

Endless 511

Chapter 511: Voices Of The Past [Part 1]

“Are you sure there’s a hidden path here?” Finn asked, watching Alex tap the wall in front of them.

“I’m sure,” Alex replied. “But I think I first need to find some sort of hidden mechanism to open it.”

The young man double-checked his map. After he zoomed to his current location, he confirmed that the hidden path was located behind the wall before him.

Fran also approached the wall and pressed her hand over it. Suddenly, all of them heard a distinct click before the wall opened sideways.

Alex blinked before glancing at Fran. He was pretty sure the young lady only touched the wall and didn’t do anything special.

Fran was also surprised, not expecting that the wall would suddenly open up the moment she touched it.

“Ah! That must be it!” Alex finally connected the dots when he remembered that some events in the game could only be triggered by certain characters.

The hint was right under his nose. Earlier, Fran had mentioned hearing something calling out to her, prompting her to travel to the Whispering Valley with her brother.

Since that was the case, it was highly likely that the hidden entrance, as well as some hidden events in the Whispering Dungeon, would only react to Fran.

“Are you okay, Alex?” Fran asked after seeing the young man nodding his head as if he finally understood something.

“I’m fine,” Alex replied. “Fran, can you lead the way?”

Fran nodded. "Yes."

The young lady then entered the hidden path, stepping into the darkness.

Since she could perfectly see even without a light source, this wasn't a problem for her.

Finn hurriedly followed his sister and Alex followed behind him.

As usual, the last to enter was Lex since he had to guard their rear just in case something unexpected happened.

While descending the staircase leading to the lower floors, Alex took out his Mimic Lantern to check for any traps around them.

Fortunately, the path wasn't booby-trapped. Aside from the seemingly long staircase, nothing else seemed out of place.

The only sound they could hear was their footsteps, which were faintly echoed by the walls surrounding them.

After nearly thirty minutes of walking, they finally found themselves in another spacious cavern.

A good distance away from them was a silver gate at least ten meters tall.

It was still lightless, and Alex only spotted it right away because the gate faintly glowed in the darkness.

The young man didn't lower his guard and checked the map for anything suspicious. Seeing that the map was clear, Alex focused once more on the gate.

"The thing calling out to me is past that gate," Fran said confidently. "I can still hear its call."

The young lady walked toward the silver gate to better understand what was happening.

Finn followed closely, ready to defend his sister if anything suddenly attacked them.

Alex and Lex also approached the silver gate to get a better understanding of what it signified.

“It’s not the gate of the Floor Boss that’s for sure,” Lex commented. “It has a mysterious feel to it that I can’t explain.”

When Fran stood a meter away from the gate, several runic words appeared on its surface.

It was written in Fae Language, which Alex could perfectly read and understand for some reason.

They shifted, aligning into a coherent prophecy, one that felt less spoken and more remembered.

— — —

“To the One who left something precious behind.

Your soul bears the weight of an unfinished dawn.

In ages forgotten, a vow was shattered,

And a thread left frayed between life and silence.

Through rebirth you return,

Drawn to the echo of what you once abandoned.

The past you fled now reaches for you,

Stirring in the hollow between heartbeats.

Beyond this Gate lies the remnant of your former self,

Awaiting judgment, completion, or release.

Only by facing what you were

May you become what you are meant to be.

Remember this...

A soul cannot outrun its own shadow.

Loose ends are the chains of eternity...

And only the bearer may break them."

A sigh escaped Fran's lips as she finished reading the words out loud. It was as if something resonated from deep inside of her, and she felt like the one calling out to her was patiently waiting at the other side of the gate.

But just as she was about to press her palm on the gate to open it, Alex grabbed her hand, stopping her completely.

"Wait, Fran," Alex said. "The words written on this gate may be a warning to those who want to enter it. There is also a possibility that we might get separated when we enter, so I suggest that we hold hands as we walk through the gate."

"... What you say makes sense," Fran replied softly, as if still in a trance. "Very well, I'll hold your hand."

She then reached out to hold Alex's right hand, which had stopped her from opening the gate earlier.

Suddenly, her right hand was held by someone, prompting her to look at her brother, Finn.

"You might get lost inside, so I'm holding your hand as well," Finn stated.

But with both her hands being held by someone, Fran wouldn't be able to open the door.

"Don't worry, we will open the door for you," Alex said. "I'll open this side, and your brother will open that side."

Having come to an agreement, Alex and Finn pressed their palms on the gate.

Lex reached out to place his hand on Alex's shoulder, as if making sure that they wouldn't get separated as well.

With one final push, the two teenagers opened the gate.

The massive gate didn't offer any resistance and opened itself up to its first visitors in hundreds of years.

A silver portal flickered to life in the darkness within the gate, ready to accept those who wished to challenge their fates.

"Let's go," Fran said. "The voice calling out to me is getting stronger."

Without waiting for anyone's reply, Fran stepped forward.

Alex and Finn moved alongside her. The two teenagers made sure to match Fran's step as she lifted her foot to enter the silver portal.

A second later, they all disappeared, leaving nothing behind.

Chapter 512: Voices Of The Past [Part 2]

"Ugh!" Alex groaned in pain as he fell on the ground.

Once the surprise of the pain passed, he looked around his surroundings.

"Nyahahaha! That's what you get for being a stupid human!" a pink-haired fairy the size of an adult's hand laughed at Alex while holding its belly. "Why are you acting like a monkey? Do you think you're one? Well, you do look like them, so you think that you can do what monkeys do, right?!"

"S-Shut up, you stupid Fairy!" the young man snapped at the creature making fun of him.

Alex was shocked because he was certain that he had no intention to say anything, and yet his mouth moved on its own.

It was then that a familiar notification sound reached his ears and a blue window screen appeared in front of him.

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Synchronization Rate: 100%

— — —

'Oh sh*t...'

Alex couldn't help but curse internally. Did he really have to go through this again?

It was very similar to the trial he had taken in the Heracle Mountain. Except right now, Alex was forced to become a spectator as the owner of his body bickered with the pink-haired fairy, who was making faces at him.

"Nyahahaha! Stupid human!" The pink-haired fairy laughed as it flew higher, preventing the young man from reaching it. "Stupid monkey!"

"Come down here, pipsqueak!" the young man roared in anger. "Let's see if you'll still be laughing when I get my hands on you."

"Stupid! Stupid!" the pink-haired fairy taunted. "Even monkeys are smarter than you!"

(A/N: Baka! Baka~ Sorry, I can't stop myself lmao!)

The young man could only gnash his teeth in anger, while the rest of his party members laughed from the side.

"Alex, it's your fault for taking a nap on that tree branch," a man who could easily pass for a bodybuilder said with a smile.

"That's right." A beautiful elf nodded. "Only Elves can do such a thing. It's too early for humans to accomplish what we can do."

"Hey! Fairies can also sleep on tree branches!" the pink-haired Fairy complained.

"You're right, Fran," the beautiful elf replied. "Fairies can do it too."

“Nyahahaha! Hear that, stupid Alex?” Fran laughed. “You’re a hundred years too early to act like a monkey!”

“You’re the monkey!” Alex retorted. “Your whole race is a monkey!”

“What did you say, you stupid Alex?!” Fran raised her little fist in anger. “How dare you call our entire race a monkey?!”

“Stupid! Stupid Fran!” Alex turned around and patted his bum, further infuriating the little fairy, who was about to unleash a Wind Blade towards him.

“Okay, kids. Knock it out.” A man in his early twenties, who was sharpening his sword with a whetstone, called out to the two bickering kids. “We’re not out on a field trip you know? If you’re that noisy, the strong monsters of this place might just decide to hunt us down.”

“Fran started it!”

“Stupid Alex started it!”

The man who had the body of a bodybuilder laughed out loud as he looked at the fourteen-year old boy and the mischievous ten-year old Fairy.

Fran and Alex were like oil and water. They never got along and would often tease each other when an opportunity arose.

This was already a normal occurrence within their party, so they were already used to it.

