

Endless 91

Chapter 91: Reality Is Really Different From A Game

“Alex, I just wonder... why didn’t you loot them after?” Cairo inquired. “I’m sure those murderers have decent items in their possession.”

“Master, there are Unique Skills that allow their users to momentarily see what happened before someone died,” Alex explained. “There are also skills that can track items or equipment.

“I didn’t mention it earlier, but the Blade Fangs are just one of the many Adventurer Killer Parties. They are part of this organization called Silent Coffin, a bloodthirsty bunch who go after those who kill their members.

“As one of the parties under their organization, they probably reported back to their organization regularly to sell loot or pay some kind of protection money. If they don’t appear soon enough, their comrades might start to investigate.”

“What about the two Adventurers we saved earlier, then?” Cairo asked. “What if Silent Coffin discovers them and interrogates them? Won’t you be in danger then?”

If what his disciple said was true, then there would be ways to find out why the members of the Blade Fang failed to report to their organization.

Alex shook his head. “They left before the members of Blade Fangs died, and there are many entrances leading to the Dungeon of Beginnings. Unless they’re stupid, they won’t spread this news outside.

“Lastly, the dungeon is the perfect place to erase evidence. The gang’s items and equipment will probably be purified by a mysterious power and placed inside treasure chests as rewards. That’s how dungeons work, Master.”

“Dim.” Dim Dim nodded in agreement.

Having known about the underground organization, Silent Coffin, right from the start, Alex hadn’t dared to loot the dead members of the Blade Fangs. Doing so would be courting death.

“But what if they’re stupid?” Cairo asked pointedly. “What will you do then? Those two boys don’t look that bright to me.”

Alex pondered a bit before answering.

“If they really come to find us, then I guess we have no choice, Master,” Alex replied.

“Are we going to eliminate them?” Cairo smirked fearlessly.

He was more than happy to cut down evil people who preyed on the weak and innocent. Although he was only a year older than Alex, he had seen far too many things. If he told his disciple about some anecdotes from his travels, the latter would certainly turn pale.

Hearing his master’s question, Alex didn’t reply and simply smiled. He didn’t like conflict, but when pushed into a corner, he would fight.

Truth be told, he wasn’t really too worried about the retaliation of the Silent Coffin. By the time they tried to investigate, all traces of the Blade Fang would already be gone from the face of the world.

“Here is fine, Master,” Alex said as he stopped walking. “Now, we will go treasure hunting.”

“Treasure hunting?” Cairo arched an eyebrow. “How?”

Alex replied by activating the Map of Forgotten Paths.

As soon as he activated this special feature, blinking dots appeared on the map. Most of them were green, but he could see some blue dots and a yellow one too. The latter were at least five times bigger than the green dots, so they stood out on the map.

A little box in the lower left corner of the map explained what each color meant, letting Alex know what to expect.

The green blinking dots on the map represented people inside the dungeon in real-time.

The blue blinking dots were hidden rooms and led to treasure chests.

Although both were helpful, neither was particularly interesting. The yellow dot, on the other hand, made Alex arch an eyebrow. The description only said it was a “Hidden Pathway” leading directly to the fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

‘Interesting,’ he thought. ‘I didn’t know there’s a feature like this inside the dungeon.’

When Alex had still been playing ELO, he had only discovered hidden rooms with treasure chests when running away from monsters.

However, these rooms had been dead-ends.

Once he had exited a hidden room, he would find himself surrounded by monsters attracted by Charles’ Challenger’s Mark, leaving him no path to escape.

Now that he didn’t have to worry about such a tragic end, Alex decided to experiment with the abilities of the Map of Forgotten Paths.

He was most interested in the white arrows moving on the map like snakes, heading to specific locations.

Some of them led to the second floor of the dungeon while others, to Alex’s surprise and relief, showed the way to the exit.

He hadn’t expected that after merging the Map of Forgotten Paths with his map, the former’s range would no longer be restricted to three hundred meters.

It was now a floor-wide ability.

Although the majority of the map was still unexplored and covered by a black fog, it still displayed the paths leading to the exit, which would bring them to the City of Harmonia.

But there was a catch.

'The exit is ten miles away from us.' Alex frowned. 'Reality is really different from a game.'

He didn't know how long it would take them to run ten miles inside the dungeon, but when he had been playing ELO, it had only taken him an hour to find the exit.

And that was purely due to luck.

Also, they would not be running in a straight line. The Dungeon of Beginnings had many intersections and winding paths that made traversing it a challenge.

They would be further slowed down if they had to fight monsters along the way.

Last but not the least, Alex discovered that there were as many as twelve paths that led to the second floor of the dungeon.

This meant that once Charles entered the dungeon, monsters would emerge from these locations because of his passive skill, Challenger's Mark.

The Dungeon of Beginnings was a very vast dungeon that could be entered from several villages, towns, and even cities.

Regardless of where one entered the dungeon, they would be sent to a random location inside, which would also be ten miles away from the City of Harmonia.

'So the exit that leads to the city is at the center of the dungeon,' Alex mused. 'And the annoying part is, we need to circle around the dungeon to reach it.'

The more Alex analyzed the setup of the dungeon, the more he understood why Charles' tutorial quest had been nearly impossible to clear.

The worst part was that by midnight, the interior of the first floor would change, similar to what happened to the first floor of the Etherion Domain.

The only saving grace was that the white arrows on the map would lead him to their destination, even if it was in an unexplored area.

After making up his mind, Alex toggled some filters to remove the other arrows that led to the second floor of the dungeon.

This would prevent him from getting confused once they started running for their lives.

"Alex, what's wrong?" Cairo asked after seeing his disciple and Dim Dim stare at the vacant space in front of them for nearly two minutes.

Alex was even rubbing his chin as if he was examining something.

Cairo's words broke the young man from his daze, making him cough lightly.

"Master, follow me for now," Alex said. "We'll start our treasure hunting."

Since the countdown timer of three hours was already ticking, he decided to use that time to get to the blue blinking dots before heading to the yellow dot that led directly to the fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

Chapter 92: Master, Do You Want To Hunt A Rank 2 Field Boss?

With his master watching his back, Alex approached the nearest blue dot on the map. Once he arrived, he zoomed in, scanning the section of the wall carefully to pinpoint where the hidden entrance was located.

“It’s over here,” Alex muttered when he noticed a small cut on the wall and pressed his hand over it.

A moment later, a passage appeared right in front of their eyes.

Cairo blinked once, then twice, because he had no idea how his disciple had located this hidden room instantly.

He had assumed that “treasure hunting” meant killing monsters until they dropped a rare item.

But seeing the bronze chest at the center of the hidden room, Cairo realized Alex literally meant hunting treasure chests.

Just as Alex was about to open it, Dim Dim reminded him to do his good luck ritual and pray to his Goddess of Luck, Astrea.

“Thank you, Dim Dim,” Alex said. “I forgot about that.”

“Ahem~” Dim Dim raised its body, pleased to be of help to its friend.

After clapping his hands twice and bowing toward the treasure chest, the young man finally opened its lid.

Inside the chest was a pouch that contained 20 gold coins.

Although it wasn’t a rare item, no one could possibly dislike free money.

< You have gained 20 Gold Coins >

“Let’s go to the next treasure!”

“Dim Dim!”

Cairo smiled faintly as he ran after his disciple, who seemed to be enjoying his treasure hunt.

Of course, they also encountered monsters along the way. But with the strength of the current Alex, they didn't really pose a threat and were easily dealt with.

When they arrived at the next hidden room, Alex performed the ritual again and opened the treasure chest.

This time, they found a tunic which looked like it belonged to a noble family.

Surprisingly, the tunic smelled faintly of old forests and polished wood.

Alex then took it out from the treasure chest and checked its information.

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< Tunic Of The Verdant Crest >

Item Grade: Uncommon

Stats: +1 to Constitution

Passive Skills: Traveler's Vitality

< Traveler's Vitality >

— Increases natural Stamina regeneration by 5% while moving.

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'Oh, not bad,' Alex thought before taking off his shirt to wear the tunic.

He wanted to get used to its feel, so he wouldn't be too surprised when he used it inside dungeons or when traveling.

"How do I look, Master?" Alex asked.

"You look like a third-rate young master from a noble family," Cairo replied.

Dim Dim giggled, finding Cairo's remark quite amusing.

