

Endless 71

Chapter 71: The Cavalry Has Arrived [Part 2]

Efa rolled to the side as she desperately tried to evade the sword strike of a Hobgoblin that had broken through the South Gate.

The defenders had fought valiantly to keep the monsters outside the city, but the destruction of the gate was inevitable.

The Orcs and Hobgoblins effectively used their shields to block the arrows and crossbow bolts raining down on them from above.

Meanwhile, the Mages—the only ones that stood a chance of destroying the shield-bearing monsters—were being targeted by the Goblin Archers, Goblin Shamans, and Goblin Mages.

A few of them had died because of this, while the rest suffered various levels of injuries.

In the end, everyone just fought however they could until the gate collapsed right under them.

The moment the monsters poured into the city like a raging tide, Santino and Darius ordered the defenders to follow the strategy they had devised as a contingency plan.

This meant everyone would resort to guerrilla tactics, taking advantage of their familiarity with the city as a way to cut down as many of the monsters as they could.

Efa was a Rank 2 Scout who could both wield a bow and a sword if needed. Her versatility, which she also demonstrated after Alex had saved them, was one of the main reasons Elaine partnered with her.

While she could fight a Hobgoblin in a one-on-one battle if she fought seriously, this wasn't a situation where she could choose that option.

"Kragg hernak!" the Hobgoblin said to the young lady who had nowhere to go.

Its eyes were filled with malice and lust as it looked at Efa, whose strength it recognized.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm sure I don't like it," Efa retorted before glancing at the two other Hobgoblins that had cut off her escape route.

Left with no choice, she decided to break through by force, then run to where the other Adventurers were.

Just as she was about to throw caution to the wind, she saw something fall on top of the first Hobgoblin's head and shatter upon impact.

Immediately, the three Hobgoblins shrieked in pain as the chili powder and black pepper powder exploded all over their faces.

"Dim Dim!" Efa looked up at the roof of the house and saw Alex's little friend, who had just saved her life.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim replied before throwing another brittle vial at the dire wolf that was about to lunge at Efa from behind her.

Like the Hobgoblins, the Dire Wolf was also temporarily blinded, allowing Efa to make quick work of it.

With absolute precision, the Scout stabbed its eyes with the two daggers she wielded with equal mastery.

As much as she wanted to kill the wolf, more monsters were heading in her direction, so she had to escape right away.

"Dim Dim!" exclaimed the Dim Sum God as it jumped from roof to roof, guiding Efa to Alex and the other Catkins.

The young man had asked the Dim Sum God to look for Efa and help her as much as possible.

Although Alex wanted to go and find her himself, he was currently defending one of the shelters where the women, children, and older people were staying.

The airship of the Clawford Tribe circled the town, raining spells and arrows from above.

“Protect the Oathkeeper!” one of the Catkins shouted when he saw Alex fending off the attacks of an Orc and two Goblin Warriors.

The young man was protecting the gate of the shelter with everything he had.

The Orc was a Rank 2 monster and specialized in brute physical strength.

Unfortunately for it, Alex was no longer the weakling he had once been.

Now that he had become a Ranker, he could effortlessly hold his ground against a monster that could have killed him easily not that long ago.

As for the two Goblin Warriors, Alex parried and countered their attacks with the sword in his hand, standing firm with the power of the Oathkeeper

“Shield!” he shouted as he summoned a shield to protect him from the attack of the Goblin Warrior, which he was unable to block.

A magical round shield appeared on his left side, blocking the sword strike of the Goblin Warrior, who died shortly after one of the Catkins came to Alex’s rescue.

When news that an Oathkeeper had finally appeared in their tribe, the Catkins became elated. Nearly all the warriors had wished to meet Alex, very eager to see the second Oathkeeper of their tribe.

However, they heard that Alex was going back to the Town of Thaloria to help defend it against a monster stampede. An old Catkin, who was a captain of an airship, volunteered to take Alex and Cairo back to their destination free of charge.

This was his way of forming a connection with their new Oathkeeper, which had played an important role in the founding of their tribe.

Many warriors also volunteered to help, and wouldn't take no for an answer. They wanted to meet Alex, and they reckoned he could use some aid. It was a win-win situation.

One thing led to another, and soon, three hundred strong warriors from the Clawford Tribe were coming to fight alongside their Oathkeeper.

Left with no choice, Alex had agreed to bring them with him. Frankly, he was now very happy with that decision.

The Catkins fought tooth and nail with a ferocity that made the young man realize how powerful they truly were.

They were not only very fast but also very agile, and their teamwork was impeccable.

A handful of Ninjas from the Hartwell Clan also joined the fight, attacking the monsters where they least expected it.

But there was one thing that Alex found quite peculiar.

Whenever a monster was about to target him, that monster would soon find itself getting ganged up by Catkins, who didn't want anything bad to happen to their Oathkeeper.

'I didn't know if I should be thankful or not,' Alex thought. 'I guess I'll just thank them for now.'

Suddenly, something he didn't expect happened.

[Level Up!]

'Um?' Alex blinked at the notification that appeared in front of him.

He was just standing in front of the gate, doing absolutely nothing, so he didn't expect that he would advance a level out of the blue.

Without a second thought, he opened his status page to check his experience bar, so that he would understand what was happening.

[Experience Points: 2%]

[Experience Points: 6%]

[Experience Points: 9%]

'Oh, my, Goddess!' Alex's face lit up when he realized he was gaining experience points just by doing nothing!

It was at that moment when it hit him.

'Wait, could it be that I formed a party with the entire Clawford Tribe?!'

That was the only explanation he could think of why his experience points were rising on their own accord.

Alex glanced at his surroundings and saw his master kill an Orc that had tried to ambush him from behind.

At that moment, his experience points rose to 15%. The young man immediately gave Cairo a thumbs up in his heart.

In ELO, there was a term called “leeching”.

It described low-level players gaining experience points without contributing much or at all just because they’re in a high-level party.

Simply put, the players would soak up experience from others’ efforts without even lifting a finger, allowing their ranks to rise safely.

In other words, Alex was now a leech. He almost laughed out loud at the realization. If he could, he’d cheer for everyone who was doing all the work for him.

Chapter 72: Facing The Juggernaut’s Wrath

A minute later, another notification sounded inside Alex’s head, and the corners of his lips rose up in happiness.

[Level Up!]

“Just stay put, Alex,” Cairo said. “We’ll handle the rest.”

“That’s right, Oathkeeper!” a Catkin Warrior added, laughing. “Focus on protecting that shelter. We assure you, nothing will go past us!”

“Got it.” Alex nodded without hesitation.

Turning down free experience points out of pride?

Pride? What was that? Could that be eaten?

‘I hope more monsters come here,’ Alex thought. ‘That way, my experience points will rise faster.’

As if someone heard his prayer, dozens of Orcs and Hobgoblins turned toward the Catkins and Alex.

Seeing their vanguard lying on the ground, all dead, these monsters were enraged and charged at the Catkins with fury.

“Begone, you vile beasts!” A Catkin with prayer beads on his hands stomped his foot, creating countless Earth Spikes that jutted out of the ground, impaling the monsters that had charged in their direction.

[Level Up!]

‘Wow!’ Alex’s eyes widened in shock, impressed with the monk-like Catkin’s power.

Although he couldn’t appraise people and see their stats, he could roughly tell that the monk-like Catkin was at least a Rank 4 or Rank 5 Martial Expert.

The young man’s guess was rather accurate. As one of Ramza’s strongest subordinates, the monk-like Catkin had been specifically asked by the Patriarch to accompany Cairo and Alex to the Town of Thaloria and assist them if they were in danger.

That said, Cairo was no weakling. He was a genius and had a vast amount of combat experience. Despite being only a year older than Alex, he was already a Rank 3 Demon Slayer, who became more powerful whenever he fought against Demon-Type Monsters.

Given that Cairo’s Rank was already that high at the tender age of eighteen years old, the Catkin was hailed as one of the prodigies of the Kingdom of Avalon.

However, Alex had undergone an explosive growth as of late.

He might still be far from becoming a Rank 3 prodigy like his master, but the way things were going, it would only be a matter of time before he reached Rank 2 without even doing anything!

As the young man closely watched his experience bar fill up thanks to his accidental party unknowingly carrying him, a shout from a distance grabbed his attention.

