted from the chariot. He was lightly patting Alex's body, as if making sure that he wasn't hurt anywhere.

"I'm fine, Vaan," Alex said. "You stopped Charles before he got to me."

"You're not fine. Something managed to slip through," Vaan replied as he pulled out something dark from Alex's body, which looked like a small spirit or miasma. "Stand still. I see three more of them hiding inside your body."

The sight of that... parasitic thing being pulled out of him shocked Alex, but he made sure to stay still as Vaan cleared his body of that unknown element that had come out of Charles.

After making sure that nothing else remained inside Alex's body, Vaan followed him to the arena to inspect Charles' condition.

"Hey, are you alright?" Alex asked Charles, who was lying on the ground.

"I'm hurting all over," Charles replied. "Getting trampled by horses and a chariot isn't exactly something I signed up for in this tournament."

Vaan giggled. Relief washed over him after he confirmed that his friend had finally regained control of his body.

“Let me help you up.” Alex supported Charles’ body until the latter was able to get to his feet.

Vaan then moved to hold Charles’ left hand and raised it high, prompting Alex to finish his job as the commentator.

“And the Champion of the Sun Tourney!” Alex shouted. “Charles Lambeeeeeeeeeeeeert!”

“””Whooooooo!”””

The audience cheered and applauded the champion of the tournament.

Although they didn’t know what had happened earlier, that didn’t change the fact that it was one of the most exciting matches that they had watched in their lifetimes.

“Well done, young man,” Morax mumbled as he, too, clapped. “I expect great things from you... and your friends.”

After saying those words, the Calamity-Class existence in Solara disappeared completely.

He planned to visit his brothers and sisters, excited to tell them that a new member of their family had made his mark in the world of Arcana.

Chapter 505: The Power Of A Little Bun [Part 1]

The awards ceremony came right after Alex had declared Charles the champion.

“Congratulations, Charles,” Alex said. “You did well.”

“But I lost control in the end...” Charles replied, embarrassed.

“Then the solution is simple.” Alex smirked. “You just need to continue training hard until you can control your power and not the other way around. Isn’t that right, Renard?”

Alex glanced at the young man who had come in second.

“That’s right.” Renard replied before turning to Charles. “Next time, I won’t lose.”

There was a firmness in his declaration, which made Charles feel relieved instead of anxious.

Renard had always been strong-willed, and this was in line with his usual way of handling things. He had grown up knowing that he couldn’t win all of his battles, and he believed there was more to learn from the battles he lost than battles he won.

And he definitely learned a lot from Charles, who had shown power that far surpassed his expectations.

“See! All’s well that ends well.” Alex nodded.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim smiled happily because its friends were safe and sound.

The Champion would get seventy-percent of the money in the prize pool and a Rare Artifact from the Headmaster of Solara Academy.

Since Harry had also gained a lot from this collaboration with Alex, he wasn’t too stingy when it came to the rewards.

“The prize money is 140,000 Gold Coins,” Harry said as he handed Charles a small pouch. “Also, you also get this rare item. It’s called a Memory Ball. It’s very useful for adventures since it records the path you take.

“If you’re lost, just use the Memory Ball. It will guide you back to the entrance or help you retrace your steps. It’s a good item for people who have no sense of direction. Charles, remember this—even in the darkness, you can always come back to the light.”

The Headmaster of Solara Academy gave the young man a long and hard look before patting his shoulder.

“As for you, Renard Vale, you will receive forty thousand gold coins,” Harry added. “That was a good fight. I look forward to your future growth. Also... if ever you wish to switch academies, you’re more than welcome to stay here in Solara Academy.”

Somewhere in the sea of spectators, Professor Rowan felt his lips twitching. He and Harry were good friends, but seeing the bastard openly try to poach one of his students still made him shake his head helplessly.

Harry also patted Renard’s shoulder before turning to the VIP Seats to give Lady Celestria a playful wink.

The Saintess’s right eye twitched. Everyone seemed to want to get on her nerves as of late.

“Once again, let me present to you the Sun Tourney’s Champion!” Harry raised Charles’ right hand. “I look forward to the next Sun Tourneys here at Solara Academy!”

The crowd cheered, genuinely happy at the idea of more Sun Tourneys being held in the future.

Clearly, the Headmaster had found a good way to earn a lot of money and had no intention of doing it only once. Just like Alex, he profited massively from the Gambling Dens that had to get permission from him to start their business.

An hour later...

Alex went to Harry’s office to collect his shares of the rewards.

When he got there, he was surprised to see that Lady Celestria was also there to talk to the Headmaster.

"You're finally here," Lady Celestria said as she smiled sweetly. For some reason, that made Alex shudder. "I've been waiting for you."

For a brief moment, Alex thought he had seen a bulging nerve right above the young lady's eyebrow. It would mean that the Saintess was incredibly pissed off about something, but getting so worked up wasn't in line with her personality.

Thinking that he was just tired and seeing things, Alex entered the room and walked toward the Headmaster to get his sweet, sweet money.

