

Endless 61

Chapter 61: Make Your Final Preparations

"Oh, I almost forgot my good luck ritual," Alex said before clapping his hands twice and bowing toward the chest with a solemn look on his face.

"... What are you doing?" Leo asked when he saw Alex do some odd ritual. This was his first time seeing something this unusual.

"I'm just praying to Goddess Astrea for good luck," Alex replied.

"Goddess Astrea?" Leo scratched his head. "I don't remember any Goddess who goes by that name."

"Um, she's just around my age, so I'm sure you haven't heard of her," Alex answered and hurriedly opened the treasure chest to prevent Leo from asking any more questions.

When he lifted the cover, he found three items inside it.

A Medium-Grade Magic Crystal, a Skill Book, and Leather Gloves.

Just the Medium-Grade Magic Crystal was enough to make Alex happy. With it, he could once again raise his Magic Stat.

Once he absorbed it, he gained an additional ten points to his Magic Stat. The conversion also wasn't bad, so he was very satisfied.

He then grabbed the blue skill book to see what kind of skill book it was.

Since its color was blue, it meant that it possessed a rare skill. Naturally, that made him very excited.

< You have acquired the skill book Enchant Fire >

< Would you like to learn it? >

< Yes / No >

—

Alex didn't hesitate and chose yes.

The skill, Enchant Fire, allowed someone to imbue their weapons, armors, and, at times, even skills with the fire element.

When it was used on a weapon, it would gain fire properties, allowing it to deal fire damage.

If it was used to enchant armor, it would gain fire resistance, decreasing the damage from fire-based spells.

It was a very useful skill, especially against enemies resistant to physical attacks.

Granting an elemental property to a weapon also allowed it to damage specters and other ghost-like creatures that didn't have any physical bodies that could be hit.

After learning the skill, Alex then reached out to take the pair of gloves, another rare item.

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< Gloves of Strength >

Item Grade: Rare

Stats: +3 to Strength

Passive Skills: Colossal Break

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< Colossal Break >

Cooldown: 30 seconds.

Effect: If your enemy is stunned, silenced, or is in a weakened state, your next attack is guaranteed to deal critical damage.

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“Very nice,” Alex muttered before putting on the gloves.

What he lacked right now was a skill that would inflict a lot of damage to his enemy.

With the Gloves of Strength, Alex could use Shield Bash to Stun his opponent before using Slash, allowing him to deal critical damage.

He was certain that if he managed to get a more powerful offensive skill, this combination attack would become one of his trump cards.

After taking everything from the chest, the young man didn’t forget to pick up the monster cores the two other fire salamanders had dropped after dying.

Now that he had acquired a Job Class and gotten his revenge, he no longer had a reason to stay on the fourth floor of the Etherion Domain.

He, Dim Dim, and Sir Leo headed toward the path that would lead them to the third floor.

The young man didn't know that Cairo, Ramza, and the Elders—who were observing him in the secret room—were now feeling more hopeful that the other Catkins would be saved.

They didn't know that the Will of their ancestor was currently inside the guardian golem.

When Alex obtained the Oathkeeper Job Class, he was transported to a separate dimension, where he received the blessing of The Lovers.

Although they didn't personally make an appearance, the fact that Alex was able to become the Oathkeeper meant that they had deemed him worthy to acquire it.

"Strange. Why is that guardian golem following him?" one of the Elders asked. "Is that little white thing on top of its head controlling it?"

"That's very possible," another Elder replied. "Did you forget? It called out to the patrolling guardian golems and asked them to help Alex. Maybe that little thing can command golems."

Ramza, who was standing beside Cairo, looked at the guardian golem with a solemn expression.

By right, the only one who could command the guardian golems was the current Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan.

But he had no plans to complain right now.

Having a Rank 3 guardian golem assist Alex in fighting against the mutant monster was a welcome sight.

In fact, he wished that Dim Dim could command the other golems to come with them.

However, when the three arrived at the stairs that led to the third floor, the guardian golems guarding it remained in their spot, leaving Ramza and the other Elders disappointed.

Alex, Dim Dim, and Leo walked up the stairs, steeling themselves for the battle that could be their last.

Although he had acquired a Job Class and Leo was currently controlling a guardian golem, they weren't confident that they would be able to defeat the monstrosity waiting for them on the second floor.

Meanwhile, on the first floor of the Etherion Domain...

Lioren was kneeling on the ground, waiting for Lavinia to forgive him.

The young lady didn't even spare him a glance and instead focused her attention on the group's preparations for the upcoming battle.

Some Catkins were busy sharpening wooden spears, while others were busy drawing magic circles on the ground.

Although the Clawford Tribe preferred to use weapons in battle, some of them were gifted with Magic as well.

In fact, Lavinia herself could also use Magic, and she had spent the entire day condensing her Magic power inside a monster core, which she planned to use as a grenade against the Boss Monster.

If she was lucky enough to throw the core into the monster's mouth, then she could detonate it from within the monster's body and inflict serious damage.

“Princess, please forgive me,” Lioren pleaded for the umpteenth time. “I promise to never disobey you again.”

After learning that the Patriarch had a way of observing what was happening inside the Etherion Domain, Lioren felt very anxious. This could affect his future prospects in the Clawford Tribe.

Lioren’s bias against Alex had not only angered their princess but also strained the relationships he had forged with the other Catkins.

Since the Clawford Tribe paid great importance to the thoughts and moods of their Young Miss, they all refrained from interacting with Lioren so that Lavinia wouldn’t direct her anger at them.

Lavinia, to her credit, knew this as well and decided to look at the bigger picture.

“Rise, Lioren,” she ordered. “I will forgive you once and never again. So you better not repeat the same mistake in the future. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Young Miss,” Lioren replied, finally breathing a sigh of relief internally. “I will not do it again.”

“Good. Make your final preparations.”

“Yes!”

After that brief exchange, Lavinia once again turned her attention to condensing her Magic power in a second monster core.

They only had half a day before the seal would break apart, and everyone was extremely nervous about their inevitable battle with the Boss Monster.

Since Lavinia understood that no one would be able to function properly without sufficient rest before the battle, she commanded the Catkins to rest as much as they could. She also assigned watchers to pay close attention to their surroundings.

She was also very tired and wanted to sleep badly.

But she endured and focused her attention on the monster core that was starting to fill up with her Magic.

Chapter 62: The Oathkeeper's Last Oath [Part 1]

After a few hours of concentration, Lavinia finally decided to rest.

She felt fearful and anxious for what was about to happen, but she did her best to look calm in front of the other Catkins. The Clawford Tribe instinctively looked up to the Hartwell Clan for support and, as one of them, she mustn't show any signs of fear and weakness.

As long as she stood at the front lines, the Catkins would fight to the death if they had to.

The young lady could have sworn that she had gotten only ten seconds of sleep when she felt a presence that made her eyes open in shock.

The other Catkins, who were also resting, woke up from their slumber and stared fearfully at the north.

A powerful aura of malice and death was emanating from that direction, forcing everyone to stop whatever they were doing.

"Everyone, prepare for battle!" Lavinia shouted as she drew her sword whip from its scabbard, already prepared to fight.

All the Catkins obeyed and readied themselves for battle.

They watched as countless birds cried out, scattering in different directions as if they were trying to escape something that would threaten their lives.

As if trying to intimidate the helpless Catkins, the Rank 2 Boss Monster didn't bother to hide its presence and knocked down every tree in its path.

It could feel the fear and anxiety of its prey, which only filled it with anticipation. It was looking forward to playing with its food before eating them one by one.

As the trees fell one after the other, the Catkins stood rooted to the ground.

They had the strong urge to run away, but they couldn't do that.

Simply running away would make it easier for the Boss Monster to pick them off one by one.

Their only chance of winning was to fight together. If they could not defeat the monster as a team, then they stood no chance of fighting it alone.

When the monster finally appeared in front of the Catkins, they couldn't help but shudder from its menacing aura.

"Everyone, I know you're frightened!" Lavinia shouted. "But we must make our stand here! Show this abomination the courage of the Clawford Tribe!"

Her bravery diminished the fear the other Catkins felt, and they all gripped their weapons firmly in their hands.

Cairo, Ramza, and the Elders approved of Lavinia's leadership skills, but they still couldn't help but worry for her safety.

The mutant spider locked its gaze on the young lady, whom it recognized as the person who had summoned the dire bear.

It made a chirping sound as if to laugh at Lavinia's bravado, which it intended to soon destroy in the cruelest way possible.

Lavinia might not be able to perfectly understand what the spider was thinking, but she could tell it was planning to do something sinister to her.

As such, she took the initiative to charge at it and engage it in combat.