Alex didn't mind and decided to head to the yellow blinking spot while explaining it to his Master.

"A hidden path that leads directly to the fourth floor?" Cairo frowned. "How do you know about these things?"

"Men's intuition," Alex replied with a poker face.

"Hah..." Cairo helplessly shook his head. But he could only accept his disciple's answer since it seemed that his disciple couldn't tell him about it. "Is this part of your ability as a Seer? Are you getting visions of these locations?"

"No, Master," Alex replied.

His Master had been very kind to him, so if possible, he didn't want to lie. After giving it some careful thought, the young man decided to open up a bit and explain the matter to Cairo in a way the Catkin would understand.

“Master, do you remember when we went to the Floating Forest?” Alex asked. “I found a few treasure chests there with the help of the Fairies. In one of those chests, I received a map called Map of the Forgotten Paths.

“This map then suddenly merged with my body, so now, whenever I’m inside a dungeon, I can see the locations of hidden rooms, as well as paths no one else can find easily. However, I can only use this ability for three hours every day.”

“You got very lucky,” Cairo replied. “Now I understand how you’re able to accurately locate these places. I’m thankful you shared this secret with me, but don’t tell this to anyone else. If they find out you are a walking treasure detector, people might have other ideas about you.”

Alex nodded. “I know, Master. I only told you this because I trust you with my life.”

Hearing the young man’s flattery made the Catkin smile. However, he knew Alex was being sincere when the latter said he trusted him with his life.

Half an hour later, they finally arrived at the secret path that led directly to the fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

“The fourth floor is where the Rank 2 monsters are located,” Cairo said. “But a Rank 3 might also appear, so make sure to stay close to me at all times.”

“Yes, Master,” Alex replied as he lightly tapped the wall in front of them.

The path opened, and a staircase leading downstairs appeared. Cairo gestured that he would go first, probably to ensure Alex’s safety. Just in case something unexpected happened, he would be able to react before it reached his disciple.

Alex had no complaints because he understood that his Master truly cared for his safety.

When they arrived on the Fourth Floor, Alex gave his surroundings a good look to help himself adapt to their new environment.

The fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings looked like a thick underground forest with overgrown roots and bioluminescent fungi serving as lighting.

The light of the fungi wasn't that strong, so Alex could barely see in the dimly lit surroundings. By his estimate, he could only see about two to three meters ahead. It was rather discomfoting, not knowing what was beyond his range of sight.

Cairo, on the other hand, wasn't subjected to Alex's sight problems.

Catkins had Dark Vision, allowing them to see perfectly even in dimly lit places. Cairo was not an exception.

"Master, let me check our surroundings for a bit," Alex said.

"Okay." Cairo nodded.

Since the Map of the Forgotten Paths was already activated, all Alex needed to do was glance at his map.

This time, there were no yellow dots—only a few dozen green dots could be seen on the map.

There were also two blinking blue dots on the map. However, getting to them would take some time since they were quite far from their location.

But Alex's eyes caught something more striking when he looked at the map for the first time.

The thing that really stood out was a big, red, blinking dot moving on the map as if it was patrolling around.

Fortunately, the map had given the red dot a label, allowing Alex to know what it was.

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< Vraxis, the Thorn Forged >

Monster Rank: Rank 2

Monster Grade: Rare

Type: Wandering Field Boss

Health: 1,100 / 1,100

Attack: 80 – 120

< Skill List >

Thorn Barrage, Rootbound Snake, Nature's Wrath.

— Thorn Barrage: Fires a spray of needle-thorns in a wide cone, causing bleed damage over time.

— Rootbound Snare: Causes thick roots to burst from the ground and trap nearby enemies.

— Nature's Wrath (Enrage): When below 30% HP, Vraxis goes berserk, gaining increased attack speed and spawning aggressive Thorn Minions.

Appearance: A towering beast that looks like a twisted fusion of stag, tree, and stone, covered in thorns and fungal growths. Its antlers glow faintly under the dungeon's light.

Note: Legends say it was once a guardian spirit of a forgotten grove, now corrupted by the dungeon's power.

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'This upgraded map sure is very useful,' Alex thought. 'A twisted fusion of stag, tree, and stone? I remember seeing this monster a few times during Charles' dungeon expedition.'

How could Alex forget the damn annoying Mini Boss that killed him about a few dozen times in the past?

As a stag, it moved with incredible speed and was among the powerful creatures that appeared on the First Floor within minutes of the Challenger's Mark being activated.

Seeing it right now made Alex have the strong urge to kill it.

Aside from their ranks, monsters have different classifications as well.

Common, Rare, Mutant, Super Rare, Named, Legendary, and Divine.

The Rank 2 Boss Spider that Alex faced inside the Etherion Dungeon was a mutant, which made it more powerful than the wandering Field Boss, Vraxis.

At most, it had the same threat level as the Crimson Fire Salamander Mini Boss that Alex had faced on the Fourth Floor of the Etherion Domain, making it a very formidable enemy.

But things were different this time around.

For example, he was with his Master, Cairo, a Rank 3 Demon Slayer.

Although Vraxis wasn't a Demon, Alex was confident that if he and his Master worked together, they would be able to defeat the monster that had killed Charles Lambert over a dozen times.

“Master, do you want to hunt a Rank 2 Field Boss?” Alex asked with a smile.

“You rascal,” Cairo replied. “Since when did you develop the hobby of fighting Field Boss Monsters inside a dungeon?”

“But Master, I’m only confident about beating it because you’re here with me,” Alex replied. “Also, wouldn’t it be a good idea to fight it now before we enter the dungeon with Charles?”

“I don’t know if it will respawn in the future. But if we fight it now, we will at least know what to do when we meet it a second time, no?”

“Fine.” Cairo understood the young man’s logic, so he agreed to hunt the Field Boss Monster with him.

Knowing their enemy would really help them during the dungeon outbreak, which Cairo believed would be very difficult, even for him.

Fortunately, their goal was to run to the exit, not fight the monsters, when the trial for the Dungeon of Beginnings officially began.

Chapter 93: Vraxis, the Thornforged

A thunderous roar reverberated throughout the fourth floor of the Dungeon of Beginnings.

The movement of Vraxis, the Thornforged, was getting visibly more erratic, as if he was losing his temper from getting his crap beaten out of him.

The Catkin Swordsman was agile and deadly. Alex watched in amazement as his master engaged the stag in combat, winning without too much of a problem.

Because Cairo didn’t need any help, the young man focused on dealing with stray monsters who were drawn by the Mini Boss’s call for reinforcements.

Most of these monsters were the Rotting Treants, which were half-dead, aggressive tree monsters.

Fortunately, they only come alone or in groups of twos.

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< Rotting Treant >

Monster Rank: Rank 2

Monster Grade: Uncommon

Type: Undead Tree Monster

Health: 200 / 200

Attack: 35 – 45

Note: Its heart long dead, the rotting treant knows no mercy, only the endless hunger of decay.

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In the past, Alex would have already run away from such a monster. But now, he welcomed the challenge.

With sword and shield in his hands, he faced the rotting treant, while Dim Dim threw stones at its head.

The Dim Sum God knew its secret weapon, the brittle vial, would not have any effect on the undead monster.

Since that was the case, it just kept on throwing stones at the rotting treant, triggering Alex's passive skills, Improve Stone Throw and Head Shot.

For some reason, Dim Dim had access to some of Alex's skills, allowing it to deal significant damage and also act as a distraction to the monster, which was torn between attacking Alex or whacking the little bun to oblivion.

While the two were locked in combat, the young man suddenly heard his master's shout from a distance.

"Alex, behind you!"

The young man didn't think twice before looking behind. The sight that greeted him was the Mini Boss charging in his direction.

Its eyes glowed crimson, and its body was riddled with dozens of wounds, all of which had been inflicted by Cairo.

Clearly, Vraxis had entered a berserk state. Since it had common sense, unlike most NPCs, its aggro shifted to Alex, the weaker one. The Catkin was simply too much for it to face in a one-on-one battle.

With a leap that would put Olympic swimmers to shame, Alex jumped to his right side and rolled on the ground to evade the charge of the stag monster.

A moment later, the sound of something hard hitting a tree trunk reached his ears, followed by a familiar notification sound indicating that he'd levelled up!

The rotting treant the young man had been fighting earlier was hit by the stag's full-frontal assault, which obliterated its body into pieces.