"Alex!" Efa shouted the moment she saw the young man standing near the gate of one of the town's shelters.

"Efa!" Alex exclaimed, relieved that his friend was safe and sound.

He also saw Dim Dim leaping from rooftop to rooftop until it finally landed on top of his head, feeling proud of itself for accomplishing its mission.

"I'm glad you're safe, Efa," Alex said when he saw the Scout, who had several scratches and bruises on her body.

"I had a very close call earlier," Efa replied. "If not for Dim Dim, I might have already died or suffered a fate worse than death."

The Scout glanced in her surroundings before frowning.

"Where's Elaine?" Efa asked. "Is she not with you?"

"Don't worry, Elaine is safe," Alex assured. "She's just resting for a bit. I'm sure she'll be here soon."

As if waiting for that moment, the Swordswoman appeared in their field of vision as she ran toward them with a relieved expression on her face.

Elaine had been worried about Efa, knowing that the Scout had been assigned to defend the South Gate, where the battle was more intense than the one at the north.

"I'm glad you're safe, Efa," Elaine said. "Since you're here, I assume the South Gate has also fallen?"

Efa nodded. "Captain Santino and Guild Master Darius are employing guerrilla tactics to whittle down the enemy's numbers. Earlier, I felt like there's no hope of winning, but now, I have changed my mind."

After seeing how strong the Catkins were, the young lady was starting to think that there was a way to overcome the invasion.

Suddenly, they heard screams coming from the other side of the street.

When they looked at the direction of those voices, they saw dozens of Adventurers with pale faces twisted by fear running toward them.

"Everyone, be careful!" one of the Adventurers shouted. "There's an Orc Juggernaut behind us!"

A roar filled with bestial fury reverberated through the air as the house at the side of the street collapsed, as if demolished by a force of nature.

Standing nearly four-meters tall, with a body as hard as iron, the Orc Juggernaut roared at the Catkins. "Prepare to be annihilated," it seemed to say.

The Catkins hadn't had any trouble dealing with the Orcs and Hobgoblins earlier.

But this time, all of them became serious because the monster in front of them was no ordinary foe.

Alex looked at the monster and, just as he expected, several rows of text appeared in front of him.

This gave him a rough understanding of what kind of monster they were about to face.

< Orc Juggernaut >

Monster Rank: Rank 4 Field Boss

Monster Grade: Super Rare

Attribute: Earth / Demonic.

Health: 10,500/10,500

Attack: 800 – 1,200

Active Skill: Juggernaut Rush, Body Slam, Savage Blow

Passive Skill: Iron Skin, Demon's Rage

< Iron Skin >

— This monster's body is as hard as iron.

< Demon's Rage >

— This monster becomes more powerful when fighting against many enemies at once.

Note: The Orc Juggernaut doesn't see enemies. It sees obstacles, and obstacles are meant to be crushed or turned into meat paste!

'Oh sh*t...' Alex was so utterly distracted by the numbers in the monster's stats that he momentarily failed to notice the upgrade to his monster encyclopedia. The encyclopedia was now able to show the monster's skill, which only made Alex realize how deadly the Orc Juggernaut was.

When he had been playing ELO, he hadn't gotten the chance to encounter an Orc Juggernaut in the wild since they were really rare monsters to begin with.

Although he had seen its pictures online, seeing it in the flesh made the monster more domineering and formidable in his eyes.

'If I get a direct hit of even one of its attacks, I'll probably die instantly,' Alex thought.

Elaine's and Efa's expressions turned grim. Even so, they did not waver, and both of them braced themselves to fight the monster they were seeing for the first time in their lives.

"Elder, I need your help to deal with this monster," Cairo said to the monk-like Catkin before glancing at the others around him. "The rest of you, stand back. This monster becomes stronger whenever many people attack it at once."

The Catkins hesitated a bit, but they still followed Cairo's order in the end.

He then gave Alex the 'do not interfere' look, which prompted Alex to nod his head in acknowledgement.

"Be careful, Cairo," said the monk-like Catkin. "Even I can't take this battle lightly."

The Orc Juggernaut no longer planned to wait and rushed at the two Catkins, whom it recognized had decided to challenge it head on.

The monk-like Catkin stomped his right foot down and sent Earth Spikes at the charging monster.

However, just like its name, the Juggernaut simply bulldozed through the Earth Spikes, shattering them head-on through brute strength.

Cairo didn't want it to continue charging toward the other Catkins, so he took the initiative to lunge in the monster's direction.

He then executed three quick slashes on its right calf, hoping that it would be enough to render it immobile.

Sparks flew as Cairo's sword slashed through the monster's skin.

But, to his surprise, his sword only managed to leave shallow cuts on the monster's calf, which were obviously not enough to bring it down.

Chapter 73: Going Deep Behind Enemy Lines [Part 1]

A monster that could kill me with one hit.

And a Demon Slayer who has vowed to protect the world from the corruption of Demons.

It's very obvious who's stronger, but in my eyes, the battle before me is more like a beautiful tango of death.

My master, Cairo, uses his speed to dodge and launch attacks at the Orc Juggernaut every time there is an opening, sending sparks flying in the places where his sword manages to hit.

But his opponent has overwhelming strength. A single punch from it destroys the walls of the houses in the vicinity and the road that serves as their temporary battlefield.

Even the other Orcs and Goblins that have arrived at the scene cannot recklessly intervene. If they get too close to that dance of death, their lives will also end in a heartbeat.

I watch as the Elder of the Clawford tribe launches a barrage of Stone Bullets and Earth Spikes from a distance, ensuring that Cairo will not be targeted by the other monsters who are capable of ranged combat.

The other Catkins also understand that their Young Master has shifted all of his concentration to his enemy and has left nothing to spare for the dangers in his surroundings.

For a brief moment, I feel that I am once again sitting in my comfortable gaming chair and watching an epic cinematic scene from ELO.

A part of me wishes to fight alongside Master and put myself in the jaws of death to better understand my limits.

However, the logical part of me understands that I have no role to play in that battle aside from being an extra baggage for my master.

While it is frustrating to think about it, I also understand that I am still not strong enough to face the Orc Juggernaut.

The Rank 2 mutant spider we so desperately fought? The Orc Juggernaut could easily smash something like that into meat paste in the span of less than a minute.

In other words, this creature was a force of nature that only the truly strong could face head-on.

And Master, although weaker than it, is one of those individuals who will not back down against an opponent he has decided to kill.

"Demon Slaying Art, First Form," Cairo says as he dodges the punch of the Orc Juggernaut, which sends dirt and gravel flying in every direction.

"Culling Blade!"

The sword in my Master's hand is covered in a purple flame, and the moment it makes contact—unlike what has happened earlier—no sparks go flying everywhere. Instead, blood spurts out of the Orc's calf, making the latter cry out in pain.

"Sixth Form," Cairo states. "Lightblind Cross!"

Two quick sword strikes, followed by a blinding flash that resembles a cross, appear in the same area that the Catkin targeted earlier.

For the first time since the battle started, the Orc Juggernaut falls to one knee as it momentarily loses the ability to stand.

It roars hatefully at Cairo, who has distanced himself after spending a lot of stamina on unleashing those two skills against his enemy.

I am sure that my master understands that unless he neutralizes the Orc Juggernaut's mobility, the entire town might get destroyed due to their battle.

'That's the famed Demon Slaying Skills of the Catkin Tribe,' Elaine, who is standing beside me, mutters. "I thought it was only effective against demons?"

"Demon Slayers become stronger when they are fighting against demons," Efa explains. "It's like a passive buff that is exclusive to that profession. That's also the reason why Demons hate them."

"That monster is under a Demonic State," I say confidently. "I think it might be under the control of a demon or has been corrupted by one."

"What?!"

"That monster is under the control of a Demon?!"

I nod. "Yes. This is why Master is also becoming stronger than ever. His abilities are boosted whenever he is fighting against a Demon, his natural enemy. But this fight is far from over."

How do I know?

It's rather simple.

I just look at the monster's health bar, and it tells me everything I need to know.

< Orc Juggernaut >

Health: 9,683/10,500

'Only a tenth of its HP was lost during that exchange,' I note while observing my master, who is now starting to breathe heavily.

Even though I am certain Master is now stronger than ever after fighting his natural enemy, his fight is still an uphill battle.