She couldn't let the monster make the first move, knowing that if it had the initiative, it would gain unstoppable momentum that would throw their plans out the window.

Seeing their Young Miss initiate combat, Lioren and the others charged alongside her, weapons drawn and ready to strike.

"Serpent Lash!" Lavinia yelled as she swung her sword whip against the unmoving foe.

The sword whip unfurled like a snake about to strike, flying directly toward the mutant spider's head.

However, the Boss Monster simply used its forelegs to deflect Lavinia's blow with ease.

The young lady had already anticipated this, so she remained unfazed. Instead, she raised her left hand and chanted a spell.

"Fire Bolt!"

A ray of flame shot out from her hand and flew toward the monster, which was underestimating them.

Instead of tanking the shot, the mutant spider finally made its move and jumped over the attack with its fangs bared.

"Now!" Lavinia shouted.

As if waiting for that order, all the Catkins flung the wooder spears in their hands at the spider that was about to land on their Young Miss.

Lavinia deftly jumped to the side and evaded the incoming spears. This was part of the strategy they had devised for the battle.

She would try to get the spider's attention and force it to attack her.

Once that happened, everyone would attack it at the same time, allowing them to land the first hit in this battle.

Just as Lavinia had predicted, the spears hit their mark... but only a handful of them.

Most of the spears were deflected by the monster's legs, and the few that struck its body barely left a scratch.

If their tactic succeeded in doing anything, it was pissing the monster off.

It started to spit out web balls that hit the Catkins and pinned them where they stood, preventing them from escaping.

The web was incredibly sticky. The more they struggled, the more entangled they found themselves, worsening their situation.

"Ahhhh!"

"Nooo!"

"Run!"

Lavinia roared and attacked the monster with her weapon, forcing it to once again focus its attention on her.

The monster spat a web ball in the young lady's direction, but she managed to dodge it at the last second.

Lioren and the others lunged at the mutant spider from its blind spot.

However, the spider had sensed their attack earlier, so it simply leaped away before hurtling more web balls in mid-air.

Two of Lioren's teammates were hit by the attack and screamed in fright.

The battle had just started, yet a sixth of their numbers were already out of action.

Although fearful and anxious, the Catkins didn't panic because they knew that Lavinia still had a trump card she had created just for this battle alone.

Just as they were about to make an opening for her, the spider suddenly unleashed a screech so mind-rending that it made everyone instinctively cover their ears.

The spider then used this opportunity to lunge at Lavinia, whom it deemed the greatest threat in battle.

Still shaken by the screech, Lavinia's reaction time became a bit slower.

Time seemed to slow down as the young lady saw the spider descend in front of her with its fangs ready to strike.

It was at that moment that she realized she was fighting an enemy way out of her league. Any belief that they had a chance of beating it was simply false hope.

But, in that slow-moving world, she also saw something she didn't expect.

Her eyes widened in shock as she saw that a boulder was slowly but surely about to collide with the mutant spider's body.

Time resumed its normal flow, and the boulder struck its mark, knocking the spider off course. Its fangs sank into empty air instead of Lavinia.

Lavinia and the Catkins glanced in the direction from which the boulder had come and saw Dim Dim perched on the head of a guardian golem.

But there was someone else standing beside them, and it was none other than Alex. He was holding a gray shield with the emblem of the Clawford Tribe embossed in its center.

"Have no fear!" Alex shouted.

"Dim Dim is here!" Dim Dim declared, raising its body proudly.

Not missing a beat, Alex lightly tapped his sword on the shield in his hand and shouted.

"Come here, you ugly spider!"

< Taunt [EX] activated! >

The mutant spider, who had just suffered a surprise attack from the side, screeched before jumping at Alex with the intention to kill.

Although they were far apart, that single leap closed the gap between them easily.

Taunt [EX] forced its target to exchange one blow with Alex.

It had a cooldown of two minutes, but that didn't mean others couldn't interfere while the Boss Monster was in a taunted state.

Leo, possessing the guardian golem, roared and smashed his fist into the monster's face, eliciting a painful scream. With Alex's taunt still affecting it, the monster couldn't control its body and failed to dodge the heavy blow.

Cairo, Ramza, and the Elders all rejoiced as the young man joined the battle.

Now that Alex, Dim Dim, and the guardian golem had arrived, the chances of winning against the Boss Monster were no longer zero.

Lioren and the rest of the Catkins, who hadn't liked Alex at the beginning, were now very happy to see him.

Lavinia, who had almost given up a minute ago, also looked at the young man with hope in her eyes.

"Everyone, let's work together to beat this thing!" Alex shouted. "I'll tank it, so don't hesitate to attack when you see an opportunity to strike!"

The Catkins shouted back in acknowledgment as their morale drastically rose.

Lavinia took a deep breath before her expression turned serious again.

Now that someone would tank the attacks of the Boss Monster for them, she and the Catkins could now attack it without holding back.

Leo, who saw this scene, couldn't help but remember the past, when he had played the same role for his tribe.

"Can you do it?" Leo asked the young man, who was preparing to get beaten up badly by the spider.

"Sir Leo, don't ask the obvious," Alex replied. "Even if I can't do it, I will still do it. After all, someone has to take the hits, right?"

“Indeed.” Leo nodded. “Someone needs to take hits so the others can kill this thing.”

The guardian golem then shot a Stone Bullet the size of a volleyball at the mutant spider, who was no longer planning to play around with its prey.

Cairo, Ramza, and the Elders of the Hartwell Clan all watched with bated breath at the battle that would be recorded in the history of the Clawford Tribe and talked about for many years to come.

Chapter 63: The Oathkeeper’s Last Oath [Part 2]

No longer feeling as confident as it had when it first terrorized the young Catkins, the jumping spider decided to play smart and jumped toward the forest, using the trees to hide itself from its targets.

“Don’t follow it!” Leo ordered, surprising the Catkins because they didn’t know that golems could talk.

Ignoring the teenagers’ dumbfounded looks, the first Oathkeeper hurried to release the Catkins who had been trapped by the monster’s sticky web.

Using brute strength, he freed the captives, allowing them to rejoin the battle.

Alex listened carefully to Dim Dim, who knew perfectly well where the Boss Monster was hiding.

The young man was waiting for his Taunt to finish its cooldown before provoking the monster to get out of its hiding place.

The scary part about Alex’s Taunt skill was that he didn’t need to see his target. As long as he had used it on his target once, it would become susceptible to further Taunts as long as it was within his range.

After Leo freed the last Catkin, he ordered them all to stand at the center of the clearing so he could protect them if the monster suddenly attacked from its hiding place.

Lavinia glanced at Alex, who was looking at her as if he had something on his mind.

“Do you need me for something?” she asked.

“Do you have anything that can deal a lot of damage to that Boss Monster?” Alex asked back.

“I do have something,” Lavinia answered. “But I need to get close to it.”

“Good.” Alex nodded. “I’ll create an opportunity for you.”

The young man then explained his Skills to the young lady. She quickly understood what he wanted from her.

“Very well,” Lavinia said. “As long as you can give me an opening, I can make it happen.”

Suddenly, Lioren, who had been listening to the two of them, appeared beside Alex.

“I still don’t like you,” the Catkin admitted. “But I’m thankful that you arrived to help us at this time. I’m sorry if I did something to offend you in the past. All I want you to know is that I plan to fight alongside you in this battle, so you can trust your back to me.”

Lioren glanced at the shield on Alex’s left arm and remembered the stories of the first Oathkeeper.

The drawing of Everguard was something every Catkin had seen when learning about their tribe’s history.

Although no Oathkeeper had appeared for the past hundreds of years, the legacy he left behind was still passed down from one generation to the next.

“Very well.” Alex raised his fist towards Lioren. “I’ll entrust my back to you.”

Lioren nodded and fist-bumped the person he hadn't expected to come to their aid when they needed it the most.

"Dim Dim!"

Dim Dim's shout reminded everyone that the Boss Monster was about to make its move.

Almost as soon as the Catkins heard the Dim Sum God's warning, dozens of web balls descended from the sky, forcing them to separate from each other.

"Careful!" Leo shouted. "It plans to cover the ground with sticky webs to limit our movements."

Alex had no plans to let that happen. With Dim Dim's help, he ran closer to the spider's hiding spot.

"Come out, you cowardly spider. Face us like a Boss!"

< Taunt [EX] activated! >

An angry screech answered his Taunt. A few seconds later, the Mutant Boss descended upon him after jumping from its hiding spot.

Lavinia, who was in on the plan, also ran alongside Alex the moment he made his move.

Now that the monster had finally reappeared, she took out a monster core from her storage ring and hurled it at the spider without hesitation.