“Lunch is ready, so come and eat,” the beautiful elf said. “After that, we will look for a place to camp out for the night and regroup with the members of the Hero Party tomorrow.”

The swordsman nodded. “They should have arrived at the meeting point by now. I just hope that the other teams have also finished their own missions.”

Alex glared at Fran one more time while the fairy stuck out her tongue at him.

The two decided to stop their argument for now and eat with everyone in their party.

The beautiful elf, Medina, handed Alex a wooden bowl filled with vegetable stew.

“There’s no meat...” Alex muttered.

“Ara?” Medina tilted her head to the side. “You’re a growing boy, so you should eat your vegetables. Don’t be like Carlo who grew up like a bear because he ate nothing but meat. He’s all muscles and no brain. Do you like to grow up like him, Alex?”

“O-Oi!” Carlo couldn’t help but look at Medina with indignation. “What do you mean I have no brain? I’m actually the smartest in our group, you know?”

Alex chuckled. Carlo was indeed the smartest in their group. But Medina liked to tease him because she found him easy to mess with.

The leader of their group, Ron the Swordmaster, smiled faintly.

Everyone in their party was like family to him, including Fran and Alex, who had joined them a year ago.

He, Carlo, and Medina were adventurers. They had made a name for themselves while climbing up the ranks to become a Rank A Adventurer Party.

Because of this, they often received special missions like scouting for the Hero Party or assisting them when they were faced with hardships.

Left with no choice, Alex reluctantly ate the vegetable stew. But seeing his pout, Carlo chuckled and handed him one of the fishes he’d been grilling earlier.

“Eat up and grow strong,” Carlo said. “A boy should eat meat. That’s the way of a true man.”

Medina rolled her eyes at Carlo’s words, but she didn’t make any move to stop him either.

Alex thanked Carlo and happily ate his stew and fish together.

Fran, on the other hand, was eating the fruit that Medina had cut into strips just for her.

Fairies didn’t need to eat and simply absorbed the power of nature around them. However, they could also eat when they felt like it.

When she had first joined the party, she had felt left out during meal times. Because of that, she decided to eat with everyone else just to have a sense of belonging.

After filling up their stomachs, the Adventurer Party called Dawnseekers resumed their march to look for a place to camp out for the night.

“There’s a cave three-hundred meters in that direction,” Medina reported. “I don’t know if it’s a monster den. Should we check it out?”

“Let’s check it,” Ron replied. “If it’s taken, then we let it be. If not, we can stay there for the night. The clouds in the sky are getting dark, so it might rain soon. I’d rather stay inside a cave than under a tree when the rain falls.”

Everyone agreed with their leader and made their way to the cave.

Fran then used her Nature Magic to check for signs of life inside the cave. When she didn’t sense any presence, she used her magic at the entrance to see if there was a beast that had recently claimed it as their home.

“All clear!” Fran declared. “The previous owner of this place was a Dire Bear, but it stopped coming here four months ago. I say it’s either dead or has migrated somewhere else. So it’s safe to use.”

“Good.” Medina nodded. “I’ll place wards near the entrance just in case we get an unexpected visitor.”

Medina was an Arcane Archer, but she knew a few spells that were very useful when camping out in the wild.

Alex and Carlo went out to look for branches to use for their campfire during the night. Since it was going to rain, it would probably become colder than usual.

Fran sat on Ron’s shoulder as he sat cross-legged on the ground and meditated.

He would serve as the night watch starting at midnight, so he was already using this time to rest up a bit in preparation for his night vigil.

When the rain was about to pour from the sky, Alex and Carlo returned, carrying branches and logs they could use as kindling.

“What’s wrong, Alex?” Carlo asked. “You’ve been looking behind us for quite some time now.”

“I feel like something is watching me from behind,” Alex replied. “Don’t you feel anything?”

“I don’t feel anything.” Carlo shook his head. “But let’s tell the others just in case. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Alex nodded in agreement and hurried towards the cave.

When the two humans were no longer in sight, something stepped out from the foliage and glanced in the direction where the two had walked.

It looked like some kind of shadow creature. After a second or two, it once again melded among the trees, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Chapter 513: The Sacred Order

“What’s wrong, stupid Alex?” Fran asked in a teasing tone. “Why do you keep looking outside? Do you need to pee? Or maybe... the little monkey needs a potty?”

“Shut up, stupid fairy.” Alex glared at the annoying fairy, who was once again poking fun at him.

“Is there something there, Alex?” Ron asked. “You’ve been looking outside the cave since earlier.”

Carlo glanced at the fourteen-year old boy, and remembered what he had said earlier. Alex had always been very sensitive to the gazes of people because he had once been a thief.

Unfortunately for him, he had made the mistake of trying to pickpocket their leader’s pouch during their visit to Arian City.

After catching him red-handed, they initially planned to bring him to the guards, but Medina had intervened. She had said that Alex was still too young to know what was right or wrong. Instead, they should let him join their party to correct his ways.

At first, Carlo had thought that she was joking. But the beautiful elf had always been upright and righteous. In the end, Ron had agreed to let the thief join their party so that he would grow up to be a proper individual by sticking with them.

Fran had joined a month before Alex, so she had naturally treated him like a junior even though she was four years younger than him.

Since then, the two had always been bickering with each other. It had already been a year since their first meeting.

“For some reason, I felt like someone was watching me when I was out with Carlo,” Alex replied. “I thought I was just being paranoid at first, but I can usually feel when someone is looking at me. Someone, or something, is out there and they know that we are inside this cave.”

Fran glanced at the entrance of the cave and frowned. No matter how she looked, she couldn't see anything out of place.

Since she was Fae, she also possessed Dark Vision, allowing her to see even during the night.

Medina always looked after Alex like an older sister, so she took his words seriously. The beautiful elf took out a lyre from her storage ring and started to play.

Shutting her eyes, she hummed a little tune before plucking the strings and creating a mellow sound.

Faint runic letters materialized around her and spread out as they headed out of the cave.

Although her self-taught detection magic was very subtle, it was very powerful when it came to sensing her surroundings.

Ten minutes later, the beautiful elf slowly opened her eyes. She carefully stored the lyre inside her storage ring before taking out her bow.

Seeing her reaction, the entire party became fully alert.

"What is it, Medina?" Ron asked, his sword drawn and ready to fight.

"It is very faint, but there is indeed something out there," Medina replied cautiously. "It has strong stealth abilities. If not for the special melody I played, I might have missed it completely."

"Do you know what kind of creature it is?" Carlo asked.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think it's a Shade," Medina answered.

Carlo clicked his tongue. "Damn... a very troublesome critter. I just hope that it's not a High-Ranking Shade."

The mischievous and playful Fran hurriedly moved to hide under Alex's cap.

The two of them might not get along well usually, but they were both part of the Stay Away From Fighting Group, which avoided joining battles unless there was absolutely no other choice.

After a few tense minutes, Alex's breathing became steadier.

"It's gone," Alex said. "Maybe it sensed that we are now aware of its existence and decided to pull back."

Ron sheathed his sword because he also sensed that the danger had passed. However, he believed that the creature would come back at a later time when they were sleeping and at their most vulnerable.

"We will do double shifts tonight," Ron declared. "Let's eat first and decide who will be on the first night watch with me."

Usually they only needed one person to stay awake to act as the guard while others were sleeping.

However, Shades were very dangerous entities.

The Demon Lord had employed them as advanced scouts. Some of them were so incredibly powerful that they could wipe out entire parties.

There had been ambushed by one once many years ago. If not for the teamwork between the original three members—which they had honed for many years—they might not have survived that encounter.

During the uneasy dinner, Alex suggested that he, Carlo, and Fran should take the first shift instead of Ron.

“The Shade has most likely realized we are aware of it and won’t attack so soon,” Alex reasoned. “Since Ron is our strongest fighter, he should cover the time when the Shade is most likely to strike.”

“That makes sense,” Medina said. “Having half the party awake at any given time will also discourage it from attacking.”