A few seconds later, the treant turned into particles of light, leaving a monster core behind.

“Demon Slaying Arts First Form!” Cairo shouted as his sword was covered with purple flames.

“Culling blade!”

Vraxxis cried out in pain as the Catkin’s blade perfectly hacked the side of its body.

However, just before it was about to counterattack, it heard a mighty shout from behind.

“Shield Charge!”

While the Mini Boss was distracted, Alex took this opportunity to use his strongest attack.

Svalinn slammed into the monster’s backside, making it stagger.

However, the young man wasn’t finished with his attack just yet.

“Rear Ender Thrust!”

This attack wasn’t really a skill. The young man simply shouted a cool name on the spot, thinking it would help with his plan to end the rear of the Mini Boss with a single, powerful thrust!

Alex’s sword glinted with ferocity as its sharp point stabbed at the monster’s you-know-where. Vraxxis roared due to a pain that far surpassed anything inflicted by Cairo’s Demon Slaying Arts.

However, the Mini Boss was still a Mini Boss, so it firmly planted its front hooves on the ground before giving Alex a back kick filled with rage, desperation, and humiliation.

A loud thud echoed within the corrupted forest as Alex blocked the attack with his shield.

However, he was still sent flying by the impact and crashed into a wall of the dungeon.

He no longer had the passive skill, Knockback Immunity, since he no longer possessed Everguard. At the moment, it was being repaired by the Hartwell Clan.

“Demon Slaying Arts Second Form!” Cairo stabbed his sword on the ground, making it shine in a golden light.

“Grand Cross!”

A giant golden cross formed under the Mini Boss, then emitted a radiant light that was very effective against Corrupted and Undead Monsters.

Vraxxis uttered its last and final roar before dissipating into particles of light.

A single sword strike from Cairo might have already finished it, but the Catkin still chose to use one of his Demon Slaying Arts as a form of overkill.

Alex was expecting to hear another Level Up notification, but it didn’t come.

The young man then glanced at his Status Page to check his experience bar to see how many experience points he gained when Cairo killed the Boss Monster.

[Experience Points: 44%]

‘Is it because the experience points are shared between me and Master?’ Alex thought. ‘Well, I guess it’s not that bad.’

Since Cairo was the one who had dealt the most damage to the Boss Monster, it was understandable that most of the experience points went to him.

The most Alex had done was land two attacks on the Mini Boss, which had already been on the verge of death.

When the monster died, a treasure chest appeared where it had stood earlier.

It was a silver treasure chest, which guaranteed at least two rare items. But on rare occasions, Super Rare Items might also be found in silver treasure chests.

Alex was a bit disappointed that it wasn't a gold treasure chest.

A gold chest gave a guaranteed Super Rare Item when opened, so many guilds would try to farm Wandering Bosses in order to get the items they exclusively dropped.

"Master, this treasure chest is yours," Alex said. "You were the one who worked hard to kill the Mini Boss, so this is rightfully yours."

Cairo nodded and didn't refuse his disciple's proposal.

Unlike Alex, who always performed a good luck ritual before opening a treasure chest, Cairo simply lifted the lid and peered inside the chest.

There were three items inside it.

Vraxxis' Monster Core, a purple shard, and a pair of gauntlets.

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< Brambleheart Shard >

Type: Rare Crafting Material

— When used to craft weapons, it will increase the chances of getting a passive life steal effect.

Description: A fragment of Vraxis' cursed heartwood, still pulsing faintly with stubborn life. In skilled hands, it can be forged into weapons that feed on the vitality of those they strike.

< Thornwoven Gauntlets >

Type: Rare Equipment

Effect: Strength+3 and +Critical Hit Rate.

Minor Thornlash Effect: Increase bleeding damage done by melee attacks.

Description: Gloves crafted from living, cursed vines, a relic of Vraxis' own forgework. They tighten around the wearer's hands, enhancing grip and strength, but whisper in an ancient tongue when blood is spilled."

— —

'Those two items are good,' Alex thought. 'Especially the Minor Thornlash effect. Since Master likes to slash his enemies repeatedly, they will lose their health faster from bleed damage.'

Cairo kept the two items inside his storage ring before glancing in the young man's direction.

"Rear Ender Thrust?" Cairo asked, amused. "That's the first time I've heard of this skill. When did you learn it?"

Alex chuckled because he understood that his master was just teasing him.

In order to avoid the topic, the young man decided to praise the Catkin for fighting the boss by himself without breaking a sweat.

Cairo chuckled, knowing that the young man was just buttering him up to change the subject.

Chapter 94: First Meeting

After looking at the map and confirming there were no longer any monsters in the vicinity, Alex turned to Cairo.

“Master, you’re really strong,” Alex said. “But it feels like you could’ve killed that monster much faster. Why did you hold back?”

“You might face Vraxis in the future, so I wanted to show you how to deal with such a threat on your own,” Cairo replied. “If it respawns during the day of the trial, we might need to kill it a second time.

“Didn’t you tell me to expect the worst when I’m with you? Perhaps I’ll be dealing with a greater threat by then, so you’ll have to fend for yourself.

“Do you at least understand how to effectively fight against it after watching me?”

“... Hahaha. Of course, Master.” Alex chuckled anxiously as he slightly evaded Cairo’s gaze. “I made sure to note how you defeated it.”

“Oh? Then why did you pause, hm?” Cairo smirked. “Also, is that sweat?”

The young man cranked up the gears inside his head to come up with a proper explanation to that question.

“Master, I just fought rotting treants and landed two hits on the Mini Boss,” Alex replied in a righteous tone. “If I didn’t sweat after that kind of battle, then doesn’t that mean I hadn’t fought seriously?”

Cairo wanted to roll his eyes, knowing his disciple was trying to worm his way out of their discussion. However, he didn’t delve into it further since he was certain this wouldn’t be their last time diving in the Dungeon of Beginnings before the trial started.

Alex was currently thinking that it might be a great idea to eliminate the Mini Boss Monsters on the fourth to the sixth floor. That way, the high-ranking monsters they would need to face during the dungeon run would decrease drastically.

“Well, then, what’s the plan?” Cairo asked. “Are we still going to explore, or should we return to the village?”

Alex pondered a bit before giving his reply.

“Let’s return to the village for now, Master,” Alex answered. “I have had enough excitement for today.”

“Then, are we going to come back here tomorrow?”

“Of course, Master. This is a good way to farm experience points, you know?”

Cairo blinked once, then twice. They were only a year apart, but he often felt like he was five generations older. His disciple was always using strange terms that he often struggled to understand.

In the end, Cairo thought the words “experience points” meant battle experience. He assumed Alex was talking about learning a monster’s attack patterns in order to handle them more effectively next time.

After collecting their loot, the two retraced their steps to the hidden pathway leading back to the dungeon’s first floor. Just as Alex had said, he’d had enough excitement for one day and wanted to return to the inn to rest before the Map of Forgotten Paths lost its effect.

Although it was a bit of a shame, he didn’t have the time to explore the blinking blue dots on the map, which marked the locations of hidden treasures.

While the pair was on their way back to the first floor of the dungeon, Charles Lambert was taking a short break after finishing his training.

The young man looked at his calloused hands, which had been swinging the wooden sword every day for nearly a month.

'Tomorrow, I'll use the cheap sword I bought from the weapon shop,' Charles thought. 'It's best that I practice using real weapons before I fight monsters. But I am still worried about...'

His adoptive parents had repeatedly told him not to enter any dungeons because he possessed a skill that would attract monsters to him.

However, if he wanted to become a scholarship student of Frieden Academy, he had no choice but to enter the Dungeon of Beginnings. This was the only condition he must achieve to reunite with his sisters.

There was also one more thing weighing on his mind.

For some reason, he kept feeling that something was calling out to him from somewhere in the mountains about a mile away from Briarwood Village.

Each day, the feeling grew stronger, urging him to go and investigate.

'My instincts are telling me I shouldn't go, but it just keeps on nagging me.' Charles sighed helplessly.

It was like enduring a toothache that wouldn't go away until you pulled out the tooth that was the root of the problem.

The teenage boy could still endure it... for now.

But he had a feeling a day would come when the inexplicable feeling would be too intense for him to ignore, which might affect his mental state.

Shaking his head, the young man decided to take a stroll in the village to clear his thoughts.

Life in Briarwood Village was very simple.