Harry didn't hesitate to hand Alex a small pouch. The bag weighed about half as light as he expected it to weigh. He blinked in confusion and squeezed the bag a few times to make sure his senses weren't playing tricks on him.

"Alex, do you know that any business conducted here in Solara has rules to obey," Lady Celestria explained in a cloyingly sweet voice. "And taxes are an important part of doing business."

"T-Taxes?" Alex looked at her in disbelief. "You taxed me, Saintess? I mean... do you even have the right to do that?"

"You bet I do," Lady Celestria replied, still smiling. "Also, I am here to ensure that the laws are properly followed. Isn't that right, Headmaster?"

"O-Of course!" Harry smiled while beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

Lady Celestria didn't tax the Headmaster because she knew that he had been renovating several buildings to make room for the next batch of students. Besides, he had yet to piss her off as much as Alex had.

"Let me get this straight, Your Grace," Alex said. "You taxed me because it is the law and you are here to reinforce it, right?"

“That’s right.” Lady Celestria nodded.

“Phew!” Alex patted his chest in relief, which surprised the Saintess. “And here I thought I did something bad. It seems that there has been a misunderstanding, My Lady. You see, the contract for my collaboration with the Headmaster wasn’t signed by me. I’m just here to collect the money for that person.”

“Huh?” Lady Celestria blinked. “What are you talking about?”

Alex smirked before glancing at the Headmaster. “Sir Harry, please show the Saintess our contract.”

Harry didn’t know why Alex looked so carefree, but he took out the contract that was inside his storage ring.

“My Lady, please check the name of the Party A that has signed the contract in your hands,” Alex said calmly.

Lady Celestria frowned, but did as told.

It was then that she realized that the signature clearly did not say Alex.

The Saintess blinked as she looked at the cute name that was written beneath the line as well as the little emblem—which served as the signature—pressed above it.

Dim Dim.

That was the name of the person who signed the contract, which made the Saintess look at the little bun on top of Alex’s head.

Dim Dim reached out to take something from its dimensional storage and handed it to Alex.

Alex accepted it and presented it to the Saintess.

The young lady looked at the silver token, which was inscribed with words that almost made the vessel on her forehead pop.

Dim Dim: Tax Exempt – Issued by the Slime Princess.

At first, Lady Celestria wanted to ask if Alex and Dim Dim were making fun of her. However, at that moment, her Deity, The Sun, sent her a message that made her look at the little bun in disbelief.

“That token is real. Dim Dim is exempt from paying taxes.”

That was the message that was sent to her by The Sun, proving that the token was authentic.

“Ahem!” Dim Dim raised its body proudly.

It was one of the only two creatures in Arcana that exempt from paying taxes for life.

The other one was Eiko, the Guardian of Slime Paradise.

“Since you are here to upload the law, My Lady, please help me with this injustice!” Alex exclaimed indignantly as if he had been wronged. “I mean... It’s just five million gold coins. I’m sure that the Saintess will not do me dirty, right?”

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim raised its little hand as if to back up Alex’s words.

Faced with the shameless young man and the tax-exempt little bun, the Saintess knew that this was a battle that she had no chance of winning.

Chapter 506: The Power Of A Little Bun [Part 2]

Two minutes later, Lady Celestria very reluctantly took out a pouch from her storage ring.

This was the other half of Alex's profits, which she had taken from the Headmaster as "donation" for the Temple of the Sun.

She wanted to get back at Alex and make him pay for repeatedly embarrassing her during the tournament. But since her plan didn't work out, she had no choice but to return the money to its rightful owner, Dim Dim.

What the Saintess didn't know was that Alex was fully aware of the Solara's tax law.

That was why he had made sure that the one signing all the contracts was Dim Dim, for only death and divine intervention could defeat taxes.

Dim Dim might look cute, harmless, and innocent. But behind that smile were many privileges. Tax exemption was but one of them.

This was the power of the little bun!

"Thank you, My Lady," Alex said happily as he accepted the pouch from the young lady and put it straight into his own storage ring. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone about what happened here today. Also, if you like, I can tie up Renard and send him later to your room. Do you want me to do that?"

Lady Celestria glared at Alex venomously before leaving the office without saying a word.

The Headmaster chuckled awkwardly before apologizing to Alex because things got a little complicated.

However, he was also quite surprised that the young man had been able to think far ahead and anticipate the legal issues that might arise after the tournament.

With millions of gold coins secured inside his storage ring, Alex and Dim Dim returned triumphantly to the hotel, where a celebration party for Charles and Renard was about to begin.

When Alex arrived, the festivities had just started. Chuck was the emcee of the event, entertaining and delighting the crowd with his antics.

The moment Alex stepped into the biggest event hall of the hotel, Lex fell into step behind him.

He had asked his Guardian to protect him because he might get mobbed after getting his profits from Harry.

At the corner of the room, Professor Rowan was chatting with Charles.

The Headmaster had also realized that the young man was a Void-Touched. He planned to train Charles personally to ensure he could control his power as soon as possible. For everyone's sake, whatever had happened during the final match shouldn't happen again.

And to Renard's surprise, he was actually surrounded by girls. Even Alex had to do a double take at this strange sight.