At most, the Elder of the Clawford Tribe can only provide support from time to time.

As I look at the airship in the sky, I notice that the Catkins on it are only attacking the Orcs and Goblins in the surroundings.

'Smart move,' I think. 'The captain might have told his crew, as well as the other Catkins on the ship, not to attack the Orc Juggernaut because it might start hurling entire walls of houses in their direction as a form of retaliation.'

'If that really were to happen, the airship would suffer serious damage. In the worst-case scenario, it might even crash into the town.'

Aside from me, Dim Dim, Elaine, and Efa, everyone is fighting desperately.

I have already leveled up two more times since my Master and the Orc Juggernaut started fighting.

Perhaps feeling inspired to fight, I add the six stat points I have received to my Strength Stat, making me feel a little stronger.

Alex Stratos

Age: 17

Alignment: Chaotic Good

Mana: 59/59

Job Class: Oathkeeper

Strength – 50 [+3]

Intelligence – 30

Dexterity – 20

Agility – 70

Constitution – 65

Stamina – 65

Magic – 69

Luck – 24

Available Stat Points: 0

AP: 240

Active Skills: Oathkeeper's Duty, Shield [EX], Shield Bash, Shield Charge.

Passive Skills: Improved Stone Throw, Head Shot.

[Difficulty Level: Hell Mode]

All I need is sixteen more stat points, and I will officially become a Rank 2 Oathkeeper.

And frankly, judging by the progress of my experience bar that's still rising, it is nearly guaranteed that I will reach that rank by the time the battle ends.

I watch as the Orc Juggernaut stands up once again, its injury healing at a rapid rate.

It is at that moment when I hear Dim Dim shout above my head.

“Dim Dim!” The Dim Sum God points at a cloaked individual in the distance, who is hidden behind several Orcs and Hobgoblins.

‘I see,’ Realization dawns on me after my gaze lands on the person wearing a black cloak paired with a mask covering their face. ‘That’s the mastermind behind this stampede.’

With a target in mind, I whisper to Elaine and Efa beside me.

Both of them look at me in shock because I have just told them a crazy plan to throw the monster army into chaos.

However, for that to happen, I must reach the person pulling the strings from behind.

Seeing that the masked individual is under the protection of dozens of strong monsters, who seem to be their bodyguards, Elaine and Efa know that this mission isn’t going to be easy.

With my plan already laid out in great detail, I grab the Dim Sum God on top of my head and adopt a throwing posture.

“Are you ready, Dim Dim?” I ask.

“Dim!” Dim Dim replies affirmatively.

“Go for it!” I shout before throwing the little guy towards the airship with all my might.

In order to reach my target, I need the captain’s help in clearing a path that leads to the cloaked individual, so that Elaine, Efa, and I can execute my daring plan of going deep behind enemy lines.

Chapter 74: Going Deep Behind Enemy Lines [Part 2]

“Remember, lads. Hit them, and hit them hard!” the captain of the airship, Gil Rogers, shouted. “If any of you start slacking, I’ll throw you off my shi—ackk!”

Something white and soft hit the captain on the face, interrupting his speech.

“What in the tarnation is happening?!” Captain Gil asked as the unidentified object which had hit him now perched itself on top of his steering wheel.

“Dim Dim!”

“Huh? You look oddly familiar.”

“Dim Dim!”

“Ah, yes. You are the Oathkeeper’s companion. What are you doing here?”

Dim Dim then began to explain Alex’s plan, prompting the captain to use his telescope to look at the battlefield.

When he spotted the person whom Dim Dim was talking about, he whistled and gave an order to his crew.

“Change of plans, boys!” Captain Gil shouted. “All hands, prepare to strike. The target is that bastard wearing that black cloak over there!”

Looking in the direction their captain was pointing at, the Catkins on board the airship noticed the suspicious individual oddly under the protection of the Goblins and the Orcs.

“That rascal is the mastermind of this monster stampede,” Captain Gil explained. “Let’s show him the might of the Clawford Tribe!”

""Yes!""

The resounding affirmation of the warriors on the airship spread on the battlefield, as their captain spun the steering wheel to the right, making the ship circle around the battlefield.

"Fire at will!" Captain Gil ordered the moment they came within range of their target.

A barrage of arrows and spells rained down from the sky, catching the cloaked person by surprise.

Using their magic, they created a barrier to defend themselves from the attack, not caring about the lives of the monsters around them.

Screams of pain, anger, and frustration reverberated in the surroundings as monsters died one after the other.

The Goblin Shamans, Goblin Archers, and Goblin Mages retaliated, but Captain Gil was already prepared for their counterattack.

"Don't underestimate my ship, you bastards!" Captain Gil shouted and activated the barrier of his ship. "I fought in the great pirate wars during my prime. Do you really think that my ship can't handle a beating?! Boys, get them!"

Dim Dim, who was right beside the captain, also raised its small hand, imitating the captain and shouting as well.

"Dim Dim!"

"Hahaha! We'll make a pirate out of you yet, little one."

"Dim Dim~"

“Oh, your best friend is a pirate and owns a ship bigger than mine?”

“Dim~”

“Hahaha! She sounds like someone incredible.”

“Ahem!” The Dim Sum God raised its body proudly because its best friend was truly someone incredible.

Captain Gil chuckled and once again turned the ship so his forces could unleash their second barrage at the suspicious individual, who had started to escape from their line of sight.

It was then that the captain saw three airships heading in their direction, and the flags they bore made him smirk.

“It looks like the Kingdom treats this place of great importance,” Captain Gil muttered.

The three airships were, in fact, battleships from the Kingdom of Avalon.

They had traveled from the Capital City of Harmonia after getting a report that the Town of Thalaria was about to face a monster stampede.

The moment the three ships started their aerial bombardment, the defenders of the city cheered in unison.

The Orc Juggernaut that Cairo was facing wasn’t spared from the ship’s bombardment.

A Fireball Spell hit it just in time before it landed a successful blow on Cairo, who had been momentarily distracted after getting hit in the arm by a stray arrow from a Goblin Archer.

The swordsman had been forced to use his arm to block the attack, for it would have otherwise hit his chest, which would have led to a serious injury.

Cairo immediately distanced himself from the monster and watched as more spells rained down on it from above.

He had only fought the Orc Juggernaut because he hadn't wanted others to get hurt fighting it, so the moment help arrived, he was more than happy to leave the rest to the reinforcements.

Since his battle was already over, he glanced in the direction where his disciple had stood earlier.

He frowned when he didn't see the young man.

"Have you seen Alex, Elder?" Cairo asked.

"Huh? Isn't he just over ther—" The Elder was about to point in the direction of the shelter, but their Oathkeeper was no longer there.

"Did any of you see the Oathkeeper?" Cairo asked the rest of the Catkins, who were busy fighting around them.

Due to how intense their battles were, they didn't have time to pay attention to their surroundings, so no one saw Alex leave his spot.

Cairo no longer hesitated and jumped on top of a roof to get a better view of the town.

Half a minute later, he saw his disciple running down one of its alleys with Elaine and Efa by his side.

Narrowing his eyes, Cairo looked in the direction where they were headed and noticed a cloaked individual who was running toward the South Gate.

'A Demon Worshiper!' The Catkin immediately felt his passive ability activate after setting his sights on the suspicious person trying to escape.

Without a second thought, he ran toward the person whom Alex was chasing instead of regrouping with his disciple.

If he could subdue the enemy before his disciple arrived at the scene, then the young man wouldn't have to endanger himself again, like he had done in the Etherion Domain.

Although he didn't say anything, Cairo felt that he owed Alex a debt for saving his sister, as well as the other Catkins, inside the domain.

Because of this, he didn't want his disciple to endanger himself again, at least not until he became strong enough to protect himself fully.

'This brat is acting reckless again,' Cairo thought, apparently forgetting the fact that Alex was only a year younger than him.

While Cairo ran and jumped from roof to roof, Alex, Elaine, and Efa were forced to slow their advance because they kept meeting groups of Goblins and Orcs along the way.

But now that the reinforcements from the Kingdom of Avalon had arrived, Alex no longer had to worry about protecting the other shelters, and could just focus on gaining experience as he fought all the monsters that stood in his way.

Chapter 75: Just Eat It, And Trust Dim Dim!