The other members of the party nodded, agreeing to this arrangement.

An hour after their dinner ended, heavy rain started to fall. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed, and streaked across the sky like live dragons, fighting against each other.

The only saving grace was that the Shade might have thought that attacking them wasn’t worth the risk and hence stayed away from the camp.

After breakfast, the group once again continued their journey to Arian City, which was half a day walk away.

The travel was surprisingly smooth as if whatever had happened the night before was just a bad dream that everyone shed away.

“Alex, Fran, just go to the orphanage first,” Medina said. “You don’t need to go with us to the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“Good!” Fran nodded. “Time to play hide and seek with the kids again! Alex, you’re going to be IT as usual. If you find me this time, I’ll teach you a fairy spell that even a stupid monkey like you can use.”

“Hmph! This time, I will definitely find you.” Alex rubbed his nose.

“Oh really?” Fran said in contempt. “Our score is 69-0. You still haven’t found me after so many games. What makes you think you’ll find me this time? The kids have even started calling you Mr. Hide-And-Seek Loser King.”

“You’re the one who made up that name!” Alex complained. “But this time things will be different. I’ll find you and you’ll teach me that spell that I asked you to teach me. I’m no longer the Alex of yesterday.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Fran smirked. “Now let’s go to the orphanage!”

Fran didn’t even wait for Alex’s reply and simply flew to the orphanage called Little Hearth.

This was an orphanage that was sponsored by the Dawnseekers. Alex, and Fran were very close to the children there.

After seeing the two youngest members of their party leave, the three Adventurers headed to the Adventurer’s Guild.

There, they found the members of the Hero Party lounging about the common room.

“You’re finally here, Ron,” one of the Heroes of the Kingdom, Sean, said with a smile. “If you keep me waiting for one more day, I swear weeds will start growing on my body.”

“It’s good to see you, Sean,” Ron replied. “Frankly, I thought you kicked the bucket after your last mission.”

“As if.” Sean snorted. “I just hunted a Dark Dragon. It was tough, but I still killed it at the end.”

The members of the Hero Party glanced at the Dawnseekers and gave them a brief nod.

Sean’s party was composed of five people.

Excluding Sean, they had an Elf Archer, a Sorceress, a Cleric, and a Spearman.

The five of them were Rank S Adventurers, and their party went by the name Sacred Order.

“Do you have what we asked of you?” Sean asked as soon as Ron sat on the couch across from him.

“Of course,” Ron replied. “It was a very troublesome job, but we managed to get it.”

The Swordmaster then took out an ornate box from his storage ring and presented it to Sean.

The Hero opened the box and saw a silver ring adorned with a jewel that looked like amber.

A moment later, he took out a similar looking ring from his pocket and placed it beside the ring inside the ornate box for comparison. It was a replica that would allow him to determine if the ring was genuine.

Both rings then started to glow with a faint golden light. The members of the Hero Party sighed in relief.

“It’s real,” Sean muttered. “So the legends are true...”

“What legends?” Ron asked.

“It’s a secret that I am not authorized to share,” Sean said before carefully closing the box. ‘Now, I just need to find the true second half of this ring in the Shadow Forest.’

He then stored it inside his magic bag, which was protected by several layers of magic before taking out a pouch to give to Ron.

“Thank you Ron,” Sean said as he handed the pouch to the swordmaster. “Here is your pay. Two hundred gold coins. We will be leaving this town tomorrow and heading to the capital. If something important comes up, I’ll ask for your help again.”

“As long as the pay is good, you can count on us,” Ron replied as he took the pouch. “Well then, if there’s nothing else, please sign this scroll so I can present it to the Guild Receptionist as proof that we completed the mission.”

“Of course.” Sean took out an enchanted pen and signed the mission scroll. “It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Ron.”

“The pleasure is mine, Sean.” Ron smiled.

After delivering the requested item and receiving the signed scroll, the three adventurers went to the orphanage to rest and spend some time with the kids, whom they planned to treat to a delicious dinner with their earnings.

Chapter 514: Hide-And-Seek Queen

“One, two, three, four,” Alex said. “Five, six, seven...”

As the teenage boy counted with his eyes closed, forehead pressed against the arm resting on a tree, several children ran away and looked for places to hide.

Playing hide-and-seek with Fran and the children had already become part of his after-mission routine.

Alex might not want to admit it, but being caught pickpocketing Ron’s money pouch was the best thing that happened to him.

Not only had he stopped being a petty thief, but he was now earning properly as an adventurer.

Many kids in the orphanage also idolized him and wished to become adventurers like him when they grew up.

With the Dawnseekers sponsoring the orphanage, this outcome was an inevitable result.

“Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty!” Alex shouted. “Ready or not, here I come!”

The teenage boy scanned the surroundings and easily found one of the kids hiding behind a tree not far from him.

The rules of this hide-and-seek game were simple.

Firstly, those who were found would join the seeker in searching out the other children.

Secondly, they could hide anywhere as long as they didn't leave the vicinity of the orphanage.

Alex was very good at this game because he had been a thief. But there was one creature that even he had never been able to catch since he had started playing this game with the children.

"Did you find her?" Alex asked one of the girls who was helping him search for the other hiding children.

"No," the girl replied. "This is Fran we are talking about. She will definitely pick a very obvious but also not-so-obvious hiding place."

"Yes, and this is what makes her tricky." Alex nodded.

The fairy didn't hide in places that were impossible to reach, like the roof of the orphanage or on the top of trees. That would have been no fun at all and quite unfair as well.

Instead, she always hid in places that could easily be overlooked, which annoyed Alex very much whenever he asked her to come out because he couldn't find her.

There was a time when Fran had hidden inside the flower vase in the dining room, munching on cookies while waiting to be found.

However, after 69 losses against her, Alex was starting to understand how she thought.

'This time, I will find you and will rub victory in your face,' Alex vowed as he hawkishly prowled the orphanage to look for Fran and the other children.

Half an hour later, he managed to catch all of them except for the very elusive fairy.

The children were also very determined to find Fran since she was the self-proclaimed Hide-and-Seek Queen of the orphanage.

Also, she promised to give the kids candy if they succeeded in finding her. How could any child say no to candy?

However, despite their resolve, Alex and the kids still hadn't found Fran after an hour of looking around.

"Lunch is ready!" the Headmistress of the orphanage called out to the children. "We have fried chicken, so come while it's still warm!"

It was at that moment that the missing fairy finally showed herself.

"Fried Chicken!" Fran exclaimed as she left her hiding place. "Come, everyone! We have fried chicken!"

""Yay!""

Alex blinked once, then twice, when he saw where Fran had flown out from.

She had been hiding inside one of the shirts drying in the sun.

And the funny thing was that Alex had walked around that place six times earlier, checking if Fran had hidden herself behind the laundry.

However, he hadn't thought that she would be hiding inside it, so he hadn't bothered to check.

"Urgh..." Alex face-palmed, which earned him a giggle from Medina.

"It looks like Fran won again." Medina patted Alex's head. "Don't feel down. You'll find her one of these days. Now, let's get some fried chicken."

Ron, Carlo, and Medina had bought a lot of chicken at the market before heading to the orphanage.

Fried chicken was easily one of the children's favorites, so the adventurers had made sure to buy enough for everyone.

"Are you really a fairy?" Alex watched as Fran happily ate the fried chicken on her plate.

"Of course," Fran answered after chewing the food in her mouth.

"Then where does all that food go inside your body?" Alex asked.

Fran had already eaten two fried chickens, yet she looked the same as usual.

"Don't you know?" Fran grinned mischievously. "Girls have a different stomach for desserts!"

"But a fried chicken is not a dessert."

"Anything is a dessert if you're brave enough."

"... That doesn't make any sense." Alex scratched his head before deciding to stop asking a question that he knew wouldn't be answered.

"Nyahahaha!" Fran laughed. "With this, the score is 70-0. Pupupu! Alex the Monkey lost again!"

"Alex the Monkey!" a five-year-old boy shouted.