As one of the three Main Heroes of Arcana, Renard wasn't losing out in the looks department.

The ladies just generally avoided him because no level of handsomeness could make up for his habit of looking at the world like it owed him money!

But after seeing the battle, they understood that he was a great catch who could help their noble families rise a step higher!

However, it wasn't just Renard who seemed to be in the spotlight.

Vaan was surrounded by many men, all desperately trying to court "her" with promises of eternal love, mountains of jewels, and more titles than "she" could remember.

Just like Renard, Vaan had shocked everyone by unleashing a power that rivaled Charles'.

In fact, Vaan had even gotten the upper hand and trampled Charles underneath his chariot.

“She” had always been very popular in the academy. Also, “she” was part of the Damne Family, which was a Viscount Family.

As the only remaining bloodline of this prestigious house, Vaan had always been a target for the nobles who wished to secure the lands belonging to “her” family.

However, since she was always sticking with Alex, the majority of her fans thought that the young man had managed to seduce her.

No one doubted their closeness after hearing how Alex had stood up for her when a greasy noble tried to coerce her into marriage.

Still, after that display of power and beauty, the guys finally threw caution to the wind.

Although Alex and Vaan were very close, they didn’t seem to be formally engaged. This meant that Vaan was fair game. Right now, “she” and Renard were now facing the full brunt of their popularity.

After seeing Alex enter the event hall, Vaan finally felt that his savior had come. Without even saying a word, he slipped away from the crowd, grabbed Alex’s arm, and pulled him toward the table where the other members of Endless Horizon were seated.

“Did you not like your sudden rise in popularity?” Alex teased. “By the way, have you been properly debuted and introduced to noble society? This might be a good opportunity for that.”

“Give me a break,” Vaan said helplessly. “Please. Be a good boy and act as my shield. I won’t survive like this otherwise.”

“Fine.” Alex smirked and allowed his friend to use him as a buffer against his admirers.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim jumped and landed in Lapis’s arms.

“Good job, Dim Dim,” Lapis said, happily patting its head. “Do you want a slice of cake?”

“Dim~”

“Good. Say ahh...”

Lapis had always had a hard time finding true friends. She knew that most of the people who approached her only did so because she was a princess and because they wanted to form a connection with her older sister, Aeris.

This was also why she liked Dim Dim very much. Unlike the rest of the students, the little bun had zero hidden agenda toward her.

Of course, the members of Endless Horizon didn’t treat her any differently either, so she also formed closer ties with them.

“So, did you get IT?” Lumi asked.

“Of course,” Alex replied. “The Saintess tried to get in the way, but she didn’t know that I already covered all my bases.”

“What are the two of you talking about?” Lavinia chimed in. “And why did the Saintess try to get in your way, Alex?”

Alex didn’t hide anything from Lavinia and told her about what had happened in the Headmaster’s office.

After he finished his tale, Lavinia looked very amused. She even pitied the Saintess for being outsmarted.

“So, what’s the plan?” Lumi asked. “You will not be joining the Field Trip, right?”

“No,” Alex answered. “Tomorrow, I’ll be leaving for the Whispering Valley.”

Lavinia and Lumi nodded in understanding because they already knew about Alex’s Treasure Hunting Expedition.

Naturally, Lumi would be accompanying Alex on his trip.

Lavinia and Evangeline also wanted to go, but things might go awry if Professor Rowan realized that a handful of his students had suddenly gone missing.

If it were only Alex and Lumi leaving their group quietly, Lavinia and Evangeline could still make some excuses in order to buy the young man some time so that he could return to the city before they returned to Frieden Academy.

That was the role that they were going to play for his sake, which would require some effort and cunning on their part.

The party lasted until nine in the evening before the students finally returned to their rooms to rest.

Nessia accompanied Charles to his room because she was worried that he would suffer another episode. Although he was not using his powers, she was concerned that his weakened state meant that whatever was lurking inside him could slip past his defenses.

Alex and Dim Dim retired to their room because they would go on an adventure when morning came.

Lex would also accompany them on this trip, so Alex wasn’t too worried about facing dangerous monsters inside the Whispering Valley, where something unexpected was waiting for him.

Chapter 507: Unexpected Meeting In The Whispering Valley

An hour before sunrise, Alex, Lumi, and Dim Dim left their hotel room and headed to the South Gate of the city.

Lex was already waiting for them with a carriage.

“I will say this now, but traveling to the Whispering Valley at this time of the year is quite dangerous,” the coachman said, concerned. “The mist in that area becomes so thick that it’s nearly impossible to see anything.

“Also, it is the mating season of several monster species that live there. They will become more aggressive at this time, so people usually avoid this route during this time of the year.”

“I understand,” Alex replied. “Please take us to the drop-off point. We will take it from there.”

The path to the Whispering Valley was about three miles away from the main road that travelers all over Solara used to reach the capital city.

No carriage would take anyone there. The coachman would drop them along the main road and they would have to hike the rest of the way.

However, at this time, the fog was so thick that there was nearly zero visibility.

In the end, Lex had to pay the coachman extra gold coins just to convince him to even go all the way to the drop-off point. They couldn’t exactly haggle with the coachman because he was already the only one willing to accept their commission.