The people here farmed, fished, or hunted game in the forest.

Of course, there were also dangerous monsters in the forest, but the Adventurers of their village would clear them up from time to time to ensure everyone's safety.

Charles didn't dare to venture too deep in the forest, knowing that monsters seemed to actively attack him as soon as they sensed his presence.

However, he still had to build up battle experience, so he sometimes wandered to the outskirts of the forest and fought forest boars, horned rabbits, and occasionally forest wolves that roamed alone.

His adoptive father had taught him how to wield the sword at a young age, so his foundation was solid. He also practiced daily without fail, which was how he had become a Ranker.

Currently, he was close to becoming a Ranker. However, since he still hadn't chosen any Job Class, he had yet to learn any skills aside from Slash and Heavy Slash.

Heavy Slash was a more powerful version of the Slash skill, which was Charles' trump card.

Although he was confident that he could fight a Rank 2 Monster when pushed into a corner, it would be best that he avoided that kind of situation whenever possible.

When he arrived at the village's plaza, he saw Alex and Cairo coming from the opposite direction.

This was the first time he had seen the pair. Judging from the presence they exuded, Charles could tell that they were stronger than he was.

This was especially true for the Catkin, whose gaze was as sharp as a blade.

To his surprise, both gave him a smile and nod of acknowledgment before walking past him.

Alex had told his Master that he didn't plan to make contact with Charles right away.

It would be better if he got accustomed to seeing them in the village first so he would at least not be too wary of them when they decided to help him during the trial.

'Maybe they're trial takers too,' Charles thought, because the two seemed to be around his age.

He watched as Alex and Cairo entered the only inn in the village, which accepted guests who came from afar.

Inside the inn, Cairo gave his disciple an inquiring glance. The young man only replied with a shake of his head.

"Now is not the time, Master," Alex said softly. "Let's wait for two weeks."

Cairo nodded in understanding.

His disciple seemed to be taking a very careful approach when it came to Charles Lambert. Frankly, he was also curious about the boy who had been given the blessing, or perhaps curse, known as Challenger's Mark.

A skill that deliberately put its owner into harm's way, as if the world didn't want Charles to exist and wished to eliminate him as soon as possible.

Chapter 95: Greed's Hidden Teeth [Part 1]

Four days after Alex and Cairo explored the Dungeon of Beginnings...

"Do you have plans to challenge the lower floors today?" the Catkin inquired.

"Master... you look very eager today." Alex smiled. "Do you perhaps want to fight another Mini Boss?"

"No," Cairo answered. "I'm just wondering if there are any more Adventurer Parties affiliated with Silent Coffin in the dungeon. Letting them live doesn't sit well with me."

Alex was quite surprised by his master's reply. It seemed that after learning of Silent Coffin, Cairo had become hellbent on eliminating the secret organization from the roots.

"Master, just be careful, okay?" Alex said seriously. "They're not an easy opponent."

"I know." Cairo nodded. "I'll make sure to let the dungeon erase the evidence so it doesn't come back to bite me."

The young man was finally able to breathe a little easier after hearing his master's reply.

Cairo might be strong, but he was still far from becoming the Heaven's Sword, a title bestowed upon the person all the Catkin Tribes recognized as the strongest Swordsman of their race.

For now, he was still in training, and it would take a few more years before his swordsmanship reached the level where villains would think twice before crossing him.

After having breakfast together, the two set off for the Dungeon of Beginnings. Along the way, they came across Charles, who happened to be running. The trial was drawing near, so they assumed the teenage boy must be training hard as usual.

Once again, the gazes of the three met, and they all exchanged a nod of greeting.

Now that Charles seemed to have grown a little familiar with them, the pair believed it might not be that hard to talk to him in the future.

However, Alex still felt like it wasn't yet time for them to approach the young man.

'The Hidden Dungeon in the mountain near the village will open in a week,' Alex thought. 'I'll talk to Charles after Master and I clear that dungeon.'

The Hidden Dungeon was one of the secrets that Alex and the Eris Brotherhood had discovered after many playthroughs as the NPC, Charles Lambert.

Compared to the Dungeon of Beginnings, this Hidden Dungeon was much more manageable. With enough preparations, even Charles alone could beat it.

After defeating the Boss Monster, players could obtain the Whirlwind Sword from the treasure chest, which granted its wielder the AOE skill, Whirlwind Slash.

This skill was incredibly useful, especially for someone surrounded by monsters, as it allowed them to clear a path for their escape.

When Alex and Cairo entered the Dungeon of Beginnings, the young man immediately activated the Map of Forgotten Paths to locate the hidden treasures and paths inside the dungeon.

To Alex's dismay, there were no hidden rooms that contained treasure chests this time around.

However, he did not dwell in his disappointment for too long. The young man soon picked himself up and ran toward the hidden path that led to the dungeon's fourth floor.

This time, he planned to go to the two hidden rooms that he hadn't had the chance to check the last time they went down there.

After reaching the fourth floor, Cairo asked Alex if the Mini Boss had respawned.

"I don't see Vraxis on the map, Master," Alex said. "But there are two hidden rooms that contain treasure chests. Let's go there first."

Cairo nodded and followed his disciple closely.

As they headed to their destination, they encountered Rotting Treants, Thorn Wolves, and Moss Goblins.

All of them were Rank 2 Monsters, but they no longer posed a threat to the master-disciple pair, who made short work of them.

Alex also noticed that the experience points he gained from fighting such monsters were no longer as high as they used to be.

He had been leveling up like crazy ever since he had entered the Etherion Domain. However, now that he had become a Rank 2 Oathkeeper, he needed to kill at least thirty Rank 2 Monsters before he could level up.

Moreover, since he was fighting alongside Cairo, his experience points were also cut in half.

Of course, Alex wasn't too bothered by it. Their killing spree was more than twice as fast and effective than it would have been had he been alone. In fact, by the time Alex and Cairo reached the first blue blinking dot on a map, the former once again heard a notification sound inside his head.

[Level Up!]

The young man glanced at his Status Page and smiled after seeing his stats.

Alex was now a Ranker, who would not be easily defeated even if he were to fight four Goblins at the same time. He had come a long way since his arrival in Arcana.

Alex Stratos

Age: 17

Alignment: Chaotic Good

Mana: 72/72

Job Class: Oathkeeper

Strength – 50 [+6]

Intelligence – 30 [+3]

Dexterity – 20 [+3]

Agility – 100 [+3]

Constitution – 70 [+4]

Stamina – 70 [+4]

Magic – 69 [+3]

Luck – 24 [+3]

Available Stat Points: 0

AP: 2,440

Active Skills: Oathkeeper's Duty, Shield [EX], Shield Bash, Unyielding Pact, Echo of the Sworn, Balance Breaker, Shield Charge

Passive Skills: Improved Stone Throw, Head Shot, Rebuke of Steel.

[Difficulty Level: Hell Mode]

'My Agility is now in the three digits,' Alex noted. 'I should add more Stat Points to Strength next time I level up.'

With his current stats, Alex could kill most Rank 1 Monsters with a single strike. He could also fight a Rank 3 Monster in a one-on-one battle now.

Although it would take some time, the young man was confident he could win that battle with his current stats.

The only exceptions were Rank 2 Boss Monsters and Mini Bosses.

They were far stronger than monsters of the same rank, so Alex should still be careful when dealing with them.

Just as the young man and the Catkin were about to reach their destination, they stumbled upon a group of five people, which made the two stop in their tracks.

"Oh, a duo on the fourth floor?" The Swordsman of the group smiled. "Both of you must be strong if you can go this far with only the two of you. But I don't seem to recognize any of you. Are you perhaps new Adventurers?"

"Yes," Alex replied before his Master could say anything. "I hope you don't mind us."

The group of Adventurers eyed Alex and Cairo for nearly half a minute before deciding to continue their exploration inside the dungeon.

Cairo's hand rested on the handle of his sword, ready to draw it at any time, just in case the Adventurers attacked them.

Alex couldn't feel any malice from the Adventurers. But since he didn't know if they truly were harmless or not, he still made sure to keep his guard up at all times.

"Are they gone, Dim Dim?" Alex inquired.

Dim Dim nodded. "Dim."

"Good." Alex glanced at Cairo. "We'll be there shortly, Master."

"Okay," the Catkin replied as he followed behind Alex, who ran across the winding paths of the dungeon for two more minutes before arriving at their destination.