"Alex the Monkey!" a girl joined the teasing.

""Alex the Monkey!""

""Alex the Monkey!""

""Alex the Monkey!""

Some of the children joined the chant and Fran clapped her hands to spur the others into participating as well.

"Okay, kids, please behave," Medina intervened because Alex's face was already as red as a tomato. "We have more fried chicken, so eat as much as you want."

""Yay!""

With the focus of the children diverted back to their food, Alex glared hatefully at Fran before leaving the dining room with a huff.

Fran wouldn't miss this opportunity to rub salt into his wounds, so she followed him and kept on teasing him from behind.

Medina shook her head helplessly at this scene while Ron and Carlo only smiled wryly.

Several days later, a messenger pigeon arrived at the Adventurer's Guild, prompting one of its receptionists to look for Ron and the other members of Dawnseekers.

"What's wrong, Layla?" Ron asked the pretty lady who usually handled matters regarding their Adventurer's Party.

"Ron, it's bad," Layla said. "The Hero Party has gone missing, and the Main Branch wants you to mobilize and find them."

“They what?” Ron’s expression became solemn. After all, Sean’s party was a very important symbol of their kingdom in their fight against the Demon Lord and his army.

The news of their disappearance, if leaked, could create waves of panic among the people of the kingdom. For this reason, information about their disappearance had been sealed by the higher-ups.

“Where were they last seen?” Ron asked.

“The Shadow Forest,” Layla answered. “The other branches are also sending the Class A and Class S Adventurer Parties to join the search. Since you guys and the Hero Party are very close to each other, we decided that you should be the one to take on this mission.”

“I understand,” Ron replied. “We will need to make our preparations, but I promise to leave tomorrow morning. Please tell that to the Guild Master.”

“Thank you, Ron.” Layla tiptoed and kissed his cheek. “Please be safe and come back to me, okay?”

“Of course I will.” Ron hugged the young lady, who was also his secret lover. “Wait for me, Layla.”

“Un!” Layla pressed her head on Ron’s chest, holding onto him tightly.

She was worried about him because this mission was very dangerous.

The Shadow Forest bordered the Demon Realm and was one of the most dangerous areas on the battlefield.

Ron knew that this might be their most dangerous mission as of yet, so he made sure to tell his party members to prepare and arm themselves to the teeth.

Chapter 515: A Pledge To ‘The World’

“They went missing in the Shadow Forest?” Medina frowned. “Are you certain of this, Ron?”

"I only know what I've been told," Ron replied. "Layla said that the Main Branch of the Adventurer's Guild is mobilizing multiple Rank A and Rank S Parties to the Shadow Forest to form a search party."

"Of course, if we see demons, we also have to eliminate them. I'm frankly unwilling to go there, but Sean is a symbol of our Kingdom, we must at least try to find him, dead or alive."

Carlo sighed. Just like Ron, he understood how dangerous the Shadow Forest was.

A long time ago, they had been sent there for a scouting mission. Their entire group had almost perished.

Since then, they had refused to take any missions that would take them back to that frightening place.

"The Shadow Forest?" Fran tilted her head a little. "My Grandma said our tribe once lived there. However, the land got more and more corrupted, so we were forced to leave and migrate closer to the Elven Forest because it's safer to live there."

"Ron, let's leave Alex and Fran here," Medina proposed. "That place is too dangerous for children."

"I need to go with you guys," Alex insisted. "I have the sharpest Danger Sense among us. I can tell when it's dangerous, and we can make a detour if needed. And Fran is very good at hiding. I doubt that the demons can find her if she tries hard enough."

Hearing Alex put in a good word for her, Fran patted her chest in confidence.

"I am the Hide-And-Seek Queen," Fran declared. "Once I start hiding, it is impossible for anyone to find me."

"But..." Medina tried to argue. However, she had joined the children in playing hide-and-seek and knew neither Alex nor Fran were exaggerating.

Even after cheating by using tracking spells, she had failed to find traces of Fran.

“I hate to say this, but Alex is right,” Carlo commented. “There are times when this little punk actually saved us from harm. Also, our mission is not to fight but to find the Hero Party. Having him around should not be a liability.”

Ron rubbed his chin, convinced by Carlo’s words. There were indeed times when Alex’s Danger Sense had prevented them from falling into dangerous situations, which was how he had become a permanent member of their party.

“Alex, I don’t mind you coming with us, but the Shadow Forest is a very dangerous place,” Ron stated. “I already told you about the time when we almost died there, right?”

Alex nodded. “I know. You told me the story about the Shade Reaper. But I’m very sensitive to shadow-type and ghost-type monsters, so I can detect them if there’s one near me.”

“I’m also very good at scouting,” Fran pointed out. “With Alex and me working together, we will be unstoppable.”

Ron, Carlo, and Medina smirked at the same time.

“Wow.” Carlo laughed. “I never thought that these two would get along like this one day. Is the world going to end tomorrow?”

“You said just what I was thinking, Carlo,” Medina said. “These two troublemakers can only work together when it benefits them.”

Ron pondered a bit while tapping his finger on top of the table. Both Alex and Fran were good additions to their team, but the incident back then still haunted his mind.

Perhaps Carlo and Medina could tell what he was thinking, so they decided to give their leader more time to decide whether the two kids would be coming with them or not.

“Fine, but I have one condition,” Ron suddenly said after a few minutes of silence. “When we tell you to escape, both of you will escape. You must make a vow to ‘The World’ that you will not break this promise. If you can’t make that promise, we won’t be taking you with us.”

Alex and Fran glanced at each other before they raised their hands to make the pledge.

The young man placed his hand over his chest. “I, Alex, vow before The World that if you tell me to escape, I will escape.”

The Fairy followed right after, her small hand trembling slightly but her gaze firm. “I, Fran, vow before The World that when you tell us to run, I will fly away to escape!”

For people in Arcana, making a pledge to ‘The World’ was very serious.

Although there wasn’t any physical or magical binding contract that would activate whenever one made the pledge, everyone in Arcana took this seriously. After all, the Deities were real and they could hear and see those who called out to their names.

“Good.” Ron nodded. “Prepare your belongings and rest early. We will leave at first light tomorrow.”

After saying those final words, Ron stood up to prepare for their journey.

Medina and Carlo also left to buy food and other consumables that they might need on their way.

As for Alex, he took his savings and went to town to buy ropes, throwing knives, and other items that he might use when his life was on the line.

On the other hand, Fran went to the roof of the orphanage and faced the location of ‘The Star’ in the sky, praying for guidance and safety.

The Fairies had this tradition because even with no moon in the sky, the stars would still be there to guide their way.

When morning came, the Dawnseekers gathered at the Adventurer's Guild to formally accept the Search Mission to find the missing Hero and his party members.

"Is everyone ready to go?" Carlo asked as he sat on the coachman seat of the carriage provided by the Adventurer's Guild.

"Let's go, Carlo," Ron ordered.

As soon as the permission was given, Carlo whistled at the horses and led them to the North Gate of Arian City.

The journey to the Shadow Forest was a ten-day trip, and frankly, The Dawnseekers believed that it might be already too late when they reached their destination.

But they also theorised that if Sean and his party members had escaped, they would've likely headed to Aran City as that was one of the safest places in the kingdom. Their friends, the Dawnseekers, were there to protect them.

Chapter 516: The Shadow Forest

Their travel to the Shadow Forest was surprisingly not as smooth as they thought it would be.

Bandits tried to rob them not twice but thrice, which made Ron wonder if the trouble in the northern border had spread to the southern frontier.

Fortunately, the bandits weren't too skilled and mainly relied on their superior numbers. The Dawnseekers easily defeated them and made sure that they wouldn't be able to steal from others again.

After being delayed for a day, they finally reached the outskirts of the Shadow Forest.

There, several tents had already been pitched. Most of the people here were from the military of the kingdom.

The adventurers' camp accommodation was at least a hundred meters away from here, as if to say they didn't want to mingle with the soldiers if possible.