As the carriage finally started moving, Alex, Lumi, Lex, and Dim Dim had nothing else to do but rest until they reached their destination.

According to the coachman, it would take them at least three hours.

Lumi sighed. “It’s quite unfortunate that we can’t use Princess Xenia’s airship. Maybe we should have taken Vaan. His chariot is surely faster than this carriage.”

“You’re right, but I have asked him to look after Charles and Renard while we are away,” Alex replied. “Although the tournament is over, there might still be some idiots who want to cause trouble for them.”

“You’re thinking too much,” Lex commented. “Professor Rowan is there to oversee the First Years, so they will be as safe as they can be.”

Dim Dim nodded. “Dim!”

“Then can you tell me more about the Whispering Valley?” Lumi asked. “I haven’t heard of it before.”

To be honest, Alex really didn’t know much about it as well. He only knew two things for certain. One, it was located in the southwest of Avalon. Two, it was named after the sound that it produced.

The winds passing through the valley made a sound similar to murmuring or whistling.

Locals had started calling it Whispering Valley a long time ago. To this day, its name hadn’t changed.

Fortunately, Lex seemed to know a little bit about Whispering Valley.

“In the past, Whispering Valley wasn’t really a valley but a wide open plain,” Lex stated. “But a great battle between two Rank 9 changed the topography of the land, creating a valley.”

“Do you know the names of those Rank 9 Powerhouses, Sir Lex?” Lumi asked.

“No. This happened well before I was even born, but I’m guessing that if anyone survived that battle, they are probably still alive today.”

When a human managed to reach Rank 8, their lifespan increased by at least three hundred years.

According to rumors, reaching Rank 9 would further increase their lifespan to a thousand years. For those lucky and powerful enough to become a Paragon, they could expect to live for five to ten thousand years.

Of course, long-lived races like the elves could easily reach that number. If any of them reached those high ranks, they could probably live for tens of thousands of years.

Lex then made a gesture with his hands, creating a soundproof environment so that they could discuss some important matters.

“Well then, what are we expecting to find in the Whispering Valley?” Lex inquired. “The map you showed me came from a treasure chest, so its authenticity is guaranteed. But what exactly is there?”

“I have no idea, Sir Lex,” Alex admitted. “This is why this trip to Solara was a good opportunity to check it out.”

“I just hope that we won’t be experiencing something similar to what happened in the Heracle Mountain,” Lumi commented.

“Hey, don’t raise a flag.” Alex complained.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim also raised its little hand, telling Lumi not to jinx their adventure.

“Fine.” Lumi sighed.

Of course, the main reason why she didn’t like the trial was because she had been trapped in a body that was not her own.

She had been forced to watch as Latifa and Alex suffered against the Barbarian King without being able to do anything about it.

Lumi hated the feeling of helplessness that she had felt back then. If possible, she didn't want to experience it a second time.

Nearly three hours later, the mist in the surroundings started to thicken, forcing the coachman to stop his carriage.

"I'm sorry, but this is as far as I can go," the coachman said. "Forcing my way through this fog will be very dangerous. I don't want to be involved in any accidents because I have a family waiting for me back home."

"Thank you, Sir," Alex replied. "We can hike from here. Dim Dim will make sure that we won't get lost even in this mist."

"Ahem!" Dim Dim raised its body proudly, as if telling everyone that they could count on it.

After bidding goodbye to the coachman, Alex, Lumi, and Lex waded into the thick mist.

The young man had taken out his Mimic Lantern so that even if the visibility was low, the others could still follow him.

Lex didn't have this problem because he could perfectly sense Alex's aura and follow him.

Lumi had also secretly left a mark on Alex's body, allowing her to know his location even with her eyes closed.

Of course, she didn't let him know about this beforehand because she didn't want him to think of her as some kind of stalker.

Since Dim Dim was the one navigating their path, they managed to find the trail that led to the Whispering Valley easily.

Aside from the constant howling of Dire Wolves and the roars of other beasts, their trip was pretty uneventful.

No monsters dared to attack them during their journey, partly due to Lex's presence.

The old man didn't hold back his aura, allowing the monsters to detect how strong he was.

Because of this, none dared to come close because they knew that the old man was someone they had no chance of defeating.

Soon enough, they entered the entrance of the valley. However, they didn't expect to find two familiar faces, who were also surprised to see them there.

"Fran?" Alex looked at the adorable dwarf in surprise.

"Hey, I'm here too, you know?" Finn protested with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Good morning, everyone," Fran said with a smile. "What are you all doing here?"

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim replied before Alex could give his answer.

"Treasure hunting?" Fran glanced at her brother, who narrowed his eyes after hearing the little bun's reply.

"So, you're here to find those ruins as well huh?" Finn commented. "How did you know that there are treasures in this place?"

Alex pondered for a bit before telling the two dwarves about the map that he had gained from a treasure chest.

The young man even showed it to them, which made Finn mutter something in dwarven that was too soft for Alex to catch.

"I see." Fran nodded. "No wonder we can't find that place. We were searching in the wrong spot."