"Alex, is it just me, or have you grown stronger since the last time I saw you?" Elaine asked as she slashed a Goblin Warrior in half with her sword.

"I noticed it too, and I'm certain your strength has improved significantly," Efa commented while making short work of the two Goblins with her daggers.

"I changed my Job Class and have experienced many life and death battles as of late," Alex answered before using his shield to bash the body of a Hobgoblin, allowing Elaine and Efa to both land the killing blow.

Although the Hobgoblin was a Rank 3 Monster, it now looked like a slightly bigger Goblin Warrior to him after his encounter with the mutant red-striped zebra jumping spider in the Etherion Domain

Granted, Alex wouldn't be able to kill it in a one-on-one battle easily, but he at least knew now that he had the abilities to fend off the attacks of Rank 3 Monsters and below and survive a battle with them.

Nothing could beat actual combat experience, and his trial in the Etherion Domain had honed his fighting skills.

"Still, we won't be able to catch up to that weirdo with the number of enemies blocking our path," Elaine pointed out as she swung her blade against another Goblin, who had lunged at her from her right side.

At that moment, the airship of the Clawford Tribe flew above their heads, and something small and white fell down and landed on Alex's head.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim announced its arrival with a big smile on its face.

"Welcome back, Dim Dim. Good job earlier!"

"Ahem~"

The Dim Sum God felt proud because it had been able to help everyone by telling Captain Gil to target the cloaked individual, who seemed to be the mastermind of the monster stampede.

"Dim Dim," Dim Dim reported that it had seen Cairo jumping from roof to roof in pursuit of the alleged mastermind behind the monster stampede.

"Oh?" Alex smiled faintly. "Master is pursuing that person alongside the airship?"

Dim Dim nodded. "Dim."

“Good.” Alex smiled. “Now we just have to gain some experience points and level up.”

“Dim Dim~”

Two minutes later, the young man heard two notification sounds inside his head, making his eyes widen in shock.

[Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

He could understand leveling up once, but leveling up twice instantly was a first even for him.

Fortunately, it didn’t take long for him to understand what just happened.

—

< Your allies have slain the Orc Juggernaut! >

< You gained +200 Arcana Points >

< You gained the item Juggernaut’s Belt as a reward. >

—

< Juggernaut’s Belt >

Item Grade: Super Rare

Stats: +3 to All Stats, including Magic and Luck.

Passive Skill: Enhanced Rush

Effect: Any skills that increase movement speed, including offensive skills like Shield Charge, will gain a 30% increase in movement speed, and an additional 30% damage upon hitting the target.

— —

'Sweet.' Alex grinned after seeing the information about the reward item that he received for free.

Items that granted a direct increase in Magic and Luck were highly sought out by players, because these Stat Parameters couldn't be increased using normal means.

The young man then glanced at his Skill tab, where he could see the progress of the skill that he was currently trying to learn at the moment.

— —

< Shield Charge >

— In order to unlock this skill, you need to use Shield Bash 100 times against an enemy monster.

[Number of times Shield Bash is used = 43/100]

— —

Alex sighed because although he wanted to use Shield Bash as many times as he could, his stamina wasn't high enough to use it consecutively.

Using up his stamina wasn't an option either, especially during a battle as big as a monster stampede.

Because of this, he would stop using his Shield Bash when he was left a third of his stamina. He didn't plan to go any lower than that to avoid running out of options in the case he met some kind of emergency where he would need to use his stamina to execute skills like Slash.

"Dim Dim, please give me some roasted pork buns," Alex said.

"Dim Dim~" Dim Dim nodded and summoned a bamboo steamer that hovered in front of Alex.

The young man set aside his sword for a brief moment and started to eat a pork bun while casually using his shield to bash the monsters in front of him.

Elaine and Efa didn't know if they should laugh or cry when they saw the young man inexplicably start eating in the middle of the battle.

"Alex, now is not really the time to eat, you know?" Elaine wanted to facepalm, but she directed that energy towards kicking a Goblin instead, sending it flying.

"Actually, now is the right time to eat because I'm running low on stamina," Alex explained before finishing the last piece of the bun in his hand. "You and Efa should eat as well. Trust me. It will help you guys in the long run."

As if waiting for him to say those words, the Food Buffs he wanted to see started to take effect.

— —

< Food Buff >

— Barbecued Pork Bun

— Stamina regeneration increased by 30%

Duration: 1 hour

—

“Are you serious?” Efa asked because the bamboo steamer with a single pork bun flew in her direction.

“Just eat it, and trust Dim Dim!” Alex stated.

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim also raised its hand, telling Efa to trust it.

Although she felt a bit silly about eating during a battle, she decided to trust the two and bite into the pork bun.

“D-Delicious,” Efa muttered.

A few seconds later, she felt less exhausted, allowing her to retain her current pace in battle.

Elaine had also decided to eat the pork bun because Alex and Dim Dim insisted on it.

Similar to Efa, the Swordswoman also felt her strength returning to her.

“I have so many questions, but I will ask them later,” Elaine said as she followed behind Alex, who had just finished killing the last Goblin blocking their path.

Efa sped up a bit and ran past Alex.

As a Scout, it was her duty to scout for enemies and ensure that their party could avoid fighting as much as possible.

Their goal was to catch up to the cloaked person, who was currently on the run after their plan to destroy the Town of Thaloria was thwarted. That person probably didn't expect that the town would receive several reinforcements.

"Alex, I can hear Guard Captain Santino and Branch Guildmaster Darius at the plaza," Efa reported.
"Should we help them or ignore them?"

"Do they sound like they need help?" Alex asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's go. My master is strong enough to apprehend that person. Let's help the others first!"

"This way!" Efa replied before making a sharp left turn, leading towards the town's plaza.

She had heard the shouts of Santino and Darius in that direction and, from what she could tell, they might need all the help they could get.

When Alex's group arrived at the plaza, several bodies littered the streets.

Goblins, Orcs, and Humans lay on the ground, either dead or dying.

The Captain of the Guards, Santino, and the Branch Guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild were facing off against six High Orcs, all of which were Rank 4 Monsters.

But, the six High Orcs weren't the only threat because they were accompanied by dozens of Orcs

Santino was a Rank 4 Knight, while Darius was a Rank 5 Brawler.

Although they were capable of fighting a High Orc in a one-on-one battle, they were forced into a defensive battle because both of them were protecting their subordinates.

“Do it, Dim Dim!” Alex shouted.

“Ei!” Dim Dim didn’t hesitate and started throwing one brittle vial after the other.

The young man often wondered if Dim Dim had some kind of Auto-Aim ability because all of its throws were very accurate.

And just as he expected, the brittle vials hit the High Orcs’ heads, shattering upon impact. What followed was a sight of multiple monsters desperately trying to ease themselves from the suffering brought by the simple weapon Alex and Dim Dim liked to use in their battles.

However, even after losing their sense of sight, the High Orcs were still able to sense around them.

Perhaps, the only thing that Dim Dim had done was to make them angrier because their attacks became more ferocious. In their rampage, they even sent Santino flying.

Chapter 76: Alex’s Secret Weapon

“Brittle vials are no longer enough, Dim Dim,” Alex said. “Time to use our secret weapon!”

“Dim?” Dim Dim blinked in confusion. It tried to recall if they had other secret weapons aside from their brittle vials but couldn’t come up with any.

“Did you forget?” Alex asked. “Our secret weapon is calling for reinforcements!”

Alex took out a small round ball from his storage ring and threw it high up above their heads.

A few seconds later, it exploded and left red smoke lingering in the air.

The Elder of the Hartwell Clan had gifted the ring to Alex, and with it came a promise that the latter could use it to ask for help if he was ever in danger.

Although he wasn't truly in danger, the situation was dire enough to need some backup right away.

The sound of something rumbling spread in the city as over two hundred Catkins bulldozed their way in Alex's direction.

Right after seeing the red smoke, they stopped fighting their opponents and immediately rushed over.

They were only hundreds of meters away from Alex, so with their speed, they arrived at his location in less than two minutes.

One of the airships of the Kingdom of Avalon noticed the movement of the Catkins and followed behind them.

When they arrived at the plaza, the captain of the airship immediately ordered a bombardment to clear out the mass of monsters still trying to push their way deeper inside the Town of Thaloria.

"Protect the Oathkeeper!" the Elder of the Hartwell Clan shouted before unleashing dozens of Earth Spikes at the Orcs that had decided to target Alex and his small party.