The moment the monster core left her hand, it glowed bright red until it reached its limit.

A loud explosion sent reverberations through the surroundings, forcing Alex to dodge to the side before the Boss fell on top of him.

White smoke swiftly blanketed the area, preventing Lavinia from seeing if her attack had worked.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim pointed inside the white smoke, and Leo fired Stone Bullets in that direction.

He hoped his attacks would land on the monster’s body and deal extra damage to it.

Suddenly, from within the white smoke, eight eyes glowed bloody red. Everyone could now tell where the spider was.

But for some reason, Alex had a bad feeling. He trusted his gut and backed away with Lavinia.

“Everyone, be careful!” he shouted. “Something doesn’t feel right!”

The words had barely left his lips when he saw something move from within the white smoke.

A moment later, the guardian golem standing near him was blown away.

Alex instinctively raised his shield in front of him. Right after, the sound of something hard hitting his shield spread through the surroundings.

The young man then coughed out a mouthful of blood because the impact from the blow rattled his entire body.

His Knockback Immunity prevented him from being pushed back as long as he stood on something solid like the ground.

But that also meant that he had to tank much of the aftershock. He felt like he had been hit by a truck and wished that he could have been blown away instead.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim jumped high before throwing two brittle vials at the monster.

Just as the brittle vials were about to land on their target, the Dim Sum God was slapped away by the Boss Monster’s foreleg and sent flying through the air.

“Dim Dim!” Alex shouted when he heard the little one’s pained cry after it was hit by the monster.

A split second later, a screech filled with anguish and frustration reached his ears. The brittle vials had broken on the spider’s head, and its eyes were now in stinging pain thanks to the chili and pepper mix.

Alex finally understood why Leo had been blown away by the Boss Monster’s attack earlier.

The red-striped zebra jumping spider’s body had turned completely black. It also glinted like it was made of metal.

Blinded by Dim Dim’s attack, the monster was now recklessly waving its forelegs, as if trying to deter those who wished to take advantage of its weakened state and come closer.

It didn’t take long for Lavinia to realize that her magic core grenade hadn’t caused as much damage to the monster as she had hoped.

“Lavinia, do you have a healing potion?” Alex asked with a pale expression.

His question snapped her out of her daze. She promptly took a healing potion from her storage ring.

“Here,” she said as she handed the bottle to him.

“Thank you.” Alex didn’t hesitate to gulp the potion down and recover from his injuries.

When he was done, he once again looked at the monster. It was still attacking randomly and screeching in pain.

“Do you have any more tricks up your sleeve?” Alex asked hopefully.

“I have one more magic core grenade with me,” Lavinia answered. “But, as you can see, my first attempt didn’t deal any damage to it.”

“If its exoskeleton is protecting it from external attacks, then we should detonate your grenade inside its body,” Alex stated.

“I have thought of that, but how can we do it?” Lavinia asked. “The spider is faster and stronger than before. I’m not confident I can accurately throw the core into its mouth.”

Just as Alex was about to reply, he heard a determined voice.

“Dim Dim!”

The Dim Sum God had returned with a red bruise on its white cheek.

Its body was also dirty from crashing into the ground, but its eyes were filled with fighting intent.

“Dim Dim!” it continued.

“Are you sure?” Alex asked after hearing Dim Dim’s plan. He wasn’t sure if the strategy was feasible because he didn’t know if the buff of Colossal Break would apply to the Dim Sum God.

“Dim!”

“Alright, I understand.” Alex nodded. “Lavinia, please give Dim Dim the magic core grenade.”

The Catkin princess agreed and handed the core to the little guy, who gratefully accepted it.

Dim Dim then jumped on Alex's head, hyping itself up for a revenge showdown with the mutant spider that had dared to slap it away.

Despite his uncertainty, Alex trusted Dim Dim, so he agreed to do little one's plan even though it seemed like a suicide move that could potentially end their lives.

Chapter 64: The Oathkeeper's Last Oath [Part 3]

"Those with spells, use spells!" Alex ordered. "Those with spears, throw your spears. Those who can't do ranged attacks or do not have weapons, throw stones! Everyone, attack!"

As soon as the order was given, Leo hurled a Stone Bullet at the blinded monster's head. It hit the mark, resulting in a deafening screech of anger, pain, and frustration.

Now was the time to go on the offensive, and everyone didn't hold back and attacked with everything they had.

"Serpent Lash!" Lavinia moved closer and used her sword whip to deal more damage toward the monster that had terrorized her and the other Catkins for the past few days.

Because of it, they hadn't been able to sleep or eat properly.

Their anxiety had kept their brains active, and their fear had made them lose their appetite. Battle preparations had been difficult as the Catkins had struggled to calm those pressing emotions.

Lavinia might not show her anger, but she was going to make that spider pay for the suffering it had put her companions through!

Alex and Dim Dim took out more brittle vials and threw them at the monster's head and body.

Just like Lavinia, they also had a lot of pent up frustrations. So, they joined the Catkins, and threw caution to the wind.

However, the young man didn't forget to pay attention to the Boss Monster's health, which was slowly decreasing after their relentless attacks.

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< Red-Striped Zebra Jumping Spider >

Monster Rank: Rank 2 Field Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Mutant

Health: 982/1,200

Attack: 70 – 150

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'It's working!' Alex cheered silently. 'We just need to keep this up and we will win!'

Despite the fact that the monster's body had turned to something similar to metal, it still suffered one damage from each hit it received from the wooden spears and stones.

No matter how small that damage was, it could still accumulate, especially when it was inflicted repeatedly by nearly thirty Catkins.

Leo's Stone Bullets also dealt great damage to the enemy, frustrating it further.

But just as Alex thought that they already had this in the bag, the Boss Monster suddenly lunged toward one of the Catkins who was armed with only a stone.

Knowing that the Catkin didn't stand a chance, Alex tapped his shield with his sword, and activated his skill, Taunt [EX].

"Over here, you pest!" Alex shouted. "Come and get me if you can!"

< Taunt [EX] has activated! >

The Boss Monster's body stiffened just as it was about to deliver its deadly blow to the Catkin, giving the latter time to jump to the side to evade its attack.

Despite its blinded state, the jumping spider turned and started approaching Alex. His Taunt skill forced the spider to engage him in battle.

However, just like what Alex and Leo had planned beforehand, the guardian golem charged at the monster and punched its head with all of its strength.

This was the strategy that both of them agreed to use, every time an opportunity presented itself.

Sparks flew as the golem's fist hit the spider's head.

But to Alex's surprise, the Boss Monster endured the hit and immediately started spitting web balls at the guardian golem at point-blank range, quickly covering its entire body.

Leo tried to break free from the web binding his body, but the more he struggled, the more entangled he became.

Clearly, the Boss Monster's sticky web had also gotten stronger after its sudden transformation.

“Sir Leo!” Alex watched in horror as the Boss Monster continued to cover the guardian golem’s body with its sticky web, making sure it would no longer get in its way.

The spider’s vision was starting to recover, but it could only see a few meters in front of it clearly.

Further objects were blurry. However, that was enough for the monster to identify the locations of its targets.

It was very angry because its prey had managed to injure it, which the Boss Monster didn’t expect at the start.

“Everyone, make sure to look out for each other!” Lavinia ordered. “We are going to get out of this alive! Don’t stop attacking it!”

The Catkins obeyed her order despite the surge of anxiety coursing through their veins after seeing that even the guardian golem could not escape the spider’s web.

They continued to hurl their ranged attacks at the Boss Monster, but the latter was no longer in the mood to play games with its prey.

It leaped at one of the Catkins and spat out several web balls while it was still in mid-air.

“Ahhh!”

“Noooo!”

“Save meee!”

“Damn it!”

“Help me! Princess!”

While some of the Catkins were able to dodge, the rest were not fast enough to evade the spider's counterattack.

"Dim Dim, I'll leave it to you!" Alex exclaimed before running towards the Boss Monster with sword and shield at hand.

He had taken out several oil lamps from his storage ring earlier, and placed it on the ground beside the Dim Sum God.

Dim Dim took one of the oil lamps and headed towards Leo, who was covered in sticky webs.

The two knew that they would need the Guardian Golem's help to defeat the Boss Monster, so freeing it should be their topmost priority.

Lavinia immediately understood what the two intended to do.

However, since Dim Dim was already going to help the guardian golem, she followed Alex to help her people, and give them some time to rejoin their battle formation.

"Shield Bash!"

Alex slammed his shield on the side of the spider's body, causing it to stagger and preventing it from sinking its fangs into one of the Catkins that had been caught in its web.