Just like before, he looked for any unusual symbols on the wall of the dungeon. When he saw a small emblem, similar to a raindrop, he knew that this was the entrance to the room he was searching for.

After placing his hand on the emblem, a hidden door appeared, which Alex and Cairo calmly entered together.

Chapter 96: Greed's Hidden Teeth [Part 2]

"Wait, Alex," Cairo called out before his disciple could approach the treasure chest at the center of the room.

"Yes, Master?" Alex paused. "Do you want to open the chest?"

"That's not what I mean." Cairo shook his head. "That's not a treasure chest. It's a Mimic."

The young man blinked once, then twice, before focusing his attention on the unmoving bronze treasure chest.

No matter how hard he stared at it, there was no sort of monster description popping up. Logically, it shouldn't be a monster.

However, it was also possible that the treasure chest hadn't been recognized as a monster yet. Besides, he trusted the Catkin with all his heart, so he didn't doubt the latter's warning.

As if to prove that Cairo was telling the truth, Dim Dim took out a stone from who-knows-where and tossed it at the treasure chest.

A dull thud reached Alex's ears as the stone bounced off the lid of the treasure chest.

At first, nothing happened.

However, a second later, the lid of the treasure chest creaked open to reveal rows upon rows of sharp teeth, ready to snap at the little guy who had tossed a stone at it earlier.

Its large tongue also emerged from within, slobbering all over the place. It truly looked like an abomination made to punish the greedy Adventurers who thought that they had lucked upon another treasure chest.

This time, the creature's description finally appeared, confirming that this was indeed a monster and not the treasure chest Alex was looking for.

< Mimic >

Monster Rank: Rank 2

Monster Grade: Rare

Type: Aberration

Health: 300 / 300

Attack: 50 – 80

Note: Not all chests inside dungeons contain treasures and gold. Some are ancient predators in disguise, waiting for the opportunity to bite off the hands that dare to open their lids.

— — —

When the Mimic lunged at Alex, the young man didn't back down and used his shield to attack as well.

"Shield Bash!"

The sound of metals clashing against each other reverberated inside the room.

A moment later, the Mimic crashed back down on the ground, allowing Cairo to land the killing blow.

With a screech filled with regret, the Mimic faded into particles of light, leaving a single item behind.

— — —

< Mimic Core Shard >

"Ye think it's just a shiny rock, eh? Foolish thought. The shard is still alive, in a way. After all, it takes a Mimic to know a Mimic."

Item Grade: Super Rare

— A crystalline organ of a defeated Mimic. Required for crafting mid-tier magical gear or dungeon enchantments.

— Can be used as a crafting ingredient for the Mimic Lantern, which detects whether a treasure chest is a Mimic or not inside a dungeon.

— — —

“A Mimic Core Shard. Now that brings back memories,” Cairo said softly. “The first time I encountered a Mimic, I almost got my hand bitten by it. Fortunately, my grandfather was around to stop me from touching the treasure chest.

“Once we get to the City of Harmonia, you should ask an Alchemist to help you craft a Mimic Lantern. That will help you determine whether a treasure chest is really a treasure chest or not until you are able to sense it naturally.”

Alex nodded and stored the shining crystal inside his storage ring for future use.

He had seen a Mimic in the past, though this was his first time encountering it in person. It wasn't rare to bump into one in ELO, but that could hardly compare to seeing one in real life.

At that moment, Alex made a decision.

Until he got his own Mimic Lantern, he would always toss stones at every treasure chest he found inside a dungeon unless they were dropped by Boss Monsters.

That way, if it was a Mimic, he would be able to react on time and smack the opportunistic monster to oblivion!

“Where to next?” Cairo asked. “Is there another secret room on this floor, Alex?”

“Yes, Master. It’s not far from here.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

“Dim Dim!”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Just like Alex, Dim Dim was a bit disappointed to learn that the treasure chest was actually a monster.

However, it had learned a valuable lesson. Like Alex, it decided that from now on, it would always check whether a treasure chest was a monster in disguise.

When they arrived at the other secret room, Alex didn’t even need to do anything because the Dim Sum God was very eager to put what it had learned into practice.

“Ei!”

“Ei!”

“Ei!”

Dim Dim threw stones at the treasure chest.

“Look, Master.” Alex chuckled. “Dim Dim now has trust issues when it comes to treasure chests.”

However, his amusement was short-lived.

After the third rock bounced off the treasure chest's lid, a screech filled with anger and surprise spread inside the room as the treasure chest opened its lid, revealing its razor-sharp teeth.

"You were saying?" Cairo smiled faintly.

"I think I now have trust issues toward treasure chests as well, Master," Alex replied.

The Catkin laughed before taking a step forward.

His blade, now freed from its scabbard, shone faintly as the Swordsman cut the monster in half.

A few seconds later, it turned into particles of light, leaving two items behind.

The first item was a small pouch that contained 50 gold coins.

The second item was a pocket watch, which didn't seem to be working.

However, after a quick appraisal, Alex learned what this item could do.

< Memory Dial >

"Some memories are better left buried."

Item Grade: Super Rare

Type: Accessory

Active Skills: Echo Recall

< Echo Recall >

— When this skill is activated, the owner of the Memory Dial can see past events that happened in the location where they are standing.

— You can choose a specific date and time, or you can just let the artifact play the most memorable event that happened in your location.

Effect: Creates a temporary illusion that replays what happened in a 20-meter radius around you. This illusion will only last for five minutes.

Skill Cooldown: 48 hours

Note: This artifact is now soul-bound to Alex Stratos.

“Wow,” Alex muttered after getting the super rare item that could let him see the past.

Although the Memory Dial could only recreate the scenes for five minutes, it didn’t change the fact that this artifact was very valuable.

‘This is the perfect item for detectives when they investigate the crime scene,’ Alex thought.

“Is that a good item?” Cairo inquired after seeing that his disciple was looking at the pocket watch in his hand with a solemn expression on his face.

“Yes, Master,” Alex replied. “It’s an incredible item that can recreate previous events that happened in the location where its owner is standing.”

Cairo, now aware of how powerful the pocket watch truly was, warned Alex to use it with caution.

After all, seeing fragments of the past was no different from uncovering other people's secrets. This ability could lead to serious trouble if not used wisely.

The saving grace was that the artifact was soul-bound to Alex, which meant no one else could wield it for malicious purposes.

The Catkin's warning rang true. If Alex were to use it in public, others would just become more wary of him. The more extreme ones might even actively try to eliminate him to preserve their secrets.

"So, what's the next plan?" Cairo asked. "Should we go to the fifth floor and check what kind of monsters spawn in that location?"

Alex pondered for a bit before nodding. "I think that's a good idea, Master. We might find some other secrets as well if we go there."

With a destination in mind, the two once again continued their exploration.

They still had a few weeks before the trial started, and Alex planned to take as many treasures as he could before their judgment day finally arrived.

Chapter 97: Maybe We Were Best Friends In Our Past Lives

Two weeks before the Trial of Frieden Academy...

'Here it is again,' Charles thought as he felt the familiar urge to go to the mountain take over his senses once more.

Over the past few days, the urge to head there had only grown stronger.

When he had first felt it, he had simply thought he was starting to hallucinate from all the training he'd done. But after a few days, the urge had come and gone again and again, each episode longer than the last.

Charles had been able to endure it in the past, but the call this time challenged his limit. The inexplicable pull felt so strong, he felt like his head would break apart if he didn't give in to the voice calling out to him.

"Come..."

The haunting voice was too ambiguous, sounding neither like a man nor a woman.

But that was the least of his worries. He knew that if he didn't go, he might lose his control over his mind and go crazy.

"Ugh... I don't like this." Charles felt nauseous as he did his best to keep his hold of his reason and resist the call with everything he had.

However, the urge assaulting his mind suddenly spiked in intensity, making the teenage boy blank out. In an instant, his eyes lost focus. As if falling into a trance, Charles walked out of his house and headed to the mountain from where he heard the voice.

Many of the villagers he passed along greeted him, but he uncharacteristically ignored all of them completely, continuing to walk ahead like a zombie who had lost the ability to think.

"Something doesn't seem right." Cairo, who had come to observe Charles with Alex, noted. "Is he drunk? Why is he walking like that?"

Alex frowned, knowing Charles wasn't someone who liked to drink alcohol.