These Orcs died instantly after being impaled by the Earth Spikes that jutted out from the ground.

But it didn't end there.

Believing their Oathkeeper was being bullied, the Catkins charged at the monsters with wild abandon, their furious eyes already seeing corpses instead of enemies.

"Damn! You dare to attack our Oathkeeper?!"

“Courting death!”

“Kill those Orcs! Show them the might of the Clawford Tribe!”

“No one touches our boy, Alex!”

“”For the Clan!””

The battle looked similar to a gang war where both sides pummeled, hacked, and slashed each other to oblivion.

“See?” Alex said with a smile. “My plan B worked.”

“...”

“...”

Elaine and Efa were rendered speechless because they hadn’t expected that the Clawford Tribe truly held the young man in high regard.

They had already been surprised earlier when seeing how willing the Catkins were to help Alex.

Seeing that the young man seemed to be more important to Catkins than they had thought, they couldn’t help but feel lucky that they had befriended him. After all, it couldn’t hurt to be friends with someone who had a powerful backer.

Some of the Catkins even advised Alex to take a break and to leave all the small fries to them.

The young man naturally thanked them before asking Dim Dim if it could find the trace of Cairo, as well as the cloaked person who had been running away earlier.

However, to his surprise, Dim Dim gave him a piece of good news.

“Dim Dim.”

“Oh? Master has already captured that person?”

“Dim!”

“As expected of Master.” Alex subconsciously lifted his chin, feeling proud of Cairo.

Just as Alex was thinking of what to do next, he once again heard a notification sound inside of his head, and rows of text appeared in front of him.

— —

< Congratulations! You have cleared a Hidden Quest! >

< Quest Name: Prevent the Destruction of the Town of Thaloria! >

— The Town of Thaloria is one of the important outposts of the Kingdom of Avalon. Destroying it will cause mass panic and confusion among the people.

— The Demon Worshipers have corrupted the leaders of the Orcs and Goblins, ordering them to destroy and burn the Town of Thaloria to the ground.

— You have thwarted their plans, and now, they have become aware of your existence!

Rewards: 2,000 Arcana Points, 500 Gold Coins.

— —

Alex flinched after reading the information about the Hidden Quest, which he had unknowingly completed.

While the rewards were good, he was starting to feel a little anxious about the line that mentioned Demon Worshipers becoming aware of his existence.

This secret organization was one of the antagonists in the Story Mode of ELO and, frankly, they were a pain to deal with in the game.

'Let's just pretend that I didn't see that.' Alex pushed the notification window aside. There were more pressing things at hand, and he didn't want to worry about dealing with the Demon Worshipers right now.

Suddenly, he heard another notification sound inside his head.

Thinking that it was still about the Demon Worshipers, the young man forced himself to look at the blue window in front of him.

[Level Up!]

'That's better,' Alex thought, sighing in relief as he calmly added more points to his Agility Stat. 'I need to become more agile so I can run from those bastards if they ever come to find me.'

The battle continued for one more hour before the last of the monsters were finally defeated.

During that time period, Alex gained four more levels, making him very happy.

Not only did he become a Rank 2 Oathkeeper, but he also gained some additional skills after reaching the second stage of his Job Class.

—

< Congratulations! >

< You have become a Rank 2 Oathkeeper! >

< You have learned the skill, Unyielding Pact >

< You have learned the skill, Echo of the Sworn >

< You have learned the skill, Balance Breaker >

< You have learned the skill, Rebuke of Steel >

—

[Unyielding Pact]

Magic Cost: 10

— A short-duration aura that bolsters the resolve of allies nearby, slightly increasing their resistance to fear, charm, or mind-affecting effects.

[Echo of the Sworn]

Magic Cost: 10

— Your voice resonates with the force of your Oath. Grants a small morale boost to allies, and marks you as a threat to nearby enemies, drawing aggro more easily.

[Balance Breaker]

Magic Cost: 10

— Bypass all defenses.

— Your strike briefly staggers enemies who target allies under your protection, interrupting spells or charging attacks if timed well.

[Rebuke of Steel]

— Passive Skill

— After blocking or parrying an attack, it has a 30% chance to counterattack with enhanced speed and force, dealing increased damage if the enemy is targeting an ally.

—

'The new skills are all good,' Alex thought. 'As expected of a Hidden Class bestowed by The Lovers.'

The Oathkeeper was a defense-oriented class like the Shield Savant. Because of this, most of the skills he would learn were defensive in nature.

In order to have some sort of offensive abilities, Alex intended to use the Super Rare [EX] Skill Book in his possession to learn an offensive skill that could grow stronger alongside him.

But he was holding off from learning the skill he had in mind for now because there was a 10% chance that he could get the same skill in Briarwood Village, where Charles Lambert lived.

Although the chance was low, the possibility still existed. So, saving the skill for now was a better choice.

The young man was certain that he would feel immense regret if he got a duplicate skill after using his super rare skill book.

Although the battle finally ended, no one felt like cheering for their victory.

Captain Santino and Darius both looked sadly at their fallen comrades.

Before the reinforcements arrived, they had been forced to fight tooth and nail with hundreds of monsters that had invaded the city.

The city guards only had a fifth of their total forces remaining, and hundreds of Adventurers had also died in battle.

If the Catkins and the reinforcements from the Kingdom of Avalon had failed to arrive on time, they would have been wiped out for sure.

The rest, most likely the women, would have been subjected to the worst pain and humiliation.

As for the normal townsfolk?

Well, their fate would have been the same as those who tried to defend the Town of Thaloria until their last breath.

They were indeed victorious, but it was difficult to rejoice.

Once again, Alex affirmed to himself that he was no longer playing a game but living in a new reality, where calamities like this could happen anytime, anywhere.

Only by becoming stronger would he be able to protect himself, as well as the people whom he wished to protect, in this world of ever-changing destinies.

“Dim Dim, let’s become stronger,” Alex vowed. “Strong enough to prevent another tragedy like this from happening again.”

“Dim!” Dim Dim nodded with determination because it, too, shared Alex’s sentiments.

This was the first time the Dim Sum God was involved in a large-scale battle.

And frankly, it wished that it could have saved more lives alongside the young man, whom Eriol had chosen to protect the world that it had created with the power of its divinity.

Chapter 77: Dim Dim’s Pep Talk

The battle finally came to an end.

Adventurers, Guards, and reinforcements from the Kingdom of Avalon started to gather the dead bodies of the brave defenders who had valiantly given their all to protect the Town of Thalloria.

However, Alex didn’t join them, unable to stomach close proximity to dead bodies, let alone carry them.

For most of his life, he had been an ordinary person on Earth. Since he had neither been a medical practitioner nor a soldier, he was understandably not used to seeing dead people.

“You don’t have to feel so down,” said Cairo to his disciple after seeing the latter seated on a wall that had collapsed in the battle earlier. “You’ve done your best, and things would have been worse if you hadn’t insisted on coming back to help the people of this town.

“If it weren’t for you, the Clawford Tribe wouldn’t have joined this fight. It’s actually great. After all, it has been a while since our warriors last participated in such a grand-scale mission. I’m sure they will boast about this battle when they return to our village.”

“They’re amazing, Master,” Alex replied. “Without them, things might have really ended differently.”

All the Catkins who had joined the battle, except for Cairo, were Rank 4 and above.

They were the elite warriors of the Clawford Tribe, yet they had sincerely fought to protect complete strangers, all because their Oathkeeper had wished to protect them.

This battle made Alex realize the weight of the legacy that he carried.

Just because he was the Oathkeeper, warriors rallied under his banner and accompanied him back to the Town of Thalloria.

He was supposed to be the one doing the protecting, yet he was the one who got protected instead. At the thought of it, the young man couldn't help but feel touched. This was the first time something like this had happened in his life.

Aside from that, Ramza had also pulled some strings from the back, which resulted in the reinforcements from the Kingdom of Avalon coming to their aid.

Cairo was very proud of his disciple. Deep inside, he was glad that he had met Alex on that fateful day.

"I talked to the Commander of the airships that came from Avalon," said the monk-like Elder of the Hartwell Clan, who went by the name Varro.

"According to him, Mages from the capital will be sent here to help with the repairs of the town. With their help, the Town of Thalloria should probably return to its original state in a month.