< The target has been Stunned! >

Hearing the notification sound inside of his head, Alex didn't hesitate to follow up with another skill that was guaranteed to deal critical damage to the Boss Monster.

"Slash!"

Sparks flew as Alex's sword hit the spider's abdomen. In retaliation, the monster lashed at him with one of its forelegs.

Raising his shield to block the attack, the young man tanked the blow even though it made his legs feel like they were about to collapse under him.

"Now, Lavinia!" Alex shouted.

The young lady had waited for this perfect opportunity. She jumped over Alex's body and unleashed one of her strongest attacks.

"Flame Lash!" Lavinia roared.

The sword whip in the princess's hand burst into flames and slashed across the monster's body three times before she backed away to safety.

Lioren, who was also waiting for the right moment to strike, drew close to the monster.

"Sword Impact!" he shouted as he gripped his sword with both hands and swung at one of the opponent's hind legs with all his might.

The thundering clap reverberated through the surroundings the moment the Catkin's sword made contact with its target.

This was followed by a burst of flames that made the monster scream in pain as one of its hind legs was blown off from its body.

Maddened by pain, the spider swatted Lioren, who hastily used his sword to block the attack.

But the force of the blow was still enough to send him flying.

Alex and Lavinia followed Lioren's example and focused their attacks on another of the Boss Monster's hind legs.

"Slash!"

"Flame Lash!"

Another leg was severed from the monster's body, enraging it even more

Alex and Lavinia hurriedly backed away, but the spider had no intention of letting them off so easily.

It spat several web balls in their direction. Despite their desperate attempts to dodge the attacks, one of the web balls hit Lavinia mid-jump when she was unable to change her trajectory.

Alex rushed to her side in order to use his sword to cut her free. Of course, the Boss Monster wouldn't allow such a thing to happen.

"Watch out!" Lavinia screamed as the spider unleashed a web ball at Alex.

At that moment, something tall and big appeared between the young man and the monster's attack.

Leo's body, still covered in flames due to the oil lamp that Dim Dim had used to burn the web binding him, swatted the web ball with his left hand.

This caused the sticky web to spread onto his left arm, but he didn't care about it one bit.

Roaring with determination, the guardian golem threw itself at the Boss Monster and wrestled it to the ground.

Alex used this opportunity to free Lavinia.

But just when the young lady had been freed, something fell a few meters away from them.

It was an arm. The guardian golem was now being torn apart by the Boss Monster, which seemed to have entered a second berserk state.

Chapter 65: The Oathkeeper's Last Oath [Part 4]

"Sir Leo!" Alex shouted at the guardian golem desperately fighting against the berserk Boss Monster that was hell-bent on ripping its body apart.

"Don't interfere!" Leo ordered. "It's very dangerous right now! Wait until its berserk phase is over!"

The Oathkeeper didn't seem to give a damn about his missing arm. He continued exchanging blows with the spider despite being at a disadvantage.

By now, the Catkins had succeeded in cutting off two of the monster's hind legs. With that, it could no longer jump like it used to. Enraged by the loss, it had gone berserk. Right now, the only thing it wanted to do was kill and rip apart anything that stood in its way.

The battle of the two behemoths was so intense that no one could get near them without getting hurt.

The first Oathkeeper gave his all to safeguard the seeds of the next generation of the Clawford Tribe, which he had vowed to protect hundreds of years ago.

Leo's remaining Will understood this was the last time he could help his people.

Although he knew he wouldn't be able to defeat the Boss Monster, he would inflict as much damage as he could so Alex and the rest of the Catkins could finish it off.

A minute later, another arm of the Guardian Golem was successfully yanked away by the Boss Monster. Alex's and the Catkins' expressions turned grim.

But the Oathkeeper had no intention of giving up.

After losing both arms, he used his legs and kicked the monster repeatedly on the face.

Using every part of his body, Leo fought, and fought, and fought some more.

When the monster was close, he used his head to headbutt it.

When it tried to distance itself away from him, he slammed his body against it.

Alex, who knew why Leo was fighting so desperately, couldn't help but feel emotional.

He was looking at a true Hero.

Even though his original body had died hundreds of years ago, his Will and determination to protect his tribe still remained.

So when one of the spider's legs successfully yanked the golem's head from its body, Alex and the Catkins all cried out in anger.

Although the Boss Monster's berserk state was still active, Alex no longer cared and rushed towards it with a furious roar.

The Catkins finally realized the true identity of the guardian golem that had desperately tried to protect them. That realization banished all the fear they felt, replacing it with the thought of vengeance.

Just like the young human, all of them charged at the Boss Monster, not caring that they might very well die.

Even Lavinia, who usually had a good head on her shoulders, sprinted toward the enemy, her eyes brimming with killing intent.

However, even with anger fueling their blows, they couldn't suddenly overcome the difference in strength.

One by one, the Catkins were sent hurtling. The Boss Monster's frenzied attacks left them with moderate to serious injuries.

Even Alex's nose and mouth were bleeding after tanking several blows that would surely be fatal had they landed on the Catkins instead.

After getting severely hurt, he was no longer agile enough to evade the web balls that the spider had spat in his direction. Before long, he had been turned into a human cocoon.

While everyone was fighting desperately, Alex felt himself sinking into darkness as the injuries and exhaustion he suffered washed over his body.

At the same time, particles of light flew out of the guardian golem's body and headed toward the cocoon where Alex was trapped in.

This light merged with Everguard, making the shield in Alex's hand glow faintly.

"Old friend, let us fight together one last time," Leo said to his partner, who had accompanied him for many years.

As if replying to his wish, Everguard shone brilliantly, instantly healing all of Alex's injuries.

It then emitted a golden flame that burned away the sticky web, freeing the young man.

Alex's consciousness, which was about to fade, suddenly returned.

He then stood up and looked at Everguard, which was still shining brightly.

Despite that brightness, Alex wasn't blinded by it.

In fact, he felt that Leo and Everguard were burning what remained of their life force to fight one last battle together.

This golden light wrapped around Alex's entire body, filling the young man with the strength that would allow him to accomplish the Last Oath the two protectors of the Clawford Tribe wished to fulfill at all costs.

At that moment, a scream reached the young man's ears.

The Catkins watched in horror as their Young Miss used her body to shield one of them from the fangs of the monster.

Lavinia could have turned a blind eye and allowed the young Catkin to get devoured, but her body moved on its own before she could even think.

But she didn't regret it.

It was the duty of the Hartwell Clan to protect the Clawford Tribe.

'I'm sorry, brother, father, mother, grandpa,' Lavinia thought as she closed her eyes and braced herself for the incoming attack that would end her life.

But the bite she expected didn't come.

Instead, she heard a metallic clang behind her.

It was then followed by a pained screech that made her turn around to see what was happening.

The first thing she saw was the back of a young man, whose body was glowing with a golden light.

She then saw the mutant spider lying on the ground, with its legs flailing like a turtle that had been flipped over.

Just as she wondered if she had died and was simply looking at an illusion, the young man raised his leg and kicked the spider like a soccer ball, sending it flying.

Lavinia, the teenage Catkins, and those who were watching the battle in the secret room stared in disbelief. What they were witnessing was simply too incredible.

Alex, who was brimming with strength at the moment, raised his shield in front of him.

“Shield Rush!”

He then ran forward so fast that he left a trail of afterimages. Before the mutant spider could even fall to the ground, he arrived and followed up with another attack.

“Shield Charge!”

The young man’s entire body turned into a golden comet that slammed against the Boss Monster, creating a powerful explosion.

A pained scream escaped the monster’s mouth as it rolled several times on the ground due to the force of the impact before coming to a complete stop.

Just like everyone else, it couldn’t understand why the weak human, whom it had treated as a joke earlier, was suddenly so powerful.

The monster’s berserk state had ended the moment Alex’s Shield Charge connected with its body, making it feel a pain it had never felt before in its life.

Alex gazed at the monster, whose health had decreased drastically after receiving his combination attack.

Due to Leo and Everguard burning their life force, Alex's strength had increased drastically, boosting him to temporarily become a Rank 7 Oathkeeper.

This was the highest Rank Leo had achieved in his lifetime, allowing him to protect the Clawford Tribe during his generation.

The mutant spider, who was on its last legs, tried to prop itself up from the ground but failed to do so because of its injuries.

It then noticed something white and small standing near its head, looking at him with a glare.

The Boss Monster opened its mouth in an attempt to bite the little guy, but Dim Dim wasn't fazed by it. Instead, the Dim Sum God took out the monster core that had been charged with Lavinia's Mgc power and tossed it inside the monster's mouth before jumping away to safety.