But it was also true that the teenage boy was now indeed walking like a drunk person, completely oblivious of his surroundings.

“Let’s follow him for now, Master,” Alex suggested. “He is leaving the village.”

Cairo nodded and followed the teenage boy along with his disciple.

Just like Alex, the Catkin was very curious about what was happening to the teenage boy, whom they had planned to talk to today.

An hour later, they arrived at the base of Briar Mountain, which made Alex’s expression turn solemn.

‘Could it be?’ Alex thought.

He knew there was a Hidden Dungeon in Briar Mountain. This was the place he planned to visit before leaving Briarwood Village for the Capital City of Harmonia.

But the entrance of the dungeon shouldn’t appear until the night of the full moon, which would only happen in two days.

However, as they followed Charles, who was still in a trance, Alex confirmed that the former was indeed heading to the entrance of the Hidden Dungeon, where the Whirlwind Sword could be found.

The Hidden Dungeon was actually just a simple dungeon.

It only had two floors, and only Rank 1 Ant Monsters could be found inside it.

As long as Charles Lambert became a Ranker, challenging it alone wouldn’t be difficult.

According to Cairo, the teenage boy had finally become a Ranker, so Alex believed he wouldn’t face any danger inside the Hidden Dungeon.

‘Still, there’s a nagging feeling at the back of my head,’ Alex thought.

Just as he was pondering what might be making him feel this way, a Rank 2 Brown Bear suddenly emerged from the trees and lunged at Charles with the intention to maul him.

Before Alex could react, a blur moved past him. A second later, the pained scream of the Brown Bear reverberated in the surroundings.

Blood dripped down the bear's face from a deep cut on its head.

But Cairo had no intention of letting this opportunity pass, unleashing a series of quick sword strikes that ended the bear's life before it could even understand what had happened.

Alex, who had caught up, dragged Charles away so that the teenage boy wouldn't get hit by stray attacks from the two combatants.

Fortunately, the Catkin had eliminated the threat very quickly, making his disciple sigh in relief.

"Great job, Master!" Alex said before shifting his gaze to Charles, who was trying to break free from his hold. "Hey, what's wrong with you?"

When Charles realized he couldn't break free from Alex's hold, he started to snarl and growl, acting like a wild animal. Unable to free himself, he even resorted to biting Alex's hand.

Fortunately, Alex summoned his shield on time, which protected him from getting bitten by the rabid teenage boy, who seemed to have lost his rationality.

"Dim Dim?"

"No. Dim Dim! Put down that brittle vial. Are you planning to hit me too?!"

The Dim Sum God had asked for permission to throw its secret weapon at Charles' face to calm him down.

But Alex was currently holding the teenage boy, and there wasn't much distance between them. If Dim Dim were to really throw a brittle vial, his eyes would also suffer.

"Should I knock him unconscious?" Cairo asked, completely ignoring the dead bear beside his feet.

"Yes, Master," Alex replied. "Make sure it won't hurt him too much."

Cairo nodded and gave Charles a quick and solid jab on his jaw, knocking him out cold.

Twenty minutes later...

Poke

"Nghh..."

Poke *Poke*

"Ngh.. Mnh...."

Poke *Poke* *Poke*

"Nghh!"

Poke *Poke* *Poke* *Poke*

Charles abruptly opened his eyes as he woke up from his sleep.

The first thing it saw was a small, white, and round creature, which resembled a baby slime up close.

An inch away from his nose hovered a little hand, the culprit that had woken him up from his slumber.

Seeing this scene, Alex couldn't help but smile because he fully understood what Charles was feeling right now.

After all, Dim Dim woke him up in the same manner from time to time whenever it was in a playful mood.

"You... are Dim Dim, right?" Charles asked.

He had learned the name of Alex's little pet from the shouts of the village's children, who called out to the bun as they played tag with it in the village's plaza.

"Dim Dim!" Dim Dim nodded and raised its body. "Ahem~"

"Where am I?" Charles looked around himself.

The last thing he remembered was being at home, fighting the strong urge to head to the mountains.

Although he could still feel that something was calling out to him, he was now in full control of his senses, which he was thankful for.

"Can you please tell me what happened to me?" Charles asked. "I don't remember how I ended up here, but I don't believe the two of you are kidnappers."

"We found you walking like a zombie, so we got curious and followed you," Alex answered. "Don't you remember? You were attacked by a Brown Bear, and Master rushed in to save you."

Alex took the time to explain everything clearly, not wanting any misunderstandings with the teenage boy.

Charles listened to Alex speak from start to end, then nodded in understanding.

“Listen, I don’t know what came over you, but I believe we met for a reason,” Alex said with a smile. He’d been looking for the perfect opportunity to befriend Charles, and now, the opportunity presented itself.

“Perhaps we could help you with something? Don’t worry, Master and I are competent Adventurers. If something is bothering you, we will help you this one time for free. What do you say?”

The young man even stretched out his hand in a gesture of a handshake, acting in a very friendly manner.

“My name is Alex Stratos,” Alex said. “What’s your name?”

“C-Charles,” Charles replied before reaching out to shake the young man’s hand. “Charles Lambert.”

For some reason, Charles felt as if Alex was a very close friend whom he hadn’t seen for several years.

He couldn’t understand why he was feeling this way, but his instincts were telling him that the young man in front of him was someone he could trust with his life.

It was a very surreal feeling that went beyond words, and Charles said something before he realized what he had spoken.

“Have we met before?” Charles asked as he shook Alex’s hand. “For some reason, I feel like I have known you for years.”

“Maybe we were best friends in our past lives,” Alex replied in a teasing tone.

“Could such a thing even happen?” Charles blinked.

“Who knows?” Alex answered. “After all, this world is a world with endless possibilities.”

Cairo, who had been listening to the conversation, smiled faintly.

His disciple had traveled to Briarwood Village, risking his life to save Charles because of the vision of the future that he had seen.

At least, that was what the Catkin had understood after hearing the young man’s explanation.

Since he had decided to assist Alex in saving Charles and helping the latter reunite with his sisters, the Catkin would do his best to make it happen without sacrificing anyone in the process.

Chapter 98: The Hidden Dungeon In Briar Mountain [Part 1]

“Something is calling out to you here in this mountain?” Alex’s expression turned solemn after Charles explained the likely cause of his mindless journey to Briar Mountain.

“Yes,” Charles replied. “Even as we speak, I can feel it reaching out to me, almost pleading for me to come to it.”

Alex exchanged a glance with his master, and the latter nodded in understanding.

The young man hadn’t hid the fact that there was a Hidden Dungeon in Briar Mountain from his Master.

They had even agreed to go there on the night of the full moon in order to get the items that could be obtained from killing the Boss Monster that ruled it.

But Charles’ words made Alex think that there might be some kind of secret that he didn’t know about the Hidden Dungeon.

In the game, there was no event where Charles would fall into a trance and suddenly wake up inside the Hidden Dungeon of Briar Mountain.

Alex only knew about the dungeon because it was shared in the wiki page of the Eris Brotherhood, whose members had all seriously tried to clear Charles' tutorial quest.

'I should have investigated how that player discovered the Hidden Dungeon in the first place,' Alex thought. 'Maybe he triggered an event that the rest of us didn't.'

"So, what do you want to do?" Cairo asked Charles, who was eating a roasted pork bun given to him by Dim Dim. "Would you like to go to that place where you are being called? If you say yes, Alex and I will accompany you and guarantee your safety."

Charles glanced at Alex, and the latter nodded in affirmation.

"Like I told you, this must be the workings of Fate," Alex said. "Maybe we are here to help you solve this mystery."

(A/N: Thirteen would like to have a word with you.)

Charles closed his eyes and pondered what to do next.

Frankly, he felt lucky because Cairo and Alex had been there to save him from the Brown Bear during his trance-like state.

If that happened again in the future, he might not be able to survive a second encounter with a monster during his unconscious state.

"Then, I will take you up on your offer," Charles said after careful consideration. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," Alex said. "Well, then. Shall we go? The sooner we solve this mystery, the sooner we can return to the village."

Charles nodded and stood up to lead his two new friends to where the voice was coming from.

Several minutes later, they arrived at their destination.

'I knew it,' Alex thought as he narrowed his eyes at the thick curtain of vines swaying gently in the breeze.

Nestled behind the green veil was the dungeon's entrance, well hidden to the point that anyone who didn't intentionally look for it would've walked right past it..