"I'll first ask if there is any news about Sean and his party members," Ron said as Carlo directed the horses to keep walking till they reached the other adventurers. "Medina, feel free to make a makeshift camp for now. It's already getting dark."

"I understand." Medina nodded. "Come along, you two. Make sure not to cause any trouble."

Alex and Fran could feel the tension in the air, so they nodded obediently after hearing the beautiful elf's words.

Carlo took the carriage to the parking area before joining Medina to help set up their two tents.

There were a few familiar faces among the Adventurers, who readily called out to them when they passed.

Carlo took the chance to chat a bit with them and asked if they had news of the Hero Party. Sadly, no one had heard or seen anything relevant.

Carlo frowned. They had been on the road for eleven days, and many things could have happened during that time.

As there were a few cities near the Shadow Forest, the first batch of Adventurers might have already conducted a search.

It meant that if there was still no news of the Hero and his party, the likelihood that they were dead or captured by the Demon Race was high.

Ron returned to the camp. The information he had gathered was similar to Carlo's.

“Five Rank S Parties and eight Rank A Parties have started a wide-area search since two days ago,” Ron reported. “While they didn’t find any signs of the Hero Party, they did clash with High-Level Demons inside the Shadow Forest.”

Carlo’s frown deepened. “Then this means one thing. The Forest is teeming with Demons and their allies. However, since they haven’t made an announcement to boast about capturing or killing Sean and his party members, there is a chance that they are still alive.”

Ron and Medina nodded in agreement.

‘The Demons will definitely want to lower the morale of the human army by showing them the corpses of the Hero and his party,’ Alex thought. ‘This means that the Hero Party might have encountered trouble but were not too deep within enemy lines that they couldn’t have made a safe retreat.’

‘There is also a chance that some of them are seriously injured, preventing them from leaving. The most logical answer is that they have found a good hiding spot and are simply waiting until all of them are fit enough to escape together.’

Alex kept this thought to himself because this was just his own assumption. Voicing it out would also be dangerous. If someone deemed his reasoning accurate, they would have no choice but to head deeper inside the forest.

“What’s the plan, Leader?” Carlo asked.

“We rest today. Tomorrow, we will venture inside the forest,” Ron replied before showing everyone a map that was filled with markings.

“The places with an ‘X’ are the places that have already been searched by the Adventurer Parties. The one with ‘M’ has already been searched by the military.’

After looking at the map, the Dawnseekers noticed something peculiar.

“Is it just me, or are they avoiding the Eastern Part of the forest?” Medina frowned.

The map showed markings up to a few miles from the entrance of the forest, but the eastern part was left alone.”

“I also asked why there are no search parties in the east, and they said it’s because of the thick mists blanketing the area. Reports of Shades appearing in that place have been confirmed by the Army’s Scouts, so they have decided to leave that part while searching for other locations.”

Medina suddenly thought of something before looking at Ron with a solemn expression.

“Don’t tell me... you plan to search that place, first?” Medina asked.

“Yes,” Ron replied firmly.

“What?!” Carlo looked at his leader in disbelief. “Why should we go there?! There are shades there! Have you already forgotten?!”

“Of course, I didn’t forget,” Ron replied calmly. “Isn’t that right, Medina?”

Everyone shifted their gaze at the beautiful elf, who was looking at the map thoughtfully.

“Carlo, let me ask you a question,” Medina said without lifting her head to look at the biggest person among their team. “Since the last time we fought against that Shade, have you not procured things that are effective against them?”

“Of course I have!” Carlo exclaimed. “I swore to myself that I would not allow myself to feel so helpless again. I asked a blacksmith to forge me gauntlets made from cold iron and had them blessed with Holy Water. If I see another Shade again, I’ll tear it apart with my own hands!”

Ron nodded and took out a sword from his storage ring.

The sword had a blue blade that shone faintly in the darkness.

“Spirit Blade!” Fran’s eyes widened in shock. “Hey! This thing is very rare. Where did you get it? This is very effective against ethereal beings, as well as those without a true body like Shades and Specters.

“I have my ways,” Ron replied.

Medina on the other hand, took out several arrows that were specially made to fight against Shades.

“It seems that we’re all ready for payback.” Carlo chuckled after seeing that he wasn’t the only one who had prepared for the possibility of encountering shades once more.

“As you can see, we are now different from our previous selves,” Medina stated. “We will go to the east tomorrow and see if our luck will help us accomplish a great feat.”

“Also, if we go there at least once, we will be able to gain merits from the Military,” Ron commented. “That’s not so bad, right?”

The members of the Dawnseekers nodded in agreement.

After their meeting ended, Alex helped Medina cook their dinner. However, just as he was cutting up the vegetables, he sensed someone gazing at him.

Thinking that it was just an Adventurer, he glanced in the direction where the gaze was coming from.

However, there was no person in that direction, and he was looking straight to the forest.

‘This feels familiar.’ Alex’s expression became serious when he realized that it was the same sensation he had felt in the forest where they had camped out before reaching Arian City.

However, Alex forced himself to become calm, thinking that it was impossible for the same creature to also be in the Shadow Forest at this time.

'I might be getting paranoid,' Alex thought. 'It's impossible for that thing to have followed us all the way here.'

Suddenly, Medina lightly patted his shoulder, which made him almost jump in fright.

"Alex? What's wrong?" Medina asked. "You're sweating."

"I-I am?" Alex wiped his forehead and realized that he was indeed sweating.

"Is there something wrong?" Medina asked. "Come on. You can tell me anything."

For a brief moment, Alex hesitated. However, since Medina treated him like a family member, he decided to tell her what he felt, even though it seemed impossible.

"Is it still looking at you?" Medina asked in a volume that only Alex could hear.

"No," Alex replied. "I can no longer sense it, so it might have left."

Medina nodded. "I'll inform Ron and Carlo, just in case."

"You're not doubting me, Medina?" Alex asked. "I might just be feeling paranoid, you know? It's impossible for that creature to have traveled all the way to this place."

The beautiful elf smiled before patting Alex's head.

"Did you forget, Alex?" Medina asked. "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. While we haven't confirmed that your assumption is correct, being prepared for anything will not be a bad thing for us, right?"

Alex felt something warm spreading inside his chest. Being trusted was truly a wonderful feeling.

“Thank you, Medina,” Alex said.

Medina then brought out a dagger from her storage ring and gave it to Alex.

“Take this dagger,” Medina stated. “It’s very effective against Shades and Creatures without true forms.”

Alex didn’t have any weapons effective against Shades, so he wouldn’t reject a dagger that worked against them no matter what.

He just hoped that he was just being affected by the tension in his surroundings.

Of course, he didn’t know that from a place where he couldn’t see, a shadow creature was heading deeper toward the eastern side of the forest, where the Dawnseekers would be going the next day.

Chapter 517: The Nightmare That Wears A Crown [Part 1]

“Are you all ready?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Medina replied.

“Ready!” Carlo smirked.

Sitting on top of Alex’s cap, Fran enthusiastically raised her hand. “I’m ready!”

Alex nodded. “Ready.”

Ron looked at his party members and briefed them about the latest update on the Shadow Forest.

“In the north, the Demons are very active, so they have frequent skirmishes,” Ron stated. “But we’re heading east, so we don’t have to worry about that problem. Of course, that doesn’t mean we have nothing to worry about.

“The east is covered in thick fog, and demons who specialize in ambushes thrive in that kind of environment. As a precaution, never lower your guard and always stay within a four-meter range of each other.”

The Swordmaster then glanced at Alex and Fran, knowing that he would be taking them to one of the most dangerous places in their kingdom.

“Alex, stay as close to Medina as possible,” Ron instructed. “Fran, don’t leave Alex’s side. If there’s a battle, the two of you will go to the rear and support us from behind.

“Alex, do not recklessly engage. Just use your throwing knives or your slingshot to provide cover fire. Fran, use your buffs to strengthen all of us. Do I make myself clear?”

The two younger members of Dawnseekers nodded. They understood that they were heading to a dangerous place and they didn’t want to drag their party members down if a fight happened during their search mission.