Dim Dim had been hurt by the mutant spider earlier, so it had been waiting for the right opportunity to get its revenge.

Just as the Boss Monster was wondering what had been tossed inside its mouth, it suddenly felt something hot inside its body.

A moment later, its body expanded before bursting apart, sending flesh and blood flying in every direction.

The monster's head fell on the ground rolling. It only stopped when it hit Alex's feet.

Without hesitation, the young man raised his glowing shield and slammed it on the monster's head with all the strength he could muster.

The spider's head shattered like a watermelon, leaving nothing behind.

When the monster's body started to turn into particles of light, the young man heard two voices inside his head.

""Thank you, Alex.""

The young man recognized Sir Leo's voice and instinctively knew that the second voice belonged to the shield in his hand.

Everguard had gained sentience over the years and had poured everything it had into accomplishing its final task.

The sound of something breaking reached everyone's ears as the shield, which had protected the Clawford Tribe for hundreds of years, finally broke apart after fulfilling its last mission.

Alex knelt and gathered the shield's broken shards one by one and piled them up together.

When he was done, he pressed his hands together in prayer and thanked Everguard for fulfilling its last oath before it left the world to reunite with its dear friend, who had gone before it.

Chapter 66: You Return To Us Not Merely As Warriors, But As Legends Reborn

Several days after the battle against the mutant spider had ended...

The gate that led to the Etherion Domain opened, and countless beams of light shot out of it.

Alex and the other Catkins were ejected from the domain after their ten-day trial period ended.

Frankly, the adults were just happy that the very stressful ordeal that all of them experienced was finally over.

The parents of the Catkins, who had been informed of what had happened inside the domain, hugged their children tightly.

Although they were proud warriors, some of them still teared up after seeing that their loved ones were truly safe.

Given the intensity of the battle, some of the teenagers were still injured. Even so, the baptism of blood made them realize more how precious life truly was.

This would shape them to become better individuals in the future, who would pave the way to the prosperity of the Clawford Tribe.

Ramza and the Elders had ordered their tribe's healers to come. As soon as the children got out of the domain, they rushed to the wounded and immediately started healing them.

"Thank you," one of the parents of the teenage Catkins who had entered the Domain walked up to Alex and bowed to him. "If not for you, I would have lost my one and only daughter. I can't thank you enough for saving her."

At first, Alex planned to say that it was a team effort by everyone. But seeing Cairo's encouraging gaze, the young man decided to accept the Catkin's gratitude instead.

"You're welcome," Alex replied. "But I believe most of the credit does not belong to me. The first Oathkeeper, Sir Leo, was the one who saved us all. I think we should hold some sort of festival for him for keeping his oath so long after his death."

"That sounds like a great idea!" Ramza, who was approaching the young man, nodded. "I'll see to it that a feast will be held in his honor."

The more he looked at his grandson's disciple, the more appealing Alex became in his eyes.

The birth of a new Oathkeeper held great significance to the Clawford Tribe.

Because of this, he decided to let Alex keep Svalinn, which had been a treasure given to their clan as a gift.

While being hugged by her parents, Lavinia kept stealing glances at Alex as he spoke with her grandfather.

After the battle, Alex had bidden everyone goodbye, and no one had seen him since that day.

Lavinia had tried to look for him on the first and second floors, but she hadn't been able to find him.

Of course, she wouldn't find him there. After receiving permission, the young man returned to the fourth floor of the domain to farm experience points from the Rank 2 fire salamanders that spawned there.

Although he had lost the passive skill of Fire Immunity he had temporarily gotten from Svalinn, he had gained Fire Resistance in return.

This allowed him to fight the monsters in the Scorched Barrens, raising his combat awareness and his swordplay.

He also gained five levels, further boosting his stats in the process.

Overall, this trip had given Alex a taste on what it was like to fight with the strength of a Rank 7 Oathkeeper.

This Rank was for those whose combined stats were above 6,400 but below 12,800.

'I'll reach that rank someday,' Alex thought as he followed his Master to the grand hall.

Ramza had followed tradition and prepared a feast for the challengers.

This year's trial had produced some exceptional warriors, with Lioren managing to get one of the Hidden Job Classes available in the Etherion Domain.

But the true star of this gathering was none other than Alex, who had become the second Oathkeeper in the long history of the Clawford Tribe.

Unlike the other Hidden Job Classes that anyone could get, there could only be one Oathkeeper at a time.

This elevated the young man's influence as well as gained him the admiration and respect of Ramza and the Elders of the Hartwell Clan.

"Master, can I just sleep?" asked Alex, who didn't want to mingle with everyone.

"No," Cairo replied firmly. "This is your duty as my disciple. So make sure you perform well."

A sigh escaped the young man's lips, but he no longer insisted on skipping this tradition that welcomed the challengers who had survived the trial.

When everyone had been properly seated, Ramza raised a goblet and gave his speech.

"Welcome home, brave warriors of the Clawford Tribe. You have braved great dangers inside the Etherion Domain and returned not broken but forged anew.

"The trials you faced were not just tests of strength but also spirit. Where others faltered, you endured. Where hope flickered, you carried the flame.

"You return to us not merely as warriors but as legends reborn. This feast is to honor your determination, as well as the courage you showed when the mutant spider came to hunt all of you down.

“The world may not remember your accomplishments, but we will remember. As such, enjoy this feast, brave heroes of the Clawford Tribe!”

Cheers rang out inside the main hall as the teenagers also raised their cups and drank from them.

Alex also found Ramza’s speech very moving, so he shared his drink with Dim Dim.

The little guy then took out a straw from who-knows-where and started slurping the fruit juice happily.

Lively chatter commenced between bites of food as the teenagers shared the stories of their experiences in the domain with their parents.

They would glance in Alex’s direction from time to time as they told their parents about the Oathkeeper who had protected them with everything he had.

“Are you interested in him, Lavinia?” Ramza asked his granddaughter in a voice low enough only for her to hear.

The young lady immediately blushed before shaking her head, making her grandfather chuckle.

Lavinia’s parents smiled faintly, while Cairo scratched his cheek. To be honest, this was an unexpected development even he hadn’t foreseen.

“Y-You’re misunderstanding things!” Lavinia tried to explain, subconsciously raising her voice as she rushed to deny her feelings, but this only attracted the attention of others at the table.

Even Alex, who was letting Dim Dim drink his fruit juice with a straw, glanced in Lavinia’s direction. The young lady’s face turned a shade redder.

“I’m sorry.” Ramza said to his guests with a smile. “I was just teasing my granddaughter, so she reacted like this.”

Faint smiles and laughter spread inside the hall. Lavinia lowered her head in embarrassment.

Ramza no longer teased his granddaughter and simply listened to everyone's tales of their adventures inside the Etherion Domain.

Less than an hour later, the feast finally ended, and everyone returned to their homes.

Alex was then escorted to his guest room, where he immediately took a shower before resting on his bed, feeling refreshed.

Dim Dim yawned and closed its eyes.

Just like Alex, it was also very tired of their adventure so it fell asleep within a few seconds.

The young man also closed his eyes to rest and, just like his companion, he fell asleep in less than a minute, dreaming of a time when he finally became a Rank 7 Oathkeeper and felt invincible with the power he wielded in his hands.

Chapter 67: Can I Make A Request?

"Your disciple sure is something," Ramza remarked as he looked through the window of his office. "It seems that you made the right decision in choosing him as your first disciple."

"That, he is." Cairo nodded. "Also, it's more like he chose me, instead of me choosing him."

The two smiled faintly as they watched the young man ran up the stairs that led to the residence of the Hartwell Clan, while carrying on his back a basket commonly used by those who gathered herbs.

It was halfway filled with stones, and this was the tenth time the young man had climbed the stairs since he woke up this morning.

Even at a different place, Alex found a way to continue his daily training, not wanting to waste a single day before his departure for Briarwood Village.

He had also received news from Cairo that the Town of Thaloria was expecting a monster outbreak in the next few days.

Alex told his Master he planned to return to the town to help defend it, and Cairo agreed.

However, the airship bound for the town would only pass by Etherion Village tomorrow morning, so Alex needed to wait until then.

"Are you sure you're going to accompany him back to Thaloria?" Ramza asked. "A monster outbreak can be very dangerous, you know?"

"I know." Cairo nodded. "But I'm currently searching for my way of the sword. If I were to run away from such a challenge when my disciple chose to make his stand, I'm sure it would haunt me all my life.

"I don't want to have a heart demon, which might hinder me from reaching the goal I have in mind."

"You still dream of becoming Heaven's Sword?" Ramza arched an eyebrow. "You know it's not going to be an easy path, right?"