"They will also reinforce the walls and the gates of the city, and imbue it with magical protection. That way, even if another monster stampede happens, the town will not be overrun by monsters so easily."

Alex nodded and thanked the Elder for sharing the information.

In the game, the Town of Thalloria didn't suffer any monster stampede.

The young man was starting to wonder whether his presence had caused a butterfly effect to take place, resulting in the calamity that had descended upon the quiet town.

'There's also the fact that the level of my story mode difficulty is Hell.' Alex frowned.

He didn't want to think about it too much, but he couldn't help but think of what-ifs.

What if everything had happened because of him?

Wouldn't that mean that the deaths of everyone in the town were his fault?

Just as he was thinking along those lines, he felt something poke his cheek from his right side.

Alex glanced at his shoulder where Dim Dim was currently perched.

"Dim Dim." Dim Dim shook his head.

As if reading his mind, Dim Dim told him that this event wasn't his fault.

The Dim Sum God added that the world of Arcana didn't revolve around Alex. It followed its own destiny and would not be easily influenced by anyone.

On top of that, Dim Dim also thanked the young man. If he had decided not to return, the Town of Thaloria might have already been wiped out from the face of the Kingdom of Avalon.

The little guy's explanation made Alex feel a lot better, and the guilt he felt subsided.

"Thank you for the wakeup call, Dim Dim." Alex lightly patted the little one's head for giving him a pep talk.

“Dim Dim~” Dim Dim’s smile widened.

Clearly, it was very happy that it managed to dispel the doubts in the young man’s mind.

Now that the calamity was over, Alex started to ponder what his next plan was going to be.

The Goblins and the Orcs in the forest had suffered greatly from this battle. Their numbers had also decreased drastically.

With that in mind, Alex thought it was now the perfect opportunity to revisit the Floating Forest and collect some Rare Items like the Silent Striders, which he hadn’t been able to get in the past.

However, he wasn’t a fool, so he decided to ask his master to accompany him on his trip to the forest.

But while they were talking, Varro overheard them and volunteered to also accompany Alex to ensure that he would get back from the forest alive.

— —

The next day...

“...”

Alex blinked once, then twice, after seeing over a hundred Catkins looking at him with smiles on their faces.

“Alex, I heard you’re going to take a stroll in the forest? What a coincidence, I also plan to hunt a boar or two for lunch,” said a Catkin Warrior cheerfully.

“This is the first time I’ve been here in the Floating Island of Thaloria,” another Catkin commented. “That forest is one of its attractions. Since you plan to go there, why don’t we go together?”

“I believe there might be some rare herbs deeper inside the forest,” a chubby Catkin added. “I’m an expert when it comes to finding them, so you can count on me!”

“A stroll in the forest after a great battle? Sounds good.”

“Hahaha! This is going to be fun!”

“What are you waiting for, Alex? Are you tired? Do you want me to carry you?”

Cairo, who was standing beside his disciple, averted his gaze while doing his best to keep himself from laughing.

Meanwhile, Varro chuckled, knowing that it was his casual slip of the tongue that had caused the current scene. He had been with his comrades for a friendly drink last night, and he had accidentally mentioned that Alex wished to go to the forest to look for treasures.

The Catkins were strong, but they also had suffered various levels of injuries during the battle.

However, none of them died.

The injured Catkins were currently being treated and were now in recovery.

Those who still felt they could fight another monster stampede heard Varro’s talk about accompanying Alex in the forest, so they decided to accompany their Oathkeeper as well.

“Let’s go, Alex.” Varro patted the young man’s shoulder. “With this, we can hunt for food to share with the townsfolk. I say it’s a win-win for everyone.”

Somehow, the Floating Forest that was once scary to the young man no longer felt scary.

In fact, the monsters living inside it should be the ones scared because over a hundred battle-hungry Catkins were about to head deeper inside their domain and fight to their hearts' content.

"Just give up, Alex," Cairo said. "Now, let's go."

"Dim Dim~" Dim Dim giggled while perched on Alex's head because it was fun seeing everyone feeling so excited to enter the forest.

"Okay, let's go," Alex said, offering a silent prayer to the pitiful creatures that would be unlucky enough to block their way inside the Floating Forest.

Chapter 78: It All Makes Sense Now

"Ei! What are you guys doing here?!"

"This lake belongs to us, Water Fairies! Scram!"

"Wait! Maybe they have candies?"

"Mister, do you have candies?"

Countless Water Fairies, who were only as tall as Alex's hand, flew fearlessly close to the group of Catkins as if they weren't worried that the strangers might hurt them.

In the world of Arcana, the Fairies were always treated as a neutral party.

But while they had no natural enemies, that didn't mean they weren't hunted down.

Greedy humans would come and capture a few of them to be sold in auctions because they made good familiars for Mages.

Normally, Fairies only had one criterion before flying close to strangers—their heart must be good.

They were born with an innate ability that allowed them to instinctively tell whether someone was good. If a bad person appeared before them, they would immediately hide or flee without a second thought.

The people from the Town of Thaloria were on good terms with the Fairies and would sometimes bring them sweets as offerings.

This was why the Fairies thought that the group had come to give them some candies.

“Water Fairies?” Varro smiled faintly. “We have a lot of Wood Fairies in the forests around Etherion Village. To think I will see Water Fairies here. Truly fascinating.”

“You’re also a fascinating and handsome mister,” one of the Fairies cooed as she flew close to Varro. “Do you have candies?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any candy,” Varro replied honestly. “However, I have this.”

Varro took out a jar of pickled fruits and opened its lid.

The Water Fairy didn’t hesitate to take one of the pickled fruits inside it and started to eat.

“Wow! This is actually good,” the Water Fairy declared. “Sweet, sour, and salty. Sisters! Come, let’s eat together!”

Before Varro could even react, a swarm of Water Fairies descended upon him, demanding that he gave them some pickled fruits as well.

Alex took this opportunity to sneak into the lake.

He took off his upper and lower clothes, leaving only his underwear on him.

But just as he was about to jump into the water, a Fairy flew in front of him and raised her hand.

“Stop!” the Water Fairy shouted. “You are not allowed to enter the lake.”

“Dim Dim!” Dim Dim summoned a bamboo steamer and offered the Water Fairy a custard bun.

The Water Fairy was hesitant at first, but still came close to take a bite of the custard bun.

“Wow! This tastes good!” the Water Fairy exclaimed.

“Ahem~” Dim Dim looked very proud of itself because the Fairy liked the food it gave her.

“Okay, you can go as long as you pay the price—two more custard buns,” the Water Fairy greedily asked for more.

Dim Dim was more than happy to oblige, giving the Fairy what she wanted.

After finally appeasing the Fairy, Alex jumped into the water and swam toward its center.

A few curious Fairies decided to swim beside him.

After swimming for a while, the young man finally saw what he was looking for and dived down to put his hand on the chest lying at the bottom of the lake.

He directly stored it inside his storage ring before swimming back up to the surface.

“Mister, are you no longer going to look for other treasure chests?” a Water Fairy asked. “There’s more of them inside the forest, you know?”

“T-There are more?” Alex repeated in surprise.

“Yes, there are three more chests located around the lake area,” another Water Fairy commented. “But we hid them so others won’t find them!”

The five Water Fairies then looked at Alex with devilish smiles on their faces.

“If you want information, you know what to do, right?” The Water Fairy rubbed her hands together.

“Say no more,” Alex answered. “You want custard buns, Dim Dim has custard buns.”

“We want four for each of us!” one of the Fairies bargained.

“Deal!” Alex replied instantly.

He was afraid the Water Fairy would back out of their agreement, so he hurriedly swam back to the shore.

As he neared the lakeside, he saw Dim Dim happily handing out custard buns to the Water Fairies, who were quickly becoming addicted to the snack.

Unlike their sisters, the five Water Fairies who accompanied Alex didn’t approach Dim Dim for custard buns since they had already managed to seal a deal with Alex.

When the young man told Dim Dim about his agreement with the Fairies, it only nodded and summoned more bamboo steamers for the Fairies.

“Your name is Dim Dim, right? You’re a good guy!”

“The more I look at you, the more you look like a custard bun. I am very tempted to give you a bite.”

“Hey! Don’t bite our bun supplier! What will you do if Dim Dim runs away?”