“I already informed the Military Commander that we will head East,” Ron added. “Whether we find Sean or not, our efforts and the risks we are undertaking will be recognised. If we ever get separated, we are to return to this camp to regroup. Do I make myself clear?”

““Yes!””

Ron nodded and led the way to the entrance of the forest. They already have their respective roles, so there was no need to say anything.

Medina naturally took the lead, followed closely by Ron.

Alex and Fran were at the middle of the formation, while Carlo stayed at the rear, protecting their backs from unseen surprises.

After two hours of walking, they finally came across the thick mist that covered the eastern region of the forest.

“Medina...” Ron glanced at the elf lady, and the latter nodded in understanding.

She took out the magical lyre from her storage ring and strummed its strings.

No sound came from the lyre... at least, not sounds that ordinary humans could hear. Medina was using an advanced magic that allowed her to scan the nearby surroundings for creatures both living and... possibly no longer living.

The elf continued to strum as she led the way for the party.

Her long ears paid close attention to any subtle sounds in their surroundings.

“The mist is really thick here,” Fran muttered as the visibility only continued to drop.

Alex could only see about two meters ahead of him, so he made sure to move as close to Medina as possible.

Perhaps because their vision was so obscured, they were all the more sensitive to the sounds of the forest.

From time to time, they heard beasts screech, birds call, and gusts of wind howl. It sounded no different from normal forests... but it had an eerie quality to it.

Every sound made Alex and Fran even more alert. In fact, the teenage boy’s fingers were firmly wrapped around the handle of his dagger, ready to draw it at the first sign of danger.

Carlo followed closely behind Alex, ensuring the safety of their two youngest members.

Finally, after two more hours, Medina stopped strumming her lyre and raised her hand, signaling everyone to stop.

"There are humans ahead," Medina said in a volume only her party members could hear.

"Are you sure they're humans?" Ron asked.

"I believe so," Medina answered. "However, they seem to be hiding in some kind of shelter. Perhaps a cave."

"Let's go to where they are," Ron said. "How many are they?"

"I sensed three individuals," Medina frowned. "But..."

"But what?" Carlo moved closer. "Come on. Spill it out."

"I can't be certain, but I might be sensing other presences with them," Medina stated.

"Enemies?" Ron narrowed his eyes.

"I'm not sure," Medina answered. "Be careful, everyone."

She then took out her magical bow, ready to draw it the moment they came across something.

Ron also took out his sword while Alex drew his dagger.

Carlo clenched his fists, ready to brawl at a moment's notice.

The group slowly but surely made their way to where the other humans were.

Alex soon saw the entrance of a cave, which meant that they were in the right location.

But before they could even peek inside, something flashed in front of him, and the sound of two weapons clashing against each other reached his ears.

The moment something moved toward them, Medina backed away and Ron charged forward.

When they saw Ron's opponent keep his footing after clashing with the Swordmaster, the party knew that they were not dealing with some kind of small fry.

The swordsman whom Ron was fighting raised his sword and prepared to unleash a powerful attack.

"Grand Cro—"

"Wait, Sean! It's me, Ron!"

The swordsman who had struck them paused mid-chant.

The mist was too thick. The only thing they could see was the silhouette. However, a voice—part doubtful and part hopeful—reached their ears.

"Ron? Is that really you?"

"Yes, Sean. It's me. The Guild commissioned us to look for you."

The fog lightened a bit, allowing Alex to see the person that they had come to look for.

However, when he saw Sean's current appearance, the teenage boy couldn't help but gasp in shock. There was a fresh scar on the Hero's face, starting from his right brow and ending on his left cheek.

"Sean, you..." Ron looked at the Hero, whose right eye socket was empty.

"I know." Sean sighed. "Come. It's not safe here. Our battle might have attracted THEM."

Without waiting for their reply, Sean moved toward the cave in haste.

Ron made a signal for everyone to follow him and headed to the cave in single file.

Now that the Dawnseekers had found the Hero and his party, it was now time to understand what had happened and why they did not return to the human camp all this time.

Chapter 518: The Nightmare That Wears A Crown [Part 2]

Within the darkness, a light hovered above the Hero's head, bright enough to illuminate the path they were taking.

They were diving deeper and deeper into the cave, only stopping when they arrived at the dead end, where two people were leaning against the wall.

It was none other than the Cleric and the Sorceress of Sean's party. However, the Elf Archer and the Spearman were nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, Alex noticed a foot sticking out in one of the blankets laid down on the floor.

"They're dead..." Fran muttered, as if voicing out what Alex barely dared to think.

Fairies were very sensitive to life. Since Fran didn't feel any life energy under the blanket, she realized that whoever the foot belonged to was already dead.

Ron, Medina, and Carlo looked at Sean, and the Hero sighed and nodded.

“Millie is dead,” Sean confirmed in a tired, aggrieved voice. “Jonas sacrificed himself to give us time to escape. However, I was seriously injured and the path was blocked by elite demons. We had no choice but to head east to escape their pursuit.

“This mist you see is Millie’s doing. She used the last of her life force to cast an elemental spell to hide us from our enemies. If not for her, we might also be dead right now.”

The Sorceress, Carla, and the Cleric, Rhea, looked very worn out as well. They had been in a constant state of fear and anxiety, not knowing if their enemies would be able to find their hiding place.

“Don’t worry. We will help you return safely,” Ron said firmly. “That’s the reason why we came here.”

Sean looked a bit hopeful after seeing the Adventurers whose skills he trusted. “Did you encounter any demons along the way?”

“No,” Medina replied. “I didn’t sense any Demons. But there were plenty of Beasts.”

Hearing her reply, Carla, and Rhea nearly wept because they could now see a chance to return safely.

“It took us four hours to get here. If we leave now, we can return before sunset,” Ron stated. “Let’s leave now while we still can.”

The Hero nodded and moved closer to the blanket that he used to cover his dear friend.

“Forgive me, Millie,” Sean said sadly. “I’ll bring you home now.”

He placed the dead elf inside his storage ring because that was the only way that he could give her a proper burial.

"I'm going to say this now, but there's a possibility that we'll encounter the creature that attacked us," Sean said in a serious tone. "I have dealt it a serious injury, but it's been weeks since our last encounter. It might've already recovered."

"Just what kind of creature did you face to end up like this?" Carlo asked.

Sean lowered his head as if the mere act of saying the name of that monster made him want to bite his lip in frustration.

"Shade Reaper King," Sean answered.

"Sh*t..." Carlo cursed.

A Shade Reaper King was a very powerful Shadow Creature. In fact, the monster that had almost wiped the Dawnseekers out in the past was only a Shade Reaper, a creature significantly weaker than a Shade Reaper King!

"No wonder..." Ron muttered. "But did your Holy Sword not work on it?"

"The Holy Sword can destroy all demons and evil creatures," Sean replied. "But we didn't face it alone. There were also Elite Demons during that encounter. Dealing with them all at once was extremely difficult. If not for my friends' sacrifices, I wouldn't be here speaking to you right now."

"I understand." Ron nodded, but he, too, was now extremely uneasy. "Hey, what are the chances that the Shade Reaper King is still somewhere out there?"

"The main reason why we decided to remain in hiding is because we are afraid to encounter it while we're injured," Sean explained. "As for whether it is still out there or not... Well, the odds can never be zero."

"But I'd rather take the chance to return while there is still light outside. Once evening comes, we will be at its mercy."

Hearing the Hero's words, the Dawnseekers decided that they shouldn't waste anymore time in the cave.

The sooner they returned to the camp, the sooner they could escape that dreadful monster that could kill them one by one.

"We will lead the way," Ron said. "Carlo, guard the rear."

"Okay." Carlo nodded.

The Hero Party and the Dawnseekers moved to the entrance of the cave. However, they didn't leave it right away.

Medina took out her magical lyre once more and started to strum its strings.

Two minutes later, she stepped out of the cave, which was the signal for everyone to follow her.