The adorable dwarf then looked at Alex and made a proposal.

"How about we all go to the ruins together?" Fran asked. "As for the treasures, we will divide it equally with each other. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good to me." Alex nodded.

Dim Dim agreed readily. "Dim!"

Since Fran was a close friend to both Alex and Dim Dim, the deal was struck right away.

Finn looked hesitant but went along with forming a team with Alex, Lumi, Dim Dim, and the old man whom he had seen in the academy from time to time.

He and his sister had explored many ruins together.

They had this kind of sixth sense that allowed them to know if a dwarven ruin was nearby or not.

Unfortunately, the fog was quite mysterious, preventing them from pinpointing the exact location where that feeling was coming from.

If not for the map that Alex had shown them, the two dwarves might have gone in circles while trying to locate the entrance of the dwarven ruin, which they believed held secrets that hadn't been discovered for a very long time.

Chapter 508: The Secret Of The Whispering Valley [Part 1]

With the help of the map and the Dwarven sensitivity towards anything that had been left by their race, they found the entrance of the ruins.

Or at least, they stumbled upon it without knowing that it was the entrance.

A magical formation had been put in place, which hid the entrance by making it seem like it was the wall of the narrow path that they were walking on.

If they continued to follow the trail, they would have missed it completely.

The map allowed Fran and Finn to strengthen their sensing abilities, which led them to the discovery of the gate that was protected by a powerful illusion.

“Looks like this is the place that we’re looking for,” Fran said as she extended her hand to the wall, where it passed through without any resistance.

“Very clever trick.” Finn smirked. “Only Dwarves will be able to find this place for sure.”

Dwarves might not specialize in casting magic like the Elves, but they were experts in making Runic Weapons and Magical Formations.

This was why trying to bring down a Dwarven Fortress wasn’t an easy task. During the early days when war had been a common occurrence on the continent, the Dwarves had been able to live relatively peaceful lives within their underground cities.

“Well then, shall we go inside?” Fran took the lead and entered the hidden entrance of the ruins.

Finn followed behind her and Alex followed behind him.

Lumi walked a few steps away from Alex and Lex took the rear position in order to protect their escape route.

The cave was very dark. Only those who had Dark Vision like the dwarves could enter it without needing any kind of lighting.

Lumi could see in pitch-black darkness as well. Since Lex was blind, the darkness didn't really make a difference to him.

The only one that needed a light source was Alex, but with the help of his Mimic Lantern, he was able to see perfectly in the long hallway that could easily allow six people to walk side by side.

"This place is quite old," Finn muttered. "My guess is that it has been abandoned for at least six to seven hundred years."

"Six to seven hundred years?" Alex frowned. "Is that a long or short time for Dwarves?"

"Dwarves can live up to three-hundred years," Finn stated. "So, twice that number can be considered a long time even for us."

The group then arrived at a spacious cavern with a ceiling that was at least fifteen meters high.

Fran who was leading the way suddenly stopped and raised her hand.

"We have company." Fran took a fighting stance. "And there are a lot of them."

Alex couldn't see the path up ahead, but after opening his map, he saw dozens of red blinking dots that were headed in their direction.

Finn summoned his axe and stood beside his sister, cursing under his breath. "Cave Rock Spiders and there's so many."

Cave Rock Spiders were Rank 3 Monsters. Just like their name implied, their bodies were as hard as rocks.

“Light!” Alex cast the spell which created a floating orb of light above his head, illuminating his surroundings.

Unlike the others who could fight perfectly in the dark, he needed a light source to protect himself from the monsters.

He returned the Mimic Lantern to his storage ring and took out Everguard and his War Hammer, Sacrament.

Lumi snapped her fingers and several Fox Fires appeared around her.

As for Lex, he took out a pipe, lit it, then started to smoke. The old man leaned on the wall, enjoying his little break.

Clearly, he had no intention of helping the teenagers handle the monsters that were rushing towards them.

“Fran, you take the left, I’ll take the center,” Alex said. “Finn, please handle the right. Lumi, support those who you think need help.”

Fran nodded and lunged to the left, her gauntlets glowed faintly, eager for battle.

Finn didn’t like being ordered around, but he understood that if they wanted to survive, they needed to work together.

The dwarf charged to the right and raised his war axe to hack anything trying to block their path.

Alex used his Shield Charge skill and rammed the Cave Rock Spider in front of him.

“Unyielding Pact!” Alex shouted.

Immediately, a ripple of magic spread out from him. The skill boosted the resolve of his allies, increasing their resistance against fear, charm, and mind-affecting effects.

He subconsciously cast this skill because he remembered that Lumi hated spiders. Also, he didn't know what kind of abilities these Rock Cave Spiders had, so increasing their resistance against debilitating abilities was a must.

Lex quietly watched the battle of the teenagers and couldn't help but nod in satisfaction at the two dwarves, who were fighting extremely well.

Fran was very agile. She was incredibly strong too.

With every punch or kick, a Rock Spider would be sent flying. Their rock-hard carapaces cracked under her merciless strikes.