“That’s right! Dim Dim, don’t mind this crazy girl. Just keep those custard buns coming!”

After satisfying their cravings, the five Fairies kept their promise and led Alex to the location of the three hidden chests around the lakeside.

He didn’t open them on the spot and simply placed them inside his storage ring.

The young man planned to take a good look at them when he was back in the Town of Thalloria.

“Come back again, okay?”

“We will be waiting for you, Dim Dim!”

“Mwah!”

A Fairy kissed the Dim Sum God’s cheek, making the little guy giggle.

Soon, more fairies started to kiss Dim Dim and thank him for the delicious food that it had shared with them.

When they finally left the lake, the Catkins headed deeper inside the forest and caught some boars and bears along the way.

Everyone in the village needed food after that battle. Since it was convenient anyway, the Catkins decided to hunt for a few days' worth of supplies for the entire town before they returned to the Etherion Mountain the next day.

No Orcs or Goblins appeared before them since the survivors had gone into hiding.

The Catkins had no intention of annihilating them completely. After all, that wasn't why they were in the forest.

After a few hours of hunting beasts and collecting precious herbs, Alex and the Clawford Tribe returned to the Town of Thalloria, bringing enough food to feed the townsfolk for a week.

Along the way, Alex had also taken two more treasure chests from the locations that had been mentioned in the ELO forum by the other players.

All in all, he managed to get six treasure chests on this trip, making it worth the journey.

"Welcome back, Alex," Elaine said after seeing the young man. "Did you get what you were looking for in the forest?"

"Yes," Alex replied. "How are the survivors?"

"Sad and mourning the dead." Elaine sighed. "Tonight, they will start a ceremony to send off the departed to the afterlife."

Alex had heard that everyone who had died in battle would be burned in a pyre blessed by a priest.

Their remains would then be gathered and buried under a monument, which would be placed in the town plaza.

It was at that moment that something clicked inside Alex's head. If his memories served him right, there was indeed a monument in the plaza in the game.

Actually, he had been surprised because he hadn't seen the monument after arriving at the town for the first time.

This monument was called the Heroes Monument, where the brave warriors of the Town of Thaloria were buried together.

'I see, so that's how it came to be,' Alex thought. 'But the timeline doesn't match. Wait! I think I am misunderstanding something!'

Alex had completely forgotten that Story Mode was different from the MMORPG Mode of the game.

In Story Mode, the players interacted with the important characters of the game, allowing them to learn these characters' backstories, as well as other important information related to them.

In MMORPG Mode, the players would travel in a vast, open world, where the events of Story Mode had already come to pass.

If Story Mode was the past, then the MMORPG Mode was the future.

Alex had forgotten about that part because in Story Mode, the player didn't start in the Town of Thaloria.

Instead, it was dependent on the location where the character the player chose to play lived.

For example, Charles Lambert lived in Briarwood Village.

If a player chose to play this character, his starting point would be in Briarwood Village with a different tutorial quest, unlike the one that Alex had done after arriving in Arcana.

'It all makes sense now,' Alex mused.

Now that he understood the key differences between MMORPG Mode and Story Mode, he wouldn't be thrown off when certain events in one didn't occur in the other.

"What's wrong?" Elaine asked. "You suddenly stopped talking."

"I just remembered something," Alex replied. "Sorry, what were we talking about again?"

"We're talking about the ceremony tonight," Elaine answered.

"Right." Alex nodded. "Is there something I can do to help with the preparations?"

"You've already done enough," Elaine pointed in the direction of the Catkins, who were carrying forest boars and bears on their backs. "But if you really want to do something, how about you accompany Efa and me tonight during the ceremony?"

"Understood. I'll be there," Alex promised.

After bidding goodbye to his friend, he headed to the Cat Tail's Inn, where he had booked a room for himself.

It was now time to open the chests that he had gathered and see what kind of treasures awaited him.

Chapter 79: Opening Treasure Chests

After returning to the inn, Alex took out the six treasure chests he had gotten from his expedition in the Floating Forest.

The first chest contained, of course, the Silent Striders, which he had set his sights on since his arrival at the Town of Thaloria.

— —

< Silent Striders >

Item Grade: Rare

Stats: +2 Stealth, +3 Agility

Effect: Reduces noise while walking, making sneaky approaches easier.

— —

He didn't hesitate to equip the shoes before opening the next treasure chest he had acquired with the help of the Fairies.

— —

< Thousand-Year-Old Ginseng >

"Not all treasures glitter. Some grow in silence."

Item Grade: Rare

— A very precious ingredient that is highly sought out by Alchemists.

— This item can be exchanged for Arcana Points in the Arcana Shop and is worth 200 Arcana Points.

— —

"Only 200 Arcana Points?" Alex blinked before opening his Arcana Shop to search under the ingredients tab.

He vaguely remembered that the Arcana Shop also sold ingredients useful for alchemists.

However, when he saw that the Thousand-Year-Old Ginseng was being sold in the shop for 500 Arcana Points, he decided not to sell the ginseng in his possession and store it for future use.

The young man once again performed his good-luck ritual before opening the third treasure chest.

He hoped he would get something useful that he could use immediately.

—

< Donger Pill >

“Eating this pill will make your little guy rise faster than a necromancer’s army.”

Item Grade: Super Rare

— Not for the faint of heart. Or the faint of hips.

— A pill that will cure erectile dysfunction instantly!

— Permanently increase stamina regeneration by 50%.

— Side effects may include smug grins, sore thighs, aching hips, and suspiciously happy spouses.

— Legends say it once took down a succubus... thrice.

Warning: May cause walls to shake and neighbors to complain.

--

The corner of Alex's lips twitched after reading the information of the Donger Pill.

Although it was a super rare item, the young man had mixed feelings about the treasure he just acquired from the treasure chest.

A moment later, he coughed lightly and looked at the pill as if he was some kind of food aficionado professionally giving it a critical appraisal.

"The permanent increase in stamina regeneration isn't bad," Alex said, trying to sound objective. "I'll keep this for now."

While it was not a lie, it wasn't the whole truth. Dim Dim looked at him with a smug smile on its adorable face, as if understanding what Alex was thinking.

"Ahem, next!" Alex opened the fourth treasure chest in an attempt to sweep the subject under the rug.

--

< Boots of Minor Levitation >

"At least your feet won't get dirty. Unless, of course, you suddenly trip."

Item Grade: Rare

— The wearer constantly floats two inches above ground level.

— Allows the wearer to walk over water.

— You cannot jump or fly while wearing these boots.

— Perfect for those who wish to become 2 inches taller.

— —

'Not bad,' Alex thought. 'This can be useful under certain situations.'

If there was a time when he needed to fight in water-type terrains, the Boots of Minor Levitation would definitely be of big help to him.

"Only two left," Alex muttered.

The items he received were all useful in their own ways, including a certain life-saving pill, so he was looking forward to checking what the other two treasure chests contained.

— —

< Traveler's Lantern >

"Light that never dims, even in the deepest shadows."

Item Grade: Rare

— A magical lantern that never runs out of fuel. It provides bright light in a 30-foot radius, even in total darkness.

— —

“This is indeed very useful,” Alex remarked after turning the lantern on to see how bright it was.

A few moments later, the young man nodded in satisfaction. The brightness of the lantern was just right, neither too blinding nor too dim.

‘Now, for the last one,’ Alex placed his hand on the lid of the last treasure chest. ‘Give me something good.’

— —

< Map of Forgotten Paths >

“Not all paths are meant to be found. But some definitely are.”

Item Grade: Super Rare

— Reveals hidden or secret rooms, passageways, and shortcuts within dungeons or surrounding areas.

— When within the vicinity of any dungeon or ruin, the map automatically highlights hidden doors, secret passages, or concealed stairways within a 300-meter radius.

— The paths are clearly marked with glowing symbols or lines on the map, visible only to the holder of the map.

— Hidden treasures, traps, and even specific enemies’ locations may be revealed.

— This map can only be activated once per day, and its effect lasts for three hours. After this period ends, the map resets and will not be usable again for the next 24 hours.

[Note: The Map of Forgotten Paths can be merged with the Player’s personal map.]

[Would you like to merge the two maps together?]

[Yes / No]

--

Alex didn't think twice and merged the Map of Forgotten Paths with the one he already owned, so he no longer needed to worry about it getting stolen by others.