"I am prepared for it," Cairo answered. "That is the path that I wish to take."

Ramza sighed before resting his hand on his grandson's shoulder.

"There is a fine line between being brave and being stupid," Ramza stated. "You can follow your dream, you can follow your heart. We will not stop you. But remember this, we don't care if you become the Heaven's Sword or not. As long as you return to us safely after your long journey ends, that is all that really matters to the Hartwell Clan."

Cairo nodded in understanding before shifting his attention back to his disciple, who was now walking down the stairs to start all over again.

“By the way, does your disciple plan to stay in the Town of Thalaria to become an adventurer for life?” Ramza inquired.

“No.” Cairo shook his head. “He plans to enroll in Frieden Academy as a freshman. However, he said he plans to visit Briarwood Village first. Also, he asked me if I could accompany him there for a mission.”

“Briarwood Village?” Ramza frowned. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a small village in the southeastern edges of the Kingdom,” Cairo commented. “It doesn’t have any redeeming features aside from the fact that one of the entrances to the Dungeon of Beginnings is located there.”

“So there’s really nothing special about the village?” Ramza wondered.

“I’ve been there once, and all I can say is that nothing stood out to me.” Cairo shrugged. “For some reason, Alex seems determined to go there. I don’t know how to put it, but I have a feeling that he has been training so hard for this trip.”

“How... peculiar.” Ramza rubbed his chin. “Now I’m getting interested in that village too. Maybe you should ask him why he wants to go there instead of directly going to the capital city of Harmonia to enroll in the academy.”

Cairo pondered for a bit before agreeing. “Since he asked me to come with him, I’m sure this trip will not be an ordinary one. There must be danger involved.”

“We’ll talk to him after breakfast. If he opens up, then good. If not, then I will respect his privacy.”

“Mmm.”

While the two Catkins were observing Alex, the young man once again ran up the staircase until he reached the very top.

No notification sounds informed him that he gained any additional stat from his morning exercise, but that was fine with him.

Usually, it took him a few days to raise his strength and agility through training, so he wasn't bothered by the lack of notifications.

But despite all this, Alex still felt stronger because his already fit body was getting even fitter.

As the young man wiped the sweat from his face, he noticed Lavinia, who was standing in the distance with her two handmaidens, looking at him with a calm expression.

He then hurriedly lifted Dim Dim from the top of his head and brought the little one closer to his face before whispering something in its ear.

"Dim Dim, why is she looking at me as if she wants to eat me?"

The Dim Sum God glanced in Lavinia's direction before whispering back in Alex's ear.

"Dim Dim."

"Huh? Are you sure?"

"Dim!"

Feeling conflicted, Alex decided to walk up to her and greet her.

"Good morning, Lavinia," Alex said to the princess, who was a year younger than him.

"Good morning," Lavinia replied calmly.

Lavinia's handmaidens looked at the young man in surprise when he addressed her by her name instead of calling her Princess or Young Miss like everyone did.

Only the members of the Hartwell Clan were permitted to address her as such.

But it was more surprising that their Young Lady—rather uncharacteristically—didn't tell Alex off for acting too familiar without permission!

Seeing the frowns on the handmaidens' faces, the young man thought that he might have been a nuisance for turning the stairs that were used by the staff of the residence into his training ground.

"Um, am I perhaps disturbing the peace of your residence by running up the stairs?" Alex asked awkwardly. "I'm terribly sorry about this. I just thought that it was a good place to train."

"... My brother used to do the same when he was younger," Lavinia replied. "When he was first taught the sword by my grandfather, he would always run up and down the stairs in the mornings."

"Oh?" Alex's face brightened up. It was his first time hearing this information about his master, so he was naturally happy to know even just a bit more about the latter. "Do you look up to your brother, Lavinia?"

"I do." Lavinia nodded. "By the way, is it fine if I call you Alex?"

"Of course," he replied.

"My brother has said that you will be leaving tomorrow to return to the Town of Thalloria, where a monster outbreak can happen any day. Why must you go to such a dangerous place when you can just stay here and train in peace?"

"It's because of experience points," Alex answered in a heartbeat.

"Huh? Experience points?"

"I mean, I want to experience what a monster outbreak is like. For some reason, I think I will be facing something similar before I enroll in Frieden Academy."

"Frieden Academy..." Lavinia muttered. "You plan to study there?"

"Yes." Alex nodded.

The young lady smiled sweetly, which made Alex's heart skip a beat.

Lavinia was already a beautiful young lady, but her smile lit up her face with an angelic charm. This was a side of her that he hadn't seen before.

"This is probably the first time I'm seeing you smile," Alex managed after regaining his composure. "You should smile often. It makes you look prettier."

The sudden casual compliment caught Lavinia by surprise, reddening her face.

"I-I came here to see you today to ask if you can give me the remains of Everguard," Lavinia said. "M-My grandfather wishes to have a blacksmith fix it. Since you are our Oathkeeper, he has decided that you need a good shield to protect you in your journey."

"Oh..." Alex was also planning to give the remains of Everguard to a good blacksmith for repair. However, he also understood that repairing it completely was not possible.

The young man took out his storage pouch, where he stored the broken parts of the loyal shield, and handed it to Lavinia.

"T-Thank you," the princess stammered as she accepted the pouch. "The repairs will take some time, but we will surely deliver it to you as soon as possible."

"Understood." Alex nodded. "But can I make a request?"

“A request?”

“Yes.”

Alex believed that the blacksmith would simply melt the broken parts of the shield to forge another one.

That shield would no longer be Everguard, but he wished to honor its sacrifice.

“The shield doesn’t have to look exactly like Everguard,” Alex stated as he placed his hand over his chest.

“But I wish to have the emblem of the Clawford Tribe embossed at its center. The Oath I chose may not be to protect the Clawford Tribe, but I wish to keep Sir Leo’s memory here in my heart.”

Lavinia looked at the faint smile on Alex’s face. This time, it was her heart that skipped a beat.

As if to hide her embarrassment, she simply nodded before making a hasty retreat back to the residence so the young man wouldn’t see the expression on her reddened face right now.

The Ninjas, who were assigned to guard Lavinia, exchanged smiles with each other before following their princess from the shadows.

This was the first time they had seen their Young Miss act so bashfully. Some of them believed that spring had finally come to the princess, who must be feeling such strong emotions for the first time in her life.

Chapter 68: Same Destination

“Are you ready to go?” Cairo asked his disciple, who was currently doing light stretches in front of the Hartwell residence.

“Yes, Master,” Alex replied. “Everything I have is inside my storage ring, so I can go anytime.”

The Catkin nodded before glancing at his sister, who was walking toward them.

Lavinia had come to say goodbye to Alex and once again thank him for everything he had done for the Clawford Tribe.

"I have baked some cookies for you and my brother to take on your journey," Lavinia said as she handed a magic pouch to her brother and the young man. "Although I already said it inside the Etherion Domain, let me say it again."

The young lady bowed respectfully, not caring about her position as the princess of the Clawford Tribe.

"Thank you for saving me and the other members of my tribe," Lavina stated. "I will pay this debt to you someday. Also, if you ever need help, don't hesitate to approach our family. We will always support you in any way that we can."

The young lady looked at her brother for a brief moment before moving closer to whisper something in Alex's ear.

"If you ever feel intimidated by my brother and grandpa, you can just tell me what you want," she murmured. "I can be your middleman in the Clawford Tribe."

"Thank you, Lavinia," Alex whispered back. "I'll keep that in mind."

After saying what she needed to say, the young lady took a step back and once again acted as the prim and proper daughter of the Hartwell Clan.

Cairo looked at his sister with amusement, knowing what his little sister might be thinking.

But since he believed that she was already old enough to make her own decisions, he decided to let her handle things the way she deemed fit.

“Alex, feel free to visit us again.” Ramza emerged from the residence and patted the young man’s shoulder. “Our doors are always open for you and Dim Dim.”

“Dim Dim~” Dim Dim nodded gratefully because it had enjoyed the delicacies the Hartwell Family had served during the feast.

The Patriarch then glanced at his granddaughter and chuckled.

“Cairo once mentioned that you are an orphan. Is that right?” Ramza said as he shifted his attention back to Alex. “Then, why don’t you think of us as your family? What do you think of this, Lavinia?”

“Grandpa, why are you asking for my opinion?” Lavinia replied in a calm manner. “But that suggestion isn’t bad.”

Ramza smirked while Cairo only shook his head helplessly from the side.

“Thank you, Lord Ramza,” Alex replied.

He didn’t reject or accept the old man’s offer because he could feel that there were some strings attached to his invitation.

The young man valued his freedom the most, and he didn’t want to get tied down to one place.