Ron and Sean took the vanguard.

Alex, Fran, Clara, and Rhea were at the middle, while Carlo was at the rear of the formation.

Now that they knew of the existence of the Shade Reaper King, they walked much faster than normal, hoping to get away as fast as they could without alerting the monster to their presence.

Perhaps due to their traumatic experience, every sound, whether it be birds or beasts, made Clara and Rhea shudder uncontrollably.

Alex and Fran felt sorry for them, but there was nothing they could do about it.

The trip back wasn't as smooth. A few beasts tried to ambush them through the mist. However, Medina had detected their presence in advance and informed Ron and Sean, who were both arguably the best swordsmen in their kingdom.

They made short work of these beasts and kept their carcasses inside their storage rings.

Both of them thought of leaving the bodies behind, but they realized that if they left a trail of dead beasts behind, their chances of being tracked went up significantly.

The Death Reaper King was not the only one they needed to be careful about. Elite Demons roamed these parts freely.

The Adventurers were so frightened that they wondered if their breaths or heartbeats were too loud.

An hour later, the party was making good progress when Alex suddenly got goosebumps on his arms.

The feeling of being watched made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. His Danger Sense, which he relied on the most, gave him a clear warning.

"Ron, someone or something is looking at me," Alex reported. "My Danger Sense is also warning me."

Upon hearing Alex's words, the Swordsman immediately approached him.

"Where do you feel the danger coming from?" Ron asked, his voice extremely serious.

"In that direction," Alex pointed at his left.

Ron looked to the left and even squinted, but the mist prevented anyone from seeing far. The swordsman turned to Medina for a second opinion.

“I don’t sense anything alive in the vicinity,” Medina said. “But I do trust Alex’s Danger Sense. Something must be out there, deliberately evading my detection spell.”

Ron didn’t think twice and moved Alex closer to Medina. “Coordinate with Medina and tell her where you feel the danger. She will then pick a path for us to follow.”

A good distance away, concealed by the mists, a Shadow Creature peeked from a tree and locked its gaze on the teenage boy who could, somehow, detect its presence despite its best efforts to stay hidden.

Chapter 519: The Nightmare That Wears A Crown [Part 3]

An hour after leaving the cave, the group was forced to seek shelter. Medina had detected demons in their surroundings, and they didn’t want to risk it.

The gaze that had locked itself on Alex’s body had disappeared some time ago, but the teenage boy could sense that the creature was somewhere nearby and had merely concealed its presence.

“I have something important to say,” Sean said to get everyone’s attention. “Truth be told, an oracle told me that there’s a high chance that I will lose my life in the Shadow Forest.”

“What?!” Ron looked at the Hero in shock. “Then why did you still come here?!”

“Because there’s always a chance that it won’t come true,” Sean replied. “Also, she said one more thing that made me reconsider taking this trip here.”

“And what is that?” Medina asked. “Although not all prophecies from oracles come true, what can possibly convince you to go to a place where you might die?”

Sean took out the ornate box that Ron had given him before they parted in Arian City.

He opened the box and showed the Dawnseeker Party the two silver rings placed inside of it.

“She said that if I come here with these two rings, the human race will win in the war against the Demon Lord,” Sean stated. “As you may already know, if a Hero dies, another one will take his place.”

“They call us humanity’s greatest Champions, but in reality, we’re expendable. Just like how a powerful Demon Lord appears from time to time, so do we. That has always been the case since the ancient era.”

Everyone listened to his revelation without interrupting his speech. Clearly, he had more to say to everyone after he showed them the ring.

“Remember this—no matter what happens, even if I die today, these rings must not fall into the enemy’s hands,” Sean declared. “If it does, the Demons will win this war.”

“What can those rings do exactly?” Fran asked. “Do they hold some kind of power?”

Sean nodded. “They do. These rings are the Gaia Rings.”

“What?!” Medina gasped in shock. “Those are the legendary Gaia Rings?!”

Sean took out the two rings from the ornate box and pressed them against each other.

Everyone then heard a faint click, which made them realize that the two rings were actually meant to combine into one.

A silver ring with a golden amber at its center. And if one looked closely, they would see a pattern within the amber that looked like the roman symbol “XXI”.

“The one who can wield the power of this ring will help us win this war,” Sean explained. “Unfortunately, the ring doesn’t react to me, which means that I’m not its destined owner.”

“If even one of these rings falls into the hands of our enemies, they can use it to find the other half. I asked Ron to get the first half of the ring so I can look for the second half hidden here in the Shadow Forest.”

“We found it, but before we could leave safely, the enemy also found us, leading to this situation.”

There was a hint of bitterness in his tone. If only Sean could activate the power of the ring, none of his party members would have died in battle.

“So you went to this forest to retrieve the other half of the ring that I handed to you.” Ron nodded in understanding. “Couldn’t you have asked a Rank S Adventurer Party to search for the missing half instead?”

“If you were in my place, would you have done such a thing?” Sean asked. “Can you put the fate of humanity in some random Adventurers and Sellswords? I can’t do that. The lives of many people are at stake.

“I only have one reason for telling you all these things. To those who can escape among us, protect these rings at all costs.”

Having learned the gravity of the situation, everyone understood what they needed to do in case of emergencies.

“I will keep the rings in my pocket for now,” Sean stated. “But if I were to fall, remember, take the rings and escape the forest no matter what the cost.”

The Hero’s words and gaze were so serious that it reflected his resolve. In the end, Ron and the other members of Dawnseekers promised to heed his request.

After resting for a bit, the party once again resumed their escape.

The demons were still at large, but they also didn’t want to remain inside the forest until nightfall.

The Shades would be active by then, and the last thing they wanted was to be found by the Shade Reaper King. If that being were to come, they’d undoubtedly be stuck in a very dire situation.

Suddenly, Medina's sharp hearing heard a whistling sound, prompting her to grab Alex and push him down on the ground.

"Everyone, duck!" Medina shouted

The members of the Dawnseekers didn't hesitate to heed her warning and crouched low on the ground.

Unfortunately, the members of the Hero Party were slower in this regard, and one of them was hit by the arrow.

A cry of pain escaped the Sorceress' lips as an arrow hit her arm.

More arrows came their way, but Ron was already on the move and deflected it with his sword.

"They found us!" Carlo clenched his fists tightly. "How many are they, Medina?!"

"Thirty," Medina answered before nocking an arrow on her bow. "Brace yourselves, Orcs are coming!"

Without a moment of hesitation, the elf fired a barrage of arrows at the nearest Orc charging in their direction.

"Ack!" As multiple arrows hit their mark on its chest, the Orc stopped in its tracks and soon collapsed on the ground.

Just as everyone thought that things couldn't get any worse, the sound of horns spread in the surroundings.

"Damn it!" Carlo cursed as he smashed the head of another Orc using his fist. "They're calling for backup!"

“Run!” Ron ordered. “We can’t stay here! Medina, lead the way. Carlo and I will cover our retreat!”

The beautiful elf grabbed Alex’s shirt and pulled him as she made her escape.

“Rhea, take Carla and follow Medina,” Sean ordered. “Take this with you!”

Sean tossed the ornate box to the Cleric, Rhea, who nodded in understanding.

She had already used her healing magic to treat Carla’s injury, but the tip of the arrow was soaked in poison.

Although she successfully detoxified her friend, the Sorceress was in no condition to join the battle, so they ran away with the ornate box entrusted to them.

The sound of weapons clashing against each other echoed in the forest as the ladies made their escape.

Suddenly, Alex once again sensed the gaze locked on his body, which made him shudder uncontrollably.

“It’s back!” Alex said to the elf that was carrying him like a sack of rice. “The gaze is back!”

“Hang on tight!” Medina replied. “Wind Walk!”

A gust of wind wrapped itself in Medina’s and Alex’s body, making them lighter and increasing their movement speed.

The Sorceress and the Cleric used similar skills to boost their mobility, increasing their chances of escape.

Unfortunately, a powerful presence stopped them in their tracks.