As for Finn, his axe was surprisingly sharp. Heck, it was even sharp and durable enough to cut through stone as if he was just chopping wood!

As for Alex, his war hammer was the perfect weapon against his opponents.

Also, the magical shields that circled around his body were bashing any spider that came too near, allowing him to take a breather from the dozens of spiders that were trying to swarm them.

Lumi was unleashing purple fireballs at the spiders, supporting Alex, Fran, and Finn by covering their blindspots.

Although this was the first time that the four of them were fighting as a team, their coordination wasn't so bad.

Perhaps because all of them were strong enough to handle monsters of this level, they were able to defeat their opponents in less than five minutes.

The Rock Cave Spiders that died crumbled into fine gravel, leaving behind their Monster Cores.

In order to make sure that Finn wouldn't feel disgruntled, Alex asked him to store the monster cores so that they could divide their spoils after they finished their exploration.

Finn frowned, but still agreed to this arrangement.

It was very obvious to Alex that Finn didn't like him very much, which was perfectly understandable. Even in the game, Finn was cold towards those who approached his sister.

Alex was very tempted to call him brother-in-law, but he understood that the moment he did that, Finn would hack him to pieces, starting with Little Alex.

"I'm sure that this is not the last of them," Fran said. "Everyone, please be on your guard."

Alex, Finn, and Lumi nodded. Everyone knew that if you found one spider monster, there would always be more hiding somewhere.

And they were right.

The group spent nearly an hour fighting against dozens of spider monsters at a time. Alex couldn't help but wonder if they had actually entered a dungeon instead of a dwarven ruin.

Actually, some Dwarven Ruins could transform into Dungeons if they managed to gather enough magical energy, elemental energy, or even miasma after a long time.

He hadn't had the time earlier to check his map properly, but after doing so, he confirmed his suspicion.

First Floor of the Whispering Dungeon.

That was what was written on his map. He was suddenly relieved that he hadn't asked Charles to accompany him. A monster outbreak would have forced them to flee for their lives.

Chapter 509: The Secret Of The Whispering Valley [Part 2]

"We're inside a Dungeon?" Finn asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Alex replied. "And this place is called the Whispering Dungeon."

After their battle with the Rock Cave Spiders, Alex decided to tell his comrades the truth about the ruin they had found.

With a frown, Finn crouched down and pressed his ear against the ground.

Fran did the same wordlessly, leaving Alex, Lumi, and Dim Dim to wonder what the two dwarves were doing.

"You're right. This is indeed a dungeon," Finn confirmed a minute later. "To think that the Dwarven Ruins turned into one... This is not going to be easy."

Fran nodded in agreement. They had come to check the Ancient Ruins because she had been hearing it call out to her ever since their arrival in Solivane.

Finn could also detect dwarven ruins, but he hadn't sensed this one as strong as his sister had.

"How can you tell that this place is a dungeon?" Lumi asked.

"It's because of its heartbeat."

Fran and Finn answered at the same time, but their answer clarified nothing for Lumi.

“Dungeons have hearts?” Lumi blinked in confusion.

“The Dungeon Core can be considered the heart of a dungeon,” Fran explained. “No matter how deep a dungeon is, we dwarves can hear the fluctuations coming from the Dungeon Core. We refer to these fluctuations as the Dungeon’s Heartbeat.”

Finn nodded. “We also confirmed that this dungeon has ten floors. We are only at the First Floor, yet we’re already fighting Rank 3 Monsters. I’m afraid this will not be an easy expedition.”

The Dwarves had only come to investigate the Dwarven Ruin. However, now that the ruins had turned into a dungeon, they were wondering if they should continue their expedition or not.

Alex felt worried upon hearing their words, but then he remembered Lex was with them. An idea lit up in his mind and he immediately voiced it out.

“How about we try to dive in as deep as we can?” Alex proposed. “If things get really too hard to handle, we can just leave. Besides, if we’re really the first to discover this dungeon, we can always come back and bring more capable helpers with us.”

Fran and Finn glanced at each other before nodding at the same time.

“It’s a good plan, Alex,” Fran stated.

“Since we’ve come this far already, going back without exploring will feel like a waste of time,” Finn commented.

Alex then glanced at Lumi, and the latter shrugged. If Alex wanted to explore the dungeon, then she would follow him. If he wanted to leave, she would leave with him. It was that simple.

As for Lex, the old man had a faint smile on his face.

“It’s been a long time since I last entered a dungeon,” Lex commented. “I want to explore it a bit more as well.”

With the strongest fighter in the group pushing for further exploration, Alex felt that they might be able to even reach the Tenth Floor.

“But we didn’t bring a lot of supplies with us,” Finn pointed out. “Our food and water can only last us two days. If we want to explore for longer than that, we have no choice but to exit and get more supplies before returning.”

“Food and water are not a problem.” Alex grinned. “We have Dim Dim here. He will solve our food and water problems.”

“Ahem!” Dim Dim proudly raised its body.

If they needed food, the Dim Sum God could just summon bamboo steamers filled with dumplings to feed everyone to their hearts’ content.

For water, it could buy stuff like Cola Cola from its God Shop. It wanted to share these drinks with its friends as well.