This was also the reason why he had chosen the Oath of the Heart—he wished to follow whatever his heart desired.

Arcana was a vast and beautiful world.

He would like to travel to different continents and see new sights he had never seen before.

After bidding goodbye to everyone, Alex and Cairo walked down the stairs to head to the port where the Airship would arrive shortly.

Ramza and Lavinia watched them from the top of the stairs and wished them a safe journey in their hearts.

“Say, what made you change your mind?” Ramza asked his granddaughter. “I thought you’re not interested in studying at Frieden Academy.”

The old Catkin had a sly smile on his face because he already knew the answer to this question.

However, he wanted to hear his granddaughter’s answer because it was still better to confirm things, rather than make random guesses.

“I realized that the Clawford Tribe is just part of a bigger world,” Lavinia replied. “Although I love it here, in order to grow, I need to experience many things. Here, I am treated as a princess, and everyone respects me.

“But outside our lands, I am just an ordinary Catkin whose background will more likely not matter to the people I interact with. I don’t want to become stagnant, Grandpa. I want to keep moving forward.”

“Just like Alex?” Ramza asked in a teasing tone.

“Yes, just like Alex,” Lavinia replied without hesitation. “He was a weakling when he first came here. Someone I could have defeated even if I had tied one of my hands behind my back. But now, he is the Oathkeeper.

“An existence not even the Clawford Tribe can ignore. Maybe, just maybe, Frieden Academy will give me the same growth. I have heard that even prodigies from the Kingdom of Avalon, as well as their neighboring kingdoms, gather there to learn and compete with each other.”

Ramza nodded. "You're right. I'm also an alumnus of Frieden Academy, and I truly learned a lot from my stay there. Within its walls, I also made lasting friendships and lasting enemies, some of which have remained until now."

The old Catkin smiled faintly as he reminisced about his youth.

"Very well, I will use my connections and enroll you at the academy," Ramza promised. "Go there to learn and compete, as well as discover your true self."

"Thank you, Grandpa." Lavinia held the old man's hand, acting like a pampered granddaughter.

"But aren't you going to use your connections to let Alex enroll directly as well? That way, he no longer needs to join that trial to be a scholar of the academy."

"A sword will become dull if it is not regularly sharpened, Lavinia," Ramza explained. "Also, I believe Alex would feel too indebted to us if I were to pull some strings to let him enter the academy easily."

"Granddaughter, he is now the Oathkeeper. Someone who will stand at the front lines of every battlefield he faces. I'm sure experiencing a few trials will not do him harm."

"... Grandpa, we almost died in our last trial, you know?"

Ramza coughed lightly. "That was an isolated incident and shouldn't be used as an example."

"Uh huh." Lavinia smirked before shifting her gaze back to the young man, who was now far away from her.

However, she wasn't worried.

Since their destination was the same, both of them would meet again without a doubt.

Chapter 69: Monster Stampede

Town of Thaloria...

Everyone had solemn expressions on their faces, as they looked in the direction of the forest.

“Sh*t!” Elaine cursed.

From where she stood, she saw the faint outline of the hordes of Goblins marching out of the Floating Forest a distance away.

“You can say that again.” Efa tapped the Swordwoman’s shoulder before running away. “Let’s go!”

For the incoming monster stampede, adventurers had formed teams, each of which was assigned a role.

Theirs was to monitor the periphery of the forest, and the moment they saw the monster stampede was about to start, they were to hurry back to the town to inform everyone of the situation.

The South Gate facing the forest had already raised its drawbridge, preventing the monsters from entering.

Elaine, Efa, and the rest of the Adventurers, who were hurrying to return to the town, circled to the North Gate, which was the only entrance the Town of Thaloria had left open.

“To the ramparts!” the captain of the guard, Santino, shouted. “Prepare the crossbows! Archers to the east wing!”

The west wing was meant for the Crossbowmen, while the east was prepared for the Archers.

Everyone who had decided to remain in the town were committed to defending it even though many of them did not really have any experience in battle.

The teenagers were responsible for bringing ammunition up the ramparts, ensuring that the range attackers wouldn't run out of bolts and arrows.

The rest of the townspeople would also do what they could to protect the town where they had lived all their lives.

Nearly half of the townsfolk had already chosen to evacuate, opting to stay with their relatives in other towns or cities until the calamity was over.

Likewise, some Adventurers, who didn't have strong ties with the Town of Thaloria, chose not to participate in its defense.

A monster stampede was no joke, and those who underestimated its danger would find themselves dying very horrible and painful deaths.

"The Orcs have really joined hands with the Goblins," Santino said through gritted teeth.

"Can we really do this, Captain?" one of his subordinates asked fearfully.

"Soldier, we are here to do only one thing," Santino replied. "To defend this town with all of our might. You ask me if we can really do this, then the answer is really simple. Of course, we can! Now stop talking if you don't have anything helpful to say!"

The last thing he wanted to do was to lower the morale of the defenders before the battle even started.

The Branch Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild, Darius, nodded at the captain in satisfaction.

"Captain Santino is right," Darius said. "We will win this fight!"

"Yes!"

The soldiers and the Adventurers looked at the middle-aged man with a scar on his right cheek, feeling inspired.

Darius had been part of a Rank A Adventurer Party during his prime.

He had achieved many amazing feats, which allowed him to become the Branch Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild in the Town of Thaloria after his retirement as an Adventurer.

With him working side by side with the town's guards, everyone felt a little more confident in the upcoming battle.

'Still, we are greatly outnumbered.' Darius frowned. 'If we can prevent them from climbing the walls, then we might have a chance.'

Nearly five hundred defenders had remained to defend the Town of Thaloria, but the monster army numbered past four thousand.

If the monsters managed to enter the city, then the chances of reversing the tide were very low.

'No matter what happens, we must prevent them from getting inside the city!'

This was the collective thought of everyone who was looking at the monster army fast approaching the city gates.

'Goblins, Hobgoblins, Orcs, and High Orcs,' Efa noted, furrowing her brows. 'Rank 1 up to Rank 4 Monsters have come. This is really bad.'

A quarter of the Hobgoblins were riding on dire wolves, and this group eyed the South Gate with gleeful smiles on their faces.

"Grakka-mak!" The Captain of the Hobgoblin Riders raised its sword and urged its dire wolf to circle the city.

Santino and Darius cursed internally when the rest of the Hobgoblin Riders followed suit.

The majority of their forces were concentrated on the South Gate, and only a few dozen guarded the North.

But before either men could give any order, the Goblins and the Orcs shouted their war cries.

“Steady, men!” Santino ordered.

He wanted to keep everyone as calm as possible. The monsters were still outside of their strike range, and he knew that if everyone panicked while the enemies were still far, the situation would be much worse once the distance was closed.

A tense standoff ensued between the defenders and the invaders.

However, this delicate balance was broken when one of the Orcs roared and charged forward, raising a metal shield to protect its body.

“Mages kill him!” Darius ordered.

Since the arrows and cross bolts wouldn’t be able to penetrate the monster’s shield, only the spellcasters had a chance to stop the Orc’s advance.

Spells rained down on the Orc. Although it was strong, it was no match against the magical bombardment that led to its demise.

Its death seemed to have sparked something in its comrades.

Suddenly, all the remaining Orcs howled in fury. Soon, dozens of them, carrying similar shields, began their charge.

The moment the Orcs moved, the Goblins followed suit. Like the Orcs, a quarter of the Goblins also had smaller round shields to protect themselves.

“Open fire!” Santino shouted.

“Mages! Prioritize those with shields!” Darius ordered. “Archers, focus on those without them!”

Santino and Darius knew that something was terribly wrong with this particular monster stampede.

Orcs didn’t really use shields, for they preferred to bash everyone with their clubs or bare fists.

Goblins occasionally use shields, so there was nothing surprising about that.

However, their shields were usually quite crude. The ones they were using right now... A single glance was enough to tell that they were of good quality.

Seeing dozens of monsters equipped with shields, the two leaders of their respective factions believed that someone or something might be orchestrating this stampede from behind the scenes.

Complete chaos descended on the battlefield as the Goblin Shamans and Goblin Mages unleashed their own barrage of spells to attack those at the ramparts.

The Goblin Archers also returned fire, applying more pressure on the defenders.

One of the Goblin Mages heard a faint whistle in the wind. Before it could register what the sound was, an arrow struck its forehead, instantly killing it.

Efa, who had shot the arrow from the ramparts, once again aimed at the Goblin Mages and Goblin Shamans, who posed the greatest threats on the battlefield.

Screams of the injured and the dying defenders reached her ears, but she couldn't pay them any heed.