"It's coming from that wall," Charles explained as he pointed at the location that Alex was eyeing.

"I'll go first," Cairo said. "Charles, you stay behind Alex."

He already knew about Charles' passive skill, Challenger's Mark.

The moment the teenage boy entered the dungeon, all the monsters within two kilometers would sense his presence, prompting them to head in his direction.

Fortunately, Alex had told him that only Rank 1 Monster Ants spawned inside this particular dungeon.

He and his disciple were confident that they could easily defeat them and clear the dungeon without fail.

The moment they entered the dungeon, Charles' body shuddered uncontrollably, as if a power that had remained dormant inside his body suddenly awakened.

Alex immediately sensed a change in the atmosphere of the dungeon. His master didn't miss it either.

The dungeon resembled an underground cave, barely lit by faintly glowing crystals embedded in the walls that cast a dim, eerie light across the uneven path.

Suddenly, countless chirp-like sounds reached their ears at the same time.

Scritch-Scritch

Scritch-Scritch

Scritch-Scritch

The dungeon seemed to tremble as countless red eyes added light to the darkness, all zeroing in on the entrance where Charles stood. Moments later, dozens of meter-long Black Ants charged forward in a frenzy, as if they had entered a berserk state.

.

“I’ll handle this!” Cairo said before embedding his sword in the ground. “Demon Slaying Arts, Third Form!”

“Crimson Requiem!”

Two red flashes that criss-crossed on the ground surged forward, cutting all the Ant Monsters in their path.

That single attack killed dozens at once, but the Ant Army wasn’t easily defeated. Dozens might have died, but dozens more took their place.

Alex and Cairo were now experiencing the true effect of the Challenger’s Mark, which made them thankful that the Hidden Dungeon only had two floors and that only Rank 1 Monsters spawned inside of it.

Although the enemies were many, they didn’t pose a threat to the Rank 3 Demon Slayer, who decided to engage them in close combat.

With a swing of the Catkin's sword, two to three ants died at the same time, turning into particles of light.

Cairo was like a killing machine that didn't allow even a single ant to get past him, keeping Alex and Charles safe from harm.

At first, he thought this fight would never end because the number of monsters didn't seem to decrease, no matter how many he killed.

But ten minutes later, the fighting finally ended.

As the last Black Ant turned into particles of light, dozens of Rank 1 Monster Cores littered the ground.

Cairo then sheathed his blade, not even breaking sweat after eliminating so many monsters at once.

"Wow," Charles muttered as he looked at the Catkin, who had single-handedly cleared all the monsters of the dungeon. "He's so amazing."

"I know, right?" Alex looked smug because his master looked really cool during his fight earlier.

"Um, aren't you going to pick those monster cores on the ground?" Cairo asked. "With so many of them, I'm sure they will fetch over a few gold coins."

Alex, who was trying to earn as many gold coins as he could, immediately went to pick the monster cores and stored them inside his storage ring.

"Dim Dim~" Dim Dim happily picked up one of the monster cores and put it inside a small pouch that Alex had given it.

Dim Dim had asked Alex if he could give it a gold coin later, wanting to buy some candies for the children of the village it had befriended.

Of course, Alex had agreed, which motivated the Dim Sum God to help him with collecting the monster cores. Cairo believed there were enough cores they could get ten gold coins from the Adventurer's Guild.

While this was happening, Charles once again felt that strong call from within the dungeon, asking him to hurry to its location.

"Guys, I'm hearing it again," Charles said. "The voice is getting stronger, and I can tell it's feeling excited."

"Lead the way," Alex said after picking up the last monster core.

Since he believed that all the monsters inside the dungeon were now dead, Charles could now safely guide them to the place where he was hearing the voice.

However, Alex had a very bad feeling about it.

But in order to confirm his suspicion, he decided to keep silent for now and simply follow the teenage boy, whom the swarm of monsters had tried to kill earlier.

Chapter 99: The Hidden Dungeon In Briar Mountain [Part 2]

"It's here." Charles pointed at the bronze gate in front of him. "The voice is coming from this place."

"That's the Boss Room," Alex commented.

This wouldn't be his first time entering the bronze gate in front of them.

The rare sword and the few other items that could be obtained from defeating the Boss Monster in the Hidden Dungeon tremendously helped in the Dungeon of Beginnings. Ever since Alex learned of it, he had always visited it before taking the trial.

'A Rank 1 Queen Ant Boss Monster and two peak Rank 1 Ant Warriors,' he recalled. 'They're behind that gate. They should be easy to handle.'

But he was a bit bothered by what Charles had said about the voice speaking directly inside his head.

Alex had never encountered it in the game, so he was now very curious about what was waiting on the other side of the gate and if something different would happen this time.

“Don’t let your guard down,” Cairo warned as his hand pressed against the bronze gate to push it open. “I’ll go first. Both of you stay behind me.”

Alex and Charles nodded in understanding and stayed put.

The Catkin opened the gate, revealing the interior of the room. The light coming from the glowing crystals embedded in the Boss Room’s walls was dim.

Unlike Cairo, the two young men had no Dark Vision, so it took some time before their eyes adjusted to the lighting, allowing them to see what was in front of them.

At the other side of the Boss Room, three pairs of red eyes glowed faintly in the darkness.

It was none other than the Boss Monster and its two minions.

— —

< Queen Black Ant >

Monster Rank: Rank 1 Boss Monster

Monster Grade: Uncommon

Type: Dungeon Boss Monster

Health: 600 / 600

Attack: 20 – 50

Note: Not all queens are regal. Some are monstrous, their love a curse that spawns legions of gnashing maws.

— —

< Soldier Black Ant >

Monster Rank: Rank 1

Monster Grade: Uncommon

Type: Ant Type Monster

Health: 100 / 100

Attack: 10 – 40

Note: A single soldier is little threat, until the ground itself writhes with their kind.

— —

The five-meter long Ant Queen remained calm as it eyed the invaders of its domain.

The two Soldier Ants by her side remained immobile, waiting for their Queen's command.

Suddenly, Alex, Cairo, and Charles heard a voice directly inside their heads.

“Come, child of man,” the Ant Queen said. “You, who challenge the laws of this world by simply existing.”

The gigantic Ant Queen fixed her gaze on Charles, who was looking at her with a conflicted look on his face.

“You’re the one who called out to me?” he asked. “What do you mean about challenging the laws of this world by simply existing?”

“It is because you are an existence born inside a dungeon,” the Ant Queen replied. “A being who shouldn’t have lived yet is still alive today.”

“Whether it be by some sort of destiny or luck, the challenge you are about to face will certainly be your last. Unless... someone intervenes with your destiny.”

The Ant Queen then shifted its attention to Alex. The two held each other’s gazes before a cryptic chirping sound escaped the Ant Queen’s mandibles, as if it was chuckling.

Charles was still unable to understand what the Ant Queen was trying to tell him. But he decided to ask the most important question right now.

“Why did you call out to me?” he asked. “What do you want?”

“To live,” the Ant Queen replied. “Just like you, who wish to live.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Just come, and I will make you understand.”

Unsure if he should listen to the Ant Queen, Charles glanced at Alex and Cairo, hoping to get their opinion.

Alex didn't know what to say because this was the first time something like this had happened.

Cairo also had no idea if the Ant Queen could be trusted or not. However, he was confident that he could kill the Boss Monster without too much effort if he wished.

The only problem was that the Catkin hadn't felt a single shred of killing intent from the Ant Queen and her two Soldier Ants.

They simply stayed where they were, not making any move to attack the intruders.

Since he couldn't decide whether the Ant Queen could be trusted or not, Alex decided to ask the Dim Sum God what it thought.

"Dim Dim," the Dim Sum God said.

"Are you sure?" Alex inquired.

Dim Dim nodded. "Dim."

Charles could very much understand Dim Dim, so he decided to take a leap of faith and see what would happen next.

After taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, the teenager took a step forward.

He walked steadily toward the Ant Queen, his heart beating wildly inside his chest.

Cairo had already taken out his sword, while Alex had readied his shield.

If Charles' life was in any danger, the Oathkeeper would instantly teleport in front of the teen and protect him, while Cairo would go in for the kill.

Dim Dim, who was still perched on top of Alex's head, also took out a brittle vial, ready to throw it if something unexpected happened.