With food and water not being a problem, the group started their expedition with Alex at the lead.

He had a map with him, which made traversing the dungeon easier. Although most places were covered in black fog, the places they had visited were now visible to him.

Alex then activated the special function, Map of Forgotten Paths, which allowed him to see the locations of the treasures as well as hidden rooms on the floor that he was currently on.

There were two treasure chests on the First Floor, and he planned to take them back and ask Astrea to open them for him.

Besides, he had long agreed to share some of the treasures he would find in the Whispering Valley with her.

After finding the two treasure chests, Alex led their party to the staircase that led to the Second Floor.

At first, everyone thought that Alex just got lucky when he found the treasure chests. But when he also easily found the way to the Second Floor, they were starting to think that he had some very useful ability for dungeon exploration.

As soon as they entered the Second Floor, Fran's and Finn's expressions suddenly changed.

"What's wrong?" Alex noticed that the two dwarves seemed to have sensed something.

"There's a faint smell of blood in the air," Lex commented. "We might be in the domain of Blood Beasts."

"You're quite impressive, old man," Finn said with a smile. "Ordinary humans can't pick up this scent. Are you perhaps some kind of unknown expert?"

Lex chuckled after hearing Finn's praise. "Indeed. I used to be a very famous person in the past. But now I'm just a blind old man who needs to make a living to survive."

The corner of Alex's lips twitched at the old knight's attempt to be humble. However, Lex wasn't able to hide the big grin on his face after being praised by the younger generation.

Suddenly, Alex saw a red blinking dot headed towards them, prompting him to warn the others.

"Now, that is one nasty looking creature," Finn said as he firmly gripped the handle of his War Axe.

"You're right," Lumi commented. "But as expected, it's another Spider-Type Monster."

Alex wasn't able to see what everyone was seeing, so he grabbed the orb of light that was floating on top of his head and hurled it at the spot everyone was eyeing warily.

It was then when he saw a two-meter tall red spider and wondered if he shouldn't have been so curious.

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< Bloodlace Arachne >

"Its shell is a walking chalice, every strike spills more fuel for its fury."

Monster Rank: Rank 4

Monster Grade: Rare

Attribute: Blood / Toxic

Species: Crimson Widow Spider

Type: Blood Beast

Health: 10,420 / 10,900

Attack: 820 – 1,200

Active Skills:

Bloodburst Spit – Fires a corrosive glob of blood-acid.

Venomlash Leap – Leaps onto a target, dealing multiple rapid bites.

Carapace Shatter Charge – Cracks its own hardened shell to unleash a high-damage tackle.

Passive Skills:

Hemotoxin Surge – Increases damage the lower its HP becomes. Has a high chance of dealing critical damage with each strike.

— — —

“Oh sh*t...” Alex cursed after his appraisal skill activated.

This wasn’t his first time seeing this type of monster. He had fought them many times in the game since they were common in dungeons and even in the open world.

The most annoying ability of this spider was its Hemotoxin Surge.

He recalled some of his team members dying to this beast when victory was within grasp. Its attacks were the deadliest when it was closest to death, making it an incredibly dangerous monster that could wipe out an entire party if not handled properly.

Chapter 510: The Secret Of The Whispering Valley [Part 3]

“Be careful!” Alex warned his comrades. “This monster grows stronger the more damage it receives. It’s also a Rank 4 Monster, so don’t let your guard down!”

Alex couldn’t believe that right after they entered the Second Floor of the Whispering Dungeon, they immediately encountered such a ferocious beast.

If the Second Floor was already like this, it was practically confirmed that the lower floors were much more dangerous.

“Does it have any weaknesses?” Fran asked.

She was the only Rank 4 among their group and the one with the highest burst damage.

“Its red carapace is very hard, but once it receives damage, it will enter a semi-berserk state,” Alex explained. “If you can, please target its head and deal as much damage as possible. We must kill it before it can kill us.”

“Understood.” Fran nodded before taking a fighting stance.

As if waiting for that moment, the Bloodlace Arachne unleashed a barrage of Bloodburst Spit.

Alex summoned several magical shields to protect his allies while Fran dashed ahead.

Although she was very agile, Alex didn’t want to take any chances and sent a few magical shields to hover around her like miniature satellites.

When Fran was only a few meters away from the spider, it suddenly jumped backward before jumping a second time toward the wall.

From there, it propelled itself toward Fran, its fangs ready to strike.

“Be careful!” Alex shouted.

The Bloodlace Arachne had used its skill, Venomlash Leap, one of its deadliest abilities.

Instead of dodging, Fran merely stood still, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

She pulled back her right arm in preparation to strike the beast that had vastly overestimated its power.

“Berseker Uppercut!” Fran shouted as she took a step forward before leaping upwards, her right fist covered in bright golden flames.

Alex heard a loud crack as the spider slammed into the ceiling before crashing on the ground once more.

Giving the stunned monster no time to recover, Finn charged at it with his axe.

With a practiced swing, he severed the head of the Bloodlace Arachne from its body, leaving behind a fountain of blood.

The siblings’ teamwork was quite something.