This would also grant his map more flexibility because he could summon it anytime and anywhere.

'Sweet.' Alex couldn't help but smile because he hit the jackpot with the treasure chests he had taken from the Floating Forest.

After carefully storing everything inside his storage ring, the young man decided to take a short nap.

"Dim Dim, please wake me up before sunset," Alex said.

Dim Dim nodded. "Dim."

The young man then closed his eyes to sleep. Although he didn't look like it, he was actually quite tired from the recent battle, and his body was aching in many places.

But since the healers were busy healing those who had serious injuries, he decided to just drink a healing potion and let his injuries heal naturally.

It didn't take long for Alex to fall into a dreamless sleep, snoring softly as he lay on the bed.

Dim Dim, on the other hand, crawled toward the window of the room and looked at the town that was suffering greatly from the aftereffects of the monster stampede.

It looked at the places where he and Alex had visited.

It looked at the places where it had played with the children of the town.

Those places were all in ruins after the Goblins and the Orcs had invaded the city.

But Dim Dim believed that the Town of Thaloria would regain its former glory and become the hub where future Heroes of Arcana would visit at least once during their stay in the Kingdom of Avalon.

Chapter 80: No One Needs To Know Aside From Us

As the sun slowly set over the horizon, the survivors of the Town of Thaloria gathered outside the South Gate.

A giant pyre had been prepared. There, all the defenders who had died in battle were laid to rest.

It was a solemn moment, in which everyone would pay their final respect to the Heroes who had sacrificed their lives so others may live.

Alex stood beside his Master, Cairo. Elaine and Efa were also close to him. All of them watched as a Priestess from the Order of the High Priestess walked toward the pyre, holding a torch in her hand.

She then started to sing a song from an ancient Elven language well-known throughout the world of Arcana.

The title of this song was called The Song of Rebirth.

A song that wished for the departed to find the light, and once again be reborn into the world.

(A/N: Relax. I made sure to write the translation, so none of you need to open your Elven dictionaries. No need to thank me.)

“In the ashes, where the earth sleeps,” the Priestess sang softly. “Whispers of a flame begin to weep.”

“From the dark, a spark takes flight,

A song of old, a flame of light.”

The people of the town also joined in singing the song.

Some sang as they wept, knowing they wouldn’t see their loved ones again.

Others sang to send their friends off in peace, promising the departed that they would live on for their sake as well.

“”Rise, oh soul, from shadows deep,

Through endless nights, through sorrow’s sleep.

The fire burns, and with it, grows,

A heart anew, a world to know.””

Amidst the singing, the Priestess lowered her torch and lit the pyre, sending gentle flames to wash over the bodies of the departed, wrapping them in golden flames of purification.

“In the ruins where the cold winds blow,” the Priestess sang. “A seed of hope begins to grow.”

“Touched by flame, it learns to sing,

A song of life, a new dawn's wing."

"Rise, oh soul, from shadows deep,

Through endless nights, through sorrow's sleep.

The fire burns and, with it, grows,

A heart anew, a world to know."

Cairo, Elaine, and Efa also sang beside Alex.

The young man didn't know the lyrics or the rhythm of the song. He didn't dare to sing, fearing it might ruin this solemn ceremony to send their souls to the afterlife. He felt like his voice would break the harmony of those sincerely singing for their loved ones. Not to mention, it might also be disrespectful to the dead.

As the beautiful yet sorrowful melody came to an end, the townsfolk quieted down and allowed the Priestess to sing the last verse of the song.

"Breathe the wind, feel the flame,

Through the ashes, we are not the same.

Born again, from dust and rain,

We rise, we rise, to live again..."

Alex watched as the gentle flames sent golden sparks that rose toward the sky, making it look like those who had died were now about to embark on another journey to their next life.

When the Priestess finished singing, the sobbing sounds intensified.

Houses could be rebuilt.

Damaged streets could be restored.

But life, once lost, was forever lost.

When the flames finally died down and only embers remained, Alex returned to the inn with Cairo, Elaine, and Efa.

The priests would collect the ashes and store them in a special container.

It would then be buried under the plaza, where a monument enshrining their bravery would be built to remember them by.

"Times like this, people need to drink," Elaine said with a forced smile. "So, let's drink a toast for our departed friends, who are now about to embark on their new adventure."

The Swordswoman then poured some wine into her companions' cups.

Some of the patrons, who had also decided to drink in the Cat Tail's Inn, also filled their cups with wine.

"To the brave Heroes of Thaloria!" Elaine shouted as she raised her goblet.

""To the Heroes of Thaloria!""

Alex drank silently and observed his surroundings.

The once lively tavern was downcast at the moment, but this, too, would come to pass.

Soon, Adventurers from other towns and cities would come to visit the Floating Islands of Thalaria, and a new cycle would begin.

That was simply the cycle of life, and that had always been how the world of Arcana worked.

Perhaps feeling melancholy, Alex drank more than he could. After he dozed off, Elaine and Efa took him back to his room because everyone else was still busy drinking.

Cairo also decided to retire for the night and go to the room that he had booked in another inn with the other Catkins.

“Dim Dim, over here.”

Dim Dim, who was about to follow Alex to his room, heard Lily’s voice, prompting it to leave the inn to look for its friend.

In one of the abandoned homes near the Cat Tail’s Inn, a little girl wearing a red riding hood costume reached out to pick the Dim Sum God from the ground and hold it close to her chest.

“Are you sad, Dim Dim?” Lily asked, lightly patting the head of her friend.

“Dim...” Dim Dim nodded.

“It’s going to be okay.” Cupid materialized beside Lily and also patted Dim Dim’s head. “The Priestess did a good job. I’m sure that they all passed on peacefully to the afterlife.”

"Dim." Dim Dim nodded a second time, deciding to spend the night with its friends, who were worried about him.

— —

The next day...

'Is this deja vu?' Alex thought as he looked at the two sleeping girls beside him.

Both of them were properly dressed, while he was only wearing his pants.

Oh, well. At least he had pants on this time.

"I see, so nothing happened," Alex muttered. "I should really tone down on drinking when I'm such a lightweight."

"Why do you sound so disappointed?" The petite and beautiful Efa opened her eyes and looked at the young man who was scratching his head in frustration. "Did you perhaps want something to happen?"

Looking at Efa's mischievous and seductive gaze, the young man almost said yes.

But after remembering the faces of his "Queens" in ELO, he forced himself to calm down.

He would be meeting them at Frieden Academy, and he didn't want to have a loose attitude when it came to relationships.

Efa and Elaine were good friends, allies, and companions.

He didn't want to treat them as casual flings because that might cause complications in the future.

But there was a problem, Efa's rough, small hands were rubbing his chest and abs, as if coaxing him to give into the temptation.

"Just a night is enough, you know?" Efa teased. "No one needs to know aside from us."

"That's right."

Another devilish voice came from behind Alex as Elaine joined the conversation.

"All you need to do is say yes, and we will take you to heaven," Elaine whispered in Alex's ears, almost making him waver.

Just as he was about to give an answer, the young man found a small white bun peeking at him from the window of his room.

Dim Dim also had a mischievous smile on its face, as if waiting for Alex to make his decision.

"Oh goodness. Look at the time." Alex glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's already this late? I'm really feeling hungry. How about we have breakfast?"

Alex didn't wait for Efa's and Elaine's reply before sliding off the bed.

He then picked up his clothes on the floor and stored them inside his storage ring.

The young took out new ones and wore them as quickly as he could before leaving the room in haste.

"Pffft!"

Efa was no longer able to hold back her laughter because Alex's expression had been priceless.

Even Elaine couldn't help but smile faintly, entertained by how easy it was to fluster the young man.

Dim Dim then crawled down from the window and entered the tavern through another window that connected to it, leaving the two ladies behind.

"Ugh... my hips hurt a bit," Alex muttered as he walked down the stairs. "Did I push myself too hard in yesterday's battle? I feel so drained right now."

The battlefield had been chaotic, and Alex had tanked several hits from Orcs and Hobgoblins, who were all Rank 3 Monsters.

His body had already been in pain back then, but he had been enduring it through sheer willpower.

Thinking that it was the side effect of pushing himself to the limits, the young man met up with Dim Dim and ordered breakfast for himself, the little bun, and the two ladies who had also decided to join them for breakfast.