“No way!” Rhea’s face paled when she saw the creature blocking their path.

A three-meter tall Shadow Creature emerged in their path. It hovered in the air, wielding a death scythe.

Although the Shadow Creature looked like a congregation of black mists, there was a vague yet distinguishable shadow crown on top of its head.

Sean had mentioned that the Shadow Reaper King was like a Nightmare wearing a crown, and seeing it in the flesh made Alex realize that he didn’t exaggerate in his description.

“Shade Reaper King!” the Sorceress screamed in fright after seeing the monster that killed her friends.

Medina gritted her teeth as she put down Alex on the ground. Running away from such a powerful Shadow Creature was suicide, but fighting it was akin to suicide as well.

“Pull yourselves together, Carla, Rhea!” Medina shouted. “We have to fight this thing if we want to live!”

Her shout made the two members of the Hero Party realize that she was right.

They really had no other options but to fight for their survival.

“Here. Please take this and keep it safe.” Rhea handed the ornate box to Alex, whom she deemed was a non-combatant due to his age.

Medina smiled and lightly patted the teenage boy’s head before whispering something in his ear.

“If you see an opportunity to escape, just run,” Medina whispered. “I know you have a general idea where the military camp is, so head there as fast as you can. Don’t worry, we will follow behind you once Ron, Carlo, and Sean catch up and support us.”

Alex nodded in understanding. He had absolute faith in his party members, and once they fought together, he believed that they would be able to defeat even a Shade Reaper King.

“On my signal,” Medina said as she took out two elemental short swords from her storage ring.

Since they had no vanguard, she would play that role and allow the Sorceress and Cleric to support her from behind.

Alex really had no intention of leaving so soon, so he tightly held the dagger Medina had given him earlier.

Fran was also chanting Fae Magic, ready to assist her friends in battle.

Chapter 520: Gaia’s Rings [Part 1]

The sound of explosions reverberated inside the forest as the Sorceress unleashed a fireball spell.

The Shadow Reaper King swiftly moved around, so her spells missed her target, setting some trees in the distance ablaze.

Sparks flew as Medina’s elemental swords clashed with the Reaper King’s death scythe.

She specialized in archery, but she was also a very decent fighter in close combat.

Despite looking like someone in her early thirties, Medina was actually four hundred years old.

The beautiful elf was actually the strongest member of the Dawnseekers and had merely left the spotlight to Ron all the time.

Since this was a battle of life and death, she no longer held back and fought fiercely, keeping the monster from targeting her party members.

“Take this!” Fran shouted. “Faerie Fire!”

A purple fireball the size of a basketball hit the Shade Reaper King's body, making it screech in pain.

"There's more where that came from you punk!" Fran unleashed another spell, aiming to immobilize their enemy. "Faerie Chains!"

Two purple chains shot up from the ground and wrapped the Shadow Reaper King's weapon, preventing the latter from swinging it.

"Ray of light!" the Cleric shouted, and a beam of radiant light hit the Shadow Reaper King's body, making it roar in pain and anger.

"Fire Bullet Barrage!" Carla unleashed a barrage of Fire Bullets at the monster, preventing it from regaining its momentum.

For a moment, Alex thought that they were already winning, but he was wrong.

After receiving the hit of countless elemental spells, the Shade Reaper King unleashed a wave of darkness that sent Medina flying backward.

The beautiful elf's body crashed against two trees, making her cough a mouthful of blood.

The moment the vanguard was gone, the monster didn't hesitate to attack the Sorceress and Cleric, who desperately created an elemental barrier to protect themselves.

While this was happening, Alex and Fran rushed to Medina's side, checking her condition.

"Are you alright, Medina?!" Alex hurriedly took out a potion and helped the elf drink it.

"No, this can't be happening!" Fran gritted her teeth as she used a Minor Healing Spell at the fallen Elf, whose right arm was bent in a weird angle.

“Alex, Fran...” Medina said through gritted teeth. “Both of you should just run. Don’t worry, Ron and Carlo will be coming here soon. We will be able to escape together.”

“No!” Alex replied. “Just get better first. Here, drink another potion.”

The teenage boy’s hand was shaking as he helped the elf drink, which spilled from her lips because Alex’s hand was shaking badly.

Suddenly, two screams reached their ears, which made Alex’s and Fran’s faces turn pale from fright.

Medina already knew what happened, but instead of thinking of her own survival, she urged Alex and Fran to escape, almost behind them to leave her behind.

“Fran, take Alex and leave this place,” Medina said calmly. “You’re very good at hide and seek, right? If the two of you hide, that monster will not be able to find the two of you.”

“Please, Medina, come with us,” Alex pleaded as she tried to help her stand up. “Let’s all hide together.”

Fran also grabbed hold of Medina’s clothes and tried to pull her up. But the elf resisted and urged them to escape on their own.

“I will only slow both of you down,” Medina said calmly. “Please, make your esca—”

The elf wasn’t able to complete whatever she was going to say because she saw the Shade Reaper King hovering behind Alex with its scythe raised and ready to strike.

She didn’t know how, but her desire to save the teenage boy made her body move as if she wasn’t injured.

With a strong kick, she sent Alex flying out of harm’s way before rolling to her right side to evade the monster’s attack.

Fran screamed in fright before she cast a purple fireball at the monster's head, hitting it at point blank range.

Alex propped himself up from the ground and stood up shakily. The elf's kick didn't hurt him because she had cast some kind of wind spell on his body that served as a shield, cushioning her kick.

She saw Fran desperately trying to hold the monster back by casting one spell after the other.

Unfortunately, her magic wasn't strong enough to deal any serious damage to the fiend they were facing.

A cry of pain escaped the Fairy's lips as the Shade Reaper King slapped her away.

"Fran!" Alex shouted and ran toward the Fairy, whose radiance dimmed considerably after getting slapped.

"A-Alex, run," Fran said as the teenage boy held her gently. "It's too strong. We are all... going to die."

"No, this can't be happening." Alex held back a sob as he glanced in Medina's direction, who was fighting to lure the monster away from them.

Even at this time, the beautiful elf was still doing her best to give Alex and Fran a chance to escape to safety.

Alex desperately wanted to find a way to save his friends, but there was nothing he could do, which frustrated him.

Suddenly, the ornate box that had fallen on the ground due to the fighting, opened slowly.

The two rings glowed golden, and flew towards Alex and Fran, who was at a loss on what to do.

The rings flew straight to their ring fingers, adjusting their size to fit them perfectly.

A moment later, a wave of power washed over their body, making them gaze at the rings that were now in their hands.

“T-This...” Alex muttered as he looked at the Gaia Ring on his ring finger.

Fran was also shocked to see the ring in her hand. She brimmed with power, something she had never felt before.

“Full Heal.” Fran said as she pressed her hand over her chest, using a spell that she didn’t know would work or not.

However, to her surprise, a radiant light covered her body, healing all of her injuries.

Seeing this miracle, Alex suddenly realized what they needed to do.

“Fran, help Medina,” Alex said. “I’ll distract the Shade Reaper King.”

“Un!” Fran nodded.

As soon as the two of them came up with the plan, both of them charged at the monster, who was so close to killing a very important person in their life.

With a growl filled with anger and determination, Alex lunged at the Shade Reaper King with the dagger Medina had given him.

His body felt so light and filled with strength, making him feel like he could do the impossible.

The Shade Reaper King sensed someone behind it, but when it turned around, a brilliant flash of light momentarily blinded it and stalled its movements.

“Die!” Alex roared as he stabbed his dagger on the monster’s chest.

The Shade Reaper King roared in pain before smacking Alex away.

The teenage boy crashed and rolled on the ground before coming to a stop. To his surprise, that blow didn’t injure him. He barely felt anything as well, fueling his confidence a little.

“I can do this...” Alex muttered. “I can do this!”

Locking his gaze on the monster, Alex felt his strength and power rising exponentially, as if something inside of his body had been forcefully awakened.

Before long, his body was covered in a silver light, removing the fear that had once taken hold of his heart.