"Kid, keep your head low and your shield raised high," Efa said to the teenage boy who had handed her a quiver of arrows. "Go back and tell the others to be careful!"

"Yes!" the youth replied with conviction.

But just a second later, a cry of pain escaped his lips as a fireball exploded a few meters away from him and Efa. The force of the explosion nearly made the two of them fall off the ramparts.

"Here, drink this!" Efa swiftly handed the teen a healing potion, which allowed him to recover from his minor injuries. "Go back to the city. Now!"

"Yes!" The teenager no longer stayed and ran away in haste.

His near brush with death had left him shaken, and he was no longer in the right state of mind to continue providing support to the people defending the city walls.

As she looked around her, Efa realized that a third of the defenders on the walls had already been injured by the Goblins' counterattack.

Several minutes passed as the battle grew more intense.

Efa, who was on top of the walls, had suffered several injuries from stray spells that had almost hit her directly.

She no longer knew where Elaine was. They were now grouped according to their class, and the Swordswoman and other close combatants had a different task.

The constant banging sound of the Orcs trying to break the gate made her feel more anxious.

They had done their best to attack the monsters from on top of the walls. However, the monsters had formed some kind of formation with their shields raised high to block the defenders' attempts to stop them.

This looked more like an organized army rather than a monster stampede.

Just like Efa, many thought that something wasn't right with this situation.

The monsters were already difficult to deal with, but they would be incredibly dangerous to fight against if they were also using human strategies.

Just as she thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, she saw five Hobgoblin Riders running through the streets.

'They are coming from the north!' Efa almost screamed out loud when she realized that the North Gate had already been breached.

It was only a matter of time before the South Gate fell as well.

Santino and Darius, who also saw the Hobgoblin Riders heading in their direction, immediately cried out in anger as they headed down from the ramparts in order to engage the five monsters and their mounts in battle.

The North Gate had already fallen.

If the South Gate fell as well, the monsters would fully invade the Town of Thaloria, and they would no longer have any place to run.

Chapter 70: The Cavalry Has Arrived [Part 1]

"Whirlwind Slash!"

Elaine spun around, slashing the Goblins that had tried to lunge at her from every direction.

Blood spilled like a river as her blade cut through the Goblin flesh, drawing their blood.

She was one of the defenders tasked to protect the North Gate.

However, since fewer people had been asked to defend it, they struggled and eventually failed to hold back the Hobgoblin Riders and the Goblin Mages from breaching the city.

But the North Gate fell not because of the monsters.

Two men wearing dark cloaks cast fireballs at the gates until it was destroyed.

This allowed the monsters to enter the city and engage the defenders in combat.

Oddly enough, some of the Hobgoblin Riders ignored the defenders and headed straight toward the South Gate.

Clearly, they planned to open the South Gate so their comrades could run amok within the city, just like them.

'Watch out!' Elaine shouted at one of the Adventurers fighting against a Goblin Warrior.

The Adventurer turned around, only to see an Orc already in mid-swing.

A second later, the Adventurer was sent crashing toward one of the nearby houses.

Judging from how strong the blow had been, Elaine believed that the Adventurer might already be dead. If he wasn't, he was close to dying.

With a mighty roar, the Orc headed toward the Swordswoman, brandishing its weapon.

Elaine didn't face it head-on.

Instead, she focused on evading and counter-attacking, dealing steady injury to the monster.

Annoyed by the pesky Swordswoman, the Orc swung its club repeatedly, forcing Elaine to back away.

Just as she was coming up with a way to fight the monster, she saw a Goblin Mage hurl a Fire Bullet in her direction.

With no time to dodge, Elaine braced herself and raised her sword to block the spell aimed at her chest.

The impact forced her to stagger a few steps backward.

But before she could regain her balance, the Orc was already upon her, its arms raised to strike.

Elaine roared as she pushed herself to the limit to block the incoming attack.

The sword and the wooden club clashed, shattering the ground beneath her feet.

Blood seeped down the corner of her lips, but she had no time to wipe it away because the Orc was about to unleash another follow-up blow.

To make matters worse, the Goblin Mage that had attacked her earlier was also casting another Fire Bullet aimed at her.

Forced to choose which one to block, Elaine gritted her teeth and raised her sword to face the Orc's blow instead.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as Elaine watched the Fire Bullet and the Orc's swing descend upon her.

As she found herself at the crossroads of life and death, the Swordswoman remembered the time Alex had rescued her and regretted her failure to repay him for saving her life back then.

'This is going to hurt,' Elaine thought as she braced herself for the impact of the two attacks that left her no room to defend herself fully.

Suddenly, she saw a faint light appear between her and the Orc.

The sound of metal hitting something hard spread through the surroundings.

Elaine watched in shock when she saw a familiar young man standing in front of her, holding a shield in each hand.

"Are you alright, Elaine?" Alex, who had suddenly materialized in front of her, asked.

"A-Alex?" she muttered in disbelief. "Did I already die? Is this some kind of delayed vision or something?"

"Dim Dim?" Dim Dim blinked once, then twice, as it looked at the Swordswoman while perched on top of the young man's head.

"Sorry, but this isn't a dream," Alex replied. "Also, I can't fight against two of these monsters at once. Master? Please kill that Goblin Mage first."

An airship suddenly appeared overhead, and a young Catkin jumped from its deck with his sword ready to strike.

[E/N: So handsome, ah~]

"Who told you to jump out of the ship without permission?" Cairo demanded, his brows slightly furrowed. "Oh well. You did it to save your friend. I will turn a blind eye to it now, but never again."

Alex had used his skill, Oathkeeper's Duty, to instantly teleport to Elaine's side.

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< Oathkeeper's Duty >

Effect: If a nearby ally is in danger, you may intercept the damage by instantly teleporting to their side.

— This skill can only be used once every hour.

— Attacks that can kill you instantly will not kill you. But your health will be reduced to 1 HP.

— When you block using Oathkeeper's Duty, the attacker would be Stunned for three seconds even if they have Stun Immunity.

—

Compared to the blow he had tanked from the Rank 2 mutant spider, the Orc's attack didn't come close.

The young man was holding two shields, one in each hand.

One of them was the shield that Ramza had lent him while Everguard was being repaired. The other was none other than Svalinn, which he used to block the Goblin Mage's Fire Bullet.

The Orc staggered backwards as the Stun effect kicked in.

"Now, Dim Dim!"

“Dim!”

The Dim Sum God jumped up and threw a brittle vial at the Orc’s face, unleashing the chili and black pepper powder combo.

Elaine, who didn’t miss this chance to counterattack, thrust her sword at the Orc’s waist and gave it a twist.

The Orc screamed in pain and tried to use a backhand blow to send the already injured Swordswoman flying.

But Alex was too fast to let it have its way. He moved in to tank the blow, and a dull thud sounded as the club crashed into his shield.

“This is the first time I’ve seen someone fight with two shields in hand,” Elaine commented with a smile.

“This is called Dual Shielding,” Alex replied. “If Swordsmen can use dual wielding, I can use dual shielding. It’s an original technique I came up with, by the way.”

Elaine chuckled before once again stabbing the Orc and twisting her blade to deal extra damage.

This time, the Orc let out a blood-curdling roar before collapsing on the ground, dead.

The Swordswoman then lost the strength in her legs, almost collapsing.

She had already pushed herself to the limit, and her injuries had also taken their toll on her body.

Fortunately, Alex was there to catch her and support her body.

“Here, drink this first.” He gently fed Elaine some healing potion through her slightly-parted lips, speeding up her recovery.

As the effect of the healing potion kicked in, the Swordswoman looked at the airship above their heads.

A blue flag fluttered freely in the breeze, and at its center was the shape of a claw, representing the Clawford Tribe.

"Looks like the cavalry has arrived," Elaine said softly.

"Indeed," Alex replied.

Over three hundred Catkins from the Clawford Tribe had accompanied him on this return trip to the Town of Thaloria.

All of them were skilled warriors, and they made short work of the monsters pouring into the city with ease.

Some of the Catkins fired arrows from the deck of the airship, supporting their comrades in battle.

Cairo was like a death reaper on the battlefield, killing all the monsters that were in his way.

"Sir Alex, Lord Cairo, the Gate on the other side of the city has fallen!" reported one of the Catkins, who was holding a telescope.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Cairo asked as he swung his blade sideways, flinging away all the blood that had stained its surface. "Let's go, Alex."

"Yes, Master!" Alex replied before asking one of the Catkins to look after Elaine for the time being.

With Alex and Cairo taking the lead, the warriors of the Clawford Tribe charged toward the South Gate, where the bulk of the monster army was starting to make their way inside the city.