The two Soldier Ants protecting the Ant Queen moved aside, allowing Charles to pass through.

When the young man was only two meters away from the Boss Monster, the Queen spoke once more.

"Touch my head," the Ant Queen said before lowering her head. "You will understand the reason why I called you here."

Sensing that there was no malice or killing intent from the Ant Queen, Charles reached out his hand to touch its head.

Alex and Cairo raised their senses to the limit, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

But nothing happened.

The Ant Queen and Charles remained unmoving.

Even the two Soldier Ants didn't move from their spots, making them seem like a part of a painting.

Seconds passed...

Minutes passed...

Only after ten minutes did something finally happen.

The Ant Queen and the Two Soldier Ants turned into particles of light, leaving behind their monster cores.

“What the...” Alex muttered. Despite his experience playing ELO, he could not come up with an explanation for what he was seeing. “They... died?”

Cairo frowned. He also had no idea why the Ant Queen and her two minions died without anyone attacking them.

But it wasn’t over yet.

A glowing orb, the size of a basketball, hovered above Charles.

It then slowly descended until the teen reached out to hold it before pressing it towards his chest.

At that exact moment, Alex heard a cracking sound reverberate inside the Boss Room.

As the walls and the floors suddenly fractured like a mirror, the young man was certain that something bad was going to happen next.

And then it happened.

The world around them shattered, sending pieces of glass flying in every direction.

The ground beneath their feet collapsed. Before they knew it, they felt weightless as they fell into a dark abyss.

But this fall didn’t last that long. The next second, Alex found himself looking at the clear blue sky.

“Huh?!” Alex immediately propped himself up and found himself outside the entrance of the dungeon.

Cairo had also stood up. He was looking at their surroundings, checking if they were in any danger.

“Are you alright, Alex?” the Catkin asked.

“Yes, Master,” Alex replied. “What just happened?”

“That is what you call a Dungeon Collapse,” Cairo answered. “It’s the phenomenon that happens when someone breaks the Core of a Dungeon.”

The two then shifted their attention to Charles, who was standing a distance away.

The teenage boy had his eyes closed. His hands were still pressed to his chest.

“I finally understand,” Charles said softly before opening his eyes. “The reason why my adoptive parents told me to never enter a dungeon and the real reason why I have Challenger’s Mark.”

The teenage boy sighed deeply, looking very depressed.

Now that he knew what kind of fate was waiting for him inside the Dungeon of Beginnings, Charles was starting to think that perhaps his aunt knew about his secret. That might explain why she had insisted on him undergoing the Trial of Frieden Academy.

However, things had changed.

Since he understood more about himself, he would be able to plan better and use the power he had just acquired from the Hidden Dungeon to raise his chances of surviving the greatest battle of his life.

Chapter 100: Everything Will Start And End In The Dungeon Of Beginnings

“Thank you for everything. I will repay this debt in the future.”

Those were Charles’ parting words to Alex and Cairo before going his separate way.

Although the master-disciple pair was very curious about what had happened inside the dungeon, the teenage boy didn’t seem willing to talk about it.

In the end, they returned to the inn to rest from their dungeon expedition.

“Dim Dim, what do you think happened earlier?” Alex asked.

“Dim.” Dim Dim shook its head.

Clearly, even the Dim Sum God had no idea about what had happened between Charles and the Ant Queen.

The entire scenario had been simply bizarre. The harder the young man tried to make sense of the situation, the more confusion clouded his mind.

Something suddenly came to Alex’s mind, and he let out a sharp cry.

“Ah! The Whirlwind Sword and the Medium-Grade Magic Crystal inside the treasure chest!”

Alex had completely forgotten that after the Ant Queen had died, a treasure chest containing those items should’ve appeared.

However, it never happened.

When the Queen died, it dropped a Monster Core instead of a treasure chest.

Then, the Dungeon Core had appeared, and Charles had absorbed it, leading to the dungeon collapsing and disappearing forever.

“What a waste!” Alex pinched the bridge of his nose. Those two items could have opened a path for Charles to become a Magic Swordsman.

It was one of the Job Classes available to Charles Lambert after he went to the temple to gain a profession.

While Alex was lamenting on how Charles had missed out on those items, Charles was sitting on top of his bed and thinking about something else entirely.

“... Why me?” The teen sighed as he finished digesting the influx of information he had absorbed from the Dungeon Core.

All he wanted was to live peacefully with his sisters, but they had been taken away from him by their aunt. In order to reunite with them, he had to become a scholarship student of Frieden Academy.

And in order to do that, he must enter a dungeon—something his adoptive parents had repeatedly asked him to avoid.

Now, he knew why they gave him this warning.

Once he entered the Dungeon of Beginnings, the monsters inside it would run in his direction with only one goal in mind.

To kill him.

Charles was now painfully aware of the true power of his passive skill, Challenger’s Mark, which manifested when he entered the Hidden Dungeon.

This was all thanks to the information that was directly implanted to his brain by the Ant Queen, and the Dungeon Core.

However, not everything was bad news.

He had gained something after absorbing the Dungeon Core, which he believed was a blessing the world had given him to help counter his curse.

But even with his new ability, he still believed that challenging the trial of the Dungeon of Beginnings on his own was a suicide mission.

The image of Alex and Cairo then appeared inside his head.

The silver-haired young man had mentioned that he was going to take the Trial of Frieden Academy, which was why he had come to Briarwood Village.

His Master, Cairo, was there to ensure he would be able to clear the dungeon without any hitch.

Charles had witnessed Cairo's strength first-hand. Frankly, he couldn't help but feel a little envious. If he had the Catkin Swordsman's power, he wouldn't be as afraid of the monsters he was set to face two weeks from now.

"I have to get stronger." Charles clenched his fist. "I have to meet my sisters on the other side!"

Faint blue flames emerged from his clenched fist, illuminating the dark room.

There was no turning back for him.

He wasn't given any path of escape.

Either he charged head-first to his death or survive the trial by the skin of his teeth.

“How ironic,” Charles murmured. “Everything will start and end in the Dungeon of Beginnings. Truly a fitting name for the first trial of Frieden Academy.”

The teenage boy then closed his eyes and continued to process the information he had received from the Ant Queen and the Dungeon Core.

He only had two weeks left, and he would use every day as if it were his last.

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Clawford Tribe...

Ramza was having dinner with his family when the head butler of the Hartwell Clan whispered something in his ear.

The Patriarch of the Hartwell Clan nodded before shifting his gaze to his granddaughter, Lavinia.

“Lavinia, do you have anything scheduled for next week?” Ramza asked.

“No, Grandfather,” Lavinia replied. “Are you going to give me a mission?”

“Well, it can be considered as one.” Ramza smiled. “You see, Everguard has been reforged, and someone has to pick it up from the Capital City of Harmonia. That shield is very important, and I can only assign its delivery to someone I can trust.

“If I remember correctly, your brother and Alex are in Briarwood Village right now. Someone needs to deliver the shield to him. After all, our Oathkeeper will need his shield, you know?”

Lavinia blinked once, then twice, before eyeing her grandfather with suspicion.

“Why me?” she asked. “You can send the Ninjas to bring Everguard to Alex. Why must I personally go?”

“You don’t want to?”

“I-I didn’t say I didn’t want to go.”

Ramza chuckled and shook his head before turning serious.

“You know how important Everguard is. Of course, I can assign this mission to our Ninjas, but it will lack sincerity if it isn’t a member of the Hartwell Clan who hands it over to the Oathkeeper.

“If you don’t want to, I understand. Roselia, please free your schedule next week. Since you have served Alex during his stay here, he will be more familiar with you. Go to Harmonia to collect Everguard and deliver it to Alex in Briarwood Village.”

“Yes, Master,” the maid, who had taken care of Alex during his stay in the Hartwell Residence, bowed respectfully.

Lavinia eyed Roselia and her grandfather before shifting her gaze back to her plate.

She then continued eating, not showing any signs of interest in the mission.

However, Ramza and Roselia had watched the young lady grow up, so they already knew what she was thinking inside her head.

Although she tried to act calm in front of them, both of them were certain that on the day Roselia left for the City of Harmonia, Lavinia would find an excuse to accompany her.

She would then insist on personally delivering Everguard to the young man who had opened her eyes and made her understand that a bigger world was waiting outside of Etherion Village.

A world that she planned to see with her own eyes by leaving the safety of her family and venturing into the unknown.