It seemed that Fran always initiated the attack against strong opponents while Finn followed up with a finishing blow.

Alex had assumed that the Rank 4 Spider would be a pain to defeat because of its annoying abilities.

Fortunately, Fran’s burst damage and Finn’s killing blow had managed to subdue it before it could unleash its full power.

But before Alex could even praise the two dwarves, three more red blinking dots appeared on his map.

“Three more Monsters at eight o’clock!” Alex shouted.

Fran and Finn glanced in the direction Alex was pointing at and saw three Bloodlace Arachne headed in their way.

“Allow me,” Lumi said before unleashing the charged purple fireball that she had been strengthening since the start of the battle.

Alex watched as one of the spiders was hit by Lumi's fireball and sent flying backward.

That spider's red eyes glowed brighter, which meant that its passive ability had activated.

"I'll take care of the spider Lumi hit," Alex declared. "The rest, focus on the two other spiders."

"Shield Charge!"

Alex zeroed in on the spider that had entered a semi-berserk state. During this state, the Bloodlace Arachne became much more lethal. Those ignorant of its attack patterns would instantly find themselves at death's door.

With a screech filled with hatred, the spider lunged toward Alex, its mandibles ready to strike.

"Hammer for all seasons... Fifth Form!" Alex roared as he swung his hammer with all the strength he could muster.

The body of his war hammer burst into flames as Alex unleashed one of the techniques that he had gained during his expedition in the Heracle Mountain.

"Forgefire Strike!"

Alex was now a Rank 3 Oathkeeper. Although he specialized in defense, his blows were nothing to scoff at.

His war hammer slammed on the spider's maw, dealing critical damage.

However, it was still not enough to finish the job.

Fortunately, Dim Dim was with Alex. In rapid succession, the little bun had thrown three of its Alchemical Bombs into the monster's mouth just before Alex's war hammer made contact with it.

A loud explosion followed suit. Before Alex knew it, the Spider had already turned into black mist, leaving its Monster Core behind.

He then turned around to help his allies, but the battle on their side was already over.

Fran and Finn had eliminated one of them with their impeccable teamwork while Lex had merely walked up to the last spider and slapped it across the face, killing it instantly.

“Old man, you’re really strong, huh!” Finn had already sensed that Lex was no ordinary person, but seeing the gardener in action allowed him to confirm his suspicion.

“It’s just a lucky strike.” Lex smiled faintly. “You and your sister are very strong for your age. I’m sure a few years from now, both of you will be a force to reckon with.”

As someone who had seen many prodigies during his service to the Aetherion Empire, Lex could tell that Fran and Finn had great potential.

After picking up the monster cores, Alex once again checked his map and saw that there was a yellow line opposite the stairs that led to the Third Floor.

When the Map of Forgotten Paths was active, it showed the location of hidden rooms, treasures, and paths.

Hidden rooms were blue while hidden paths were represented by yellow lines.

Back in the Dungeon of Beginnings, Alex had used these hidden paths to enter the lower floor directly without having to go through the previous floors even though that had gone against the natural order within dungeons.

The young man pondered what to do.

Taking the shortcut would save time and energy. However, a lower floor also meant significantly stronger monsters.

While he believed that Lex could handle everything that the dungeon could throw at them, there was a chance that they might have to fight a swarm of high-ranking spiders, which would be extremely dangerous for their party.

In the end, Alex told his friends about the hidden path, which made Finn look at him suspiciously.

“How do you know about these things?” Finn demanded.

He had already seen how Alex easily located the treasures. And now, the latter could even “find” the path that led to the Second Floor so quickly and seemingly without effort.

Once could be considered a lucky accident. But this was the third time, and Finn could only see it as some kind of pattern.

Alex knew that if he didn’t handle this properly, his future brother-in-law might become more wary of him.

“Actually, I have a special ability that works exceptionally well in dungeons,” Alex replied. “I can sense the locations of treasures. I can sense concealed paths as well, but not all the time and not always accurately. It also allows me to detect monsters within a certain range.”

“That’s an amazing skill, Alex,” Fran said with a smile. “It’s the perfect skill for Adventurers.”

Her compliment made Alex happy, but he also felt guilty about telling a white lie.

Finn had heard of similar abilities in the past, so he no longer pressed Alex for more answers.

After roughly explaining the abilities of his map by passing them off his own, Alex had two pieces of news for his companions.

“The good news is... I sense a hidden path that could let us bypass the other floors,” Alex said. “The bad news is that we don’t know what floor this path will take us. Since it’s like a one-way thing, we might find ourselves on a very deep floor.”

Fran, Finn, and Lumi turned solemn. This was indeed a hard decision to make.

The lower floors were surely filled with worse monsters, but in the future they might regret not taking a peek.

Lex only listened from the side with his hands clasped behind his back.

Although his role was to protect Alex, he wanted the young man to make his own decisions that would allow him to gain the strength he needed to protect himself.

The temptation to play it safe was great, but risking nothing meant gaining nothing.

The four teenagers discussed their options. Within minutes, they had already come to a decision—they would check it out first and retreat if things turned out badly for them.